Abstract

Many cannot imagine that real character formation can be achieved in any format other than in the traditional brick-and-mortar model of residential education with in-class face time. Profound character formation, however, can and has happened through quality and effective learning in online education. Good pedagogy toward fostering character formation begins with an understanding of the heart and soul and their relationship to one another. Allowing this knowledge to inform the creation of well-framed questions and prompts while fostering mutual engagement between students and between students with their instructor provides not only higher levels of learning but also lasting character formation in the student. This article addresses a foundational approach to character formation in online classes and some practical, user-friendly techniques to facilitate deeper learning and character formation. These are applied to various features of a learning management system, particularly discussion threads, video conferences, and collaborative documents.

Introduction

The content for this article is drawn from a book of the same title. “Character Formation in Online Education” Based on Character Formation in Online Education: A Guide for Instructors, Administrators, and Accrediting Agencies Zondervan, 2015

Skepticism remains among educators whether a goal of character formation in online education is possible. Many cannot imagine that real transformation can be achieved in any format other than in the traditional brick-and-mortar model of residential education with in-class, unmediated face-to-face time. Character formation has and continues to be cultivated through online education. For some instructors, the question remains whether character formation can happen in online education, but for a growing number of educators, the question is how it can be achieved. The following pages offer a foundational approach to character formation in online classes and some practical, user-friendly practices to facilitate deeper learning and character formation. These techniques are applied to various features of a learning management system (LMS), particularly, discussion threads, video conferences, and collaborative documents.

The Heart and Soul
Character formation begins with a proper understanding of the heart and soul. The heart is often misrepresented in American culture, for the heart has much more to do with how we live than what we might be led to believe. Perhaps the closest we can come to this idea is when we speak of doing something “whole-heartedly.” In Proverbs 4:23, believers are warned: “Guard your heart above all else, for it is the source of life” (HCSB). Mentioned nearly one thousand times in God’s word, it is clear that the heart is important to God. Three components make up the human heart: mind, emotion, and will (Coe, 2011). The mind, the thinking function of the heart, is where our thoughts are received, processed, and formed. Emotions are tied to thoughts as we have feelings about all thoughts. The will is an expression of what we actually do (or do not do) with our thoughts. Components of the heart—mind, emotion, and will—are often examined separately but were created to function together. They make up who we are. Our lives are our hearts in motion because the heart is the control center of the soul.

What About the Soul?

The soul, too, is often misrepresented. Understood as the non-material “essence of who we are,” would unfortunately be only partially correct, as Scripture does not support the bifurcation between “soul” and body.1 The two words translated “soul” in the Bible, nephesh in the Old Testament and psuche in the New Testament, describe living beings or human beings, not just the immaterial aspect of a person. Early in Genesis (2:7) we are told that the union of our body (the material substance) with our spirit (the immaterial substance) forms a living soul (nephesh). The soul, which includes the body, comes to mean “the whole person,” all of what makes up the “self.” All human beings are souls.

Considering the soul as only its immaterial aspect can minimize the impact the body and its actions have on character formation. When the body is excluded from an understanding of the soul, we unintentionally disregard the effect physical actions and behaviors have on our soul. In an organic and dynamic way, the heart impacts our actions and behaviors and these, in turn, influence our soul and thus the heart.

Character formation happens as we learn to think, reflect, and live as Christians with a conspicuous faith, allowing our souls to be vessels and conduits for the grace of the Holy Spirit’s presence and power. This kind of reflection in online classes is possible through well-framed questions that keep the whole person in mind and through the development of a strong learning community that fosters positive relationships for optimal learning.

The Well-Framed Question

A prudent question is one-half of wisdom. Francis Bacon

Questions are at the heart of learning. A good question affects intelligence, interest, attention, memory, and conduct. The quality, more than quantity, of questions is critical in generating transformative learning and an integrative learning community. Well-framed questions stimulate the students’ understanding of concepts and course material and encourage insightful engagement with peers and the professor. They help advance the line of discussion, inquiry, and reflection toward greater understanding of an idea or intellectual task. Vague or simplistic “yes
or no” questions fail to do this, as do mundane, repetitive questions. Investigative questions help students discover truth for themselves and enable them to reflect on its impact on their lives.

Reflecting on a topic or idea is the brain’s way of making connections toward grasping a concept or truth. Puritan pastor Richard Baxter understood the power of consideration and meditation “for the moving of the affections, and for the powerful imprinting of things in the heart” (Baxter, 1650). Intentional reflecting helps connect thoughts with emotions. “The deeper something is in our heart, the more it influences our life” (Saucy, 2013), as the heart is the control center of the soul, the whole person.

Questions or prompts that impact character formation most are those whose responses make a close connection between the subject matter and human emotion. With a proper understanding of “heart” and “soul,” well-framed questions that include these words or are created with “heart” and “soul” in mind help promote meaningful meditation. This is particularly important as the Internet can make more matters more pressing, generating quick reactions rather than deep reflections. The addictive nature of Internet use can leave people little time to ponder more deeply on a matter and places more emphasis on the insatiable self than on the concerns for or impact on others. Human beings are designed to pause. Meditating on a response to an effective prompt touches the emotions and affects the will, which results in living out what has been learned and embedded in the heart.

Information, facts, or truths are applied to students’ lives in ways such that students can determine how their lives will be characterized. Here are a couple sample questions that are designed to elicit meaningful meditation:

- Paul states in Colossians 3:23, “Whatever you do, do your work heartily (with the soul), as for the Lord” (HCSB). In light of the biblical understanding of the soul, what challenges do you face in being obedient to God?
- Consider Psalm 119:11-13. Which is more difficult for you, to get God’s word into your heart and soul or to speak having been impacted by God’s word? Explain.

Not only are we impacted as individual souls that are directed by our hearts, but as souls created to thrive in community.

The Online Learning Community

Our culture perpetuates individualistic isolationism with its emphasis on self. Such autonomy is a constant temptation in contemporary society. Anthropology professor Michael Wesch observes that students are fluent with entertaining self, not with educating self. They may be digitally adept but not adept at educating themselves. The ease and ability of accessing information is not equated with acquiring knowledge. As educators, we have been placed in the unique position to impact not only what but how students mature in their learning and to further develop critical thinking and discernment of the information they retrieve.

The training in and for our various disciplines taught us to ask defining questions, think broadly for resources, pursue answers, wrestle with apparent contradictions, press through when we have “hit the wall,” and discover deep within us the motivation that what we are learning will indeed
make a difference in our world. When we bring these to our students, they take notice of what education looks like.

A Christian education has always been more than content delivery or information transfer. It is committed to both academic excellence and spiritual transformation. Educators care about their academic discipline and Christian fidelity as they equip their students through an academic subject. They understand that knowledge without character formation limits true impact on students, their community, and the world.

Students learn more when the course content fascinates them and when they believe professors care about their learning. Create something they want to learn and that they want to learn from you. Students become more engaged in their own spiritual transformation when they are confident their professors value life transformation. The goal is character formation and educators can provide opportunities for students to change something about themselves and grow as whole persons. Consider these words from a student:

A few weeks ago I thought I knew most of what it meant to be a Christian. I thought I had a good grasp on my faith if I did little things to improve it. I thought I knew who I was and who my God was. I was wrong. At the end of the course, in just these three weeks, I have gained more knowledge on biblical interpretation and have developed my spiritual formation more than I ever have in my life. I now have confidence to serve the Lord, obey his command, and submit to his authority because I know my identity in Christ. This brings me the greatest joy. I am looking forward to a continuing transformation toward being more Christ-like in my faith through the forms of spiritual discipline. I have learned.

This kind of learning can best be accomplished in a community that values knowing and being known. Learning together influences deeper levels of engagement.

In an online learning community, this includes relationships with both professors and peers. Cognitive anthropologists Lave and Wenger (1991) observe that, “Learning involves the whole person; it implies not only a relation to specific activities, but a relation to social communities—it implies becoming a full participant, a member, a kind of person.” Having others present changes behavior and adds emotional engagement to the process. Creating an effective communal environment for learning is critical and can be challenging. There are schedules to consider as well as the willingness and ability to engage in conversation and dialogue, and this refers to the professor as well as students. Cultivating a presence in an online course community is critical. The professor who cultivates interaction with and between students breeds a “classroom away from the classroom” that is healthy enough to minimize the disadvantages of geographical distance, while maximizing the advantages of engaged learning and having profound experiences of authentic Christian community.

**Collaborative Learning Tools and Ways to Use Them**

Collaborative learning focuses on both content and the process of learning. C.S. Lewis stated, “It often happens that two schoolboys can solve difficulties in their work for one another better than the master can” (Lewis, 1958). Participation, dialogue, and reciprocity are key elements necessary for students to sense and know they are included in something greater than themselves.
Meaningful dialogue in a variety of formats inspires critical thinking and reflection, combats mental inertia, and fosters transformation. Students may come curious, but they leave inspired.

To simply “make conversation” would mean to speak in an artificial way, but there should be nothing artificial with the ways conversations can now be fostered to involve students in their learning processes. The design of an online course must be formed by the intent of the professor to foster student engagement with their peers, instructor, and the content (Brinthaupt, Fisher, Gardner, Raffo, & Woodard, 2011). Involved faculty and students’ peers have important roles in building relationships for a strong learning community. The use of various means of communication must be employed (Milheim, 2012). Instructors can use any number of tools to create a natural online learning environment.

Three key features of a learning management system (LMS) are highlighted below. Each is designed to give students the opportunity to process and reflect on their learning in community. The use of well-framed questions and prompts in any of these tools allows students to be reflective, challenging them to apply their knowledge to their own experiences. These specific features in an LMS provide easy access to increased learning through conversation: discussion sessions, collaborative documents, and video conferences.

**Discussion Forums: Give Your Students Something to Talk About**

Discussion sessions have become a mainstay for online courses. Here students engage with course materials in combination with well-framed discussion prompts or questions that stimulate dialogue among students in a given small group with input from the professor and teaching assistant. Students are typically required to respond first to professor-generated prompts and then to at least one other group member’s response. The discussion thread created reveals the depth of engagement and understanding of course material. Not only is there more student participation when using this feature, but the professor can also observe, contribute to, and guide these discussions in meaningful ways.

Effective, well-framed discussion prompts stimulate formational changes. Here are three categories of varying quality discussion prompts: low, mediocre, and transformational.

*Low quality* discussion prompts do little for character formation. These questions result in responses that require no depth and give little or no evidence of deep thinking or meaningful reflection of material. Simple, one-word responses or “search-highlight-copy” responses contribute little to learning. For example:
- Did you read Psalm 139?
- What did you think about the reading assignment?

*Mediocre quality* discussion questions begin to address character formation but at a surface level.
- What evidence of both good theology and human emotion is found in Psalm 139?
- How might this resonate with you?
- What was an uncomfortable or unexpected reaction you had from your reading of the Parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15?
**Transformational** discussion prompts promote character formation

- How does a truth found in Psalm 139 impact how you relate to God? To yourself? To others in your community? Substitute the name of a person you are having difficulty with as you pray Psalm 139 over them. What change do you notice in yourself as you do? Be specific.
- In Luke 15:20, the forgiving father runs to his returning son. The word translated “embraced” means “fell on his neck.” Have you experienced this kind of forgiveness from God? Explain.

Through the careful and prayerful use of discussion prompts, students can profoundly discover the graces of God as he nourishes their souls. Students do not live in a vacuum, so take the opportunity to step into their lives. How is the truth of what they are learning being expressed in their lives? This can be approached with questions such as “What does this particular truth look like in your life?” or “What God-given opportunities might be clothed in this challenge?” or by commenting on how you observe God working in an individual’s life. Press students to be specific, avoiding superficial, cliché-ish, or cosmetic answers. Take the opportunity to leave either written or recorded comments for students. These validate their efforts, and the encouragement can be deeply meaningful.

Here is a student’s reflection on using discussion threads:

- I absolutely loved the discussions. It was such a fun way to interact and learn about each week’s lessons, and I already feel like I know everyone in the group. :P The discussion posts were an encouraging and fun way to learn and help each other learn about each concept. I have to admit, checking back and finding a reply or two to something I posted was just like getting a notification on facebook :P I know it's silly, but it was a great motivation to get those posts out so that we could interact more in order to build such a community feel with God's community.

**Collaborative Documents: Collected Thoughts and Ideas**

Collaborative documents. As implied, this is a feature where more than one person contributes to the creation or building of a document. A document can be reviewed, edited, and evaluated between assignment partners or small group members. These electronic documents are available 24/7 for students to add their research, input, or opinions as required by the instructor. The completed document can then be submitted to the professor upon its due date.

The professor can also pose well-framed questions or prompts in a collaborative document. Students can then post responses, reflections, or findings in either an asynchronous or synchronous setting. Here are two examples.

1. The following explanation and prompt was used to elicit responses from a time spent in prayer:

   You may be familiar with using the acronym A-C-T-S for prayer. “A” for Adoration, adoring God for who he is. “C” for Confession. As we recognize who God is, it places us in a position of how we “miss the mark” and we respond in a time of confession. “T” is
for Thanksgiving, where we often jump to thanking God for his blessings in our lives. Perhaps the first matter to be thankful for is the forgiveness received having confessed our sin before God. “S” is for Supplication, where we ask for things.

Christians commonly spend most of their time in prayer in supplication, asking God for what we want or need in our lives. This can negatively impact our idea and understanding of God. So, here is the brief exercise:

- Spend 10-15 minutes in praying A-C-T, without the S.
- Afterward, collect your thoughts on this experience.
- In this collaborative document, anonymously add your brief reflections/takeaways from this exercise.

Here are a few of the online responses to the above prompt:

- I thought about it as going to a friend or my dad and spending a second saying hello and then spending the rest of my visit just listing everything I needed them to do for me. They wouldn’t really feel loved by me or feel like I even wanted to spend time with them.
- In praying using ACT, I was able to realize how often I think of myself over God. I found that many times my mind would break away from God and I would start talking about myself and my problems. Without supplication, I thought about myself a lot and I need to change to give glory to God. I understood how much God appears in my life, even when I don’t notice him.
- It was brought to my attention that my view of God is most likely distorted, I do spend a lot of time in prayer actively using the "Supplication" part. I was glad that was something I could focus on not doing but it sure was hard! Taking that part out of my prayer with God reveals to me that there is SO MANY THINGS I have to be in complete and utter thankfulness of Him, quite the opposite of asking for things! I love being in adoration of God but I feel that I need to be trained somewhat in this area, I think that by better understanding who God is (and clearing that distorted view) and His attributes I will be able to better apply this to prayer.

These responses help further discussions on our relationship with God and the role of prayer.

2. The collection of students’ responses below reveals thoughtful reflections having acted on their readings and discussions on confession. Consider the depth of these responses, representative of many more, collected in the matter of a few minutes. Rarely can these two aspects, the quantity and quality of responses, be experienced in a typical classroom setting. You may be surprised by the quantity and transparency of the responses when using well-framed prompts.

- It granted me freedom from the guilt that clung on to me.
- I am much more aware all throughout the day of my thoughts and attitudes and where I need to confess the bad/negative and ask Jesus to forgive me and help me to change.
- It helped me to be free from the weight of the guilt and shame and to gain accountability and support from a friend who pointed me to how God’s hands were working.
- There was a sense of vulnerability and repentance. It was a weight lifted off my chest and it felt good to give it to God.
Anonymous comments give students the freedom to contribute without concern for image management. Depending on the topic and the relationship you have built with students and they have developed with one another, you may have great success in asking for names to be added along with comments. When the professor acknowledges those comments, it affirms students’ input and thus their thinking process.

A meaningful prompt presented in a collaborative document brings together powerful individual experiences that can impact the entire class. In less time than it would have taken to hear from a few representative student voices, the professor can instead have a document where most if not all uninhibited expressions are given a “voice.” The professor, now able to observe character formation in process, can follow up with further conversations through video conferences and posts on discussion threads.

The professor can also create a collaborative document that serves as a place for students to post prayer concerns, answers to prayers, or updates. This cumulative collection of posts from class participants not only expresses a core value of the professor but also helps to grow trust and mutuality in the learning community.

Students appreciate the efforts of their instructor to incorporate various technology options as part of their learning activities. Use these features judiciously, and you will find the quantity and quality of responses mutually rewarding and transforming.

**Video Conferencing: Lights. Camera. (Inter)Action**

LMSs continue to make video conference sessions more user friendly with clear, strong connections conducive to conversations without video or audio delays. Many LMSs have this feature built into them, thus eliminating the need to use a program outside of the learning platform that instructors and students would have to download and install separately on their computers.

Video conferences are preferably not used for teaching purposes but rather for following up or offering personal perspectives on previously viewed video lectures or completed assignments. When used between individuals or with small groups, dialogue is encouraged and community is furthered. Participants’ names appear along with their real time images, so instructors do not have to memorize students’ names ahead of time or be anxious about addressing a student by an incorrect name.

When scheduling video conferences, seek the most opportune and convenient time for all involved. Half-hour time slots held during morning and evening hours appear most practical. It may help to know that the most difficult night to get good sleep is Sunday, due to social jetlag; the easiest is Thursday. Friday morning video conferences, therefore, may be more profitable than Monday morning ones.

The venue for video conferences ranges from the comfort of your own home or office to any place a strong Internet connection is available, preferably with little or no background noise,
music, or other people. Using different rooms in a home (e.g., living room, dining room, kitchen) can give a personal touch and let your students feel like you are inviting them into your personal space.

You are not alone when it comes to initially feeling uneasy using video conferences for a class. Students, too, can feel uncomfortable, even when they are in their own familiar environment. Yet, within some sessions one can serendipitously meet parents, siblings, roommates, and even pets as they appear on a student’s screen (although pets are never as impressed or inquisitive as human viewers). Seize these opportunities; they contribute to the ease of growing a safe and engaging learning community.

And, of course, a professor can use video conferences as virtual office hours, too, for students with questions or situations that require attention. The students as well as the professor can request these.

**Leading a Group Video Conference**

Introductory video conferences establish the welcoming and friendly tone for subsequent sessions. Informing students that they are being prayed for allows them to begin seeing a depth of care and trust found in an interactive learning community. As you grow more familiar with the students and they with you, it becomes easier to converse over course-related challenges, reflections, and assignments. Where vulnerability is embraced, conversations can be directed toward heart and soul matters by sharing your own stories and brief observations on life matters or asking how their learning is intersecting current life situations. Your students face the challenges of thinking about and living out truth. Meet these challenges with empathy, concern, openness, and prayer.

As you progress with video conferences, address any present issue students might have. It helps to then answer any questions they might have about the course such as written or reading assignments, discussion threads, or LMS issues. If you as the professor have made observations about a group’s participation in that week’s discussion threads, for example, take the opportunity to offer your verbal comments. Suggestions to help students foster their learning community, to approach a particular assignment, or to better understand a difficult reading assignment are greatly appreciated by students. This makes them feel as though they have an inside track from the professor and provides additional points of contact and relationship building.

Being mindful of directing attention toward character formation, consider the following ways to involve students in dialogue as participants in a video conference:

- Listen for the challenges that your students are facing. Challenges in our lives are God-ordained opportunities to give evidence of God’s Spirit working in us. What challenges are your students experiencing in or while taking this course? How can they rely on God even more?
- What difference do your students see in themselves since the beginning of this course? What puzzles them about what they are learning from God? What truth has them pondering a few minutes longer than usual? How has their love for God grown? How has their love for people grown?
As you approach the close of your live video sessions, consider giving your students a “heads up.” If the coming week is going to be challenging, tell them so. If there is something you want them to pay even closer attention to, let them know. You are offering lifelines to them as the rigors of your course mount. An easy way to remember what should be addressed in a video conference is: “Past, Present, Future.” It is that simple.

Lastly, take the opportunity to pray for the students. Knowing the tasks they have at hand and having listened intently to their concerns, close the video conference with a short prayer. Your modeling the importance of bringing others and their concerns before God is impactful for all. Prayer, discussion thread responses, video conferences, and the way technology is used in a course are just a few ways the heart of the instructor comes through. As an instructor, you have a critical role in impacting transformation in the lives of students.

**Conclusion**

Great professors inspire students. Now they get to do it in their online classes. They facilitate student learning and reflection using a number of features in a learning management system. Students in online classes can experience a real sense of community and never feel that it is just them and the computer screen. Both professors and students take ownership and responsibility for the work of engaging and participating in a learning community.

As students are inspired toward character formation, their souls are impacted, their hearts are transformed, their lives are changed, and their impact on others becomes boundless. Character formation is important and all the more as our world needs knowledgeable men and women of integrity and virtue.

The growing number of online courses provides strategic intersections between learning and character formation. Future research in these areas would serve to further equip educators with best practices for effective growth in character formation in their students. Character formation in online education is a reality well worth the investment. There is nothing quite like witnessing lives being transformed before your very eyes (even if it is on a computer screen).

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1. Jesus speaks of a separation of soul and body in Matt 10:28, but he is describing what happens at death when the soul or person is separated from the body, resulting in a disembodied soul. In Revelation 6:9, the Apostle John identifies the disembodied souls of those persons who were martyred. These disembodied souls would be incomplete souls because though the soul remains the real person with or without being embodied, it is designed for embodiment. For Christians, this will happen at Christ’s second coming when believers receive new, resurrected bodies.

2. Michael Wesch, is associate professor of cultural anthropology at Kansas State University. His work also includes media ecology and the emerging field of digital ethnography, where he studies the effect of new media on human interaction.

**References**


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