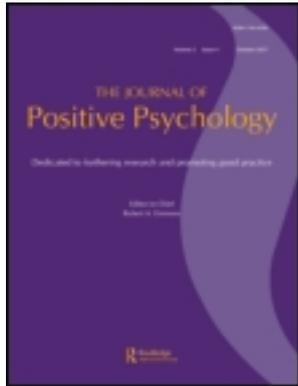


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Virtues and character strengths for sustainable faculty development

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Virtues and character strengths for sustainable faculty development

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For this special issue about teaching Positive Psychology, I show how the virtues and character strengths are at the heart of an interdisciplinary faculty development program. They can be pragmatic responses to the critical incidents encountered during a semester, and serve as stimuli for continuing reflection and sustained renewal. First, I synthesize research on faculty development, teacher behaviors, and re-define the virtues and character strengths to apply directly to learning and teaching. Second, I describe a four-module program with reflective exercises that can be delivered in face-to-face workshops, via guided self-instruction, and in online formats.

Keywords: virtues; character strengths; teaching; faculty development

Before reading the Positive Psychology literature, I conducted continuing education workshops, sponsored by the American Psychological Association (APA), on ‘Thinking about Learning/Learning about Teaching’ for new and experienced teachers. The topics included composing philosophy of teaching statements and linking them to strategies for designing effective syllabi, identifying student learning outcomes, choosing effective pedagogical and assessment strategies for these outcomes, and constructing post-semester evaluation methods. I recognized, however, that after the behavioral skills of effective teaching had become well-practiced, faculty turned to larger ‘why-questions’ about their identities as academics and how to adapt to changes in the populations and environments of higher education. How they could use ‘signature strengths every day in the main realms of your life to bring abundant gratification and authentic happiness’ (Seligman, 2004, p. 161) became the bridge to Dahlsgaard, Peterson, and Seligman’s (2005) and Peterson and Seligman’s (2004) work on virtues and character strengths.

In a special issue of *Teaching of Psychology* on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, McGovern and Miller (2008) first re-defined the 24 character strengths to be directly applicable to learning and teaching. For example, Peterson and Seligman (2004, pp. 29–30) use the following definitions:

Creativity [originality, ingenuity]: Thinking of novel and productive ways to conceptualize and do things; includes artistic achievement but is not limited to it.

Citizenship [social responsibility, loyalty, teamwork]: Working well as a member of a group or team; being loyal to the group; doing one’s share.
Gratitude: Being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen; taking time to express thanks.

In McGovern and Miller (2008, p. 282), we adapted these three original definitions:

Creativity and ingenuity: Constructs novel and innovative conceptualizations of student learning and pedagogy.

Citizenship and teamwork: Builds collaborative communities of learners rather than solely rewarding individual achievements.

Gratitude: Appreciates and responds to being graced by the profound and simple gifts found in the classroom and its diverse participants.

With adapted definitions of the virtues and strengths as core concepts, we designed a faculty development workshop to explore a life story model of identity (McGovern, 2006) and critical questions that emerged from teaching, research, and citizenship activities. Workshop participants generated, in small groups, critical incidents that could be addressed effectively by a single or multiple character strengths.

I delivered a keynote address in 2009 to the Association for Psychological Science/Society for the Teaching of Psychology and an introductory 2-h workshop to 30 international psychology faculty in 2010. Based on positive responses at these annual teaching institutes and feedback from other university colleagues who reviewed the workshop materials, I created a more thoroughly integrated faculty

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development program that could be delivered in face-to-face workshops, by guided self-instruction, or via online courses (McGovern, 2011a).

Faculty virtues and character strengths for sustainable development

If faculty construe their role to be as a sage on the stage, being knowledgeable is valued above all else. Yet, the landscape in higher education has changed and psychologists now understand student learning in more complex ways. In the summary chapter from a national conference on undergraduate education in psychology handbook, McGovern (1993) proposed this interactive set of questions:

What kind of *outcomes* can be achieved with
 What kind of *students* taught by
 What kind of *faculty* using
 What type of *teaching methods* as part of
 What kind of *curriculum*? (p. 218; italics in original)

This formula remained valid for the study groups at the University of Puget Sound national conference who produced a new blueprint for the future of undergraduate psychology (Halpern, 2010). As a participant and group leader at the 2008 conference, I was struck by how many of the issues being studied by academic faculty psychologists could be integrated with the virtues and character strengths. A chapter on ‘psychologically literate citizens’ (McGovern et al., 2010) as a desired learning outcome for all students taking psychology courses led to my chapter on ‘virtues and character strengths of psychologically literate faculty’ (McGovern, 2011b).

To more effectively synthesize the Positive Psychology objectives about virtues and strengths leading to gratification and authentic happiness, and the longer tradition of faculty development in behalf of teaching and learning, I revised all of the character strength definitions. They are shown in Table 1.

I re-designed the original workshop structure and handbook materials. After a brief introduction to Positive Psychology tenets and the intellectual and empirical bases for the virtues and character strengths, and my application of them to learning and teaching, there are four distinct modules.

- Module 1 on *Core Virtues* introduces participants to all six virtues and their broad applications to learning and teaching.
- Module 2 on *Thinking about Learning* explores the virtues of Wisdom and Knowledge and Humanity and how character strengths intersect with the philosophical assumptions for learning and teaching held by participants.
- Module 3 on *Learning about Teaching* evaluates how the virtues of Justice, Temperance,

and Courage are integral to the management of critical incidents.

- Module 4 on *Sustainable Renewal and Strategic Planning* probes how the virtue of Transcendence is a capstone for the reflective exercises and becomes the platform for strategic planning for growth and sustained renewal.

The actual workshop delivery depends on audiences and time availability. With 35 doctoral students planning academic careers, I delivered Module 1 and exercises from Modules 2–4 in a 3-h session in spring 2011. I constructed an online Blackboard-based course using the same handbook in order to continue discussions with this same group through the academic year 2011–2012, as they finish their doctoral programs and begin new teaching appointments. I will deliver a 7-h session with exercises from all four modules to doctoral candidates and new and seasoned faculty members as an APA Continuing Education Workshop in summer 2011.

In the following sections, I offer a synopsis of all the modules and some of the exercises.

Module 1: Core virtues

Beginning with a guided fantasy exercise about a past teacher’s ideal qualities, faculty members explore all six virtues’ applications to learning and teaching. The module stimulates participants’ focusing on their assumptions about exemplary teaching, but they learn to use the vocabulary of the virtues to articulate their understandings. Roundtable discussions foster the evaluation of past experiences, as they discover common denominators fostered by interpreting diverse episodes as the displayed qualities of various virtues.

Module 2: Thinking about learning (Wisdom and Knowledge and Humanity)

Planning a semester begins with identifying required learning outcomes and then scripting pedagogical strategies to accomplish them. I ask participants to match their current syllabi outcomes with the character strengths of wisdom and knowledge and humanity. Interdisciplinary doctoral students in a recent workshop discovered that objectives from diverse curricula (e.g., anthropology, marketing, and mathematics) came together as liberal arts outcomes when construed as modeling character strengths like *critical thinking* or *love of learning*. From the virtue of humanity, they evaluated how tending and befriending strengths like *social and emotional intelligence* captured the types of interpersonal relationships they hoped to have with students and their faculty mentors,

Table 1. Virtues and character strengths for learning and teaching.

WISDOM AND KNOWLEDGE: Cognitive strengths used to acquire and create knowledge
Creativity and Ingenuity: Construct original and innovative strategies for learning and teaching
Curiosity and Openness to New Experiences: Examine processes as well as outcomes of learning and teaching; find gratification in the mundane phenomenology of required tasks and topics
Critical Thinking, Judgment, and Open-Mindedness: Seek and evaluate evidence fairly, and respond differentially, even when contrary to personal beliefs or perspectives
Love of Learning: Pursue new discoveries and methods in the world of ideas, systematically, and appreciate serendipity
Perspective and Wise Counsel: Provide wise counsel to students and teachers, grounded in reflected experience, and with empathy for diverse ways of seeing and being in the world

HUMANITY: Interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending
Care, Compassion, Generosity, Kindness, and Nurturance: Contribute ethically and responsibly to the welfare of others despite a breadth or depth of differences
Social/Emotional Intelligence: Attend to subtle cues in teacher and student and colleague relationships and group dynamics; able to use one's emotions as part of problem solving
Love: Create safe-havens in the classroom that foster reciprocal relationships of support and respect; demonstrate cognitive and affective acceptance of others

JUSTICE: Civic strengths that contribute to diverse and healthy communities
Citizenship, Loyalty, and Teamwork: Build collaborative communities of learners rather than solely rewarding individual achievements or solo performances; foster effective group dynamics
Fairness: Develop nuanced capacity to identify biases in our perspectives; reason, make judgments, and implement ethical actions
Leadership: Facilitate the task demands and interpersonal dynamics of learning environments

TEMPERANCE: Discipline that protects against excess in our relationships with students, faculty colleagues, and administrators
Forgiveness and Mercy: Diminish anger with empathy; sustain and renew relationships despite setbacks that derive from others' shortcomings or mistakes
Humility and Modesty: Communicate genuine self-assessments of strengths and limitations, valuing multiple perspectives and outcomes
Discretion and Prudence: Take care in daily choices; promote measured balance and harmony in the pursuit of intended goals
Self-Control and Self-Regulation: Manage initial reactions to consider and implement disciplined responses, especially in difficult, 'no-win' classroom and professional situations

COURAGE: Emotional strengths to accomplish goals despite internal or external obstacles
Bravery and Valor: Act with conviction, despite risks and dangers; to 'bear witness'
Authenticity, Integrity, and Honesty: Declare clear principles and values; present oneself sincerely and act genuinely, modeling how this quality is essential for trusting relationships
Persistence and Perseverance: Sustain effort despite obstacles, boredom, or frustration, and without apparent rewards; find pleasure in completing tasks
Enthusiasm, Vitality, and Zest: Show a passion for teaching, learning, and deliberate practices for well-being; demonstrate a focused sense of priorities

TRANSCENDENCE: Strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and meanings
Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence, Awe, and Wonder: Recognize and take pleasure in others' and one's own talents and creativity, and especially in the splendid discoveries of students
Gratitude: Be thankful for grace of both simple and profound gifts from learning and teaching
Hope and Optimism: Respond to successes and adversities with an open-minded perspective tempered by humility and wisdom; expect the best and work to achieve it
Humor and Playfulness: Approach life with a playful recognition of incongruities and circumstances beyond our control
Spirituality, Faith, and Purpose: Foster inquiry about higher purposes and meanings; enable students to genuinely grapple with mystery and what is sacred in their life experiences

Source: Adapted by McGovern (2011a) from Peterson and Seligman (2004).

whether teaching French, electrical engineering, or behavioral neuroscience.

The in-depth program available with more time, via guided instruction, or online in an interactive format, probes all 24 character strengths for all six virtues. For example, in the module on thinking about learning, wisdom's cognitive character strengths include *creativity, curiosity, critical thinking, love of learning* and *wise counsel or perspective*. The following are examples of stimulus prompts from these five character strengths to illustrate how they can inspire the content and

processes we script into our syllabi even before a first class meeting.

- How do I conform AND vary from traditional ways to create a course and its potential for learning? The topics covered? Innovative pedagogical strategies?
- What do I assume about how my students learn?
- How do I motivate students to be amiable skeptics in thinking critically about different points of view?

- What are my cues for feeling ‘in a rut’ about my subject matter or my methods?
- Who are the types of individuals who seek my counsel and the perspectives they seem most apt to explore with me?

Humanity’s tending and befriending strengths include *care and compassion, social/emotional intelligence, and love*. Sample prompts to explore these character strengths include:

- How do I communicate my accessibility and a willingness to listen to more than what has already been spoken? Do students or peers feel ‘safe’ with me?
- What evokes ‘noise’ in my interpersonal relationships and disrupts my empathy?
- How do I fulfill my needs for intimacy and community by the work that I do and with the colleagues who share the same academic life?

Module 3: Learning about teaching (Justice, Temperance, Courage)

In order to diversify how we learn about teaching, critical incidents exercises (e.g., creating collaborative learning environments; disruptive student reacting to a hot topic; sagging attendance and diminished performance) connect the virtues of justice, temperance, and courage with their respective character strengths.

Justice is practiced when we use civic character strengths – *loyalty and teamwork, fairness, leadership* – that teach students how to contribute to a healthy community life. This virtue connects directly to the new concept of psychologically literate citizens (McGovern et al., 2010). Sample prompts include:

- How do I facilitate both the achievement of independent learning and the communitarian skills formed by collaborative learning?
- How does someone ‘fail’ in my classes? Do I allow students to choose to fail? How much responsibility am I willing to take for *not* letting someone fail?
- How do I adapt my leadership ethic for the dynamics of specific environments and diverse populations of students or faculty colleagues?

Temperance protects us against excess in our relationships with students, colleagues, and administrators. Its character strengths include *humility and modesty, forgiveness and mercy, discretion and prudence, and self-regulation and self-control*. The following prompts and others for temperance’s strengths help faculty consider alternative strategies:

- What is my genuine appraisal of my subject matter expertise and how well I teach it?

- What is my calculus for balancing mercy with justice in conflicted situations?
- What are my ‘go-to strategies’ for clear and authentic responses as I try to balance long-term outcomes with short-term demands to take immediate action?
- What have I learned are my low and high thresholds for anger, frustration, sadness and disappointment, need for recognition and reward, fatigue?

Students’ post-semester missives frequently recall situations when our displays of temperance’s character strengths had long-lasting value. Their recollections about ‘What would my professor do in this situation?’ offer inspiration about alternative responses to tough situations.

Contemporary college classrooms increasingly call upon us to practice the virtue of Courage as we use emotional character strengths to accomplish goals despite internal or external obstacles. Courage’s character strengths include *bravery and valor, authenticity and integrity, perseverance, and enthusiasm and zest*. A sampling of prompts includes:

- What has been my experience(s) of danger or risk? Hostile student? Unpredictable or ill-tempered colleague/administrator? What have I feared most in such interactions?
- What single principle about authentic learning and teaching do I stand by – across diverse students, situational contexts, and my years in academic life?
- What are the roots and fruits of my being careless from time to time?
- How do I set my priorities for an academic year, and what calculus do I use to evaluate or recalibrate their importance as time goes on?

Module 4: Sustained renewal (Transcendence and Strategic Planning)

Having drawn inspiration from the memories of ideal teachers, scripted desired cognitive and emotional learning outcomes, and navigated critical incidents, we reach the end of a semester’s work. Student ratings of instruction or a peer review of our performance provides us with food for thought about its quality. Why return to do battle again? How do we savor the pleasures of learning and teaching and situate the failures in a larger perspective? The virtue of transcendence helps forge connections between recent experiences and a larger universe of meanings. Its character strengths include *appreciation of excellence and awe, gratitude, hope and optimism, humor and playfulness, and spirituality or sense of faith and purpose*.

In McGovern (2006), I explored how important it was to evaluate our learning and teaching as part of a longer narrative of an academic career. Our answers to ‘why-questions’ inspire sustained commitment and renewal of a teaching life. The prompts for Transcendence also synthesize what participants have learned about the other five virtues’ strengths.

- How do I appreciate the many acts of COURAGE demonstrated by students who return to school each year despite economic or emotional adversity?
- How can I express my gratitude for HUMANITY’S tending and befriending acts offered me by my students and colleagues?
- Hope springs from environments of JUSTICE – safe places where others can be trusted and unanticipated things learned. Do I create spaces where hope flourishes?
- How do I recognize my limitations in moments that call for TEMPERANCE, learning from students’ playfulness and being able to laugh at my own foibles?
- How have my students affirmed my faith in WISDOM and KNOWLEDGE this past year, and my commitment to the power of learning and teaching?

These prompts consolidate understanding of the inter-relationships among the virtues and their character strengths. A subtext for sustainable faculty development, via these reflections on the virtue of transcendence, is to consider what remains to be added in future chapters of an academic life narrative. The synthesis questions from transcendence provide the experiential conclusion to the workshop. A final roundtable discussion focuses on developing a strategic plan as the pragmatic conclusion to the exercises.

Final thoughts

The work of a teacher – exhausting, complex, idiosyncratic, never twice the same – is, at its heart, an intellectual and ethical enterprise. Teaching is the vocation of vocations, a calling that shepherds a multitude of other callings. It is an activity that is intensely practical and yet transcendent, brutally matter-of-fact, and yet fundamentally a creative act. Teaching begins in challenge and is never far from mystery (Ayers, 2001, p. 122).

Faculty members are storytellers who have academic degrees. The virtues and character strengths have

high value as stimuli for the gathering of insight-laden stories about learning and teaching. They have even higher value as the sources for faculty members’ sustainable growth and renewal as they build academic communities of psychologically literate citizens where virtue is learned by being practiced.

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