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CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT IN A DISTANCE EDUCATION
LITERATURE COURSE: PERSPECTIVES ON INDEPENDENT
STUDY ENGLISH 395R—CHRISTIAN FANTASY LITERATURE

by

Michael C. Johnson

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Instructional Psychology & Technology

Brigham Young University

December 2009

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a dissertation submitted by

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This dissertation has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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As chair of the candidate's graduate committee, I have read the dissertation of Michael C. Johnson in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

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ABSTRACT

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT IN A DISTANCE EDUCATION
LITERATURE COURSE: PERSPECTIVES ON INDEPENDENT STUDY ENGLISH
395R—CHRISTIAN FANTASY LITERATURE

Michael C. Johnson

Department of Instructional Psychology & Technology

Doctor of Philosophy

The goals of higher education often entail the development of students' character. Rarely, however, are these character development goals connected to the unique design and delivery of distance education programs. Additionally, the research literature that explores the character development aspects of distance education is sparse. Thus the purpose of this study is to contribute to the understanding of how character development may occur in a distance context. Taking a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, I examined instructor and student perceptions of character development in a fantasy literature independent study course.

Findings indicate that students perceived development of traits and strengths in the following areas: moral character (moral desires, moral discernment, and moral

courage); relational character (improved relationships, open-mindedness, the sharing of learning with others, and improved communication); spiritual character (humility, faith, hope, and charity); and performance character (self-discipline and self-directedness in learning, analytical and deep approach to learning, imagination and creativity, appreciation of literature, motivation to continue education, and self-confidence).

Participants also perceived a variety of corresponding approaches, methods, factors, and influences for bringing about such character development, such as (a) the applicability of literary themes and character attributes and experiences to their lives; (b) the conversational nature of the instruction (an invitational and deep learning approach, preparation for reading and analyzing the literature, offering choices to enhance engagement and relevance, asking questions that promote analysis and personal connections with the literature, affording multiple opportunities to write, and providing timely, encouraging, and helpful feedback); (c) a trusting, respectful, and friendly relationship between the student and instructor (obtained through the instructional conversation and the instructor's personal and engaging writing style, personalizing contacts, being helpful and showing concern, and being sincere and honest); (d) the independent study context (flexibility in time and location and a more independent learning experience); and (e) the students' readiness and agency (choices, initiative, and effort). Students also perceived interrelationships among these elements.

The study offers possible implications for character development in the context of distance education, as well as directions for future research.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Any effort of this size is never the work of one person alone. I owe a debt of gratitude to so many (for their assistance, support and encouragement, kind words, and small acts of service) that I cannot begin to name them all. Yet I need to make particular mention of individuals whose contributions were especially invaluable.

This study would not have been possible without Dr. Walker and the students who participated. I express my gratitude to each one for sharing their time, experiences, and insights as well as their support.

I wish to thank my current and former colleagues at the Center for Teaching & Learning (CTL) for their support and patience during the dissertation process. In particular, I wish to thank Aubrey Kiene and Andrea Velazquez for assistance with transcriptions, Susan Eliason for offering editing advice, and my supervisors Stephanie Allen, Larry Seawright, Jon Mott, and Russell Osguthorpe, for providing the support and encouragement necessary to complete this work. I also want to thank those at the Department of Independent Study and Division of Continuing Education who helped facilitate this study, particularly Mary Stevens and Justin Johansen.

A special thanks also goes to Jessica Draper, my former colleague at the CTL, for offering advice on early drafts and willingly editing a later draft of this dissertation. I also extend my gratitude to Hilary Hendricks for her editing services.

I want to express my appreciation to my dissertation committee, in particular my chair, Dr. David Williams, for their patience, support, and guidance. They have made this work better and have helped me progress personally and professionally in many ways. Additionally, I want to thank Richard Osguthorpe and Russell Osguthorpe for helping me prepare portions of this dissertation for presentations and publication. Their mentoring in this respect is very much appreciated.

Thanks to all my family and friends for their support and love through this process. I want to thank my mom for believing in me. I thank my children, Bethany, Risa, Hyrum, Camilla, McKaylee, and Maxwell, for their support, sacrifice, and prayers. And most especially to my wonderful wife, Kari, who not only suffered and sacrificed but also read and offered editing advice on several drafts. She may have read this dissertation as many times—if not more—than the members of my committee. She stuck with me through the hard times and even managed to write a book of her own along the way. She is my inspiration!

I owe a final debt of gratitude to my Father in Heaven, my Savior Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost. They provided strength, comfort, love, and guidance when I needed it most. I humbly acknowledge that I could not have finished this work without their divine assistance.

In so acknowledging these contributions, I also willingly accept responsibility for any faults or weaknesses in this work.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Historically the development of character has been and continues to be an important outcome of higher education (Berkowitz & Fekula, 1999; Bowen, 1977; Boyer, 1987; Chickering, 2006; Dalton, Russell, & Klein 2004; Dewey, 1916). Philosophers and educators from Socrates and Aristotle to Dewey and other modern educational theorists have argued that the outcomes of education should include not only intellectual development but also character development (Boyer, 1987; Dalton, Russell, & Klein 2004). Boyer (1987) charged educators, particularly the teachers of undergraduates, with preparing students for civic service:

We need educated men and women who not only pursue their own personal interests but are also prepared to fulfill their social and civic obligations. And *it is during the undergraduate experience*, perhaps more than any other time, *that these essential qualities of mind and character are refined* [italics added]. (p. 7)

More broadly, some theorists, philosophers, and scholars have stated that education is a moral endeavor—and consequently, the moral implications and effects, for better or worse, on students' character development are unavoidable (Balmert & Ezzell, 2002; Berkowitz, 2002; Berkowitz & Fekula, 1999; Carr, 2005; Lewis, 1965).

Although emphasis on character outcomes has waned at times, there has been a recent resurgence of interest in character development in higher education (Berkowitz & Fekula, 1999). In light of public and corporate scandals (such as illegal lobbyist activity; accounting irregularities at Enron, Arthur Anderson, and WorldCom; and questionable practices in the financial and credit industries), business leaders, university presidents (Carroll, 2003), and educational philosophers have called upon those who work in higher education to devote more concern to the development of moral character and ethics. Additionally, as many universities include a character component in their goals and

university mission statements (see Berkowitz & Fekula, 1999; Kuh, 1998), accrediting boards have called upon these institutions to more closely align their institutional, program, and course goals (The Higher Learning Commission, 2003; Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2003). Thus there seems to be a concern about character development at all levels of the university experience.

More recently, distance education has become an increasingly prevalent part of higher education. There are even many programs that are available completely (or mostly) online (Eastmond, 1998; Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2004). Some universities allow or require students to complete their programs of study from a distance, and this trend is expected to grow (Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2004). Gunawardena and McIsaac described the growth of distance education as follows:

Distance education has experienced dramatic growth both nationally and internationally since the early 1980s. It has evolved from early correspondence education using primarily print based materials into a worldwide movement using various technologies. The goals of distance education, as an alternative to traditional education, have been to offer degree granting programs, to battle illiteracy in developing countries, to provide training opportunities for economic growth, and to offer curriculum enrichment in non traditional educational settings. A variety of technologies have been used as delivery systems to facilitate this learning at a distance. (p. 356)

There are several other reasons for the expected growth of distance education, such as the need to use university resources more effectively, to reach or serve a larger student population (including non-traditional students), and to provide working professionals with continuing education opportunities (Eastmond, 1998; Garrison, 2000; Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2004).

Problem Statement

As Balmert and Ezzell (2002) stated, “We cannot afford the moral order of distance education to be shaped by happenstance” (p. 54). Yet despite neither character education nor distance education being new enterprises, there is limited research regarding how these two fields of educational purpose and practice intersect. There is a lack of theoretical or practical guidance for researchers, instructors, and designers who seek to help students with character development in distance education courses.

Study Purpose

The primary purpose of this study was to understand the phenomenon of character development of students within the context of a distance course in higher education. I took a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to describe the lived experience of an instructor and his students in a course sponsored by the Independent Study Program at Brigham Young University (BYU, in Provo, Utah). The course and professor were selected based on high student ratings regarding character building, a standard topic for questionnaire items in BYU’s Independent Study end-of-course survey. Themes emerged from an analysis of the participants’ experiences that can help guide the development of theory and provide guidance to the practice of instructors and instructional designers related to character outcomes in distance education courses. Additionally, the findings could benefit students interested in better understanding their own character development.

To better achieve the main purpose, the study included four sub-purposes: (a) describe the students’ and instructor’s perceptions of the students’ character development in the course, (b) determine what explicit or implicit character development goals the

instructor had, (c) understand from the instructor's and students' perspectives which experiences in or elements of the course contributed to students' perceived character development, and (d) describe the theoretical and practical implications from this study for instructors and designers of distance education courses who are attempting to help students develop their character.

Research Questions

I addressed four research questions with participants in the study:

1. Did students and instructor perceive that students developed their character while taking the course? What specific or practical experiences did students have that indicated to them that they had developed their character? How closely do their perceptions match definitions of character in the literature and the institution's mission statement?
2. What explicit or implicit character development related outcomes or goals did the instructor have for students in the course?
3. According to the participants, what elements of the course experience contributed to students' perceived character development? What were the participants' perceptions of what the instructor did to help students develop their character? What other course related experiences did students have that they perceived as contributing to their character development? How did they perceive that these experiences helped them progress in their character development? How closely do participants' perceptions match researchers' and theorists' recommendations about character development and learning in distance education contexts?
4. What theoretical and practical implications do themes emerging from this study have for instructors and designers of distance education courses who are attempting to create instruction that helps students develop their character? What implications do the findings have for distance education students?

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature reviewed to situate this study of students' character development in the context of English 395R included research that offered definitions of character. I also review considerations found in articles and studies of the use of literary works in character education, theories of distance education, and studies in which character, moral, ethical, and value education occurred in distance education contexts.

Frameworks for Understanding the Concept of Character

It is difficult to approach the subject of character education without some discussion of what *character* is (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004), though the term has always been ambiguous. Nucci (2001) called attention to this lack of clarity:

We are entering an interesting period in the field where the term “character education” is serving as the generic, publicly accepted label for a range of approaches to moral education, without any clear conceptual framework for what the term “character” even refers to. (p. 128)

I suggest that ideas about character are not as nebulous as Nucci suggests, but rather, are necessarily broad. Because character development in terms of higher education can be thought of as preparation to lead a moral, or “good” life, an institution’s definition of character must be broad enough to encompass the many situations students will encounter both in and following their university experience—a tremendous task! Simultaneously, any definition of character relies on a sense of what is “right” and “good,” concepts that once again vary among individuals and circumstances. With this daunting breadth in mind, I offer some of the principal frameworks that provide definitions, models, or components of character provided in scholarly literature, as follows.

Rest's Definition of Moral Character

Among the views of character is Rest's (1986) and Bebeau, Rest, and Narvaez's (1999) definition of *moral character* (Bebeau et al., 1999, p. 22), which is having enough strength and determination to follow through on appropriate decisions, and which they also equate with related terms such as "courage, persisting, overcoming distractions and obstacles, having implementing skills, having ego strength" (p. 22). Moral character is the fourth component in the authors' four-component model of morality or moral development; the model also includes *moral sensitivity*, *moral judgment*, and *moral motivation*, components they feel are necessary for moral character but do not form part of their definition of character.

Ryan and Bohlin's Tripartite Model of Character

Ryan and Bohlin (1999) stated that *good character* relates to "knowing the good, loving the good, and doing the good" (p. 5), and that character amounts to the "sum of our intellectual and moral habits" (p. 9). They further elaborated on these desired outcomes of character education:

To do this [help students become persons of intelligence and moral character], we need to help them develop knowledge of the good and intelligent judgment so that they learn to choose well among competing and attractive options in life. Simultaneously, we need to help them love the good—concern for the needs of others, fidelity to one's commitments, a job well done, true friendship—and the habits necessary to attain it. Loving the good is about educating students' feelings and passions so that they love the right things for the right reasons (for example, so that they learn to do their homework for the sake of learning rather than simply a grade, or that they join the KEY club to give to others rather than to gain recognition). (p. 46)

Lickona's Habits of the Mind, Heart, and Behavior

Similarly, Lickona (1999) discussed habits of the mind, the heart, and behavior. For each of these domains, Lickona describes a variety of constituent components. He

stated that the *habits of the mind* or “cognitive side of character” (p. 600) encompasses at least six components: (a) *moral alertness*, or recognizing that a situation has moral implications, (b) an “understanding [of] the virtues and what they require of us in specific situations,” (c) *perspective taking*, (d) *moral reasoning*, (e) *thoughtful decision making*, and (f) *moral self-knowledge* (p. 600). The *habits of the heart*, which is the affective domain or “emotional side” of character, consists of five components: (a) *conscience*, or a feeling of an obligation to do what one has judged to be the right thing to do, (b) *self-respect*, (c) *empathy*, (d) *loving the good*, and (e) *humility*, which Lickona defined as “a willingness to both recognize and correct our moral failings” (p. 600). Finally, the *behavioral side of character*, Lickona explained, brings in three additional components: (a) *moral competence*, which he described as including listening and communication skills, conflict resolution, and cooperation; (b) *moral will*, which includes self control and courage; and (c) *moral habit*, which he describes as an inner disposition to reliably act in a moral way.

Lickona’s Ten Essential Virtues

Lickona (2003) also described ten essential virtues for strong character:

1. *Wisdom*, which he defines as “good judgment” (p. 1);
2. *Justice*, which he defines as “respecting the rights of all persons” (p. 2);
3. *Fortitude*, which “enables us to do what is right in the face of difficulty” (p. 2);
4. *Self-control*, or “the ability to govern ourselves (p. 2); and
5. *Love*, encompassing “a cluster of important human virtues—*empathy, compassion, kindness, generosity, service, loyalty, patriotism (love of what is noble in one’s country), and forgiveness*” (p. 2);

6. *Positive attitude*, which consists of “The character strengths of hope, enthusiasm, flexibility, and a sense of humor” (p. 2);
7. *Hard work*, which “includes the virtues of *initiative, diligence, goal-setting, and resourcefulness*” (p.2);
8. *Integrity*, specifically “adhering to moral principle, being faithful to moral conscience, keeping our word, and standing up for what we believe” (p. 2);
9. *Gratitude*, which “moves us to count our everyday blessings” (p. 3); and
10. *Humility*, which is foundational to living a moral life because it is “necessary for the acquisition of the other virtues because it makes us aware of our imperfections and leads us to try to become a better person” (p. 3).

Berkowitz’s Psychological Characteristics and Moral Anatomy

Berkowitz (2002) described character as “an individual’s set of psychological characteristics that affect that person’s ability and inclination to function morally” (p. 48).

To clarify this definition, Berkowitz added the concept of *moral anatomy*:

By this [moral anatomy], I mean the psychological components that make up the complete moral person. There are seven parts to the moral anatomy: moral behavior, moral values, moral personality, moral emotion, moral reasoning, moral identity, and foundational characteristics. (p. 48)

Berkowitz included “honesty, altruism, responsibility, and other characteristics that support moral functioning” (p. 48) among these foundational characteristics.

Peterson and Seligman’s Character Strengths and Virtues

Peterson and Seligman (2004) described a model of character that included six virtues, each consisting of a variety of character strengths:

1. *Wisdom and knowledge*, which the authors described as “cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge” (p. 29). They included five character strengths of wisdom and knowledge: (a) *creativity*, (b) *curiosity*, (c) *open-mindedness*, (d) *love of learning*, and (e) *perspective*.
2. *Courage*, which they described as “emotional strength that involves the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal” (p. 29). The authors included four strengths as part of courage: (a) *bravery*, (b) *persistence*, (c) *integrity*, and (d) *vitality*.

3. *Humanity*, which they defined as “interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others” (p. 29). The authors included three strengths as part of humanity, (a) *love*, (b) *kindness*, and (c) *social intelligence*.
4. *Justice*, which they described as “civic strengths that underlie healthy community life” (p. 30). The authors included three strengths as part of justice: (a) *citizenship*, (b) *fairness*, and (c) *leadership*.
5. *Temperance*, which is comprised of “strengths that protect against excess” (p. 30), such as (a) *forgiveness and mercy*, (b) *humility and modesty*, (c) *prudence*, and (d) *self-regulation*.
6. *Transcendence*, or “strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning” (p. 30). The authors included four strengths as part of transcendence: (a) *appreciation of beauty and excellence*, (b) *gratitude*, (c) *hope*, (d) *humor*, and (e) *spirituality*.

Davidson, Lickona, and Khmelkov’s Moral Character and Performance Character

Davidson, Lickona, and Khmelkov (2008) proposed a conception of character with two major portions, *performance character* and *moral character*, in this way:

We came to realize that character isn’t just about “doing the right thing” in an ethical sense; it is also about doing our best work. If that is true, then character education isn’t just about helping kids get along; it is also about teaching them to work hard, develop their talents, and aspire to excellence in every area of endeavor. (p. 373)

They defined performance character as having a “mastery orientation” (p. 373) which includes qualities of *diligence*, *perseverance*, *a strong work ethic*, *a positive attitude*, *ingenuity*, and *self-discipline* among other qualities that help contribute to an individual’s realizing his or her “potential for excellence in any performance environment, such as academics, extracurricular activities, the workplace, and throughout life” (p. 373).

Davidson et al. (2008) also described moral character as having a “relational orientation” (p. 373) consisting of qualities that assist individuals in their interpersonal

relationships and ethical conduct, which include, but are not limited to, “integrity, justice, caring, respect, and cooperation” (p. 374). Moral character, they suggested, also has a moderating role in that it helps individuals direct their performance goals to “honor the interests of others, to ensure that we do not violate moral values such as fairness, honesty, and caring in the pursuit of high performance” (p. 374).

Lickona and Davidson (2005) explained that moral character and performance character consist of three “psychological components” (p. 20), which they call “awareness, attitude, and action” (p. 20). These correspond to the “cognitive,” “emotional/valuing,” and “behavior/habit” aspects of character.

Based on Peterson and Seligman (2004) and others, Davidson et al. (2008) recommended helping students achieve eight foundational developmental outcomes of character education:

[A student should become a] (1) lifelong learner and critical thinker; (2) diligent and capable performer; (3) socially and emotionally skilled person; (4) ethical thinker; (5) respectful and responsible moral agent; (6) self-disciplined person who pursues a healthy life-style; (7) contributing community member and democratic citizen; and (8) spiritual person engaged in crafting a life of noble purpose. (p. 379)

The authors argued that these eight character strengths were foundational but did not comprise an exhaustive list.

BYU's Definition of Character

BYU's (n.d.) definition of character takes into consideration many aspects of the previous definitions related to the virtues or character traits, including the Aristotelian view of virtuous character traits (Sanger & Osguthorpe, 2005), and draws upon the standard works of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. *The Aims of a BYU Education (BYU Aims)* state that one of the principal goals of a BYU education is to build

individuals of “strong moral character” and that such an education “should reinforce such moral virtues as integrity, reverence, modesty, self-control, courage, compassion, and industry” (Character Building section, ¶ 2). The *BYU Aims* further explain that “BYU aims not merely to teach students a code of ethics but to help [students] become partakers of the divine nature” (Character Building section, ¶ 2). Additional elements of the “divine nature” and “strong moral character,” according to the *BYU Aims*, include (a) *virtue*, (b) *temperance*, (c) *brotherly love*, (d) *honesty*, (e) *strength and courage*, (f) *fortitude*, (g) *service*, (h) *sportsmanship*, (i) *careful use of university funds*, (j) *treating all other people with dignity and fairness*, (k) *wholehearted acceptance of commitments*, (l) *academic integrity*, (m) *intellectual integrity*, and (n) *the spiritual integrity of personal righteousness*. The *BYU Aims* declare that character is developed by “coming unto Christ through faith, repentance, and righteous living” (Character Building section, ¶ 2) and that “character is constructed by small decisions” (Character Building section, ¶ 5).

Synthesis of the Definitions

All these various definitions present a variety of views that are seemingly, at once, both indistinguishable and disparate, and there is little in the literature that connects these different definitions of character (Sanger & Osguthorpe, 2005, 2009). As R. D. Osguthorpe (2009b) declared, “if there are terms or concepts that are both easily understood and ambiguous, character appears to be one of them” (p. 83). Yet there are some consistencies among the various definitions. For example, Rest’s (1986) and Bebeau et al.’s (1999) concept of moral character is similar to Lickona’s (1999) concept of moral will and moral habit and Lickona’s (2003) trait of integrity. Berkowitz’s concept of moral anatomy, which he describes as a basis of character, overlaps in several points

with Rest's (1986) and Bebeau et al.'s (1999) four components of moral development. Lickona's (1999) three-part view of character (habits of the mind, heart and behavior) is congruent with Ryan and Bohlin's (1999) knowing, loving, and doing the good. There is considerable overlap as well between Lickona's (1999, 2003) definitions/traits and BYU's (n.d.) institutional definition. These other definitions share many aspects with Peterson and Seligman's (2004) character strengths and virtues and with Lickona and Davidson's (2005) and Davidson et al.'s (2008) concept of moral character. However, Lickona and Davidson's (2005) and Davidson et al.'s (2008) conceptualization of moral character is much broader than Rest's (1986) and Bebeau et al.'s (1999) definition.

Finally, Lickona and Davidson (2005) and Davidson et al. (2008) added the concept of performance character, which encompasses the pursuit of excellence in all endeavors but that must be accompanied by moral character. Their view is consistent with the *BYU Aims* (BYU, n.d.), which state, "a BYU education should bring together the intellectual integrity of fine academic discipline with the spiritual integrity of personal righteousness. The result is competence that reflects the highest professional and academic standards—strengthened and ennobled by Christlike attributes" (Character Building section, ¶ 3).

For the purposes of this study, the concept of character incorporates all of the definitions of character discussed above, as well as the conceptions of character that the participants expressed in their interviews.

Instructional Considerations from Studies on the Use of Literary Works in Character Education

As English 395R is a literature course, I reviewed theories and previous research related to the use of literary works as a principal component of character education.

However, only limited research has occurred in this area (Solomon, Watson, & Battistich, 2001).

Many theorists suggested that the reading of literary works may help transmit values and develop character (for example, Bennett, 1993; Cain, 2005; Carr 2005; Chanan, 1974; Cheek, 1992; Feder, 1978; Lemming, 2000; Lickona, 1991; MacIntyre, 2007; Nelson, 2002; Ryan & Bohlin, 2003; Scharf, 1978; Smagorinsky, 2000; Tappan & Brown, 1989; Vitz, 1990; Wynne & Ryan, 1993). Lemming (2000) discussed a common role of literary works in character education:

Virtually all of the current efforts to educate for character accord a special role to narrative. Narrative plays an important role in this process for it is through the use of stories that cultural values are most often given shape and made meaningful in the lives of children. (p. 413)

MacIntyre (2007) further elaborated on the importance of literary works as part of character education:

Man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal.... I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’...the telling of stories has a key part in educating us into the virtues. (p. 216; see also Lemming, 2000, pp. 413-414)

Cain’s (2005) findings suggested that reading literary works is effective in character education because stories are more engaging than other forms of media.

Character-related themes are common in literary works. Pike (2006) suggested there are negative consequences for abandoning beliefs and values in the teaching of literacy and focusing exclusively on teaching literary skills. He argued, similar to Lewis (1965), that trying to claim a value neutral stance is not intellectually honest. Rather, we should explore literacy and literary works in light of values and morals so children have the “language” they need to confront the marketplace of ideas and make thoughtful

decisions about what value systems they will live. Thus, according to Pike and Lewis, the study of literature is an endeavor inherently fraught with moral implications.

Character-related Aspects of the Literary Works

Theorists discuss elements that make literary works valuable in character education, mentioning characters and moral themes as the most prominent elements.

Characters

The characters in literary works contribute in important ways to character and moral education. Egan (1978) suggested that literary works provides students with heroes with whom they can identify in an influential way:

Stories have a crucial characteristic that makes them ideal.... They allow, and encourage, the reader to associate with some noble and powerful force that achieves success against a threatening world. Occasionally they allow the hero or heroine to die or lose, but only in a context which enables the reader deliciously to share the hero's or heroine's moral or other superiority, which is not recognized by the unfeeling world. (p. 5)

Literary works can be a source of role models or villains (Kazemek, 1986; Wynne & Ryan, 1993). Mills (1988) stated that effective stories are rich in characters who have human experiences and treat problems that students face, and claimed that characters could serve as role models. Additionally, Jung (as cited in Mills, 1988) argued that some characters “have universal meaning” which can help support psychological growth: “There are as many archetypes as there are typical situations in life. Endless repetition has engraved these experiences into our psychic constitution” (p. 327).

Moral Themes

Literary works usually contains moral content (Nelson, 2002). Some researchers have suggested that literature that contains moral dilemmas, and characters who have to make moral choices, can contribute to students' moral growth (Harding & Snyder, 1991;

Yeazell & Cole, 1986). Cheek (1992) suggested that literary works contains moral themes and values that both students and teachers perceive as helping prompt student thinking. She stated that some participants in her study felt that literary works could stimulate them to behavioral changes, while some teachers in the study were less willing to make that connection.

Instructional Approaches and Recommendations

Although some feel that there is power in the stories themselves, many do not believe that the reading of literature alone is sufficient to assist with character development (Narvaez, Bentley, Gleason, & Samuels, 1998; Narvaez, 2002). Transfer or generalizing what is learned to their lives, at least with teens, does not happen without help. Narvaez (2002) reminded character educators that reading is an “active” process; readers get different things out of the text based on their own personal backgrounds and experiences, and do not necessarily “get” the message that the author intended. She further noted that readers construct themes, especially moral themes, through a process that is not always automatic or easy. With this in mind, she suggested that character educators “should drop their simplistic understanding about reading moral stories to build character” (p. 169).

Others have suggested that it takes some integration of fictionalized dilemmas with real-life dilemmas for students to make connections between what they discussed in class and their life outside school (Harding & Snyder, 1991; D. F. Johnson & Goldman, 1987). D. F. Johnson and Goldman (1987) explained the need for real-life connections with literary works:

Moral education and curricula that clarify values may need to include components that explicitly teach children how to generalize from particular scenarios studied

in the classroom to real-life situations in which they are expected to apply the morals and values taught. (p. 218)

Theorists have recommended instructional approaches that may help students to understand literary works and their moral and character implications, including (a) selecting appropriate literary works, (b) moderating discussions, (c) asking questions, (d) providing opportunities to write, and (e) developing the student-instructor relationship.

Selecting Appropriate Literary Works

One important instructional consideration is the selection of appropriate literature. Although some researchers recommend realist literature (see Mills, 1988; Scharf, 1978), others recommend fantasy and fairy tales as appropriate for character or moral education. Bryan (2005) explained that fairy tales, specifically tales by the Brothers Grimm, “have strengthened the attitude of readers toward life, toward human relationships, and toward moral standards” (p. 4). He continued by explaining some of the qualities of fairy tales that make them useful in character education:

These tales provide interesting stories that are designed to catch the attention of young people while alluding to the virtues of kindness, sweetness, love, courage, endurance, obedience, caring, consideration, and loyalty. These old tales contain in their picturesque language the symbols of some of the deepest human feelings. They also satisfy, in fantasy, human desires for beauty, sincerity, achievement, and belonging. Whether one is conscious of it or not, these stories may become sources of moral strength, a strength which is part faith and part courage, and is wholly unshakable. In the land of “once upon a time,” issues are never clouded. Good triumphs and evil is punished. Knowing and understanding fairy tales enriches the lives of children and adults and even though not all of the ethical principles are easily understood, the Grimm brothers' tales teach the readers valuable lessons. (p. 5)

Bettelheim (1977) also discussed the value of using fairy tales in character education:

Nothing can be as enriching and satisfying to child and adult alike as the folk fairy tale. True on an overt level fairy tales teach little about the specific

conditions of life in modern mass society; these tales were created long before it came into being. But more can be learned from them about the inner problems of human being, and of the right solutions to their predicaments in any society, than from any other type of story within a child's comprehension. Since the child at every moment of his life is exposed to the society in which he lives, he will certainly learn to cope with its conditions, provided his inner resources permit him to do so. (p. 5)

Similarly, others have recommended specific fantasy works such as *A Wrinkle in Time* (Dana & Lynch-Brown, 1991) and the *Harry Potter* series (Glanzer, 2008) as suitable or useful for character education.

Moderating Discussions

Discussion is one important technique for using literature to contribute to students' character development. Reading literature may stimulate thought and reflection. However, teachers can enhance texts' effects through moderating discussions and questioning (Cheek, 1992). In Cheek's study, the discussions focused on higher order thinking skills surrounding the literature, and participants perceived discussion as the most productive method for learning about the moral values in the literature. Others have stated that literary discussion "can spark moral development" (Dana & Lynch-Brown, 1991, A Model section, ¶ 6). Smagorinsky (2000) also advocated for open-ended discussions.

Glanzer (2008) suggested three strands of discussion teachers could use with *Harry Potter* to avoid "offering a bland moral education that fails to address good and evil" (p. 527). The first recommended area of discussion is "the temptation of evil or vices within [one's self]" (p. 527); Glanzer contended, "Too often critics of character education want to talk about evil or injustice in the greater world without considering their own character" (p. 527). The second area of discussion Glanzer recommended is

“external social evils” (p. 527). He stated, “I do not want my sons or my students to merely grapple with ideas of the good. I want them to learn to choose and fight for the good and against the evil. I want them to learn to engage in moral battles” (p. 527). The third discussion area is the larger “metaphysical battle” between good and evil. Glanzer believes that although public schools cannot advocate specific moral traditions, they can discuss what different religious and philosophical traditions have to say through literature as students begin to form their own “burgeoning thoughts” (p. 528) in this arena. His views are consistent with Noddings’ (1994) thoughts on the importance and direction of instructional discussions.

Ryan and Bohlin (1999) discuss three possible foci for discussions around literature (views, values and virtues) but argue for the virtues approach over the other two:

What distinguishes virtues from views and values, then, is that virtues are cultivated from within the individual and actually improve character and intelligence. Views are simply intellectual positions, and values evoke neither a moral commitment nor the promise of leading a good life. Additionally, unlike views and values, virtue is not passive. Virtue is both the disposition to think, feel, and act in morally excellent ways, and the exercise of this disposition. Furthermore, it serves as both a means and an end of human happiness. (p. 45)

The program that Lemming (2000) evaluated extended the idea of discussion beyond the classroom. Instructors sent letters home inviting parents to discuss with their student the character-related concepts the student had been learning about in school.

Asking Questions

Asking questions is a key method used to promote and direct discussions. In Lemming’s (2000) study, the program included reading a story to illustrate a character concept followed by discussion questions that helped students understand and apply the

concept. Discussion about character themes (engagement) made a significant contribution to students' ethical understanding and sensibility. Curricular emphasis also contributed to ethical sensibility (Lemming, 2000).

Scharf (1978) recommended open-ended questions, with no particular right or wrong answers, to encourage students to reach their own conclusions. Harding and Snyder (1991) also argued that open-ended questions promote meaning making and moral reasoning. They stated, "Only genuinely open-ended questions and the encouragement of differing opinions will generate meaningful dialogue and permit a focus on the moral reasoning supporting each decision" (Theory-Based Strategies for Moral Education Using Novels and Film section, ¶ 9). One study reported, "Instead of teaching the students, we are actually asking relevant questions (Adams, 2007, p. 30). Kim's (2001) study compared three story-telling strategies and found that asking more open-ended discussion questions more effectively helped students increase their moral knowledge and apply it to their own lives, as well as increasing students' interest in the literature.

Dana and Lynch-Brown (1991) described an approach in which students are asked probing questions. The authors provided examples of questions that deal with understanding the literature and the moral issues from the perspectives of the characters or putting the student in the place of the character. Mason (1993) and Kazemek (1986) also described approaches designed to help students view dilemmas from the perspective of the characters.

Others propose questioning that extends beyond perspective taking. Among the questions that Mills (1988) recommended in his study were ones that asked students to

apply the dilemmas the characters face to past and present real situations. Kim (2001) suggested that engaging students with moral stories and reflecting on their own life experience related to moral values was helpful to students' moral development. Glanzer (2008) proposed asking more application questions, looking at the deeper questions of life. He stated that instructors should not fear to bring up the question of the meaning of life with students.

Smagorinsky (2000) declared that a reflective approach is of greater benefit than didactic approaches. In this approach, he used stories as a basis for discussion of virtues related to character education. He asked the students to define terms using the stories and their own experiences. Through further reading, discussion, writing, and other group activities, the students discovered what these concepts meant to them.

Dana and Lynch-Brown (1991) agreed with Kazemek (1986) when she warned that using literature in a "crudely didactic fashion" (p. 269) may backfire, preventing the students from developing a love for the works and a "sense of moral interdependence" (p. 269) and prompting them to view the instructor as a dictator, propagandist, or indoctrinator. Dana and Lynch-Brown (1991) suggested that instructors can avoid didacticism by using discussion to allow students to develop their own ideas and by having students read literature for other purposes in addition to moral development.

Providing Opportunities to Write

In the program Lemming (2000) evaluated, the students typically wrote about the character-related concept as part of the wrap-up of a study unit. Writing was also an important part of Smagorinsky's (2000) approach. Kirschenbaum (1995) explained that writing about moral values can help students internalize and develop moral values.

Nelson (2002), citing Hirsch, stated, “the interrelatedness of reading and writing to higher-order cognitive mental activity is at the heart of effective student growth and learning” (p. 2). Nelson (2002) summarized the role of writing, “The content of written response to literature generally reflected the active role of the reader in the meaning-making process and supported the idiosyncratic nature of the response” (p. vi). Kim (2001) and Tappan and Brown (1998) also suggested that it is beneficial to have students write, including writing their own stories.

Developing the Student-instructor Relationship

Another important consideration in character education that some theorists have discussed and researchers have explored is the influence of the instructor and how he or she relates with students. Harding and Snyder (1991), citing Kohlberg, recommended that the instructor act as a moral advocate but still respect each student as an “autonomous moral agent” (Theoretical Rationale section, ¶ 7). They also pointed out that “[the teacher] must understand, stimulate, and encourage, rather than directly teach, moral values. Instead of attempting to model good values and discourage negative ones, the teacher should be a supportive, questioning, moral stimulant” (Theoretical Rationale section, ¶ 7). Similarly, Scharf (1978) stated that if the teacher has already determined the “right” answer to questions she asks students, the students try to guess what the teacher wants to hear rather than thinking for themselves. Cheek’s (1992) study found that instructors played a similar role in encouraging students’ character growth:

An atmosphere which encouraged free exchange of ideas appeared to be the rule in these classrooms; teachers encouraged students to speak up and students seemed comfortable doing so. Students believed that their teachers encouraged independent thinking and the development of a critical eye. Even in classrooms where teachers verbalized personal opinions, student did not feel that their teachers were preaching or moralizing. (p. 116)

Adams (2007) described an elementary school program where the teachers reported that holding higher expectations for students has helped the students participate more intelligently in conversations about the books they read. Also, the instructor serves as a model of good conversation about the literature. As a part of that modeling, the researcher found that the teachers sharing their experiences had a positive influence on students' willingness to share their own thoughts.

The instructor can have a positive influence on character related outcomes as well as enhancing learning activities. Lemming (2000) found that the interpersonal relationship between the students and instructor, along with the curricular emphasis of character, positively affected students' ethnocentrism, which the author defined as related to respect, measured by how much children felt like they would like to be friends with children of various ethnic backgrounds. Lemming also reported that this interpersonal relationship (in addition to the teacher's characteristics, moral example, and use of moral language) contributed to the positive changes in the students' behavior.

Instructional Approaches and Recommendations from Theories of Distance Learning

I also drew upon theories of distance education to find good-practice recommendations related to character building. However, none of the theories I explored directly discussed character-related outcomes. Three principal theories of distance learning were readily applicable to the BYU Independent Study context of the course I studied: (a) Wedemeyer's (1971, 1981) theory of independent study; (b) Holmberg's (1986, 1999, 2003) theory of "Guided Didactic Conversation" (Holmberg, 1986, p. 31) or "teaching-learning conversation in distance education and the empathy approach" (Holmberg, 1999, p. 59); and (c) Moore's (1997) theory of "Transactional Distance"

(p.22). Some of the key recommendations from these theories include (a) engaging in conversation or dialogue, (b) developing the student-instructor relationship, (c) encouraging learner autonomy, (d) engaging and supporting learners, and (e) making courses accessible and flexible.

Engaging in Conversation or Dialogue

One of the key recommendations of Holmberg's (1986, 1999, 2003) theory is engaging in "teaching-learning conversation in distance education" (Holmberg, 1999, p. 59). Holmberg (1999) explained that a course is a communication process that should have the character of a conversation. This conversation takes place both through direct communications (such as comments on student's assignments, mail, email, and telephone contact) as well as through a "conversational style" (p. 59) in print and recorded materials. Holmberg explained that the conversational style can help motivate and "involve the student emotionally" as well as "engage them in...[an] exchange of views" (p. 59). The latter assertion, Holmberg claimed, has been empirically tested. Similarly, one of the elements of Moore's (1997) theory of Transactional Distance includes the element of "instructional dialogue" (p. 23). Moore described the nature of dialogue and the characteristics of that distinguish it from other types of interactions:

Dialogue is developed by teachers and learners in the course of the interactions that occur when one gives instruction and the others respond. The concepts of dialogue and interaction are very similar, and indeed are sometimes used synonymously. However, an important distinction can be made. The term 'dialogue' is used to describe an interaction or series of interactions having positive qualities that other interactions might not have. A dialogue is purposeful, constructive and valued by each party. Each party in a dialogue is a respectful and active listener; each is a contributor, and builds on the contributions of the other party or parties. There can be negative or neutral interactions; the term 'dialogue' is reserved for positive interactions, with value placed on the synergistic nature of the relationship of the parties involved. The direction of the dialogue in an

educational relationship is towards the improved understanding of the student. (pp. 23-24)

Moore (1989) described three types of interactions or dialogues that contribute to learning: (a) learner-content, (b) learner-instructor, and (c) learner-learner. Both Holmberg (2003) and Moore (1997) hypothesized that the conversation or dialogue is more important for less experienced learners and becomes less important for more experienced, self-directed learners.

Developing the Student-instructor Relationship

Another aspect of distance education theory, related to the conversation or dialogue, is the relationship between the student and the instructor and other students. Holmberg's (1986, 1999, 2003) theory focuses on maintaining a conversational relationship between the teacher and learner, even through simulated conversation. He said that it is important to "creat[e] feelings of rapport" (Holmberg, 1986, p. 36) between the student and the instructor. Holmberg (2003) also explained, "Central to learning and teaching in distance education are personal relations between the parties concerned ... and empathy between students and those representing the supporting organization" (pp. 81-82). Holmberg (2003) hypothesized, "The stronger the conversational characteristics, the stronger the students' feelings of personal relationship to the supporting organization" (p. 82). He also suggested that students become more involved when they feel that "the supporting organization [i.e., the instructor] is interested in making the learning matter personally relevant to them" (p. 82). The stronger the learner's feelings of personal relationship and personal involvement, Holmberg argued, "the stronger the motivation and the more effective the learning" (p. 82). Moore's (1997) theory focuses on the

“psychological and communications spaces between any one learner and that person's instructor” (p. 22) but does not address the relationship to the same degree as Holmberg.

Encouraging Learner Autonomy

Another important element is to allow the learner to adapt the instruction by determining goals and activities (Holmberg, 1986; Moore, 1997; Wedemeyer, 1971, 1981), a phenomenon Moore calls “learner autonomy” (p. 31). Moore (1997) defined learner autonomy as “the extent to which in the teaching/learning relationship it is the learner rather than the teacher who determines the goals, the learning experiences, and the evaluation decisions of the learning programme” (p. 31). One of the purposes of providing students with choices is so they can help make their learning more personally relevant (Holmberg, 1986; Wedemeyer, 1971, 1981).

However, Moore (1997) also stated that not all adults are prepared to take control of their own learning and that one of the instructors’ goals should be to help students to work toward becoming autonomous learners. Wedemeyer (1971) also noted that one of the principal goals of an independent study program should be “developing in all learners the capacity to carry on self-directed learning” (p. 550).

Engaging and Supporting Learners

Holmberg (1986) stated that effective distance education “engag[es] the learner in activities, discussions, and decisions, and generally cater[es] for helpful real and simulated communication to and from the learner” (p. 36). He also stated that the course should be “offered in a way felt to make the study relevant to the individual learner and his/her needs” (p. 36). Holmberg, Moore, and Wedemeyer suggested a variety of ways in which to engage and support learners.

Encouraging Student Participation in Learning

Wedemeyer (1971, 1981) recommended providing for “greater student responsibility” (Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2004, p. 360). Holmberg (2003) suggested “suitable frequency of assignment submissions” (p. 82) to keep students actively engaged. Moore (1997) recommended providing for “practice, application, testing, and evaluations” (p. 29). He also suggested that instructors provide opportunities “for student creation of knowledge” (p. 29) and “stimulate analysis and criticism” (p. 29) or other higher-order cognitive skills.

Offering Feedback

Holmberg (2003) argued that “Short turnaround times for assignments and other communications between students and the supporting organization” (p. 82) has a positive influence on student learning. Moore (1997) also pointed out that feedback is an important way to enhance learners’ motivation.

Providing Instructional Guidance

Holmberg (1986) suggested that, while respecting students’ integrity, instructors should provide opportunities for students to receive support and advice. Moore (1997) also noted that an important variable to consider is providing “advice and counsel” (p. 29) about the use of instructional materials and resources.

Facilitating Access and Flexibility

Another important aspect of distance learning courses, according to Holmberg (1986), is “facilitating access to course content” (Holmberg, 1986, p. 36). Wedemeyer (1971, 1981) also explained that independent study courses should provide a variety of opportunities to begin and complete instruction at the learner’s convenience.

Character Education in a Distance Education Context

Although there is a limited body of literature covering the nexus where character education and distance education meet, even when including moral or ethics instruction, there is some overlap with the character and distance education literatures. First, I explore the advantages and disadvantages of distance education as a venue for teaching character. Next, I provide the instructional approaches and considerations that emerged as themes in the studies I reviewed.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Distance Education

Schonfeld (2005) found that the asynchronous aspects of the course he studied provided flexibility that allowed students to participate in clinicals and other professional training where student participation was not previously possible. He also found that the relative anonymity of the Web helped some students participate more in the course discussions. Schonfeld found some disadvantages, such as the fact that the flexibility of the course tended to encourage students to procrastinate. In response, he created firmer deadlines to help students manage their time better.

Anello (1997) explained that one of the limitations of correspondence courses is limited interaction. Taplin (2002) also expressed concern that limited direct contact with faculty, other students, and university personnel poses an obstacle to students' achieving the goals of values education. Chachra (2005), responding to Smith's (2005) article, expressed the opinion that the Internet can be used to deliver some background information for case studies, but is not well suited to dynamic discussions of cases.

Huff and Frey (2005) warned, "It is less clear that online education, without social influence of direct contact with other students and professionals, can encourage

students to adopt ethical standards into their professional self-concept or encourage the formation of ethical communities” (p.405). Thus, they encouraged instructors to “exercise moral imagination” (p. 404) in planning instruction.

Instructional Approaches and Recommendations

A few authors have shared views on how to conduct moral or ethical instruction at a distance. Some of the key recommendations from these studies follow.

Providing Opportunities to Read, Write, and Reflect

In a study Silverdale and Katz (2003) conducted, students read a story about a dying student nurse and her experience with the nurses caring for her; students took notes as they read reflecting on how they would care for a dying patient. Other studies that used reading were mostly direct instruction of ethical principles (Crustinger & Tas, 2005, Schonfeld, 2005). In Crustinger and Tas’s (2005) study, the students completed e-modules that encouraged student reflection on the ethical topics they read about. Students also wrote a weekly report on ethics in their internship experiences in an e-journal. The students in Schonfeld’s (2005) study took quizzes on their reading and completed a writing assignment.

Using Case Studies

One of the most common approaches involved using case studies (Crustinger & Tas, 2005; Gartland 2003; Huff & Frey, 2005; Smith, 2005; Keefer, 2005). Smith (2005) argued that case studies are “vital” as a method in teaching ethics, especially in online teaching. He reasoned, “Although students will not have a live person with whom to interact, they should be able to relate to real case-study situations resembling those they may encounter in practice after graduation” (p. 454). He also argued that case studies can

help students better understand the complexities of real-life ethical issues. Crustinger and Tas (2005) described an instance in which student created their own case studies based on situations they encountered in their internship experiences, thus making the instruction more personally relevant. Keefer (2005) reported on a case-based online course on ethics in science and engineering, recommending that instruction be anchored in authentic problems and relevant cases that require realistic performance or demonstration of knowledge from the students and that challenge them “to assess, revise and reflect on their own thinking and provide them with multiple opportunities to have their thinking challenged by other students, ethicists, professionals, or other outside resources” (p. 424).

Engaging Students in Discussion

Huff and Frey (2005) advocated for discussion of case studies as a basis of ethical instruction online. Crustinger and Tas (2005) reported success with students who presented their own cases and engaged in “lively discussion” (p. 69) with faculty to identify and resolve the ethical issues. In Schonfeld’s (2005) study, students posted questions or situations on the course’s asynchronous discussion board. Students also participated in a regular virtual chat and met virtually once a month with their clinical faculty to discuss the applications of the theoretical topics they studied in the course to their clinical practice.

Gartland (2003) studied moral reasoning in pre-service teachers. Participants were assigned to read ethical dilemmas (or case studies) and discuss them in either online discussions or in face-to-face settings. Using Rest’s Determining Issues Test to assess the students’ change in moral reasoning, the study showed no difference between the two groups. However, the results indicated that both groups made what researchers felt were

significant improvements to their level of moral reasoning, with those who initially scored the lowest on average improving the most.

Anello (1997) extended the idea of discussion and interaction with others beyond the course by encouraging students to serve or teach someone in their own family or community, thus enhancing the social aspect of their learning experience.

Developing the Student-instructor Relationship

Hambrecht (2004) argued that teachers in distance education courses should maintain a moral relationship with students as they would in a face-to-face course through the pedagogy they employed, the instructional materials they developed, and the evaluation methods they used. She shared two core characteristics, respectfulness and fairness, which she feels are key to establishing a moral relationship with students. Rice (2002) also viewed the instructor's relationship with the student as important:

While technology may be a valuable tool for specific tasks, such as enabling students to send papers to the professor electronically, it is the professor 'knowing the students as well as the subject' that is essential to the college experience. (p. 258)

Schonfeld (2005) explained that students knowing that the instructor cares about their learning helps them stay motivated and on task. However, he argued that building this type of student-instructor relationship at a distance is a challenge.

Engaging in Experiential Learning

Stiles, Jameson, and Lord (1993) reported on a study of a course in business ethics in which instruction took place in a blended learning environment that used Kolb's model of experiential learning. They describe Kolb's model as "concrete experience; observation of, and reflection on, that experience; analysis of key learning points arising from it; and the consequent planning and trying out of new behaviour" (p. 254).

Employing Principles of Good Practice

Loui (2005) recommended using Chickering and Ehrmann's (1996) seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education as a guide to teaching ethics at a distance. These principles are (a) encourage contact between student and instructor because it can strengthen student motivation; (b) develop reciprocity and cooperation among students because collaboration increases involvement in learning; (c) use active learning techniques because students learn best when they make connections for themselves and apply what they learn; (d) give prompt feedback because students benefit from a knowledge of what they know and how well they are doing; (e) emphasize time on task because students learn when they focus; (f) communicate high expectations because students rise to higher expectations; (g) respect diverse talents and variety of learning styles, because students have various talents and styles of learning. He further encourages instructors to use technologies creatively, not only to duplicate face-to-face pedagogy. Additionally, they should assess the effectiveness of their practice. Finally, he mentions that although educational technologies facilitate the transfer of knowledge, instructors need to avoid the temptation to use these tools for merely sharing information.

Summary of Themes Explored

Overall, my study of character education through literature in a distance learning course involves the convergence of three questions: What is character? Can character be taught through literature? and, Can character be taught through distance education? This summary of my literature review seeks to integrate the answers I found.

Frameworks For Understanding the Concept of Character

There were several frameworks (definitions, models, and views of essential components) of what constitutes *character*. First, I explored Rest's (1986) and Bebeau, Rest, and Narvaez's (1999) concept of moral character, which is part of their four-component model of moral development that also includes moral sensitivity, moral judgment, and moral motivation. Next, I describe definitions of character that describe the cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of character, such as Ryan and Bohlin's (1999) "*knowing* the good, *loving* the good, and *doing* the good" (p. 5) and Lickona's (1999) habits of the mind, the heart, and behavior. I also described Berkowitz's (2002) "moral anatomy" (p. 48), which expands on the tripartite views of Ryan and Bohlin and Lickona. There are also several definitions of character that focus on virtues (Lickona, 2003) and character strengths (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). BYU's (n.d.) institutional definition of "divine nature" and "strong moral character," (Character Building section, ¶ 2) also included a variety of character traits or virtues. Finally, Davidson et al. (2008) and Lickona and Davidson (2005) distinguished between two types of character, which they viewed as complimentary, moral character and performance character, but also included related virtues as part of their definition. Each of the definitions I read became part of the definition of character used here. Later, views expressed by participants in my study further added to this concept.

Literary Works Used in Character Education

The second theme described here includes recommendations for helping students develop character—especially when teaching from a distance. Several studies in the character education literature discussed the importance of literary works or narrative (for

example, Bennett, 1993; Cain, 2005; Carr 2005; Chanan, 1974; Cheek, 1992; Feder, 1978; Lemming, 2000; Lickona, 1991; MacIntyre, 2007; Nelson, 2002; Pike, 2006; Ryan & Bohlin, 2003; Scharf, 1978; Smagorinsky, 2000; Tappan & Brown, 1989; Vitz, 1990; Wynne & Ryan, 1993), including elements such as the characters (Egan, 1978; Kazemek, 1986; Mills, 1988; Wynne & Ryan, 1993) and moral themes (Cheek, 1992; Harding & Snyder, 1991; Yeazell & Cole, 1986) in the stories. Only one study related to character in a distance education context really made use of narrative (Silverdale & Katz, 2003), whereas two other studies used reading as a form of direct instruction of ethical concepts (Crustinger & Tas, 2005; Schonfeld, 2005).

Instructional Practices Related to Character Outcomes in a Distance Education Context

Another theme encompassed strategies for teachers. Theories of distance education discuss the importance of engaging and supporting learners in student participation and in taking responsibility for their own learning (Holmberg, 2003; Moore, 1997; Wedemeyer, 1971, 1981). Recommendations included frequent assignment submissions (Holmberg, 2003), providing for adequate practice and testing, and encouraging student involvement in higher-order thinking skills (Moore, 1997).

Another means of engaging students, common across all the literature reviewed, was conversation or discussion. Discussion was an important approach in the literature of character education (for example, Glanzer, 2008; Lemming, 2000; Noddings, 1994; Ryan & Bohlin, 1999; Smagorinsky, 2000) and in many of the studies that examined character education at a distance (for example, Crustinger & Tas, 2005; Huff & Frey, 2005; and Schonfeld, 2005). The theme of dialogue (Moore, 1997) or conversation (Holmberg, 1986, 1999, 2003) was also important in the distance education literature.

Although many authors cited the importance of discussion and conversation in instruction, only within the character education literature did the theme of using questions explicitly emerge as an important way of generating and maintaining conversation (Adams, 2007; Dana and Lynch-Brown, 1991; Harding & Snyder, 1991; Kazemek, 1986; Kim, 2001; Lemming, 2000; Mason, 1993; Scharf, 1978).

Writing was another theme related to engaging students; this recommendation emerged in some of the character education literature (Kim, 2001; Kirschenbaum, 1995; Lemming, 2000; Nelson, 2002; Smagorinsky, 2000; Tappan & Brown, 1998). However, only one study of character education in a distance context (Crustinger & Tas, 2005) discussed student writing as a significant part of the learning activities.

The most common theme in the literature on character education at a distance is the use of case studies (Crustinger & Tas, 2005; Gartland 2003; Huff & Frey, 2005; Smith, 2005; Keefer, 2005). Other approaches this literature advocated were experiential learning (Stiles, Jameson, & Lord, 1993) and using Chickering and Ehrmann's (1996) seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education (Loui, 2005).

Some writers in both character and distance education advocated for making the learning relevant or applicable to the life of the learner (for example, Glanzer, 2008; Holmberg, 2003; Noddings, 1994; Smagorinsky, 2000; Wedemeyer, 1971, 1981), although there was limited discussion on how to make learning relevant. Crustinger and Tas (2005), however, reported on a case that included the integration of students' internship experience into an ethics course.

Several additional themes emerged from the distance education literature. First was the importance of timely feedback, an emphasis important to undergraduate

education as a whole (Holmberg, 2003; Moore, 1997; Loui, 2005; Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996). Another theme concerned providing guidance to the students for activities and using instructional materials and resources (Holmberg, 1986; Moore, 1997), which Holmberg (1986) suggested the instructor should offer respectfully. Related to this is the theme of learner autonomy, or involving students in choices about their learning and supporting them in becoming more self-directed learners (Holmberg, 1986; Moore, 1997; Wedemeyer, 1971, 1981). Another theme unique to the distance education literature is the importance of increasing students' access and making courses flexible to meet their needs (Holmberg, 1986; Wedemeyer, 1971, 1981).

A final theme, which authors from each of the three sets of literature found important, was the student-instructor relationship (for example, Hambrecht, 2004; Holmberg, 1997; Lemming, 2000; Rice, 2002; Schonfeld, 2005). Some authors, recognizing the importance of the student-instructor relationship, went so far as to suggest that the lack of direct contact with the instructor in distance education limits character development, improvement in moral reasoning, or integration of values and ethics (Huff and Frey, 2005; Taplin, 2002).

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

To better understand how students experienced character development within the context of a distance education literature course, I took an approach which combined *hermeneutic phenomenology* or *human sciences* (van Manen, 1990, 2002) with aspects of *hermeneutic inquiry* (Koch, 1995, 1996), which is based upon the writings of philosophers such as Heidegger (1962), Merleau-Ponty (1962), Gadamer (2004), Ricoeur, (1981), and Sokolowski (2000). I also drew upon the work of qualitative researchers (Patton, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Spradley, 1980; Williams, n.d.) to help clarify the methodological choices made for this study.

According to some researchers, quantitative measures can oversimplify the complex and integrated nature of character (Kuh, 1998; Strange, 2004). In this regard, Merleau-Ponty (1962) emphasized the importance of experience:

I am not the outcome or the meeting-point of numerous causal agencies which determine my bodily or psychological make-up. I cannot conceive myself as nothing but a bit of the world, a mere object of biological, psychological or sociological investigation. I cannot shut myself up within the realm of science. All my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from a particular point of view, or from some experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless. The whole universe of science is built upon the world as directly experienced, and if we want to subject science itself to rigorous scrutiny and arrive at a precise assessment of meaning and scope, we must begin by reawakening the basic experience of the world of which science is the second-order expression. (p. viii)

Thus a study of lived experience can add to the limited discussion of character education in a distance education context in a unique way. As van Manen (1990) explained, phenomenological research helps achieve “tactful thoughtfulness: situational perceptiveness, discernment, and depthful understanding” (p. 156). Phenomenology provides a reasonable alternative to the extremes of both positivism and relativism in that

it accepts that individuals have their own perceptions of reality but that there is also knowable truth (Sokolowski, 2000).

The hermeneutic phenomenological approach consists of the following activities, which van Manen (1990) states are not a series of steps but rather a “dynamic interplay among six research activities” (p. 30):

- 1) turning to the nature of lived experience;
- 2) investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it;
- 3) reflecting on ... themes which characterize the phenomenon;
- 4) describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;
- 5) maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon;
- 6) balancing the research context by considering the parts and whole. (p. 30-31)

In the following sections, I discuss these research activities as they pertain to the present study. Although these activities are not linear, a linear presentation provides a more coherent overview of the research activities and help explicate the rigorous nature of the study (Diekelmann, 2001; van Manen 1990; Williams, n.d.). I also discuss the similarities and differences between the hermeneutic phenomenological approach and other qualitative approaches.

Turning to the Nature of Lived Experience

Discussing the phenomenological research activity of *turning to the nature of lived experience*, van Manen (1990) stated,

Phenomenological research does not start or proceed in a disembodied fashion. It is always a project of someone: a real person, who, in the context of particular individual, social, and historical life circumstances, sets out to make sense of a certain aspect of human existence. (p. 31)

After discussing the selection of the specific phenomenon and participants in the study, I explain how three other considerations van Manen (1990) recommended apply to the present study (or do not apply): (a) “orienting to the phenomenon” (p. 39), (b)

“explicating assumptions and pre-understandings” (p. 46), and (c) “bracket[ing]” (p. 47) researcher assumptions and pre-understandings.

Selecting the Phenomenon and Its Context

Howell, Allred, Laws, & Jordan (2004) studied BYU’s Independent Study Program using student course evaluations and a portfolio assignment from a capstone course to discover if the Independent Study program was helping accomplish the aims of a BYU education. The *BYU Aims* (BYU, n.d.) declared that a BYU education should be intellectually enlarging, spiritually strengthening, character building, and promote life-long learning and service. Howell et al. found that the vast majority of courses scored above neutral on measures related to these aims on the student evaluations. Thus the authors concluded that BYU’s Independent Study program contributed significantly toward the achievement of the BYU aims.

Although Howell et al. (2004) described success at the program level at BYU, as Lemming (2000) declared, “simply to know that a programme ‘works’ without understanding why is of little practical value” (pp. 424-425). Howell et al. only briefly described the type of character development students felt that they achieved through BYU’s Independent Study program, and they did not discuss what elements of the experience contributed this character development. Thus, I selected BYU’s Independent Study program as the context for this study, since others have reported success with character development in this distance education program. However, one study could not explore the depth and breadth of the entire program. As van Manen (1990) explained, the best place for a study in the human sciences to start is with an individual case:

Pedagogical theory has to be *theory of the unique*, of the particular case. Theory of the unique starts with and from the single case, searches for the universalities, and returns to the single case. (p.150)

Also because “Every part of the BYU experience should therefore strengthen character” (BYU, n.d., Character Building section, ¶ 5), exploring one course should yield some valuable results. Therefore, I chose one specific course to uncover more depth behind Howell et al.’s findings and to discover whether my study would substantiate their claims.

To find a course with a sufficient number of potential participants who felt that they experienced “character building,” or character development, I used “intensity sampling” (Patton, 2000, p. 234). In intensity sampling, the researcher selects a case (or cases) that “manifest the phenomenon of interest intensely” (p. 234). In the selection process, I included courses with a minimum of 100 responses (to provide a sufficiently large pool of potential participants) on the course evaluation from November 16, 2001 to August 7, 2006. Although any of the top-rated courses might have sufficed for the study, I narrowed the potential pool to those courses that rated above six on a seven-point scale for character building. From these courses, I selected the course on Christian Fantasy Literature because it was the highest rated course that was not specifically a religion, ethics, or self-improvement course. Also, because there is a limited amount of research on the use of literature as a method of character education (Solomon et al., 2001), this course provided an opportunity to contribute to the character education literature in another way.

Selecting the Participants

I chose to interview the instructor because he has the most in-depth perspective on goals of the course and how he teaches the course. Additionally, he has taught the course over 25 years. Thus he provided insights about student experiences beyond those of the students I interviewed for the study.

Of most interest are the students' lived experiences. To select student participants, I also used "intensity sampling" (Patton, 2000, p. 234). I first asked the instructor for students that he knew who reported character development. At the time, the instructor could not make specific recommendations, so I obtained a list of students who had completed the course and began to randomly select participants. However, much of the contact information I had for former students was no longer current. So after three attempts at random selection, I located only a small number of potential participants. I then attempted to email or call the remaining students on the list. Although the contact information for many of the remaining students was outdated, 14 individuals agreed to participate. All participants responded that they had experienced some character development in the course, though to varying degrees, and thus fit the intensity sampling procedure.

I interviewed a sufficient number of participants in order to obtain a "maximum variation" (Patton, 2002, p. 234) sample. Willing participants naturally formed a diverse sample. The participants fall into the following categories: Five English majors and nine non-English majors; ten degree-seeking students and four non-degree seeking students; twelve off-campus students and two on-campus (for at least portions of their course experience); three male students and eleven female students; ten belonging to the

school's sponsoring religious organization (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) and four belonging to other religious denominations or have no specific religious affiliation. In addition, participants completed the course at a various times, from just a few months before the interviews began to eight years previous (most of the participants completed the course within two to five years prior to the first round of interviews).

Patton (2002) explained that in any study there are trade offs between depth and breadth. I interviewed 14 student participants, in addition to the course instructor, to allow for a sufficient level of depth and breadth. With 14 former students, I could conduct interviews, ask follow-up questions, and include the participants in reviews of the data analysis (see the “interpretation through conversation” section below). In chapter four, I provide narratives of the students' experiences. Rather than share the complete narrative of all the students, I chose to share a more complete narrative of the instructor and four selected participants, who reasonably represent the diversity of the student participants. Table 1 shows the diversity of the highlighted student participants.

Table 1

Diversity of Highlighted Participants

Participant	English major	Degree seeking	Off campus	Gender	LDS
Bob	No	No	Yes	Male	Yes
Joy	No	Yes	Yes	Female	No
Leia	Yes	No	Yes	Female	Yes
Pam	Yes	Yes	Yes	Female	Yes

I also share selected stories from each of the other participants to provide a fuller picture of the types of experiences that students had in the course.

Orienting to the Phenomenon

Hermeneutic phenomenological studies should begin from personal experience (van Manen, 1990). I have not taken the course that serves as the context for this study; nevertheless, I have previously read all the major works studied in the course (*Screwtape Letters* by C.S. Lewis and the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy by J.R.R. Tolkien). I further “turned to” the participants’ experiences (trying to understand the experience from the participants’ perspective) by reviewing the course material and the works they studied in the course.

Previously, I conducted an unpublished pilot study (M. C. Johnson, 2006) that explored the experiences of one student who took the course. However, that study focused on learning in general and not specifically on character development. Later, I discuss pre-understandings and assumptions that came from that study. That study served as a starting point, but I did not use data from that study in the present study.

Explicating of Assumptions and Pre-understandings

In any credible qualitative study, the researcher should explicitly state his or her biases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002; Williams, n.d.). In hermeneutic phenomenology, the analogous activity is *explicating assumptions and pre-understandings* (van Manen, 1990). Typically, one of the principal reasons for researchers to state their biases is to let readers know what the researchers’ beliefs are so they can take them into consideration as they read the study. Researchers also can state their biases so they can be self-aware and consciously attempt to temper the influence of

biases on their work; although, as researchers and humans, we are never able to completely suspend our assumptions (Patton, 2002; Yanchar & Williams, 2007).

Reflecting on these assumptions and bringing them to the forefront can help researchers temper and at least document their influence.

The literature review in Chapter 2 serves as an explication of my pre-understandings of the state of the discussion in the areas of character education, distance education, and the intersection of these two domains. Although I may not agree on all points, an awareness of the ideas shows some potential influences on my reflections of the participants' lived experiences.

In addition to the pre-understandings described in the literature review, my beliefs, personal and professional experiences, and my training as a teacher and instructional designer, among other possible influences, affect the way I view the phenomenon under study. I include some of the most relevant pre-understandings and assumptions below (and in the spirit of full-disclosure, I have provided a more complete account in Appendix A):

- I am a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and ascribe to its doctrines and beliefs.
- I believe that men and women are *moral agents* who were created to “act and not to be acted upon” (The Book of Mormon, 2 Nephi 2:13-14; Bednar, 2006).
- I believe that because people are moral agents, they can choose to learn or not to learn. Educators can try to manipulate or coerce them, but learning that is done for more intrinsic and less self-serving reasons is deeper, more meaningful, and longer lasting (Doctrine & Covenants 121:34-44).
- I believe that student intentions (such as why the student is learning and how he or she approaches that learning) are critical to learning. People also come into any learning situation with varying needs and differing levels of readiness.

- I believe that most theories and models of how people learn, from behaviorist, cognitive, and constructivist perspectives, contain some elements of the truth. However, many of these theories and models ignore or minimize the importance of what it truly means to be human, especially in relation to our moral agency.
- I believe that instructional designers and teachers do not cause learning. “We never educate directly, but indirectly by means of the environment. Whether we permit chance environments to do the work, or whether we design environments for the purpose makes a great difference” (Dewey, 1916, p. 19). The type of environment that Dewey speaks of is more than just a physical environment. It includes social, emotional, motivational, and other elements.
- I believe that learning is a social activity. As implied in the idea of the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), people learn when they face situations beyond their capabilities but that they can handle with some help from a more capable other.
- I believe that good teaching or instructional design does not merely dispense knowledge or cover material. Rather, it should encourage and enhance learning and growth. Good teaching or instruction motivates and inspires people to strive for more, to become the best they can be.
- I believe that teachers and instructional designers should seek to help students become self-directed and able to go forth and teach others. As Lewis (1991) stated, “We teach them in order that they may soon not need our teaching.... We must aim at making ourselves superfluous. The hour when we can say ‘They need me no longer’ should be our reward” (p. 50).
- I believe that more research efforts should be directed at understanding good practice and understanding instructional innovation in the context of real practice (R. T. Osguthorpe, 2006).
- I believe that learning, teaching, and instruction are not essentially different whether they occur in a classroom or at a distance (M. D. Merrill, personal communication).
- I believe that Berkowitz (2002), Davidson et al. (2008), Lickona (1999), Lickona & Davison (2005), and Peterson and Seligman (2004) propose reasonable definitions of character.
- I believe that there are some universal moral laws, imperatives, or norms (Lewis, 1965). Most, if not all, of the world religions and many other philosophies have some form of the golden (or silver) rule that either states to do unto others as you have them do to you or at least to not do to others what

you would not have done to you (Lickona, 2003; Inouye, personal communication).

- I believe that without moral agency, there can be no real character or moral development (Straughan, 1988).
- As with other types of learning, I believe that a person needs to desire to change or improve to develop their character (in fact, a principle that the character education literature seems to ignore is repentance). Thus, what character development can or will take place is likely to vary from individual to individual.
- I believe that more integrated approaches to character education (Berkowitz, 2002; Berkowitz & Fekula, 1999) could be most beneficial. In other words, moral and character issues should be addressed as part of every subject. Teachers and students should address the moral implications of what they are teaching and learning. High standards of character and moral conduct should be expected and encouraged at all times.
- I believe that moral educators should see the students that they teaching as moral agents and help them see the need to use their agency wisely.
- As Gandhi was credited with saying, “We must become the change we wish to see” (Holden Leadership Center, 2009). I believe that this is especially true in character education.
- My findings in a pilot study (M. C. Johnson, 2006), although not entirely focus on the course *Independent Study English 395R—Christian Fantasy Literature* nor on character development, influenced what I expected I might find in this study. In that study, the participant found these aspects of the course helpful to her learning experience: (a) the interesting topic, (b) the opportunity to study more in-depth (covering a couple of principal works in depth rather than briefly covering 10-15), (c) the less constraining schedule of an independent study course, (d) the types and quality of the course assignments and assessments, (e) the flexibility in many of the essay and short answer questions, (f) the willingness of the instructor to not just look for the one “right” answer, (g) the nature and quality of the instructor’s feedback, and (h) the instructor’s enthusiasm and encouragement.

Bracketing Assumptions and Pre-understandings

Heidegger (1962) stated that phenomenology means “to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself” (p. 58; also quoted in van Manen, 1990, p. 33). To enter the hermeneutic phenomenological reflective

attitude and to have the lived meaning emerge from the descriptions of lived experience, van Manen suggested that researchers temporarily suspend or “bracket” their preconceptions or pre-understandings and assumptions so that the lived experiences can speak for themselves without interference (also see Sokolowski, 2002).

However, Guignon (2006) explained Heidegger’s reasons for not bracketing assumptions and pre-understandings:

In Heidegger’s view, there is no pure, external vantage point to which we can retreat in order to get a disinterested, presuppositionless angle on things. So fundamental ontology begins with a description of the “phenomena” where this means what “shows itself,” what “becomes manifest” or “shows forth” for us, in relation to our purposes as they are shaped by our forms of life. But this need to start from an insider’s perspective is not a restriction in any sense. On the contrary, as Taylor shows, it is because we are “always already” in on a way of life, engaged in everyday dealings with things in a familiar life-world, that we have some “pre-understanding” of what things are about. It is our being as participants in a shared practical world that first gives us a window unto ourselves and reality. (p. 6)

Koch (1995), discussing these same issues, explained, “All claims to understanding are, for Heidegger, made from a given set of fore-structures which cannot be eliminated, but only corrected and modified. Hence the famous ‘hermeneutic circle’” (p. 832). I chose not to attempt to bracket or ignore my pre-understandings and assumptions. Rather, by explicitly stating and documenting them up front, I was more aware of them so I could remain open to participant descriptions (Fleming, Gaidys, & Robb, 2003) and seek to understand the participants’ perspectives (Williams, n.d.). In so doing, my pre-understandings and assumptions could thus be “corrected and modified” (Koch, 1995, p. 832).

Investigating Experience as We Live It

The second principal research activity is *investigating experience as we live it* (van Manen, 1990). This stage primarily consists of data collection, focusing on gathering pre-reflective lived experiences.

Consistent with other qualitative paradigms (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002; Williams, n.d.), phenomenology seeks multiple perspectives to enrich understanding (Sokolowski, 2000; van Manen, 1990, 2002). The sources of data or lived experience that van Manen (1990) described and that I chose for this study are “Interviewing (the personal life story)” (p. 66) and the use of “Diaries, Journals and Logs as Sources of Lived Experiences” (p. 73), within which are included the course materials and teacher-graded assignments.

Interviewing

I conducted in-depth, structured, conversational interviews with the instructor and with the selected willing students, although some side discussion occurred as part of building relationships with the participants (van Manen, 1990). For a protocol of both instructor and student interviews, see Appendix B. In some cases, I was able to conduct interviews face-to-face (four total, including the instructor). However, due to the distance from the participants, I conducted the majority of interviews by phone or Skype (a voice over IP service).

I recorded the interviews with the permission of the participants. I took field notes during the interviews and after each interview. In my field notes, I included both *descriptive notes* (describing the actions of those involved in the interviews, descriptions of the setting, etc.) and *reflective notes* (including some initial analysis, reminders of

which experiences and statements seem important, and thoughts on my own feelings and dispositions) (Williams, n.d.). I immersed myself in the participants' experiences by listening to the interviews and reviewing the field notes often. I also transcribed (or had transcribed) the interview recordings to help facilitate the analysis.

The Instructor

I conducted one face-to-face interview with the course instructor and asked follow-up questions through email. The purposes of these interviews were twofold. First, to discover the instructor's views of character development and his perspective on how he has tried to help students develop their character. In other words, I tried to learn about his experiences related to creating the course. Second, I sought his perspective on his experiences teaching the course, especially on how students viewed their own character development based on his interactions with students through correspondence and assignment submissions.

The Students

I conducted interviews with 14 students who had previously completed the course. In the interviews, I asked them to share their experiences related to the course and what they learned in the course. From these experiences, I tried to understand their views on character development and how the course contributed to their own character development. Additionally, I attempted to build a relationship with the participants that would allow me to later explore the meaning of their experiences with them (van Manen, 1990).

Collecting and Reviewing Course Materials and Other Related Documents

Van Manen (1990) spoke of using diaries, journals, and logs as sources of lived experiences. I had access to and reviewed the course materials, as well as the literary works the students read for the course. As the instructor and students described their experiences with creating or taking the course, I reviewed the course materials to see if there is evidence or negative cases of what students and the instructor said about the course.

As a confirmatory source (for purposes of triangulation and negative case analysis), I also reviewed instructor-graded assignments. These were significant in that I was able to view the students' original responses to questions the instructor posed regarding the literature. Also, I could view the feedback students received from the instructor. Four of the participants provided physical copies of the graded assignments, including instructor feedback. Five participants provided the ungraded electronic files of submitted assignments. Additionally, one of these participants shared quotes of the instructor feedback in a follow-up interview.

Conducting Hermeneutic Phenomenological Reflection

The third research activity van Manen (1990) described is *hermeneutic phenomenological reflection*, which is a human sciences term similar to data analysis. In this activity, the researcher attempts to discover the lived meaning that emerges from the participants' lived experiences. The keys to conducting hermeneutic phenomenological reflection (van Manen, 1990) that are applicable to this study include, (a) "Conducting Thematic Analysis" (p. 78), (b) "Composing Linguistic Transformations" (p. 95), (c) "Interpret[ing] through Conversation" (p. 97), and (d) analyzing collaboratively.

Additionally, I conducted several rounds of taxonomic analysis (Spradley, 1980). I also compared the resulting themes from the participants' perspectives with themes from the character education and distance education literature.

Carrying out Thematic Analysis

According to van Manen (1990, 2002) theme is “the experience of focus, of meaning, of point” (p. 87). It is a way to capture the lived experience of the phenomenon under study. However, van Manen (1990) pointed out that a theme is only an approximation at best; it does not fully capture the meaning of the experience, but it moves us closer to understanding it.

To isolate thematic statements, I used a combination of the approaches Van Manen (1990, 2002) described:

1. “Wholistic ... approach” (van Manen, 1990, p. 92). The researcher looks at the text of the lived experience as a whole. The researcher asks, “What sententious phrase may capture the fundamental meaning or main significance of the text as a whole?” (van Manen, 1990, p. 93). However, since there is likely to be more than one theme or many interpretations of the experience, this approach alone is the most subject to “err or seeing meaning that is idiosyncratic” (p. 94).
2. “Selective or highlighting approach” (van Manen, 1990, p. 93). The researcher looks for statements that “stand out” or that seem to elucidate the meaning of the experience under study. The researcher asks, “What statement(s) or phrase(s) seem particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon or experience being described?” (p. 93).
3. “Detailed or line by line approach” (van Manen, 1990, p. 93). The researcher more methodically looks at each sentence or small cluster of related sentences to seek the meaning or theme that each holds. In this case, the researcher asks, “What does this sentence or sentence cluster reveal about the phenomenon or experience being described?” (p. 93).

I used all of these approaches to some degree as I conducted the thematic analysis of the interviews and collected other forms of data to strike a balance among the parts and

the whole (in addition to the taxonomic or hierarchical analysis I describe later). I gave precedence to the most salient statements (selective approach) to locate themes related to the research questions, but only after first conducting a detailed exploration of the text (interview transcripts) to allow the more meaningful statements to show themselves.

The process of isolating thematic statements is similar in nature to coding, which is part of many other qualitative approaches. However, it is unique in that it is more descriptive and does not rely upon single terms or codes that other approaches often use. Rather, as I discussed, themes form more complete attempts at drawing out the meaning of lived experience.

Composing Linguistic Transformations

Van Manen (1990) explained that as themes emerge and the researcher understands them, he or she captures these in what are called *phenomenologically sensitive paragraphs*. The notes I created from this process formed part of the field notes, and I used them to create drafts for use in interpreting through conversation and collaborative analysis. As I previously mentioned, after interviews with participants, reviewing other sources of data, and during and after reflective analysis of the data, I wrote these linguistic transformations.

Interpreting Themes through Conversation

In addition to gathering lived experiences, interviews in hermeneutic phenomenology also allow for the researcher to develop a conversational relationship with the participants in which they can discuss the meaning of the participants' lived experience (van Manen, 1990). To arrive at a common understanding of the meaning of lived experience, participants and the researcher enter conversation, through a process of

questioning and answering, and thus create a common language that allows for understanding (Gadamer, 2004). Thus to an extent, the participants became co-researchers or co-investigators (van Manen, 1990).

In interviews, participants discussed the meaning of their experiences with me. As Kvale and Brinkmann (2008) stated, an interview is “an inter-view” in that “knowledge is created in the inter-action between two people.... The knowledge produced in a research interview is constituted by the interaction itself, in the specific situation created between an interviewer and an interviewee” (p. 32). Mishler (1986) also shared, “through reformulations of questions and responses, [interviewers and respondents] strive to arrive together at meanings both can understand” (p. 65). Thus, this process does not yield a purely emic perspective, since the data were responses to questions that I, as the researcher, posed to participants, and we interacted to understand each other.

Additionally, as I completed rounds of thematic analysis, composition of linguistic transformations, and taxonomic analysis, I shared the results of these activities on two occasions. I also shared drafts of the participants’ experiences for their feedback and clarification. Finally, as I drafted more complete versions of the results, I gave participants opportunities to read the drafts and respond either in writing or in follow-up interviews. This allowed them to not only respond to or correct what they said but also to reflect on the meaning of their experiences and perceptions as well as those of the other participants. In this way, the participants and I “work[ed] together to reach a shared understanding,” which according the Fleming et al. (2003) is a “suitable method for achieving understanding of a phenomenon of interest” (p. 117).

Thus, we (the participants and I) jointly constructed results of this study through the interviews and conversations with participants about the analysis (Fleming et al., 2003; Gadamer, 2004; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008; Mishler, 1986; van Manen, 1990).

Interpretation through conversation is similar to member checking in other qualitative paradigms and can help improve the quality of the study and contribute to its trustworthiness and credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Williams, n.d.).

Analyzing Themes Collaboratively

The purpose of collaborative analysis is similar to peer debriefings: a check on the trustworthiness of results in which peers provide a sounding board or reality check for the research work (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Williams, n.d.). I worked closely with members of my committee to obtain their feedback on the results to see if the themes that emerged resonated with them (van Manen, 1990). I asked other individuals to review drafts, to provide proofreading and editing services, and to respond to the emerging findings. I intended this process to help reduce the risk of my personal biases from influencing my analysis, but it also enriched and deepened the analysis (van Manen, 1990).

Carrying out Taxonomic Analysis

To van Manen's (1990) methodology I added *taxonomic* (Spradley, 1980) or *hierarchical analysis*, to "show more of the relationships among the [themes]" (p. 112). This is consistent with the idea of the hermeneutic circle (Koch, 1995, 1996; Ricoeur, 1981) and the attempt to understand the relationships among themes within the context of the whole rather than treating them as discrete ideas. Spradley discussed seven steps to taxonomic analysis, which I tried to follow. In the first step, "select[ing] a domain [or set of themes] for taxonomic analysis" (p. 116), I selected a question and worked with the

themes related to that question. In the second step, “look[ing] for similarities based on the same semantic relationship” (p. 116), I essentially looked for themes that had a similar meaning and grouped them. In the third step, “look[ing] for additional included terms” (p. 117), I asked if there were any other themes or subthemes that I should include in the groupings I created. In Spradley’s fourth step, “search[ing] for larger, more inclusive domains that might include as a subset the domain you are analyzing” (p. 118), I continued to look for hierarchal relationships between the themes. In the fifth step, “construct[ing] a tentative taxonomy” (p. 119), I created a taxonomy in the form of an outline. In the sixth step, “mak[ing] focused observations to check out your analysis” (p. 119), I revised my tentative taxonomy on multiple occasions and included the participants and others in reviews to refine it. I made further revisions as I drafted the chapters of the dissertation. In the final step, “construct[ing] a completed taxonomy” (p. 119), after several rounds of revision and rewriting, I constructed the completed taxonomies as chapters five and six of this study and reviewed a final draft with the participants.

Comparing Themes with Theories of Character and Distance Education

After completing the other analyses, and prior to the final check with participants, I reviewed the theories and approaches discussed in chapter two, including the *BYU Aims* (BYU, n.d.), and compared the themes discovered in the participants’ lived experiences with theories and approaches to character education and distance education.

Phenomenological Writing and Rewriting

The fourth research activity is writing and rewriting. The purpose of the research process, according to van Manen (1990), is the creation of a phenomenological text that allows the reader to enter into a dialogue with the text. He expounded upon this idea:

Language is the only way by which we can bring pedagogic experience into a symbolic form that creates by its very discursive nature a conversational relation: a discourse about our pedagogic lives with children [or in this case about an instructor with his students]. (p. 111)

Writing is not just the goal of phenomenological research, as van Manen explained; it is also an important part of the process. Through writing about the experiences of others, the researcher moves beyond being the mere collector of others' experiences. Writing becomes an important element of the phenomenological reflection. I used the stories of the participants to discover and reflect upon the themes that lay in them. As I converted these themes into writing, I took what I had written to the participants as a springboard for "interpretation through conversation" (van Manen, 1990, p. 97). As I further refined my writing through conversations with the participants, I also shared drafts with my members of my committee and others to engage in collaborative analysis. I repeated this process several times, working toward van Manen's (1990) criteria for a text that is oriented, strong, rich, and deep. Van Manen further explained the importance of depth, "Research and theorizing that simplifies life, without reminding us of its fundamental ambiguity and mystery, thereby distorts and shallows-out life, failing to reveal its depthful character and contours" (p 152-53). To attempt to achieve this level of writing, I used the phenomenological device of anecdote and spent a considerable amount of time not just writing but rewriting.

Using Anecdotes or Stories

Many consider “anecdotal evidence” as that which is unscientifically proven.

However, an anecdote in human science research serves a different role. Van Manen (1990) defines an anecdote as “rather like a poetic narrative which describes a universal truth” (p. 119). Schank (1990) described the power of story:

People think in terms of stories. They understand the world in terms of stories that they have already understood. New events or problems are understood by reference to old previously understood stories and explained to others by the use of stories. (p. 219)

Phenomenological writing depends upon a careful balance between anecdote (lived experiences) and a discussion of the themes (lived meanings) that emerge from these experiences (van Manen, 1990, 2002). Anecdotes serve several functions in a phenomenological text:

1. “Anecdotes form a concrete counterweight to abstract theoretical thought” (van Manen, 1990, p.119). Anecdote is a form of vicarious experience (Swan, 2005) that moves readers closer to direct experience and also invites them to recall personally related direct experience with the phenomenon.
2. “Anecdotes express a certain disdain for the alienated and alienating discourse of scholars who have difficulty showing how life and theoretical propositions are connected” (van Manen, 1990, p. 119). With anecdotes, the readers can see more concrete examples of how the themes the text discusses apply in others’ real world experiences.
3. “Anecdotes may be encountered as concrete demonstrations of wisdom, sensitive insight, and proverbial truth” (van Manen, 1990, p. 120). An anecdote can often demonstrate a truth better than simply stating the truth.
4. “Anecdotes of a certain event or incident may acquire the significance of exemplary character” (van Manen, 1990, p. 120).
5. Anecdotes are valuable to the researcher because they provide the “experimental case material on which pedagogic reflection is possible” (van Manen, 1990, pp. 120-21).

Well-written anecdotes can, according to van Manen (1990), add value to the phenomenological text in a variety of ways. First, compelling anecdotes can capture readers' attention. Second, they can lead the readers to reflect on and seek for significance in their own lives. Third, they can personally involve the readers in looking for meaning through their own experiences. Fourth, they can transform readers by moving them emotionally and teaching them. Finally, they give the readers a gauge of their own interpretive sensitivity as they respond to each anecdote.

Well-written anecdotes (oriented, strong, rich, and deep) can serve similar functions as thick, rich descriptions do in case studies and other qualitative approaches. Thick descriptions enhance transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Williams, n.d.). Anecdotes, as previously mentioned, can help the reader understand and reflect upon personal meaning. Additionally, an anecdote is a means for human science researchers to help clarify and gain a greater understanding of the participants' perspective—as is desirable in case study methods (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Williams, n.d.).

Rewriting

“Phenomenological descriptions, if done well, are compelling and insightful. The eloquence of the text may contrast sharply with the toil, messiness, and difficulties involved in the research/writing process” (van Manen, 1990, p. 8). The “toil, messiness, and difficulties” refers not only to writing but also to rewriting. I wrote and rewrote after interviews, before, during and after rounds of analysis, after sessions of interpretation through conversation with the participants, and after any collaborative analysis that took place during the study. Thus writing and rewriting were an important part of the process of data collection (turning to lived experience) and data analysis (phenomenological

reflection). Through the rewriting process, I engaged in additional rounds of analysis, particularly taxonomic analysis.

Maintaining a Strong and Oriented Relation

The fifth research activity Van Manen (1990) recommended is to maintain a strong and oriented relationship with those the research affects. Van Manen (1990) described four different groups that human science research affects, and gave examples of how their involvement in human science research might affect them: (a) Those “with whom the research is concerned and who will be interested in the phenomenological work” (van Manen, 1990, p.162), who may feel uneasy about the results of the research or feel “hope, increased awareness, moral stimulation, insight, a sense of liberation, a certain thoughtfulness, and so on” (p. 162); (b) the institution where the research takes place, because the study might affect research methods as well as practice related to the study; (c) the participants of the study, who might attain to “new levels of self-awareness, possible changes in life-style, and shifting priorities of living” (p. 163), or if the research is if done poorly, might come away from the experience with bad feelings, including “anger, disgust, defeat, intolerance, insensitivity, etc” (p. 163); and (d) the researcher, who may come away with “a transformation of consciousness, heightened perceptiveness, increased thoughtfulness and tact and so on” (p. 163).

To maintain an ethical relationship with the intended audience and the institution, I have tried to share the results of the study with others through conference presentations, journal publications (for example, see the article version of this dissertation in Appendix C) and sharing findings with those at BYU involved in the creation of Independent Study courses. I have guarded the anonymity of the participants, treated them respectfully, and

gave them multiple opportunities to respond to the data, the analysis, and the final written documents as Williams (n.d.) recommended. Finally, through conducting this study, I have had occasion to reflect on my own character. I have experienced a “heightened perceptiveness” of my own strengths and weaknesses, and I hope to have grown in some ways.

Balancing the Research Context

The final research activity van Manen (1990) mentioned is “balancing the research context by balancing the parts and the whole” (p. 161). In the interchange between the phenomenological reflection, including carrying out thematic analysis, and writing a phenomenological text, there has to be a balance among the parts and the whole of the lived experience of those we study. Hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with the balance among parts and wholes.

The meaning of the word *analysis* is related to the breaking up of a whole into its constituent parts to determine how those parts relate to each other and to the overall meaning, purpose, or function of the whole (Anderson et al., 2001). That is one of the aims of phenomenology, but in remembering that the whole is more than just the sum of its parts, we have to be more thoughtful. This process of considering parts and wholes in context of each other is called the *hermeneutic circle* (Koch, 1995,1996; Ricoeur, 1981). I have attempted to balance the analysis of the parts with an understanding of the whole through several means. In Chapter 4, I provided thick, rich descriptions of the students’ experiences, principally in their own words. I have tried to share the relationships between themes that participants discussed. Also, a primary purpose of the taxonomic

analysis is to show the relationships among the parts and to the whole of the participants' experiences with character development in the course.

Establishing Trustworthiness

In quantitative studies, criteria for judging the trustworthiness of the study include reliability and validity. In qualitative studies research, more appropriate criteria of trustworthiness include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002; Williams, n.d.). Williams (n.d.) discussed additional criteria that are appropriate for hermeneutic phenomenological studies. These criteria include conducting a meaningful study, treating participants ethically, and completing a well-written report.

Establishing Credibility

I attempted to establish or enhance the credibility of this study in the following ways: (a) disclosing biases (Patton, 2002) or assumptions and pre-understanding (van Manen, 1990); (b) staying engaged in the research context sufficiently or prolonged engagement (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Williams, n.d.); (c) using multiple sources, data types, and theoretical perspectives to triangulate the analysis of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002; Williams, n.d.); (d) conducting member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Williams, n.d.); (e) conducting negative case analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Williams, n.d.); and (f) conducting peer debriefings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Williams, n.d.).

Explication of Researcher Biases

Reporting my biases (pre-understandings and assumptions), as I explained previously, helps to establish credibility by (a) enhancing my ability to understand my

own pre-understandings and assumptions, (b) informing those reviewing my work of what my pre-understandings and assumptions are so they can advise me if they feel that I am allowing them to influence my analysis inappropriately, and finally, (c) helping readers as they interpret the methods and findings of the study.

Prolonged Engagement

Williams (n.d.) defines prolonged engagement as “being present in the site where the study is being done long enough to build trust with the participants, experience the breadth of variation and to overcome distortions due to the presence of the researcher in the site” (Chapter 5, Credibility section, ¶ 2). There is no specific timeframe for prolonged engagement. However, I tried to spend “sufficient time” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 301) in the research context to achieve prolonged engagement by (a) working with participants sufficiently to gain their trust; (b) verifying that I had as much of the participants’ experiences that are relevant to the topic and context of the study (through conducting multiple interviews as needed, asking participants to write about their experiences, and through interpretation through conversation); (c) soliciting documentation (letters, instructor-graded assignments, etc.) that was created when I, as the investigator, was not a part of the context, thus overcoming “distortions due to the presence of the researcher” (Williams, n.d., Chapter 5, Credibility section ¶ 2) as much as possible.

Triangulation

Triangulation of multiple sources of data, methods, theoretical perspectives, and investigators further enhances trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). I used multiple sources to collect lived experiences (multiple students and the instructor). I

used multiple data types, including (a) interviews of the instructor and students, (b) written experiences from the interviewees, (c) course materials and any available instructor-graded assignments and correspondence between the instructor and students, and (d) literature from the course readings. Additionally, I compared themes from the participants' comments with comments on the course evaluations from November 16, 2001 to August 7, 2006. Many of the same themes appear in the course evaluation comments, though without the same depth. I compared the essential themes resulting from the hermeneutic phenomenological study with multiple theoretical perspectives from both character education and distance education. Although I am the principal investigator, triangulation of investigators included involving the participants and members of my committee in the analysis and review process.

Member Checks

Previously I equated member checks with the human science practice of interpretation through conversation. I discussed my analysis of the data with participants to more accurately represent their perspectives as we collaborated to achieve a better understanding of their lived experiences in the course, usually through written correspondence. Additionally, I conducted member checks of the stories (rich descriptions) in Chapter 4 with the participants and made any corrections they requested.

Negative Case Analysis

I conducted negative case analysis through all stages of analysis. To do so, I collected additional data, checked student claims against the artifacts they provided, and asked follow-up questions during "interpretation through conversation" (van Manen, 1990, p. 97) with the participants.

Peer Debriefings

Through close consultation with my committee, I checked the appropriateness of data collection activities and conducted collaborative analysis activities to help ensure less biased analysis of the data. Through this collaborative analysis, I also conducted what William (n.d.) calls “progressive subjectivity checks” (Chapter 5, A Checklist ¶7) to increase the likelihood that I did not unknowingly allow my pre-understandings and assumptions to color my analysis.

Enhancing Transferability

I provide thick description of the participants’ experiences and the emerging themes to enhance transferability (Guba & Lincoln, 1985; Williams, n.d.). Though this study is not designed to generalize to all teaching situations, nor even to all distance teaching situations, the understanding that this study provides can potentially help people be more thoughtful, tactful, and sensitive in their activities as instructional designers, instructors, or learners in a distance education context. I intended the richness of the anecdotes and discussion to allow readers to draw their own conclusions about how the important themes of the participants’ experiences are applicable in their own situations. A good phenomenological study should invite the readers’ participation and reflection (van Manen, 1990).

Enhancing Dependability and Confirmability

To enhance the dependability of the study, I maintained an audit trail. The audit trail can also help enhance confirmability along with peer debriefings and member checks. As I chose between the research activities, I tracked the research design decisions

I made. I include a sample of the audit trail in Appendix D. Additionally, my field notes and audit trail were available to my committee as part of the peer debriefing.

Including Other Criteria

In Williams' (n.d.) discussion of standards for qualitative research, he listed some additional criteria that also seem appropriate for hermeneutic phenomenological research. These are that the research should be meaningful, the participants should be treated ethically, and the report should be well written.

Meaningful Research

Williams (n.d.) argued that a qualitative study—or really any study—should be conducted with a meaningful purpose in mind. Williams also stated that the researcher should be able to clearly explain why he or she undertook the study and why it is valuable. I have explained the purpose of the study in chapter 1 (that I am seeking to understand the lived experience of students reporting that they developed their character in a distance education course) as well as in the first section of this chapter, where I discussed why I have chosen to do a hermeneutic phenomenological study. The results of the study, ideally, confirm the meaningfulness of this study.

Ethical Treatment

Patton (2002) and Williams (n.d.), among others, argued that participants in any study must be treated ethically. To do this, I ensured the participants' anonymity, allowed them to respond to and even disagree with data and my findings, and treated them with dignity and respect (Williams, n.d.). In the section "Maintaining a Strong and Oriented Relation," I explained further ethical concerns of human science research (van Manen, 1990, 2002) that I have addressed as I conducted the study.

Well-written Report

Hermeneutic phenomenological writing has its own standards, which I attempted to meet through a process of writing and rewriting. As I discussed previously, the text should be oriented, strong, rich, and deep. As Williams (n.d.) stated, “the descriptions should develop a sense of ‘being there’ for the reader” (Chapter 5, Other Criteria section, ¶ 6). Williams also stated that reports should be clearly written, including appropriate grammar and language usage. I worked toward meeting these criteria through the process of interpretation through conversation (or member checks) and through the collaborative analysis (or peer debriefings) and rewriting. Additionally, other trusted individuals outside my committee read and critiqued my writing as part of the rewriting process.

CHAPTER 4: NARRATIVE DESCRIPTIONS OF PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCES

In this chapter, I share the stories and perceptions of the participants. I primarily use the words of the participants to provide a first person, or emic (Williams, n.d.), perspective that readers can use in their interpretation of the study results. First, I present a narrative of the professor's experiences developing and instructing the course, including character development he has observed in students. Next, I share thick descriptions of the course related experiences and perceptions of four selected student participants (whose selection I described in chapter 3). Finally, I provide brief sketches of the other ten student participants because they had unique and personal experiences that the four highlighted students do not represent that help illuminate the themes that emerged from the study. These stories provide necessary background to the thematic analysis in subsequent chapters.

The Instructor, Dr. Walker

At the time of the study, Dr. Walker was a professor of English at Brigham Young University. He has also taught the Independent Study English 395R—Christian Fantasy Literature course since 1982.

Reflections on His Discovery of The Lord of the Rings

Dr. Walker's experience creating and teaching the Christian Fantasy Literature course begins with an experience he had while working on his dissertation. He took a break from writing to read *The Lord of the Rings*, and it captured his imagination. He shares with his students:

I started to read *The Lord of the Rings* in London while I was supposed to be writing my Ph.D. dissertation one dismal rainy Thursday afternoon. I missed dinner because I was still reading. By the middle of that night, I was so caught up in reading *the Rings* I forgot to watch my favorite Marx Brothers movie on TV.

When, the next night, I finished the appendices at the end of *The Return of the King*, I grieved because there was no more of *The Lord of the Rings* to read. It was the best reading I've ever had; no epic novel of war—not *Vanity Fair*, not *A Farewell to Arms*, not even *the Iliad*—captivated me the way *The Lord of the Rings* did. May your reading be as satisfying. (Walker & Clark, 1982, p. 68)

In reminiscing on that experience, he further clarified, “[My dissertation] was on [Dylan] Thomas’ poetry which is very modern, depressing, and kind of about as opposite as you can get [to *The Lord of the Rings*]” (personal communication, October 9, 2007). At the time, Dr. Walker described himself as “a realist clear through” (personal communication, October 9, 2007). However, that was a change from how he started out; he explained, “I was hooked on reading as a first grader with *The Wizard of Oz* books.” Later, “because it seemed juvenile,” he began to feel differently about the fantasy genre. He felt that “if we cannot have reality in our reading then lets not read it” (personal communication, October 9, 2007).

So when a good friend gave him a copy of *The Lord of the Rings*, he admitted, “I refused to read it for a couple of years, even though I had great faith in [my friend], just because I was so resistant to the form” (personal communication, October 9, 2007).

When he finally did read the trilogy, it not only captivated him, but he felt like a “reformed alcoholic” (personal communication, October 9, 2007) in that he wanted to share his discovery with everyone. “Because of my resistance to the genre,” Dr. Walker stated, “I was stunned” (personal communication, October 9, 2007). From that experience he changed the topic of his dissertation to write on *The Lord of the Rings*, and it has affected his work ever since.

Reasons for Teaching Christian Fantasy

Dr. Walker explained two reasons why he chose to write and teach the Independent Study Christian Fantasy Literature course. First, he said, “I had discovered things in this territory that were life changing and character building. Things that really I thought should be shared. I thought, ‘It is a shame for people to miss this’” (personal communication, October 9, 2007). Second, he wanted to point people to other great works of literature. He confessed, “I would like everyone in the world to read the standard works every year without fail, including the Old Testament. I would like them to read all of that and probably Shakespeare” (personal communication, October 9, 2007). He asked himself, “‘How can I hook them in, like with my kids, what is the best way to get these people to read Shakespeare?’” (personal communication, October 9, 2007). His response was simple and helped tie those two purposes together:

I thought maybe the best way was maybe the way I came to Shakespeare, which was first of all by reading *Wizard of OZ* and then graduating to Tolkien and Lewis.... So in the first place I just wanted to share the good stuff, in the second place it seemed like a great bridge or path to lead people from newspaper reading to literary reading. (personal communication, October 9, 2007)

He explained that although he hopes that his course will lead people to Shakespeare and the scriptures, he does not explicitly make that invitation to students. He said he invites them to do so “only by implication, but emphatically” (personal communication, November 21, 2007). He then explained how he invites students in this direction:

We start where we are, with what we can enjoy and identify with, and move deeper into it: “It is best,” says Tolkien’s hobbit Merry, “to love first what you are fitted to love ... you must start somewhere.” The biggest change in attitude by my fantasy students is that they realize that literature goes beyond that, that literature can not only “begin in delight,” as Robert Frost says, but “end in wisdom.” The wisdom part, and the deeper delight of that, invites the students to read deeper stuff. I’m pretty sure I’ve led more students more deeply into great writers by teaching Tolkien than by teaching Shakespeare.

One thing for sure: at least two dozen students over the past two decades have used Christian fantasy as a bridge to return to higher education. Most of those were women who've raised families, and who didn't believe their mothering experience was as educative as it was until they proved it to themselves through working with unthreatening material.

The course is explicit in its expectations for students to push beyond their comfort zones into educational stratospheres. (personal communication, November 21, 2007)

Dr. Walker further expressed what he has gained from his study of these two authors and why he is interested in helping students come to know Tolkien and Lewis:

I've had my soul stretched by the imagination of these guys. In everything in Tolkien, notably in his best creations the hobbits, there is "more than meets the eye." That trains a perceptive reader to look for more everywhere. Great fantasy can train us to think outside the box, beyond our usual ruts, outside our ordinary minds.

Besides helping me think differently, Tolkien and Lewis have taught me to imagine more, to envision the invisible. Merry talks of the "things that are deeper and higher," and much of this fiction attunes alert readers to see that, to realize possibilities beyond what I'd recognized. My wife swears that since reading *The Lord of the Rings* I talk to trees, and even I admit after meeting Treebeard that everything is more alive than I had realized.

They [Tolkien and Lewis] show me that great literature can be a kind of revelation, sensitizing to the spirit, awakening appetite for better things, and showing the way to get there. It can hold up a mirror to our experience, showing us "things that are, and things that were, and things that yet may be." If truth is stranger than fiction, the strangest fictions may stretch us most toward truth. Tolkien and Lewis have further made me aware, through their incessant literary quests, that I am on a quest myself, that my life is in process, a story that I am making up as I go along. They show me the story that I tell myself about myself can be limiting or confused or misguided, and that it can be altered in better directions.

Lewis and Tolkien have, finally, taught me how to teach: not by lecture but by discussion. Not by fiat but by invitation. Not by rule but by example. Not by sermon but by parable. I struggle daily in the classroom and out of it to teach the way we learned in first grade Show and Tell: not by telling but by showing. (personal communication, November 21, 2007)

Approach to Designing and Teaching the Course

Dr. Walker's approach to the design of the course grew out of his personal philosophy of education, summarized in a quote that hangs on his office wall, "None of us is as smart as all of us" (personal communication, October 9, 2007). He stated that he tried to work that into his course in the terms of a "practical pedagogical" approach:

That means ... you are sharing the learning instead of a hierarchal top down learning. I tell my students in class that I think that there is a lot more wisdom, a lot more insight, even a lot more, despite my gray hairs, experience out there then there is up here. We will share our insights as far as we can and we will all be wiser for it. We are smarter for having all of our input instead of just having the input of one person no matter how bright and Harvard educated that person happens to be. (personal communication, October 9, 2007)

The design also contained elements of attitudes and beliefs he gained from his study of Tolkien and Lewis:

The independent study course grew out of my enthusiasm for the "Christian Fantasy" subject matter—I was excited about Tolkien and Lewis, more excited about the way they focused so invitationally on significant Christian concerns. My enthusiasm was shared by a decade of students in English and Honors classes on Tolkien and Lewis. (personal communication, November 21, 2007)

Despite the challenges distance education presents, Dr. Walker was convinced of the value of Independent Study, "having taken almost a fifth of [his] own courses at BYU through distance learning" (personal communication, November 21, 2007). He went on to explain his experience as a student in Independent Study courses:

I took most of my psychology minor courses, some general education classes, and several English major courses by independent study. My immediate motivation was to graduate quickly—campus hours were limited, and the additional IS hours didn't count toward that, so the independent study classes expedited my education by about a year. (personal communication, May 29, 2008)

Dr. Walker further explained how his experiences as a student in Independent Study affected his approach to the courses he has taught through independent study:

That practical background made my instructional approach pragmatic, based on the approaches that had worked well for me in those independent study courses: I designed the kind of course that I wanted to take. The textbook syllabus I wrote for this course was basically the book I wanted to read. (personal communication, November 21, 2007)

With his practical approach and the desire to create something that he would also want to read, he related how he began the process of designing and writing the course:

In writing the course I tried to identify principles that could be learned through studying this literature that were both crucial and engaging. I used those to outline the course, then meditated on practical ways to help students learn the principles: some of the more effective outcomes of that pragmatic pedagogical approach were such assignments as [1] creating their own language to help them see how complex and how world-shaping language is, [2] assessing actual ethical situations in terms of C. S. Lewis's self-assessment paradigm, [3] analyzing Tolkien and Lewis fictional style according to the students' own stylistic preferences. (personal communication, November 21, 2007)

In addition to his own preferences, he also enlisted the help of a trusted student to improve the quality of the course:

I wrote the course over a summer, working steadily on it from May through August. I asked one of my favorite graduate students, Nate Clark, to test-take the course with an eye to clarification and revision: I wanted the advantages of a student perspective before we put it in print. He had so many helpful suggestions from that student interior view that I credited him as co-author. (personal communication, November 21, 2007)

In the syllabus, the professor states that one of the main purposes of the course is for the students to enjoy themselves:

The real objective of English395R—"Christian Fantasy: J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis" is for us to have as much fun with Tolkien and Lewis as possible. But please don't admit that to anyone; if some one asks you what we're doing in this class, tell them: "We're studying selected touchstones of Christian fantasy with sufficient thoroughness to enable us to read intelligently any literature of the genre, appreciating its unique perspectives and relating them to personal values." (Walker & Clark, 1982, p. 6)

Reflecting on that statement, although he hopes that students come away with the ability to “read intelligently any literature of the genre” (Walker & Clark, 1982, p. 6), he does want the learning experience to be enjoyable:

I don't think you can learn unless you are having fun on a certain level. Unless there is some sense of verve with it, some sense of vitality, of discovery, of satisfaction, of pleasure in some sense, I personally have never learned anything without that and so what I am thinking to myself is that the fun has to be part of the process. The purpose is the values.... The way to do that, to a remarkable extent to me, is through enjoying it as much as possible.... If there is not enough light in a narrative or the sound of the poetry or the appeal of it, well then I don't think you will ever get your wisdom out of it. (personal communication, October 9, 2007)

Since making the course fun was an important goal for him, he tried to make the course enjoyable in “any which way [he] could” (personal communication, November 21, 2007). He elaborated on the techniques he used to make the course “fun” for his students:

I introduce myself wryly, start the first lesson with a joke, and entitle that lesson, an exploration of the essential justifications for studying fantasy, “For the Everlovin’ Fun of It.” I jumped at every chance I could see for humor or lightness of tone or familiarity in the subject matter, and more especially in the approach to it.

Realizing I'm no David Letterman, I tried to deepen the enjoyment level by personalizing the course for students, frankly befriending them. I refer to the students by name, encourage answers that grow out of personal experience, try to remember (lately I've had to take notes) student idiosyncrasies well enough to be able to relate to them out of their own backgrounds, particularly when I could find shared backgrounds with them. I call students frequently, especially when they seem frustrated or nervous. Trying to apply the old Primary principle that the most important teaching in a class may go on outside the class, I've attended students' weddings, visited them in prison, contacted them in any way that has presented itself.

At a deeper level of enjoyability, the course is designed for adaptability; it should be a different course for every student who takes it, a course more directly designed for that student's particular interests. The third novel we read, for instance, is selected by the student. Several sections of the course offer alternative possibilities, and I urge students individually to go beyond even that in redesigning the course to their particular needs. Those choices, and the practical

learning results of those choices, aim to make the course more enjoyable for each student.

But the bottom line enjoyability lies in the learning itself. Dean Eliot Butler used to contradict my views on the pure fun of learning; he was convinced “He who thinks learning is fun has either never learned or never had any fun.” But I think there’s no real learning without joy. I tried to set up the course substantively, so that students could really teach themselves a thing or two, could even have a chance to alter fundamentally their views of the world. My hope for my students is that they will come out of English 395 not just having better readings of fantasy, but having better ways to read—and not just fantasy, but all fiction, all literature, all life. It’s on the level of learning that I think the course should be most enjoyable. (personal communication, November 21, 2007)

Although Dr. Walker feels that it is more difficult to have the same type of relationships with students as he does in his face-to-face courses, he tried to create the course so it would be as interactive and as much like a discussion as possible. There are several ways that Dr. Walker tries to interact with students and make the course a more personal and meaningful experience for students:

The personal dimension of the course is crucial to me, and I’m convinced it matters to the students. I . . . wish them Merry Christmas and Happy Easter or whatever the season warrants, and chat in the margins with them about personal aspects of their responses so we can move from a hierarchical relationship to a personal one. (personal communication, November 21, 2007)

In trying to be more personal, Dr. Walker explained that he tries to “say things like I am actually feeling [because] I don’t think you can fake that, so as a technique it would probably very lousy” (personal communication, October 9, 2007). He says that being more friendly and personable with students is something he feels strongly about and tries to do in his face-to-face courses. That is why he also tries to do this with his students at a distance, “we are pretty aloof here and we got all this distance between us and so anything that you can do” (personal communication, October 9, 2007).

To further build the relationship and create an experience more like his face-to-face courses, Dr. Walker invites students into a conversation:

I set up questions that invite a lot of writing to try to establish a genuine conversation. I go out of my way to encourage them to respond honestly and personally, and try to respond in kind: it's crucial to me interact with the students' ideas rather than succumbing to the temptation to treat them like computer terminals. (personal communication, November 21, 2007)

Although he uses many multiple-choice questions in the course, Dr. Walker explained that any combination of the five options could be correct and that “The reason for the answer is far more important for me than which answer is chosen” (personal communication, October 9, 2007). These multiple-choice questions then become mini-essay questions in disguise. He also commented that grading these types of questions provided him some of his best opportunities to interact with students and share personal insights with them.

One of the most consistent ways that Dr. Walker interacts with the students is through grading their assignments. This requires a considerable investment of time on his part. He shared that he used to feel that he spent “way too much” time grading papers, until he realized its importance:

The grading response was my only consistent chance to interact with the students—except for the course itself, my only opportunity to teach. I'd guess I average, through the thick and thin seasons of Independent Study, an hour a day grading submissions. I grade them as soon after arrival as my campus teaching and meeting schedule will allow, and always have them out by the end of the day. (personal communication, November 21, 2007)

Dr. Walker discussed the rationale for trying to quickly grade and return students' assignments:

An underestimated means of personalizing the course is to get things back quickly to students. I've invested a great deal of time over the years in rapid response—except for rare times traveling away from BYU, I've never in twenty years

returned a student lesson later than the day I received it. Like returning calls quickly, that says to the students clearer than verbal reassurance that I'm interested in them, will take time for them, think they matter. I keep the tone of that responding personal, sounding as if I cared so they'll realize I do. [A student] emailed this week: "Thanks for grading and returning all my assignments so promptly! It really encourages me." (personal communication, November 21, 2007)

In addition to grading of assignments, he finds other ways to interact with his students:

I email whenever I get a chance, usually to clarify student concerns or alleviate frustrations. I call students frequently to further personalize. I leap at any excuse to do that, especially indications of worry. I frequently call, for instance, before the final, to let them know what to expect and to assure them they'll do well because they already have in the course.

Mostly it's just a matter of wanting to be friends with these great folks. I got an email from a former student, [Name Student], a few days ago that claimed he had an argument with another former student, [Name of another student]: "I think he's the best friend I had in school." "That can't be," [the second student] replied, "because he's my best friend." I don't buy the hyperbole, but they really are my friends. (personal communication, November 21, 2007)

Dr. Walker discussed the effects that trying to build a trusting and personal relationship with the students has had on students' learning experiences over the years:

I haven't done a study on it so it is extremely anecdotal but it feels to me that it becomes more personal as you are using first names but it does become certainly more honest and I am pretty sure more deep. When students are trying to give you what they think you want, they don't do as well as when they are trying to give you what they think because they think better, they know better what they think than what you think. So when they are comfortable enough to trust the relationship enough to really say what they are thinking I am pretty sure it is better. It certainly feels like it does. They care more about the substance; they care more about what they are saying, they are more invested in a personal way.

I think we put students in a difficult situation a lot of times in guessing what we are thinking and if they realize that "he really does want to hear what I am thinking" then it stimulates their thinking, at least the expression of it.... It is worth doing it on those bases alone and anyone could do that. I know that I am sold on the principle, but you can see from one class what happens to students from the beginning when they are afraid. And unless you attribute that to our own teaching skills that made them twice as good at the end then at the first, you

would have to say that something about the relationship itself was contributing to the learning process. (personal communication, October 9, 2007)

Observations of Character Development in the Course

Dr. Walker hoped students would experience specific character development while taking the course. He stated,

I thought a challengingly inviting independent study course could, minimally, help students realize they were in charge of their own learning enough to discipline themselves through a course where they had to motivate and pace [themselves] and bring to fruition their own study. At the least I hoped students would come out of the course better disciplined, more self-starting and proactively engaged in their own education.

Maximally, I dreamed pretty high. I thought some students might be able to take off with this kind of course, under the thrilling impetus of their own learning momentum, into some stratospheric educational territory: I wanted the course to be not just a course in some readings of Tolkien and Lewis and their fellow fantasists, but an opening up of entirely new ways to read not just fantasy or even the best literature, but how to read life. (personal communication, November 21, 2007)

In addition to the type of character development Dr. Walker hoped to see in his students, he observed, and students reported to him, some of the ways in which they experienced character development:

My best experience with student learning both as learner and as instructor has come through making the most of student responsibility. I start with high expectations, trusting that the students will maximize their opportunities to learn, and give them every chance to do that I can. Seems to me that the particular strength of independent study is that very student responsibility; because they have to lean less on teachers and classmates, the individual student has a chance to depend more on her own best efforts. A student this past year wrote on a lesson: “Thanks for all the options. Independent Study should be independent.”

I’ve observed some instances of character building through the Christian Fantasy course. Some of that is straightforward strengthening of self-confidence, as per the letter I received this week from [a female student]: “I loved the course. I have always struggled to believe in my ability to understand and interpret literature. I was ashamed and felt very inadequate and ‘underread.’ I wanted to stretch myself, to hush my recital of voices telling me I was not good enough. This course has changed me, blessed me with confidence and joy. I am able to see things as they

were meant to be, not as I have experienced them in the past. What made this all possible? I believe it is the sharing of self that was expected. It was the adventure of escape from previously conceived notions of my own self. I will never be the same. I have learned to love reading through this course.”

I am convinced by this kind of student reaction that learning can be a kind of natural tonic, particularly learning on our own, and more particularly learning of processes, of new ways of reading and thinking and awareness. That kind of essential learning can extend beyond ourselves into a kind of educational quest, a taste for expanding awareness everywhere we can. A month ago a former student, inmate at [a state prison in the United States], wrote to tell me his experience with Tolkien and Lewis had inspired him to initiate a myth reading club at the prison, “The Coal Biters.” Attendance already averages two dozen inmates, but the most encouraging aspect for me was the elation of my former student—just turned down for admission at [a university in the Western United States], his disappointment was eclipsed by his sense of proactive learning with colleagues through the reading group.

Learning at its best can affect character in other ways, can even provide a kind of inoculation against the disappointments of life. One of my students described her character enhancement through the course in terms of *The Once and Future King*: “The best thing for disturbances of the spirit,” replied Merlyn, beginning to puff and blow, “is to learn. That is the one thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only love and lose your moneys to a monster. There is only one thing for it then: to learn. Learning is the thing for you.”

Wish I’d kept comments from students over the years celebrating what they perceive as their character growth through the course: there’s been considerable enthusiasm. Yesterday a student finishing the course, [Name of Student], wrote: “I could never express all that I have felt and learned from this class. My eyes have been opened and my resolve has been strengthened. My little glimpse of the writings of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien has been a feast for my soul, showing how each event in our life presents opportunity for growth. Through the varied experiences and challenges our lives present we are reformed and remade into the beings God intended us to become.”

Maybe the most dramatic character building through the course comes in terms of size, sheer extension of the student soul—or at least mind. Was it Emerson who said “The mind stretched by an idea can never shrink back to its former size”? The course deliberately attempts to stretch the perceptions and expectations of students through engagement with such paradoxes as “realistic fantasy” and “the problem of pain” and “the possibilities of prayer.” (personal communication, November 21, 2007).

Reflections on the Longevity of the Course

Dr. Walker originally wrote and developed the course in 1982. Yet despite not having been revised for over 25 years, the course is among the highest rated courses in BYU's Independent Study program's portfolio. Dr. Walker mused on why this might be the case:

We got a little lucky with the inherent appeal of the subject matter: Tolkien and Lewis are not just popular writers, but artists with the kind of literary quality that has lent their fiction staying power over time. The course was written when the popularity was obvious but the quality was not; Tolkien particularly was at the center of a maelstrom of critical debate trying to exclude him from the respectable literary canon. I was convinced he got too little critical respect, and over time he's been granted more.

I suspect the teaching approach has held up because it's more of a learning approach. This course tries to do what I think all courses should do, especially independent learning courses, and that's put responsibility for learning where it can do some good: on the student. I'm convinced most of us resist being taught, particularly if we feel any coercion or condescension in the teaching; yet we thrive on learning. The moral of that story for pedagogy is: get out of the way and let the students learn. I tried to set the course up in a way that students could come to insight through their own best thinking and on the basis of their own experience, tried to make the course not a matter of memorizing what I know but of students discovering individually what is true for them.

The most straightforward and most effective way to manage that is through questions. Socratic questions don't work too well for me—too artificial and condescending, leading the student by the nose to what is already known. So I try to ask real questions, questions I don't know the answer to, ideally questions nobody knows the answer to. I'm persuaded a really good question is worth at least a dozen lectures and as many as two-dozen sermons. The best questions hold up well—my most productive questions are ones that have been around a long time, questions of the “And who is my neighbor?” type. Questions that are answered in the back of the book are hardly worth asking. But real questions, questions like “does God like me?” are invaluable. (personal communication, November 21, 2007)

Highlighted Students

I highlight the following students to help provide a more in-depth view of the student's experiences taking the course. I selected these four students (Bob, Joy, Leia,

and Pam) because they were reasonably representative of the participants as a whole (see the “Participant Selection” section of chapter 3 for more details).

Bob

Bob has a doctoral degree in history. He has taught at the university level both in the United States and overseas. He has also taught at the secondary level. He is currently teaching at a juvenile correctional facility in the western United States. In addition to teaching history, he also teaches literature courses. He has several publications in history, and he has published works of fiction and poetry. He is married, and his wife has a degree in British literature.

Bob explained how he came to take the Christian Fantasy Literature course, “I am a professional student and I was looking for stuff that might help me with [what] I am doing with the kids [at his school]” (personal communication, October 13, 2007). He had taken “a number of courses” through distance education, including courses from BYU Independent Study, and when he came across this course he said, “I wanted to take it for some time” (personal communication, October 13, 2007). In addition to his interest in the topic, he decided to take the course through BYU because he had found the other BYU courses he had taken were “up to the quality that I would expect of a university,” and because he could not find anything similar at the local universities and community colleges.

Approach to the Course

Because of his previous experience taking Independent Study courses he was, as he said, “used to how the system works there” (personal communication, October 13, 2007). Bob commented on his approach to the Christian Fantasy Literature course:

I dove into the reading and did a lot of research about it. That is my nature to check and see what is in the field. I re-read all of Tolkien's works as well as reviewed what I have read of C. S. Lewis. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

He also read other books on Lewis' life as well as other books. He also watched some television programs from BYU and another university. He said, "I just dove in and did it. I enjoyed the assignments and I enjoyed the writing" (personal communication, October 13, 2007).

In addition to getting down to work and reading additional resources, Bob also spent time discussing the course with others:

I discussed the assignments with my wife, with colleagues at school, with my students, and showed them what I was doing and what I was interested in, paper instruction, I used the papers that I was writing as tools to help my students see how it is done. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

He said that the discussions with his wife were the ones that actually benefited him most, because his wife was a British literature major. He commented, "She was able to help me make connections with other things not necessarily in the coursework but took it a little farther and helped enrich [the experience] a little" (personal communication, October 13, 2007). He explained the effect of taking the course and discussing the course with his wife:

It has helped my relationship with my wife.... She is very much into British Literature and quite a fan of Tolkien and Lewis and quite a number of others. It has opened up new areas for us to talk of what we are seeing, understanding, and experiencing. It gives us additional points of reference for dialogue. It has helped us become closer because we developed a new area of common ground. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Of his discussions of the course with others besides his wife, he noted, "The other people were interested in what I was doing but didn't contribute [to his learning]" (personal communication, October 13, 2007). However, he later mused on the effect of

the course on the quality of his discussions with his colleagues and students, his abilities to discuss related issues, as well as his understanding of his own learning:

When I talk with other people we often, especially with my students and colleagues, we often discuss things in terms of the book, the characters and how it applies to real life. I think I am better able to respond to some of the questions that arise and realize things that I don't know when I would have usually thought that I did. I am beginning to understand what I don't understand, what I need to study, what I need to look at, what I need to ponder about, all that was influenced by the course. There are a lot of other courses and a lot of other experiences that I have had but this particular course was so effective because the fact that it got me thinking. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Reflections on the Independent Study Experience

Discussing his experience in taking the course through Independent Study, Bob declared that he appreciated the format:

I found it a lot better for me. I was able to have more time to contemplate and think about what is going on instead of taking notes and trying to meet the assignments that you have in a usual university classroom where you are in there with a bunch of other students and you have a semester to get back. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Generally, Bob did not encounter any disadvantages to taking the course through an Independent Study. He felt he had access to plenty of resources through his state's university system and to other resources, had he needed them, through BYU. He even took advantage of the time it took for Dr. Walker to send back graded assignments. He mused, "The time you wait for stuff to come back is time spent reflecting on what you sent. So, that went very well too" (personal communication, October 13, 2007).

One of the reasons Bob did not run into any disadvantages with the characteristics of a distance-learning course is because of his experience and learning style. In addition to earning a Ph.D., he has taken numerous other courses to gain experience in other fields. He also has become more self-directed in his learning. He shared, "I have reached

a point in my life that I don't need to be in a classroom to complete work and the self-paced part was good (personal communication, October 13, 2007).

Another reason Bob appreciated the independent study nature of the course is because he holds himself to a high standard of achievement:

I have taken classes at various colleges and I haven't found them as challenging intellectually. Part of it is because I have my own standard that I have to keep and I was able to work at the level that I wanted to without having to worry about driving everyone else crazy. I had an experience in a Plant Science class and the instructor thought that I was doing too much work. All I was doing was learning and some of the other students thought I was a weirdo because I wanted to excel beyond what was expected. In this course, there wasn't anybody else sitting there besides the instructor going over it. It was challenging and that is why I really enjoyed it. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Impressions of the Course

There were few, if any, features that Bob didn't like about the course. He explained some of the elements that he appreciated:

I really found it challenging, stimulating, interesting. The assignments got me thinking about a number of things that I could do with my students as well as [improving] my own writing. I liked the way the course had us compare Tolkien and Lewis to others that have written fantasy. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Bob mentioned the quality of Dr. Walker's responses to his work in the course as an element that he liked:

The responses were very well done. They were critical where they needed to be critical, and I think they were more than fair. I also felt that I was getting more attention from the professor than I would at a seminar or university. It was good feedback and good input from the instructor. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Personal Growth from the Course

Bob had a number of goals when he took the course. He explained one of his main goals related to his work. "I was looking for information that would help me

recommend this literature and other literature to my students and would help me make it more enlightening. I found that” (personal communication, October 13, 2007). Another goal was more personal, “I also wanted to improve my own writing. I found things in there, especially in Tolkien’s writings, that helped me understand better how I could approach some of the stories” (personal communication, October 13, 2007). There were also unanticipated benefits, “Frankly (and this is a side benefit) it increased my enjoyment of other media and literature. It gave me additional basis for reading and discussing them” (personal communication, October 13, 2007). Bob added, “Basically [the course] just helped me grow in so many different ways it is hard to specifically come up with one at the moment” (personal communication, October 13, 2007).

One part of the course experience that Bob felt was beneficial was just seeing how Dr. Walker designed and organized the course:

I like the way the course was designed and the way it was built, one point upon the other. It was truly step-by-step and it made it a lot easier to comprehend where we were going in the course. I wouldn’t have a clue on how to do a course like this. It was instructive just seeing how it was designed. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

He shared how experiencing the course design has influenced him as a teacher:

It has influenced me because my background is in the university levels and coming down to public school level, I have had to learn how to talk to the kids and organize in a way that I don’t lose them and I think that this course has helped me reflect on how I organize my class material and improve. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

In addition to improving how he teaches, what he learned in the course gave him “more to share with others” (personal communication, October 13, 2007):

I have been able to share this with some of my students I have had kids that after we sat down and looked at simple books, I work with high school students that may have a fourth grade reading level, and being able to get into them and share and discuss what is going on. I have been able to touch more lives as well as

I encourage them to read farther. You can't imagine the joy in them saying they have never read a book and then have them go on and finish a series. That has led me to look at other series and learn more about British and American literature so that I can be more of an effective teacher. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Bob also explained how one of the assignments in the course helped inspire him to improve as a writer:

I have always dabbled in poetry here and there. One of the assignments in the course was to see if you could take a passage from one of the Tolkien pieces and turn it into verse.... It let me see the poetics in his writing and it got me thinking about my own writing. I went back and looked over some of the poetry that I had written and got thinking about it. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

That assignment and studying Tolkien inspired him to learn more about poetry and work to improve his own writing:

I ended up signing up for some of [BYU's] poetry courses. It also gave me a perspective of seeing things around me ... it got me looking into the nature poetry that I really enjoy. I started writing more and did a couple of workshops and started taking another course in distance learning in poetry, which I really enjoyed. I spruced up some of my stuff ... and published it. I am continuing to write. It also gave me ideas for the historical fictional pieces that I have been working on and how to approach it to develop a better understanding of the human condition. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

These experiences provided further opportunities for Bob's growth as a writer and in his thoughts about the importance of writing, which he has further explored in other courses and workshops he has taken since completing Dr. Walker's course.

Bob especially enjoyed the part of the course that asked students to compare the works of Lewis and Tolkien to other works of fantasy. This portion of the course helped Bob in several ways. One of the course outcomes for Bob was an improved understanding of what makes for good fantasy literature:

Not only did it help me to understand why I didn't like a lot of the other [Fantasy works] out there.... It has also given me reference as I am reading other works

and getting ready to present them to my students and help them through it and answer their questions. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Insights from the course helped his own writing of fiction and poetry. “It gave me a basis to look at stuff I write to see where I am going with it and not just being a knock-off but developing literature that stands on its own” (personal communication, October 13, 2007).

Bob shared two ways that the course was spiritually strengthening to him. First, he stated that he found Lewis’s approach to Christianity to be enlightening:

C. S. Lewis’s writings on Christianity have always interested me but this caused me to look at it a little deeper and compare the way he viewed the religious world with [my] view and how it affects life. It led me to think a little deeper in terms of [what] we believe. In the questioning, I did not question my faith, I questioned how much I understand the faith of others as well as my own. It improved my own relationship with my Father in Heaven and also my relationship with my family members in terms of my Christianity. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Second, he gained additional spiritual insights from the works of Tolkien. He saw the theme of enduring through strife:

Little people can make a big difference just by living their lives to the fullest and doing what they can. That has helped me increase my own desire to endure some of this nonsense either at work or others and just keep going forward doing what I believe is right (personal communication, October 13, 2007).

Bob explained some of the ways that reading the literature in the course influenced him:

Especially the vicarious experience that I had in reading the literature the first time and comparing them to books that have been written since. Seeing the quality of the characters and being able to see things through their eyes that I hadn’t seen before helped me get ready for some of the things that I do and face in my own life. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

He said this helped him “[be] able to say I don’t know how this is going to turn out but I am going to commit to the course and see what happens” (personal communication, October 13, 2007).

In one of his assignments, Bob explained that he connected with one of the characters, a character from Lewis’s *The Screwtape Letters*:

Like Wormwood's patient, I struggle with humility. I know what humility is and it has served my spiritual growth. But like the patient, I am tempted to find pride in that humility. Screwtape advised Wormwood that when the possibility appeared that the patient might become humble, the way to handle an attack of humility was to encourage the patient to find pride in his humility. "Catch him at a moment when he is really poor in spirit and smuggle into his mind the gratifying reflection, 'By jove! I'm being humble,' and almost immediately pride – pride at his own humility – will appear." [Letter XIV] I cannot say that there is a tempter whispering encouragement in the ear of my soul, but I know that on many occasions a surge of pride has followed the realization that I had just been humble. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Expanding on the idea of the course helping him endure strife and handle challenges in his life, Bob shared about his situation at work:

I work in a very bizarre place. I have a very mean administrator that I work with. There have been times that I have had to just forge ahead; not knowing whether or not I was going to have my head handed to me on a platter because I overspent the amount that this person thinks that I should have in teaching [or for not] following her philosophy of education. I am very independent on that. I think the experience I have in leading and contemplating the principles that were taught in this course have helped me to stand up further to some of the nonsense that I face in my job. It has actually help me come around to where instead of being the odd duck, people have decided that I am the person that they need to come to when they need to get something done. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Bob commented that what he learned from the course was not only valuable for this life, but was worth taking with him beyond.

Joy

Joy lives in the southwest United States. She is a wife, the mother of two teenagers, and a nurse (LPN or LVN). She decided to acquire her RN designation, so she

began a nationally accredited online nursing program at a university in the eastern United States. She explained how she came to take the Christian Fantasy Literature course while in this program:

I had two humanities [courses] to take.... [The university has] a course search [that] shows you everything that they have to offer that will fit that requirement. Then they list other classes that have been approved from other universities across the country that will also fit that requirement. I actually found both of my Humanities [courses] at BYU. I took the Christianity Fantasy class and I also took the Bible as Literature class [both taught by Dr. Walker]. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

“I chose the course because of it being a Christian course,” said Joy. “Christian and Fantasy aren’t two words that I would think that necessarily go together and so I was curious” (personal communication, October 13, 2007). Besides filling a requirement and satisfying her curiosity, Joy had another reason for taking the course:

I had to have the humanities requirement and when I saw those courses and I thought, “What better courses to take. Something that I can do to take care of the humanities requirement and also still be involved with God actively in taking them.” (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Approach to the Course

Through her online nursing program, Joy became an experienced distance learner. However, this course was different than many of the other courses she had previously taken. She summed much of her previous experience this way, “You got an outline and they told you what you needed to know, you studied it, and when you were ready you would go take your test. That classified as a four-hour nursing class” (personal communication, October 13, 2007). However, that experience did help her develop good study habits and learn how to learn on her own. “I was already pretty much in the habit after taking seven nursing [courses] of just sitting down and getting to it” (personal communication, October 13, 2007). She could manage her learning and when she felt it

was time to get to work she had the self-discipline to do it. Yet she was also self-aware enough that she stated, “When I felt like I needed to take a break I would take a break. When I was feeling a little overloaded I might...watch movies with my kids or go out in the evening or whatever” (personal communication, October 13, 2007).

Joy had a supportive family that helped her through her experience. When she really needed to study, her husband would make dinner. Her husband and children usually gave her the time and space she needed to get her work done. If they did not have plans for the evening, such as one of her children playing in a ballgame, she would usually do her course work until it was time to get ready for bed. She also spent a significant amount of time working on the course on the weekends, when time permitted.

Joy took the course reading with her to many of the places she went so that when she had a free moment she could read. When she received the course material, she put the course manual in a three-ring binder so she could take it wherever she needed to go. Typically, though, when she arrived home from work she went her bedroom to read or do her coursework on the computer in her bedroom. She took out her materials and went through the questions and worked on her responses. She often used the Internet as a resource to help her research as she thought about the questions. Joy commented on the quality of the questions Dr. Walker asked and the questions in the assignments helped her think about the reading in a different way:

The assignments really made you look at things in a way that I may not have. You really had to think about things more.... It really made you think of things that if you were just sitting down to read the book you wouldn't necessarily think about. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

She typed up all of her responses to the assignments on her computer and submitted those files. She added that the course required a lot more writing than she was accustomed:

On the downside it was an extremely long amount of writing and I am not an English major. Nursing is a lot of brief writing, [The course] was a lot of essays and even the multiple-choice questions were essays. That was the only downside of the course that I found. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Despite not particularly enjoying all the writing, she did feel that she came away from the course more confident as a writer. She stated that it helped her feel like she could go on and finish her bachelor's degree sometime, and she was considering working on a master's degree in nursing, for which she would have to do a considerable amount of writing.

Despite being busy with other responsibilities, Joy shared that it took her approximately five months to complete the course:

But I am also working full-time with two teenage kids that are involved in sports and everything, which is why I like the distant learning and self-paced part of it because if I am busy one week and don't get to it I am still OK. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Reflections on the Independent Study Experience

Joy commented on why she appreciated the independent study format, "I loved it because of the freedom" (personal communication October 13, 2007). That freedom worked for Joy because of her many roles. She needed the flexibility to be able to work around the needs of her husband, her children, and her work.

Joy mused that although working independently provided significant freedom, it was not without its drawbacks:

That of course is the downfall that you don't have anyone else that you can pick up the phone and call or walk up to the professor after class and say I am not sure

I am quite getting this. You have to figure it out on your own which is negative, but it also can be a positive because it forces you to think more through the process than having anyone feed you their opinion and going from that, it is completely you. (personal communication October 13, 2007)

She took another course through her online nursing program with more rigid timelines that allowed for online communications with the professor and other students. However, having assignments due on a regular basis and on specific days caused her some stress. “If I had a busy week with the kids it was staying up later or working harder or giving up things that I wanted to do because I had to get things done at a certain time” (personal communication, October 13, 2007). She declared that it would be great if someone could figure out how to mesh the best of both formats.

She made up for the lack of personal communication with other students in the course by talking to those around her. Her son had seen *The Lord of the Rings* movies, so she spent time talking with him. She also tried, with less success, to talk about what she was learning with the other nurses at work:

I work in the [pediatric] surgery department ... it is a very small group and there are about five nurses that work together. I would talk to them and they just thought that I just lost my mind because *The Lord of the Rings* was nothing that any of them would ever read either. They would say, “You are crazy.” And I would say, “I know, I thought the same thing. You should read it, it is great.” (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Reactions to the Literary Works in the Course

Joy said that she especially appreciated reading *The Screwtape Letters*, *A Greif Observed*, and *The Lord of the Rings*. She reflected on what she enjoyed about each of these works and how they affected her.

The Screwtape Letters. Joy explained, “*The Screwtape Letters* were really thought provoking and really made me think” (personal communication, October 13, 2007). She

said the book caused her to ask, “Is that really how God works in our lives and how the devil decides to work in our lives against Him?” (personal communication, October 17, 2007). “In everything I try to look for spiritual growth. With *The Screwtape Letters*, I felt some obvious spiritual growth when looking at things from the opposite direction” (personal communication, October 13, 2007). She commented on how this view helped her self-evaluate, “I can maybe be more mindful not to let those things pull me away from God and to certainly see where some of those had in the past” (personal communication, October 17, 2007).

There were several insights that she really identified with in her life. For example, at one point Screwtape teaches his nephew Wormwood how to mislead or confuse his patient (the person he was charged to tempt) about prayer:

I have known cases where what the patient called his "God" was actually located—up and to the left at the corner of the bedroom ceiling, or inside his own head, or in a crucifix on the wall. But whatever the nature of the composite object, you must keep him praying to it—to the thing that he has made, not to the Person who has made him. You may even encourage him to attach great importance to the correction and improvement of his composite object, and to keeping it steadily before his imagination during the whole prayer. For if he ever comes to make the distinction, if ever he consciously directs his prayers "Not to what I think thou art but to what thou knowest thyself to be", our situation is, for the moment, desperate. (Lewis, 1996, p. 30)

This passage caused her to think about how the devil could, “using things that are normally intended to be pure, twist them to make them impure to pull us away from God (personal communication, October 13, 2007), including prayer.

Joy shared another insight she gained from *The Screwtape Letters*:

In the beginning [of the book], [Screwtape] is talking about [the patient] being in church and thinking bad thoughts about the people around him, [thinking] that he is better than them and being judgmental. That is a hard thing to do when you see someone and not be judgmental. It made me more aware in my own judgments. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Joy had another experience with the assignment that called for her to select a theme from *The Screwtape Letters* and analyze it:

It was not an easy task.... I struggled with this for several days, flitting between multiple options, none of which really felt right. Sunday morning, as I sat in church, our pastor started discussing a new topic, LOVE! That was it, my subject, how simple is that, the one thing that Screwtape and other tempters cannot in any way, shape, or form comprehend. The love God has for all of his creations, mainly us humans. (personal communication, October 13, 2009)

Writing about this theme was one of the many spiritually strengthening experiences she felt she had in the course. The experience reconfirmed for her that “as we humans know, the fact so allusive to Screwtape, the love God has for us is the most unselfish and unself-serving love that there is” (personal communication, October 13, 2007).

A Grief Observed. After a few lessons on *Screwtape* and a couple more on C.S. Lewis, Dr. Walker gives the students an opportunity to select a work of Lewis’s and analyze and write about it:

He also ... gave us a list of C. S. Lewis books that we could read. My father passed away quite unexpectedly a little over a year ago and I don’t think it had even been a year at that time and he talked about C. S. Lewis’s background and how he had lost his wife and written a book and that was the book that I choose to read because what I was going through personally in my life and that helped me a little bit in my own grief and I turned around and passed it on my mom to read. They had been married almost 50 years when he passed away. (Joy, personal communication, October 13, 2007)

She read and wrote about her experience, drawing upon the experience of Lewis, though she admitted that losing a parent as an adult is different from losing your spouse. When she was at the hospital as her father was getting close to death, she felt concern for her father’s eternal welfare. She described her experience with one assignment:

Recently ... I lost my father quite unexpectedly.... I miss him greatly and my grief pops up at very odd times. One day when driving home from work I called my 14-year-old son. His voice sounded so deep when he answered and I thought

of how much he has grown in the last year and how proud my Dad would be of him, his first born grandchild. I hung up and cried most of the way home.

I am hoping in reading C. S. Lewis' book, *A Grief Observed*, I will work through some of the feelings I have not really allowed myself to deal with. I also look forward to giving it to my Mom when I am done. I can't imagine the feeling of loss that she has losing her partner after 47 years of marriage....

My situation and loss are nothing like that of Lewis, other than the fact of a loss itself. The loss of a parent that you have lived away from and the loss of your partner that is your life are two definite different losses. However, grief over losing someone close to you is pain no matter which way it comes to you. I never felt the anger that Lewis did towards God, but it was comforting to see someone else question God in similar ways that I had. I have carried a slight guilt in the questions that would pop up in mind seemingly all on their own. I am also able to get a better idea of what my mother has been going through the last eleven months by seeing some of the feeling Lewis describes. She shares with me a lot, but some things, I'm sure, are beyond words.

In the first chapter Lewis describes how grief feels, stating, "There is a sort of invisible blanket between me and the world." That is exactly how I felt but didn't have the words to describe it so perfectly. I walked around feeling like I was in a fog. Similarly to Lewis' feeling of embarrassment, the condolences from everyone just made me feel like screaming, until someone I barely knew giving the usual "I'm so sorry for your loss," follows with "I know how hard it was when my Mom died." The fog seemed to lift slightly, if only briefly, and in talking to someone that had also been through it I felt a little like it would eventually be okay. I got a similar feeling from Lewis' book, a comfort from hearing from someone else.

Lewis later speaks of how appalled he is when standing outside his church he sees a man with a hoe and a watering can going to care for his mother's grave. The appalling part was that he referred to the grave as Mum, like it was his Mum and not just the grave where she is buried. After Joy had died, he questions if this is in one way better a link than one just preserved in his memory. I have to agree with the man calling the gravesite Mum. My Father was cremated and stayed in the temporary plastic container provided to us from the funeral home for the first couple months. Mom would walk by it and yell at it for leaving her like my Dad's ashes would some how apologize. It finally became clear he would not go to a mausoleum until my Mother went with him. Therefore, my sister and I purchased a very proper and fitting urn to permanently place his ashes in, a beautiful golf bag, complete with clubs, a towel, and an umbrella leaning against its side [proper and fitting since he used to play golf five to six times a week]. It looks like a statue on the fireplace but we all speak to it and call it George. I wonder what Lewis would have to say to that. Knowing that it has brought healing tears and laughter to our family and close friends I think he would approve.

I worried about my Dad's fate and often thought about asking him of his relationship with Jesus, but never did. While I watched the fight for his life from outside the ICU room, I pleaded with God over and over to get him through this and I would buck up and have the conversation I had put off. A voice in my head told me "don't worry, he is with me." In the days after his death I agonized about this, was it truly God letting me know He had my father, or just my very overactive imagination saying what I wanted to hear? At the end of the book Lewis speaks of laying the questions before God and not that there is no answer but a silent waiving of the question. "Peace, child; you don't understand." This is in a small way comforting to me. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

The Lord of the Rings. Before she even officially signed up for the course, Joy obtained the reading assignments from the Independent Study Web site and began to read them:

[While] waiting for my packets to come in I started reading [*The Lord of the Rings*] and was just taken over; I loved it. It just opened up a different genre that I would have never otherwise looked at. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

She became involved in the book and in the lives of the characters. She expressed her feelings this way, "When I finished *The Lord of the Rings* the first time I just felt lost; I felt like my best friends had all just left me" (personal communication, October 13, 2007).

Because Joy completed the Bible as Literature course before she began the Christian Fantasy Literature course, she found that she needed to go back and read *The Lord of the Rings* again when she took the course. However, she found that reading it while taking the course helped her learn and appreciate it even more:

I thought that I better re-read [*The Lord of the Rings*] so I can remember it. I read it again and got even more out of it and I liked it even more, and I never re-read a book. Once I have read it I am done. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

She recalled how compelling the story was:

Picking up a book and reading for enjoyment is like a mini vacation, I love to get involved in the story like I am part of it and with *The Lord of the Rings* it was just so easy to fall into that. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Some of the things in *The Lord of the Rings* that really impressed Joy were seeing the battle between good and evil and the Christian undertones of the novel (Christian symbolism, themes, etc.).

Another element of *The Lord of the Rings* that Joy appreciated was the characters:

When you read them and you get involved in their life and their travels and what's happening to them and how they handle things, it's almost as a role model as to how you want to be seen and you want to behave. (personal communication, October 17, 2007)

One of the things she appreciated about the characters was the sacrifice that many of them made to stand up against evil and help their friends. She cited some specific examples:

Boromir [being] willing to give his life to save Pippin and Merry, Aragon giving up what could be a very luxurious life as a king to roam the countryside and fight back, Frodo and the rest of the Hobbits leaving the Shire to travel in very scary places ... just because the love of their friends and just right there shows a testament to friendship. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

She said that the examples of the characters helped strengthen some ideals that she already held regarding "the importance of strong friendships" (personal communication, October 13, 2007).

Joy also explained another way the characters in *The Lord of the Rings* helped inspire her:

With *The Lord of the Rings*, just how all of the hard decisions they had to face, the fights that they had to fight, the things that they had to give up that were dear to them, the struggles that they had to come out on the side of good. (personal communication, October 17, 2007)

She mentioned that this helped remind her of what may be required in standing up for what is right:

It is not always easy to do the right thing and be on the rights side. Sometimes it is easier to fall and be on the wrong side. Just to see everything that they gave up for the good it would be strengthening my own thoughts that it is not always easy and sometimes it does takes sacrifice to be on the side of good. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

She further elaborated, “I don’t plan on fighting Trolls or anything, but I don’t know, there are some people in the world that you could probably consider Trolls” (personal communication, October 17, 2007).

Reflections on Her Relationship with Dr. Walker

Joy signed up for both courses but began the Bible as Literature course first. She was getting ready for the final exam in that course when she began working on the Christian Fantasy Literature course. Because she had already built a relationship with Dr. Walker, she related well with him. As she began the Christian Fantasy course, she sent in a self-introduction (because she had not done that during the Bible as Literature course) and included a question about the final exam for the Bible as Literature course. She wanted to know if it were possible to take the Bible with her into the final exam. Dr. Walker wrote back with a humorous reply:

Great to have you back in action. You’re doing your usual fine work. Thanks for filling me in on your personal side. I miss that with these mail classes. Unfortunately, the Bible test isn’t open book, as you surmised. Independent Study is so tight about what they allow into the testing center, I’m surprised they allow students. (personal communication, October 17, 2007)

Joy explained, “I really like Dr. Walker and I really felt somewhat of a bond with him just from comments that he would make on my papers because I really never had any [other] correspondence with him” (personal communication, October 13, 2007). Some of

the comments she appreciated most were simple. She recalled, “He wrote, ‘I love how openly and honestly you write.’ Just little comments like that off to the side, “Well analyzed, [Joy].’ ...At the bottom of one of my essays he just wrote ‘Superb!’” (personal communication, October 17, 2007).

Through the course and from the feedback from Dr. Walker, she said, “I really felt like I knew him personally by the time I was done with both of those classes” (personal communication, October 13, 2007). She shared the effects of her relationship with Dr. Walker on her work on the assignments in the course:

I guess that I was just giving so much of myself and I don’t think I would have given so much of myself if I hadn’t done the Bible as Lit. class as well. Because I think that was probably a little more personal because my core beliefs are in [the Bible]. (personal communication, October 17, 2007)

Despite her appreciation for his comments, she could not communicate much with Dr. Walker. She reported, “I really would have liked to have heard his opinion and I really wasn’t able to get that” (personal communication, October 13, 2007). There were times when it was difficult to take the courses on her own, and there were times when she was not sure of what Dr. Walker was really asking and would have liked to have been able to have closer contact with him.

She was particularly impressed that Dr. Walker did not force any particular religious point of view or his own personal opinions on the students:

Especially coming from a university that has a specific religious background.... It didn’t preach anything out of that specific religion.... It wasn’t trying to make me think one way or the other. It was all up to your own thought process and it was just the literature. (personal communication, October 17, 2007)

Leia

Leia was a young newlywed who put her education on hold so she could work to help support her family while her husband pursued his education:

Originally I went to college for a secondary Education degree in English education. I did not finish my degree because I got married instead but it is something that I would like to pursue in the future if the opportunity ever arises again, it is something that I would like to do. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

In addition to previously pursuing an English degree, Leia grew up with a love for books, especially for fantasy and science fiction. This was one reason she was interested in taking the Christian Fantasy Literature course:

I grew up around a lot of books, I had an older brother that read a ton and so I got that habit from him I guess and it is something that I do a lot.... My dad really enjoyed science fiction and fantasy; I grew up watching *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *Lord of the Rings* old cartoons, and things like that so I have always had a predisposition towards fantasy, science fiction, and that type of a thing. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

She learned about the course from one of her friends who knew about her “predisposition” for fantasy, which is how she ended up taking it.

Approach to the Course

Leia, however, did not take the course to complete a degree or fulfill a requirement; it was more to have something to do and for personal enrichment:

I actually took it more for fun than I did for a course requirement.... I had time, I was working a job where I sit in my office and answer a phone and when your phone only rings three or four times a day that is a lot of time to fill. I kind of saw it as an opportunity to read the fantasy literature that I like but also gain a little bit more of an understanding of the Christian aspects. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Although she did most of the course work while at her job, she clarified, “there were sometimes when I did stuff at home but not usually” (personal communication, October 13, 2007).

Leia completed the course in a relatively short period of time (she reported that it took her between four to five months to complete the course). Despite her efficient work, her approach was not consistent day to day. Leia described her work on the course as “kind of in spurts” (personal communication, October 13, 2007):

I would sit down and [work on course for] two or three days then take a few days off then do a few more days, it was never a consistent thing. It depended on my work load and some days I would get there and I wouldn’t want to do it, and I am the type of person that if I don’t want to do it then I don’t. So it was very spontaneous for me. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Her husband had previously read *The Lord of the Rings*, so while she took the course she shared what she was learning with her husband:

That was a lot of fun because ... I would actually read through the content and quizzes and things like that, I would find things that I never have really thought about before and I could come home and show him. He is very deep and he likes to think about things like that so it was fun for him too because he kind of took the course along with me, just informally. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Leia mentioned that because it was hard not getting to interact with other students in an Independent Study course, the interaction with her husband was very helpful and extended her own thinking about the course:

You don’t get to bounce your ideas off of people and hear what they have to say and different insights like that. So it definitely enriched the course for me because I could go home to him and say, “Hey this is what I read and this is what the course material said,” and he would say “have you ever thought of it this way,” so it definitely made the course better and brought into it for me that interaction; the ability to listen to other people’s perspectives.... I think everybody is different when they read literature and everybody learns differently and so for me to be able to bounce that off of him and have him bring his own perspective into it was really interesting. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

On one occasion, they discussed Letter II of *The Screwtape Letters* about how the devil's servants try to get people at church to fault find with those with whom they worship. Her husband, who served as a missionary for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, shared with her experiences in which he saw things like that in some of the congregations he was in during his missionary service. Some people they were teaching would find fault with church members or leaders and in essence say "there is no way that your church can be true" (personal communication, October 13, 2007). Talking with her husband about experiences like that helped her "see how things from the literature would come to life and be an actual real-life experience" (personal communication, October 13, 2007).

She shared another example of an insight she gained from her husband when she was studying *The Lord of the Rings*. In the lesson that discusses Christian symbolism in *Lord of the Rings*, she stated that she saw how Frodo and Aragorn were figures of Christ, but then she came home from work and discussed the lesson with her husband:

He said, "Why couldn't Gandalf be a Christ figure because in a way he dies and is resurrected again and it is up to him to save his people which of course is the order of the wizards and it is his mission in life to bring enlightenment to people between good and evil?" and that is something that I never thought of prior to that. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

She noted that having these types of discussions enriched her experience in the course. They allowed her to get thoughts from someone else and bounce her ideas off of someone. Additionally, she said that these discussions helped her and her husband learn to communicate with one another:

It helped my marriage a little bit; it helped us to communicate a little better. When I took it [we] had only been married six to seven months, so we were still in that stage of trying to learn to communicate with each other and we are both totally

different when it comes to that. So being able to read the stories that he had read too and then come home and being able to discuss the ideas that I had, and the ideas that the instructor had, and him throw in his two cents, it helped us to learn more about each other and more about how we think. So that was definitely a very good side effect. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Impressions of the Course

Leia enjoyed several things about the course. One aspect she enjoyed was the topic:

I really liked that [the course] covered fantasy because even at [her former school] there is not a course that covers fantasy literature.... I think people discredit [fantasy] as “these people are weird they like dragons, wizards, and elves” and that kind of a thing. So I enjoyed that it was a course that covered material that isn’t usually studied. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Leia said that she also liked being able to work on the course at her own pace:

I [could] do it when I want and when it is convenient for me. It gave me that freedom that if I wanted to do five chapters a day I could do five chapters a day. If I only wanted to do one I could only do one. That freedom allowed me to do a lot more with my other time. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Generally, she also liked how the course was written:

I really enjoyed the way that he explained things. He would...go through and explain a character and personalities and what they were. He would tell about the author. Like when Tolkien was writing Lord of the Rings he had this image of a hobbit in his mind and this is how the whole thing was born or that he would tell stories about hobbits to his children. I liked that he explained it enough so that you could know what was going on with the characters but at the same time ... he didn’t put so much in there that you got lost. Sometimes you go to a class and the teacher is trying to be smart and he gets way too much into it and you go, “What is he talking about?” But I never had that feeling with this course. I really thought the workbook was well written ... it really followed what you were doing and it explained a lot of what the instructor wanted you to gain from it. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Although she said, “Overall I liked the experience, I liked the course material and I liked the way that it was structured” (personal communication, October 13, 2007), there were parts of the of the course structure she did not like as well. She felt that it covered

too much of *The Lord of the Rings* at once, addressing “very large chapters and very large sections at a time” (personal communication, October 13, 2007). When she tried to respond to the questions in the course, she would say to herself, “Oh, I don’t remember that,” and she had to go back through the books to refresh her memory. She shared her ideas about how she would have liked to approach *The Lord of the Rings*:

I would have liked to see it done in smaller sections so that you could cover the more in depth type of things in each of the different sections, maybe do it by book or by three or four chapters so it didn’t have such a rush feel to it. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Additionally, although she liked that the course covered the Christian fantasy genre, there was at least one work she read in the course she did not enjoy:

I didn’t particularly like the book *Mere Christianity*. We had to read *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis. It wasn’t my favorite work, it was difficult for me to read and to understand and I think that there are better works by C. S. Lewis that you could study. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Personal Growth from the Course

Leia reported that “As a child and as a teenager I was very withdrawn and I didn’t have a lot of friends and I did do a lot of reading” (personal communication, October 13, 2007). She especially enjoyed reading fantasy and science fiction novels such as *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars*, and so forth. At that time, she recalled, not many of the people she went to school with knew or appreciated these kinds of works; “people would laugh at me for [reading these books]” (personal communication, October 13, 2007). She claimed, “my personality flaw was that I preferred these books to people” (personal communication, October 13, 2007).

However, as Tolkien has gained in popularity and especially now that she has taken this course and grown in her understanding of the works and of fantasy, she became more confident in recommending books to people and talking to them:

I never really knew how to bridge the gap between [her appreciation for literature and talking to people about it] and this course definitely showed me how to take [the literature] and discuss it with people. It helped with the interaction with people and now I can walk up to someone in a bookstore that I don't know and say, "that is a good book" and they ask why and I can tell them about it. So it did give me more confidence in content and things like that. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

She had an interesting experience when she was in line for the release of the seventh *Harry Potter* volume at a bookstore:

Probably one of the best experiences that I had is that I went to the midnight selling of *Harry Potter* seven. I was standing behind a gal and she was probably in her 40's ... and as we were walking through the store and they had us lined up and down the isles because there were 500-600 people there. As we were walking through the isles she would pick up a book and I could say, "Oh I have read that book that is a really good book," and then we would talk about it and that would open doors and other avenues. This course and being able to take it and learn about things that I haven't thought about before, it kind of made me more confident in recommending books and talking to people about books because it definitely opened an avenue of communication about what I read and what I can talk to other people about. So it did change me in that way. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Before she gained confidence through the course, she said she would have been much more reluctant to strike up a conversation with people she did not know.

Even though she was previously an avid reader of fantasy, she commented that the course helped her "to read some fantasy literature that I haven't read before" (personal communication, October 13, 2007). For example, she mentioned, "I like to read things more far out than *Screwtape Letters* which is fantasy but not the type that I would usually read. But it gave me that perspective of what other types of fantasies are out

there” (personal communication, October 13, 2007). Leia further reflected on the affect of the course on her as a reader:

Basically what I took out of [the course] was looking at things in a different way. A lot of the time I think people just read and take it as a straight story but [the course] ... helped me to think of it in a different way and ... [to] look at it from a Christian perspective. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

She further clarified how the course has affected her approach to reading:

When I open a book it is not just a story there are other elements to it, it definitely has changed my life as a reader and a reader of the fantasy genre. It definitely has helped me to think beyond the book; to research more. Even now when I pick up the book I get on Wikipedia and look up the author and see what life experiences they have had and it gives me a better idea of where the author is coming from. Like ... *Harry Potter* ... you think it is a child’s book but when you read J. K. Rowling’s life history or you listen to interviews with her you learn that is not just a child’s story but it is about the author in certain ways and it is about the human experience, really, and that is kind of the way I think about things now ... I never thought of *Lord of the Rings* as a Christian piece of literature, I just always considered it a fantasy thing. Like *Chronicles of Narnia*, we didn’t read it in the course, but I did read it and I read about C. S. Lewis and it kind of made me think a lot more about his experience as a person and as a writer. It definitely changed my perspective on reading and researching. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Leia also mentioned that the course influenced her as a writer:

I like to write too and I like to see different writing styles and it helped me to see how these kinds of writers put their lives and religion into their writing and their characters and their stories. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Leia had an experience at work with a young woman that the course helped her to deal with in a more understanding way:

I used to work at a place and I worked with a little gal ... and she would come to me a lot with ... problems of immorality or drinking and things that I have been taught my whole life to avoid. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

She felt that this young woman was bringing these problems upon herself, so she should just stop doing these things and her problems would disappear:

It was very irritating for me at first because it was like, “Well just quit being stupid!” But at the same time I kind of had to take a step back and realize her life experiences have been completely different than mine, she hasn’t been taught these things and these life struggles that she is going through right now could be something like getting married or having a child that would be large decisions for me. These are large decisions for her and so it helped me to step back and say, “How can I, as a totally different minded person, help this person who may not understand [things the way I do].” I talked with her for quite awhile about her life experiences and to learn more about her, about where she was coming from, what type of person she was, what kind of childhood she had and it was just very eye opening. It helped me to look outside [my own perspective] and see things as most people live. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Even though Leia believed that the young woman needed to change her behavior, Leia was able to take the time to better understand her as a person instead of instantly prescribing solutions to her problems. Just having someone to listen to her problems was a helpful service to this young woman.

In speaking of the influence of the course on her experience with this young woman, she shared that seeing different perspectives and seeing value in them helped her to be more open to others’ views:

Just studying the authors ... Tolkien and C. S. Lewis and were not [of the same denomination as she was] but in reading their literature and their life stories and experiences that brought them about writing these books, it kind of made me realize that people who are not of our faith or not of our same mind, they have the potential to be spectacular, to do great things, to put things together in extraordinary ways and that made me think about this girl that I am talking to, with her life experience she is going to do something fantastic. She may or may not change the world with it but because she is different, we are all different, each of our experiences are different, we each can create something out of that. That is kind of what I thought about when I read Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, that even though they have a lot of [similar] ideas they weren’t raised [the same as I was] and their lifestyle was not [the same as mine]. And even though they might not be the most perfect people they have still created the best of what they could with what they had and that made me realize that people are like that too. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Pam

Pam attended BYU for four years working on a degree in English. At the beginning of her senior year she met her husband, who was ready to graduate and had been accepted to optometry school. After they got married, she left school to work so he could continue his professional preparation. She explained, “While he was going to Optometry school, I worked full time. That’s when I started the Independent Study program” (personal communication, October 2, 2007).

She felt fortunate, given her situation, that she had been an English major, “I was kind of lucky that English was my degree because there are tons of Independent Study classes for English” (personal communication, October 2, 2007). She registered for the Christian Fantasy course because it was one of the electives she could take to finish her degree. She shared, “My favorite author is C. S. Lewis, so when he was listed as one of the authors we would study I was pumped.... I was pretty excited about [taking the course]” (personal communication, October 2, 2007). She decided to save this class until the end of her program to give herself something to look forward to. She explained, “This was one of the classes that I had intentionally saved for the end because I knew it would be like a treat for me” (personal communication, October 2, 2007).

Unfortunately, the end didn’t come as quickly as Pam anticipated. It took her another four years to complete the remaining nine or ten courses she needed to graduate. At one time she took off eight months to teach an early morning religion class for teenagers in her area. She also had her first child. Very soon after the birth of her son, she and her husband had a more serious setback: “[That] year my husband was diagnosed with cancer. So I took off probably six or seven months while he was going through

treatment” (personal communication, October 2, 2007). It was after her husband finished his treatments and was doing much better that she began the Christian Fantasy course.

Approach to the Course

Pam’s approach to the course was fairly focused. She mentioned that she used a goal sheet that BYU Independent Study provided to set weekly goals and keep her on track, “So I usually would just kind of set weekly goals to finish the book and write a paper, finish a book one week and write a paper the next week” (personal communication, October 2, 2007). She found the goal sheet helpful in her efforts to stay on track and finish the course.

Pam reported that another factor that helped her stay on course was that she taking her last couple of classes before she was ready to graduate:

I kind of just approached it from the standpoint that I was ready to be graduated. When I took the class I was pretty excited about it, but the reality was that I needed to graduate too. Eight years to finish a Bachelors degree is a long time. So I was pretty motivated to stay on course and get things done. (personal communication, October 2, 2007)

Despite her focus to finish so she could graduate, she also had the challenge of working around her one-year-old son: “I was at home with him and I would pretty much would try to read during his nap time and then I would work on paperwork or whatever” (personal communication, October 2, 2007). She mentioned, “I did most of my reading in my bedroom and most of my writing in the computer room and most of my course work I just closed myself off” (personal communication, October 2, 2007).

At the time she was taking this course she was also working on another English course. Between the two courses, she estimated, “I don’t think that on average I spent more than two to three hours a day. That would be my average guess of time

involvement” (personal communication, October 2, 2007). Pam took approximately nine months to complete the two courses she was working on.

Pam used resources beyond those the course offered. She said, “I did a lot of reading actually. I’ve always liked C. S. Lewis so I did a lot more reading into his personal life” (personal communication, October 2, 2007).

Pam also talked to family members about what she was reading. She mentioned, “I might have enjoyed having classroom discussion about some of these books, and having some other people around” (personal communication, October 2, 2007). However, to make up for that she reported, “I imposed that on my family, so, I got some discussion. I had my family read some of the books I was reading ... because I enjoyed [the books] so much” (personal communication, October 2, 2007). Pam enlisted the help of her husband, mother, and sister to read the works and discuss them with her. At the time, Pam and her husband were living with her family due to her husband’s illness, which made it more convenient to include them in the process. She reported, “It was definitely a big topic of discussion for me. It was something I enjoyed talking about quite frequently (personal communication, October 2, 2007). Pam felt that talking with her family was helpful in two ways. First, “being able to talk through some of my thoughts it certainly perpetuated more thinking about the books” (personal communication, October 2, 2007). Second, “when I talked about [the books] I’d want to quote things correctly. I would have to think about it or go back and reread things a lot more” (personal communication, October 2, 2007).

Although she thought having other students with whom she could discuss the readings would have been helpful, she felt that there good side to working individually:

In the same light, maybe it was kind of good. I definitely enjoyed having the time alone to read the books, but not have the thoughts of other people. I don't know that in a classroom setting I would have come to some of the conclusions I came to on my own. (personal communication, October 2, 2007)

Though she declared, "I think that J. R. R. Tolkien is an amazing writer"

(personal communication, October 2 2007), one of the conclusions Pam came to on her own was that she didn't enjoy *The Lord of the Rings* as much as she thought she might:

I have to say that I came to the conclusion that I don't know if I liked him quite as much as I thought I would ... I thought I would like *The Lord of the Rings* a little more, I mean, the movies are my favorite. Actually, I didn't enjoy the book quite as much as I enjoyed the movies, surprisingly. I usually enjoy the books more. (personal communication, October 2 2007)

She said, "I know that some people are really passionate about [Tolkien's] writing"

(personal communication, October 2, 2007) and so being in a classroom of other students who felt that way might have influenced her.

Pam came to another unexpected conclusion from her reading of *The Great Divorce*. She learned, "The most important things we do are sometimes lost in the shuffle of a busy life" (personal communication, October 2, 2007).

Reflections on the Independent Study Experience

Pam described her experience taking courses through Independent Study, including the Christian Fantasy Literature course, this way: "I felt that my class work done outside of campus was more beneficial than what I had done on campus" (personal communication, October 2, 2007). She gave at least one possible reason for this:

I felt like it was harder for me at least, to apply myself because I really had to commit to doing those and setting up my test myself and writing the papers without a group and that kind of thing. It really came down to me doing the work that needed to be done. (personal communication, October 2, 2007)

Although she claimed, “Certainly if I had been around to go on campus I would have appreciated that just as much,” she noted, “I just know that I can see a distinct difference in the depth of learning from the time I left campus to the time that I graduated” (personal communication, October 2, 2007).

In this course, as well as in her other Independent Study courses, she felt that her greatest challenge was “having the self-discipline to actually finish.... I always found that to be one of the challenging parts. As much as I love the books, there was still the work that had to be done” (personal communication, October 2, 2007). She recalled that she had to request an extension for some of her courses to finish them (students have one year to complete Independent Study courses). Although she struggled with the self-discipline needed to do her assignments even with her last courses, including Christian Fantasy Literature, Pam saw some improvement: “ I definitely was better at it than when I started, but I can’t say that it ever came very readily for me to be very timely” (personal communication, October 2, 2007).

Impressions of the Course

Pam said the Christian Fantasy Literature course “was my very most favorite class whether on campus or doing Independent Study. I think [the course] was by far one of the most influential classes that I took” (personal communication, October 2, 2007). Pam’s summarized her overall impression of the course, “I think I got a B+ in the class.... Although I felt like what I got out of it was A+” (personal communication, October 2, 2007).

With other classes that she took, she reported, “I don’t necessarily remember as much. I can’t say that any class comes to mind that was quite as influential” (personal

communication, October 2, 2007). She theorized the factors that contributed to her not having as memorable experience in some of her other courses: “Because I kind of just ploughed through [the other courses], they were more, ‘just get them done.’... I really enjoyed [Christian Fantasy Literature course] though. That was a big difference” (personal communication, October 2, 2007).

Pam reported that the course lived up to her expectations: “I don’t think there was anything I didn’t like about that class. I really enjoyed everything about it” (personal communication, October 2, 2007). She further explained her feelings about the course:

I loved it. You can quote me on that. It was a great class. I was impressed and quite frankly kind of surprised because I had taken a class by [Dr. Walker] through Independent Study and I had really enjoyed it. And so I was excited to be taking another Independent Study class from him but I was quite surprised at how influential it was despite the fact that the course had already been laid out, who knows how long ago, and it’s probably not changed every year or anything. (personal communication, October 2, 2007)

She further elaborated, “I had a great experience intellectually and spiritually, because I mean, [the course] is definitely a co-mingling of those two ideologies, the spiritual side of reading and the educational side of reading” (personal communication, October 2, 2007).

Pam explained that there was “something about [Dr. Walker’s] approach” in writing the course that helped her get more out of the reading in the course:

Dr. Walker, 25 years ago when he wrote that class, was able to write it in a way that really helped me feel like I could get something out of it.... I find that very powerful and influential. (personal communication, October 2, 2007)

She explained elements of that “something about his approach.” One element was that he effectively used excerpts from either the work she was about to read and/or from other works to enliven the discussion materials to help her prepare for the reading. Next, she explained, “I really liked his attitude towards the course. I think that that influenced my

attitude towards the course too” (personal communication, October 2, 2007). She also appreciated Dr. Walker’s writing style:

The way he wrote the curriculum was very influential to me. This was the second class I had taken from him and so I remember in the first class I had taken from him kind of feeling like that too, that I enjoyed his style. (personal communication, October 2, 2007)

Part of that style, she explained, was his ability to make his writing personal:

For a piece of paper, I felt like it was a very personal piece of paper that I could like hear him talking to me. I felt a certain closeness to the professor that in other classes I definitely have not. Sometimes I just take the class, I guess. (personal communication, October 2, 2007)

Of the literature she read in the course, Pam said one book stood out: “The book that influenced me the most was *The Great Divorce* by C.S. Lewis” (personal communication, October 2, 2007). She mentioned that the course provided her assistance with the reading:

When I read [*The Great Divorce*], I really liked the guidance of the course. It was just that perfect amount of intervention and his opinions of the reading, and yet not so much so that I felt like I had to think the exact same way that he thought. I was able to have my own ideas and opinions too. (personal communication, October 2, 2007)

One of the elements of the course Pam enjoyed were the papers she got to write. She explained, “I felt they were more like personal essays rather than just a typical structured paper” (personal communication, October 2, 2007). Pam explained another related aspect of the course that she appreciated:

I didn’t feel from the professor that I had to think the way he thought in order to be considered a good learner or good student in that class. My own opinions were valued just as equally even if they varied from the professor’s. (personal communication, October 2, 2007)

She confessed that “although a lot of times I did agree [with the professor] ... Just having that freedom to think on my own was helpful” (personal communication, October 2,

2007). The professor, in allowing for that freedom, “gave me a lot of encouragement as a reader and a writer” (personal communication, October 2, 2007).

Pam shared, “One thing that I noticed about Dr. Walker was that he gave encouraging feedback” (personal communication, October 2, 2007). However, she clarified that he did provide corrective feedback when needed; but even in those cases, he was positive and respectful. She contrasted his approach with some of her previous professors, “some professors ... were negative, very confusing, not very straight forward. But in [the Christian Fantasy Literature course] the feedback was very straightforward” (personal communication, October 2, 2007).

Pam also explained, “I felt like [the professor’s] expectations for me as a student were very clear. I didn’t find that to ever be a problem, which I really appreciated and found to be a good thing in comparison to other classes” (personal communication, October 2, 2007). In contrast, she noted her experience in some of her other courses:

With some other professors that I had taken independent study classes from, I found [it] very difficult to understand what the professor was trying to get me to do out of the course. There was one course I’d even taken and I felt like the professor wouldn’t accept anything other than his opinion, which I differed from on many points. I tried to call him, I tried to get in touch, to try to figure things out so I could get a better grade in the class and that was very difficult. That was not the case with Dr. Walker, by any means. (personal communication, October 2, 2007)

With the Christian Fantasy Literature course and another course on adolescent literature, Pam declared, “After all the years of doing Independent Study, I definitely left on a good note with those classes” (personal communication, October 2, 2007).

Reflections on The Great Divorce

Pam shared that she was unaware of the circumstances that she would be pass through before she took the course:

I didn't know the events that would transpire in my life up until that time. I had no clue that my husband had cancer. I had no clue that we would have a newborn baby a week before he was diagnosed. So I took this class coming away from some very life changing experiences. (personal communication, October 2, 2007)

Despite the life-changing nature of these events, she said,

I'd have to say that I was really glad that it ended up that way because the books that I had read, particularly by C. S. Lewis ... reading *The Great Divorce*, was one that I'll have to go back to...it was by far my most favorite book.... I appreciated a lot of the other reading we did for that class, but nothing compared to how that book influence me so I don't know how to separate the two really. It just made me reshape the way I thought about things. (personal communication, October 2, 2007)

Impressed by the profundity of Lewis' ideas in *The Great Divorce*, Pam explained, "It helped me to think about the way I think about things (personal communication, October 2, 2007). "It's not all doctrinally sound, but I thought that a lot of the points that he made about human nature and how, essentially, the plan of salvation works were very inspiring" (personal communication, October 2, 2007). Learning how deeply Lewis thought about things inspired her to see that there was room still for her to grow.

Pam explained how the events in her life at the time influenced her experience reading *The Great Divorce*:

What had happened in my life and reading that book, at the time I was able to read it, coming away from seeing my husband almost die was really powerful, I guess, in the way that I could really understand those things in a different light. (personal communication, October 2, 2007)

Pam described a part of *The Great Divorce* that she related to most, given the circumstances that she had just passed through:

I guess one of the parts of *The Great Divorce* that inspired me the most was the part about the mother who had lost her son.... I can't remember if he had been killed, or died through an accidental death. She just obsessed over him and how she felt she was being a good mother by obsessing over his death. She felt that

that was a worthy thing and she couldn't understand why that wasn't worthy and it was because she really loved her son more than she loved God essentially.

For myself, when my husband was diagnosed, I thought that my life was going to end. It was horrible. I was so upset with his diagnosis that I wondered how I was going to come to the reality that he could pass away. Statistically, it was very likely he would have. So I was reading that part of the book I could see, kind of, had things gone differently, had my husband passed away, how maybe I might have reacted. I could feel the immense amount of gratitude for the fact that he had to rise and that I needed to strengthen my faith in a much different way than I thought I had because once you've had cancer you're definitely more prone to getting that type again or another type because of the treatment weakening your system.

And so I just remember reading that part, something in the book along the lines about how "that's just a state of mind." How did he word it? I used to have this memorized, but ... something along those lines. And his response, the character that C. S. Lewis voices in the book, that what God offers us is reality, that and nothing else ... what Satan or what hell offers us is really just a state of mind, it is just a façade, it is only that real, which is not real at all. What C. S. Lewis was saying is that what God offers us is tangible realities: Earth that we live on, the life that we have, those realities come from God not from Satan, true happiness is a reality and that comes from God. And when we are depressed or upset it comes from the consequences of actions, the choice that God gives us basically. (personal communication, October 2, 2007)

Her experiences with *The Great Divorce* and with the course in general affected

Pam in a few ways:

I think that that book, well, that class in general, helped me to make up my mind and commit more fully to my faith. It strengthened a side of my character that I hadn't really tapped into before. I always felt I was a faithful person and that I didn't have any major gaps in my beliefs until I could compare *The Great Divorce* to my recent life's experiences. So I was impressed to have that look inside myself and be able to see what I could do to become better. I was really glad for that. (personal communication, October 2, 2007)

Her experience also made her reflect on how she approached her study of the scriptures:

I wanted my scriptures to become that same influence. So as I read scriptures, I felt like I could understand them on a different level. It kind of enriched my personal reading of the scriptures all around in a lot of different ways. (personal communication, October 2, 2007)

Other Participant Sketches and Stories

The following are brief introductions and selected stories from the remaining participants. I offer these to augment the four highlighted students and to present stories and perceptions referenced in subsequent chapters.

Eve

Eve was nearing the end of degree in English. She had five courses remaining, three General Education courses and two major courses. At that point she was pregnant with her first child, so she began taking courses through Independent Study.

She chose to take the Christian Fantasy Literature course because, she said, “it looked interesting and looked like it wasn’t going to cause me too many headaches out of the English classes I could pick” (personal communication, November 6, 2007). She was very focused on finishing her degree. This was partially because, as she explained, “I was up against a deadline because my parents had paid for everything and they said, ‘We’ll pay for everything until your 22’, and I was about to turn 23 so I had to get it done” (personal communication, November 6, 2007). She also had that focus, in part, because after so many years of schooling she felt ready to be done.

One of the aspects of the course that Eve appreciated was its flexibility:

Well, I think that the flexibility, really, it made a world of difference ... being able to choose when I was going to do it on my terms. Specially, having a newborn being able to work around him.... I also was running a business at the time so being able to dependably go to a class to make sure that I’m getting the work done and being able to finish everything within four months there was just absolutely no way. (personal communication, November 6, 2007)

In addition to the time flexibility, she explained, “[The course] allowed for me to pick and choose things that I thought I might actually be interested in, rather than the lesser of however many evils” (personal communication, November 6, 2007). She further

explained that this flexibility allowed her to have a better experience. She said, “I think it encouraged more growth” (personal communication, November 6, 2007). She later elaborated on the freedom and flexibility the course provided:

I’m a Montessori teacher-in-training and one of the big deals about Montessori is that you respect the child enough to be able to choose the things that are right for them at that time to be working on, to be learning and for them to focus on. So if all they want to do all day is cut and color, then that’s ok because that’s really where their development is right now and forcing them to do other stuff is not necessarily going to help with their development.... And so, following through on that theory a little bit further, I felt like I was given significantly more freedom to be able to pick and choose the stuff that I felt like I was going to enrich my life the best. (personal communication, November 6, 2007)

She also enjoyed the course content. She explained that it gave her a good excuse to read some works she wanted to read anyway:

A lot of English majors don’t actually like Classic literature, I do. So, there was that added bonus to it, it’s not like it’s a waste of time that I’m reading this because I’m going to get something out of it. (personal communication, November 6, 2007)

From this, she said, “I definitely gained a greater appreciation for C. S. Lewis and his work. Obviously that was my preferred part of the course” (personal communication, November 6, 2007). She described how what she learned in the course affected her rereading other works by C. S. Lewis and “really being able to see more of the Christian symbolism” (personal communication, November 6, 2007) after she finished the course. For example, she reread *The Chronicles of Narnia*: “Like I was saying ... *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the seven books are all about the Creation, the Fall, the Atonement and then the last battle.... It is just incredible ... being able to go back and see those things” (personal communication, November 6, 2007).

Hannah

Hannah grew up in a fairly religious home and even attended a religiously sponsored private high school. However, when she went away to college, “I began exploring everything that was out there” and that “turned [me] off to the religion my mom and dad brought me up with” (personal communication, August 30, 2007). Because of this, she said, “I was constantly looking for something, the answer, for something that fit” (personal communication, August 30, 2007).

After completing her schoolwork at a few universities, she began a teacher certification program at another university. The program permitted students to take distance education courses from other universities to fulfill some of their requirements. To fulfill an English requirement in her program, her school recommended the Christian Fantasy Literature course from BYU because other students reported a good experience in the course. When she found out that she would be able to study C. S. Lewis, whom she had read before, she decided to take the course. Just prior to that time, a friend had recommended *The Screwtape Letters* to her, which furthered her interest in taking the course.

She tried to approach the course with an open mind. She shared, “Because the course was called Christian Fantasy, I guess I was just like, ‘I’ll try to have an open mind and I will learn a lot. It will be great’” (personal communication, August 30, 2007).

One of her most memorable experiences in the course was reading *The Screwtape Letters*:

I remember reading *Screwtape Letters* in particular, just the version of Christian philosophy, and learning about history. A lot of the religions that I have studied have skeletons in the closet, some part of their history that they are not proud of. But it all comes back to the essential philosophy of the teachings. And that kind of

helped bring me back and helped me be more open-minded again to Christianity. (personal communication, August 30, 2007)

Although she had moved away from these same ideas as a young adult, because she was now choosing to read these ideas on her own, she felt it helped her become more open minded. She also felt that course materials and assignments increased her understanding.

She shared that this open-mindedness toward Christianity manifested itself in her being less judgmental toward those who call themselves Christians:

I am less apt to judge a person if they admit that they are Christian. For example, to me being Christian has meant holding the values of a right wing conservative. Now I don't think this way and if anything, according to Lewis, Christianity doesn't have anything to do with whom you vote for. It has to do with compassion and your actions. (personal communication, October 2, 2007)

Another benefit from the course and her openness to Christianity is that her relationship with her mother has improved. Prior to taking the course, she had a difficult time talking to her mother about religion:

I think first that that understanding and open mindedness about Christianity was a good reflection for me. And I know something that my mom and I have never seen [eye to eye] on.... This course helped me talk to her a lot more about Christianity and understand where she was coming from. (personal communication, August 30, 2007)

This openness has manifested itself with her friends as well. She and her friends take a more liberal political position, and some of her friends slam Christianity, largely due to the more conservative positions that many Christians hold. But since taking this course, she found herself defending Christianity to her friends. She related, "I was actually defending it. I was saying it is actually a really amazing philosophy when you look at it in this light. I was able to talk about what that light was that C. S. Lewis painted" (personal communication, August 30, 2007).

Hannah shared some thoughts on what elements of the course helped make it a good experience for her:

I think it was probably mainly the content, but another huge part of it was also a lot the writing work and guided questions and essays. The questions weren't just about the literature but asking about you and you as a reader how does it apply to you in the real world, I think it was more the ability to make that bridge. I felt like a lot of the other literature courses I had taken, they were great I learned a lot, but it was more about the content and the literature. It wasn't necessarily about how I felt about reading the literature, how does it relate to the real world and today's society. [That] was probably another ingredient that made the Fantasy class a little bit stronger. (personal communication, August 30, 2007)

Hannah commented on the characters, which was one of the elements of the content that was meaningful for her:

I think some of the readings and some of the characters you read about are great role models, no matter what age you are ... many people associate Fantasy with escapist literature, but I think that the characters are all people that we can relate to even though they are in this kind of mythical realm. That people can definitely take away specific personal traits and qualities. (personal communication, August 30, 2007)

Hannah further shared her response to the characters from *The Lord of the Rings*:

I think what I'd say about the characters, especially [in] *Lord of the Rings*, is that I liked them all and that is perhaps Tolkien's point. All of us want to be Aragon, successful at battle, kings of our domains. However, we forget that Aragon was once scared of his destiny. Furthermore, most of us want to believe we could endure hardship like Frodo and deny temptations. However, many of us have struggled with our innermost "Gollums" and have fought temptations or have fell [sic] into temptations. (personal communication, October 2, 2007)

She also shared some of the kinds of questions from the course that helped her get more out of her reading:

I think there was even specific test questions or essay questions when we were reading the books, there was a kind of a focus on character building, in the sense that there was a question about 'which character reminds you most of yourself and why?' Or 'which character would you most like to be like?' There were those kinds of questions to help the students bridge the gap between fantasy and the real world. (personal communication, August 30, 2007)

Through another example she shared an aspect of the questions that helped her to analyze the literature and draw her own conclusions:

I think I even remember the last essay question on the essay test, ‘Why do you think Tolkien created this unbelievable world and why is it so easy to believe?’ As a student, to be able to make that connection on my own with religion rather than having the professor or a critical essayist tell us, “This is where this is symbolized” The student was able to make their own connections and I think that is powerful. (personal communication, August 30, 2007)

Another aspect that she felt was helpful was the freedom to choose what books she read for the course. Not that she got to choose everything she read, but she appreciated the occasions that gave her a choice. She expressed, “I think it engages people more when they have a choice in what they are learning” (personal communication, August 30, 2007).

Upon further reflection, she noted another way that she was particularly impressed with the course and the instructor:

Just the fact that it was a BYU Course and the university has a religious affiliation. Not really knowing what to expect from the course even though it was called Christian Fantasy Literature. I never felt that I was being preached to or told I had to be a certain way or that this course was going to make me think in a certain way. I think that the course was just so creatively set up in that you get so involved in all these different books and in all these different characters and in analyzing the different moments in these characters lives that you kind of come to that conclusion on your own. (personal communication, August 30, 2007)

Hannah finished her teaching certification program and is now a teacher at a K-12 school. She mentioned that she has shared some of the things she learned in the course with her students:

To bring it full circle, I taught a semester on Science Fiction and Fantasy and we touched on both [*The Lord of the Rings*] and *Screwtape Letters*. So it was interesting to convey my experience to the students and also hear their experience from the literature as well. (personal communication, February 22, 2008)

Helen

Helen recounted how she came to take the Christian Fantasy Literature course through BYU:

Well I was working on my bachelors at [a University in the Midwest United States] and I was working in a special bachelors program called the Board of Trustees Bachelor of Arts Program. It was one where we could basically choose the classes that we wanted to either working toward a major or just enough classes in each one of the categories that the school has got there and be able to graduate with a bachelors degree.

Since I never decided what I wanted to be when I grew up I just decided to take a lot of different classes that interested me and that I thought that at sometime in my life I could use ... just not knowing when. All of these were independent study, I finished my associates degree in college so most of those classes were taken in a classroom and I had a few that were Independent Study classes and then the rest of my Bachelors was all Independent Study except for one geology field trip that I took that had other participants.

So when I took all the ones at [her university] that I was interested in then I looked at the BYU website and started choosing ones from there that I was interested in and that would help me fill the rest of my bachelor's program. So the last part of my bachelor's degree was basically from BYU.... As I was looking into the ones from BYU, I came across this one and since science fiction and fantasy is the genre that I read most of the time this is where I need to go; I need to take this one. It was great! (personal communication, October 30, 2007)

Helen discussed one of the aspects of the Independent Study courses at BYU that she appreciated:

I really like the BYU Independent Study programs better then the ones at [the university she attended] because the ones at [her university] you had fall semester and you had spring semester and if you took an IS class in the fall semester you had a deadline and you had to complete it within the fall semester where at BYU you have an entire year to do it, In fact I think the last four classes I finished in one semester even though I had a year to do it. I needed to get them done to graduate but I liked that flexibility.... So being able to compare the classes from the two universities I enjoyed BYU better because I didn't feel as stressed. (personal communication, October 30, 2007)

While taking the Christian Fantasy course, Helen took advantage of additional resources. She discussed the course with a friend at church who is an English teacher at a

local community college. She used the Internet to get additional perspectives or to find background information. She also took advantage of movies that were available such as watching *The Lord of the Rings* series, including the bonus features on the DVDs about the life of J. R. R. Tolkien. In addition, she learned more about C. S. Lewis by watching the movie *Shadowlands*:

I was looking through some of the papers that I turned in and I noticed that I answered one way [on a question] and ... I finished *Shadowlands* and before I turned it in I crossed out my answer and said, "After watching this, this is what I really think happened." And the professor said, "Yes, you are right." (personal communication, October 30, 2007)

Kate

As an undergraduate, Kate took a few Independent Study courses to help fulfill requirements. She studied at BYU as a music major and English minor. Later, after she graduated, she considered pursuing a master's degree in English. To meet the entrance requirements for the program, she decided to take some additional upper-division English courses. As she looked through the course catalog, she noticed the Christian Fantasy Literature course. Kate, as a teenager, had read Tolkien and loved it, so she decided that it would be a good course to take.

She had a good experience for the first part of the course. She followed the course instructions and responded to the professor's questions. Although she admitted that she did not necessarily like every question, she felt that the professor asked very good and probing questions about the material. And of course she enjoyed studying the works of Tolkien and Lewis.

However, after she turned in the first unit, her experience in the course was quite unique from most students. With the first submission, she asked the professor if he, or

someone else he knew, would be willing to read a fantasy story she was writing. His response was “bring it on” (personal communication, July 20, 2007). So accordingly, she sent him the first few chapters of her manuscript. He responded very enthusiastically, and called her to talk to her about her work. He told her how much he liked what she was doing and asked her to send him more of the story. They spoke on a few occasions about how her writing was coming along and to discuss directions she might want to take the story. He also encouraged her to finish working on it so she could submit it for publication.

During these conversations, an interesting thing happened. She mentioned that she did not have much time to work on her story since she was working full time and taking this course. So he offered her a deal. If she would keep working on her story and prepare for and take the course final exam, he would waive the rest of the course assignments. She took the deal. So for the rest of the course, she used the course materials to review *The Lord of the Rings* in preparation for the final and she worked on her own fantasy story.

Kate shared, “I wanted to get up to campus and meet him, but our work schedules didn’t allow that so I was never able to meet with him face to face” (personal communication, July 20, 2007). She also recalled how her contact with Dr. Walker continued beyond her completion of the course:

For a few months after I finished the course, he sent me a few things that came across his desk that he thought would be of interest to me. He sent me an article that he published in some paper or journal. So we kept in touch for a few months after I completed the course. (personal communication, July 20, 2007)

Although she felt her interaction with Dr. Walker was a highlight, she commented, “Probably the thing that impacted me the most, and has lasted the longest, is

how important it is to define good versus evil in Faerie stories” (personal communication, July 20, 2007). She further explained the importance of fantasy:

The old faerie stories were quite violent and many people wanted to keep them out of the hands of young children to protect them. But Tolkien talked about how that was the way children were taught values. That is one of the most important aspects of fantasy, especially Christian fantasy. In fact, that strong distinction makes me feel safe because I know that there is an absolute good and that being loyal to that and keeping a clear perspective on that provides a kind of safety that may not be physical safety, but it is ultimate safety. (personal communication, July 20, 2007)

She pointed out that although in this world there are many who try to muddle what is good versus evil, particularly in politics, in Christian Fantasy good versus evil is clearer and there are always a few characters who are willing to “stand up for what is right” (personal communication, July 20, 2007). She explained how this element of fantasy has affected her, “It clears my perspective helps me feel like I can stay on the path too and represent the good” (personal communication, July 20, 2007). Kate noted the effect of this perspective on her:

It helped me to have courage to see the good versus evil in the world ... this course gave me the courage to see the world that way and avoid rationalizations and “gray areas.” A lot of people around here have chosen to look at things very relatively and as gray, but this course helped me to have the courage to say, “No, this is wrong.” The experience of this literature and connecting it with Christianity has given me the courage to say that. (personal communication, July 2, 2007)

She told of a situation in which that courage helped her. Kate used to work at a place where her bosses, though belonging to a Christian church and having been taught better principles, would treat certain of their employees preferentially. She said that there were “a lot of double standards” (personal communication, July 20, 2007). They would let some employees get away with behavior that others would be disciplined for. They also asked some employees to act against their principles. They practiced what Kate

called “unrighteous dominion” (personal communication, July 20, 2007). Kate worked in this challenging environment while taking the course, and she determined that she would do what she felt was the right thing and not cave in to her bosses. She stated that, although her determination did not come entirely from taking the course, her course experience still definitely influenced her ability to take this stand and stick by it. She said that many times since taking the course she has remembered the characters from *The Lord of the Rings* and that memory has been one of the factors that gave her strength to remember to stand up for what is right.

Lucy

Lucy was in school at BYU working on a degree in nutrition and had a year left when her husband graduated with a degree in software engineering. She had also just given birth to her first son. They debated whether she should stay to finish her degree or to leave so her husband could accept a job in another state. At the time, there were no other options for her to complete her degree. They prayed and decided to take the out-of-state job.

Several years later, after she heard one of her religious leaders encourage women to finish their educations and earn a college degree, she learned about Brigham Young University’s Bachelors of General Studies (BGS) program. She said, “That was when I went ahead and applied and was accepted into the program to complete my degree” (personal communication, October 3, 2007). Because the BGS program does not offer a nutrition emphasis, she selected an emphasis in English with a specialization in American Literature. That is how she became aware of the Christian Fantasy Literature course.

Initially, she made good progress on the course. She said, “I was actually cruising right through the course. I probably would have finished it within six months” (personal communication, October 3, 2007). However, she took approximately four to five months off to provide hospice care for her mother, who was ill with a blood disorder and was later diagnosed with leukemia. Thus, Lucy appreciated the flexibility of the course:

That’s kind of the nice thing about Independent Study, it allows for things like that to happen. And it was unfortunate and we just kind of worked through it and Independent Study allows for some flexibility there and fortunately I was able to get the extension and complete the course. (personal communication, October 3, 2007)

Lucy shared several characteristics that she liked about the course and Dr. Walker’s teaching. She appreciated Dr. Walker’s technique of helping students prepare for the readings:

He would give you his point of view in the sense that he would kind of lead you along to show you how much he likes Tolkien and how much he enjoys reading Tolkien ... it made me excited to read it. (personal communication, October 3, 2007)

She added, “but he never really let me know how he saw certain things” (personal communication, October 3, 2007). He did not intend to withhold information but rather to let students think for themselves. She shared, “The thing I like about Dr. Walker was he was really good at respecting my point of view” (personal communication, October 3, 2007). She elaborated that in some courses the professors wanted the students to figure out what they wanted the students to say. She contrasted her previous experiences with her experience in the Christian Fantasy course:

With Dr. Walker you had to just simply write well and demonstrate well your point of view and be able to understand the concept that he was discussing and if you could do that, then that was what he was looking for. (personal communication, October 3, 2007)

Unlike many other participants, Lucy wasn't a big fan of fantasy literature before taking the course, but she hoped to gain a new perspective and appreciation for C. S. Lewis. She said, "I definitely came to see him more than just [the author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*]" (personal communication, October 3, 2007). Although she appreciated *The Lord of the Rings* as a great story, she also wanted to understand it on a new level. She said that reading *The Lord of the Rings* again and having someone help her through it helped her to see it as "great literature" (personal communication, October 3, 2007). She also gained a more general appreciation of fantasy literature and some basis for determining what makes good fantasy:

There are great fantasy writers and just run-of-the-mill dime novels that are out there for people to read. But there's great literature out there for people to read that has deep meaning and more fantasy literature than just something that you can pick up for two bucks from off the shelf. It helped me to understand that there are more aspects to fantasy writing and Christian literature than what you normally think of. (personal communication, October 3, 2007)

Among the influential works that she read, Lucy appreciated *The Screwtape Letters*. She shared some of the insights she gained from her study of that book:

After reading *Screwtape Letters* I grew to appreciate, with an additional sense of humor, the battle between good and evil. I didn't previously know Lewis' Christian beliefs prior to reading his writings. However, after reading *Screwtape* I came to understand that he believed in a devil and his capabilities to thwart our efforts here. The thing that surprised me was the focus Lewis put on the devil keeping things out of our minds. Usually we think of the devil putting ideas into our minds or other people's minds. Yet, *Screwtape* tells his nephew to keep things out his mind. I hadn't really given much thought to that previously. I think it was ideas like this that made me take a new perspective on Satan. I believe that Christian writings like *Screwtape Letters* helped me understand and appreciate other "faith" writers. It also helped me to see that good and evil aren't clear cut. (personal communication, March 12, 2008)

Lucy explained that she also gained an appreciation for the others' beliefs through her studies in the course:

C.S. Lewis, in particular, helped me appreciate common beliefs of others. After reading *Screwtape* and then an article on prayer, I found that a lot of Lewis' beliefs coincide with [my values]. While volunteering in school I come in contact with several women who are of various faiths and I think this helped me to appreciate and see the commonalities we all share and appreciate them more. In fact, several of them had read *Screwtape* and we were able to discuss our perspectives on what Lewis thought and believed. (personal communication, March 12, 2008)

Yet another benefit of the course for Lucy came when she shared what she learned with her children and point them to some of the authors and works that she studied. She said, “My children have kind of gotten in a rut with just reading some of the same stories over and over again” (personal communication, October 3, 2007). So she has pointed them to works like *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *Dragonsong*. She could sit down and discuss the books with them. She declared, “It’s been fun to sit and talk about these things that I have just studied. And yet I guess I wouldn’t have even thought about recommending them if I hadn’t just finished the course” (personal communication, October 3, 2007).

Marian

Marian is a media specialist or librarian at an elementary school in the southern United States. She took the Christian Fantasy Literature course because many of her students and their parents wanted to know whether they should read *The Lord of the Rings*:

That was the only reason I took it was that ... at the time I was in [an elementary school in the southern United States], and I would say that 99% of the students have a strong Christian faith and parents are very concerned about what their children read and want to make sure that what they read goes along with their beliefs. And I always try to make sure that the books in the library don’t have any bad words and don’t promote things that don’t go along with our beliefs. That is the main reason I took it, so I can do a better job at what I do. And a lot of the children were wanting to read [*The Lord of the Rings*] because there were rumors that the movies were coming out. (personal communication, October 6, 2007)

Marian is also a wife and mother of two, and she took courses through distance education because of her busy schedule at home and work. At the time, she was also pursuing an advanced degree in Educational Leadership, so she had experience taking courses through distance-education programs.

She previously took an Adolescent Psychology course through BYU Independent Study, so she decided to take the course through BYU. During her coursework, she especially appreciated learning about the authors (Lewis and Tolkien): “it made me realize that when looking at different literature for children it is important to look at the author too” (personal communication, October 6, 2007). Gaining a deeper understanding of the books and the lives of these authors helped her speak with her students about the books and recommend them.

She also had an experience in which a book she was reading struck her “wrong,” and when she investigated the life of the author she found he did not hold the same values as she and the community she serves:

I was reading a book recently, and I don't know, but there was something about it ... it is really a popular children's book.... And the author is an atheist. Some of the passages in it kind of bothered me and so I decided research [the author] a little and I found that out ... I thought that this is not a book that I want to promote. It made me decide to look at author's life a little bit if something in a book bothers me. (personal communication, October 6, 2007)

She used what she has learned in the course to help her better serve her students and their parents.

Michaela

Michaela, after studying at several schools, eventually found herself at BYU. She was an English major and had only two courses left when her husband found a job out of

state. She moved, but was determined to finish her degree. Before she left she found out that she could complete her last two required courses through BYU's Independent Study. One of the courses she needed was an English elective, and her husband suggested the Christian Fantasy Literature course because he liked C. S. Lewis and a friend of his had taken the course on campus and really enjoyed it.

Michaela said that her learning experience was “awesome” (personal communication, August 25, 2007). She was a newly minted stay-at-home mom with two little girls under the age of two. With the move out of state, she found herself alone in a new place with few friends and no contact with family aside from occasional phone calls. So she felt that reading “escape” literature and completing her course work to keep her busy was a perfect combination.

The kind of questions that Dr. Walker asked impressed Michaela. She said, “The questions were thought provoking” (personal communication, July 19, 2007). She appreciated that most of the questions did not have set “right or wrong answers”; rather, she said, “You had to think,... you had to defend your answers, so you had to look for facts or evidence for what you were stating. It helped me look closely at the literature” (personal communication, July 19, 2007).

She recalled some of the questions in particular: “He asked things like, ‘Which character did you relate to and why?’ and ‘Which character was the voice of Tolkien?’” (personal communication, July 19, 2007). In response to the question of which character was her favorite, she responded, “Faramir because he had such a strong character, he was humble yet he stood up for what was right, he wasn't corrupted by the ring (or lust for the ring) or a desire to rule the world” (personal communication, July 19, 2007). To answer

that question well, she had to go back through the books to find reasons why she liked Faramir. She further recalled that Dr. Walker commented on her assignment, “That is not who I would have picked” (personal communication, July 19, 2007). However, he also said that she had defended her choice well and he gave her full credit on the question.

Another question dealt with Tolkien’s language. Tolkien was a linguist, she said, but it wasn’t just the languages he created, it was his way of using the English language in a beautiful, poetic way. He was gifted at using poetic devices. She recalled that Dr. Walker “asked us to find places where Tolkien used literary devices in his poetry” (personal communication, July 19, 2007). She found it enlightening as she compared a Tolkien poem about Tom Bombadil with a hymn.

She reflected on the influence of these types of questions on her experience in the course:

This is a silly thing but the fact that I can remember anything and it has been eight and a half to nine years [since she was in the course], that I can remember any of the questions is pretty amazing. It must have made me think. (personal communication, July 19, 2007)

Michaela also appreciated learning about what makes for good fantasy literature:

It has made me a lot more critical of other fantasy; there is not a lot of well-written Fantasy, so that is sort of a down side. But there is a good side of that too. It is good to distinguish between escape literature, literature that is just for fun, and literature that is worthwhile and worth spending some time to studying. (personal communication, July 19, 2007)

Beside her appreciation for Tolkien and for good fantasy literature, she said she also gained a greater appreciation of all literature. She said, “I learned how to analyze literature better” (personal communication, July 19, 2007). She applies these analytical skills not only to literature but also to other media, as she said, “to look at works and discover what they really teach, what is of value, not just what is entertaining” (personal

communication, July 19, 2007). Though she admitted that this course was not the only place she learned to be analytical, it did help her a lot, and she has used what she gained again and again throughout her life.

For example, when *The Lord of the Rings* movies came out she observed, “It was fun to see [the movies], but at the same time I was disappointed in them” (personal communication, September 8, 2007). Michaela explained that when she analyzed the movies and compared them to the books there were some things that “were not as true or didn’t have the depth of the books” (personal communication, September 8, 2007). She shared, “I sat down one day to write down what it was about the movies that I was not happy with” (personal communication, September 8, 2007). She went on to write an essay, as she might have during the course, about the movies. She even included examples of what the characters said or did to help support her points.

One thing she did not really get out of the course was as strong appreciation for C. S. Lewis. She said that the course almost left her feeling that, “Well, Lewis is OK, I guess” (personal communication, July 19, 2007). This may be partially due to the fact that the C.S. Lewis book that she chose to read was *Mere Christianity*. She said that she struggled a little with that book and did not really like it as much as other works by Lewis that she has read since taking the course. Some of those works, such as *The Great Divorce*, *Out of the Silent Planet*, and *Perelandra*, among others, helped her come to a greater appreciation for C. S. Lewis’s writing.

Mort

Mort was in his early fifties and had two courses to complete when he decided to finish his bachelor’s degree at a college in the Midwest United States. Due to his family

and work obligations, he decided to take these courses through distance education programs. One he took through a consortium of universities in a Mountain West state, and the other was the Christian Fantasy Literature course through BYU. These courses took him a bit of time:

Unfortunately, I am not was one of those [driven individuals]. I wish I were one of those driven guys. That's probably why I got my degree at 53. My first course took me two years to finish. I had to get an extension so I did this one [the Christian Fantasy Literature course] in a year or a year and a half. I can't remember. I think I only had to get one extension, I don't remember. So it's drawn out for a long time. (personal communication, September 27, 2007)

Despite taking longer than the typical student, he did eventually complete the two courses he needed and earn his bachelor's degree.

Although Mort generally enjoyed the course, He said that "one of his biggest frustrations" (personal communication, September 27, 2007) was not being able to talk with the professor to get his questions answered. He explained, "There was not a lot of communication that's all, but I can't say I communicated a whole lot with him either" (personal communication, September 27, 2007). He had tried to contact the professor a couple of times but finally gave up because it seemed to him that the communications were not getting directly to the professor.

Despite this frustration, he did receive some positive outcomes from the course. In looking back, Mort reported that among the benefits, the course helped him learn to pause and analyze what he read:

I hadn't done any [literature] courses, I mean I have been a reader since the day I learned to read and as I said I am a devourer of books and so I guess what it did do. It got me. I realized how much I enjoyed tearing things apart and looking at things a little more critically. So, I mean, it has probably helped me a little bit that way ... you know sometimes you need a little direction, a little help to get you to do those thing because otherwise you just kind of devour things and you don't

look at things critically or that. So, I guess in that respect it did kind of awaken something in me again. (personal communication, September 27, 2007)

Since completing the course, Mort has sometimes taken more time to analyze

literature:

I have read a couple of books my daughter was reading and stuff like that 'cause I wanted to see what she was reading. Then we were able to sit down and talk about that and so it has got me back into once in awhile reading novels. Before that I was pretty much just reading spiritual books and stuff, which is OK, but there is something about literature ... a good story that is pretty exhilarating when you find a good one. (personal communication, September 27, 2007)

One of the required readings Mort liked best was *The Lord of the Rings*. He

explained one of the most meaningful insights he had from his reading:

My last paper I needed to provide an insight that I had gotten. And that was one of the great things when I had read the books originally I had just ran through them. This way I had to kind of study them; so I actually got to know the characters and my favorite was Aragorn. [For the assignment] you were supposed to come up with an insight or something that was kind of your own. Well, I had never looked. If you go to the back of that last book *Return of the King*, he has all these little historical notes; really it's hundreds of pages. And somehow I found in there where Aragorn had gone to live with the [elves]. He learned the healing arts from them. Then in the end of the book when the last battle is happening and everything, the people in the city are taking care of their wounded, some old lady comes up and says, "I remember a prophecy made long ago that there is healing in the king's hands." And so I just brought that out that was probably where he learned it when he was with the elves.... So that was kind of neat. (personal communication, September 27, 2007)

He further explained some of the insights he gained from reading about and analyzing the character Aragorn:

I suppose the thing was that in one sense you know, he was, in the beginning when [the hobbits] met him as Strider he was kind of a lost character in the sense that ... really in a way he was supposed to have high destiny; he was in the line of the kings. So that was kind of interesting. So slowly over time he begins to accept his, if you want to call it, calling, his place in that world and discovers that he is a leader and that people are looking for him and for that. He is not only a hero but he is brave and he just rose to the occasion. (personal communication, September 27, 2007)

In talking about the influence of this book on his life, Mort commented that he could not say that he was dramatically different because of the course. However, he did admit that studying the character Aragorn had an effect on him:

I guess that is probably one of the reasons I like the Aragorn character because in a lot of ways he was, when he began in his life up to that point he was a ranger who was just kind of a loner, did his own thing, they considered him kind of wild, I don't know... just to watch the metamorphosis of him moving into his true destiny and moving forward and being a man of courage and all that, that probably affected me more.... I related to him, and that is probably why I picked him, because in a lot of ways I feel like the decisions in my life have not been good. And so that in a way I have missed, in a sense, my calling in life and what I am doing is not really it and doesn't really probably use all the God-given gifts that I have....That is probably why I was attracted to him. And then how he dealt with things. (personal communication, September 27, 2007)

Sam

Sam was an English major at BYU nearing completion of his degree when he took the Christian Fantasy Literature course. He took the course to fulfill an elective requirement for his degree:

But I wouldn't take any course just to graduate. I looked into it and saw that it offered something that was fairly unique ... it was on a theme and topic and reading materials that interested me so I figured it was a win-win situation. (personal communication, October 10, 2007)

He started the course over the summer while he was off from school working. He hoped he could squeeze in another course before the next Fall Semester. However, he didn't finish it in time, so he had to complete the course while attending other classes.

Sam had previously taken British Literature and the Bible as Literature courses from Dr. Walker. At the time of his enrollment, in the course he was also taking a Senior Seminar from Dr. Walker in which they also discussed *The Lord of the Rings* and compared them with the Peter Jackson movies. Sam said that his additional experiences with Dr. Walker influenced his experience in the Christian Fantasy course:

Yeah, it definitely influenced it a bit ... it was helpful because I could go talk to him in person, whether it was in class or his office, and get the answers that I needed, rather than trying to communicate through a phone call or an e-mail a lot of the time. So it was easy to get the answers and help that I needed. The other thing that helped is knowing him. As I was reading the materials I could imagine him speaking it and demonstrating it to me even though I was just reading it. (personal communication, October 10, 2007)

Prior to taking the course, Sam was not a fan of fantasy. In fact, he admitted in the first assignment, "Fantasy is not my cup of tea" (personal communication, October 22, 2007). However, through his work in the course he changed his views:

I got an appreciation from the literature that I was reading. A lot of the course was Tolkien and C. S. Lewis and I gained an appreciation for Tolkien that I didn't much have before. But I hadn't read anything of Lewis's besides a quote here and there. To be able to read Lewis's stuff and to compare that to Tolkien and other types of fantasies out there I was able to learn more about the genre. I had never been a huge fantasy fan so I gained an appreciation for that and - also, to see the Christian undertones that were in each of these works and how different authors were able to integrate these symbols and themes into their works, but in completely different styles - and the great part is that you are studying about Christianity which happens to fall in line with my religious beliefs. So here you are and you are reading and learning all of this great literature, but at the same time you are strengthening your testimony in your own religion and strengthening your own beliefs in Christianity. (personal communication, October 10, 2007)

Sam shared his feeling about what helped him to connect with the characters in the literature they read in the course:

You see, I think the key to empathizing with anybody (fictional or real) is to spend time with that person and get to know them. It's like the old "walk a mile in their shoes" kind of thing. With a book we are granted a special insight into people's behaviors, personality, thoughts, and insecurities (all of which real people don't often allow). We are also given a lot of time with that character when we read a book, more so than in a movie or other media. Because we are dedicating our time to that book (and by association, its characters) we come to empathize with them. A book that is not well written or that contains stale characters does not warrant my time, and thus there is less empathy.

One of the course questions was who is your favorite character in [*The Lord of the Rings*] and why. I chose Gollum due to his complexity as a character. Sure, he's despicable and nasty and selfish, but through the course of the book (and [*The Lord of the Rings*] is one you definitely set aside a lot of time to read!) I came to

empathize with his situation because I knew where he was coming from. I had spent time with him during my read. Whereas a figure like Sauron receives nothing like this from me because he is merely a threat and not a figure in the book. I spent no time with him and therefore, had no compassion. (personal communication, March 1, 2008)

Sam explained, tongue-in-check, how the course affected him, “Yeah, if I wouldn’t have taken [the course], I would be out robbing convenience stores or meeting up with hookers” (personal communication, October 10, 2007). On a more serious note, he shared his feelings about the effects of the course:

I hate to say it, but I don’t know if I would have changed dramatically, but certainly I wouldn’t have changed for the better if I hadn’t taken it. I am definitely in a better position than I was prior to taking it and I am a sucker for a good read and how I can personalize the readings to myself and that is exactly what the course did. If I hadn’t taken it I probably wouldn’t have discovered Lewis yet. I wouldn’t have discovered the lessons. I wouldn’t be a bad person, per se, but I wouldn’t be the better person that I am having taken it. (personal communication, October 10, 2007)

Another result that Sam took away from the course was a desire to share what he had learned with others:

I personally shared several of the insights that I was learning in church meetings, both in speaking and the teaching responsibilities that I had. Although I never made a point of saying that I was taking the material from this course, I would definitely reference Lewis and Tolkien and explain where it could originally be found. I would often use the knowledge that I was gaining in day-to-day discussion with friends and roommates to help them make sense of a point, or just in friendly dialogue/debate about a topic. While there was always a desire to share it, I made sure that I didn’t bring it up unless I felt that doing so would benefit the other person. For example, I would not raise the point of prayer because I really liked what was said, but only if the other person mentioned something about it and I thought that they would find the help beneficial. In many cases it was, and I had several people later tell me about how the material really helped them. (personal communication, March 1, 2008)

Sam explained an aspect of the course that was important in the learning he experienced (and which he tried to exemplify in how he shared insights with his friends):

The course really prompts you to action, but it doesn't demand it from you.... It does ask you to become involved and it does ask you to examine yourself and what you are doing and I really think that [when] taking the course it is really up to the individual to look into the course and to try this. If that doesn't make you want to change at all then you are either really good or just really stubborn and so I think it prompts you to change, but it doesn't demand it. (personal communication, October 10, 2007)

Victoria

Victoria was a student at BYU and had some free time over the summer before her final semester, so she decided to take advantage of the time and fit in an extra through Independent Study. She chose her major in part because of an experience she had had while staying with her grandmother:

Well for about three years I couldn't decide what I wanted to major in and my first two years I was studying at [a university in the eastern United States] and I was studying music there. I transferred to BYU and got swallowed up in this big humongous school and I didn't know what I was going to study.

So I was at my grandmother's house that summer after my first year at BYU. I really had to decide what to major in since I was entering my fourth year of college. I was absorbed in a quilting project and my grandmother had C. S. Lewis narrating his book *The Four Loves* on tape and so I listened to that while cutting out quilting pieces ... and just absolutely fell in love with it and was just mesmerized that one man knew so much.

I thought "Oh, if I could just spend my college education studying about these great men with their great minds and great stores of knowledge to fall upon; that would be fantastic." ... So that is what I did. I loved learning how great minds thought and just all the different history and education of the ages. So it was the perfect thing for me. (personal communication, November 1, 2007)

In addition to the influence of C. S. Lewis, she was also interested in taking the Christian Fantasy Literature course after viewing *The Lord of the Rings* movies.

Victoria told how she was impressed by one particular idea in *The Screwtape Letters*. In Letter XXVI, Screwtape advised his nephew on the difference between charity and unselfishness:

The grand point is that of “Unselfishness.” Note once again the admirable work of our Philosophical Arm in substituting the negative unselfishness for the Enemy’s positive Charity. Thanks to this you can, from the very onset, teach a man to surrender benefits not that others may be happy in having them but that he may be unselfish in forgoing them. (Lewis, 1996, p, 94)

This theme also reminded her of an experience she had with her cousin, so when she was assigned to write an essay on a theme from *Screwtape*, she choose to write about that experience:

“She has exhausted my generosity and abused my unselfishness,” I thought as I realized my cousin ... had used my expensive face wash *again* and waited expectantly for me to go shopping so that we could use *my* money to buy *us* food! “I can’t believe this! I hardly have any money, yet she expects me to buy everything for her with out contributing?! The prudish miser!” I gulped back, nearly saying it out loud. At the beginning of our week-and-a-half long trip to St. Louis, sharing my substance and buying our meals had been a pleasure. I was happy to be able to give, but then as the days wore on, I began to wear out too. “She does not know how unselfish I am being and how difficult this is for me!” I mourned. (personal communication, November 1, 2007)

She further explained that although her cousin had plenty of money, she liked to be frugal with her money and never did offer to pay for anything. She confessed, “I never confronted my cousin about it. I was struggling with angry feelings for her but I didn’t communicate how I was feeling. I thought she should have [offered to pay for some things]” (personal communication, November 1, 2007).

After exploring the ideas related to the differences between unselfishness and charity in *The Screwtape Letters*, she concluded her essay:

In light of my recent experience with my cousin, I realized my weakness and was discouraged that my capacity for Unselfishness was so small and so conditional. Feelings of guilt arose, especially as I realized how immeasurably I had been blessed by my cousin’s love and generosity. The sour experience has been on my mind for a month hence as I have wanted to find some sort of explanation as to what I was not doing, or doing wrong. C. S. Lewis’s treatment of Unselfishness hit the spot. I finally saw myself and my motivations clearly! The problem has been identified and a remedy prescribed! (personal communication, November 1, 2007)

Conclusion

This chapter included stories and perceptions from the instructor and all the student participants in the study, with a more complete telling of the experiences of four of the students (Bob, Joy, Leia, Pam) and brief introductions and selected stories from the remaining participants. The instructor's and highlighted students' experiences and the selected stories from the other participants show the similarities and differences among the various participants' experiences in the course and lay a foundation for understanding the analysis. In the next two chapters, I discuss the themes that emerged from the participants' stories and perceptions related to the ways that students experienced character development (Chapter 5) and the characteristics of the course experience that contributed to their character development (Chapter 6).

CHAPTER 5: PARTICIPANT PERCEPTIONS OF CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

In response to the first two research questions, in this chapter I provide an analysis of the types of character development that the students perceived that they experienced with this course, as well as the development that Dr. Walker observed in his teaching experiences, along with what he hoped to help students achieve when he designed the course. I also discuss how the perceived character development relates to definitions of character in the literature.

The students' responses did not initially reveal a perfect consensus about whether each perceived outcome related to character development or some other kind of outcome. To respect each participant's view, if at least one student felt that they experienced character development in a particular way, even if other students classified it differently, I included that aspect in the initial analysis as a character outcome. Through the process of "interpretation through conversation" (van Manen, 1990), students reviewed the results of my analysis and had multiple opportunities to confirm or oppose the classifications. None of the participants objected to other participants' views of character development in the course; on the contrary, they generally confirmed them.

The students and Dr. Walker reported character development in traits and strengths related to the Davidson et al.'s (2008) and Lickona and Davidson's (2005) concept of moral character, including relational and spiritual aspects. Additionally, participants discussed their perceptions of character development in ways related to Davidson et al.'s and Lickona and Davidson's concept of performance character. Because of these similarities, I organized the participants' views of character development in traits and strengths into the four areas: (a) moral character traits and strengths, (b) relational

character traits and strengths, (c) spiritual character traits and strengths; and (d) performance character traits and strengths.

Moral Character Traits and Strengths

Lickona and Davidson (2005) described three components of moral character: awareness, attitude, and action. Students perceived development of traits and strengths in moral character similar to these three components: (a) moral desires or motivation, (b) moral discernment, and (c) moral courage.

Moral Desires or Motivation

Some students shared that the course helped them want to be better people and choose the right. As Lucy explained, “As I walk away from the course it made me realize that I can be an influence for good in my home in my community ... I think that that’s how it fulfills the character building [aim]” (personal communication, October 3, 2007). Pam said that reflecting on her personal experiences in light of reading of *The Great Divorce* helped her to want to do better. Both Helen and Michaela said that reading Tolkien inspired them to stand up for good things in their life, to be noble. Joy expressed a similar sentiment:

It is not always easy to do the right thing and be on the right side. Sometimes it is easier to fall and be on the wrong side. Just to see everything that [the characters in *The Lord of the Rings*] gave up for the good would strengthen my own thoughts that it is not always easy and sometimes it does takes sacrifice to be on the side of good. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Victoria shared that she came away with the basic principle “not to give into evil and hold on to the good even if the odds are against you” (personal communication, November 1, 2007). Sam explained that the course helped him want to be a better person

and a greater asset to society. He said that there were few other courses at BYU that would top this course in helping people want to change themselves.

Additionally, Pam noted that the course helped her to reprioritize things in her life and see where God should be in relation to other things she values and spends her time on. Lucy also reported that what she learned in the course helped her reprioritize her life so she can spend more time serving others. She said that was challenging, because her life was hectic as a mother and a student trying to complete a bachelor's degree through a distance education program. Although Dr. Walker did not specifically mention moral desires as one of his desired outcomes, it is consistent with his desire to help students "read" life in a new way.

Students' reports of strengthening their desire to do good and to be good is similar to several perspectives in the character and moral education literature. For example, Lickona and Davidson (2005) discussed that one psychological component of moral character is attitude, which in part includes "Car[ing] deeply about doing the right thing; mak[ing] the moral self central to identity" (p. 20). Additionally, one of foundational character strengths of Lickona and Davidson (2005) and Davidson et al. (2008) is becoming a "respectful and responsible moral agent committed to consistent moral action" (Davidson et al., 2008, p. 380). Berkowitz (2002) also includes moral values and moral identity as a part of his "moral anatomy" (p. 48). Similarly, Ryan and Bohlin (1999) and Lickona (1999) consider loving the good as part of moral character. The model of moral development Rest (1986) and Bebeau et al. (1999) proposed contains the component of moral motivation, in which people prioritize "moral values over other personal values" (p. 22). Although the BYU Aims (BYU, n.d.) do not explicitly discuss

moral desires or motivation, the moral virtue of integrity is consistent with concept of desiring to be good as well as trying to do what is right.

Moral Discernment or Sensitivity

The participants perceived that the course experience helped students become more morally discerning on several levels. Improving moral discernment is one of the purposes of the course according to Dr. Walker: “I wanted the course to be ... an opening up of entirely new ways to read not just of fantasy or even of the best literature, but how to read life” (personal communication, November 21, 2007). The themes of the two principal works students explored in the course lead us to believe that it was a desirable outcome and part of what Dr. Walker meant when he said he hoped that students would learn a new way of reading life. Students described being able to see more clearly or more sensitively distinguish between good and evil. As one student Dr. Walker quoted said, “My eyes have been opened” (personal communication, November 21, 2007).

Marian shared the experience of reading a fantasy novel for children that did not feel right to her, so as she had learned to do in the course, she checked into the life of the author. She found information about the author that caused her to not recommend the book to her students. Michaela shared that in addition to analyzing literature and media for meaning, this course helped her assess whether that literature is good or worthwhile. She explained that the course prompted her to be more mindful whether the lessons are worth applying personally, which in turn helped her make more purposeful decisions not only about what kinds of media to consume but which messages she is going to heed.

Victoria explained that fantasy helps distill the battle of good versus evil and that reading *Screwtape* helped her see more clearly how the devil really works. Lucy also

discussed how the course helped her see how temptations come into our lives. She described her experience reading *The Screwtape Letters*:

After reading *Screwtape Letters* I grew to appreciate, with an additional sense of humor, the battle between good and evil.... I came to understand that he [Lewis] believed in a devil and his capabilities to thwart our efforts here. The thing that surprised me was the focus Lewis put on the devil keeping things out of our minds. Usually we think of the devil putting ideas into our minds or other people's minds. Yet, *Screwtape* tells his nephew to keep things out of his [patient's] mind. I hadn't really given much thought to that previously. I think it was ideas like this that made me take a new perspective on Satan. (personal communication, March 12, 2008)

Similarly, Joy said that through the course she became more aware of worldly things that were trying to pull her (and all of us) away from God.

The course contains a lesson on "Self-Assessment Lewis Style" (Walker & Clark, 1982, p. 44). This is, in part, because of what Dr. Walker said he gained from his study of Tolkien and Lewis through his life:

Tolkien and Lewis have further made me aware, through their incessant literary quests, that I am on a quest myself, that my life is in process, a story that I am making up as I go along. They show me the story that I tell myself about myself can be limiting or confused or misguided, and that it can be altered in better directions. (personal communication, November 21, 2007)

One of the ways that Dr. Walker hoped students would be able to read life better is to be able to alter their own story in more positive directions.

At least half the participants reported that the course helped them look at themselves and find areas that they needed to improve. Still others spoke of experiences where this was the case, although it is not easy to determine how much this tendency continued beyond the course. As Joy shared, she became more aware of worldly things that are trying to pull us away from God, and she applied that personally in being more mindful of those things in her own life. She also shared that reading *Screwtape Letters*

helped her become more aware of her own judgments and how she views others. Pam also expressed a similar perception regarding *The Screwtape Letters*:

It helped me think about the way I think about things. And so I was impressed to have that look inside myself and be able to see what I could do to become better. I was really glad for that. (personal communication, October 3, 2007)

Michaela shared that the course helped her look at who she is and to consider others' perspectives. Sam noted that the course helped him personalize the literature. Victoria's experience with unselfishness versus charity was a specific instance where she could see where she needed to improve.

The students' reports of becoming more sensitive to or discerning of right and wrong is comparable to concepts in the character education literature. Lickona and Davidson (2005) included "awareness" as a psychological component of moral character, which includes the idea of "recogniz[ing] the ethical dimensions of situations" (p. 20). Additionally, one of foundational character strengths of Lickona and Davidson (2005) and Davidson et al. (2008) is becoming an "ethical thinker" and partly consists of "possess[ing] moral discernment" (Davidson et al., 2008, p. 380). It was also consistent with a portion of Lickona's (2003) essential virtue of wisdom. Lickona explained that part of wisdom was that it "enables us to discern correctly, to see what is truly important in life" (p. 2). Lickona (1999) also included in his habits of the mind two components that relate to the idea of discernment. The first was "moral alertness" (p. 600), what he described as recognizing that a situation has moral implications. Second is "moral self-knowledge" (p. 600), which related to the idea of being more self-analytical. Additionally, the participants' discussion of moral discernment was related to Ryan and Bohlin's (1999) "knowing the good" (p. 5). Rest's (1986) and Bebeau et al.'s (1999)

model contains the component of moral sensitivity, which included being sensitive to the moral implications of situations. BYU's *Aims* (n.d) did not directly address the concept of moral discernment.

Moral Courage

Dr. Walker shared a comment from one of his students who was just finishing the course related to moral courage:

Yesterday a student finishing the course wrote: "I could never express all that I have felt and learned from this class. My eyes have been opened and *my resolve has been strengthened* [italics added]. My little glimpse of the writings of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien has been a feast for my soul, showing how each event in our life presents opportunity for growth. Through the varied experiences and challenges our lives present we are reformed and remade into the beings God intended us to become." (personal communication, November 21, 2007)

Some of the student participants shared specific examples during which they felt the course influenced them to stand up for the right or choose wisely. Bob shared a story about his boss, who put a lot of pressure on him to do things her way rather than the way he felt was best for his students. He mused, "Contemplating the principles that were taught in this course have helped me to stand up further to some of the nonsense that I face in my job" (personal communication, October 13, 2007). Kate also faced a situation in which her bosses pressured their employees to conduct themselves unethically. She said that the course helped her to be more resolute and stand up to their pressure. Hannah shared that some of her friends do not think highly of Christians. Since taking the course she said, "I was actually defending it [to them]" using what she had learned from C. S. Lewis to help her. Other students reported making better choices regarding what literature and media to participate in and in choosing to spend more and higher quality time with their families.

There are several similarities between the student's perceptions of their development of moral courage and definitions in the literature. Lickona and Davidson (2005) stated that two of the psychological components of moral character include "attitude," which included "ha[ving] the courage of conscience in the face of social pressure," and "action," which in turn included "act[ing] upon ethical convictions" as well as "tak[ing] a stand for what is right" (p.20). Rest's (1986) and Bebeau et al.'s (1999) fourth element of moral development was "moral character," which consists of "having the strength of your convictions, having courage, persisting, overcoming distractions and obstacles, having implementing skills, having ego strength" (Bebeau et al., 1999, p. 22) to follow through on moral decisions. Ryan and Bohlin's (1999) concept of "doing the good" (p. 46) and Berkowitz's (2002) description of character as "an individual's set of psychological characteristics that affect that person's ability and inclination to function morally" (p. 48). Lickona (1999) added the concept of "conscience" or a feeling of an obligation to do what one has judged to be the right thing to do. Additionally, he included in his behavioral side of character the components of moral will, which included self-control, courage, and moral habit, which he described as an inner disposition to reliably act in a moral way. Lickona (2003) also included fortitude, which "enables us to do what is right in the face of difficulty" (p. 2). One of Peterson and Seligman's (2004) virtues was courage, which they described as "emotional strength that involves the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal" (p. 29). They added that courage consists of the strengths of bravery, persistence, integrity, and vitality. BYU's definition of "strong moral character" (BYU,

n.d.) included strength and courage as well as fortitude. These aspects of character are consistent with the students' perceptions related to moral courage.

Relational Character Traits and Strengths

Davidson et al. (2008) noted that their concept of moral character has a “relational orientation” (p. 373). Lickona and Davidson (2005) also stated, “[moral character] consists of those qualities—such as integrity, justice, caring, and respect—needed for successful interpersonal relationships and ethical behavior” (p. 18), though Davidson et al. and Lickona and Davidson explained that these qualities did not constitute an exhaustive list. Participants in the study mentioned ways that they perceived their character development that seem to support the relational aspect or orientation of moral character.

Although Dr. Walker did not specifically say how he was trying to help students improve their relationships with others, he personally tried to have a good relationship with his students. He also occasionally invited students to discuss issues from the course with others. Participants discussed four ways that they developed their character related to relational character traits and strengths: (a) improving relationships generally, (b) becoming more open-minded and understanding of other perspectives, (c) sharing what they were learning with others, and (d) improving communication with others.

Relationships

Some students shared that the course helped them generally improve and appreciate their relationships. Bob said that his experience in the course strengthened him spiritually and helped him improve his relationship with his wife and children. As Joy reported, the example of the characters from the literature helped reinforce her

appreciation for friendship. However, not all the students felt they developed their character in this way. Eve, for example, said she is not really a people person and that this course did not really change that.

Improving relationships with others is consistent with several of the definitions of character. For example, for Davidson et al. (2008) moral character had a “relational orientation” (p. 373) and consisted of qualities that assist individuals in their interpersonal relationships and their ethical conduct. Peterson and Seligman’s (2004) virtues included “humanity,” which they define as “interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others” (p. 29). Additionally, Ryan and Bohlin’s (1999) concept of loving the good included “concern for the needs of others, ... true friendship—and the habits necessary to attain it” (p. 46). The *BYU Aims* (BYU, n.d.) also contained elements related to the importance of relationships.

Open Mindedness

Some students reported that they developed their character during the course through becoming more open minded and understanding of other perspectives. For some, their experience in the course helped them understand and be more open to others perspectives generally. For example, Bob said that C. S. Lewis’s writings about Christianity caused him to look a little deeper at others and his own beliefs as well as to ask himself, “how much [he] understand[s] the faith of others as well as [his] own” (personal communication, October 13, 2007). Pam shared that she gained new perspectives on religion and human nature from reading and analyzing the literature. She said, “It reshaped the way I thought about things,” and “It helped me think about the way I think about things” (personal communication, October 2, 2007). Joy reported that the

course, especially her reading of *The Screwtape Letters*, helped her become more aware of her own judgments and how she views others.

Other students shared that becoming more open-minded affected specific relationships. Leia said that she gained an appreciation for the authors' (Tolkien and Lewis) perspectives, and that appreciation changed and extended her way thinking, prompted her to become more understanding of others. She cited the instance of helping a young lady at her work who had made some bad choices; Leia overcame her tendency to be irritated with, judge, or write off this person, and she was able to be more sympathetic and helpful.

Lucy shared that she felt that many of Lewis's beliefs coincided with her own and that her experience in the course opened up some opportunities to talk with others about common beliefs:

While volunteering in school I come in contact with several women who are of various faiths and I think this helped me to appreciate and see the commonalities we all share and appreciate them more. In fact, several of them had read *Screwtape* and we were able to discuss our perspectives on what Lewis thought and believed. (personal communication, March 12, 2008)

Hannah shared that although she had departed from the religious ideas that her parents taught her growing up, this course helped her gain a new appreciation for Christianity. She said she was less apt to judge those who profess to be Christians. Additionally, she shared, "This course helped me talk to [my mother] a lot more about Christianity and understand where she is coming from" (personal communication, August 30, 2007).

Davidson et al. (2008) included having respect for others, their beliefs and perspectives, as a part of their concept of moral character. Peterson and Seligman's

(2004) virtue of wisdom and knowledge included the character strength open-mindedness, which they defined as “thinking things through and examining them from all sides; not jumping to conclusions; being able to change one’s mind in light of evidence; weighing all evidence fairly” (p. 29). Peterson and Seligman also included the character strength of “fairness” (p. 361), within their virtue of justice, which include the aspect of “perspective taking” (p. 403) and respect for others, which was consistent with some of the students’ examples of ways they became more open minded. Seeing other perspectives (either specific or generally) corresponds with perspective taking, which was part of Lickona’s (1999) habits of the mind. Lickona also listed empathy as a habit of the mind, which Leia showed with the young lady at her work. Although less explicitly stated, the concepts of “compassion” (BYU, n.d., Character Building section, ¶ 2) and “treating all other people with dignity and fairness” (Character Building section, ¶ 5) in the *BYU Aims* both implied some perspective taking and open-mindedness.

The Sharing of Learning with Others

Another way that students expressed that they improved their relationships with others was through sharing what they learned. For the most part, they shared with the intent to help and serve others. A few examples of this include Helen, who tried to share insights and the hope she gained through the course with her son, who struggled with depression. Sam mentioned that when he shared insights to help others, “I made sure that I didn’t bring it up unless I felt that doing so would benefit the other person” (personal communication, March 1, 2008). Lucy felt that sharing what she has learned in the course has helped her help others:

I think it strengthened me as a mother. I think it helped me to strengthen me in terms of being better able to help my children, like if I had to give an example

helping them with literary choices. Also in helping, like in my book group. I think I can help women in their understanding of another book and also strengthen them in other ways. (personal communication, October 3, 2007)

Michaela wrote fantasy stories to help teach her children the importance of concepts such as work and dedication. Bob shared what he learned about the literature and teaching with his colleagues at work as well as used it to enhance what and how he taught his students. Hannah also enriched her teaching by sharing what she learned from the course with her students. Joy shared the book *A Grief Observed* with her mother to help her through mourning the loss of her companion of 47 years. Marian used skills from the course to make reading recommendations to her students as well sharing her faith with them.

In these examples, the students reported that they wanted to share what they learned to benefit others rather than for selfish purposes. This service aspect of improving relationships is consistent with Davidson et al.'s (2008) concept of caring, which was part of their concept of moral character, as well as Ryan and Bohlin's (1999) loving the good, which included a "concern for the needs of others." It also corresponds to what Ryan and Bohlin said concerning "educating students' feelings and passions so that they love the right things for the right reasons" such as seeking to "give to others rather than to gain recognition" (p. 46). Peterson and Seligman (2004) included kindness as part of their virtue of humanity, and Lickona (2003) includes love in his essential virtues, of which kindness was an element. Berkowitz (2002) included "altruism" as one of his "foundational characteristics" (p. 48). These authors' views are relatively consistent with the stated or implied reasons the students gave for sharing with others. The *BYU Aims* (BYU, n.d.) included the elements of brotherly love and service as parts of the definition

of “strong moral character” (Character Building section, ¶ 2) Thus, this aspect of character development, though perhaps closer to the lifelong learning and service aim, is consistent with the character-building aim.

Communication

A few students reported that the course helped them improve their communication with others. For example, Leia reported that working on the course together helped her and her husband get to know each other better, as they were still relative newlyweds when she took the course. Bob shared a similar thought about how the course improved his relationship with his wife, in addition to developing a common interest.

Lickona and Davidson (2005) and Davidson et al. (2008) included effective communication as a component of their foundational strength of becoming a “socially and emotionally skilled person” (Davidson et al., 2008, p. 380). Lickona’s (1999) moral competence included listening and communication skills. Ryan and Bohlin (1999) discussed the need to develop the “habits necessary to attain [true friendship]” (p. 46). Learning to communicate well would likely be one of these habits. Additionally, Solomon et al. (2001) discussed communication skills as an example of “behavioral competencies” that may make “prosocial behavior” (p. 567) more likely. Although not explicitly included in BYU’s (n.d.) character-building aim, improving communication skills was a part of the intellectually enlarging aim.

Spiritual Character Traits and Strengths

Davidson et al. (2008) and Lickona and Davison (2005) both discussed the character strength of becoming “a spiritual person crafting a life of noble purpose” (Davidson et al., 2008, p. 380). Participants perceived that they developed in ways that

appear to support the idea of becoming a more “spiritual person.” Although Dr. Walker did not specifically state that he intended to help students improve any particularly spiritual character traits or strengths, the subject of Christian fantasy is steeped in these themes. Students discussed four spiritually related traits or strengths in which they perceived development: (a) humility, (b) faith, (c) hope, and (d) charity.

Humility

A few students explored the theme of humility in the course and said that it helped them understand humility or to feel more humble. Helen shared that her reading filled her with a sense of nobility yet humility because the characters always receive help in their moments of peril. She shared, “You just read that and say I want to be like that and I want to feel that nobility and yet humbly knowing that I am nothing without a higher order of things helping me out” (personal communication, October 30, 2007). Helen added that she knows that in her life her Father in Heaven has come to her aid. Bob admitted in an assignment, “Like Wormwood's patient, I struggle with humility. I know what humility is and it has served my spiritual growth. But like the patient, I am tempted to find pride in that humility” (personal communication, October 13, 2007). He concluded his essay acknowledging the need to battle against pride:

Lewis through *The Screwtape Letters* reminds me of the battle I must do against false pride, especially spiritual pride. My greatest allies in the war against pride are not just my good wife and my friends, but also God, Christ and the Holy Ghost. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Although the course was not his sole inspiration in his battle to overcome pride and be more humble, it did serve as a reminder and helped clarify the battle for him. Michaela also discussed the quote from *The Screwtape Letters* in which Screwtape counsels his

nephew to help his patient be proud of his humility. She shared that she often remembers that insight when she notices her humility with a feeling of pride.

The virtue of humility also appears in the literature as an element of character. One of Lickona's (1999) habits of the heart included "humility," which he defined as "a willingness to both recognize and correct our moral failings" (p. 600). Lickona (2003) also listed humility as an essential virtue for strong moral character. Peterson and Seligman's (2004) virtue of temperance included the strengths of "humility and modesty" (p. 461). The *BYU Aims* (BYU, n.d.) did not specifically address humility.

Faith

Nearly every student said that the course experience helped strengthen his or her faith to some degree. For example, Hannah said that taking the course helped reinforce her belief in a Higher Power: "I definitely think, I was never an atheist, but my belief in a higher power was reinforced and brought full-circle. And it made me think about a lot of things" (personal communication, August 30, 2007). Victoria shared that the experience strengthened her religious commitment; she felt that the course helped her come closer to Christ, understand her own beliefs, and see that intellect and faith can co-exist. She also felt that the course helped her improve her prayers. Pam felt that in addition to helping her enrich her study of the scriptures and reprioritize her life, which are very much related to improving her relationship with God, that the course also strengthened her faith and her commitment to her beliefs. She explained, "I think that that book [*The Great Divorce*], well, that class in general helped me to make up my mind and commit more fully to my faith and strengthen a side of my character that hadn't really been tapped into before" (personal communication, October 2, 2007). Marian reported that the course

helped her with her spiritual learning. Mort explained, “I would say that it was spiritually uplifting and insightful. It gave me some insights” (personal communication, September 27, 2007). Eve said that the course helped her think about how Tolkien and Lewis saw things differently and examine her own beliefs. At the same time things they said resonated with her and affirmed or validated her own beliefs. Sam noted, “So here you are and you are reading and learning all of this great literature stuff but at the same time you are strengthening your testimony in your own religion and strengthening your own beliefs in Christianity” (personal communication, October 10, 2007). Finally, Joy said her experience in the course simply strengthened the ideals she already held.

Although faith is not as prevalent in the literature, there are some views that relate to the idea. Peterson and Seligman’s (2004) virtue of “transcendence,” which they defined as encompassing “strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning,” (p. 30) included the character strength of spirituality, within which they added “religiousness” and “faith” (p. 599). Building upon this idea of transcendence, other theorists discussed helping students become “spiritual person[s] engaged in crafting a life of noble purpose” (Davidson et al., 2008, p. 379) who “pursues deep, meaningful connections—to others, nature, *a higher power* [italics added], and so on” (Lickona & Davidson, 2005, p.193). These views seem consistent with elements of students’ perceptions related to growth in faith. The *BYU Aims* (BYU, n.d.) also declared that students develop character by “coming unto Christ through *faith* [italics added], repentance, and righteous living” (Character Building section, ¶ 2). Thus, according to the *BYU Aims*, faith in Christ is foundational to character development.

Hope

Dr. Walker explained that he observed students whose learning experiences in the course have fortified their hope for the future:

Learning at its best can affect character in other ways; [it] can even provide a kind of inoculation against the disappointments of life. One of my students described her character enhancement through the course in terms of *The Once and Future King*: “The best thing for disturbances of the spirit,” replied Merlyn, beginning to puff and blow, “is to learn. That is the one thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only love and lose your moneys to a monster. There is only one thing for it then: to learn. Learning is the thing for you.” (personal communication, November 21, 2007)

Only two participants in the study specifically mentioned that the course helped them increase or fortify their hope. Helen said that from her reading of fantasy she, like the protagonists who usually receive help in moments of peril, can count on divine assistance when she is in need. This understanding helped her to tell herself, “OK, you know, I can make it through” (personal communication, October 30, 2007). Mort reported that his study of Aragorn in *The Lord of the Rings* inspired him. Mort felt personally that he had not lived up to his full potential, but that Aragorn’s example gave him hope that he too can improve his situation or fulfill his destiny. Mort also mentioned that the “patient” from *The Screwtape Letters* inspired him in a similar way: “So that was interesting to see the weakness of the guy and yet God helping him in a sense. Then in the final end the decisions he makes are right and it all turns out all right” (personal communication, September 27, 2007).

Although the literature discussed the virtue of hope less frequently, Peterson and Seligman’s (2004) virtue of “transcendence” (p. 30) mentioned the character strength of hope, which included “thinking about the future, expecting that desired events and

outcomes will occur, acting in ways believed to make them more likely” (p. 570).

Lickona (2003) described essential virtues and included “positive attitude” as one of these essential virtues. He stated that one of the elements of having a positive attitude is hope. Hope was not explicitly mentioned in the character-building portion of the *BYU Aims*, but is nevertheless consistent with BYU’s concept of strong moral character, given the Apostle Paul’s discussion of the three Christian imperatives of faith, hope, and charity (Holy Bible, King James Version, 1 Corinthians 13:13).

Charity

Victoria was the only student who specifically mentioned exploring the theme of charity and trying to work on having more charity. She said that her experience in the course helped her work through her feelings of frustration with her cousin. She saw, through her reading of *The Screwtape Letters*, the difference between unselfishness and charity. Essentially, Lewis (19964) explained that unselfishness focuses on the self, whereas charity looks outward and is concerned about others’ needs. After considering how this idea applied to her and her feelings about her experience with her cousin, Victoria exclaimed, “C.S. Lewis’s treatment of Unselfishness hit the spot. I finally saw myself and my motivations clearly! The problem has been identified and a remedy prescribed” (personal communication, November 1, 2007). Since the course, she has worked on having charity rather than trying to be unselfish. She explained, “[unselfishness versus charity] is something I have been thinking about now [since the course] because life is a continual process. Once something is brought to your life doesn’t mean you have mastered it” (personal communication, November 1, 2007).

Although the literature does not specifically mention charity, the concept of charity is consistent with other terms. Peterson and Seligman (2004) included the virtue of “humanity,” which they defined as “interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others” (p. 29). Within this virtue the authors included the character strengths of “love” (p. 303) and “kindness” (p. 325), which both relate to Victoria’s discussion of charity and how it came into play with her relationship with her cousin. Lickona (2003) also included love as one of the essential virtues. The *BYU Aims* (BYU, n.d.) listed “brotherly love” and “treating all other people with dignity and fairness,” and further explained that, “BYU aims not merely to teach students a code of ethics but to help them become partakers of the divine nature” (Character Building section, ¶ 5). The reference to divine nature came from 2 Peter 1, in which the apostle Peter invited followers of Christ to partake of the divine nature, which in turn encompasses several elements and culminates with charity (2 Peter 1:4-8). Thus charity is consistent with some definitions in the literature and with aspects of BYU’s character-building aim.

Performance Character Traits and Strengths

Davidson et al. (2008) discussed the importance of fostering not only moral character but also “performance character” (p. 373). They explained the rationale for including performance character in their definition of character:

We came to realize that character isn’t just about “doing the right thing” in an ethical sense; it is also about doing our best work. If that is true, then character education isn’t just about helping kids get along; it is about teaching them to work hard, develop their talents, and aspire to excellence in every area of endeavor. (p. 373)

Similar to Davidson et al.’s (2008) and Lickona and Davidson’s (2005) concept of performance character, participants perceived improvements in six traits or strengths that

seem to support the development of performance character: (a) self-discipline and self-directedness in learning, (b) analytical and deep approach to learning, (c) imagination and creativity, (d) appreciation of literature, (e) motivation to continue their education, and (f) self confidence.

Self-discipline and Self-directedness in Learning

Dr. Walker hoped that students would develop their character by taking charge of their own learning and become more self-directed and self-disciplined:

I thought a challengingly inviting independent study course could, minimally, help students realize they were in charge of their own learning enough to discipline themselves through a course where they had to motivate and pace and bring to fruition their own study. At the least I hoped students would come out of the course better disciplined, more self-starting and proactively engaged in their own education. (personal communication, November 21, 2007)

Marian reported, “[taking the course] made me realize that I had the self-discipline to do independent study” (October 6, 2007). Although not directly relating it to character development, other students also reported that their experience in the course helped them become more self-disciplined and self-directed in their learning to varying degrees. For example, Hannah explained that because of the independent study context she had to become more self-disciplined to complete the course. Pam said that not just in relation to this course but during her experience with independent study she had struggled with becoming as self-disciplined as she wanted to be. However, she felt that having taken the course, as well as other independent study courses, she had improved in this respect.

The relationship between self-discipline and character also appears in some of the literature. Davidson et al. (2008) and Lickona and Davidson (2005) included helping students to become self-disciplined in their list of important character outcomes and self-

discipline as a part of performance character. Peterson and Seligman (2004) mentioned two character strengths that relate to self-discipline, persistence (“voluntary continuation of goal-directed action in spite of obstacles, difficulties, or discouragement” [p. 229]) and self-regulation (“how a person exerts control over his or her own responses so as to pursue goals or live up to standards” [p. 590]). Although Peterson and Seligman did not exclusively discuss self-discipline within the context of students becoming better learners, Davidson et al. (2008) did. Some theories of distance education also include helping students become more self-directed learners as a primary goal (Moore, 1997; Wedemeyer, 1971, 1981).

Analytical and Deep Approach to Learning

Some participants said that they developed their character through becoming better learners. Dr. Walker explained that one of his hopes for the students taking the course was for them to “take off with this kind of course, under the thrilling impetus of their own learning momentum, into some stratospheric educational territory” (personal communication, November 21, 2007). Michaela said that her experience in the course helped her prepare in many ways for learning on her own as she transitioned from undergraduate to non-school life. Bob explained how the course helped him:

[I] realize things that I don't know when I would usually think that I do. I am beginning to understand what I don't understand and what I need to study and what I need to look at, what I need to ponder about; all that was influenced by the course. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Many of the students perceived that they learned to better analyze literature and other media, which was one of Dr. Walker's primary goals for the course. Students also reported taking a deeper learning approach during the course, and that to varying degrees they have continued to approach learning in deeper ways, though perhaps not in every

learning situation and not just because of this course. For example, Lucy shared that the course helped her become a little more thoughtful and take time to think about what she is reading more than she used to: “It helped me to understand that there are more aspects to fantasy writing and Christian literature than what you normally think of” (personal communication, October 3, 2007). She also said that she used some of the analysis techniques she learned in this class in other courses, which deepened her understanding. Michaela and Bob said that what they learned in the course influenced how they view and interpret other types of media. Students reported that they continued to use these analytical skills in other courses and other aspects of their lives.

Though only a few students initially considered this type of learning as part of their character development, this view is consistent with Davidson et al.’s (2008) view of performance character and their developmental outcome of helping students become “lifelong learner[s] and critical thinker[s]” (p. 380). Additionally, it is consistent with elements of Peterson and Seligman’s (2004) virtues of wisdom and knowledge, and Ryan and Bohlin (1999) stated that character consists of the “sum of our *intellectual* [italics added] and moral habits” (p. 5).

Entwistle (2000) and McCune and Entwistle (2000) described this deeper form of learning as consisting of seeking personal meaning, making evidence-based explanations, and enhancing individual conceptions of a topic, which all lead to a more thorough understanding rather than memorized facts, derivative descriptions, and answers unsupported by evidence that yield only a limited grasp of the subject. Dr. Walker invited students to take a deep learning approach and adds the nuance of personally applying concepts and principles when he added “appreciating [fantasy’s] unique perspectives and

relating them to personal values” (Walker & Clark, 1982, p. 6) as part of the overall objective for the course.

Imagination and Creativity

Imagination is an aspect of fantasy literature that Dr. Walker learned to appreciate from his study of Tolkien and Lewis, and he hoped to share that appreciation with his students. He tried to apply this quality personally in his life:

Tolkien and Lewis have taught me to imagine more, to envision the invisible. Merry talks of the “things that are deeper and higher,” and much of this fiction attunes readers to see that, to realize possibilities beyond what I’d recognized. My wife swears that since reading *The Lord of the Rings* I talk to trees, and even I admit after meeting Treebeard that everything is more alive than I had realized. (personal communication, November 21, 2007)

Victoria mentioned several times that she gained an appreciation for imagination from her study of Tolkien and Lewis. Although her appreciation for imagination does not spring entirely from the course, her course experience and Dr. Walker’s approach to the literature helped her understand the concept of imagination more deeply. She also said that she tried to be more imaginative and to share the value of imagination with others. Other students, such as Bob, Kate, Michaela, and Pam, discussed how the course inspired them to continue or begin new creative writing pursuits. Kate and Michaela specifically worked on fantasy stories of their own.

Although most students did not specifically categorize their heightened appreciation of imagination as a character–development outcome of the course, Peterson and Seligman (2004) included creativity as a character strength in their first virtue, “Wisdom and Knowledge” (p. 95). They explained that creativity means a person is capable of producing “ideas or behaviors” that are “original” or “novel” as well as “adaptive,” or that they “make a positive contribution to that person’s or to the life of

others” (p. 95). What students reported (in writing stories and poetry, etc.) is consistent with this definition. Additionally, being more imaginative and creative would help students realize their “potential for excellence” (Davidson et al., 2008, p. 373) in specific pursuits, such as writing fiction and poetry, which is a component of performance character (Davidson et al., 2008; Lickona & Davidson, 2005).

Appreciation of Literature

Among Dr. Walker’s goals for the course was to share his love for great literature and to help students not only to appreciate fantasy literature, but to help them move into Shakespeare and the Bible. He explained that he wanted to teach them about “great literature itself with the invitation that it might even take them to better literature” (personal communication, October 9, 2007).

Although the students came into the course with varying levels of enthusiasm for fantasy, most, if not all, of the students reported that they left the course with a greater appreciation for fantasy literature. For example, Sam explained, “I had never been a huge fantasy fan, so I gained an appreciation for that” (personal communication, October 10, 2007). Victoria said that she felt fantasy was “fluff” before she took the course. Now she sees fantasy as a more legitimate literary form and she gained a greater appreciation for Lewis and Tolkien. Other students had similar changes in their perspectives on fantasy literature and literature in general. The few students who did not report greater appreciation for fantasy as an outcome of the course, such as Hannah and Kate, reported that they already had such a deep appreciation for fantasy literature before they took the course.

So although only one student initially defined her gain in appreciation for literature as part of her character development, most students gained a greater appreciation for literature in general through their course experiences. This aspect of the students' perceived character development is consistent with Peterson and Seligman's (2004) "appreciation of beauty and excellence" (p. 537), which is an aspect of their virtue called "transcendence." This outcome is also consistent with Ryan and Bohlin's (1999) concept of "loving the good" (p. 46) They explained, "Loving the good is about educating students' feelings and passions so that they love the right things for the right reasons (for example, so that they learn to do their homework for the sake of learning rather than simply a grade)" (p. 46). In this case, students developed a passion for what they learn, beyond just memorizing material for a grade and moving on. As Pam declared, "I think I got a B+ in the class.... Although I felt like what I got out of it was A+" (personal communication, October 2, 2007).

Motivation to Continue Education and Learning

Dr. Walker reported that he observed that the course served as a bridge to further education, whether formally or informally:

One thing for sure: at least two dozen students over the past two decades have used Christian fantasy as a bridge to return to higher education. Most of those were women who've raised families, and who didn't believe their mothering experience was as educative as it was until they proved it to themselves through working with unintimidating material. (personal communication, November 21, 2007)

Several students in the study reported that because of the course they felt a desire to continue their learning. For example, Eve shared that this course prompted her interest in pursuing a master's degree because her experience helped her see that not all education had to be the "drudgery" of reciting back rote learning. She saw instead that a course

could give her “freedom” and encouragement to think for herself (personal communication, November 6, 2007). Leia said this course helped her value education more and to complete her degree so she could teach and share the things she learned with others. Michaela noted that this course served as a springboard for her lifelong learning. Although other students also reported that the course helped feed their desire to learn, Helen said that she had a desire to learn since her childhood, although the course did influence her desire to read additional fantasy literature.

The “desire to continue learning” aspect of becoming a better learner is consistent with Peterson and Seligman’s (2004) virtue of wisdom and knowledge, specifically the character strength of a “love of learning” (p. 163). Also Davidson et al. (2008) recommended helping students to become lifelong learners as one of their developmental outcomes (also see Lickona & Davidson, 2005).

Self-Confidence

Dr. Walker also observed that students have experienced increased confidence as a result of their experiences in the course:

I’ve observed some instances of character building through the Christian Fantasy course. Some of that is straightforward strengthening of self-confidence, as per the letter I received this week from [a female student]: “I loved the course. I have always struggled to believe in my ability to understand and interpret literature. I was ashamed and felt very inadequate and ‘under read.’ I wanted to stretch myself, to hush my recital of voices telling me I was not good enough. This course has changed me, blessed me with confidence and joy. I am able to see things as they were meant to be, not as I have experienced them in the past. What made this all possible? I believe it is the sharing of self that was expected. It was the adventure of escape from previously conceived notions of my own self. I will never be the same. I have learned to love reading through this course.” (personal communication, November 21, 2007)

Students reported increased confidence in many areas. For example, Leia reported that her interactions with Dr. Walker helped her be more confident in her own opinions

and her ability to think and read and to analyze literature as well as to share her opinions about literature with others. Joy said that, due to the amount of writing and the feedback Dr. Walker gave her, she gained more confidence in her ability to write. This led her to begin thinking about working toward becoming a nurse practitioner, which takes a considerable amount of writing. Marian said she was more confident in her ability and her self-discipline to complete independent-study style learning, which was important for her as she continued her educational pursuits. Kate reported that she felt more confident in her ability to write. Bob explained that seeing how Tolkien and Lewis wrote helped him improve as a writer; and that seeing how Dr. Walker taught the course has helped him improve as a teacher. Pam said that the course gave her “a lot of encouragement as a reader and writer” (personal communication, October 2, 2007).

Michaela also reported that she became more confident as a learner through her experience in the course:

It seems to me that “self-confidence” doesn’t really define what is going on here. It isn’t just feeling more confidence, but learning to trust your own ability to think. This should be the ultimate goal of education because it’s going beyond gathering information to actually *learning* and learning to learn. You don’t need a teacher to tell you what to think anymore—how sad that it is such a rare experience for a teacher to encourage students to think for themselves. (personal communication, July 15, 2008)

Although not many in the literature explicitly discussed confidence building in the character or moral education literature, Davidson et al. (2008), as well as Lickona and Davidson (2005), included the goal of helping students becoming more “emotionally and socially skilled [people]” (Davidson et al., 2008, p. 380). In their description of this developmental outcome, they included the concept of “possess[ing] a healthy self-confidence and a positive attitude” (p. 380). Self-confidence, as the participants described

it, is similar to Bandura's (1997) discussion of self-efficacy, since their gains in self-confidence typically related to specific skills or tasks. As Bandura explained, self-efficacy is key to learning a skill. Davidson et al. (2008) discuss helping students become lifelong learners who "aspire to excellence in every area of endeavor" or "develop their talents" (p. 373). In both cases, self-confidence (or self-efficacy) is helpful (Bandura, 1997). Additionally, Solomon et al. (2001) discussed self-efficacy as an example of "personality factors" that also may increase the likelihood of "prosocial behavior" (p. 567).

Conclusions

As Nucci (2001) stated, among those who study the phenomenon of character development there is not "any clear conceptual framework for what the term 'character' even refers to" (p. 128). Thus, it is not surprising that the participants gave varying responses when I asked what kinds of character development they observed through their course experience. Yet the students' perceptions of how they developed their characters were consistent with various perspectives of character that exist in the literature. They were also fairly consistent with the institutional definition of character. However, as expected, their experiences in this one course did not completely encompass all aspects of the various definitions of character I discussed in the literature review, including the *BYU Aims* (BYU, n.d.).

In summary, the participants perceived development in character traits and strengths related to moral character through an increase in moral desires, moral discernment, and moral courage. They reported improvements in relational character traits and strengths through general improvements in their relationships with others,

becoming more open-minded, sharing what they have learned with others, and improved communications. They perceived improvements and awareness in spiritual character traits and strengths of humility, hope, faith, and charity. They also perceived enhancements in traits and strengths related to performance character as they perceived that they became more self-disciplined and self-directed in their learning, more analytical and deeper learners, and more imaginative and creative; they also gained a deeper appreciation for literature, desired to continue their educations (formally and informally), as well as perceiving some improvements in their self-confidence. I summarize these character-related outcomes below (see Figure 1); however, not every student reported each character outcome. See Appendix E for a summary of the character development each individual student reported and which they classified initially as character development.

<p>Moral Character Traits and Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Moral desire• Moral discernment• Moral courage	<p>Relational Character Traits and Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Relationships• Open-mindedness• The sharing of learning with others• Communication
<p>Spiritual Character Traits and Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Humility• Faith• Hope• Charity	<p>Performance Character Traits and Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Self-discipline and self-directedness in learning• Analytical and deep approach to learning• Imagination and creativity• Appreciation for literature• Desire to continue education• Self-confidence

Figure 1. Summary of participants' perceived character development.

CHAPTER 6: PARTICIPANT PERCEPTIONS OF COURSE ELEMENTS CONTRIBUTING TO CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

In this chapter, I share the themes that emerged in answer to the research question “According to the participants, what elements of the course experience contributed to students’ perceived character development?” The elements of the course experience that participants perceived made for a more effective learning experience and contributed to their character development include (a) the literature they studied in the course, (b) the instructional conversation that occurred between the instructor and each student in the course, (c) the relationship which obtained from the conversation and how the professor interacted with the students, (d) the distance education context of course, and (e) the students themselves.

The Literary Works (Course Content)

As expected, one element of the experience that both the professor and the students perceived as contributing to character development was the literary works they studied in the course, especially the two primary works, *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Screwtape Letters*. This theme seems to confirm that fantasy can be useful as content in character education (see Bettelheim, 1977; Bryan, 2005; Dana & Lynch-Brown, 1991; Glanzer, 2008). Participants also mentioned some of the essays they read and works that they selected, including *The Great Divorce* and *A Grief Observed*, as helpful to their character development.

In this section, I describe the elements of the literary works that students cited as contributing to their character development, and explain the aspects of character to which the students felt the literature contributed.

Elements of the Literary Works Contributing to Character Development

As discussed previously, many theorists suggest that reading literary works can help transmit values and develop character (for example, Bennett, 1993; Cain, 2005; Carr 2005; Chanan, 1974; Cheek, 1992; Feder, 1978; Kilpatrick, 1992; Lemming, 2000; Lickona, 1991; MacIntyre, 2007; Nelson, 2002; Ryan & Bohlin, 2003; Silverdale & Katz, 2003; Smagorinsky, 2000; Tappan & Brown, 1989; Vitz, 1990; Wynne & Ryan, 1993). Participants in the study described four aspects of the literary selections they read that helped contribute to their character development, (a) great stories, (b) admirable characters, (c) intriguing or interesting insights and themes, (d) applicability to real life.

Stories

One aspect of the content that made the literary works meaningful for students is that the stories were engaging. As Joy explained, she got wrapped up in the stories:

Picking up a book and reading for enjoyment is like a mini vacation, I love to get involved in the story like I am part of it and with *The Lord of the Rings* it was just so easy to fall into that. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Sam hypothesized that people are more willing to invest time in reading what the author has to say if the story is well written and interesting. He stated, “A book that is not well-written or that contains stale characters does not warrant my time” (personal communication, March 1, 2008). Although not every participant loved all of the selections, the majority of the students enjoyed the primary works they studied (*The Lord of the Rings* and *The Screwtape Letters*) and most of the works they chose to read (for example, Pam felt strongly about *The Great Divorce*, and Eve enjoyed reading *Perelandra*).

In the academic literature, narrative is considered an important form of learning (Tappan & Brown, 1991; Vitz, 1990), and was an important part of the instruction in Silverdale and Katz's (2003) study. Although Lemming (2000) and MacIntyre (2007) discussed other reasons for the importance of the story (meaning making of cultural values and because humans are essentially story-telling creatures, respectively), Cain (2005) proposed that reading is helpful part of character education because written work is such an engaging form of media. Cain's discussion of engagement is consistent with what some of the participants suggested. Generally, researchers consider engagement an important element of learning (see Wedemeyer, 1971); thus, it is reasonable to assume that it is also important for character-related development, since character from many perspectives involves aspects of the cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains (for example, see Berkowitz, 2002; Davidson et al., 2008; Lickona, 1999, 2003; Lickona & Davidson, 2005; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Ryan & Bohlin, 1999).

Characters

The students proposed a few reasons why the characters in these stories contributed to or influenced their character development. The first reason is, as Hannah explained, that the characters serve as great role models to whom you can relate even though they exist in a mythical realm. She especially appreciated the characters in *The Lord of the Rings*:

All of us want to be Aragon, successful in battle, kings of our domains. However, we forget that Aragon was once scared of his destiny. Furthermore, most of us want to believe we could endure hardship like Frodo and deny temptations. However, most of us have struggled with our innermost 'Gollums' and have fought temptations or have fell [sic] into temptations. (personal communication, October 2, 2007)

Joy expressed a similar sentiment about how the characters in the literature influenced her:

When you read them and you get involved in their life and their travels and what's happening to them and how they handle things, it's almost as a role model as to how you want to be seen and you want to behave. (personal communication, October 17, 2007)

Another reason students posited was that, although the characters exist only in the realm of fantasy, the characters went through experiences the students could relate to:

[I] realize even though characters may be wizards or hobbits or elves they are experiencing the same human experiences as everybody else. I can reflect my experiences with Frodo. I can say Frodo's friendship with Sam is similar to friendships in life. I think it is definitely enriching in the fact that you can look at these stories, and even though a lot of the times they are discredited, that there is a lot of depth to them and you can learn a lot of things from the story and from the characters. (Leia, personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Finally, the characters were inspirational. Helen expressed that the way the characters faced evil helped her feel "noble yet humble" (personal communication, October 30, 2007). She cited cases such as the "patient" in *The Screwtape Letters*, who with God's help overcame the temptations of Wormwood; Aragorn, who worked and fought with the people rather than just claiming his right to the throne due to his lineage and succeeded in the end through the help he received; Frodo, who endured through his journey; Sam Gamgee, who helped Frodo throughout the whole book—all of these inspired hope and her ability to say, "OK, I can do this" (personal communication, October 30, 2007). That is not to say that every character was inspiring, but in most of the works, students found characters to whom they could relate.

The idea that the characters serve as role models who have relatable experiences, and who inspire students is consistent with Egan (1978), who said that literature contains heroes and heroines to whom students can relate. Similarly, Harding and Snyder (1991)

and Yeazell and Cole (1986) suggested that literature about characters who have to make moral choices may contribute to the moral growth of students. Students in the study mentioned being inspired by characters such as Frodo, who made the moral decision to stand up for the right in the face of so much danger and evil. Mills (1988) stated that stories are rich in characters that have human experiences and that literature that easily relates to problems students face is beneficial for character growth. Although I found no specific mention of characters being inspirational in the literature I reviewed, it is not inconsistent with the views related to the importance of characters that Egan (1978), Harding and Snyder (1991), Mills (1988), Wynne and Ryan (1993), and Yeazell and Cole (1986) expressed.

Insightful Comments and Themes

One item that several students commented on was that they found insightful comments in the literary works and that the works also dealt with powerful themes. Dr. Walker explained that powerful themes and insightful comments were some of the reasons for his desire to teach the course: “I think because I had discovered things in this territory [Christian fantasy literature, specifically in Tolkien and Lewis] that were life changing and character building things that really I thought should be shared” (personal communication, October 3, 2007).

Several students (Bob, Helen, Michaela, Pam, Joy, Victoria, Sam, Hannah and Eve) commented that *The Screwtape Letters* contained insightful comments. Although mentioned less frequently, students found other works they chose to read by C. S. Lewis (e.g., *The Great Divorce*, *A Grief Observed*, *Perelandra*, and *Mere Christianity*) and *The Lord of the Rings* to be insightful. From all these literary works, students mentioned

gaining insights from the author into how the devil works, as well as new perspectives on humility and charity, on our purpose here on earth, on man's relationship to God, and on what Christianity really means, among other insights, insights which prompted them want to change their attitudes, desire, and behaviors.

Several students mentioned that the literary works dealt with important themes. For example, students commonly mentioned the theme of good standing up to and overcoming evil in *The Lord of the Rings*. Victoria explained, "Well, fantasy kind of distills the battle between good and evil and you can see really clearly what was good and bad" (personal communication, November 1, 2007). Lucy and Helen also noticed the power of even humble or lower-status individuals to make a difference in the world. Others, such as Sam and Kate, spoke of the Christian themes and ideals and that seeing these themes helped them strengthen their faith. Also Joy and Leia both mentioned the theme of friendship they saw and appreciated in *The Lord of the Rings*.

The students' view of themes and insights seems consistent with several of Nelson's (2002) observations—she stated that literature contains moral content—and with Cheek (1992), who suggested that literature may contain moral themes and values. *Relevance to Life*

The participants perceived that the literary works contributed to character development not just because the characters and the themes were interesting or inspiring, but because they were relevant and applicable in the students' lives. One of lessons in the course, "Realer than Real" (Walker & Clark, 1982, p. 15), invites students to assess their "willingness to trust fantasy" (p. 16). As Dr. Walker explained,

[Lewis and Tolkien] show me that great literature can be a kind of revelation, sensitizing to the spirit, awakening appetite for better things, and showing the way

to get there. It can hold up a mirror to our experience, showing us “things that are, and things that were, and things that yet may be.” If truth is stranger than fiction, the strangest fictions may stretch us most toward truth. (November 21, 2007)

This aspect of the content and of the course was one of the elements that fascinated Kate. She noted, “That became a very exciting concept to me, a story about something that didn’t actually happen but about something that was true, that was still a real story” (personal communication, July 20, 2007).

Several other students mentioned that what they learned from the course was often easily applicable to real life. For example, Joy said regarding what she learned from her reading of *The Screwtape Letters*, “You can identify with those things in your life” (personal communication, October 13, 2007). She also mused about how the love that the hobbits in *The Lord of the Rings* had for each other was a testament to friendship that strengthened the ideals of friendship she already held. In another example, Pam found the story of the woman in *The Great Divorce* who had struggled with losing her son to death applicable to her own struggles with dealing with her husband’s bout with cancer. Although she did not lose her husband, applying this woman’s story to the feelings she experienced when she faced the possibility of losing him helped her grow closer to God and reprioritize her life. Mills (1988) stated that one of the reasons that literary works are effective is that literary works easily relates to problems that students face.

Contributions of the Literary Works to Character Development

Participants connected their character development in several areas to reading the literary works: (a) all aspects of moral character traits and strengths, (b) relational character traits and strengths (including becoming more open minded), (c) spiritual

character traits and strengths, and (d) performance character traits and strengths (especially appreciation for literature and becoming more imagination and creative).

Moral Character Traits and Strengths

Students perceived that the literary works helped them with aspects of moral character traits and strengths, moral desires, moral discernment, and moral courage. For example, both Helen and Michaela explained that reading Tolkien inspired their desires to be good and to stand up for what is right. Lucy discussed an insight that helped her become more morally discerning:

After reading *Screwtape Letters* I grew to appreciate, with an additional sense of humor, the battle between good and evil.... The thing that surprised me was the focus Lewis put on the devil keeping things out of our minds. Usually we think of the devil putting ideas into our minds or other people's minds. (personal communication, March 12, 2008)

Kate said that Tolkien helped her to have the courage to stand up against the pressure her former bosses put upon her to act unethically.

Relational Character Traits and Strengths

Students mentioned that the literary works helped them become more open minded. Hannah, in particular, reported that the writings of Lewis helped her understand Christianity better, adding, "This course helped me talk to [my mother] a lot more about Christianity and understand where she is coming from" (personal communication, August 30, 2007). Some students said that they were enthused about the interesting stories, characters, and insights and desired to share them with others—which also helped Bob and Leia further improve communication with their spouses. Others, such as Sam, found the works helpful and shared insights with others that would be helpful to them. Bob also

mentioned that the things he learned from the reading helped strengthen his relationship with his family.

Spiritual Character Traits and Strengths

Students also credited the literary works as helping them toward improvements in all the spiritual character traits and strengths that they named: (a) humility, (b) faith, (c) hope, and (d) charity. For instance, Bob and Michaela mentioned the same insight from *The Screwtape Letters* as helping them consider their own levels of humility. Helen shared that reading the adventures of the characters in *The Lord of the Rings* instilled in her a sense of humility and nobility. Nearly all the students mentioned aspects of the literary works that helped them strengthen their faith in God. As Pam stated, “I think that that book [*The Great Divorce*], well, that class in general helped me to make up my mind and commit more fully to my faith” (personal communication, October 2, 2007). Mort specifically mentioned that reading about Aragorn (a character from *The Lord of the Rings*) helped him increase hope. Victoria said that the insight she gained from *The Screwtape Letters* on unselfishness versus charity helped her understand the feelings she had had toward her cousin, when they took their trip together, and how to improve her own attitude.

Performance Character Traits or Strengths

Students perceived that the literary works helped them toward two of the performance character traits. Students stated that the quality of the literature was the main contributor to their gaining a greater appreciation of literature. The writings of Tolkien and Lewis also inspired some students to become more imaginative and creative. For example, Victoria asserted that through reading Tolkien and Lewis she gained a greater

appreciation for imagination. Bob shared, “I also wanted to improve my own writing. I found things in there, especially in Tolkien’s writings, that helped me understand better how I could approach some of [my] stories” (personal communication, October 13, 2007).

The Instructional Conversation

Dr. Walker stated, “I try to establish a genuine conversation” (personal communication, November 21, 2007). He further explained that to make the course more likely to help students develop their character, he tried to make it as much like his on-campus course, as much like a discussion, as possible, despite the distance between him and the student:

That means that you maximize the interaction instead of minimizing the interaction ... you can take advantage of the venue, that it is independent, so you can lean more on the students for their learning which means that they participate—but you’ve got to interact with them a lot. (personal communication, October 3, 2007)

The students in the course recognized and appreciated this approach. For example, Kate explained that her experience “was like a long-distance conversation” (personal communication, July 20, 2007). Conversation, or discussion, is considered an important way to foster character growth (for example, see Anello, 1997; Cheek, 1992; Crustinger & Tas, 2005; Dana & Lynch-Brown, 1991; Gartland, 2003; Glanzer, 2008; Huff & Frey, 2005; Loui, 2005; Mason, 1993; Mills, 1988; Ryan & Bohlin, 1999; Schonfeld, 2005; Smagorinsky, 2000) and is an important element of Holmberg’s (1986, 1999, 2003) and Moore’s (1997) theories of distance education.

I discuss below Dr. Walker’s instructional approach, the elements that the instructor and students believed helped make the instructional conversation effective, or

how the instructor “engag[ed] the learner[s] in activities, discussions, and decisions” (Holmberg, 1986, p. 36), and how the instructional conversation contributed to the students’ character development.

Instructional Approaches to the Course

Dr. Walker explained that he learned, to some degree, his instructional approach from the authors studied in this course: “Lewis and Tolkien have ... taught me how to teach: not by lecture but by discussion. Not by fiat but by invitation” (personal communication, November 21, 2007).

There are several aspects to Dr. Walker’s approach to the course that students appreciated and felt contributed to their character development: (a) an invitational approach, (b) a depth-over-breadth approach, and (c) a fun approach.

Invitational Approach

The instructor took an invitational approach by inviting students to take responsibility for their own learning and to think for themselves. Dr. Walker explained,

I suspect the teaching approach has held up because it’s more of a learning approach. This course tries to do what I think all courses should do, especially independent learning courses, and that’s put responsibility for learning where it can do some good: on the student. I’m convinced most of us resist being taught, particularly if we feel any coercion or condescension in the teaching; yet we thrive on learning. The moral of that story for pedagogy is: get out of the way and let the students learn. I tried to set the course up in a way that students could come to insight through their own best thinking and on the basis of their own experience, tried to make the course not a matter of memorizing what I know but of students discovering individually what is true for them. (personal communication, November 21, 2007)

This invitation for students to take responsibility for their own learning and to think for themselves is a reflection of the professor’s philosophy of education— “None of us is as smart as all of us” (personal communication, October 9, 2007)—and is consistent

with Wedemeyer's (1971, 1981) principle of providing for significant student responsibility, as well as aspects of Moore's (1997) concept of learner autonomy.

Depth-over-Breadth Approach

Dr. Walker took a depth-over-breadth approach to the content. Michaela pointed out that most of her other literature courses tried to cover several works (often 12 to 20 or more). She appreciated that in the Christian Fantasy course that the main emphasis was on *The Screwtape Letters* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Of course, they also studied two other novels (one by C. S. Lewis and one other fantasy work by another author), a short story, and a few selected essays. However, of the 19 lessons students complete in the course (there are 21 lessons, but on two occasions students select a specific option, so there is a total of 19 required lessons), two are on *The Screwtape Letters* and nine cover *The Lord of the Rings*. Thus, slightly more than half the course focuses on these two works with an emphasis on *The Lord of the Rings*, allowing the students to explore these works more in depth.

Dr. Walker encapsulated the purpose of this approach, "We're studying selected touchstones of Christian fantasy with sufficient thoroughness to enable us to read intelligently any literature of the genre, appreciating its unique perspectives and relating them to personal values" (Walker & Clark, 1982, p. 6). Dr. Walker emphasized depth rather than breadth, along with helping students develop the abilities to explore the genre on their own and to personally apply what they learn.

This deeper approach supports Dr. Walker's invitation to students to take a deeper approach to their learning, including personally applying what they learn. As the students

discussed, taking a deeper approach helped them become better learners and explore moral and character related themes more in depth.

Fun Approach

Dr. Walker tried to make the course enjoyable. He stated, “I designed the kind of course that I wanted to take” (personal communication, November 21, 2008). At the beginning of the course, Dr. Walker shared that the “real objective” of the course “is for us to have as much fun with Tolkien and Lewis as possible” (Walker & Clark, 1982, p.

6). As Dr. Walker explained,

I don't think you can learn unless you are having fun on a certain level. Unless there is some sense of verve with it, some sense of vitality, of discovery, of satisfaction, of pleasure in some sense, I personally have never learned anything without that ... the fun has to be part of the process. The purpose is the values.... The way to reach that, to a remarkable extent, is through enjoying it as much as possible. (personal communication, October 9, 2007)

Students and Dr. Walker shared a variety of things that he, as the instructor, does to make the course enjoyable:

1. He used humor, wry comments, jokes, witty remarks, etc. in the course and in his communications with students.
2. He tried to be friendly, using the students' names and “relat[ing] to them out of their own backgrounds” (personal communication, November 21, 2007).
3. He invited students to make choices and adapt the courses to meet their interests and needs.
4. He tried to make the course a meaningful learning experience for students, which he said should be the most important part:

But the bottom line enjoyability lies in the learning itself.... I think there's no real learning without joy. I tried to set up the course substantively, so that students could really teach themselves a thing or two, could even have a chance to alter fundamentally their views of the world.... It's on the level of learning that I think the

course should be most enjoyable. (personal communication, November 21, 2007)

The students expressed that they did enjoy the course. Pam declared, “I really enjoyed [the Christian Fantasy Literature course].... That was a big difference” (personal communication, October 2, 2007). Bob said the course was challenging but enjoyable. Michaela said that because she enjoyed the course so much, she put more effort into it. That effort, she explained, positively influenced all aspects of her learning, including character development.

Engagement in the Instructional Conversation

The instructor and the students mentioned several elements that influenced the nature and quality of the instructional conversation and contributed significantly to the learning experience, including their character development: (a) the instructor’s methods of preparing students for reading and analyzing the literary works, (b) the instructor’s offer of choices to the students, (c) the instructor’s questions that helped the students analyze the literature and connect with it personally, (d) the students’ written responses to the questions and assignments, and (e) the feedback that instructor provided to the students.

Preparing Students for the Readings and Assignments

The students reported that Dr. Walker used a variety of helpful methods to help prepare them for the course readings and assignments: (a) sharing interesting quotes, (b) sharing insights from the lives of the authors, (c) modeling expected outcomes, (d) providing clear instructional guidance, and (e) emphasizing moral and spiritual aspects of the literature.

Sharing interesting quotes. Some students mentioned that the interesting quotes and ideas from the literature and critics Dr. Walker shared helped their learning from the literature. He did this to introduce each lesson, to make a point, or to set up a question or series of questions. He used insights from the works they were studying, other works of literature, and occasional comments from literary critics not to tell students how to think, but to prime the pump, to activate their thinking. For example, in one lesson he wrote,

Tolkien is much criticized for the flatness of his characters. Catherine Stimpson insists that Tolkien manages in 1100 pages not a single believable woman. Edmund Wilson claims in “Ooh, Those Awful Orcs” that Sauron appears as an evil eye because Tolkien lacked the skill to give us more of him. Consider the effectiveness of Tolkien’s characters; just how good is he at giving us believable, complex personalities? How well drawn is your favorite Tolkien character? How vividly depicted your least favorite? (Walker & Clark, 1982, p. 83)

Thus, rather than stating the critics’ opinions as facts, he simply used their opinions to set the stage for asking whether students shared or disagreed with these opinions. This is one way that the instructor stimulates analysis and criticism as Moore (1997) recommended.

Sharing insights from the lives of the authors. Students also mentioned that Dr. Walker shared insights from the lives of Lewis and Tolkien at different parts of the course to help students understand the works at a deeper level. Leia explained that learning about the authors and their backgrounds definitely changed her way of thinking about the works. Marian found that learning about the authors and their lives and beliefs helped contribute to her becoming a more analytical and deeper learner. Helen said that she enjoyed learning about how Lewis had to “take himself into the very pits of hell and bring himself back out to write *Screwtape*” (personal communication, October 30, 2007). Finally, Joy mentioned that learning about Lewis’s life and how he lost his wife

influenced her selection of *A Grief Observed* as one of the books she read in the course, which turned out to be one of the significant experiences for her.

Modeling the learning process and expected outcomes. Dr. Walker also prepares students by modeling how he would go about doing some of the assignments, similar to Adam's (2007) report. As Lucy explained, he doesn't give too much away. He does not do the work for the students; rather, he shows them the process to follow. He does not do this in every lesson, but at a few points through the course. For example, for *The Screwtape Letters*, he analyzes the theme of marriage and invites students to select another theme to do a similar task. In the lesson "The Characters of Middle-Earth" (Walker & Clark, 1982, p. 82), Dr. Walker analyzes and discusses the Merry and Pippin, then asks the students to select and analyze their favorite character. This modeling helped to students, especially those who did not have as much experience analyzing literature (such as the non-English majors). Additionally, Bob said that he gained ideas for improving his teaching by looking at how Dr. Walker taught this course.

Providing clear instructional guidance. A few students felt they needed either more clarification or additional guidance at times, but most students mentioned that Dr. Walker clearly specified what he expected the students to do and what they should learn. The students generally agreed that he did not give too much of his own opinion and so did not stifle their thinking. Pam explained that, unlike other courses she has taken, she knew clearly what she was supposed to get out of the course. Bob said that he appreciated the point-by-point explanation of what students should do. He felt that the professor helped make the literature easier to understand. Helen noted, "I appreciated the chance

that I got to read *The Screwtape Letters* and have someone walk me through it” (personal communication, October 30, 2007).

Emphasizing moral and spiritual aspects of the literature. Another part of the instructional guidance was, as Kate explained, the things the instructor chose to bring out. She said things he emphasized helped her get more out of the course. She specifically recalled the lessons called “The Characters of Middle-Earth” (Walker & Clark, 1982, p. 82) and “The Moral of the Story” (Walker & Clark, 1982, p. 88) as helping her in her discovery of the characters’ morality and the entire aim of the story of *The Lord of the Rings*. Kate also liked that the course was “unabashedly Christian” (personal communication, July 20, 2007). She said that freed her to express what she saw in the literature. Pam felt that the way Dr. Walker wrote the course was “powerful and influential” (personal communication, October 2, 2007). At least part of that power and influence, Pam explained, was due to a combined spiritual and intellectual approach. For Victoria, viewing spiritual things from an intellectual perspective in the course and in the works of Lewis was strengthening. Hannah mentioned that the course was openly Christian, “I liked that this course had a spiritual spin” (personal communication, October 2, 2007). Although the course’s primary objective was not character related, the instructor encouraged students to explore character and moral issues. In this respect, the instructor acted consistently with Glanzer’s (2008) recommendation to help students explore the larger “metaphysical battle” (p. 527) between good and evil and Pike’s (2006) point about the importance of not neglecting beliefs and values in favor of focusing solely on literary skills.

Through the means discussed above, the instructor gave “advice and counsel” (Moore, 1997, p. 29) regarding the use of instructional materials and engaged the learners in the conversation (Holmberg, 1986, 2003) or discussion (Moore, 1997).

Offering Choices

“I was trying to make the course as much like a campus interactive experience as possible. A real interactive experience, not a lecture experience, but a discussion kind of experience” (personal communication, October 3, 2007), Dr. Walker explained, adding, “The course is designed for adaptability; it should be a different course for every student who takes it, a course more directly designed for that student’s particular interests” (personal communication, November 21, 2007). This idea of providing choices or making the course adaptable is similar to Wedemeyer’s (1971, 1981) idea of allowing for individual adaptation of the instruction and Holmberg’s (1986) recommendation of “engaging the learner in ... decisions” (p. 36). Additionally, providing choices is consistent with Moore’s (1997) concept of learner autonomy. Providing choices is also one way that Dr. Walker helps students make the course relevant to their lives, consistent with several theorists in both literature as character education (for example, Glanzer, 2008; Noddings, 1994; Smagorinsky, 2000) and distance education (Holmberg, 1986, 2003).

Hannah commented on the choices Dr. Walker offered in the course and conjectured, “I think it engages people more when they have a choice in what they are learning.” Eve explained, “I felt like I was given significantly more freedom to be able to pick and choose the stuff that I felt like was going to enrich my life the best” (personal communication, November 6, 2007). Dr. Walker offered several choices to the students:

1. He offered some choice in answering questions. Each lesson lists ungraded questions that guide students' reading. Although these questions usually directly prepared students for the assignments, students could use these questions as prompts to think about, ponder, and reflect on what they were studying.
2. He offered student choices through many of the open-ended questions. They chose from characters to analyze, themes to explore, insights they gained from the reading, and even the criteria they used to evaluate good fiction.
3. He provided students an annotated list of books in two of the lessons, He encouraged the students to select a book to read and analyze that would be meaningful or of interest to them.
4. He gave students the option to select one of two lessons at two different points in the course,. In the unit on C. S. Lewis, students chose between a lesson on prayer and a lesson on the purpose of pain. In the final unit, students chose between a lesson on additional works of Christian fantasy or a different work of contemporary fantasy.
5. He allowed students to also alter the course more substantially to fit their needs and interests:

I urge students individually to go beyond even that [the other choices he offers students] in redesigning the course to their particular needs. Those choices, and the practical learning results of those choices, aim to make the course more enjoyable for each student. (personal communication, November 21, 2007)

This kind of adaptation occurred less frequently than the other types of choices he offered, perhaps because not every student needed that level of adaptation, and the course materials did not specifically mention this option.

Asking Questions

Similar to the recommendations of various researchers (Adams, 2007; Dana & Lynch-Brown, 1991; Kim 2001; Lemming, 2000; Mills, 1988; Ryan & Bohlin, 1999; Scharf, 1978) Dr. Walker extensively used questions as a method of instruction in the course. Michaela described the course simply, saying that Dr. Walker shared some of his

thoughts on the literature then invited the students to share their ideas. Kate said that she enjoyed the instructor's use of questions:

I appreciated that he asked a lot of questions instead of spending a lot of time telling me what he thought. He asked very thought-provoking questions that helped me look deeper into those stories on my own power. (personal communication, July 20, 2007)

Although she admitted that she did not think every question was great.

The questions that Dr. Walker asks, Eve suggested, helped make up for the lack of classroom discussion typical in a face-to-face course (although she still missed hearing the others' perspectives). Participants shared three primary characteristics of the questions made them effective in contributing to students learning, including character development: The questions were (a) open-ended, (b) thought-provoking, and (c) personal applicable.

Open-ended questions. Students felt that Dr. Walker asked open-ended questions, as Adams (2007), Harding and Snyder (1991), Kim (2001), and Scharf (1978) recommended. Although the instructor used essay questions, the most common type of questions were multiple choice. However, they were not really standard multiple-choice questions:

I use multiple choice [questions] ... but the kind that I use are five-option multiple choice where any number can be correct. So they can all be wrong or all be right or any number in between. That gives students a chance not to just decide which is the most correct answer but to think about how right each answer is and to invest in that personally. Then you leave room for responses to each of those aspects of choice. So what you really get, although it is not as intimidating, is a little series of lessons. (Dr. Walker, personal communication, October 3, 2007)

Students stated that these questions gave them an opportunity to defend their opinions and to explore the literature in more depth.

Thought-provoking questions. One of the most effective ways that Dr. Walker invited students to take part in the conversation and to take a deeper approach to their learning was through thought-provoking questions, as some researchers recommend (for example, see Adams, 2007; Dana & Lynch-Brown, 1991; Glanzer, 2008, Kim, 2001; Ryan & Bohlin, 1999). Dr. Walker explained the types of questions that really helped invite students to engage in the learning process:

Socratic questions don't work too well for me—too artificial and condescending, leading the student by the nose to what is already known. So I try to ask real questions, questions I don't know the answer to, ideally questions nobody knows the answer to. I'm persuaded a really good question is worth at least a dozen lectures and as many as two-dozen sermons. The best questions hold up well—my most productive questions are ones that have been around a long time, questions of the “And who is my neighbor?” type. Questions that are answered in the back of the book are hardly worth asking. But real questions, questions like “does God like me?” are invaluable. (personal communication, November 21, 2007)

The students shared this view. Joy described how taking the course affected her reading of the literature:

So without the class work I don't know that I would have gotten quite as much out of [the literature] because the questions that we had to answer that I had to go back and look at brought more attention to those things and made you think about them more than just reading the story. You read the story and follow along with the storyline and it is very gripping the whole story that you wouldn't put as much thought into the fight against good and evil and the obvious strength of friendship and love that they had for each other without the questions bringing that to the forefront. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Michaela shared a similar thought when she discussed how the questions the instructor posed helped her get deeper in to the literature: “You had to defend your answers so you had to look for facts or evidence for what you were stating. It helped me look closely at the literature” (personal communication, July 19, 2008).

Personally applicable questions. Another key element was that some questions asked students to personally apply what they learned. Dr. Walker noted, “I go out of my

way to encourage them to respond honestly and personally” and “encourage answers that grow out of personal experience” (personal communication, November 21, 2007).

Although some researchers recommend taking the perspective of the characters (for example see Dana & Lynch-Brown, 1991; Kazemek, 1986; Mason, 1993), Dr. Walker asked more questions that helped students apply what they are learning to themselves and their own lives, similar to the approach that Glanzer (2008), Kim (2001), Mills (1988), and Smagorinsky (2000) recommend in the character education literature. This use of questions is another way that Dr. Walker was consistent with Holmberg’s (1986, 2003) recommendation to make the learning relevant to the learner. Some students shared that the personal application aspect of the questions was an important part of the course and deepened their learning experience. For example, Hannah explained how the real-life application was a strength of the course and one of the things that distinguished it from other courses she had taken:

The questions weren’t just about the literature but asking about you and you as a reader how does it apply to you in the real world, I think it was more the ability to make that bridge. I felt like a lot of the other literature courses I had taken, they were great, I learned a lot, but it was more about the content and the literature. It wasn’t necessarily about how I felt about reading the literature, how it relates to the real world and today’s society ... it was probably another ingredient that made the Fantasy class a little bit stronger. (personal communication, August 30, 2007)

Pam shared her feelings about the essays in the course this way: “I felt they were more like personal essays rather than just a typical structured paper” (personal communication, October 2, 2007). Thus, the course not only focused on helping students understand the literature, but bringing out how they feel about it and how it relates to them and life in the real world.

From these students' perceptions, Dr. Walker used questions in a way that appears to be consistent with Moore's (1997) recommendation to "stimulate analysis and criticism" (p. 29).

Encouraging Student Writing

Dr. Walker shared, "I set up questions that invite a lot of writing to try to establish a genuine conversation" (personal communication, November 21, 2008). This use of writing is consistent with some of the recommendations of Hirsh (1996), Kim (2001), Kirschenbaum (1995), Nelson (2002), Smagorinsky (2000), the programs Crustinger and Tas (2005) and Lemming (2000) described, as well as Moore's (1997) recommendation to "arrange for student creation of knowledge" (p. 29). Michaela explained that the course provided several opportunities to write short essays and brief responses to questions. She said that even the multiple-choice questions were really short essay questions. Smaller, more frequent writing assignments were more meaningful for her than just a couple of big papers, such as she had to write in many of her other literature courses. Sam echoed the same sentiment when he said that the multiple-choice questions did not simply have a right or wrong response, but required a significant amount of writing. They also required a significant amount of time because of all the reading and writing he had to do to respond: "That is not to say that it was busy work, I enjoyed it, but it was time consuming" (personal communication, October 10, 2007). Victoria recalled that the essays helped her personalize what she learned; they helped her put what she was learning into her own words. "Articulating that and getting more opportunities to [write]," she noted, helped to "have it more firmly in my mind what I was actually learning" (personal communication, November 1, 2007).

Providing Feedback

After the students made choices and responded to the questions the professor posed to them, it was Dr. Walker's turn to respond. Although Dr. Walker declared that essays can be "hell on wheels to grade" because of the volume of work involved, he felt that it was important to "respond in a personal way and in an individual way to the students" (personal communication, October 3, 2007). He said he used to feel that he spent "way too much" time grading, "until I realized the grading response was my only consistent chance to interact with the students—except for the course itself, my only opportunity to teach" (personal communication, November 21, 2007). He estimated that he averages an hour a day grading assignments for this course.

Many students were pleased just to receive feedback. Even though the feedback often did not consist of lengthy comments, Michaela commented that she appreciated it: "You get personalized feedback that you normally wouldn't get in a classroom" (personal communication, October 17, 2007). Both Helen and Sam also expressed appreciation for the feedback they received from Dr. Walker. As Sam explained,

It is always nice when teachers don't just give you a certain number of points and don't just say whether it is right or wrong but they actively involve you even after you have received your materials back. That was something that I appreciated as a student. (personal communication, October 10, 2007)

There are at least three aspects that students and Dr. Walker mentioned that made the feedback effective. The feedback was (a) timely, or prompt; (b) positive and encouraging; and (c) respectful, helpful, and fair.

Prompt feedback. Dr. Walker tried to provide quick and timely feedback. He shared, "I grade [student assignments] as soon after arrival as my campus teaching and meeting schedule will allow, and always have them out by the end of the day" (personal

communication, November 21, 2007). Dr. Walker explained the importance of responding in a timely manner to the students' work:

An underestimated means of personalizing the course is to get things back quickly to students. I've invested a great deal of time over the years in rapid response—except for rare times traveling away from BYU, I've never in twenty years returned a student lesson later than the day I received it. Like returning calls quickly, that says to the students clearer than verbal reassurance that I'm interested in them, will take time for them, think they matter. I keep the tone of that responding personal, sounding as if I cared so they'll realize I do. [A student] emailed this week: "Thanks for grading and returning all my assignments so promptly! It really encourages me." (personal communication, November 21, 2007)

Victoria expressed a similar view, explaining that the timely and encouraging feedback Dr. Walker provided helped her keep up her momentum in the course. Marian stated, "I liked [the course] because I got my papers ... back in a timely manner and there were good comments that helped me learn more" (personal communication, October 6, 2007). Holmberg (2003) and Loui (2005) considered timely turnaround of assignments with feedback as important for student learning and Moore (1997) stated that feedback is one of the ways instructors can support learner motivation.

Positive and encouraging feedback. Many students appreciated Dr. Walker's positive, encouraging feedback. Joy shared some examples: "He wrote, 'I love how openly and honestly you write.' Just little comments like that off to the side, 'Well analyzed, [Joy]'" (personal communication, October 17, 2007). Victoria shared, "He offered very encouraging feedback ... warm feedback, it was very nice, very encouraging." She further explained that she felt the Dr. Walker was living the experience with her:

I don't know how he managed to do that but I did always feel that way. Just making comments almost like conversational comments throughout about what I was writing, supportive of my points and stuff. It was always pleasurable to get

assignments because of that positive encouragement and I was excited to get them. (personal communication, November 1, 2007)

Upon hearing that others felt this way about their experience, Michaela exclaimed, “And all this time I just thought it was my brilliant thoughts and ideas that he [Dr. Walker] couldn’t wait to hear and learn from” (personal communication, June 21, 2008).

Fair and helpful feedback. Students felt that Dr. Walker respected their thoughts and opinions, and this primarily manifested through the feedback he provided. For example, Lucy explained that Dr. Walker was fair in his comments. She felt that even when she missed something he told her why. If she didn’t understand things, he took the time to explain it to her. Leia also expressed that even when her answer was wrong, he explained why but also pointed out what was right about her answer and did not make her feel that she was totally wrong.

Contributions of the Instructional Conversation to Character Development

Narvaez et al. (1998) and Narvaez (2002) claimed that reading literature alone is not sufficient to bring about moral or character development. Although the students’ and instructor’s comments may not be entirely consistent with this assessment (that reading literary works alone is insufficient), they do reveal that the instructional discussion surrounding the literature helped with aspects of students’ character development. Participants explained that the conversation that developed around the literature further helped their character development in several areas: (a) moral character traits or strengths; (b) relational character traits and strengths; (c) spiritual character traits; and (d) performance character traits and strengths, including becoming more self-disciplined, becoming more analytical and deeper learners, deepening their appreciation for literature, and becoming more self-confident.

Moral and Spiritual Character Traits and Strengths

The students shared a variety of ways that the instructional conversation enhanced their understanding of the literary works, which in turn helped them with other aspects of character development, such as moral and spiritual character traits and strengths. Kate explained that the concepts and themes the instructor chose to bring out or to emphasize helped her get more out of the course. She specifically mentioned that the instructor helped to bring out the morality of the characters and the theme of good versus evil in *The Lord of the Rings*. Sam shared, “It was incredibly spiritually strengthening in the fact that this is Christian literature with Christian overtones explored from a Christian point of view, and from that mindset that we are focusing on this” (personal communication, October 10, 2007). Yet, as Hannah explained the instructor did not direct students toward specific themes:

I think that the course was just so creatively set up in that you get so involved in all these different books and in all these different characters and in analyzing the different moments in these characters lives that you kind of come to conclusions on your own. (personal communication, August 30, 2007)

She added, “The questions weren’t just about the literature but asking about you as a reader—how does it apply to you in the real world. I think it was more the ability to make that bridge [that helped]” (personal communication, August 30, 2007). Victoria explained that the writing assignments in the course further enhanced the exploration of the literature, “articulating that and getting more opportunities to do that [write] and have it more firmly in your mind of what you are actually learning” (personal communication, October 11, 2007). Pam observed that she could chose to read *The Great Divorce*, and reading that book helped her increase her faith and realize the need to reprioritize some things in her life. The character Faramir inspired Michaela because of his humility and

his courage in standing up for what was right. She stated that having the opportunity to choose to analyze that character helped her explore those strengths and helped contribute to her growth in these areas.

Relational Character Traits and Strengths

Leia explained that working on the course and discussing the questions in the lessons with her husband helped her and her husband improve their communication with each other. In Joy's case, the insights the instructor provided about the lives of the authors and being able to choose to read *A Grief Observed* contributed to her ability to share what she learned with her mother. Students pointed out that the insights about the authors' lives that the instructor shared, the questions the instructor asked them inviting them to examine their own views, and even the instructor's comments in his feedback enhanced their learning of the aspects of the literature that in turn prompted some of the students see new perspectives and to become more open-minded. Dr. Walker mentioned this was one of the intents of some of his questioning.

Performance Character Traits and Strengths

Students shared that the instructional conversation contributed to their improvements in performance character traits and strengths. For example, Victoria recalled that Dr. Walker's encouraging and timely feedback helped her to maintain momentum in the course, which contributed to her becoming more self-directed. Marian found it helpful to learn about the authors and their lives and beliefs, which helped contribute to her becoming a more analytical and deeper learner. Michaela felt that studying fewer works in more depth helped contribute to her becoming a more analytical and deeper learner. Part of the reason that students saw the applicability of the literature

to their lives came in part from answering the questions. Victoria expressed it well when she stated, “I loved the twist that was taken on the subject of fantasy and why it was beneficial to reality” (personal communication, November 1, 2007). As Sam further explained,

If you weren't thinking about it while you were reading it, you were thinking about it as you were crafting your responses to it because these weren't simple yes-no responses, it wasn't multiple choice, it wasn't true-false. These were wordy responses that were required and they asked you to examine the ways that this affected you. (personal communication, October 10, 2007)

Students not only attributed gaining a deeper appreciation of literature to the works they studied, but also to what they learned through the instructor's insights and having to analyze the literature. Additionally, Eve shared that being allowed to choose what she wanted to read and to choose the topics that were important to her to write about contributed to her desire to go back to school and work toward a master's degree.

Some students mentioned that the instructor's feedback helped them gain self-confidence. For example, Leia remarked that Dr. Walker's positive remarks on her work helped her feel more confident in herself and in the work she did in the course. Joy mentioned that having to write so much, combined with Dr. Walker's feedback, helped her gain more confidence as a writer. Dr. Walker observed that when students have successful experiences working with the literature, they feel increased confidence. All these examples are consistent with Bandura (1997), who explained that mastery experiences and social persuasion are sources of self-efficacy.

The Student-instructor Relationship

The instructor and students shared ways that the relationship that develops from the instructional conversation about the literature affects the students' learning experience

and consequently their character development. These perceptions are consistent with Holmberg's (2003) theory that "Central to learning and teaching in distance education are personal relations between the parties concerned" (p. 81).

In this section, I discuss (a) ways the relationship was built, (b) what the qualities of the relationship were, and (c) how the relationship affected the students' character development.

Ways the Instructor Built the Relationship

Engaging in the instructional conversation about the literature was one of the primary ways that the instructor and students built their relationship. As Dr. Walker explained, "[It is] crucial to me to interact with the students' ideas rather than succumbing to the temptation to treat them like computer terminals" (personal communication, November 21, 2007). Dr. Walker used several strategies to build a relationship with the students through the instructional conversation: (a) the approach he takes with the course, including helping the student enjoy the course; (b) sharing his insights with students; (c) providing students with choices that permit them some control over the direction of the conversation; (d) teaching through questions rather than telling the students what they should think; and (e) providing timely, encouraging, and respectful feedback.

However there were additional techniques the professor used to help build a relationship with his students, such as: (a) writing the course in a personal and engaging style; (b) personalizing his contacts with students; (c) trying to be helpful and show concern for the students, and (d) being sincere and honest with the students and encouraging them to be as well.

Writing the Course in a Personal and Engaging Style

Students shared that the instructor wrote the course materials in a personally engaging style, he shared personal stories (such as how he discovered fantasy when he was previously a staunch realist, his analysis of his own prayers after he had read Lewis's writings on prayer, discussions he and his wife have had with their children, etc.). As Pam explained,

For a piece of paper, I felt like it was a very personal piece of paper that I could like hear him talking to me. I felt a certain closeness to the professor that in other classes I definitely have not. (personal communication, October 2, 2007)

Michaela expressed a similar sentiment when she stated, "I haven't had a lot of other [Independent Study] courses, but you got to know his personality through the course, his views on fantasy" (personal communication, July 19, 2007).

Another element of Dr. Walker's personal style of writing showed in sharing his enthusiasm for the subject. His enthusiasm was contagious, as Pam explained: "I really liked his attitude toward the course. I think that influenced my attitude toward the course too" (personal communication, October 2, 2007). Michaela also noted that the instructor showed through the way he wrote the lessons and how he responded to the assignments that he enjoyed teaching the course (which she felt was a difficult task in a distance course). Lucy explained that the professor shared his own enthusiasm for the readings, without giving too much away, to help get students excited about the selections:

He would give you his point of view in the sense that he would kind of lead you along to show you how much he likes Tolkien and how much he enjoys reading Tolkien, but he never really let me know how he saw certain things but he let me know how much he enjoyed reading it and how much he loved reading it that it made me excited to read it... I would be excited to read it simply because I felt like it was something he was excited to read. (personal communication, October 3, 2007)

As Adams (2007) found, “When teachers open up, students do too” (p. 30), and participants perceived this influence in their course experience. The openness of the instructor seemed to create “an atmosphere which encouraged free exchange of ideas” (Cheek, 1992, p. 116). Writing in a personally engaging style was also consistent with Holmberg’s (1986, 1999, 2003) recommendation of a conversational style in teaching and learning conversations and seems to support the assertion that it can engage students in an exchange of ideas and involve them emotionally.

Connecting on a Personal Level

Dr. Walker also tried to connect on a more personal level in other ways:

I ... wish them Merry Christmas and Happy Easter or whatever the season warrants, and chat in the margins with them about personal aspects of their responses...

I refer to the students by name, encourage answers that grow out of personal experience, try to remember (lately I’ve had to take notes) student idiosyncrasies well enough to be able to relate to them out of their own backgrounds, particularly when I could find shared backgrounds with them....

I call students frequently, especially when they seem frustrated or nervous. Trying to apply the old Primary principle that the most important teaching in a class may go on outside the class, I’ve attended students’ weddings, visited them in prison, contacted them in any way that has presented itself. (personal communication, November 21, 2007)

Again these efforts seem to help encourage openness, as Cheek (1992) suggested, and show the instructor’s efforts to know the students, as Rice (2002) recommended.

Being Helpful and Showing Concern

Some students also mentioned Dr. Walker’s helpfulness and concern for their success. For example, Lucy felt that the assignment to create your own language was challenging, so she wrote to tell Dr. Walker about her difficulties. He offered encouragement: “You can do it, just hang in there.” She also declared, “I never felt like

my questions went unanswered” (personal communication, October 2, 2007). Kate was impressed that he went out of his way to help her by giving her feedback on the book she was writing and sending her helpful information even after she completed the course.

However, even before that occurred, Kate said she knew he was interested in her success:

Even when we were just corresponding [by mail] he gave me evidence that he was interested in my success. I wasn’t just someone one who had paid for the course. I was a person to him and he wanted me to succeed. That was reinforced when we began to have other correspondence [by phone, etc.]. (personal communication, July 20, 2007)

The students’ perceptions are consistent with Schonfeld’s (2005) view that when the students know that the instructor cares about their learning, they are more likely to stay motivated and on task. Despite Schonfeld’s opinion that building a caring relationship at a distance was difficult, the students’ reports suggest that it is possible. However, Mort reported having a hard time getting the help he needed. He tried to contact Dr. Walker on a couple of occasions, but due to administrative difficulties those communications did not get directly to Dr. Walker, so Mort gave up. Nevertheless, Mort did report that Dr. Walker answered questions he asked on the assignments he submitted.

Being Sincere and Honest

An important aspect of Dr. Walker’s efforts (such as how he communicates with students, his efforts to show concern about students’ success, and so forth) is sincerity and honesty. Dr. Walker declared, “I don’t think you can fake that [expressions of friendship and concern] so as a technique it would probably be lousy” (personal communication, October 9, 2007). He also noted, “I go out of my way to encourage [the students] to respond honestly and personally, and try to respond in kind” (personal communication, November 21, 2007). He further elaborated,

I think those [responses to the students work] have to be personal, immediate, and spontaneous. I think they have to be human and real, I think they have to be as real as they are in class. If they start to feel canned, mechanistic, or prepared before the student had the thought then I think they are not as effective. (personal communication, October 9, 2007)

The students noted that sincerity and honesty in the relationship. For example, Sam commented, “I know that he is reading [his assignments] and responding honestly. Because of this, at least in my case, the instructor encourages honest thought ... in my responses” (personal communication, March 1, 2008). And Victoria shared, “It was almost like he was experiencing what I was experiencing for the first time.... I always felt that he was living the moment with me as I made the discoveries” (personal communication, November 1, 2007).

Qualities of the Relationship

The results of these efforts are relationships with the students that were built upon (a) trust and respect and (b) friendship between the students and Dr. Walker.

Trust and Respect

Students reported that because of the way Dr. Walker interacted with them, they built mutual trust and respect with the instructor. Dr. Walker expressed his trust for the students: “I start with high expectations, trusting that the students will maximize their opportunities to learn, and give them every chance to do that that I can” (personal communication, November 21, 2007).

Dr. Walker observed that students do not necessarily begin the course willing to open up and fully share their own thoughts. He noted that this trust develops over time:

When they are comfortable enough to trust the relationship enough to really say what they are thinking I am pretty sure it is better. They care more about the substance; they care more about what they are saying, they are more invested in a personal way. I think we put students in a difficult situation a lot of times in

guessing what we are thinking and if they realize that “he really does want to hear what I am thinking” then it stimulates their thinking, at least the expression of it. (personal communication, October 9, 2007)

One of the ways that Dr. Walker manifested this trust and respect was through sincerely seeking to learn the thoughts and opinions of his students.

Many of the students shared that they felt free to express themselves and that it was more important that they supported their arguments well than what their particular opinion was. This respect produced the students’ positive response to the instructor’s invitational approach. For example, Pam explained that Dr. Walker did not give too much of his opinion. She did not feel like she had to think the way he did about things, and felt her opinions were valuable even if they differed from the professor’s. Victoria expressed that she felt “safe” to say what she really thought. She knew he wouldn’t attack her, and that was liberating. She appreciated being able to say what she felt without worrying about whether the professor would agree.

Lucy explained that Dr. Walker respected the ideas and perspectives of the students but required them to analyze the works and defend their points of view well:

If I defended myself well and showed him how strongly I felt about it, it was right ... that was all that mattered. It didn’t have to be his point of view. That’s what I liked about it. I’ve had other professors where it had to be their point of view and that was how you got the grade. But with Dr. Walker you had to just simply write well and demonstrate well your point of view and be able to understand the concept that he was discussing and if you could do that, then that was what he was looking for. (personal communication, October 3, 2008)

Students stated that it was the quality of their thinking and their ability to write that mattered to Dr. Walker.

Hannah explained that Dr. Walker did not just reiterate critics’ opinions and theories and ask students to think the same way. He did not try to force an opinion, or

even a religious perspective, even though a religiously sponsored university offered the course. She never felt she was being told what to be or to think in a certain way. Joy explained, “Both classes I took [from Dr. Walker] were straightforward Christian without any leaning toward a specific religious affiliation. I appreciated that very much” (personal communication, October 13, 2007).

Adams (2007) and Loui (2005) mentioned the importance of having high expectations, which was one way that Dr. Walker approached the course and showed respect for students. The trust and respect aspects of the relationship are consistent with what Harding and Snyder (1991) said about being a moral advocate and respecting students as moral agents rather than trying to directly teach specific character traits. In addition, Hambrecht (2004) explained that it was important for instructors to have a respectful relationship with students.

Friendship

Dr. Walker explained that his purpose in doing what he did in the course was largely so he can change the nature of the relationship: “So we can move from a hierarchical relationship to a personal one” (personal communication, November 21, 2007) that allows “sharing the learning instead of a hierarchal top down learning” (personal communication, October 9, 2007). He did this through friendship: “Mostly it’s just a matter of wanting to be friends with these great folks” (personal communication, November 21, 2007).

Students reciprocated the friendship he offered them. As Michaela explained, “You almost felt like you were corresponding with a friend on a subject you both had interest in” (personal communication, July 19, 2007). Joy said, “I really like Dr. Walker

and I really felt somewhat of a bond with him just from comments that he would make on my papers because I really never had any [other] correspondence with him” (personal communication, October 13, 2007). And as Leia shared, “To me it was a lot of bouncing ideas off of each other” (Personal October 13, 2007).

Although not every student used the word “friend” to describe their relationship with Dr. Walker, the comments from these and other students were reminiscent of Lewis’s (1991) description of friendship, “Friendship arises out of mere Companionship when two or more of the companions discover that they have in common some insight or interest or even taste” (p. 65). Through the conversation, enhanced by the qualities of the relationship, Dr. Walker and the students came to share common interests in fantasy literature, including personal insights surrounding the literature. The friendship was also evident from what some students felt was missing from the course. For example, Joy expressed, “I really would have liked to have heard his [Dr. Walker’s] opinion and I really wasn’t able to get that” (personal communication, October 13, 2007).

Contributions of the Student-instructor Relationship to Character Development

Participants perceived that the relationship positively influenced other aspects of the course, which in turn supported aspects of character development, including performance, moral character, and spiritual character traits and strengths. Dr. Walker commented on the effects of the relationship on student learning:

Unless you attribute that to our own teaching skills that made them twice as good at the end than at the first, you would have to say that something about the relationship itself was contributing to the learning process. (personal communication, October 9, 2007)

The students similarly expressed that the relationship helped them deepen their learning and gave them confidence in their ability to analyze and personally apply what they

learned. Thus the relationship seemed to support their improvements as deeper, more analytical learners as well as supporting the exploration of moral themes and spiritual character traits and strengths which students related to the literature and the instructional conversation.

Some students reported that their relationship with the instructor most directly affected their self-confidence. Joy explained that the encouraging comments that Dr. Walker made on her work increased her confidence as a writer. Kate said that her interactions with Dr. Walker about the book she was writing helped her grow in her confidence as a writer and increased her desire to continue working on the story. Additionally, both Michaela and Leia mentioned that Dr. Walker's encouragement helped them increase their confidence as learners.

The Independent Study Context

The context of distance education, specifically independent study, provided the opportunity for students to take the course when and where they wanted. Although the students perceived some drawbacks and challenges in this format of distance education, it made taking the course possible for most of the students in the study. It also helped most of them take responsibility for and take charge of their own learning and to take a deeper approach to their learning.

In this section, I describe the participants' perceptions of (a) the independent study nature of the course, (b) how the context contributed to character development, and (c) how the context influenced other aspects of the course.

Nature of Independent Study Context

Dr. Walker and students mentioned two primary aspects of the independent study experience as beneficial to their learning and character development, (a) the flexibility of time and location and (b) the independent nature of the learning experience.

Flexible Timeframe and Location

Students could begin the course at any time and had one year to complete it. Students could extend that timeframe under certain circumstances, which at least one student did. An additional aspect of the course's flexibility is that assignments were not due at a specific time. Students could work on the course from wherever location they preferred, as Wedemeyer (1971, 1981) advocated. Students viewed this flexibility as helpful to their learning, though it required them to be self-disciplined.

Independence of the Student Learning Experience

Independent study courses, as the name implies, are designed for the student to work independently. Students did not have any contact with other students taking the course. They felt that this lack of contact with other students had both disadvantages and advantages. The primary disadvantage students perceived was not being able to hear other students' opinions about the literature. Conversely, some of the advantages about working independent of other students were that students felt more free to pursue lines of thinking that they found interesting, and some students felt that they were not unduly influenced by others' opinions—it gave them the opportunity to think for themselves.

Another aspect of the independent nature of the course was that students did not typically have direct, synchronous contact with the instructor. The principal means of interaction between the students and the instructor were the course materials, the

students' written responses to assignments, and the instructor's feedback on the assignments. Most of the students would have liked to have had more real-time access to the instructor to ask questions and hear more of his insights. Despite the drawbacks of isolation from other students and the instructor, however, the students commented that the independent nature of the course also put students into the position where to succeed they needed to take responsibility for their own learning to succeed. As Lucy commented, "I really need[ed] to be reliant upon myself to go out and find those answers for myself" (personal communication October 3, 2007).

Contributions of the Independent Study Context to Character Development

Besides making it possible to take the course, and have the experiences, and providing some convenience in time and place, students reported other ways that the independent study context influenced their character development: (a) relational character traits and strengths and (b) performance character traits and strengths.

Relational Character Traits and Strengths

The course provided a context that afforded opportunities to improve relationships with others and develop in other relational character traits and strengths. Due to the location flexibility and the independent nature of the course, many of the participants turned to their usual social networks of family, friends, and colleagues at work to discuss what they learned. One way the flexible location was advantageous for Lucy was the opportunity it gave her to influence her children:

I like the fact that sometimes when I'm studying, my kids get to come up and see me studying. So they see education is important. It is important to me, it is important to my husband.... I think it really reinforces to our children that college is important. (personal communication, October 3, 2007)

Most of the students discussed what they were learning and experiencing with at least some of the people in their social networks. In nearly all cases, the students claimed that these discussions were not only helpful to their learning but also helpful in improving their relationships with others.

Performance Character Traits and Strengths

Students reported that the context of the course helped them develop performance character traits and strengths such as becoming more self-disciplined and self-directed learners, more analytical and deeper learners, as well as more self-confident individuals.

The flexible timeframe and independent nature of the course required students to discipline themselves and to stay focused and motivated. Victoria said she knew that taking a course like this would require her to be more self-motivated. Leia said that staying motivated at times was a challenge. Pam said that staying motivated and focused was one of her challenges with taking independent study courses. Some of the students reported that completing an independent study course was a challenge. Bob expressed it well when he said, “We are not taking the Ring to Mordor, but for some, finishing an independent study course can be as difficult” (personal communication, May 19, 2008). Yet having to stay on top of their studies and stay motivated helped students become more self-disciplined and self-directed in their learning, which was also one of the ways they reported that their character had developed as a part of taking the course. As Hannah explained, “It challenges people to be self-motivated. You have to set your own schedule. If you don’t get things done it falls back on one person. So I think it just encourages that self-initiative for character building” (personal communication, August 30, 2007).

Another important aspect of time flexibility in an independent study (or asynchronous) course is that students perceived that it permitted a deeper approach to learning which helped them become more analytical and deeper learners:

If this had been a normal course, I doubt that I could have finished it (well, I guess I could have, but I wouldn't have enjoyed it as much or been able to think as deeply about the material's personal applications). It was its flexibility that allowed for convenience as well as deeper personal insights. (Sam, personal communication, March 1, 2008)

Helen expressed a similar sentiment feeling when she explained how the flexible time differed from her experience in the face-to-face courses:

If you are in a classroom situation and you have an assignment that you have to meet like reading a certain number of pages before class meets again in two days. If things come up and you have tried and tried to get those 30 pages read but you don't, then you get to class and you don't know what is going on. In an IS class, if I have two pages and I read them really well and then see what they are saying and it takes me several days just to tear those two pages apart, I have had time to digest it. Learning that way you don't feel rushed ... *you have time to understand what is being taught* [italics added]. (personal communication, October 30, 2007)

Michaela explained that the course flexibility let her take her time and explore some ideas and topics more in-depth. Kate observed that there were times when she wanted to spend more time exploring things more in-depth than in other classes: "For example, if I wanted to spend a couple of weeks on a topic, I could" (personal communication, July 20, 2007). She also explained that the reverse was true; if there were topics she was not as excited about, she could work through them more quickly and move on.

Marian said that her success in the course helped her gain self-confidence (or self-efficacy) as a learner in independent study courses, and in her ability to complete BYU Independent Study or other distance education courses. As Bandura (1997) explained, having mastery experiences was one of the most powerful sources of self-efficacy.

Influences of the Independent Study Context on other Aspects of the Course

The students reported that the nature of the course had an influence on the instructional conversation and the student-teacher relationship. Although participants did not necessarily make a direct connection between the independent study context and other aspects of character development, it remains possible that the context of the course, because it influenced elements of the course that students did perceive as contributing to character development, played both a supportive and detrimental role to character development.

The Instructional Conversation

According to students, the independent study context influenced the instructional conversation in a variety of ways, compared to a face-to-face course. The students worked independently without other students, which they viewed as both beneficial and challenging. Also, direct interaction with the instructor was limited primarily to written correspondence (reading the course materials, submitting written assignments, and receiving written feedback from the instructor).

The Student-Instructor Relationship

Although there was no face-to-face or other type of synchronous interaction with the instructor, except in a few rare cases, the independent nature of the course made the experience, as Michaela shared, “more personal and makes it more of a one-on-one experience” (Michaela October 17, 2007). The course consisted mainly of the readings and the conversation with the instructor. Although the course experience lacked the immediacy of face-to-face (or synchronous) interaction and there were no other participants in the discussion, for some of the students (such as Michaela and Kate), the

course was in some respects more of a personal and direct discussion with the professor than what they would typically experience in the classroom.

The Student

Another theme emerged, suggesting that the students perceived an important role in their own character development. For example, Michaela shared, “I think we are all affected by good literature. It helps us all want to be better, to be noble people like the characters we admire, but I cannot say definitely that I am better because of Tolkien” (personal communication, July 19, 2007). She added that she needed to make changes to develop her character. Other aspects of the course were influential, however, they did not necessarily cause character development on their own.

In this section, I discuss student’s perceptions of the two primary ways they played a role in their own character development and how the students perceived that these two aspects influenced their character development.

Factors Influencing Character Development

Based on the experiences and perceptions of the students in the course, there were two student-related facets that affected their character development relative to the course: (a) their readiness to learn and (b) their agency or the choices they made and the initiative and effort they put into the course.

Readiness (Predispositions, Attitudes, Skills, Previous Experiences, and Motivations)

As with any course, students came into the experience with varying levels of readiness for learning and character development. The general level of readiness includes things such as predispositions or attitudes, skills, previous experiences, and motivations. All these aspects of readiness influenced the students’ character development to some

degree. What students shared reflected Narvaez's (2002) thoughts on reading as an “active” process in which readers interpret the text based on their own personal backgrounds and experiences and do not necessarily “get” the message that the author intended. What the students shared seems to extend beyond just the interpretation of the literature to include other aspects of the course experience.

Some students were resistant to or less inclined toward certain aspects of character development that other students experienced in the course. For example, Eve stated that she was not much of a people person and that this course did not do much to change. On the other hand, others felt that they grew in their personal relationships as with Leia, who was relatively shy but stated that the course helped her gain confidence to overcome her reluctance to talk with people. Sam and other students said the course did not help them improve as much as learners because they had previously gained those skills in other courses. The students came to the course at various levels in their ability to analyze literature and write, including several non-English majors whose lack of previous experience meant they needed to grow in this area. Similarly, many of the students had taken several independent study courses previously and as a result had developed more self-discipline through these experiences, but they still felt that this course helped them to further develop in this area.

Several students had various personal experiences and circumstances in their lives coming into the course or occurring during their time in the course that affected their character development. Leia was in the early stages of her marriage so she felt that working with her husband on the course benefited their relationship. Kate had previously worked on a fantasy novel. This led to her seeking feedback from Dr. Walker, and

through this experience she gained more confidence as a writer. Victoria drew upon her experience with her cousin when she wrote about the difference between unselfishness and charity. Pam's experience of almost losing her husband to cancer affected how she read, interpreted, and personally applied *The Great Divorce*.

Some students took the course with specific goals or motives that influenced their experiences. For example, Bob and Marian both took the course, at least in part, to improve their ability to help their students, which both felt they accomplished. Other students took the course because they felt it would be an easy or enjoyable way to finish off a final requirement to complete a degree. For example, Mort admitted, "I am probably a cheater in some ways because really my goal was ... to pass [the course] so I could get my degree" (personal communication, October 13, 2007). He noted that this motive reduced his chances of getting all he might have from the course.

Agency (Choice, Initiative, and Effort)

Although the students noted that their readiness and other characteristics were important, ultimately how they used their opportunities to make various choices to apply what they were learning, take initiative, and put forth effort in their learning was one of the most important elements in their character development.

The students' agency was manifested in decisions they made during the course, such as what options they chose in the course and their acceptance of Dr. Walker's invitation to take a responsibility for their learning and a deeper approach to their learning; as Dr. Walker said, "maximize their opportunities to learn" (personal communication, November 21, 1997). The course provided especially rich experiences in this way because of the number of choices that Dr. Walker provided to students. As he

said, “You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink. You can lead a child to learning, but you can't make him think” (personal communication, May 28, 2008). So although the instructor invited the students to make meaningful choices, to take responsibility for their own learning, and to take a deeper learning approach (and the context of the course allows for it as well), the students had to make choices about how to respond to options, the invitations, and the context of the course. As the *BYU Aims* (BYU, n.d.) suggested, “character is constructed by small decisions” (Character Building section, ¶ 5).

Bob commented that the flexibility of the course structure allowed for a deep approach, but that taking advantage of that opportunity required commitment and self-discipline on his part. He even stated that he would use the time between submitting his assignments and receiving feedback from Dr. Walker to reflect on what he was learning. Sam shared how his efforts and his approach to learning helped him:

It really benefited me because I put effort into the course, I could see others not putting as much in but not pulling as much out of it. So I think that it is a course that works better if you are invested in the material and trying to learn. (personal communication, October 10, 2007)

Sam had taken the course to hasten graduation. Yet because he responded to the invitation to take a deeper approach to his learning, he felt he reaped the benefits. Several students, such as Michaela and Kate, talked about using the time flexibility of the course to spend more time exploring topics of interest. This option existed for everyone, but students had to actually do something to truly take advantage of that opportunity.

As students reflected on what character development they felt they experienced, they often dwelt on the books they read, the questions they answered, the essays they wrote, and how the material related to their lives and personal experience. In several

cases, the themes students choose to write about (for example, Mort choosing to analyze Aragorn and Joy choosing to discuss God's love) and the personal experiences that students chose to draw upon (such as Victoria's trip with her cousin, Pam and her husband's bout with cancer, and Joy deciding to read a book to help her with her father's passing) that enhanced the students' character development experience. The students made these choices, and although they could not always choose their experiences, they could have chosen less meaningful themes and experiences and still have passed the course while missing the same kind of experience with character development.

Dr. Walker extended invitations in the course, "Argue with some intelligent interested person—yourself, if you can find no one as intelligent and interested—the proposition: 'Fantasy is useless'" (Walker & Clark, 1982, p. 10). Many students mentioned that they went beyond these few invitations to discuss the works with family members, friends, work associates, and others. For example, Helen discussed the literature with a neighbor who was a college professor, as well as sharing some insights with her son. Bob discussed things he learned with his wife as well as colleagues and students at work. Other students (for example, Joy, Leia, Michaela, Marian, Mort, Pam, and Sam) also reported taking the initiative to discuss or share what they learned with other people. Similarly, Anello (1997) reported that an important part of the instructional strategy in his study was to encourage students to serve or teach someone in their own family or community, and thus enhance the social aspect of their learning experience. The difference was that students engaged in this type of activity on their own.

In some cases, student initiative manifested itself in seeking out people to discuss things with and additional sources of information about the authors or the works they

were studying. Bob, for example, watched lectures and programs about Lewis and Tolkien, as well as discussing things with his wife. Helen viewed the movie *Shadowlands*, which is a biographical work on Lewis. Other students consulted Web resources. Others viewed the *Lord of the Rings* movies and the bonus materials on the *Lord of the Rings* DVDs related to Tolkien. These additional resources provided insights and other perspectives, filling in for the interaction the students missed from not having classmates with whom to work. They also helped deepen the learning experience for many of the students.

Students also made choices about what to do about what they learned in the course and how they allowed that to affect who they were (whether they allowed what they learned to affect what was important to them, how they dealt with other people, decisions they made, etc.) As Sam explained,

The overtones and the methods of teaching that were used for this course—it drives you to want to be a better person. The character building comes in if you apply what you are learning to yourself and actually make a change. (personal communication, October 10, 2007)

Sam elaborated,

Well the idea of serving God and your fellow man in the way that you are asked and do what God asks of you is definitely a lesson of the course. But the choice to act is up to the individual. (personal communication, October 10, 2007)

Michaela stated a similar thought, “You could read a book and choose not to let the story move you or change your way of thinking, at least to a degree” (personal communication, July 19, 2007). She later added, “I can analyze the works all day, but if I don’t personalize it or apply it then it won’t affect my character at all. It is when you apply it that it can affect your character” (personal communication, February 9, 2008).

There are many examples of students applying what they learned from the course. Bob and Kate both faced challenging situations at work and both said that what they learned in the course helped them have the resolve to stand up against pressure. Although the course was not the only influence on their decisions, they both stated that the course helped them. Victoria continued to work on charity. Marian, who was a school librarian, took the course so she could help her students, and explained that she continued to share what she learned with her students to help them make good reading choices. Others, such as Bob, Marian, and Hannah, shared what they learned with their students as well. Lucy and Mort, among many others, have shared things they have read with their children.

Some still had opportunities to decide to make what they learned in the course more a part of their lives. For example, Lucy had a list of fantasy books she would like to read but she was saving that for after the completion of her degree. Eve and Joy, among others, were all inspired in different ways to further their education but had not yet done so. Mort said that his study of Aragorn has given him reason to hope for his future; however, he had not made any definitive plans to further his education or change his career. These choices still lie before them; the influence of what they learned becomes more profound as they choose to do something about it.

Contributions of the Students to Character Development

Students shared their perceptions of how what they brought to the course and the choices they made influenced basically every aspect of character development they reported.

Moral Character Traits and Strengths

Pam said that one of the influences in her development of moral discernment was choosing to read *The Great Divorce* and it became more significant because she had just dealt with almost losing her husband to cancer, which affected how she read, interpreted, and personally applied what she was reading. Michaela said that choosing to analyze the character of Faramir helped her gain more of a desire to do what is right.

Relational Character Traits and Strengths

As Leia explained, when she took the course, she was in the early stages of her marriage. Therefore, she felt that working with her husband on the course benefited their relationship. Hannah's experience related to leaving behind the teachings of her parents but still looking for personal answers to the questions of life had an effect on her course experience; she went from a less favorable view of Christianity to a more favorable and understanding view that helped improve her relationship with her mother. Other examples include Bob and Marian, who both took the course, at least in part, to improve their ability to help their students, which both felt they accomplished. However, there were also cases in which student attitudes or predispositions were adverse to certain aspects of character development.

Students also shared experiences in which choices they made positively affected their relationships with others. For example, Pam had her husband, mother, and others read some of the books. Joy shared *A Grief Observed* with her mother. Leia and her husband decided to work on the course together, although her husband was not formally enrolled. Many took the initiative to share what they have learned with others, such as Marian, who explained that she continued to share what she learned with her students to

help them make good reading choices. Bob and Hannah also shared what they learned with their students. Lucy and Mort, among others, shared books they have read and ideas they learned in the course with their children.

Spiritual Character Traits and Strengths

Some students explained that they made choices that were part of their development of spiritual character traits and strengths. For example, Mort chose to study Aragorn because he admired the character and in some ways Aragorn reminded him of himself, which helped him gain hope. Victoria drew upon her experience with her cousin when she wrote about the difference between unselfishness and charity and chose to pursue that theme more in depth.

Performance Character Traits and Strengths

For some students, their predispositions, attitudes, and motives helped them continue on in a positive trajectory. For example, some students had taken independent study courses previously and as a result developed more self-discipline, but still felt that this course helped them develop further in this area. Some continued their educations—for example, Leia has returned to school, in part because of her experience in the course. There also seems to be a connection between students accepting the invitation to take a deeper, more personal approach to their learning and their becoming more analytical and deeper learners, such as in the cases of Sam, Michaela, Kate, and so forth. Kate explained that she had previously worked on a fantasy novel. This led to seeking feedback from Dr. Walker, and through this experience she gained more confidence as a writer.

Summary

In summary, the participants perceived that several elements of the course experience contributed to their character development. First, students felt that the course content (the literature) contributed to their character development. Participants suggested that this was due to the literature's interesting stories, inspiring characters, and insights and themes, which they found applicable to their lives.

Second, the students perceived that the instructional conversation also contributed to their character development. The instructional conversation, based on the instructor's invitational, depth-over-breadth, and fun approach to the course, included several elements. The instructor helped prepare students for reading and analyzing the literature. The instructor offered the students choices so they could be more engaged and make their learning more personally relevant. The instructor asked questions that helped students analyze the literature and connect with it personally. The instructor also offered students multiple opportunities to write. In response to the students' written assignments, the instructor provided timely, encouraging, and fair and helpful feedback to the students.

Third, participants perceived that the student-instructor relationship also contributed to their character development. Participants explained that the relationship between the student and instructor developed through engagement in the instructional conversation and through the instructor writing in a personal and engaging style, personalizing his contacts with students, being helpful and showing concern for the students, and being sincere and honest with the students and encouraging students to be so as well.

Fourth, participants perceived that the distance or independent study context of the course contributed to character development. In particular, the nature of the course allowed for flexibility in time and location—making the course an accessible, although more independent, learning experience.

Finally, the students perceived a role in their own character development. They expressed that their own readiness to learn and their agency or their choices, initiative, and effort influenced most aspects of the character development related to the course.

Students also perceived that these elements (the content, the instructional conversation, the relationship with the instructor, the independent study context, and the students themselves) influenced each other. They felt the instructional conversation helped deepen their learning from the literature and contributed to the building of the student-instructor relationship. Conversely, they felt that their relationship with the instructor enhanced the instructional conversation. The students felt the independent study context influenced the nature of the instructional conversation and the student-instructor relationship. Finally, the literature and the other elements of the course all influenced the students and their character development.

CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I briefly summarize the connection between the findings of the study and the larger context of the literature I reviewed on character education and distance education. I then discuss some limitations of the study. Next, I provide recommendations for teachers, instructional designers, and students for making learning experiences in distance education (and possibly in other contexts) more likely to help students develop their character (as well as enhance their overall learning experience). I also discuss possible directions for future research that build upon this study. Finally, I close with some conclusions I have drawn from the study and provide encouragement to all educators to consider the moral implications of their practice as well as ways they can make the courses they design and teach more conducive not only to learning but to character development.

Summary of Findings and Implications

The themes that emerged from this case substantiate and in some cases add to many of the themes that emerged from the literature review both in the kinds of character development that participants reported and the elements of the course experience that contributed to that character development. In the methodology chapter, I discussed the importance of understanding the relationships among parts and whole to more fully understand a phenomenon, which Heidegger and others described as the hermeneutic circle (Koch, 1995, 1996; Ricoeur, 1981). Toward closing this circle, I summarize how, according to the participants, the parts (or themes) interrelate within the context of the whole experience.

Themes Related to Character Development

Below, I summarize the types of character development that the participants reported from their experiences in the course in relationship to definitions of character in the literature. I also discuss themes in the literature that did not emerge in the study and reveal themes that emerged from the study that do not appear in the character development literature.

Found in Both this Study and Existing Frameworks

Participants perceived a variety of types of character development through their experiences in the course. Students' perceived character development fell into four groups of character traits and strengths: (a) moral, (b) relational, (c) spiritual, and (d) performance.

Moral character traits and strengths. Students perceived that they developed moral character traits and strengths. Students reported an increase in moral desires through their experience in that they perceived that they increased their desires to do what is right and be better people. Student also discussed that their experience in the course helped them increase their moral discernment, which the participants described as a greater understanding of nuances in moral situations and the ability to distinguish between right and wrong actions or influences in their lives. They also perceived an increase in moral courage, which they described as an enhanced willingness to stand up against pressure to go against their moral beliefs or to stand up for others. These themes are consistent with elements of several definitions of character, which are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Comparison of Moral Character Themes Identified by Participants with Frameworks of Character Found in the Character Education Literature

Themes from the study	Comparable themes from frameworks of character
Moral desire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Moral motivation</i> (Bebeau et al., 1999; Rest, 1986) • “Car[ing] deeply about doing the right thing; mak[ing] the moral self central to identity” (Lickona & Davidson, 2005, p. 20) • “Respectful and responsible moral agent committed to consistent moral action” (Davidson et al., 2008, p. 380; also see Lickona & Davidson, 2005) • Berkowitz (2002) also includes moral values and moral identity as a part of his “moral anatomy” (p. 48) • <i>Loving the good</i> (Ryan and Bohlin, 1999; Lickona, 1999) • <i>Integrity</i> (BYU, n.d.)
Moral discernment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Moral sensitivity</i> (Bebeau et al., 1999; Rest, 1986) • <i>Awareness</i> (Lickona & Davidson, 2005) • <i>Ethical thinker</i> (Davidson et al., 2008; Lickona & Davidson, 2005) • <i>Wisdom</i> (Lickona, 2003) • <i>Moral alertness and moral self-knowledge</i> (Lickona, 1999) • <i>Knowing the good</i> (Ryan & Bohlin, 1999) • Not specifically addressed (BYU, n.d.)
Moral courage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Moral character</i> (Bebeau et al.,1999; Rest, 1986) • <i>Attitude and action</i> Lickona and Davidson (2005) • <i>Doing the good</i> (Ryan and Bohlin, 1999) • “Psychological characteristics that affect that person’s ability and inclination to function morally” (Berkowitz, 2002) • <i>Conscience, moral will, self-control, courage, and moral habit</i> (Lickona, 1999) • <i>Fortitude</i> (Lickona, 2003) • <i>Courage, bravery, persistence, integrity, and vitality</i> (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) • <i>Strong moral character and courage</i> (BYU, n.d.)

Relational character traits and strengths. Some participants reported generally improving their relationships with others. Additionally, participants perceived development of three specific traits or strengths that were beneficial to their relationships. First, participants described becoming more open-minded and understanding of other perspectives. Second, they discussed how they shared what they were learning with others. Third, some participants described improving communication with others. These themes are consistent with elements of several definitions of character, which are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3

Comparison of Relational Character Themes Identified by Participants with Frameworks of Character Found in the Character Education Literature

Themes from the study	Comparable themes from definitions of character
Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relational aspect of character (Davidson et al., 2008)
Open-mindedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open-mindedness (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) • Perspective taking and empathy (Lickona, 1999) • Respect for others' beliefs and perspectives (Davidson et al., 2008) • Compassion and treating all other people with dignity and fairness (BYU, n.d.)
The sharing of learning with others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concern for others (Ryan & Bohlin, 1999) • Caring (Davidson et al., 2008) • Kindness (Lickona, 2003; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) • Altruism (Berkowitz, 2002) • Brotherly love and service (BYU, n.d.)
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication skills (Davidson et al., 2008; Lickona, 1999; Lickona & Davidson, 2005; Ryan & Bohlin, 1999) • Effective communication as part of the intellectually enlarging aim (BYU, n.d.)

Spiritual character traits and strengths. Students reported improving or being motivated to work on the following spiritual character traits and strengths, which seems consistent with Davidson et al.'s (2008) developmental outcome of becoming a “spiritual person engaged in crafting a life of noble purpose” (p. 381): (a) humility, (b) faith, (c) hope, and (d) charity. These themes are consistent with elements of some definitions of character, which are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4

Comparison of Spiritual Character Themes Identified by the Participants with Frameworks of Character Found in the Character Education Literature

Themes from the study	Comparable themes from definitions of character
Humility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humility (Lickona, 1999, 2003; Peterson & Seligman, 2004)
Faith	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faith (BYU, n.d.; Davidson et al., 2008; Lickona & Davidson, 2005; Peterson & Seligman, 2004)
Hope	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hope (Lickona, 2003; Peterson & Seligman, 2004)
Charity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humanity and kindness (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) • Love (Lickona, 2003; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) • Brotherly love (BYU, n.d.)

Performance character traits and strengths. Some participants perceived that they developed their character in ways consistent with Davidson's et al.'s (2008; also see Lickona & Davidson, 2005) view of performance character, including the character outcome of helping students become lifelong learners and critical thinkers. Additionally, elements of what participants described in this area are consistent with Peterson and Seligman's (2004) virtues of wisdom and knowledge. Ryan and Bohlin (1999) also defined character consisting of the “sum of our *intellectual* [italics added] and moral

habits” (p. 5). Students reported that they improved in performance related character traits and strengths in five ways: (a) becoming more self-disciplined and self-directed learners, (b) becoming more analytical and deeper learners, (c) becoming more imaginative and creative, (d) gaining a deeper appreciation for literature, (e) desiring to continue their education, and (f) increasing self-confidence. These themes are consistent with elements of several definitions of character, which are summarized in Table 5.

Found in Existing Frameworks but Not Emerging from this Study

Although students’ character development touched upon elements of all of the conceptions of character cited, students did not address specific elements. For example, students did not explicitly discuss any changes in moral reasoning (Berkowitz, 2002; Lickona, 1999), “thoughtful decision making” (Lickona, 1999, p. 600), or moral judgment (Bebeau, Rest, & Narvaez, 1999; Berkowitz, 2002; Rest, 1986; Ryan & Bohlin, 1999). A few students did report reprioritizing their lives, consistent with Ryan and Bohlin’s (1999) statement “learn to choose well among competing and attractive options in life” (p. 46), which they stated requires good judgment.

Other components of character that students did not explicitly name as outcomes from the course include (a) self-respect (Lickona, 1999); (b) moral habit (Lickona, 1999) or integrity (Davidson et al., 2008; Lickona, 2003; Peterson & Seligman, 2004), including academic integrity, intellectual integrity, and the spiritual integrity of personal righteousness, and the wholehearted acceptance of commitments (BYU, n.d.), bravery, persistence, vitality (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), “diligence, perseverance, a strong work ethic, a positive attitude, [and] ingenuity” (Davidson et al., 2008, p. 373), although

Table 5

Comparison of Performance Character Themes Identified by the Participants with Frameworks of Character Found in the Character Education Literature

Themes from the study	Comparable themes from definitions of character
Self-discipline and self-directedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Self-disciplined</i> (Davidson et al., 2008; Lickona & Davidson, 2005) • <i>Self-discipline, persistence, self-regulation</i> (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) • <i>Autonomous and self-directed learners</i> (Moore, 1997; Wedemeyer, 1971, 1981)
Analytical and deep learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Performance character, lifelong learner, and critical thinker</i> (Davidson et al., 2008; Lickona & Davidson, 2005) • <i>Wisdom and knowledge</i> (Peterson and Seligman, 2004) • <i>Intellectual habits</i> (Ryan & Bohlin, 1999) • <i>Deep learning</i> (Entwistle, 2000; McCune & Entwistle, 2000)
Imagination and creativity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Creativity</i> (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) • Related to “potential for excellence” (Davidson et al., 2008, p. 373; Lickona & Davidson, 2005)
Appreciation of literature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Appreciation of beauty and excellence</i> (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) • <i>Loving the good</i> (Ryan & Bohlin, 1999)
Motivation to continue education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Love of learning</i> (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) • <i>Lifelong learners</i> (Davidson et al., 2008; Lickona & Davidson, 2005)
Self-confidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Healthy self-confidence, positive attitude</i> (Davidson et al., 2008; Lickona & Davidson, 2005) • <i>Self-efficacy</i> (Bandura, 1997; Solomon et al., 2001)

some or all of these might be implied in the theme of moral courage; (c) gratitude (Lickona, 2003; Peterson & Seligman, 2004); (d) fairness (Davidson et al., 2008), honesty (Berkowitz, 2002; BYU, n.d.; Davidson et al., 2008) and responsibility (Berkowitz, 2002); (e) curiosity (Peterson & Seligman, 2004); (f) social intelligence (Davidson et al., 2008; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) including cooperation (Davidson et al., 2008; Lickona 1999); (g) justice (Davidson et al., 2008; Peterson & Seligman, 2004), which includes the strengths of citizenship, fairness, and leadership (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), (h) temperance (BYU, n.d.; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) including elements such as forgiveness and mercy, prudence, and self-regulation (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), except in the context of the theme of self-directed learning; (i) humor (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) although the instructor used humor in the course; (j) virtue (BYU, n.d.); (k) sportsmanship (BYU, n.d.); (l) thrift, or careful use of university funds (BYU, n.d.). Additionally, students' comments were consistent with only portions of Berkowitz's (2002) "moral anatomy" in that they did not address all dimensions.

Additional inquiry is necessary to determine if students achieved any of these other outcomes. However, it seems unreasonable to assume that one course would or could help students achieve all aspects of character. Also, additional study would be needed to determine if the methods and aspects of the Christian Fantasy Literature course would be helpful in achieving improvements in these other aspects of character.

Found in this Study but Not Addressed in Existing Frameworks

The purpose of this study was neither to define character nor to add to the existing definitions of character. Rather, it aimed simply to discover how students perceived their own character development in light of the institutional mission statement and definitions

in the literature and to provide context on how this character development occurred in a distance course. Yet elements such as self-confidence, faith, charity, and sharing did not appear as prominently in the literature. This study provides possible insights on the relational aspect of moral character and the learning aspect of performance character (Davidson et al., 2008).

Themes Related to Course Elements Contributing to Character Development

Below, I summarize the themes related to the course experience that participants reported as contributing to character development and relate the emerging themes to theories of distance education and the applicable character education literature. Also I share themes in the literature that did not emerge in the study. Finally, I discuss possible contributions of this study to the literature.

Found in Both this Study and Existing Literature

Participants mentioned a variety of types of course elements that contributed to or influenced their perceived character development in the course. These elements were related to five aspects of the course: (a) the literature (or content), (b) the instructional conversation, (c) the student-instructor relationship, (d) the independent study context, and (e) the student's readiness and agency.

The literary works (course content). The students and instructors viewed the literary selections they read as an important part of character development, due to its (a) engaging stories, (b) admirable characters who faced challenges and served as role models, (c) moral and spiritual insights and themes in the selections, and (d) the applicability of what they were learning to their own lives. These aspects of the literature are consistent with themes from the character and moral education literature related to the

attributes of literature that contribute to character development (for example, see Cain, 2005; Egan, 1978; Harding & Snyder, 1991; Kazemek, 1986; Lemming, 2000; MacIntyre, 2007; Mills, 1988; Wynne & Ryan, 1993; Yeazell & Cole, 1986). The connections between themes from the study relative to the literature (content) with authors who have discussed similar themes in the three principal threads of literature reviewed are summarized in Table 6.

Table 6

Literary Work (Course Content) Related Themes and Studies and Theories that Address Similar Themes

Theme from the study	Character education studies	Distance education theories	Character outcomes in a distance education context studies
Stories	Cain, 2005; Lemming, 2000; MacIntyre, 2007; Tappan and Brown, 1991; Vitz, 1990	None	Silverdale and Katz, 2003
Characters	Egan, 1978; Harding and Snyder, 1991; Kazemek, 1986; Mills, 1988; Wynne and Ryan, 1993; Yeazell and Cole, 1986	None	None
Insights and themes	Cheek, 1992; Nelson, 2002	None	None
Relevance to life	Mills, 1988	None	None

The instructional conversation. Participants described the course as a conversation between the instructor and the students. Conversation or discussion is an important component in the character education literature (see Cheek, 1992; Dana & Lynch-Brown, 1991; Glanzer, 2008; Mills, 1988; Noddings, 1994; Ryan and Bohlin, 1999; Smagorinsky, 2000). It is also key in distance education theories (see Holmberg, 1986, 1999, 2003; Moore, 1997), although the distance education literature does not relate it to character outcomes. Conversation is also a theme in the limited literature on character and moral education at a distance (Anello, 1997; Crustinger & Tas, 2005; Gartland, 2003; Huff & Frey, 2005; Loui, 2005; Mason, 1993; Schonfeld, 2005).

One aspect of the conversation that students felt was helpful to their learning and character development was Dr. Walker's instructional approach. The instructor's invitational approach to teaching included inviting students to take responsibility for their own learning, consistent with Wedemeyer's (1971, 1981) theory of independent study and Moore's, (1997) concept of learner autonomy). The instructor also invited students to take a deeper approach to their learning, including emphasizing depth-over-breadth in the content. Finally, the instructor encouraged students to have fun and enjoy their learning experience.

Students mentioned five additional elements of the instructional conversation that made it helpful in their learning and character development: (a) the preparation that the instructor provide students for the reading and other assignments, (b) the choices the instructor provided the students, (c) the questions that the instructor asked students, (d) the opportunities to write the instructor provided students, (e) the feedback the instructor provided students on their assignments.

The instructor helped prepare students to read and analyze the literature through sharing interesting quotes and ideas from the selected works and critics' responses, as well as insights from the lives of the authors, occasionally modeling how he would do the assignment, which is similar to the case Adam (2007) described and consistent with Holmberg's (1986, 2003) theory; having clear expectations for students; and choosing to emphasize some morally relevant content, which is consistent with the recommendations of Pike (2006) and Glanzer (2008). In these ways, the instructor helped "give advice and counsel" (Moore, 1997, p. 29) regarding the use of instructional material and "stimulate[d] analysis and criticism" (p. 29) as Moore recommended, and helped engage the learners in the conversation (Holmberg, 1986, 2003) or discussion (Moore, 1997).

The instructor offered choices to the students at various points and in various aspects of the course (such as selecting what aspects to analyze in the literature and some of the selections they read), which increased student engagement and developed their character in personally meaningful ways. This approach is consistent with Wedemeyer's (1971, 1981), Holmberg's (1986), and Moore's (1997) theories about involving the learner in their own learning decisions and helping them become more self-directed. Glanzer (2008), Smagorinsky (2000), Noddings (1994), as well as Holmberg (1986, 2003), recommended making instruction personally relevant to students. One of the ways the instructor did this was by providing choices to students.

The instructor asked the students thought-provoking questions to help them analyze the literature and connect with it personally, similar to the recommendations of various researchers (Adams, 2007; Dana & Lynch-Brown, 1991; D. F. Johnson & Goldman, 1987; Harding & Snyder, 1991; Kim, 2001; Lemming, 2000; Mills, 1988;

Ryan & Bohlin, 1999; Scharf, 1978). This is yet another way the he is consistent with Moore's (1997) recommendation to stimulate higher order thinking. Dr. Walker's approach also emphasized asking the students to personally apply what they learned, similar to the recommendations of Mills (1988), Smagorinsky (2000), Kim (2001), Glanzer (2008) and Holmberg's (1986, 2003) rather than taking the perspective of the characters (Dana & Lynch-Brown, 1991; Kazemek, 1986; Mason, 1993).

The students had frequent opportunities to respond in writing to the questions and assignments, which they felt helped them clarify their thinking and deepen their learning, cementing "it more firmly in [their] mind" (Victoria, personal communication, November 1, 2007). This is consistent with some of the recommendations of Kirschenbaum (1995), Hirsh (1996), Kim (2001), Lemming (2000), Nelson (2002), Smagorinsky (2000), as well as Moore's (1997) recommendation to "arrange for student creation of knowledge" (p. 29).

The instructor provided timely, encouraging, respectful and helpful feedback to students. The timeliness of the feedback, according to Holmberg (2003) and Loui (2005), is important for student learning. Moore (1997) stated that timely feedback may support learner motivation. The literature did not discuss the other aspects of the feedback that the participants mentioned nor its contribution to students becoming improved learners and more self-confident, nor the influence of feedback on other character outcomes.

Many of these themes are found in the literature I reviewed. The connections between themes from the study relative to the instructional conversation with authors who have discussed similar themes in the three principal threads of literature reviewed are summarized in Table 7.

Table 7

Instructional Conversation Related Themes and Studies and Theories that Address Similar Themes

Theme from the study	Character education studies	Distance education theories	Character outcomes in a distance education context studies
Instructional approach	None	Moore, 1997; Wedemeyer, 1971, 1981	None
Preparation for assignments	Adam, 2007; Glanzer, 2008; Pike, 2006	Holmberg, 1986, 2003; Moore, 1997	None
Choices	Glanzer, 2008; Noddings, 1994; Smagorinsky, 2000	Holmberg, 1986, 2003; Moore, 1997; Wedemeyer, 1971, 1981	None
Questions	Adams, 2007; Dana & Lynch-Brown, 1991; Glanzer, 2008; Harding and Snyder, 1991; D. F. Johnson and Goldman, 1987; Kazemek, 1986; Kim, 2001; Lemming, 2000; Mason, 1993; Mills, 1988; Ryan and Bohlin, 1999; Scharf, 1978; Smagorinsky, 2000	Moore, 1997; Holmberg, 1986, 2003	None
Opportunities to write	Kirschenbaum, 1995; Hirsh, 1996; Kim, 2001; Lemming, 2000; Nelson, 2002; Smagorinsky, 2000	Moore, 1997	None
Feedback		Holmberg, 2003; Moore, 1997	Loui, 2005

The student-instructor relationship. Students expressed that a relationship with the instructor developed in part through the instructional conversation (i.e., through the approach to the course, including making the course enjoyable, sharing insights, providing choices, teaching through questions, and providing good feedback in a timely manner). Additionally, Dr. Walker further built the relationship with the students through (a) writing the course in a personal and engaging style, (b) personalizing his contacts with students, (c) being helpful and showing concern for the students, and (d) being sincere and honest with the students and encouraging students to be so as well. These efforts, the students reported, resulted in a relationship of trust, respect, and friendship.

The way Dr. Walker interacted with students appeared to be in harmony with the findings and recommendations of several theorists regarding the creation of an atmosphere of high expectations (Adams, 2007; Loui, 2005), respect (Hambrecht, 2004; Harding & Snyder, 1991), and the open exchange of ideas (Adams, 2007; Cheek, 1992; Kazemek, 1986; Scharf, 1978); where the students' voice is valued, rather than only the teacher's opinion (Scharf, 1978); and in which the instructor knows and cares for the student (Rice, 2002; Schonfeld, 2005). Holmberg (2003) called the relationship between the learner and the instructor "central to learning and teaching in distance education" (p. 81). Moore (1997) said that participants in the instructional dialogue should be "respectful and active listeners" (p. 24). The findings seem to indicate that the students' relationship with the instructor had a positive influence on character-related outcomes as well as the enhancing learning activities, as Lemming's (2000) findings suggested. However, more exploration into the effects of the student-instructor relationship, its relationship to learning and character development, and how to effectively build that

relationship is still necessary. The connections between themes from the study relative to the student-instructor relationship with authors who have discussed similar themes in the three principal threads of literature reviewed are summarized in Table 8.

Table 8

Student-instructor Relationship Related Themes and Studies and Theories that Address Similar Themes

Theme from study	Character education studies	Distance education theories	Character outcomes in a distance education context studies
Personal and engaging style	Adams, 2007; Cheek, 1992	Holmberg, 1986, 1999, 2003	None
Personalized contacts	Cheek, 1992; Rice, 2002	None	None
Helpfulness and concern	Schonfeld, 2005	None	None
Sincerity and honesty	None	None	None
Trust and respect	Adams, 2007; Cheek, 1992; Harding and Snyder, 1991; Kazemek, 1986; Rice, 2002; Schonfeld, 2005; Scharf, 1978	Moore, 1997	Hambrecht, 2004; Loui, 2005
Friendship	None	None	None

The independent study context. Students commented that two aspects of the course had an influence on their character development and on other aspects of the course: (a) the flexibility of time and location, including the asynchronous nature of the

instruction and learning, and (b) the independent nature of the learning experience. The students' description of the course context is similar to Wedemeyer's (1971, 1981) discussions of independent study. Wedemeyer and Moore (1987) both described helping students become more autonomous learners, which is consistent with aspects of Davidson's et al. (2008) and Lickona and Davidson's (2005) performance character. From the participants' experiences, it appears that although there were some challenges to learning more independently, some of these challenges were catalysts for aspects of their positive character development and influenced other aspects of the course experience, such as the nature of the relationship and how the instructional conversation played out. The connections between themes from the study relative to the independent study context with authors who have discussed similar themes in the three principal threads of literature reviewed are summarized in Table 9.

Table 9

Independent Study Context Related Themes and Studies and Theories that Address Similar Themes

Theme from study	Character education studies	Distance education theories	Character outcomes in a distance education context studies
Course flexibility	None	Wedemeyer, 1971, 1981	None
Independent learning experience	None	Wedemeyer, 1971, 1981	None

The student. The students also discussed at least two influences on their own character development related to the course. The first influence students described was

their readiness to learn, including predispositions or attitudes, skills, previous experiences, and motivations. This theme is similar to Narvaez et al.'s (1998) and Narvaez's (2002) discussion of how individuals get different messages from reading literature because of what they bring to the reading. However, according to student comments, their readiness affected more than their reading experiences in the course. The other way students influenced their own character development was through their agency, including the choices they made, the initiative they took, and the effort they put into the course. In addition to the choices the instructor provided for students, students also made choices about the effort they would put into the course and about sharing what they were learning with others. This is similar to what Anello (1997) suggested (only students did this of their own initiative). Students also sought out additional resources. Second, they took responsibility for what they did with what they learned after the course was over. All this affected the students' experience with character development.

This is consistent with the *BYU Aims* (BYU, n.d.), which state, "character is constructed by small decisions" (Character Building section, ¶ 5), and seems complementary to the concept of learner autonomy (Moore, 1997) and learner responsibility (Wedemeyer, 1971, 1981). As Davies and Osguthorpe (2003) suggested, student desire or intention may be one of the most significant contributors to student learning. Similarly, what learners desire and decide to do with what they learn may be significant to their character development as well, though more research is necessary in this area. The connections between themes from the study relative to the students' readiness and agency with authors who have discussed similar themes in the three principal threads of literature reviewed are summarized in Table 10.

Table 10

Student Related Themes and Studies and Theories that Address Similar Themes

Theme from study	Character education studies	Distance education theories and studies	Character outcomes in a distance education context studies
Readiness	Narvaez, 2002 Narvaez et al., 1998	None	None
Agency	BYU, n.d.	Moore, 1997; Wedemeyer, 1971, 1981; Davies & Osguthorpe, 2003	None

Found in Existing Literature but Not Emerging from this Study

The majority of the themes in the literature on (a) methods of instruction using literary works for character education; (b) distance education theories applicable to the independent study context; and (c) moral, ethical, and character education in a distance education context; also emerged in the present study. However, there were a few themes that did not appear to be relevant. First, there was no mention of the discussions of moral dilemmas (Gartland, 2003; Harding & Snyder, 1991). This may account for why the students did not mention moral judgment as an outcome, but that is only speculative. Some theorists recommended that students take the perspective of a literary character (Dana & Lynch-Brown, 1991; Kazemek, 1986; Mason, 1993), but there is no evidence of this instructional approach in the Christian Fantasy Literature course.

Ryan and Bohlin (1999) discussed the difference between views, values, and virtues approaches to discussion. No clear distinction was made as to which of these approaches, if any, the instructor used. Additionally, Holmberg (2003) and Moore (1997)

hypothesized that conversation or dialogue is more important to less-experienced learners and becomes less important for more experienced, self-directed learners. There was no explicit evidence of this, except perhaps in Bob's case. Kim (2001) and Tappan and Brown (1998) suggested encouraging students to write their own stories. Some students, inspired by the course, did write their own stories, but Dr. Walker did not use this as an instructional strategy.

There was little discussion of direct instruction of ethical principles, which were elements of the Crustinger and Tas (2005) and Schonfeld (2005) studies. Primarily the lesson on "Self-Assessment Lewis Style" (Walker & Clark, 1982, p. 44) approaches direct instruction of character-related outcomes, yet this lesson is the only instance in which the instructor specifically and directly mentioned it. One of the most common approaches in the studies of distance ethic courses was the use of case studies (Crustinger & Tas, 2005; Gartland 2003; Huff & Frey, 2005; Smith, 2005; Keefer, 2005). There is no evidence of this approach, although narrative or literature may perhaps be considered a form of case study. Finally, Moore (1998) discussed student-to-student interactions, which did not apply in the present study. However, several students tried to make up for the lack of interaction with other students through discussions with family and friends and accessing additional references on the Web.

Elaborated upon in this Study but Only Minimally Addressed in the Literature

There are a few ways that this study builds upon and potentially contributes to the existing literature. First, although some researchers suggest that character development in distance education is more difficult (Chachra, 2005; Huff & Frey, 2005), these findings suggest that character development is not only possible in distance education, but also

amenable to it. This study suggests that aspects of the distance education nature of the course seemed to enhance the character-development aims of, according to participants. For example, the independent and 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 the students typically experienced in other courses—facilitating students' deeper approach to learning and exploration of moral themes in the content of the course.

The theme of conversation or dialogue appeared in the various literatures reviewed. The present study offers an expansion upon the idea of instruction as conversation and provides potential ideas and guidance on how to conduct the instructional conversation.

Additionally, the literature does not directly discuss the importance of encouraging students to take a deeper approach to learning and its connection to character development, though further investigation in this area is needed. The findings of this study also suggest that the asynchronous nature of the course, the depth-over-breadth approach, the use of open-ended questions, and the student-instructor relationship contributed to this deeper learning approach.

The distance education literature contained the concept of learner autonomy (Moore, 1997) or allowing for individuals to adapt instruction or determine goals and activities (Holmberg, 1986; Wedemeyer, 1971, 1981), which was an important theme in this study. However, this concept did not explicitly appear in the character education literature reviewed. The instructor offered choices to students on a variety of levels,

which, according to participants, helped to keep them engaged and to make the content of the course more personally relevant.

A few theorists (Holmberg, 2003; Loui, 2005; Moore, 1997) mentioned the importance of timely feedback, which this study seems to confirm. However, the participants also described the importance of encouraging, helpful, and respectful feedback. The instructor also discussed the importance of personalizing the feedback. Feedback had some influence on some character outcomes such as self-confidence, it enhanced the instructional conversation, and it contributed to the building of the student-instructor relationship.

This study also contributes to the understanding of the importance of the student-instructor relationship. Some researchers (Anello, 1997; Chachra, 2005; Huff & Frey, 2005; Smith, 2005; Taplin, 2002) theorized that with no synchronous interaction, creating a relationship is difficult. However, this study suggests a variety of ways that the instructor and the students built a trusting, respectful, and friendly relationship, even at a distance and primarily through asynchronous interaction. The students perceived that the relationship helped improve their self-confidence and contributed to deeper learning and engagement. Thus they perceived that the relationship positively, though often indirectly, influenced many of the character outcomes described in the study.

Interrelationship of Themes—Attempting to Close the Hermeneutic Circle

Although students pointed to particular elements of the course experience that helped them with specific aspects of character development, the purpose of this study was not to make a connection between instructional strategies and a specific character outcome. The participants' other perceptions revealed a complex relationship between

themes that cannot be fully explicated. Yet the participants' explanations of their experiences showed, as I have tried to make evident in Chapter 6, that the various elements of the course experience supported each other and otherwise assuaged weaknesses in other areas.

In summary, there are multiple interrelationships among the themes emerging from students' and instructor's perception of the elements of the course that contributed to character development. Participants perceived that the course content, the literature of Tolkien and Lewis, strengthened the character development aspects of the course. However, the instructional conversation between the instructor and the students influenced what students learned from the literature and affected their approach to reading the literature. How the instructor conducted the instructional conversation and his personal qualities influenced the relationship that grew between the student and the instructor. This relationship in turn influenced how the students approached the instructional conversation, helping them in many cases to take a deeper and more personal approach to their learning. Additionally, the independent study context of the course influenced how the instructional conversation occurred, especially compared to face-to-face instruction. In some ways, this prevented students from having more direct and synchronous interaction with the instructor and virtually eliminated interaction with other students, yet students also commented that it made for a more personal or one-on-one relationship with the instructor than they had in other course contexts. Finally, students perceived that what they brought to the course, how they decided to respond to what the instructor invited them to do in the course, and how they chose to integrate what

they learned into their own lives all played roles in what they took away from the literature and the character development they perceived.

Limitations of the Study

Since no research design is perfect, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. This acknowledgement, if done honestly, can help to further establish the credibility of the researcher.

Van Manen (1990) explained one limitation of a phenomenological study:

A phenomenological description is always *one* interpretation, and no single interpretation of human experience will ever exhaust the possibility of yet another complementary, or even potentially *richer* or *deeper* description. (p. 31)

This is true of any research paradigm; truth is never established on the basis of one study alone. In this case, the research presented here represents only one study and thus is not definitive. This study is intended to provide a perspective on the phenomenon.

Van Manen (1990) further explained at least three other possible ways that phenomenological descriptions can fail (though he stated that these descriptions may still have value or merit in other respects): (a) “A description may fail to aim at lived experience, and instead have the character of conceptualization, journalistic accounts, personal opinions, or descriptions of some other state of affairs” (p. 27); (b) “A description may properly aim at lived experience but somehow fail to elucidate the lived meaning of that experience” (p. 27); and (c) “A description may elucidate, but what is elucidated is not lived experience; instead a description may succeed in conceptual clarification or theoretical explication of meaning” (p.27). I have gone through iterations of the major research activities and taken the other steps, which I described in the section

on establishing trustworthiness, to help minimize the possibilities of the weaknesses that van Manen enumerated.

Context Selection

One limitation of the study is the independent study context of the course and that prior to the study the course was exclusively a paper-based course. Although this type of course is still common (Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2004), there are several other models of distance education, which may make these findings less generalizable. The individual reader is left to determine whether these themes can inform the practice of those acting in other instructional contexts (particularly other distance education contexts).

Participant Selection

With intensity sampling, there were two groups of students not include in the study—those who did not complete the course and those who did not feel that they developed their character. Although studies of why people do not complete distance education courses or why some students felt they did not experience character development would be interesting, these questions are outside the scope of this study.

Sample Size

In any study, the researcher must decide between breadth and depth (Patton, 2002). For this study, I chose to seek for a balance between depth and breadth by interviewing 14 former student participants. Thus, I have sacrificed some breadth to the study to facilitate the depth I would like to achieve, and sacrificed some depth to gain a broader perspective.

Timing

Although one might expect a meaningful experience to have an immediate influence for good or ill on one's character, the real effects of the experience may conceivably take many years, if not a lifetime, to fully affect an individual (Berkowitz, 2002). To illustrate, a child who is involved in the divorce of her parents may as an adult have difficulty in forming positive attachments—an effect that may become apparent years after the event. I did not expect such an extreme experience to result from a distance education literature course, but some of the life-altering lessons the students learned may not fully manifest themselves for years to come. Due to the timing of this study, I may not be speaking with the participants at the “optimal” time in their lives to discover the full impact of the experience. On the other hand, there is no way to know when that would be and it would likely vary by individual. The best I could do was to locate participants through the sampling procedures I described, and I have tried to discover their current perspectives on their experience with character development in this distance education course.

Memories and Perceptions

Another possible limitation involves the memories and perceptions of the participants. The data I present are student and instructor memories and perceptions of their experiences, which means there is no conclusive evidence that the students are truly better people for having taking the course.

Because of imperfect memories and perceptions, participants could have (a) failed to notice changes in their character; (b) forgotten that their character is somehow different than it used to be (for example, that the change is now so much a part of them

that they forgot or otherwise failed to mention significant information); (c) forgotten what they used to be like and thus do not see the difference; (d) forgotten details of events that somehow influenced the development of their character or helped them see that they developed their character; (e) imagined improvements to (or development of) their character; (f) imagined details of events rather than remembered what really happened. They could also have lied, or they may not have been able to find the words to express their experiences.

Sokolowski (2000) discussed these types of possible problems in phenomenology:

Of course, errors do creep in; often I project things into remembered events that I want to see or that I think I should be seeing. I oscillate between memory and imagination. Memories are notoriously elusive; they are not tamper proof, but such are limitations of memory. Because memories are often wrong does not mean that they do not exist or that they are always wrong. Only because there are memories can they sometimes be deceptive. (p. 69)

Ultimately though, these possible limitations are not unique to hermeneutic phenomenology and could occur regardless of the approach (whether qualitative or quantitative). Nevertheless, I tried to take steps to reduce their likelihood through conducting multiple interviews and providing participants other opportunities to follow up in interviews and in writing about their experiences (either expounding upon experiences discussed during interviews or providing additional experiences). By doing interpretation through conversation (or member checks), I gave participants multiple occasions to correct errors in their memory and in my understanding of the themes that emerged. Through establishing good relationships with the participants and through collecting multiple perspectives, I believe I reduced the possibility of major errors, because there was considerable consistency among these multiple perspectives.

Quantitative Measurement

This study did not address how much character development student actually experienced nor did it address any quantitative analysis of how much the respective elements of the course contributed to the perceived character development. Although some may perceive the lack of any quantitative measurement of character development as a limitation, measurement was not the purpose of this study. A study of that nature would require pre and post measurements and extend over a significant period of time, and it would serve a completely different purpose. At the course level this would be extremely difficult because, as Berkowitz (2002) suggested, determining character development is “tricky”:

First,... character is a multifaceted phenomenon. Second, the components of character each have their own developmental trajectories. Third, each person develops at a different rate. Fourth, the developmental sequence and profile of the components of character differ in different individuals. Finally, the components of character tend to develop gradually, or in stages over a long period of time (p. 7).

In this study, I attempted only to determine what kinds of character development participants perceived. To determine how much character development occurred, a follow-up study would be required. However, to try to measure precisely how much character development occurred in the course would likely miss important findings for the reasons that Berkowitz mentioned.

Finally, most of the character development I might have tried to measure quantitatively would likely be confounded with other events and experiences going on in their personal situations. Thus, I attempted to understand the participants’ experiences with character development related to this course through their perspectives on that

relationship rather than trying to infer any relationships from researcher-created self-report instruments.

Recommendations

The case explored in this study was a literature course in a distance education context, and the recommendations regarding how to encourage character development are most applicable to similar cases. However, I invite others to consider the possible applicability of these recommendations to their situations, whether they are other types of courses in distance education, literature courses in a non-distance context, or any other type of course in a face-to-face or blended environment. I also invite others to consider other possible applications that are suitable to specific unanticipated situations.

Below I provide a few recommendations for teachers and instructional designers, for students, as well as recommendations for further research.

Recommendations for Teachers and Instructional Designers

These recommendations for teachers and designers of instruction surfaced from this study and may help improve the quality of the instruction, as well as make the learning experience more conducive to students' character development:

Build Edifying Relationships

Sincere, friendly, caring, trusting and respectful relationships with students may help them deepen their learning and contribute to their character development. Instructors should genuinely care about the students and their success in learning. As Dr. Walker said, "I don't think you can fake that, so as a technique it would probably be lousy" (personal communication, October 9, 2007). Instructors can plan ways to let students know they trust, respect, and care about them.

Invite Students into a Conversation

A meaningful instructional conversation can help students take responsibility for their learning and actively engage and apply learning rather than passively receive information. Avoid telling students what they need to know or how they should think.

Ask Meaningful Questions

Meaningful questions promote a meaningful instructional conversation with students. That does not mean all the questions have to be amazingly insightful, but more meaningful questions can challenge students to dig deeper and discover more personal meaning.

Invite Likening

Personally applying principles may help students take learning to a deeper level and positively influence character development. Teachers and designers should consider inviting students to relate their learning to their lives.

Promote Depth-over-Breadth

Teachers and designers should remember the instructor's approach of focusing on "selected touchstones ... with sufficient thoroughness" (Walker & Clark, 1982, p. 6). A depth-over-breath approach may help deepen learning.

Offer Choices

Students in the study found that the choices the instructor offered helped them become more engaged and find relevance in what they are learning. Consider ways you can give students more options and engage them in their own education.

Invite Meaningful Writing

Students in the study found it helpful to have multiple, relatively shorter writing assignments. Asking students to respond more frequently in writing gives them an opportunity to have (and develop) a voice of their own and provides the possibility of connecting one-on-one with each student.

Provide Timely, Encouraging and Respectful Feedback

Students need to know how they are doing. The right kind of feedback can provide students with that information and may positively influence relationships with them.

Invite, rather than Try to Control

Invite students to take responsibility for their learning. Student agency was a key component of the students' perceived character development. That is something that instructor and designers cannot control. However, they may positively influence students through invitation and a trusting and respectful relationship.

Leverage the Context

The distance education context can help students take responsibility for their learning and build more personal relationships. At times the challenging aspects of the context can provide opportunities for character development.

Extend Opportunities for Learning beyond the Course

Similar to the recommendations of Anello (1997) and Lemming (2000), students took opportunities to learn beyond the boundaries of the course (such as seeking out additional resources and sharing what they learned with friends, family, and coworkers). Teachers and designers can invite and encourage students, where appropriate, to look for

opportunities to supplement their learning through teaching or serving others and seeking out additional sources of knowledge.

Explore Moral and Character Issues

Most academic content typically has some moral and character issues. Encourage students to explore the moral and character related themes in the content area of the course.

Allow for Unanticipated Outcomes

Instructional goals are important. However, teachers and designers can also create rich environments where students can grow in ways they need or want.

Recommendations for Students

Because student agency played such an important role in this case, it is plausible that students can do things that can help their character development in learning situations. These recommendations are intended to help students consider the implications of these findings for their role in the character development process:

Share to Learn

Sharing what they learn in a sincere way can help deepen students' understanding and benefits others and their relationships with them. Students may find that others have interesting insights and perspectives to share as well.

Write to Learn

Writing can help students think deeper and more clearly. Even if it is not part of a formal assignment, students can write about what they are learning.

Liken to Learn

Finding personal meaning and personally applying what students are learning can help deepen learning. Students may enhance their learning and character development through looking for personal relevance in what they are learning and applying it, even if they are not assigned to do so.

Choose to Learn

Students have considerable responsibility for their own learning and to choose to make the experience what they want. No matter what the professor does, they can choose to learn. They can choose to dig deeper, to seek out additional resources and help, to share what they are learning, to apply what they are learning, and so forth.

Recommendations for Further Research

The study appears to confirm that character development can occur in an independent study or distance education context and provides some insights into how this occurred in this particular course. Yet there is a considerable amount still to discover about the phenomenon of character development in a distance education context. The following are some of the possible lines of further research that emerge from this study.

*Explore Connections between the Student-instructor Relationship and Character**Development*

From this study and theories of both distance education (Holmberg, 1996, 2003) and character education (see Adams, 2007; Scharf, 1978; Cheek, 1992; Harding & Snyder, 1991; Kazemek, 1986; Lemming, 2000), the student-instructor relationship appears to support student character development in both performance character and moral character. Yet more research is necessary to help understand the kinds of

relationships that support character development, the ways that they support character development, and how the relationships are developed and maintained.

Analyze Qualities of Communication that Contributes to the Development of the Student-instructor Relationship

Although this study suggests some ways that the instructor took an invitational approach to encourage student responsibility and deeper learning and to build a trusting and respectful relationship with students, more research is needed to be able to answer the question “What are the qualities of communication that helps invite student responsibility, deeper learning, and a positive relationship between a student and instructor?”

Investigate Role of the Student in Character Development

Students reported ways that they contributed to their own character development through what they brought to the course and choices they made. More research into the role of students in character development and how to help students take responsibility for such development appears to be called for.

Study the Relationship between Deep Learning and Character Development

In the present study, a theme that emerged was a connection between finding personal application in what the students were learning and character development. More research is needed to further understanding the relationship between deep learning (Entwistle, 2000; McCune & Entwistle, 2000) and character development.

Determine Connections between Writing and Character Development

There remain many questions on the connection between writing and character development. For example, in this study, writing facilitated a one-on-one experience

between the student and the instructor. Students also discussed that writing helped clarify their thinking and deepen their learning. Could the same benefits come from brief writing assignments before or after discussions in other distance education and face-to-face contexts?

Examine Connections between Feedback and Character Development

Students reported that the quality of the feedback (timely, encouraging, and respectful) contributed to aspects of their character development as well as to the overall success in the course. Only the distance education literature discussed feedback and then only to say that timely feedback contributes to learner success and motivation (Holmberg, 2003; Moore, 1997). The literature reviewed did not discuss the other aspects of feedback that the participants mentioned, nor its contribution to students becoming improved learners and more self-confident or other character outcomes. Thus, more research is needed to explore the role of feedback and qualities of feedback that may contribute to character development

Explore Additional Case Studies

The present case appears to substantiate the claims of Howell et al. (2004). However, there are many courses in many other subject areas in the BYU Independent Study portfolio that could be studied to further understand what practices are supporting the *BYU Aims* (BYU, n.d.) and to further substantiate Howell et al.'s claims.

Discover the Effects of Automated Feedback on Character Development

Feedback and the relationship that grew between the students and the instructor were significant in character development. However, some courses in BYU's Independent Study portfolio are primarily or entirely computer mediated though

Speedback assignments (computerized assignments with multiple choice questions used for assessment and distracter specific feedback) and computer graded exams, leaving no opportunity for instructor interaction. I recommend studies to discover if this form of Independent Study can also promote character development, and if so, in what ways it differs from the present case.

Examine Character Development in Other Distance Education Contexts

Many of the studies in the literature that looks at character related outcomes in a distance environment deal with ethics courses. There are many other types of courses that use many other forms of distance education (a variety of synchronous, asynchronous and mixed models) as well as blended courses (combining face-to-face and distance elements) that can still be studied to discover if and how they support character development.

Explore Character Development from the Student Perspective

This study offers insights into character development through student perceptions that, according to R. D. Osguthorpe (2009a), have long been missing from the literature on character development and education. More studies are needed that explore character related outcomes from the students' perspective, which seems especially relevant in the discussion of character related outcomes in higher education both in distance as well as face-to-face settings.

Conclusion

In this study I have built upon the study of Howell et al. (2004), providing additional insight into some of the ways that BYU's Independent Study program supports the character-building portion of the *BYU Aims* (BYU, n.d.)—at least in the Christian

Fantasy Literature course. I explored only one course in this study, but with sufficient depth that I discovered a variety of ways students and the instructor perceived character development related to the course, along with several ways that the instructor and the course experience helped encourage character development in students. Although more case studies on a variety of subjects and distance education contexts are necessary to develop a deeper understanding of character growth in courses in distance education, some themes seem to be significant because they are consistent with recommendations from either the distance education or character education literatures, or both. Another important finding is that it is not only what the instructor did but also how the instructor did it that appeared to make an important difference in promoting or encouraging character development.

I encourage instructors, designers of distance education, and students in distance education courses to be thoughtful about the opportunities for character development in the courses they instruct, design, or take. Although all the recommendations made herein may not be applicable to all situations, I invite the reader to consider the possibilities and liken or apply what they believe will be useful in their circumstances.

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APPENDIX A: ASSUMPTIONS AND PRE-UNDERSTANDINGS

Explicating Assumptions and Pre-understandings

In any credible qualitative study the researcher should explicitly state his or her biases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patterson, 2002; Williams, n.d.). In hermeneutic phenomenology, the analogous activity is “explicating assumptions and pre-understandings” (van Manen, 1990, p. 46) Typically, one of the principle reasons for researchers to state their biases is to allow readers to know what the researchers’ beliefs are so they can take them into consideration as they read the study. Researcher also can state their biases so they can be self-aware and help reduce the influence of biases on their work. In the following section, I discuss how reflecting on pre-understandings and assumptions in a phenomenological study helps the researcher be aware of these while researching a phenomenon. Although as researchers/humans we may never be able to completely suspend our assumptions (Patton, 2002; Yanchar & Williams, 2007) reflecting on them and bringing them to the forefront can help us decrease or at least document their influence.

The literature review in chapter two serves as an explication of my pre-understandings of the literature in the areas of character education, distance education, and the intersection of these two domains. Although I may agree on some points and differ in opinion on others, it is important to be aware of the ideas and the potential influence they could play in my reflections on the participants’ lived experiences.

In addition to the pre-understandings described in chapter two, my personal beliefs, personal and professional experiences, my training as a teacher and instructional designer, among other possible influences, affect the way I view the phenomenon under

study. In the spirit of full-disclosure, I cite some perhaps unconventional sources so as to fully explicate not only my assumptions, as well as the influence or source of them, where possible.

Ontological assumptions (beliefs). As might be concluded or at least suspected by my attendance at BYU, I am a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the university's sponsor. I have chosen to be a member of the Church because I believe in its doctrines and beliefs. With that being said, I believe that all mankind are children of God and that through the atonement of Jesus Christ and through faith in Jesus Christ, repentance of sins, and sincere participation in the ordinances of salvation (Article of Faith 1:3-4) that all mankind can "be partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4; cited in BYU, n.d.).

I believe that men and women are moral agents who were created to "act and not to be acted upon" (2 Nephi 2:13-14; Bednar, 2006).

Epistemological assumptions (beliefs). I believe that "truth is knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come" (D&C 93:24). I also believe that truth can be known through multiple means, including inspiration and especially revelation. However, as a man I cannot control when and how revelation or inspiration comes. I am not claiming that this work is ultimate truth or specially inspired by God. Though I humbly and freely acknowledge that I could not have accomplished this study without His help.

Assumptions regarding learners, learning, teachers, teaching, instructional design, and educational research. Because people are moral agents they can choose to learn or not to learn. We can try to manipulate or coerce them, but learning that is done

for more intrinsic reasons will be deeper, more meaningful, and longer lasting (D&C 121:34-44). I also believe that most theories and models of how people learn, from behaviorist, cognitive, and constructivist perspectives, have some elements of the truth. However, most, if not all, ignore or minimize the importance of what it truly means to be human, especially in relation to our moral agency.

I believe that learning requires faith (Bednar, 2006; D&C 88:118). Learning is improved when learners have faith in themselves and those who may be teaching them. To deepen learning, they should have faith that what they are doing will help them learn and that what they are learning is relevant to them and will be helpful. I also believe that faith in God helps learners to grow.

I believe there are some important characteristics of great learners that are important for all students to acquire. Great learners should, (a) be humble; (b) seek for feedback and correction; (c) make and keep commitments; (d) know that learning takes effort and they expect resistance but are willing to work hard; (e) help other people, they use what they learn to teach and otherwise serve others (Eyring, 1997).

Instructional designers and teachers do not cause learning. “We never educate directly, but indirectly by means of the environment. Whether we permit chance environments to do the work, or whether we design environments for the purpose makes a great difference” (Dewey, 1916, p. 19). The type of environment that Dewey speaks of is more than just a physical environment. It includes social, emotional, motivational, and likely other factors.

The teaching and instructional design professions should be concerned with helping learners (Inouye, Merrill, & Swan, 2005). We need to keep in mind that learners

need varying levels of guidance, motivation, and other types of help. Because learning requires faith, good teachers can also help students have faith in themselves and to not give up. I believe that teachers' interactions with the students should be honest and encouraging. Feedback, especially corrective feedback is needed, but it should be constructive, empowering, and encouraging, not demeaning or destructive.

Learning is a social activity. As implied in the idea of the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), people learn when they are in a situation that is beyond their capabilities but that they can do with some help. Often it is a parent or teacher that serves this role of helper, but that is not always the case. Peers or others can fill this role at times as well. Of course teachers and instructional designers are also agents, thus as we design or teach other agents there is an inherent negotiation of wills (Gibbons, 2008) unless we try to manipulate the learners, which I believe to be morally wrong.

Good teaching or instructional design does not just dispense knowledge or cover material. Rather, it should encourage and enhance learning and growth. Good teaching or instruction motivates and inspires people to strive for more, to become the best they can be. I believe that poor teaching or instruction can engender confusion and hinder learning, although most people learn even in the face of poor instruction.

Much of educational research is concerned with finding the most effective methods of instruction. I believe that what learners do is more important than the teaching method used (Bednar, 2006; D. K. Inouye, personal communication, November 2005). The implication that method is key means that we as instructional designers or teacher can cause learning, which I believe is a mistaken notion. I also believe that research that seeks causal relationships in teaching and learning and that tries to control

for extraneous factors can be misguided because in real world practice we cannot predict or control for these factors.

I believe that people learn in multiple ways, although some have preferred styles of learning or those that seem most productive (personally, I tend to remember things better that I see or that I write down myself, etc.). Despite preferences and strengths, I believe that most people prefer learning in a variety of ways. I also believe that it is good for us to learn to adapt to circumstance and to adapt our circumstances as needed and possible. Because I believe that people generally like variety and that people are agents, I believe efforts to find the educational “silver bullets” or best way to teach are misguided. Efforts to adapt instruction to learners, though possibly providing some efficiencies, can also potentially be detrimental to the growth and development of individuals.

Teachers and instructional designers should seek to help students become self-directed and able to go forth and teach others. As Lewis (1991) stated,

We teach them in order that they may soon not need our teaching...We must aim at making ourselves superfluous. The hour when we can say ‘They need me no longer’ should be our reward (p. 50).

I believe we do this in part by not only by helping students gain the knowledge and skills they need within a discipline but to help them to learn like practitioners and researchers do.

Yogi Berra is credited with saying, “In theory there is no difference between theory and practice. In practice there is.” More research efforts should be directed at understanding good practice and understanding instructional innovation in the context of real practice (R. T. Osguthorpe, 2006). This is the value I see in many qualitative research perspectives, particularly hermeneutic phenomenology. I am not saying that

quantitative approaches to educational research are wrong or are not valuable. I am trying to say that whatever the methods or approach, we as educational researchers should be thoughtful about the implications (moral or otherwise) of our work and the assumptions we make about learners and teaching and learning.

Assumptions regarding distance education. I believe that learning, teaching, and instruction are not essentially different whether they occur in a classroom or at a distance (M. D. Merrill, personal communication). I believe that among the most important elements of learning outcome are student actions, student intentions (i.e., why is the student learning and how that learning is approached), the student-instructor relationship, the student-to-student relationship, and student-to-other relationship (i.e., how does what the student is learning affect the students relationships with others), etc.

I believe that learning does not always take place when or where we as teachers or instructional designers intended it to whether in classroom instruction or in distance education. Although learning can take place when students are reading course materials or online in some virtual classroom or other “learning environment,” some of the most meaningful learning takes place when we least expect it. Am I implying that we should not thoughtfully design instructional experiences? Of course not! Nevertheless, we need to realize that learning does not always occur when and where we plan it and we should find ways to encourage and empower students to learn whenever and wherever they are.

Assumptions regarding character development and character education. The definition I gave in chapter two as the working definition of character was primarily chosen because it is the institutional definition. However, it also closely aligns to my personal views of character. I believe that our ultimate goal as far as forming our

character should be to become like the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Peter 1:4-8; Matthew 5:48; 3 Nephi 12:48; 3 Nephi 27:27). However, the most reasonable definitions of character, in my opinion are Lickona's (1999) definition of character including elements of the heart, mind, and hand or being parts of all three learning domains, (a) cognitive, (b) affective, and (c) psycho-motor. Also the American Psychological Association published a book called "Character Strengths and Virtues" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) in which they describe 6 primary character strengths: (a) wisdom and knowledge, (b) courage, (c) humanity, (d) justice, (e) temperance, and (f) transcendence. They further delineate and discuss related virtues under each of these strengths. And lastly, Berkowitz's (2002) concept of moral anatomy also seems reasonable, which he defined as "the psychological components that make up the complete moral person" (p. 48). He further defined seven components of the moral anatomy:

There are seven parts to the moral anatomy: moral behavior, moral values, moral personality, moral emotion, moral reasoning, moral identity, and foundational characteristics (p. 48).

Although I will not say that these definitions are correct, they appear to make some sense.

I believe that there are some universal moral laws, imperatives, or norms (Lewis, 1965). Most if not all of the world religions and many other philosophies have some form of the golden (or silver) rule that either states to do unto others as you have them do to you or at least to not do to others what you would not have done to you (Lickona, 2003; D. K. Inouye, personal communication, November 2005). Coming from a Judeo-Christian background, I believe in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20: 1-17). Even though some may choose to not believe in God, it seems reasonable to at least see the value in the last six commandments which deal with our relationship with or fellow man:

(a) honor thy father and thy mother; (b) thou shalt not kill; (c) thou shalt not commit adultery; (d) thou shalt not steal; (e) thou shalt not bear false witness; and (f) though shalt not covet. Jesus Christ then introduced a higher law in the Sermon on the Mount where he taught to, (a) not only not kill but to not get angry; (b) not only do not commit adultery but not to lust; (c) not to seek an eye for an eye but to bear our affliction with patience and turn the other cheek; (d) to love our enemies, and so forth.

I feel that what I have written above about my assumptions regarding teaching and learning (e.g., what the learner does is most important to learning, what great learners do, teaching and instructional design should be a helping professions, etc.) also applies to character and moral development. Especially important is the fact that people are moral agents. Without agency, there can be no real character or moral development (Straughan, 1988). I also believe that people come into any learning situation with varying needs and differing levels of readiness. Like other types of learning, I believe that a person needs to desire to change or improve to develop their character (in fact, a principle that seems to be ignored in the character education literature is repentance). Thus what character development can or will take place is likely to vary from individual to individual.

Although there is much discussion in the character education literature about direct and indirect approaches, I believe that a more integrated approach (Berkowitz, 2002; Berkowitz & Fekula, 1999) would ultimately be most beneficial. By integrated, I mean that moral and character issues would be addressed as part of every subject. Teachers and students would address the moral implications of what they are learning. High standards of character and moral conduct would be expected and encouraged at all

times. We would teach students that they are agents and help them see the need to use their agency wisely.

I believe that before concerning ourselves with any particular approach to character development that a primary concern is for teachers to teach morally and that by teaching morally they can better help students in all kinds of learning (R. D. Osguthorpe, 2005; R. T. Osguthorpe & Osguthorpe, 2002;). Gandhi is credited with saying, “We must become the change we wish to see” (Holden Leadership Center, 2009). This is especially true in character education.

Regarding the Christian Fantasy Literature course. In an unpublished pilot study I conducted in spring term of 2006 (M. C. Johnson) the course that serves as the context of this study the participant mentioned this course as one of the most meaningful experiences she had during her time at Brigham Young University. Although the pilot study did not entirely focus on this particular course, the following describes her experience in the course.

In 1997 her family moved to a state on the west coast of the United States so her husband could take a job. At that time, she was two courses short of finishing up her bachelor’s degree. She didn’t want to leave her degree unfinished, so she completed the last two courses through BYU Independent Study. Although she had a good experience with both courses she took, the course that she particularly enjoyed was her course on Christian Fantasy Literature (English 395R) and it was one of her favorites of all the classes she took at BYU.

She was very interested in the course topic. She studied works primarily from C. S. Lewis (*Screwtape Letters*) and J.R.R Tolkien (*Lord of the Rings* trilogy), which she

really enjoyed reading. In fact, she was only required to read the *Lord of the Rings* once or twice, but she read the whole trilogy three times.

The course was different than many of her other literature courses (she was an English major) because in this course they studied relatively fewer works and thus they were able to go more in depth in the works they studied. In contrast, in many of her on-campus literature classes they would tend to cover many works (often around 10 to 15 different works) but they would not cover them very deeply. They would discuss the works in class and after they had read five or so works, they would take an exam on those works.

Although she said she would not have minded taking the on campus version of the course, the Independent Study course had some advantages. It was less constraining time wise, which allowed her to be more thorough in her studies. The course was challenging, and she believed even more so than an on-campus course because the course seemed to try to make up for no class time by being more rigorous. She felt that the challenging nature of the course combined with a more flexible schedule contributed significantly to her learning experience.

The assignments were different from most of her other literature courses too. Rather than just writing one or two big papers or taking a couple of big exams like in many of her literature classes, in this class they had several opportunities to answer essay and short answer questions on the books they were reading. This required her to state an opinion and support those opinions with concrete examples from the books. She really enjoyed doing this kind of persuasive writing.

Some of the questions the instructor asked were very direct, but others allowed her to make choices about what to write about. She enjoyed questions like, “Pick a character and describe how the character changed and grew throughout the story,” or “Pick your favorite character and discuss why it is your favorite.” Even questions like “Which character do you think most represents Tolkien’s views and why?” provided some flexibility. On questions of this type she occasionally got feedback from the instructor stating that although he would have picked a different character he liked the points she made and her support for those points. The instructor did not constrain the students to what he wanted to hear, if they could back up their responses.

The instructor showed through the way he wrote the course and how he responded to assignments that he enjoyed teaching the course (a difficult thing in a correspondence course). She mentioned that he provided helpful and insightful comments on her papers. His enthusiasm and encouraging comments helped her to try hard on her assignments and exams.

In summary, several factors seemed to lead to her positive experience:

1. Her interest in the topic
2. The opportunity to study the reading more in-depth (covering a couple of principal works in-depth rather than briefly covering 10-15)
3. The less constraining schedule of an Independent Study course
4. The type of the course assignments and assessments
5. The flexibility in many of the essay and short answer questions
6. The willingness of the instructor to not just be looking for the one “right” answer.
7. The nature and quality of the instructor’s feedback

8. The instructor's enthusiasm and encouragement

All these factors helped her take a deeper approach to the learning experience, even though she was busy raising two young daughters.

Personally, I was excited when this course came up as a possible focus of this study because, I must admit, I enjoy the works of both Tolkien and Lewis.

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APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Instructor Interviews

Prior to asking more specific questions about the professor's experience creating and teaching the course, ask questions of a general, and likely mutual, interest to help build our relationship, such as: What do you think of the movie trilogy? Do you think they strayed too far from the original story line? Were they true to the characters? Which characters did they get right and which did they get wrong in your opinion? Etc.

Ask him about students who have written him about experiences they have had in the course that could be considered "character building" as the principal method of locating potential participants for the study.

Also ask the instructor about possible experiences he has had with students that show their personal growth, specifically what could be termed character building, that he has seen through grading assignments or other interactions (Note: The discussion of students must be anonymous):

- Describe experiences with students that you have seen the student have his/her character built (that you have been able to detect through correspondence with a student)?
- Have students expressed to you any experiences that discuss that they have "built" their character?

Ask the instructor about what he was trying to accomplish and his experiences creating the course (including making any updates).

- What he was trying to accomplish and how (using perhaps the stated course objectives as a point of departure)?
- Why do you teach this course?
- What has drawn you to the works of Tolkien and Lewis?

- You state in the course “The real objective of English 395R—“Christian Fantasy: J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis” is for us to have as much fun with Tolkien and Lewis as possible. But please don’t tell anyone; if someone asks you what we are doing in this class, tell them “We’re studying selected touchstones of Christian fantasy with sufficient thoroughness to enable us to read intelligently any literature of the genre, appreciating its unique perspectives and relating them to personal values” (Walter & Clark, 1982, p. 6). What were you trying to accomplish with creating the course? What were you hoping the students experience to be?
- How do you try to go about that? Can you provide specific experiences?
- Have you changed that at all in the latest revision of the course (or any previous revisions—although it is my understanding that the course has not be revised for several years)?
- The essays on prayer and on pain, etc. written by C. S. Lewis are not really Fantasy, so why are they included in the course???
- Do or have you taught this course on campus? What is different about that course?

I also want to understand his experiences with students as the instructor.

- Describe your experiences as an instructor of the course? What do you do as the instructor?
- How do interact with students, can you provide any concrete experiences working with students?
- What do you do that relates to the goal of BYU’s character building aim? Can you provide specific examples?

Subsequent interviews will follow-up on this questions, and seek for further understanding of the instructor’s responses. I asked him the following question in follow-up interview conducted through email:

- As well as you can recall, can you tell me about your experience developing the course? Who did you work with? What was the writing process like? How did you decide on the instructional approach?
- Why do you think that the course design/approach has held up for more than two decades?

- You said that learning ought to be enjoyable. How have you tried to make the course enjoyable (in writing the course or as the current instructor)? Or what do you see as the most enjoyable parts of the course?
- What do you do as the instructor? Can you describe your experience as an instructor? Especially unusual or meaningful experiences that may demonstrate that the students exhibited some character building?
- What do you do to try to get to know your students, if anything?
- How much time do you spend grading assignments from the course each week/month (which ever timeframe makes the most sense)? How do you go about that logistically?
- What kind of character building, if any, did you hope to help students achieve?
- What have you personally gained from reading/studying C. S. Lewis and Tolkien (LOTR)? How has studying these authors affected your life or helped make you who you are?
- You mentioned wanting your students to read the Bible and Shakespeare, do you specifically make that invitation to your students?
- Is there anything else about your experience with the course or with students, etc., that you think I ought to know?

Student Interviews

Remind the participant that the interview will be recorded and assure that they still give their consent to record.

First Interview

Ask the participants to tell me a little about themselves and answer questions they may have about me to help establish a good working relationship.

After this initial conversation, begin by asking them questions after some initial conversation to help establish trust. Begin by discussing with the participants about their experiences in the course generally. Next, explore with students how taking the course at

a distance affected their experience. Then explore the character building aspects of the course.

The following are examples of the types of questions to ask participants to learn about their experiences in the course. The interviews however, should be conducted as conversational interviews (see Spradley, 1980; van Manen, 1990) rather than as an interrogation of the participants.

Describe your experience taking this course.

- Describe your experience in the Christian Fantasy Literature course.
 - Which experiences were most meaningful?
- What did you like about the course?
- What did you not like about the course?
- Tell me about how you approached to the course as a student?
 - Why did you decide to take this course?
 - What were your goals for taking the course? What were you trying to get out of the course?
 - How long did it take you to complete the course?
 - Did you work at it consistently or in spurts? How did that go?
- In what ways has taking this course or reading the works taught in this course, etc. affected your life?
- And so forth...

Ask about Who What When Where Why, and How? Especially, Where, When,

With Whom...

- Lived space (spatiality): this can refer to location and nature of the location of the lived experience (van Manen, 1990, 2002)

- Lived body (corporeality): this refers to the fact that as humans we are physically or “bodily” in the world (van Manen, 1990, 2002)
- Lived time (temporality): this refers to more to subjective rather than objective time of the experience (van Manen, 1990, 2002)
- Lived other (relationality): this refers to the relationship with other people with whom experiences are shared, etc. (van Manen, 1990, 2002)

How did taking the course at a distance affect your experience?

- Why did you take the course through Independent Study?
- What were the biggest challenges of taking this course at a distance?
- Where there any advantages to taking the course as a distance education course?
- And so forth...

Exploration of “character building” aspects of the participant’s experience

- The course has been rated high for “character building,” which is part of the Aims of a BYU education.
- Do you feel that this course was character building? Can you describe what you mean by that?
- In what way or ways was your character built as a result of this course?
- What experiences did you have that helped you build your character?
 - Which of the experiences that you previously described helped contribute to your character being built? In what ways was it character building?
- What experiences helped you to become aware of any built character you experienced?
- How do your experiences affect others?
- How did your experiences affect your relationships with others?
- Has this course helped you make progress with any of the other aims of a BYU education (spiritually strengthening, lifelong learning and service)? (If they answer affirmatively, then we will explore experiences that show

the course helped them and in what ways they progressed toward the other aims)

- And so forth...

Follow-up Interviews

Follow-up interviews will be used to complete the line of inquiry described above, to probe deeper about the student's experiences, and to discuss each other's understandings of the participant's experiences (often using drafts of the students stories along with my analysis as far as it has developed before each encounter as a catalyst for discussion).

Conduct most of the negative case analysis in follow-up interviews (though some questions may come up in the initial interview).

- Any experiences in the course that didn't help you?
- Any negative consequences of the character building you experienced?
- Ask other probing questions related to what they are telling me and see if they always led to character building.

APPENDIX C: ARTICLE VERSION OF DISSERTATION FINDINGS

Note: What follows is the draft version submitted for publication and does not reflect any revisions made as a result of comments from reviewers nor the final version of the paper.

The Phenomenon of Character Development in a Distance Education Course*

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Abstract

The aims espoused by institutions of higher education often entail the development of students' character. Rarely, however, are these character development aims connected to the unique design and delivery of distance education programs, and the research literature that explores the moral and character development aspects of distance education is sparse. This case study examines instructor and student perceptions of character development in a fantasy literature distance education course. Initial findings indicate the instructor and students perceived myriad kinds of character development and corresponding approaches and methods for bringing about such development in the context of the course. This paper considers possible implications for character development in the context of distance education and directions for future research.

Introduction

Historically, character development has been an important outcome of higher education (Berkowitz & Fekula, 1999; Bowen, 1977; Boyer, 1987; Chickering, 2006; Dalton, Russell, & Klein 2004). As Boyer (1987) stated,

We need educated men and women who not only pursue their own personal interests but are also prepared to fulfill their social and civic obligations. And it is during the undergraduate experience, perhaps more than any other time, that these essential qualities of mind and character are refined (p. 7).

However, despite growth in distance education (Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2004), researchers have sparsely addressed character development in the distance education context. Thus instructors and designers have little guidance regarding character development in distance courses. This article attempts to make connections between these seemingly disparate fields within higher education because as Balmert and Ezzell (2002) stated, “We cannot afford the moral order of distance education to be shaped by happenstance” (p. 54).

Because there is little research that attends to the connections between character development and distance education (for one example, see Howell, Allred, Laws, & Jordan, 2004), this article describes aspects of a particular case. As van Manen (1990) explained, the best place to begin a study in the human sciences is the examination of the particularities of an individual case.

Pedagogical theory has to be *theory of the unique*, of the particular case. Theory of the unique starts with and from the single case, searches for the universalities, and returns to the single case (p.150).

Thus the task in this paper is to provide some guidance for instructors and designers vis-à-vis the development of character in distance education courses. To this end, this paper (a) provides a description of the research methods and data sources used

in examining character development in a distance education course on Fantasy Literature which integrates moral and character related themes into the course, (b) briefly identifies instructor and student perceptions of the character development that occurred in a distance education course, and (c) discusses instructor and student perceptions of the approaches and methods for bringing about such development in the context of the course.

Methods and Data Sources

The primary source of data collection was a series of in-depth conversational interviews with the course instructor and fourteen former students. The course materials (including the literature) and the students' assignments, where possible, were used as secondary forms of data. Additionally, follow-up interviews were conducted through email conversations. Although some interpretation is inevitable, the researchers attempted to remain open to participant descriptions (Fleming, Gaidys, & Robb, 2003) and sought to understand the emic perspective (Williams, n.d.).

A combination of holistic, selective, and detailed approaches to the thematic analyses were conducted (van Manen, 1990, 2002). Van Manen (1990) defines a theme as “the experience of focus, of meaning, of point” (p. 87). The secondary forms of data were used to obtain a richer view of the themes arising from the interview data, for negative case analysis and to elicit discussion in follow-up interviews.

Primarily through written correspondence, brief summaries of the emerging themes for each individual participant as well as collective themes—which van Manen (1990) calls “phenomenologically sensitive paragraphs” (p. 96)—were used to involve participants in the analysis or “interpretation through conversation” (p. 97). Participants

and the lead researcher entered conversation, through a process of questioning and answering, and thus created a common language that allows for understanding of lived experience (Gadamer, 2004). This process also served as extended member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Williams, n.d) only it invites participants to become more like co-investigators (van Manen, 1990). Likewise, the findings were also discussed with other researchers and instructional design professionals in order to generate collaborative analysis (van Manen, 1990), similar to peer debriefings used to check trustworthiness of results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Williams, n.d).

To establish credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002; Williams, n.d.), the following methods were used: prolonged engagement, triangulation (of the various interviews from both the student and instructor perspectives as well as comparing emerging themes with the course materials and student assignments, etc.), member checks, negative case analysis, emic perspective, and peer debriefings. To enhance transferability an emic perspective and thick rich descriptions were used. To enhance dependability and confirmability, an audit trail was maintained and member checks and peer debriefings were conducted (during follow-up interviews, etc.). Additionally, Williams (n.d.) added other criteria including (a) conducting a meaningful study, (b) treating participants ethically, and (c) completing a well-written report, which were also employed.

Perceptions of Character Development

The students perceived character development in a myriad of ways. The students most frequently reported an increase in their moral desire and motivation to do good, and they perceived that they developed a variety of character traits. Most often cited were

character traits related to moral discernment (Bebeau, Rest, & Narvaez, 1999; Lickona, 1999, 2003; Rest 1986; Ryan & Bohlin, 1999), moral courage (Bebeau et al., 1999; Lickona, 1999, 2003; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Rest, 1986; Ryan & Bohlin, 1999), open-mindedness (Davidson, et al, 2008; Lickona, 1999; Peterson & Seligman, 2004), self-discipline (Lickona, 1999, 2003; Peterson & Seligman, 2004), humility (Lickona, 1999; Peterson & Seligman, 2004), and hope (Lickona, 2003; Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Moral Desires

Student responses related to moral desires and motivation suggested how the course helped them to “[prioritize] moral values over other personal values” (Bebeau et al., 1999, p. 22), alter the values of their “moral anatomy” (Berkowitz, 2002, p. 48), and to “love the good” (Ryan & Bohlin, 1999; see also Lickona, 1999). Primarily, students shared that the course helped them want to be better people and to desire to choose what is right, good, and virtuous. For example, one student explained, “As I walk away from the course it made me realize that I can be an influence for good in my home in my community...I think that that’s how it fulfills the character building [aim]” (Personal Communication, October 3, 2007). And two others said that reading Tolkien inspired them to want to stand up for good things in their life, to be noble. Similarly, another student shared that she came away with the basic desire to “not to give into evil and hold on to the good even if the odds are against you” (Personal Communication, November 1, 2007). Finally, one student explained that the course helped him desire to not only be a better person, but to also be a greater asset to society, saying that there were few other

courses at the university that would top this course in helping people want to change themselves.

Moral Discernment

Many of the student responses related to the category of moral discernment implied the development of wisdom “to discern correctly, to see what is truly important in life...” (Lickona, 2003, p. 2). The responses also intimated a “moral sensitivity” to decisions between right and wrong and the moral implications of those decisions (Bebeau et al., 1999; Rest, 1986). Importantly, moral discernment was a specific objective of the course. As the instructor shared: “I wanted the course to be...an opening up of entirely new ways to read not just of fantasy or even of the best literature, but *how to read life*” (Personal Communication, November 21, 2007, emphasis added).

Expectedly then, students described being able to see more clearly and more sensitively distinguish between what they described as good and evil. For example, a student shared that in addition to analyzing literature and media for meaning, this course helped her assess whether it is good, worthwhile, and truly important. She explained that the course has helped her be more mindful as to whether the lessons conveyed in media are worth applying personally. Doing so has helped her be more purposeful in deciding not only what kinds of media to participate in but which messages she is going to heed. On a similar note, a student said that through the course she became more aware of worldly things that were trying to pull her (and all of us) away from God (and what is truly important to her in her life). And another student expressed how the course changed her pattern of thinking about moral issues, specifically the way she addresses her own self-change and improvement:

It helped me think about the way I think about things. And so I was impressed to have that look inside myself and be able to see what I could do to become better. I was really glad for that (Personal Communication, October 3, 2007).

Moral Courage

Along with developing the self-discipline to follow through and accomplish a difficult task, students also suggested that they developed an increased capacity “to do *what is right* in the face of difficulty” (Lickona, 2003, p. 2, emphasis added). Their responses reflected newly discovered strengths of bravery, persistence, integrity, and vitality (see Peterson & Seligman, 2004). For example, some of the students shared specific examples where the course influenced them to stand up for the right or choose wisely. A student shared the story of his boss who has put a lot of pressure on him to do things her way rather than the way he feels is best for his students. He mused, “Contemplating the principles that were taught in this course have (sic) helped me to stand up further to some of the nonsense that I face in my job” (Personal Communication, October 13, 2007). Another participant also had a situation where her bosses were putting pressure on their employees to conduct themselves unethically. She said that the course helped her be more resolute and stand up to their pressure. And another student shared that some of her friends do not think highly of Christians. Since taking the course she said, “I was actually defending it [to them]” and she used what she had learned from C.S. Lewis to help her. Other students reported making better choices regarding what literature and media to participate in and spending more and higher quality time with family.

Open-mindedness

Another reported character-building aspect of the course was open-mindedness. Student responses related to this category suggested that the course assisted students in “thinking things through and examining them from all sides; not jumping to conclusions; being able to change one’s mind in light of evidence; weighing all evidence fairly” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p.29). One student, for example, recalled how C.S. Lewis’s writings about Christianity caused him to explore more deeply other’s beliefs as well as his own, and another student shared that she gained new perspectives on religion and human nature from reading and analyzing the literature.

Responses in this category elicited specific examples of how students displayed their newfound open-mindedness. For example, one student said that she gained an appreciation for the authors’ (Tolkien and Lewis) perspectives and that doing so changed and extended her way of thinking. She expressed that this new appreciation and open-mindedness helped her become more understanding of others. She cited the instance of helping a young lady at her work who had made some bad choices. In particular, she overcame her tendency to be irritated with, judge, or write off this person, and she was able to be more sympathetic and helpful to her. Another student shared that she felt that many of Lewis’ beliefs coincided with her own and that her experience in the course opened up some opportunities to talk with others about common beliefs. She described the experience,

While volunteering in school I come in contact with several women who are of various faiths and I think this helped me to appreciate and see the commonalities we all share and appreciate them more. In fact, several of them had read *Screwtape* and we were able to discuss our perspectives on what Lewis thought and believed (Personal Communication, March 12, 2008).

On a similar note, another student shared that although she had departed from the religious ideas that her parents taught her growing up, this course has helped her gain a new appreciation for Christianity. She said she is less apt to judge those who profess to be Christians. Additionally, she shared, “This course helped me talk to [my mother] a lot more about Christianity and understand where she is coming from” (Personal Communication, August 30, 2007).

Self-discipline

In this category of response, students typically referred to an increase in their purposefulness and resolve to accomplish a given task, specifically as it related to their “performance character” (Davidson et al., 2008). Their responses also reflected a new-found ability to do something challenging and withstand difficulty in which they exhibited a “voluntary continuation of goal-directed action in spite of obstacles, difficulties, or discouragement” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 229). This trait was both inherent to the course (given the nature of independent study) and also explicitly attended to the by instructor. He expected that students would learn to take charge of their own learning and become more self-directed and self-disciplined:

I thought a challengingly inviting independent study course could, minimally, help students realize they were in charge of their own learning enough to discipline themselves through a course where they had to motivate and pace and bring to fruition their own study. At the least I hoped students would come out of the course better disciplined, more self-starting and proactively engaged in their own education (Personal Communication, November 21, 2007).

Accordingly, students took charge of their own learning and perceived character growth and development in this context. As a student reported, “[taking the course] made me realize that I had the self-discipline to do independent study” (Personal Communication, October 6, 2007).

Humility

Student responses related to humility suggested an explicit awareness of moral weaknesses and “a willingness to both recognize and correct [those] moral failings” (Lickona, 1999, p. 600). A few students explored this theme of humility in the course and said that it helped them in their understanding of humility or to feel more humble. One participant shared that her reading of the literature filled her with a sense of nobility yet humility. She shared, “You just read that and say I want to be like that and I want to feel that nobility and yet humbly knowing that I am nothing without a higher order of things helping me out” (Personal Communication, October 30, 2007). Another student admitted in an assignment, “Like Wormwood's patient [from *The Screwtape Letters*], I struggle with humility. I know what humility is and it has served my spiritual growth. But like the patient, I am tempted to find pride in that humility” (Personal Communication, October 13, 2007). He concluded his essay,

Lewis through *The Screwtape Letters* reminds me of the battle I must do against false pride, especially spiritual pride. My greatest allies in the war against pride are not just my good wife and my friends, but also God, Christ and the Holy Ghost (Personal Communication, October 13, 2007).

Hope

Although this trait was not mentioned frequently, several participants in the study specifically mentioned that the course helped them increase or fortify their hope. Their responses reflect a new-found “positive attitude” (Lickona, 2003) and an ability to “[think] about the future, [expect] that desired events and outcomes will occur, [and act] in ways believed to make them more likely” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 570). For example, students described how they developed hope through specific experiences in the course. One of the participants said that from her reading of fantasy that she was

reminded that she could count on divine assistance when she is in need. This understanding helps her to be able to tell herself, “OK, you know, I can make it through” (Personal Communication, October 30, 2007). Another student felt inspired by his study of Aragorn in *The Lord of the Rings*. He has felt personally that he has not lived up to his full potential. He said that the example of Aragorn has given him some hope that he too can improve his situation or fulfill his destiny. He also mentioned that the “patient” from *The Screwtape Letters* was inspirational to him in a similar way. He explained, “So that was interesting to see the weakness of the guy and yet God helping him in a sense. Then in the final end the decisions he makes are right and it all turns out all right” (Personal Communication, September 27, 2007).

In summary, the instructor and students perceived that the students had experienced character development in a variety of ways including increasing moral desires, enhancing moral discernment, moral courage and open-mindedness, and some growth in self-discipline, humility, and hope. The breadth of student responses was matched only by their capacity to discuss character-related outcomes for the course. Students did not have difficulty describing their experience in terms of the character development that might have occurred, and they displayed somewhat surprisingly displayed a great facility for discussing their personal character traits—and how they were influenced by the course and instructor. Subsequently (and not surprisingly), students provided a wide variety of responses to character-related outcomes, and even though themes emerged from their responses, the character-building aspects of the course were unique to each student. That is, each student experienced the course in a personal way that mitigated the influence of the course on character-building aims.

Approaches and Instructional Methods

Correspondingly, the instructor and students report that this appreciation and character development are the result of three inter-related approaches to distance instruction. First, the instructor used the actual content of the course to facilitate the development of character. Second, the instructor engaged students in an instructional conversation (Holmberg, 1986, 1999, 2003, also see Cheek, 1992; Dana & Lynch-Brown, 1991; Glanzer, 2008; Mason, 1993; Mills, 1988; Moore, 1997; Ryan & Bohlin, 1999; Smagorinsky, 2000). Finally, the instructor cared for the individual student-instructor relationship (Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996; Hambrecht, 2004; Lemming, 2000). In the context of this independent study course, these types and methods of character development were mitigated and enhanced by other factors, including the flexibility of time frame and location, as well as by student independence (Wedemeyer, 1971, 1981; Garrison, 2000; Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2004), readiness, and agency.

The Course Content

The instructor placed emphasis on reading and discussing literature with (a) moral exemplars, (b) moral insights and themes, and (c) applicability to living a moral life (Cain, 2005; Carr 2005; Lemming, 2000). According to the instructor and students, each of these, in turn, had an impact on the development of character. For example, the students perceived that the characters in these stories served as moral exemplars in a mythical realm. One student expressed,

When you read them and you get involved in their life and their travels and what's happening to them and how they handle things, it's almost as a role model as to how you want to be seen and you want to behave (personal communication, October 17, 2007).

Students also mentioned the importance of moral insights and themes from the literature, explaining, “Well, fantasy...distills the battle between good and evil and you can see really clearly what was good and bad” (personal communication, November 1, 2007). Finally, students suggested that the course content was character building due to its applicability in their lives. As one student explained, “That became a very exciting concept to me, a story about something that didn’t actually happen but about something that was true, that was still a real story” (personal communication, July 20, 2007).

The Instructional Conversation

To enhance character building the instructor tried to make it as much like his on-campus course, as much like a discussion, as possible, stating, “I try to establish a genuine conversation” (personal communication, November 21, 2007). The participants described a variety of aspects of the instructional conversation that influenced, both directly and indirectly, their character development. First, students felt that the instructor offered them meaningful choices (Holmberg, 1986; Wedemeyer, 1971, 1981) in the learning experience that led to the development of character. As one student explained, having choices allowed her to focus on a specific character and explore certain character strengths, contributing to her growth in these areas. Second, students commented that the instructor’s “good questions” helped them explore moral themes in more depth and to think about personal application to their lives—writing their responses further enhanced this process (Adam, 2007; Dana & Lynch-Brown, 1993; Entwistle, 2000; Kim 2001; Lemming, 2000; McCune & Entwistle, 2000; Mills, 1988; Ryan & Bohlin, 1999; Scharf, 1978). Third, the instructor also took a depth-over-breadth approach by focusing on only a few works which students felt further helped them explore moral aspects of the

literature more deeply. Finally, students explained that the instructor's prompt and honest feedback (Holmberg, 2003; Loui, 2005; Moore, 1997) contributed to seeing new perspectives and increased open-mindedness. His encouragement helped some toward becoming self-disciplined in their learning and self-confident.

The Student-Instructor Relationship

Both the instructor and students suggested that the character building aspects of the course were strengthened by the student-instructor relationship. According to the students and the instructor, the strength of the relationship depended on the ways that the instructor connected with students, the nature of the feedback provided on assignments, and the open attempts to befriend students. For example, the instructor tried to connect on a more personal level with students by doing small things that make a big difference, such as greeting them, calling the students by name, "chatting in the margins with them about personal aspects of their responses" (personal communication, November 21, 2007), making additional contact through phone or email, and offering help to students if he can sense frustration, nervousness or other needs on their part. He also placed great emphasis on open and honest feedback, stating, "I go out of my way to encourage [the students] to respond honestly and personally, and try to respond in kind" (personal communication, November 21, 2007). Likewise, one student expressed, "I know that he is reading [my assignments] and responding honestly. Because of this, at least in my case, the instructor encourages honest thought...in my responses" (personal communication, March 1, 2008). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the instructor's relationship with the students was based on mutual trust and respect, resulting in friendship. This type of relationship was important to the instructor in order to "move from a hierarchical

relationship to a personal one” (personal communication, November 21, 2007). This trust and respect resulted in students feeling free or safe to think for themselves and thus deepen their responses to the questions posed in the course. Describing the relationship, the instructor said, “Mostly it’s just a matter of wanting to be friends with these great folks” (personal communication, November 21, 2007). And students reciprocate the friendship he offers them: “You almost felt like you were corresponding with a friend on a subject you both had interest in” (personal communication, July 19, 2007). In these ways, the student-instructor relationship rendered effective the more explicit character building aspects of the course.

Other Factors

The context of distance education, specifically independent study provided certain advantages that contributed to the development of character. These advantages included, flexibility of time frame and location, student independence (Wedemeyer, 1971, 1981; Garrison, 2000; Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2004), and student agency. The flexible timeframe and independent nature of the course requires students to discipline themselves. As a student commented, “[the course] challenges people to be self-motivated. You have to set your own schedule. If you don’t get things done it falls back on one person. So I think it just encourages that self-initiative for character building” (personal communication, August 30, 2007). The students additionally perceived that the time flexibility and asynchronous nature of the course facilitated a deeper exploration of moral themes. The students also reported that the independent study context influenced the student-teacher relationship. Although there was little face-to-face or other synchronous interaction with the instructor, some students felt the course was more of a

personal and direct discussion with the instructor than what they typically experienced in the classroom. The course context made the experience, as one student described, “more personal and...more of a one-on-one experience” (personal communication, October 17, 2007). Finally, students suggested that the emphasis placed on making choices and personalizing the course content influenced their character building: “I can analyze the works all day, but if I don’t personalize it or apply it then it won’t affect my character at all. It is when you apply it that it can affect your character” (personal communication, February 9, 2008).

In summary, students and the instructor perceived that the content, instructional conversation (including a helpful, trusting, and respectful relationship between the student and the instructor), and other factors (such as the flexibility of time frame and location, as well as by student independence, readiness, and agency) both directly and indirectly influenced students’ character development.

Although some researchers suggest that character development in distance education is more difficult (Chachra, 2005; Huff & Frey, 2005), these findings suggest that character development is not only possible in distance education, but also amenable to it. That is, this study suggests that aspects of the distance nature of the course seemed to enhance the character-building aims of the course. For example, the independent and 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.

Conclusion

These findings suggest that character development in the context of higher education distance learning is often immanent in best practice instruction (see Lapsley, 2008). It recommends that teachers and instructional designers: (a) encourage the exploration of moral and character related themes and issues inherent in their content; (b) engage students in conversation and promote deeper learning through offering choices, asking meaningful questions that invite students to personally apply what they are learning, writing for clarity and coherence, emphasizing depth over breadth, and providing prompt and helpful feedback; (c) build edifying relationships of trust, respect, and friendship with students; (d) leverage the distance education context to promote deeper learning and student responsibility; and (e) help students to consciously choose to learn and develop.

For the researchers, this study offers important insight into student perceptions of character development that have long been missing from the literature on character development and education (see Osguthorpe, 2009). It also makes a contribution to how literature can be used as a means of character development, but, most importantly, this study provides some possible lines of research related to character development in the context of distance education. These possibilities include: the importance of the student-teacher relationship and how that relationship obtains including the quality of communication that invites student responsibility and deep learning; the role of students in character development and how to help students take responsibility for such

development; and the relationship between deep learning (see Entwistle, 2000; McCune & Entwistle, 2000) and character development.

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APPENDIX D: SAMPLE OF AUDIT TRAIL

10/17/07

Follow-up questions for Joy:

- Thank you for sharing what you have and for sending your assignments
- Have you thought of any specific Ah ha moments that you have recalled from the course?
- Have you found the feedback from Dr. Walker that made you feel that you knew him, like you had mentioned?
- Which questions that were asked were particularly helpful, that helped you think of things more deeply? (On this I might use what you wrote and compare your responses and run that past you)
- What do you attribute the character building that you experienced too?
- Can you distinguish between character building and spiritual strengthening for me?

Conducted the follow-up interview with Joy on 10/17/07

12/4/2007

I had a meeting with Dr. William on the 29th of November. I discussed with Dr. Williams that I have completed 14 interviews of students, I have followed up with some on some questions the resulted from reviewing those interviews. Also I have interviewed Dr. Walker and sent him some follow-up questions and he responded in writing. He wants me to bring in some van Manen on writing versus verbal interviews. I think the written responses are deeper, more well thought out and thus more valuable. But this is a slight modification that I need to make to my methods chapter. I clarified with the IRB a month or more ago that participants would be given the option to respond to follow-up questions in writing. I think Dr. Williams is right, I need to do a good job of justifying it (what I had was that non-primary participants would be asked to write, but now I did an interview with all 14 people who said they would participate so now I am letting all participants follow-up in writing).

Next steps are to finish thematic analysis, then I want to organize the themes, like Spradley (need to be explicit in this discussion, even though Spradely is not really a hermeneutic phenomenologist, so if I can find a better source to explain this step in these terms, but Spradely will do).

I will do this first with each individual, then I will combine the individual analysis in one. However, I have mentally and some on paper seeing themes that cut across people.

I will also select the individuals to highlight and write up their stories. Those I choose not to “highlight” I will write up vignettes of important stories with out trying to describe their whole experience in the course.

The stories, vignettes and individual and overall analysis I will share with each participant and ask them to respond to what I have written, and my analysis, as well as asking them to give me insight as to whether they agree or disagree with the overall analysis, looking at where they differed from the others in their experience. Not that I am asking them to do the negative case analysis for me, but just to contribute so I can get

their perspective on it...I think that is more emic! This includes going back through people's assignments that they have provided me, etc.

As soon as possible after that I need to (or should it be before?) I need to do the peer review. I must run my findings past the committee and get their feelings before I officially try to write up my Findings or Discussion chapter (I need to figure out exactly what Williams said was his preference).

So, he wants a chapter with stories and vignettes. Then a chapter with my analysis, and then a final chapter where I discuss the implications of my findings and recommendations for further research, etc.

I also have to get an article or two out of this research as appendixes.

But I am running into some serious time constraints since I am almost to the Christmas break and if I want to defend by the end of February, then I should be working on a final draft this Christmas and not still be trying to analyze and working thorough member checks and peer reviews. But if things work out well, I will be far enough along when I am through this process that writing it up will already really be done, I will just need to revise, but revision is painful. I know Dr. Williams doesn't want to hear this, but I am having a hard time believing that I will be ready in time to defend in February. I really lost too much time this summer when I was thinking that I needed to interview Dr. Walker first. But late summer and early Fall semester were very productive in pulling in participants and getting interviews done.

I also need to update my literature review (especially with focusing on the correct theory(ies) of distance education and literature as character ed). Rich said he would provide some guidance (with the character ed part). Perhaps I can get some help from Charles and Peter Rich on the Distance Education stuff. It seems to me the guided didactic conversation is one of the principal applicable theories, however.

12/21/2007

Still trying to go through the interviews and get an initial hierarchical view of individual themes and then I will put those together. But I still need to listen to all the interviews again and validate the transcriptions.

12/27/07

I realized that I need to write a little more...the paragraphs that van Manen talks about, but I am going to need to save that for the earliest draft of everything together. I just don't think that I will ever get things done with all 14 participants...I do think I need to simplify the analysis outline I am doing for people's reviews...but not too much. But I can send a draft past people as well.

I need to think this through more. A lot more.

2/12/2008

Here is the process I have covered so far since the interviews:

- Thematic analysis of transcripts on the individual level (looking at internal consistency or contradictions)
- Second pass of thematic analysis and Hierarchical analysis of individuals

- Combined Hierarchical analysis, looking for thematic agreement and difference among. During this process I began the process of writing linguistic transformations.
- Sending the combined analysis and each individuals hierarchical analysis to participants to interpret through conversation
- I will revise and then do “collaborative analysis” with my committee.
- Meanwhile I will be writing stories and then I will run those past Dr. Williams and once he feels good about it then I will send out for member checking. (The reason why I am writing the stories after analysis is because I wanted to use their words for analysis because I believe that would lend to a more emic perspective.)
- When I have revised analysis and worked with Dr. Williams to refine that, I will work with the rest of the committee.
- With the stories, after member checks, I will run it past committee, etc. for peer review.

2/13/08-2/14/08

Sent out emails with individual analysis and combined thematic analysis to participants for some “analysis through conversation” and member checking.

3/24/08

Sent out for member check/participant participation on the analysis (as of 3/24/08)

Who have I heard back from	Who do I still hope to hear back from
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Michaela (good feedback) • Bob • Leia • Hannah • Dr. Walker • Kate (still need her feedback though) • Joy (still need her feedback though) (* sent follow-up 3/20/08) • Sam (good feedback!)** • Victoria (good feedback) ** • Lucy (good feedback!) • Helen (* sent follow-up 3/20/08) • Marian (* sent follow-up 3/20/08) • Mort (* sent follow-up 3/20/08) • Pam (* sent follow-up 3/20/08) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eve (* sent follow-up 3/20/08)

4/5/08

Diversity of Participants

Participant	English Major	Degree Seeking	Off Campus	Gender	LDS
Bob	No	No	Yes	Male	Yes
Eve	No	Yes	Yes	Female	Yes
Hannah	No	Yes	Yes	Female	No
Helen	No	Yes	Yes	Female	Yes
Joy	No	Yes	Yes	Female	No
Kate	No*	No	Yes	Female	Yes
Leia	Yes	No	Yes	Female	Yes
Lucy	No	Yes	Yes	Female	Yes
Marian	No	No	Yes	Female	No
Michaela	Yes	Yes	Yes	Female	Yes
Mort	No	Yes	Yes	Male	No
Pam	Yes	Yes	Yes	Female	Yes
Sam	Yes	Yes	No	Male	Yes
Victoria	Yes	Yes	No	Female	Yes
Totals	5/9	4/10	12/2	11/ 3	10/4

APPENDIX E: REPORTED STUDENT CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

The following shows perceived outcomes students reported as character development.

	Moral Character	Relational Character	Spiritual Character	Performance Character
Bob	(Moral Courage)	(Improved relationship with family, Improved communication with wife, gained common interest / sharing with wife, sharing with students)		
Eve				(Desire to continue her education)
Hannah	(Moral Courage -standing up for others' beliefs)	(Open-minded and improved relationships)		(Self-disciplined learner)
Helen	(Moral Courage)		(Humility and faith)	
Joy	(Moral Courage, Moral Desire)	(More general-- appreciation of friendship)		
Kate	(Moral Desire-- desire to be better, moral courage)			(Self confidence as a writer)
Leia		(Communication with husband and more open-minded)		

Lucy	(Moral Desire- desire to be better, make a difference in the world)	(Open- mindedness, improved relationship)		
Marian				(Self-discipline in taking distance courses, Confidence in taking distance courses)
Michaela	(1. Moral Desire to be better, 2. Moral Discernment- more discerning about what she watches, etc.)	(Open- mindedness- consider others' perspectives)		(More analytical, greater appreciation for literature, more creative)
Mort			(Hope)	
Pam	(Moral Desire- desire to be a better person, reprioritize)		(Faith- Committed Religious Beliefs)	(More analytical, deeper learner)
Sam	(Desire to be a better person)	(Sharing what he was learning)	(Faith)	
Victoria	(1. Moral Discernment 2. Moral Courage)		(Faith-How to come close to Christ Religious commitment, Charity)	

And who reported each of the outcomes (based on initial reports):

	Moral Character Traits and Strengths	Relational Character Traits and Strengths	Spiritual Character Traits and Strengths	Performance Character Traits and Strengths
Bob	C	C	X	X
Eve			X	C
Hannah	C	C	X	C
Helen	C	X	C	
Joy	C	C	X	X
Kate	C		X	C
Leia	X	C	X	X
Lucy	C	C	X	X
Marian		X		C
Michaela	C	X	X	C
Mort		X	C	X
Pam	C	X	C	C
Sam	C	C	C	X
Victoria	C	X	C	X

Key:

C = participant reported this outcome and categorized it as character development...

X = participant reported this as an outcome, but did not explicitly categorize it as character development.

Here is a more detailed break down from the previous table:

Type of Character Development	Bob	Eve	Hannah	Helen	Joy	Kate	Leia	Lucy	Marian	Michaela	Mort	Pam	Sam	Victoria
Moral														
Moral Desire				C	C	C		C				C	C	C
Moral Discernment					X	X	X	C		C		X	X	X
Moral Courage	C		C	X	C	C				X				C
Relational														
General Improvement	C				C			C						
Open Mindedness	X		C		X		C	C		C		X		
Sharing with Others	C		X	X	X			X	X	X	X		C	X
Improved Communication	C						C							
Spiritual														
Humility	X		X	C						X				
Faith	X	X	X	C	X	X		X		X		C	C	C
Hope			X								C			
Charity														C
Performance														
Self-disciplined	X		C						C		X	X		X
Analytical/Deep learner	X	X				X		X	X	C	X	C	X	
Imagination & Creativity	X					X				C		X		X
Appreciation for Literature	X	X		X			X	X		C	X		X	X
Desire for education	X	C			X	X	X	X		X				
Self-Confidence	X				X	C	X		C	X		X		

Key:

C = participant reported this outcome and initially categorized it as character development.

X = participant reported this as an outcome, but did not explicitly categorize it as character development initially (though some opinions changed due to participation in the study upon further reflection and as participants reviewed others' comments).

APPENDIX F: INSTRUCTOR GOALS AND OBSERVED STUDENT CHARACTER

DEVELOPMENT

Analysis of Instructor's Course Goals and Observed Character Development

Type of Character Development	Instructor	Comment
Moral Character		
Moral Desire		
Moral Discernment	G	"I wanted the course to be...an opening up of entirely new ways to read not just of fantasy or even of the best literature, but how to read life" (personal communication, November 21, 2007).
Moral Courage	O	Yesterday a student finishing the course wrote: "...My eyes have been opened and my resolve has been strengthened" (personal communication, November 21, 2007).
Relational Character		
General Improvement		
Open Mindedness	G	Built-in cultural reach is an inherent advantage of the design of the course. Since Lewis is Anglican and Tolkien Catholic, when we address their Christian insights we are speaking of a different sort of Christianity than our usual Mormon version. The course is not aimed so much at inclusion of other Christian views as at clarification and expansion of our Latter-day Saint perspective. Lewis especially can be so convincing about traditional Christian doctrine that he demands reconsideration of some Mormon views we tend to take for granted (personal communication, November 21, 2007).
Sharing with Others	G	"Argue with some intelligent interested person—yourself, if you can find no one as intelligent and interested—the proposition: 'Fantasy is useless'" (Walker & Clark, 1982, p. 10).

Improved
Communication

Spiritual Character	G	I had discovered things in this territory that were life changing and character building. Things that really I thought should be shared. I thought, 'It is a shame for people to miss this' (personal communication, October 9, 2007).
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Humility

Faith

Hope	O	Learning...can even provide a kind of inoculation against the disappointments of life. One of my students described her character enhancement through the course in terms of <i>The Once and Future King</i> : "The best thing for disturbances of the spirit," replied Merlyn, beginning to puff and blow, "is to learn. That is the one thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only love and lose your moneys to a monster. There is only one thing for it then: to learn. Learning is the thing for you" (personal communication, November 21, 2007).
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Charity

Performance Character	G	One of his hopes for students taking the course was for them to "take off with this kind of course, under the thrilling impetus of their own learning momentum, into some stratospheric educational territory" (personal communication, November 21, 2007)
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Self-disciplined	G	I thought a challengingly inviting independent study course could, minimally, help students realize they were in charge of their own learning enough to discipline themselves through a course where they had to motivate and pace and bring to fruition their own study. At the least I hoped students would come out of the course better disciplined, more self-starting and proactively engaged in their own education (personal communication, November 21, 2007).
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Analytical/Deep learner	G	“We’re studying selected touchstones of Christian fantasy with sufficient thoroughness to enable us to read intelligently any literature of the genre, appreciating its unique perspectives and relating them to personal values” (Walker & Clark, 1982, p. 6)
Imaginative & Creative	G	Tolkien and Lewis have taught me to imagine more, to envision the invisible. Merry talks of the “things that are deeper and higher,” and much of this fiction attunes readers to see that, to realize possibilities beyond what I’d recognized. My wife swears that since reading <i>The Lord of the Rings</i> I talk to trees, and even I admit after meeting Treebeard that everything is more alive than I had realized (personal communication, November 21, 2007).
Appreciation for Literature	G	He explained that he wanted to teach “great literature itself with the invitation that it might even take them to better literature” (personal communication, October 9, 2007).
Desire for education	O	One thing for sure: at least two dozen students over the past two decades have used Christian fantasy as a bridge to return to higher education (personal communication, November 21, 2007).
Self-Confidence	O	I’ve observed some instances of character building through the Christian Fantasy course. Some of that is straightforward strengthening of self-confidence, as per the letter I received this week from [a female student]: “I loved the course. I have always struggled to believe in my ability to understand and interpret literature. I was ashamed and felt very inadequate and ‘underread.’ I wanted to stretch myself, to hush my recital of voices telling me I was not good enough. This course has changed me, blessed me with confidence and joy. I am able to see things as they were meant to be, not as I have experienced them in the past. What made this all possible? I believe it is the sharing of self that was expected. It was the adventure of escape from previously conceived notions of my own self. I will never be the same. I have learned to love reading through this course” (personal communication, November 21, 2007).

G = Hoped for goal or outcome of the course (also observed)

O = Character development observed by the instructor