



## **Virtue Literacy: A Six Week Study of West Point Cadets During Their Basic Training**

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## **Abstract**

In summer 2021, for the first time, the United States Military Academy at West Point included a Character Journal as part of West Point's Cadet Basic Training (CBT). The Character Journal was developed for cadets to reflect on their character. Issued on the first day of CBT, cadets were given one hour each day to reflect on the virtues they used that day, as well as a weekly reflection at the end of the week. There was also a reflection section on which virtues the cadets would like to focus on for the next week and why. There are several key components to the character journal. First, it provided a list of virtues from each of five domains of virtue (intellectual, moral, civic, performance and marital) to improve cadets' familiarity with the virtues. Next, it provided a glossary that defined the virtues in each of the domains and the seven Components of Virtue and their definitions.

In order to assess the cadets' virtue literacy at the end of the six-week CBT, three components were involved. First, the cadets were given a pre- and post-test survey of questions related to virtue that came from the Character Journal. Second, each week, over the course of CBT, the authors spent the dedicated Cadet Journal Hour with one squad at a time to observe and engage with the cadets on character and virtue. Finally, the authors conducted focus groups with squads over the course of their last week in CBT.

## **Introduction**

The Jubilee Centre's framework explains that the key notion of virtue literacy is the combination of three components: virtue perception, virtue knowledge and understanding and virtue reasoning. Virtue literacy is the notion that there is a shared virtue lexicon or vocabulary that is rich and complex. You must have this shared vocabulary about virtue that provides the fundamentals needed to help people learn, understand, reflect, and discuss virtue. Understanding this vocabulary is necessary to have both the ability to understand the virtues and to practice them.

The literature shows that virtue literacy is regarded as an important component of character education across educational levels. Further, virtue literacy constitutes the first and most fundamental aspect to any character education program. From primary schools to universities, character development programs that lack a virtue vocabulary make it incredibly challenging for students to have knowledge or understanding of virtue terms, perceive virtuous or non-virtuous actions in specific situations or be able to reason about which virtue to employ in these situations. One effective way to improve virtue literacy is to implement a character journal as part of an institution's character education curriculum.

To that end, in summer 2021, for the first time, the United States Military Academy at West Point included a Character Journal as part of West Point's Cadet Basic Training (CBT). The Character Journal was developed for cadets to reflect on their character. Issued on the first day of CBT,

cadets were given one hour each day to reflect on the virtues they used that day, as well as a weekly reflection at the end of the week. There was also a reflection section on which virtues the cadets would like to focus on for the next week and why. There are several key components to the character journal. First, it provided a list of virtues from each of five domains of virtue (intellectual, moral, civic, performance and marital) to improve cadets' familiarity with the virtues. Next, it provided a glossary that defined the virtues in each of the domains and the seven Components of Virtue and their definitions.

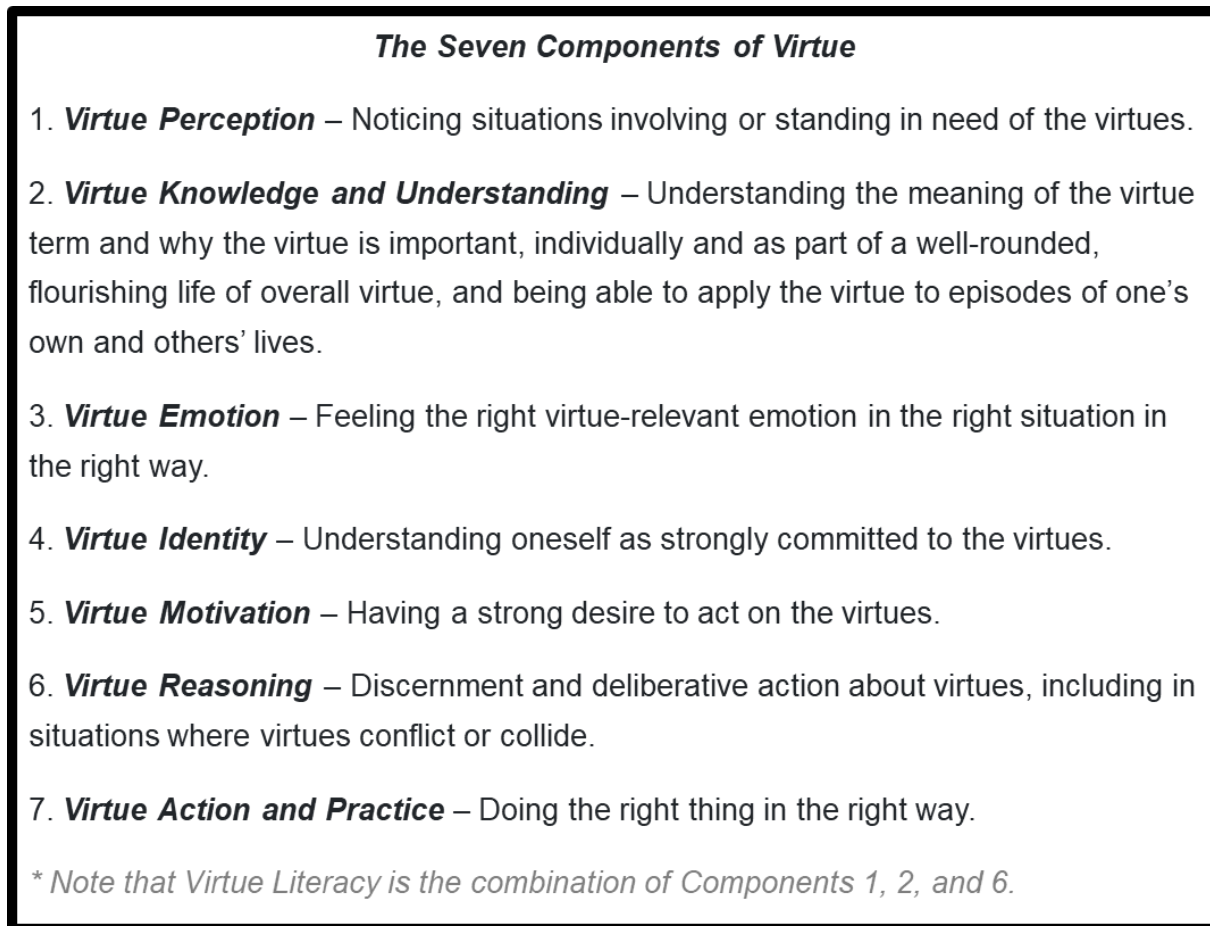
In order to assess the cadets' virtue literacy at the end of the six-week CBT, three components were involved. First, the cadets were given a pre- and post-test survey of questions related to virtue that came from the Character Journal. Second, each week, over the course of CBT, the authors spent the dedicated Cadet Journal Hour with one squad at a time to observe and engage with the cadets on character and virtue. Finally, the authors conducted focus groups with squads over the course of their last week in CBT. This paper will discuss the efficacy of the character journaling for developing virtue literacy in CBT.

### **A Framework for Character Education**

In the last ten years, character education has had a prominent place in the curriculum of primary and secondary schools. To a greater extent, educators are observing the significance of a more holistic understanding of what it means for students meet their full potential, or flourish. For students to flourish, they must acquire and develop a range of human excellences across four domains of virtue: moral, intellectual, civic and performance. These human excellences, commonly referred to as virtues, are interconnected and conducted by *phronesis*. *Phronesis*, or practical wisdom, is the meta-virtue that promotes growth in the other virtues yet develops in people as they acquire the other virtues. It is a symbiotic relationship. *Phronesis* promotes growth in virtues by facilitating their successful operation for the good of both the individual and society. For millennia, virtuous living has been understood as essential for individual flourishing and living a good life, just as virtuous citizens are essential to a flourishing society. Character education is the art of teaching students to flourish.

The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues is the exemplar in the design, method and strategy of integrating character education in schools. Their *Framework for character education in schools* (2017) has been adopted by hundreds of primary and secondary schools across the world to include the United Kingdom, the United States, much of Europe and across Asia. The Jubilee Centre's framework explains that the seven 'Components of Virtue' are the foundation of a character education program (2017). The seven Components of Virtue are as follows: 1. Virtue Perception 2. Virtue Knowledge and Understanding 3. Virtue Emotion 4. Virtue Identity 5. Virtue Motivation 6. Virtue Reasoning and 7. Virtue Action and Practice (see figure 1 for the Jubilee Centre's definitions of the Seven Components of Virtue).

The Jubilee Centre's framework describes virtue literacy as the combination of three of the Seven Components of Virtue: Virtue Perception, Virtue Knowledge and Understanding and Virtue Reasoning. Virtue Literacy is the key notion that there is a shared 'virtue' vocabulary or lexicon that is rich, dynamic, and vital. For people to learn, understand, reflect upon, and discuss virtue, an institution or organization must have this shared virtue lexicon that serves as the foundation of a character development program. Having an awareness of this vocabulary is necessary to have both the ability to recognize, understand, and practice the virtues.



**Figure 1: The Seven Components of Virtue**

### **Character Education Framework for Higher Education**

The Jubilee Centre's framework was initially developed for primary and secondary school character education programs. In the last year, the framework has been extended to higher education. In 2020, the Jubilee Centre partnered with the Oxford Character Project and published Character education in universities: a framework for flourishing. This collaboration produced a

framework adapted for higher education. Between the Jubilee Centre and the Oxford Character Project, there was a shared vision that the purpose of higher education is not merely to acquire certification or increase earning potential, but to contribute to flourishing. The new framework contextualizes character education and the importance of flourishing of university students and provides a philosophically rigorous yet practical framework for character education in the university setting. In addition to participation in the creation of the new higher education framework, Lamb et al. (2021) have identified seven character development strategies that can be applied in university contexts. Lamb et al. list the seven character development strategies as follows: 1. Habituation through practice 2. Reflection on personal experience 3. Engagement with virtuous exemplars 4. Dialogue that increases virtue literacy 5. Awareness of situational variables 6. Moral reminders and 7. Friendships of mutual accountability.

### **The Importance of Virtue Literacy**

It is meaningful that Virtue Literacy is regarded an important component of character education across educational levels, as evidenced in both frameworks and Lamb et al.'s article. From primary schools to universities, character development programs that lack a virtue lexicon, make it incredibly challenging for students to have knowledge or understanding of virtue terms, perceive virtuous or non-virtuous actions in specific situations or be able to reason about which virtue to employ in these situations. This could mean that Virtue Literacy constitutes the first and most fundamental aspect to any character education program.

### **Practical Application for Developing Virtue Literacy: The Character Journal & Virtue Reflection**

Implementing a character journal into an institution's character education curriculum is an effective way to improve virtue literacy. Journaling and self-reflection have shown to cultivate and develop virtue (Emmons, 2007, 11, 31, 85; Jubilee, 2019; Watts et. al., 2021, 21-22). There are a variety of models for character journals (Arthur et al., 2014a; Arthur et al., 2014b; Jubilee Centre, 2019). An exemplar character journal was used by the Jubilee Centre for their teacher training workshop in 2018 after a pilot of the character journal in 2014 by over 1,000 11–14-year-olds (Arthur et al., 2014b). There are a few key components to an effective character journal. First, providing a list of virtues from each of the four domains of virtue (intellectual, moral, civic and performance) is essential to improve students' familiarity with the virtues. To have a common definition of the virtues from each domain, a glossary is also needed. Further, it is a good idea to the seven Components of Virtue and their definitions. Finally, separate the journal into sections for daily and weekly reflections. For the daily reflection sections, keep it simple. Provide a basic table of the virtues defined in the glossary. This allows the students to easily select three virtues that they found important that day or will want to focus on that day or the next. While the daily reflection section is simpler, the weekly reflection sections can be slightly larger for the students to provide more depth about the virtues that used, and how,

that week. When creating or repurposing a character journal, make sure there is enough space for the students to write for the period you are requesting the student participate (i.e., one month, six-weeks, a term, a semester). Finally, provide clear instructions on how you want the student to use the character journal. Additionally, institutions might also consider improving virtue literacy among faculty and staff by encouraging them to spend time writing and reflecting on their own character and virtues in a character journal.

### **Character Education Strategies Implemented through the Character Journal**

Of Lamb et al.'s (2021) seven character development strategies, a character journal utilizes three: habituation through practice, reflection on personal experience and awareness of situational variables. If weekly discussions are also incorporated as part of the Character Journal curriculum, then two more strategies are engaged: dialogue that increases virtue literacy and the opportunity to introduce moral reminders. Further, if students are paired into groups of two or three as part of the discussion, the strategy of friendships of mutual accountability can be employed. Finally, deliberately incorporating and discussing the virtues of people whom the students admire and respect, utilizes the strategy of engagement with virtuous exemplars. Through integrating all of Lamb et al.'s (2021) seven strategies for character development, a character journal can be a powerful tool for a schools' character development program.

## **Method**

### **Participants and Procedure**

To identify if the Character Journal and Virtue Reflection Hour helped develop the new cadets' virtue literacy, four virtue-relevant questions were asked on a pre-CBT and post-CBT survey. The pre-CBT survey was the Cadet Characteristics Inventory (CCI) administered to all 1,168 New Cadets that arrived for CBT on Reception Day (R-Day). The post-CBT survey was the Cadet Character Survey administered by the data scientists at the Simon Center for the Professional Military Ethic (SCPME) to a random sample of all four classes at West Point, to include the new cadets (newly promoted to Plebes after graduating CBT). Of the post-CBT survey, 271 new cadets answered questions #1 and #2 and 265 different Plebes answered questions #3 and #4. Results only include those who responded to the specific virtue literacy item on both surveys, as well as those who passed an attention check in the second wave. This brought the total number of participants for the Respect and Moral questions to  $N = 224$  and the participants for the Resilience and Performance questions to  $N = 226$ . Demographics were reflective of the larger cadet population (i.e., majority white and male).

### **Measure – Virtue Literacy Surveys**

The virtue literacy questions and answers came directly from the virtue glossary found in the Character Journal. The questions focused on two specific virtues and two domains of virtue. The questions included the virtue of respect found in the moral domain of virtue and the virtue of resilience found in the domain of performance virtues. The four questions were: 1) What virtue is responding affirmatively to human dignity and legitimate authority? a) Respect b) Kindness c) Inclusiveness d) Civility; 2) What type of virtue is mentioned in question \_\_? a) Moral b) Civic c) Intellectual d) Performance; 3) What virtue is adapting to adversity and recovering quickly from hardships or failures? a) Resilience b) Perseverance c) Grit d) Concentration; and 4) What type of virtue is mentioned in question \_\_? a) Moral b) Civic c) Intellectual d) Performance. The answer to questions 1-3 was “A” and the answer to question 4 was “D”.

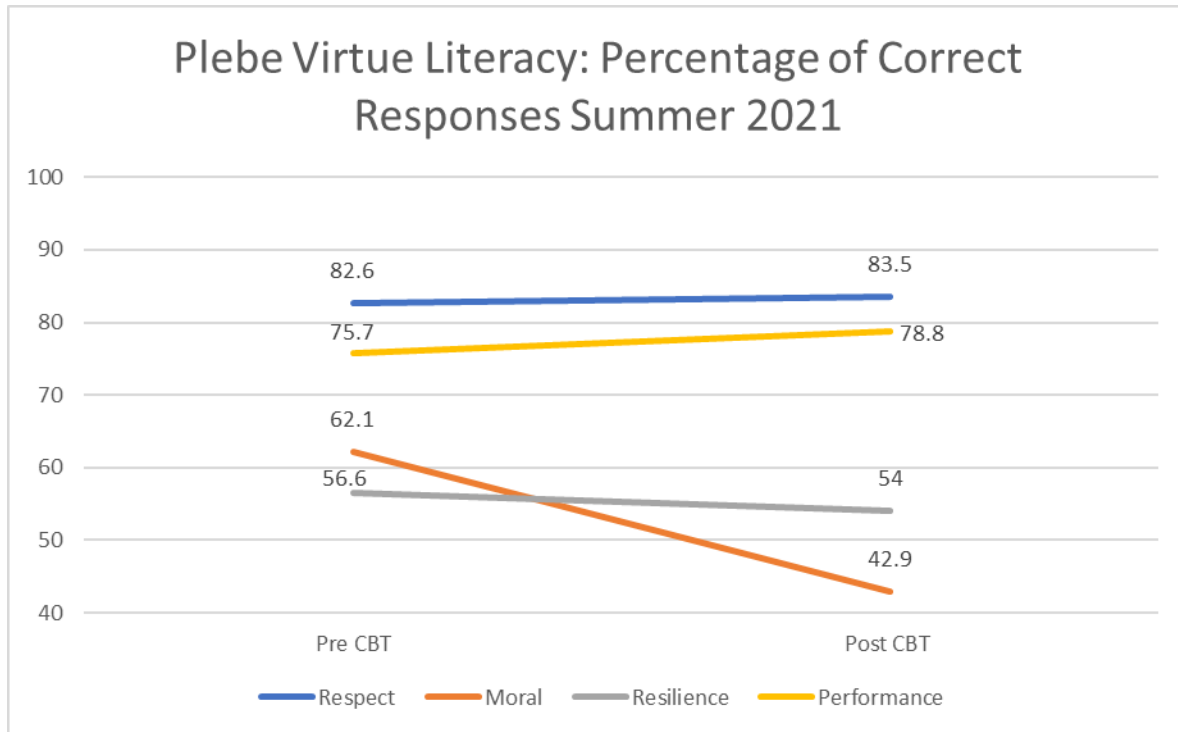
## Results

There were no notably significant changes over the course of summer training with regard to virtue literacy, although there was a significant dip in correctly responding to the moral virtue question. That said, the descriptives (see Tables 1 & 2) indicate that if a cadet did not indicate respect as a moral virtue, they categorized it as a civic virtue, which is conceptually considered very close to moral virtues. In the pre- and post-survey, if you were to add the civic and moral categories together, only 3 or 4 cadets (respectively) select intellectual or performance virtues, thus making an almost equal comparison of 100% correct responses pre- and post-CBT> Rates of correct responses pre- and post- can be seen in Figure 1.

**Table 1: PRE- and POST-CBT Response Counts**

Counts for Responses PRE-CBT					
	Civility	Inclusiveness	Kindness	Respect	Total
Respect	34	1	4	185	224
	Civic	Intellectual	Moral	Performance	
Moral	79	3	139	3	224
	Concentration	Grit	Perseverance	Resilience	
Resilience	0	15	83	128	226
	Civic	Intellectual	Moral	Performance	
Performance	6	20	29	171	226
Counts for Responses POST-CBT					
	Civility	Inclusiveness	Kindness	Respect	Total
Respect	36	0	1	187	224
	Civic	Intellectual	Moral	Performance	
Moral	96	0	124	4	224

	<b>Concentration</b>	<b>Grit</b>	<b>Perseverance</b>	<b>Resilience</b>	
<b>Resilience</b>		21	83	122	226
	<b>Civic</b>	<b>Intellectual</b>	<b>Moral</b>	<b>Performance</b>	
<b>Performance</b>	6	14	28	178	226



**Figure 2: Plebe Virtue Literacy: Percentage of Correct Responses Summer 2021**

As a reminder, question #1 is labeled as “Respect”, Question #2 is labeled as “Moral”, Question #3 is labeled “Resilience”, and Question #4 is labeled as “Performance”.

### Measure – Focus Groups

During the last week of CBT, the authors held three focus groups across the three different regiments of CBT. A total of 45 out of the 1,168 new cadets were randomly selected to take part in the focus groups. Questions focused on the method, style, and frequency of Character Journal



and reflection hour usage. Additionally, questions regarding improvement or sustainment of the Character Journal itself and the reflection hour were asked.

## **Results**

What came out of that focus groups was an overwhelming number of new cadets stated that many of the evenings (in a few cases every evening of CBT), the new cadets did not journal or have character discussions, despite it being on the training schedule. Additionally, as the focus groups contained new cadets from across all three regiments, the description of how the journal and reflection time was used, and the squad leaders' facilitation of the hour, varied wildly.

## **Discussion and Future Recommendations**

When considering both the lack of significant change in the pre-post test results and the focus group comments, it is possible that main reason for the lack of change and the inconsistency of the squad leader led reflection hour is quite possibly that the lack of facilitation training for squad leaders prior to the start of CBT. The squad leaders were given 60 minutes of training en masse prior to the start of CBT and were not given any training during CBT. The training included a discussion on the importance of reflection and journaling and an introduction to the actual character journal. Two ways to possibly improve the squad leader training on the character journal and reflection hour would be to 1) Increase the amount of time devoted to training the squad leaders. 2) Devote some of the additionally added time on facilitation training. 3) Dedicate distinct and separate training on the importance on what the character journal is for and how to use the time of the reflection hour. 4) Use exemplar faculty members to model what an hour of using the character journal and reflection time might look like for the squad leaders when they have their squad of new cadets. 5) Instead of training all 144 squad leaders at the same time, use these faculty members as facilitation trainers in order to decrease the size of trainees. If 16 faculty members are used in the training, then the squad leader training size decreases to nine. 6) Use the 16 faculty members as mentors to offer help, advice, and assistance to the squad leaders during CBT. Each faculty member could be assigned nine squads/squad leaders to mentor for the summer. If the faculty spend the reflection hour with one squad each weekday, they will observe and assist all of their assigned squads in under two weeks. This would guarantee each of the 144 squad leader in CBT would get at least three observations and opportunities for assistance during CBT. 7) Use Lamb et al.'s (2021) seven strategies for character development in the squad leader training and encourage the squad leaders to use the strategies with their squads of new cadets during CBT.

## **Conclusion**

The literature contends that virtue literacy is an important component of character education. Additionally, journaling and self-reflection have shown to cultivate and develop virtue (Arthur et al., 2014a; Arthur et al., 2014b; Emmons, 2007, 11, 31, 85; Jubilee, 2019). Using Lamb et al.'s (2021) seven strategies for character development are a good way to compliment the journaling and reflection as part of a character development curriculum. While all of the above is true, for the United States Military Academy to have a significant impact on the character development of new cadets through reflection and journaling, the seven recommendations of the authors in the previous section, must be included.

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