UNIVERSITYOF BIRMINGHAM

Where's the character education in online higher education?

Harrison, Tom; Laco, David

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

Where's the character education in online higher education? Constructivism, virtue ethics and roles of online educators

Tom Harrison and **Dávid Laco**
The University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

Abstract

As a long-term trend as well as a crisis-response to the Covid-19 pandemic, online education is increasingly becoming a supplement and /or substitute to face-to-face teaching. Online education has many advantages; however, it also threatens the relational and character-building aspect of education. In this article, we argue that it is incumbent for universities to become intentional about how to develop their students' character and especially practical wisdom much needed in later professional life. Considering the growth of online education, we offer an initial theoretical and practical input about how such character development could be achieved in this context. Building on the theoretical basis of principles from constructivist learning and neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, we outline two important roles those running online learning programmes should fulfil; that of character educators and character facilitators and illustrate these in the context of online discussion rooms. We conclude that online higher educators, particularly those developing professionals, must pay more explicit attention to the cultivation of character and wisdom in their teaching, and we make a case for further research to understand which pedagogical approaches have the most impact. The article provides both impetus and a framework for carrying out this research. The arguments made are significant as there has been little prior theory, research and practice that can be utilised to cultivate character through online education.

Keywords

Higher education, character, online education, constructivism, virtue ethics, discussion boards

Introduction

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, universities worldwide closed their campuses and shifted towards online education (Zawacki-Richter, 2021), reflecting a broader move online as experienced

Corresponding author:
Tom Harrison, School of Education, The University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 2TT, UK.
Email: t.j.harrison@bham.ac.uk

by many of the estimated 1.2 billion children affected by school closures.[1] As teachers were suddenly required to transition their classes, tutorials and other duties to the Internet, the pandemic likely became a 'black swan' moment for higher education and re-defined how we knew it (Blumenstyk, 2020). However, the current situation strengthens (dramatically) a broader long-term shift towards 'digitalisation' of programmes and courses to make them more flexible and accessible from multiple locations. The evidence of this long-term pre-virus growth includes a three-fold increase of distance courses in the US between 2002 and 2014 (Poulin and Straut, 2016), and a further steady rise to as many as 6.9 million US students enrolling in distance courses in 2018, equalling 35% of total college enrollment that year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021).

Some have argued that e-learning is a sustaining innovation that does not revolutionise but largely extends what is already offered (Flavin, 2017, 2020). However, if it succeeds in replacing rather than supplementing face-to-face courses, it might become a disruptive innovation (Christensen et al., 2011). At this moment of the pandemic, it is not quite clear whether and when life (and education) will get back to what it was before. Nevertheless, the urgent shift online will certainly be a test of what online education offers and how well it can be utilised by universities.

What we know so far is that students can learn as effectively online as in person. Recently, this was found in a comparison of online and physical classrooms of a Master's programme for aspiring in-service teachers (Mullen, 2019), which corresponds with two meta-analyses of such comparisons and confirms the effectiveness potential of online learning (Bernard et al., 2004; Means et al., 2009). Some courses such as law, education, or business, can utilise online learning for most of their content – and indeed, several institutions now make it possible to gain an MBA fully online – however, digitalisation is much more difficult for others. For example, it would not be possible to become a dentist without practical instruction, although the recent crisis showed that even here some of the learning can occur online and that majority of students in one dental programme even considered it more efficient than the face-to-face contact (Amir et al., 2020), and future advances in A.I. and virtual reality may substitute practical instruction even further.

In the transition online and the evaluation of it, it is therefore important to be sensitive to the academic discipline/subject and its specificities, and indeed, this has been a major topic in the literature (McGreal, 2004). What has largely been neglected, however, is the possibility that students engaging in e-learning might miss out on something arguably just as important – character development.

Aims of the article

The aims of this article are twofold. First, we argue that all universities, and particularly those offering education for people in or entering professional practices, should be seeking to cultivate good character and hone practical wisdom in their students (see Jubilee Centre, 2020 for an extension of this argument). Second, we turn specifically to online education and show how it can be a possibility, rather than a threat, for character education. In support of this, we discuss the synergies between constructivist learning principles and a neo-Aristotelian model as a potential basis for character education online. Lastly, we outline two essential roles that those responsible for running predominantly online education programmes must fulfil; that of character educators and character facilitators. We illustrate the practicalities of these roles through our experience running an online masters-level course at the University of Birmingham. The fundamental argument underpinning the article is that technologies used in education should seek to enable and deepen human connections that build character and enhance practical wisdom rather than undermine them.

For the purposes of this paper, we use the term 'online education' and by it mean all courses that at least partly utilise the Internet. As such, we see it as an umbrella term that encompasses synchronous and asynchronous e-learning, digital learning, distance-learning, technology-enhanced learning, online learning and other similar forms that differ from the predominantly campus-based face-to-face programmes. The choice of such a broad and inclusive term is deliberate, as the primary aim of the article is to make theoretical and practical observations about the possibilities for character education online and clear the path for further, more focused research.

'Character' is also a complex term, and the academic literature surrounding it has been described as a semantic minefield (Berkowitz and Bier, 2007), which is likely due to the inter-disciplinary nature and the implications of the various definitional and conceptual options (for a review, see Walker et al., 2015). For the purposes of this article, we conceptualise character education as any effort to intentionally cultivate human qualities or virtues in people with the goal of individual and societal flourishing (Jubilee Centre, 2017). This is a broadly virtue ethical (or neo-Aristotelian) conception of character, and as such might be considered a sub-set of moral education. In line with the modern use of the term, this definition of character prioritises moral and intellectual virtues, but also recognises the importance of civic and performance virtues. Specifically relevant for higher education is the intellectual virtue of *phronesis* (or practical wisdom), which Aristotle conceptualised as distinct from *episteme* (disciplinary knowledge) and *techne* (technical knowledge). Phronesis is the meta-virtue that applies the other virtues in specific situations and prioritises between them when a person is conflicted (Annas, 2011; Kristjánsson, 2015). Whilst it is clearly of importance that everyone studying at universities enhance their disciplinary and often also technical knowledge, the question is whether universities need to be intentional in developing virtues (more specifically, practical wisdom), and, if yes, how this could be done online.

The case for character education in higher education

Thinking about character formation in general, it is broadly agreed that the responsibility for it lies primarily with parents. Nevertheless, for the last 30 years, there has been a resurgence of the idea that schools, too, should focus on character (see, for example, Harrison, 2021; Arthur et al., 2015). In the United Kingdom, character education has received support from parents (Jubilee Centre, 2013), politicians (Morgan, 2017), educational policymakers (Department for Education (DfE), 2014), and recently also inspectors (Ofsted, 2019). Quantitatively speaking, according to a study of 880 English schools, 97% of schools said they are trying to develop character traits, 43% offered training for all staff members, and 25% of schools even had a dedicated lead of character education (Marshall et al., 2017).

The idea that universities should be places of character formation is much more contested (Kiss and Euben, 2010), yet it is also nothing new. Most world-class universities were founded with an explicitly religious affiliation that incorporated a focus on character (Reuben, 2010) and even a quick look at the mottos and mission statements of today reveals many references to virtue and/or the desire to develop such graduates who will contribute to the common good (Jubilee Centre, 2020; Jeynes and Robinson, 2010). However, in the pressures of day-to-day reality, university representatives both past and present have often assumed a more pragmatic view, steering their institutions to focus on funding-driven research and employability-driven teaching (Arthur, 2020; Gertz, 2017; Boulton and Lucas, 2011). Others, in congruence with the famous Idea of the University (Newman, 1852), have not given up on a more holistic view of higher education and call for preparation of students "for lives of significance and responsibility" (Sullivan and Rosin, 2008: xv), by going "beyond knowledge and skills to include other aspects of being a person in society"

(Quinlan, 2011: 2). Recently, such a view has also been expressed by a UK government report, which emphasised the need to balance the prevailing economic incentive in higher education with a broader human and societal concerns (Augar, 2019).

Considering the declining trust towards the professions (Blond et al., 2015) and publicised corruption scandals (e.g., the Panama Papers), there is an increasing understanding among employers that attainment and skills – on their own – are not enough for work life (CBI, 2017). Whilst scandals likely spur many value-laden classroom-based discussions that have the potential to implicitly develop character, the argument is that this should not be left to chance and universities should make moral (alongside political and civic) development an explicit goal of their efforts (Lamb et al., 2021). Recruitment prospectuses reflect this and talk of graduate attributes, personal qualities and values – all essentially emphasising that character matters and implying that the prospective university would intentionally develop this. The practice of this, however, is often lacking in breadth and depth (Wymer and Rundle-Thiele, 2017). Because of the gap between 'talk' and 'walk', the argument is that universities should set up offices and employ staff whose explicit goal is to assist students' character development (Berkowitz and Fekula, 1999). Examples of such efforts include business ethics textbooks with activities for self-scrutiny (e.g., Trevino and Nelson, 2016), and explicit and person-centred programmes to develop character through literature (Novianti, 2017) or as in leadership development courses (Brant et al., 2019).

Challenges to the case for character education in higher education

The idea that universities have responsibilities to teach students ethics and morality has been met with scepticism, suspicion and outright rejection by some (Kiss and Euben, 2010). One vocal critic is Stanley Fish (2010), who argues that university faculty should refrain from attempts to cultivate moral virtues because otherwise this might side-line the primary goal of intellectual inquiry and risk the charge of indoctrination. In response, some argue that even (with the assumption of) such a reductionistic goal of education, students still need virtues like curiosity, perseverance and honesty and that the risk of indoctrination can be addressed through 'deliberative and dialogical practices' (Kiss and Euben, 2010) that develop the reflection and critical thinking of students (Brooks et al., 2019).

Further, the focus on character education in higher education is scrutinised by David Carr (2016), who points out that character education may only be relevant until the age of majority and only in specific vocational/professional disciplines. There is some empirical evidence to support the age argument, as university students have been found to believe that their values are formed by the time they enter university (Arthur et al., 2009). On the other hand, however, those researching emerging adulthood argue this time of life is wrought with instability and new challenges (Arnett, 2007) and as such may be an important time for 'character prospection' (Noftle, 2015). The idea that character continues to develop beyond childhood is in line with the Aristotelian notion that virtues develop throughout one's life and that any action – in youth or old age – can be "on the way to leading a good life" (Kristjánsson, 2015: 25).

Even if students' characters change, should universities be intentional about their involvement in this? According to Carr (2016), character education is appropriate for those studying on professional courses at university, but the focus should be on the cultivation of *phronesis*. However, studies have found that a focus on character and virtue is absent in most professional education courses (Jubilee Centre, 2016; Bondi et al., 2012). Schwartz and Sharpe (2010) argue that one issue is that much professional ethical education (that often takes place in higher education) focuses too much on deontological and utilitarian moral philosophy. Their arguments are that 'carrots and sticks' are

insufficient if we want people to do the right thing for the right reasons. Rather, the focus needs to be on personal character alongside rules, guidance and consequences in professional education. To create such an ethos, however, "may require considerable changes in the way professional education is conducted, including greater use of the language and typology of virtue, throughout training" (Jubilee Centre, 2016: 4).

Those who argue in favour of character education say that all universities influence the character of their students and the question is only whether this is done explicitly or implicitly (Arthur, 2005). Whereas it is perhaps not the place of universities to seek to impose a prescribed set of virtues through structured and didactic teaching, few universities could operate successfully if a set of common virtues were not in place. This is typically done through policies (e.g., about student welfare, plagiarism, freedom of speech), but also through many things which are implicit. These include the ethos and culture of the institution, communication style with teachers, the nature of teacher-student and student-student relationships, as well as all the various extracurricular opportunities characteristic of a university campus. Most people (including academics) realise that these institutional and interpersonal interactions have (moral) expectations associated with them and indeed, most have an implicitly (character-) formative potential. In other words, university is typically an immersive experience, and although proponents of character education would want to see more intentionality in this, much character formation happens implicitly. The problem, however, is that with online education, many of the above characteristics fall away, and with them, much potential for character development. Given the growth in online learning it is timely to ask: where's the character education in online education?

Where's the character education in online education?

Whilst there is exists one practical handbook for college teachers wishing to develop character of their students online (Jung, 2015), the only previous research that could be found on this question were two articles written by Johnson et al. (2010a, 2010b) and three recent conference presentations in Indonesia (Aisyah et al., 2019; Wardani et al., 2019; Hilyana and Hakim, 2018). However, these worked with small samples and primarily addressed pedagogical issues in single-course studies; they did not consider theory in any depth. Given this lack of prior research, it is not possible to determine if character education is absent in most online programmes or, if it is present, how is this framed and enacted. Related research does, however, provide some evidence as to why character education might be less visible in online education than in face-to-face learning. Examples of this research include:

- Arthur et al. (2009) who found that students and recent graduates felt that living away from home, living and studying alongside new people and getting involved with additional activities outside of studies, such as volunteering, to be character building. These activities are all less likely to occur in distance learning, which primarily utilises online learning pedagogy;
- Students studying online are time poor and focus primarily on gaining qualifications that serve particular needs (Ng, 2018), making it more likely that teachers focus on discipline, knowledge and assessment;
- Technical limitations and asynchronous learning make it harder for dynamic discussion of ethical dilemmas (Chachra, 2005);
- Character development-related aims are rarely reflected in the design and delivery of predominantly online education programmes (Johnson et al., 2010a, 2010b);

- Teachers tend to use technologies to carry out learning activities that focus on the content and the teacher (Marcelo and Yot-Domíniguez, 2019).

There are also some researchers who have championed online education as being conjunct to character education. Previous research of the first author (Harrison and Khatoon, 2016), in a study with 1456 law, teaching and medical students from institutions across Britain, revealed that 35% of them preferred to undertake a pilot course on character and professional wisdom predominantly online, with some face-to-face teaching, compared to 26%, who preferred it to be predominantly face-to-face with some online content. Subsequent interviews with tutors of these programmes revealed they had to make a difficult trade-off between extended periods of face-to-face teaching, which would have been preferable for deeper learning, and the use of online learning to ensure all the course content was covered. Likewise, in a study with engineers, Huff and Frey (2005) found no a-priori reasons why courses on character and ethics can't be taught successfully online.

Our experience supports this view. We established a new online Masters in 2016 with the explicit objective of building character education into the learning design, curriculum and the pedagogical approaches we adopted. We built the programme with the awareness that the evidence as to the potential to develop character through online education was unclear, which made our approach somewhat experimental. However, especially with the present dramatic increase of online education, we see this topic as ripe for further research and clear theoretical and practical conceptualisation and it is this that we seek to propose in the following section.

Theoretical approach: constructivist learning and virtue ethics

If character education is to be present within online education, then it is incumbent on teachers to adopt more intentional and planned approaches to ensuring it is explicit in their programmes of learning. In order to accomplish this, a new model is proposed that draws on constructivist learning theory and virtue ethical theory; arguments are made below that these theories share some common philosophical principles related to education and human development. Constructivism and virtue ethics are both complex and contested theories, and therefore, before their mutual principles can be outlined, it is necessary to start by defining and conceptualising them.

In this article, constructivism is defined as a philosophy of learning where individuals form their knowledge and understanding through their interactions with the environment. This definition is built on the work of well-known educational theorists who have been associated with constructivist approaches (Dewey, 1916; Piaget, 1983). However, perhaps most notably, social constructivism is associated with the work of Vygotsky (1962, 1978) as he conducted studies that showed that children learn better in collaboration with others, particularly adults. Communities of learners are more likely to be both engaged with learning, but also to challenge and refine it. Vygotsky's firmly held belief was that the internalisation of learning relies on effective social interaction between teachers and learners, and between learners and learners. Such a theoretical approach has underpinned much contemporary instructional design in online education (see, for example, Tam, 2000; Ershier and Stabile, 2015; Mattar, 2018). Learning technologies, such as discussion boards, encourage interaction, active learning and collaboration (Peacock and Cowan, 2018). It is perhaps not surprising that a meta-analysis of proposals submitted for research into MOOCs showed that the theme of constructivism received the greatest interest and had the highest success in attracting funding (Gasevic et al., 2014).

Constructivist practice in online education normally involves students actively and collaboratively learning through interaction with each other; as opposed to being passive recipients of

knowledge without the opportunity for critical thought or reflection. A shift from a more individualist and behaviourist approach in online education, to one that focuses on prior knowledge, experience and social learning between students has been noted (Conole et al., 2004). In this respect, Kanuka and Anderson (1999) showed how constructivism is different from what they term *instructivism,* where learners are discouraged from being critical thinkers. Numerous studies have shown positive outcomes of adopting a constructivist learning approach to online education; namely: deeper learning (Akyol and Garrison, 2011), higher achievement (Cheng and Chau, 2016), increasing student satisfaction (Arbaugh and Benbunan-Fich, 2003), better communities of inquiry/ learning and shared student values (Peacock and Cowan, 2018; Toprak, 2006), amongst others.

Constructivist learning in online education has had it critics. Kirschner, Sweller and Clark (2006) argue that repeated empirical studies have shown that what they call 'minimally guided instruction' is less effective than instructional approaches that place a strong emphasis on guiding the student process. We understand this argument, especially in relation to disciplines such as medicine or law, which require a 'core knowledge' might necessitate a more didactic style of teaching led by 'experts'. However, even if constructivist learning was less suitable for the development of *episteme* (disciplinary knowledge) and/or *techne* (technical knowledge), it could still be effective for the development of *phronesis* (practical wisdom). This is where constructivist principles align neatly with neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics principles. In virtue ethics, knowledge about what is the 'right' course of action in a particular situation requires professional judgement, especially when rules are absent and consequences unknown. The ability to make the right decision, to demonstrate practical wisdom in a professional ethical situation, is developed through time, experience and in collaboration with fellow professionals; in other words, constructivist social learning. As in a constructivist position, virtue knowledge, reasoning and practice are not seen as objective facts, but rather as important social constructs. Based on this, the teacher's role is to facilitate the space were increasingly wiser judgments might be (at times collectively) decided and acted upon.

Similarities between virtue ethics and constructivism

Academic and, increasingly, practical and policy domains have seen a resurgence of Aristotelian character education, which draws on virtue ethical philosophy and posits character development as an appropriate and viable educational goal (e.g. Annas, 2011). One reason for the popularity of this approach is the way it counters the fear that deliberate attempts to educate moral virtues are indoctrinating. This myth, and many others, have been resoundingly dismissed, because its goal is to enable students to think critically and make wise choices of their own, thus increasing rather than decreasing their agency (Kristjánsson, 2013). Similar to learning in constructivism, it views good character as dependent on social interaction and building on past knowledge and experiences. Authentic virtuous action and practice and practical wisdom might be viewed as the end goal of character education; authenticity is realised when individuals themselves, through autonomous virtue reasoning and critical reflection, seek to 'do the right thing'.

We can see in the discussion above that constructivist learning and a neo-Aristotelian model for character education share some similar features. Learning/character development:

- occurs through individuals' interactions with society (it is not pre-determined);
- is shaped by education that is socially interactive (it is not pre-conditioned);
- depends on 'teachers' successfully fulfilling a number of roles/tasks towards the learner, including: setting expectations, providing introductory knowledge, guiding educational activities, and scaffolding learning /development through reflection (it rarely occurs fully autonomously);
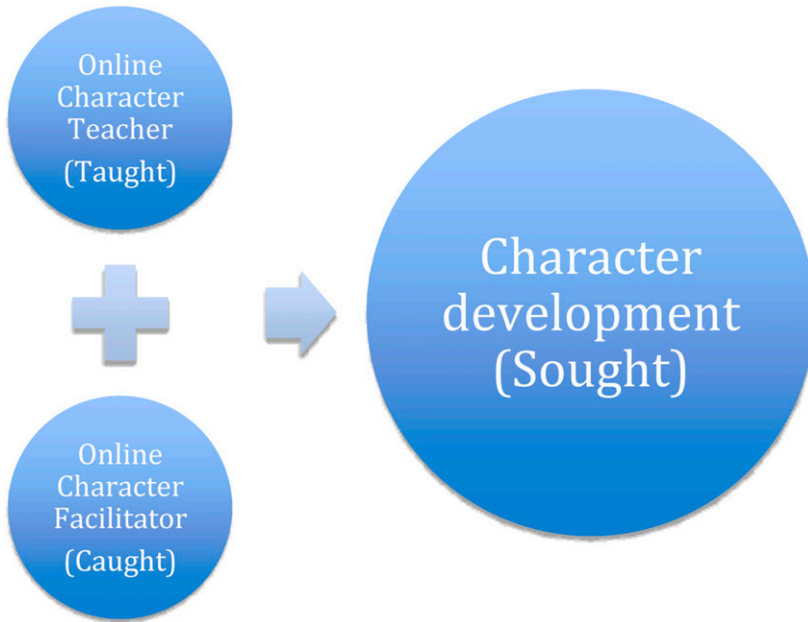
Figure 1. A practical approach to ensuring character education is present in online education.

- thrives in communities of learning that are supportive, participatory, reciprocal and offer equal opportunity (it cannot occur in a moral vacuum);
- requires individuals to think critically, independently, with reason and showing discernment (it is not indoctrinating).

Practical approach: higher education teachers as online character educators and facilitators

Drawing on constructivist learning theory and a neo-Aristotelian character education, Figure 1 below details a practical approach to ensuring character education is present in online education.

The model might be used to inform a bespoke online course on character education or an approach where character education is weaved through and within any higher education programme for any discipline. In the model, the teacher is expected to play two roles; a character educator and a character facilitator. Face-to-face, these are crucial but tend to happen naturally whilst online, they need to be deployed deliberately, and the model addresses this.

First, the role of character educators is to ensure that students are provided with the language, tools and curriculum content that is required to think about and better understand their character, which in turn informs their ethical judgments. This might be termed character *taught*. Second, the role of character facilitators is to moderate and encourage learning between students in social learning environments. This might be termed character *caught*. Third, successful fulfilment of these two roles encourage students to cultivate their own character virtues and take opportunities to hone their practical wisdom. This might be called character *sought* (see Jubilee Centre, 2017 for an overview). The ultimate aim is that through quality online teaching and facilitation students do not simply acquire knowledge and academic qualities that enable them to pass their assignments but are

also encouraged to seek out opportunities to develop their character and hone their practical wisdom. Importantly, they choose to do so.

Online character educator (character taught)

Character development in online education cannot occur in a vacuum; the teacher acting as the course leader has a critical role to play. This view is consistent with early proponents of constructivist learning, including Vygotsky, who understand the necessity for a teacher to play a role in a student's learning journey. Vygotsky believed the teacher had a role in what he called 'the zone of proximal development', and this was later linked to the idea of scaffold learning (Wood et al., 1976). This view is also consistent with the model of character education stating that teachers should be explicit, intentional and planned in their approach to character education (Jubilee Centre, 2017) but not indoctrinating. This position is not consistent with an extreme view of connectivist learning theory (Siemens, 2005), which is seen by some as a sub-theory of constructivism and touted as the learning theory for the digital age. Connectivism is a theory that is based on shifting control from the teacher to an increasingly more autonomous learner; there is no real concept of transferring knowledge, making knowledge, or building knowledge. Rather, that learning comes from growing or developing ourselves and our society in certain connected ways (Downes, 2007). Extreme proponents of connectivism argue there is no need for teachers as learning is generated by a social network of learners themselves. Although character development is about shifting control to increasingly autonomous learners, there is a role for 'teachers' to establish, enable and facilitate the educational process.

Johnson, Osguthorpe and Williams (2010: 1) contest that "rarely are character development-related aims espoused by higher education reflected in the design and delivery of distance education programs". This might be viewed as problematic because "we cannot afford the moral order of distance education to be shaped by happenstance" (Balmert and Ezzell, 2002: 54). In order for this not to be the case and for there not to be a 'free for all online', we need teachers to provide scaffolding to learning, an idea previously proposed in online education (Collis and Meeuwsen, 1999) but not in relation to character development. Vogler (2018) demonstrates that building a character-enhancing classroom community is undertaken through careful thought about the multitude of mini-interactions that take place in any learning space. This should be the same for a teacher leading an online class, where their role is to create an environment and provide the knowledge and tools that allow students to learn about themselves through interaction with others (Peacock and Cowan, 2018).

To illustrate this with our experience of running the MA course, we found that asynchronous interactive learning undertaken primarily through peer-to-peer discussion boards served as an important space for constructivist character education. Students had to learn how to disagree agreeably with their fellow students, finding ways to make critical written arguments whilst being sensitive to other learners. Through active facilitation, the tutors encouraged the students to respond to each other's posts, offering encouragement as well as thoughtful challenge. This assisted the students in building their arguments and collaborating with others, which led to new knowledge and meaning. As students posted comments, our focus was to encourage them to show key character virtues, including courage, compassion, judgment, critical discernment.

There are many activities an online character educator could undertake; two examples are provided below. Firstly, all higher education teachers should be mindful to seek opportunities to develop virtue literacy in their students; helping them to gain knowledge and understanding about why character and virtue is important, individually and as part of a well-rounded,

flourishing life of overall virtue. This might be included throughout the content as it is displayed on the learning platform, but also through announcements, facilitation of discussion boards and other communications with students. Virtue literacy could also be taught online though films, online quizzes, suggested reading and other technology-enhanced learning methods. Higher education teachers also need to prepare and present materials that require students to engage in character education.

Secondly, they might also include ethical dilemmas, particularly in professional education courses (see for example, Scott, 2016; Verrinder et al., 2016). These are also widely used in Aristotelian inspired character education as they introduce moral dilemmas to students and encourage them to think through the possible virtuous responses (Harrison et al., 2016). They are particularly useful when the dilemma contains a clash of virtues, and there is no obvious 'right' course of action (Kristjánsson, 2015). Ethical dilemmas are deemed suitable for use in undergraduate education as most late adolescents have the capacity to think about moral dilemmas from the perspective of a member of a moral community as well as hold others accountable for their actions (Damon, 1990). Dilemmas can encourage students to discuss different cases in online groups and think about the different responses to them. The process might be seen as creating online 'dilemmatic spaces' (Fransson and Grannäs, 2013) where dilemmas are chosen that do not have clear-cut right or wrong answers and encourage lively discussion and reflection of students' potential behaviour (Ribchester and Healey, 2019). The use of dilemmas is conjunct to the enhancement of professional *phronesis*, as space has been created for students to refine their approach to decision-making (Jubilee Centre, 2016; Sherman, 1999). They might also be viewed as a form of anchored instruction which has been linked with constructivism (Young and Kulikowich, 1992). Anchored learning requires teachers to mediate cooperative learning environments to explore problems over time from different perspectives. In online education, ethical dilemmas might be introduced in a number of ways; they could take the form of an animation or a professional on film explaining a dilemma that they faced in their practice.

Online character facilitator (character caught)

Just as constructivist learning is more likely to be successful in a community that is supportive and participatory, character development is most likely to succeed in conditions of reciprocity and equal opportunity. In these environments, virtues such as compassion, integrity, courage, justice, tolerance, humility and gratitude must be prioritised. Constructivist learning is therefore dependent on the creation and facilitation of a community of learning (Akyol et al., 2011). This means that teachers should establish platforms that encourage students to frequently interact and engage in deep and meaningful discussions and not to be 'lurkers' (DeNoyelles et al., 2014). As stated by Moore (2011: 19), "overall the design of the online space is the key factor to fostering and maintaining a functional community of inquiry". The focus of education, according to constructivism, is not only on content but also on process (Mattar, 2018) as otherwise we may continue to find learning which is as teacher-centred online as it is in face-to-face situations (Marcelo and Yot-Domínguez, 2019).

Discussion boards are tools of online educational platforms that enable interaction of students with the teacher and among themselves. They are the most visible and oft used approach to constructivist online education (Lyons and Evans, 2013) and have an important community-building role to play. When actively facilitated and when encouraging the students to post regularly, discussion boards can go some way to replicating the rich, deep and relational experiences often

found in a campus based higher education (Aloni and Harrington, 2018). They have been found to bring several benefits, including: increasing retention rates; increasing student participation and collaboration; deepening learning; improving literacy; reflective and exploratory learning; and building online community (Lion and Stark, 2010; Campbell et al., 2008; DeNoyelles et al., 2014). They have been described as long-distance conversation (Johnson et al., 2010a), and prominent political philosopher Michael J. Sandel argues they enable people from around the globe to come together to undertake respectful discourse through education (Sandel, 2018). The important point is that they are facilitated and set within an educational context; marking them out as different from free-flowing conversations that might occur on social media such as Twitter. There is an important balance to be struck between promoting positive critical debate and discussion and not allowing this to fall into unconstructive arguments. A key quality is learning how to disagree agreeably, which can be challenging given that social cues found in body language are not present in online discussion (Harrison, 2016). Those moderating discussion boards have a role to play to ensure they remain ethical (Chachra, 2005); which means first deciding what constitutes a 'good' discussion. To build a sense of community and participation, it is the instructor's role to reinforce, recognise, and reward students in the online classroom (Snyder, 2009), establish what is expected from student interaction on the discussion boards (Grandzol and Grandzol, 2006) and encourage social presence that would address the sense of isolation often present in online environments (Borup et al., 2012). The role of the character facilitator is to motivate and monitor discussions, ensuring that students are conducing them virtuously and with practical wisdom.

The role for the higher education teacher is to act as a facilitator of learning. This includes guiding discussion, posing meaningful questions and problems, allowing individualization without isolation, stimulating participation, encouraging reflection and summarising key ideas (Levine, 2007; Kok, 2008). Osborne et al. (2018) suggest teachers should start by introducing themselves, thus deliberately creating a horizontal, engaging and relaxed mode of interaction between participants. This can model and encourage use of the discussion board as a peer-support site as well as course education and participation site. This is an important shift from a model of linear knowledge transmission; the emphasis is back and forth knowledge transfer between learners rather than only from teachers to learners. Methods they might employ include asking 'thought-provoking questions' and "participating in the dialogue as if they were in a traditional classroom" (Kok, 2008: 94), all with the goal of helping students to form autonomous critical discernments about their and other's virtuous action and practice.

In our experience, we found it challenging, at first, to initiate online discussions, as many students expressed that they were concerned about being judged on their posts. The teaching team had to put in considerable effort, particularly during the virtual welcome week, to establish the expectations for using the boards to serve as places to show vulnerability, to ask questions and to seek help, rather than to 'show off'. Many students commented that after they had seen our initial posts and sent their first post and received positive and supportive feedback, they were much happier using the boards going forward. Over time, we worked with the students to use the boards in ways that sought to develop the critical discernment of their fellow students, for example, through sharing examples of situations from their professional practices where different values come into conflict. Students were encouraged to engage with these dilemmas, providing examples of how they dealt with similar situations in the past and/or offer advice for their fellow students.

One of the advantages of discussion boards is that they can ensure personalised and contextualised conversations about character (Johnson et al., 2010a). There is a risk that these may become shallower than in a synchronous online experience, however, on the other hand, they give learners as much time to think as each of them needs. This advantage might not only address

language problems sometimes experienced by international students (Hughes, 2013), but it may also enable everyone to reflect on the topic more deeply. This is in line with Johnson et al. (2010b: p. 6), who found that:

> asynchronous nature of the course and the flexible time frame contributed to students exploring moral themes in greater depth created an environment where students could grow in self-discipline, and helped contribute to a more personal and one-on-one relationship than typically experienced by the students in other courses—facilitating students' deeper approach to learning and exploration of moral themes in the content of the course.

Testa and Egan (2015) found in research with social workers that those students who engage with both discussion boards and written reflections were better able to critically reflect on their social work practice. This might be because the experience of grappling with challenging moral issues increases moral judgement and thus ethical discussions integrated in the curriculum increase students' moral maturity (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). Indeed, this could be viewed as the ultimate goal of character education – to support students in developing virtuous habits and seeking out opportunities to hone their practical wisdom. This in turn enables them – more often than not – to make the right ethical judgments at the right time.

Conclusion

This article makes the case that for students and society to flourish, then higher education institutions and teachers have a responsibility to be explicit in their attempts to cultivate character and hone practical wisdom in students. In this article, we considered how this might be undertaken more intentionally in online education, which has been gaining popularity long-term but also received extraordinary attention due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the associated social-distancing measures (i.e., campus closures). Given that learning at home has been somewhat normalised since the pandemic, we ask and seek to partially answer the following important question: where is the character education in online learning?

Whilst there has been a significant body of research investigating character education undertaken in classrooms and a significant body of research investigating current and emerging approaches to online learning, there has been a relative dearth of literature that brings these areas together. It is not claimed that the article solves all the issues in this area but instead provides a starting place from which to investigate further how important character qualities might be cultivated in online learning environments. Before the publication of this paper, we could find only one handbook (Jung, 2015), two research-articles (by the same author) and three conference presentations that addressed this question. The papers by Johnson et al. (2010a, 2010b) and the three conference presentations in Indonesia (Aisyah et al., 2019; Wardani et al., 2019; Hilyana and Hakim, 2018) were based on research with small samples and primarily addressed pedagogical issues in single-course studies. Our article moves the discussion significantly by addressing the theoretical lacuna. We provide here the first framework that brings together the theories of constructivism and virtue ethics and, in doing so, provides a way forward for future research and practice in the area.

In the article, we have only had space to show how the framework might inform the development and use of one common online learning approach – discussion boards. By providing an example from our practice, our aim was to show how character education might be made more explicit by higher education teachers. Many other digital learning pedagogical approaches could Wbe subjected to the same analysis, including online tutorials, academic mentoring, synchronous seminars,

and peer-to-peer distance learning. These and others should be the focus of similar research using the theoretical framework outline in the article. More importantly, a new era of research is required to empirically evaluate if and how different online learning tools impact character development. We have started to initiate such research, and we invite others to join us.

Online education often gets framed in economic language of efficiency, and at the same time is increasingly a training ground for those entering professional practices requiring moral probity through virtue reasoning and virtue practice. By prioritising character education, teachers can ensure that learning experiences are transformative and not just transactional. This will ensure that students, through social learning and critical discernment, seek out opportunities to hone their character and practical wisdom. Based on this theoretical approach, it is the responsibility of the higher education teacher to act as an online character educator (taught) and online character facilitator (caught) in a way to ensure autonomous character development (sought). It is character sought that should be the ultimate aim of online character education – that students seek, desire and freely pursue their own character development. Although there is no guarantee that quality online teaching and facilitation will lead to character sought, we argue that if teachers are intentional, conscious, planned and reflective in their character educational efforts, there is an increased likelihood that students will see the importance of virtues and practical wisdom. The wider practical implications are that technologies used in education are directed towards enabling and deepening human connections that are vital for individual and societal flourishing.[2]

Declaration of conflicting interests

Funding

ORCID iD

Tom Harrison https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2767-465X

Notes

1. Statistics from the UNESCO global tracker of children in schools during the pandemic https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse.
2. We would like to thank our three anonymous reviewers for their comments on an earlier draft of this manuscript. We would also like to thank Matthew Collins for proofreading the article prior to submission.

References

Akyol X and Garrison R (2011) Understanding cognitive presence in an online and blended community of inquiry: assessing outcomes and processes for deep approaches to learning. *British Journal of Educational Technology* 42(2): 233–250.

Akyol X, Vaughan N and Garrison R (2011) The impact of course duration on the development of a community of inquiry. *Interactive Learning Environments* 19(3): 231–246.

Aisyah N, Chotimah U and Meryansumayeka M (2019) Developing e-learning content based on character values in mathematics teaching and learning. *Journal of Physics: Conference Series* 1166: 012016.

Amir LR, Tanti I, Maharani DA, et al. (2020) Student perspective of classroom and distance learning during COVID-19 pandemic in the undergraduate dental study program universitas Indonesia. *BMC Medical Education* 20(1): 1–8.

Aloni M and Harrington C (2018) Research based practices for improving the effectiveness of asynchronous online discussion boards. *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology* 4(4): 271–289.

Annas J (2011) *Intelligent Virtue*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Arbaugh J and Benbunan-Fich R (2003) Testing the application of learning theories to web-based MBA courses. *Academy of Management Proceedings* 1: A1–A6.

Arnett JJ (2007) Emerging adulthood: what is it, and what is it good for? *Child Development Perspectives* 1(2): 68–73.

Arthur J (2005) Student character in the British university. In: Arthur J and Bohlin KE (eds), *Citizenship and Higher Education: The Role of Universities in Community and Society*. London and New York: RoutledgeFalmer, pp. 6–24.

Arthur J (2020) *The Formation of Character in Education: From Aristotle to the 21st Century*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Arthur J, Kristjánsson K, Walker D, et al. (2015) *Character Education in UK Schools: Research Report*. Birmingham, England: University of Birmingham, Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, Available at: https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/Research%20Reports/Character_Education_ in_UK_Schools.pdf (accessed 10 March 2021).

Arthur J, Wilson K, Godfrey R, et al. (2009) *Graduates of Character - Values and Character: Higher Education and Graduate Employment. Project Report*. Birmingham, England: University of Birmingham.

Augar P. (chair) (2019) Independent panel report to the review of post-18 education and funding. Post-18 education and funding review panel. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/ uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/805127/Review_of_post_18_education_and_funding.pdf (accessed 10 March 2021).

Balmert ME and Ezzell MH (2002) Leading learning by assuring distance instructional technology is an ethical enterprise. In: Paper presented at the annual conference of the adult higher education alliance, Pittsburgh, PA.

Berkowitz MW and Bier MC (2007) What works in character education? *Journal of Research in Character Education* 5(1): 29–48.

Berkowitz MW and Fekula MJ (1999) Educating for character. *About Campus* 4(5): 17–22.

Bernard RM, Abrami PC, Lou Y, et al. (2004) How does distance education compare with classroom instruction? A meta-analysis of the empirical literature. *Review of Educational Research* 74(3): 379–439.

Blond P, Antonacopoulou E and Pabst A (2015). *Professions We Trust: Fostering Virtuous Practitioners in Teaching, Law and Medicine*: London, UK: Res Publica.

Blumenstyk G (2020) *Why Coronavirus Looks Like A 'Black Swan' Moment For Higher Ed*. The Chronicle of Higher Education. Available at: https://www.chronicle.com/article/Why-Coronavirus-Looks-Like-a/ 248219 (accessed 11 March 2021).

Bondi L, Carr D, Clark C, et al. (eds), (2012). *Towards Professional Wisdom: Practical Deliberation in the People Professions*: Abingdon, England: Routledge.

Borup J, West RE and Graham CR (2012) Improving online social presence through asynchronous video. *The Internet and Higher Education* 15(3): 195–203.

Boulton G and Lucas C (2011) What are universities for? *Chinese Science Bulletin* 56(23): 2506–2517.

Brant J, Lamb M, Burdett E, et al. (2019) Cultivating virtue in postgraduates: an empirical study of the oxford global leadership initiative. *Journal of Moral Education* 49: 1–21.

Brooks E, Brant J and Lamb M (2019) How can universities cultivate leaders of character? Insights from a leadership and character development program at the university of oxford. *International Journal of Ethics Education* 4(2): 167–182.

Campbell M, Gibson W, Hall A, et al. (2008) Online vs. Face-to-face discussion in a web-based research methods course for postgraduate nursing students: a quasi-experimental study. *International Journal of Nursing Studies* 45: 750–759.

Carr D (2016) Virtue and character in higher education. *British Journal of Educational Studies* 65(1): 109–124.

CBI (2017) *Helping the UK to Thrive*. CBI/Pearson education and skill survey, Available at: https://www.cbi.org.uk/media/1341/helping-the-uk-to-thrive-tess-2017.pdf (accessed on 10 March 2021).

Chachra D (2005) Beyond course-based engineering ethics instruction: commentary on "Topics and cases for online education in engineering". *Science and Engineering Ethics* 11(3): 459–461.

Cheng G and Chau J (2016) Exploring the relationships between learning styles, online participation, earning achievement and course satisfaction; an empirical study of blended learning course. *British Journal of Educational Technology* 47(2): 257–278.

Christensen C, Horn M, Caldera L, et al. (2011) *Disrupting College: How Disruptive Innovation Can Deliver Quality and Affordability to Postsecondary Education*. Washington, DC: Center for American Progress.

Collis B and Meeuwsen E (1999) Learning to learn in a WWW-based environment. In: French D, Hale C, Johnson C, et al. (eds), *Internet Based Learning: An Introduction and Framework for Higher Education and Business*. London, UK: Kogan Page.

Conole G, Dyke M, Oliver M, et al. (2004) Mapping pedagogy and tools for effective learning design. *Computers and Education* 43: 17–33.

Damon W (1990) *The Moral Child: Nurturing Children's Natural Moral Growth*. New York, NY: The Free Press.

DeNoyelles A, Zydney JM and Chen B (2014) Strategies for creating a community of inquiry through online asynchronous discussions. *Journal of Online Learning and Teaching* 10(1): 153–165.

Dewey J (1916) *Democracy and Education. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University.

Department for Education (DfE) (2014) *Guidance on Promoting British Values in Schools*. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/news/guidance-on-promoting-british-values-in-schools-published

Downes S (2007) *'Msg 1, Re: What Connectivism Is,' Online Connectivism Conference*. University of Manitoba. Available at: http://ltc.umanitoba.ca/moodle/mod/forum/discuss.php?d=12 (accessed 09 March 2021).

Ershier J and Stabile C (eds), (2015). *Constructivism Reconsidered in the Age of Social Media*. San Fracisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Fish S (2010) I know it when i see it. A reply to kiss and euben. In: Kiss E and Euben P (eds), *Debating Moral Education: Rethinking the Role of the Modern University*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Flavin M (2017) *Disruptive Technology Enhanced Learning: The Use and Misuse of Digital Technologies in Higher Education*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Flavin M (2020) *Re-imagining Technology Enhanced Learning Critical Perspectives on Disruptive Innovation*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Fransson G and Grannäs J (2013) Dilemmatic spaces in educational contexts – towards a conceptual framework for dilemmas in teachers work. *Teachers and Teaching* 19(1): 4–17.

Gasevic D, Kovanovic V, Joksimovic S, et al. (2014) *Where is Research on Massive Open Online Courses Headed? A Data Analysis of the MOOC Research Initiative*. Available at: http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/1954/3099 (accessed 10 March 2021).

Gertz SK (2017) Universities and the humanities, then and now. *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 41(6): 844–856.

Grandzol J and Grandzol C (2006) Best practices for online business education. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning* 7(1): 1–18.

Harrison T (2016) Virtuous reality: moral theory and research into cyber-bullying. *Ethics and Information Technology* 17(4): 275–283.

Harrison T and Khatoon B (2016) *Virtue, Practical Wisdom and Professional Education*. Birmingham: University of Birmingham. Available at: https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/Research%20Reports/Interventions.pdf (accessed 8 March 2021).

Harrison T, Morris I and Ryan J (2016) *Teaching Character in the Primary Classroom*. London, UK: Sage.

Harrison T (2021) *THRIVE; How to Cultivate Character so Your Children Can Flourish Online*. London, UK: Little Brown.

Hilyana FS and Hakim MM (2018) Integrating character education on physics courses with schoology based learning. *Journal of Information Technology Education: Research* 17: 577–593.

Huff C and Frey W (2005) Moral pedagogy and practical ethics. *Science and Engineering Ethics* 11(3): 389–408.

Hughes H (2013) International students using online information resources to learn: complex experience and learning needs. *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 37(1): 126–146.

Jeynes WH and Robinson D (2010) Character education in christian higher education: a historical analysis and contemporary challenge (part I). *Christian Higher Education* 9(4): 295–315.

Johnson M, Osguthorpe R and Williams D (2010a) The phenomenon of character development in a distance education course. *Journal of College and Character* 11(1): 7.

Johnson M, Osguthorpe R and Williams D (2010b) Pedagogical considerations that may encourage character development in a distance education course. *Journal of College and Character* 11(2).

Jung JJ (2015) *Character Formation in Online Education: A Guide for Instructors, Administrators, and Accrediting Agencies*. Zondervan Academic.

Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (2016) *Statement on Character, Virtue and Practical Wisdom in Professional Practice*. Birmingham: University of Birmingham. Available at: www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/Statement_Character_Virtue_ Practical_Wisdom_Professional_Practice.pdf (accessed 11 March 2021).

Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (2017) *A Framework for Character Education in Schools*. Birmingham: University of Birmingham. Available at: http://jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/character-education/Framework%20for%20Character%20Education.pdf (accessed 11 March 2021).

Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (2013) Jubilee Centre Parents' Survey, Birmingham: University of Birmingham, Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, [Online], Available at: www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/character-education/Polling/PopulusParentsPoll.pdf

Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (2020) *Character Education in Universities: A Framework for Flourishing*. University of Birmingham. Available at: https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/character-education/Character_Education_in_Universities_Final_Edit.pdf (accessed 5 March 2021).

Kanuka H and Anderson T (1999) Using constructivism in technology-mediated learning: constructing order out of the chaos in the literature. *Radical Pedagogy* 1(2). https://radicalpedagogy.icaap.org/content/issue1_2/02kanuka1_2.html

Kirschner P, Sweller J and Clark R (2006) Why minimal guidance during instruction does not work: an analysis of the failure of constructivist, discovery, problem-based, experiential, and inquiry-based teaching. *Educational Psychologist* 41(2): 75–86. DOI: 10.1207/s15326985ep4102_1

Kiss E and Euben P (eds), (2010). *Debating Moral Education: Rethinking the Role of the Modern University*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Kok A (2008) An online social constructivist tool: a secondary school experience in the developing world. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education* 9(7): 87–98. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED502082.pdf

Kristjánsson K (2015) *Aristotelian Character Education*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Kristjánsson K (2013) Ten myths about character, virtue and virtue education–plus three well-founded misgivings. *British Journal of Educational Studies* 61(3): 269–287.

Lamb M, Brant J and Brooks E (2021) How is virtue cultivated?: seven strategies for postgraduate character development. *Journal of Character Education* 17(1): 81–108.

Levine S (2007) The online discussion board. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 2007(113): 67–74.

Lion RW and Stark G (2010) A glance at institutional support for faculty teaching in an online learning environment. *Educause Quarterly* 33(3): 23–39.

Lyons T and Evans MM (2013) Blended learning to increase student satisfaction: an exploratory study. *Internet Reference Services Quarterly* 18(1): 43–53.

Marcelo C and Yot-Domínguez C (2019) From chalk to keyboard in higher education classrooms: changes and coherence when integrating technological knowledge into pedagogical content knowledge. *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 43(7): 975–988.

Marshall L, Rooney K, Dunatchik A, et al. (2017) *Developing Character Skills in Schools*. Department for Education, Available at: http://doc.ukdataservice.ac.uk/doc/8353/mrdoc/pdf/8353_developing_character_skills_survey-report.pdf (accessed 10 March 2021).

Mattar J (2018) Constructivism and connectivism in education technology: active situated, authentic, experimental and anchored learning. *RIED: Revista Iberoamericana de Educación a Distancia* 21(2): 201–217.

McGreal R (ed), (2004) *Online Education Using Learning Objects*. Abingdon: Routledge Falmer.

Means B, Toyama Y, Murphy R, et al. (2009) *Evaluation of Evidence-Based Practices in Online Learning: A Meta-Analysis and Review of Online Learning Studies.* ' U.S. Department of Education. Available at: http://www.gilfuseducationgroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/Evidence-Based-Practices-in-Online-Learning-Review-of-Online-Learning-Studies.pdf (accessed 10 March 2021).

Moore D (2011) Using collaborative online discussion effectively for teaching. *Journal of Applied Learning Technology* 1(4): 19–23.

Morgan N (2017) *Taught Not Caught: Educating for 21st Century Character*. Melton: John Catt Educational.

Mullen CA (2019) Does modality matter? A comparison of aspiring leaders' learning online and face-to-face. *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 44(5): 670–688.

National Center for Education Statistics (2021) *Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Fall Enrollment Component, Spring 2013 through Spring 2019*. US Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

Newman JH (1852) *The Idea of the University*. Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press.

Ng C (2018) I learn for a job promotion!": the role of outcome-focused career goals in motivating distance learners to learn. *Distance Education* 39(3): 390–410.

Noftle EE (2015) Character across early emerging adulthood: character traits, character strivings, and moral self-attributes. In: Miller CB, Furr RM, Knobel A, et al. (eds), *Character: New Directions From Philosophy, Psychology, And Theology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 490–521.

Novianti N (2017) Examples of projects - teaching character education to college students using bildungs-romans. *International Journal of Instruction* 10(4): 255–272.

Ofsted (2019) *Character Education: Framework Guidance*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/849654/Character_Education_Framework_Guidance.pdf

Osborne D, Byrne J, Massey D, et al. (2018) Use of online asynchronous discussion boards to engage students, enhance critical thinking, and foster staff-student/student-student collaboration: a mixed method study. *Nurse Education Today* 70: 40–46. DOI: 10.1016/j.nedt.2018.08.014

Pascarella ET and Terenzini PT (2005) *How College Affects Students: A Third Decade of Research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, Volume 2.

Peacock S and Cowan J (2018) Towards online student-directed communities of inquiry. *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 42(5): 678–693.

Piaget J (1983) Piaget's theory. In: Mussen P (ed), *Handbook of Child Psychology*. 4th edition. New York, NY: Wiley, Vol. 1.

Poulin R and Straut T (2016) *WCET Distance Education Enrollment Report 2016*. WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies website. Available at: http://wcet.wiche.edu/initiatives/research/WCET-Distance-Education-Enrollment-Report-2016 (accessed on 10 March 2021).

Quinlan K (2011) *Developing the Whole Student: Leading Higher Education Initiatives that Integrate Mind and Heart*. Leadership Foundation for Higher Education. Available at: https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/assets.creode.advancehe-document-manager/documents/lfhe/asset_images_docs/research_resources/research/stimulus_papers/2011/2011-Stimulus%20-%20Quinlan%20-%20Developing%20the%20whole%20student.pdf_1572865844.pdf (accessed 10 March 2021).

Reuben J (2010) The changing contours of moral education.in American colleges, universities. In Kiss E and Euben JP. (eds), *Debating Moral Education: Rethinking the Role of the Modern University*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp. 27–55.

Ribchester C and Healey RL (2019) Realism, reflection and responsibility: the challenge of writing effective scenarios to support the development of ethical thinking skills. *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 43(1): 101–114.

Sandel M (2018) Michael J. Sandel on converting IT to deliberative technology. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8AF7q9OIFw (accessed 10 March 2021).

Schwartz B and Sharpe K (2010) *Practical Wisdom: The Right Way to Do the Right Thing*. New York, NY: Penguin.

Scott E (2016) Examining the legal, professional and ethical issues of gaining patient consent in the United Kingdom. In *Multicultural Society and Aging – Challenges for Nursing in Europe*. Celje, Slovenia: College of Nursing in Celje, pp. 46–53.

Sherman N (1999) The habituation of character. In: Sherman N (ed), *Aristotle's Ethics: Critical Essays*. Maryland, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc.

Siemens G (2005) Connectivism: a learning theory or the digital age. *International Journal of Instructional Technology and Distance Learning* 2(1): 3–10.

Snyder MM (2009) Instructional-design theory to guide the creation of online learning communities for adults. *TechTrends* 53(1): 48–56.

Sullivan W and Rosin M (2008) *A New Agenda for Higher Education: Shaping a Life of the Mind for Practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Tam M (2000) Constructivism, instructional design, and technology: implications for transforming distance learning. *Educational Technology and Society* 3(2): 50–60.

Testa D and Egan R (2015) How useful are discussion boards and written critical reflections in helping social work students critically reflect on their field education placements? *Qualitative Social Work* 15(2): 263–280.

Toprak E (2006) Social constructivism and international cooperation in distance education. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education* 7(3): 174–183.

Trevino LK and Nelson KA (2016) *Managing Business Ethics: Straight Talk about How to Do it Right*. John Wiley & Sons.

Verrinder JM, Ostini R and Phillips CJ (2016) Differences in moral judgment on animal and human ethics issues between university students in animal-related, human medical and arts programs. *Plos One* 11(3): e0149308. Available at: https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0149308 (accessed on 09 March 2021).

Vogler C (2018) Courage in the classroom. In: Harrison T and Walker D (eds), *The Theory and Practice of Virtue Education*. London, UK: Routledge.

Vygotsky LS (1962) *Thought and Language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Vygotsky LS (1978) *Mind in Society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Walker DI, Roberts MP and Kristjánsson K (2015) Towards a new era of character education in theory and in practice. *Educational Review* 67(1): 79–96.

Wardani F, Suparmi S and Aminah NS (2019) Evaluating the e-learning on students' character: blended learning model as a strategy to improve students' character. *Journal of Physics: Conference Series* 1155: 012029. DOI: 10.1088/1742-6596/1155/1/012029

Wood D, Bruner J and Ross G (1976) The role of tutoring in problem solving. *Journal of Child Psychology and Child Psychiatry* 17: 89–100.

Wymer W and Rundle-Thiele SR (2017) Inclusion of ethics, social responsibility, and sustainability in business school curricula: a benchmark study. *International Review on Public and Nonprofit Marketing* 14(1): 19–34.

Young MF and Kulikowich JM (1992) 'Anchored instruction and anchored assessment'. In: Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American educational research association, San Francisco, CA, Pp1-27.

Zawacki-Richter O (2021) The current state and impact of covid-19 on digital higher education in Germany. *Human Behavior and Emerging Technologies* 3(1): 218–226.