



Teaching Character: A Practical Guide

Teaching Character in a Medical School Anatomy Course

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While promoting character development and providing anatomical education to medical students may not appear aligned, there are several factors contributing to teaching character concurrently with anatomy. The structure of the anatomy course, meeting for nearly 6 months with a class size of 20 students who complete 3-5 hours of dissection-based learning each week, provides an opportunity to develop a coaching/mentoring relationship with students. Medical students face many transitions and challenges (sentinel events) which favor the teaching of character development. Additionally, students have voiced a need for increased guidance pertaining to the formation of their professional identity during the initial stages of medical school education. These factors provide an opportunity as their anatomy instructor to attempt to provide moments in which character can be “caught, taught and sought”.

To teach character within the context of a human anatomy course I developed a longitudinal reflective process, termed *character moments in anatomy*, to promote character development and professional identity formation. *Character moments* comprises four voluntary assignments, each spaced about six weeks apart, throughout the course. These assignments are introduced to the students with a focus on personal and professional development. Each *character moment* assignment consisted of two parts: (1) reflective writing on a specific set of prompts (table 1), and (2) providing a WOOP goal (WOOP = Wish, Outcome, Obstacle, Plan; [WOOP Goals | Academic Success Center | Oregon State University](#)). Students are instructed to respond to the prompts either by providing a written narrative reflection, an original piece of poetry, or original artwork. Rubrics and examples are provided to demonstrate to the students the expected level of critical reflection. Goals could be different for each assignment, the same goal modified throughout the process, or any combination thereof that was most beneficial to the student. Students have two weeks to complete each assignment. Assignments do not conflict with other curricular formative or summative assessments required of the students.

The first *character moment* assignment draws upon a critical incident common to many first-year medical students - the need to adjust to the pace of learning coupled with their approach/feelings toward human cadaveric dissection. The second assignment occurs after students have completed their first round of examinations and have completed 25% of their cadaveric dissections. A typical issue faced by many students at this time is their relationship

with their peers and specifically their dissection team. The third focuses on self-care and time management – common challenges throughout medical school that often present mid-way through the anatomy curriculum. The final *character moment* assignment is both retrospective and prospective focusing on current and future version of themselves.

All students submitting a *character moment* assignment receive written faculty feedback within 10 days of the assignment due date. Feedback was provided in each of three areas: (1) suggestions for improving critical reflection or WOOP goal development; (2) identifying, highlighting, and encouraging development or application of specific character traits or virtues mentioned by the student; and (3) offering additional resources or perspectives relevant to areas of personal or professional formation. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the process. The focus on character traits and virtues provided in the feedback was supported by other aspects of the student experience such as exposure to the role of character strengths in leadership development and completion of the VIA character strengths instrument ([VIA Character Strengths Survey & Character Reports | VIA Institute](#)). Concepts of perspective taking and bias are also explored in other aspects of the curriculum, most notably in their introductory clinical reasoning coursework. Instructor feedback was focused on highlighting the student's character development, integrating the *character moment* feedback with other aspects of the curriculum, and providing an environment supportive of growth and reflection.

Character moments have been well received in the three cohorts of learners that have completed the process. In the most recent cohort of students, 18 of 20 students completed all four of the assignments (reflection + goal). All students received feedback on each *character moment* assignment within ten days of the assignment due date. Most assignments were in narrative format with a few poems and one piece of artwork. Student development was most frequently observed in areas of compassion, awareness, and teamwork.

I consider two aspects essential in teaching *character moments*: (1) focusing on sentinel events to promote character development in an authentic manner; and (2) providing feedback aimed at motivating students to engage and develop character as they progress in their personal and professional development. The process promotes virtues identification

and application, development of practical wisdom, and the promotion of career development toward human flourishing. The reiterative reflection process aims to develop practical wisdom skills. The repeating cycle of reflection/feedback provides a venue for character to be “caught, taught and sought” within the framework of the anatomy coursework. It is my opinion that *character moments* could be developed in multiple courses provided: (1) attention is given to the interface between course content with relevant challenges and events facing the students; and (2) provision of an experience that encourages engagement with character and virtue in the context of each student’s personal and professional development.

Table 1. *Character Moments* Reflection Prompts

Character moment #1. Explore your feelings as we approach the start of cadaveric dissection. How have you been prepared for this experience? What might be the perception and experience of others with respect to cadaveric dissection? How can you best help yourself and your team be successful with approaching anatomy coursework? We view the cadaveric donor as your first patient; what does that mean to you?

Character moment #2. Describe how your anatomy dissection team has progressed during the weeks since the beginning of the course. In what areas is your team functioning well and where can it grow? What strengths and challenges do you bring to your team? What is your plan to promote teambuilding or face conflict within your dissection team?

Character moment #3. As we approach the midway point of the anatomy course, describe what you have learned about yourself since the start of term. How are you coping with the pace of learning and reaching your learning objectives? How do you feel about your personal relationships and self-care? Please describe your areas of strength and growth. How do you plan to sustain yourself through the next year in medical school and into residency?

Character moment #4. Reflect on your experiences in the anatomy coursework to date. How has this coursework informed future versions of yourself and your future medical practice? Develop a list of the things for which you are grateful over the past semester. Develop a stretch goal for one key growth front for the semester ahead.