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Experienced Based Training of Practical Wisdom to Medical School Faculty Facilitators

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Introduction

Each year, newly graduating physicians stand and recite a medical oath, a virtuous covenant between physician and patient. Within clinical practice, physicians are expected to uphold the highest ethical standards in healthcare. Yet most medical school curricula offer little to no virtues-based guidance on how one might become a "good physician" and no training for faculty on how to support the development of character and practical wisdom in their students.

For the past seven years, we have been experimenting with virtues-based reflective dialogue as a means of nurturing practical wisdom in medical students and residents at the Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW). It has been an iterative process which began within a seed grant program designed to teach innovative skills in program development and has evolved into the student learning community environment. From our experience and an ongoing review of the literature, we hypothesized that guided, virtues-based reflective dialogue based on a concrete context (i.e., a program in development; an ethical dilemma case discussion; a complex circumstance in a clinical setting; etc.) would assist in the development of character strengths and practical wisdom.

In this paper, we will provide a review of the research and methodologies that guided the development of our reflective dialogue intervention workshop with faculty facilitators of MCW learning communities. Then, we will briefly describe the learning community environment as well as detailing the intervention itself. Finally, we will explore our findings and their potential relevance to character education with medical school faculty. A comprehensive review of the research and methodologies of the foundational work within the seed grant program has been published previously and is included in the reference section (Decker and Schmitt, 2024; 2023).

Background

The Learning Community (LC) model, which was first implemented in the 2023-24 academic year, is the keystone of MCW's approach to fostering character development and practical wisdom among medical students. Central to this model is the role of faculty facilitators, who serve as navigators in cultivating an environment conducive to ethical reflection, moral reasoning, and professional development.

The LC is designed to support medical students during the formative early years of their education. Each learning community comprises a cohort of eight students led by a faculty facilitator, who may be a physician (MD/DO) or a faculty member with advanced academic credentials (PhD). These groups meet weekly over the first 18 months of medical school, engaging in discussions on complex case studies, many of which incorporate moral and ethical dimensions.

Faculty facilitators strive to create a psychologically safe environment where students feel comfortable expressing themselves, exploring dilemmas, and making mistakes without fear of

judgment. The weekly group sessions include complex case discussions on clinical scenarios that highlight ethical challenges, fostering students' capacity for moral reasoning and practical wisdom. Faculty facilitators bring diverse professional expertise and experiences to the LC environment. Their clinical and professional backgrounds enable them to provide rich, context-specific insights during case discussions. They also meet monthly with individual students to provide personalized guidance, address challenges, and support their personal and professional development.

In order to advance flourishing in medicine, we set out to deepen character development and the skill of practical wisdom in medical students by developing a virtues-based reflection and deliberation program to accompany complex case discussions in learning communities. In order to accomplish this, we developed an experiential training workshop for LC faculty facilitators to access, identify and deepen their awareness of their own practical wisdom. Faculty facilitators are exemplars to every student in their learning community, supporting the development of complex decision making and ethical training through self-efficacy, relational agency and feedback, which are components considered important in the development of practical wisdom amongst medical trainees (Paes, P., et.al., 2019).

Workshop Development Methodology

We used a Human-Centered Design (HCD) approach to guide the development of our experiential training workshop for faculty facilitators. The goal of the workshop aimed to foster the recognition, understanding, and application of character strengths and practical wisdom in medical education. The HCD methodology was employed to help us deeply understand the landscape of the learning community environment so the workshop would meet the needs of faculty facilitators, providing a meaningful, faculty-centered experience. The process included five iterative stages: stakeholder mapping, interview discovery, persona development, value formulation, and final workshop iteration. Each stage is described below.

First, we created a stakeholder map to identify all the key individuals involved in the learning communities. We categorized stakeholders into primary (faculty facilitators), secondary (students), and tertiary groups (administrative and curricular leaders). We then hypothesized each stakeholder group's needs, goals, and challenges related to character development and practical wisdom within learning communities. This stage provided a hypothetical understanding of the ecosystem surrounding faculty facilitators and guided the subsequent interview phase.

Next, we conducted semi-structured interviews with a sample of 33 individuals, including 25 faculty members, 5 students, 2 institutional program leaders, and 1 staff member. The interviews were designed to explore their perspectives on clinical case discussions in learning communities and their relevance to character strength and practical wisdom development. We sought to understand the facilitators’ current practices in preparing for and leading discussions on case discussions, some of which contain complex moral and ethical dilemmas. We also sought to learn their comfort level with virtue language sets and their personal definition of practical wisdom. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and insights.

Workshop Development Results

Using the data from the interviews, we created a persona to represent an archetypical faculty facilitator. A persona encapsulates the key attributes, motivations, and challenges faced by a stakeholder group. We learned faculty facilitators, in general, share these attributes:

- Have a busy clinical schedule with limited time, but they make the time to prepare for discussions each week.
- Have lots of experience deliberating complex circumstances within their clinical work
- Are comfortable practicing practical wisdom but may use a different language set when describing it
- At times feels like an imposter using virtue literacy terms in case discussions with students
- Have a strong sense of purpose and fulfillment derived from mentoring students.

This persona helped inform the development of a value proposition to ensure faculty facilitators derive the most benefit from the workshop and value the experience. We hypothesized faculty facilitators, in general, would value a workshop that helped them:

- Gain a deeper awareness of their own practical wisdom by guiding them to access and identify their own reflection and deliberation practice within the complex circumstances they encounter in their clinical and institutional roles.
- Once identified, deepen their virtue literacy confidence in leading discussions on moral and ethical case studies with students by engaging in reflective and collaborative exercises with other faculty facilitators.

From our value proposition, we developed these research questions:

1. Will faculty facilitators access, identify and deepen their own practical wisdom and character strengths in an experiential reflection and deliberation workshop?
2. Will they value the experience?

This formed the foundation of the final workshop design, which underwent two previous iterations based on pilot testing. One key component of the iterative process included the introduction of character strength scales to guide reflection on how character strengths sometimes work dynamically and contextually within complex circumstances.

Reflective Dialogue Workshop Methodology

Prior to the workshop, we administered a pre-survey to assess participants' current state comfort and familiarity with practical wisdom and character strengths. The survey included self-assessment on the following dimensions:

1. Comfort with defining practical wisdom.
2. Ability to identify, share, and facilitate discussions about practical wisdom.
3. Likelihood of recognizing the use of character strengths in complex circumstances.

4. Comfort with identifying, sharing, and facilitating discussions about adjusting character strengths in response to complex situations.

Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated "strongly negative" and 5 indicated "strongly positive."

The workshop, lasting approximately 50 minutes, was divided into three key sections, detailed below.

1. Character Minute

   Participants were introduced to the concept of how character strengths operate dynamically and contextually, often working simultaneously at varying levels depending on the situation. Visual aids resembling gauges were used to demonstrate this concept. Each gauge displayed a virtue at the top of the arc and its associated overuse and underuse at the edges, using easy to understand language. The needles on the gauges were adjusted to illustrate how virtues might function in synergy or antagonism, depending on the demands of a specific circumstance. We also offered a pragmatic and personalized definition of achieving "the good" in a particular circumstance. See figure 1.

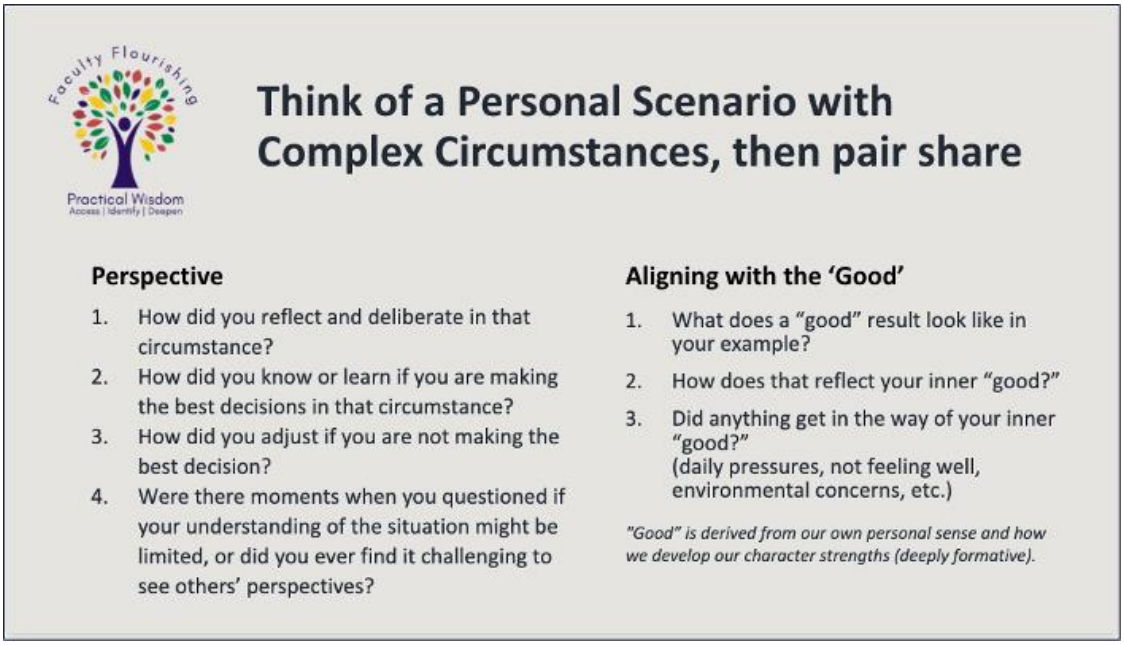
Figure 1:

2. Reflection Exercise

   Participants were guided through a reflection exercise in which they identified and described a complex circumstance they had encountered in the recent past. We defined a complex circumstance as a situation where the correct answer is unclear, where there is high risk, where self-reflection is required, where balancing multiple perspectives is necessary, or where multiple correct solutions exist (Nussbaum, H., et.al., 2020).

Participants shared their scenarios with a faculty partner, engaging in structured discussions guided by reflection questions (see Figure 2). These prompts facilitated deeper insights into the challenges and opportunities presented by such situations, as well as how participants navigated them.

Figure 2:



3. Character in Action

In this section, participants assessed character strengths by considering three specific pairings of virtues, as outlined in Figure 3 (next page). These pairs were designed to demonstrate the dynamic interplay of character strengths in complex situations. The three pairs were provided as examples and participants were encouraged to explore additional strengths or combinations that they found relevant to their personal experiences.

This exercise highlighted how character strengths operate not in isolation but as a dynamic system that adapts to the demands of a particular circumstance.

Figure 3:

Following the reflection exercises, participants engaged in a whole group discussion to share insights and experiences from their pair-share activities. This facilitated broader reflection on the dynamic application of character strengths and practical wisdom in complex circumstances and allowed participants to share their thoughts on the exercises and overall experience. This provided an opportunity for us to gather immediate feedback in a conversational setting, enriching the qualitative data.

Participants then completed a post-survey identical to the pre-survey, utilizing the same 5-point Likert scale to measure changes in comfort and familiarity with character strengths and practical wisdom. The post-survey also included an open-ended section for participants to provide qualitative comments on their workshop experience. A paired-sample t-test was performed to compare pre- and post-survey responses, assessing the statistical significance of changes in participants' comfort and familiarity with character strengths and practical wisdom.

Reflective Dialogue Workshop Results

A total of 58 participants completed the pre- and post-surveys across three pilot presentations. The cohort included 37 females and 21 males, with the following professional designations: 23 assistant professors, 16 associate professors, 5 professors, 9 residents/fellows, 3 staff members, and 2 students.

For survey questions related to practical wisdom, there was a statistically significant improvement in participants' self-reported comfort and familiarity between the pre- and post-survey responses (*p*<0.001; see Figure 4).

A subgroup analysis of residents (n=11) also demonstrated a statistically significant difference between pre- and post-survey results (*p*<0.001; see Figure 5). These findings highlight the positive impact of the workshop on participants' understanding and application of practical wisdom, regardless of their professional roles or levels of experience.

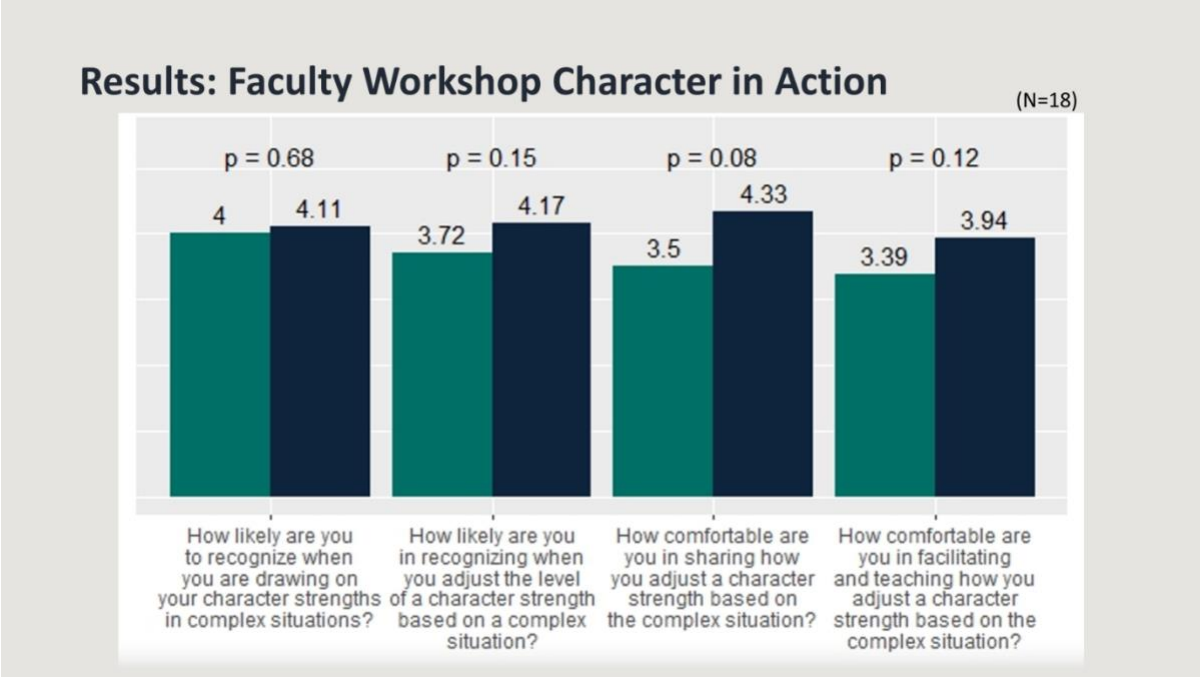
Figure 4:

Figure 5:

The character strengths-related questions were introduced during the third pilot presentation, which included 18 participants. This addition was informed by insights gained from the first two pilot sessions, prompting adjustments to the workshop to include character strengths.

For the question, *"How likely are you to recognize when you are drawing on your character strengths in complex circumstances,"* no statistically significant change was observed between the pre- and post-survey responses. However, for the remaining three questions on character strengths (see Figure 6), the results approached statistical significance, indicating a potential trend toward increased comfort and awareness following the workshop.

Figure 6:



Qualitative data was also gathered from faculty within the post-survey comment section and from residents during an informal debrief session after the workshop.

Faculty feedback on the workshop was positive, emphasizing its practical relevance and engaging format. Participants appreciated the use of visual tools to facilitate character strength conversations as well as the opportunity to reflect on a personal scenario with a partner. It was noted that they valued the character strength scales for sparking discussions on how their character strengths are at play in their decision-making. Examples of some of the comments are listed below.

> *"We should do more of these!"*
> *"I liked the application in real world settings."*
> *"It was helpful to share examples and think with gauges."*
> *"This made me more aware of the strengths and tools I use on a frequent basis."*

> *"I very much enjoyed the use of different character strength scales which allowed for a better discussion and insight into how individual choices are made."*

Resident feedback after the workshop* revealed that the exercise resonated with their training and personal development. It was noted that the reflection felt natural and could be done during a busy clinical schedule, and even helped one to recognize the positive impact of her work. Examples of comments shared by residents are listed below.

> One junior resident said she appreciated that the character strengths discussion showed she is doing good work even though she feels like she is only "surviving."
>
> One resident said it was easy and natural, and gives a process or structure to use in training and practice.
>
> Another resident said he feels like he wants to do this when he has the least amount of time.

*The resident workshop only included the practical wisdom reflective exercise, not the character strengths component.

Discussion

In medical education, faculty facilitators who engage in a guided workshop focused on a personal complex circumstance can access and identify their practical wisdom and character strengths in action. Through experiential reflection, we facilitated this process, allowing participants to recognize and articulate their existing practical wisdom. The use of visual representations was particularly impactful, helping faculty deepen their understanding of how character strengths interact and providing a framework for reflection. Participants noted that the visual tools resonated with them, offering a tangible way to reflect on their strengths and decision-making.

During the debrief sessions, there was robust discussion about the workshop's positive impact, with both faculty and residents expressing enjoyment and requesting similar future workshops. These discussions suggested that the workshop provided valuable time for reflection, fostering a deeper understanding of character strengths and practical wisdom. Additionally, the comments from participants, particularly from a junior resident who reconnected with the meaningful work she was doing despite feeling like she was "only surviving," suggest that the workshop may have offered a glimpse toward the path to flourishing.

In terms of creating a conducive environment for character formation within the faculty facilitator community, the workshop aligned with the following four of the seven domains outlined by the Oxford Character Project (Lamb, et al. 2021):

1. Reflecting in Personal Practice
   by basing the reflection on a past, personal scenario
2. Friendships and Mutual Accountability
   by using a pair-share model with a faculty colleague
3. Virtue Literacy
   by reflecting on the dynamic interplay of character strengths within complex scenarios
4. Situational and System Pressures
   by reflecting on a scenario with contextual and situational elements

Expanding these types of workshops could further strengthen the character formation environment by increasing repetition and incorporating near-peer role modeling, which could enhance the learning and development of both faculty and residents.

Next Steps

We will collaborate with the MCW Learning Community Director to share our results and explore opportunities for expanding the workshop to other contexts. Our goal is to adapt the existing three-step workshop format to address additional challenges that faculty facilitators face in their learning communities. One key area will involve developing case scenarios based on common and challenging situations that faculty facilitators encounter, such as managing students who are chronically late or less participatory in the community. By collaboratively exploring these scenarios and learning from each other, as well as from outside exemplars, we can help strengthen the faculty facilitator community.

Another important area for future development is co-learning strategies for optimizing the facilitation of case studies delivered to learning communities via the curriculum. Many of these case studies are complex and involve difficult decisions for students to consider. Training faculty facilitators to effectively guide students through these cases will further enhance the educational experience and support student learning at MCW.

Ultimately, our vision is to build a more robust faculty learning community with the goal of developing exceptional learning community faculty facilitators. Once the program is stabilized, we will assess its effectiveness in improving practical wisdom, character formation, and flourishing among participants. At this time, we are engaging in discussions and considering several different assessment tools, including the Situated WIse Reasoning Scale (Brienza, J.P., et al., 2018), the Well-Being Assessment (Weziak-Bialowolska, et al., 2021), the Harvard Flourishing Index (VanderWeele, 2017) and the Short Phronesis Measure (McLoughlin, et al., Forthcoming).

Limitations

The data collected for this study was limited to a subset of faculty participants serving as faculty facilitators and was self-reported. Additionally, the information gathering process was semi-structured and informal, which may have introduced variability in the responses and limited the depth of data collected.

The reflective and iterative approach used to refine the workshop design was informal, focusing on immediate feedback and continuous improvement.

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