Character Formation in Online Education
Book Review and Reflection

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ABSTRACT: **In recent years, higher education has experienced a trend toward online learning. This atmosphere presents a challenge to instructors who want to keep the rigor of a traditional classroom while navigating the demands of an online landscape and facilitating connections with students. In *Character Formation in Online Learning*, Jung (2015) attempts to illustrate methods in which character can be formed in an online environment that meets or surpasses the depth of a traditional classroom experience.**

INTRODUCTION

In the book *Character Formation in Online Education*, Jung (2015) immediately sets out with optimistic expectations and promises of revolutionary character formation throughout online education. "Online education, if it is going to effect character formation, deserves pedagogy that inspires" (p. 15). Any college professor would want to get in on that promise. Jung issues a call to readers to beware of the uprising that will ensue should they continue reading this book; their contentment with doing the regular activities of teaching will be disrupted by what comes forth in these pages. Unfortunately, in the view of this author, that does not prove to be the case.

While the point is made that "our world needs more pervasively influential, Christ-centered, others-focused people" (p. 15), Jung never clearly defines how to obtain that in the online classroom. This paper seeks to explore each area of this book through the lens of a faculty member seeking an enriched online experience for students in a business discipline.

PART 1: RISING TO THE CHALLENGE

Jung opens the first section of this book by laying the foundation for good teaching—describing the heart of a good teacher and the expectations they should have for their classes. Although this book is directed toward administrators and accrediting agencies as well as instructors, the opening of the first chapter focuses on the instructor's perspective,

calling on professors to remain focused on excellent teaching principles even in the ever-changing landscape of technology and education.

Jung's call to concentrate on educational quality in the face of challenges certainly sets the expectations for this book at a high level. The reader begins to expect many guidelines and resources for how to ensure that rigor and value are not lost in the online environment, while also striving for character formation of students. Jung stresses the importance of first recognizing who the students are (reminiscent of a target market strategy) before determining the best way to teach them.

However, the reader experiences a dilemma at the close of the first chapter. While no clear connection is made, it is logical to assume Jung opens with a discussion on good teaching because without it, how can character formation be expected? And the introduction mentions faith and Christ-centered actions multiple times. But the first mention of God in part 1 comes in a throw-away statement at the end of a paragraph. After Jung explains what students should learn and how they learn it, she says,

> A skillful educator knows these attitudes and tools. This knowledge, together with the desire and work of God's Spirit, makes for the greatest impact on students, regardless of the scholarly discipline. The Spirit's inspiration knows no bounds. (p. 21)

While Jung's statement is terrific, it appears to the reader as a last-minute addition to ensure faith integration in the content of this book. It is a precarious position to assume in

a book, telling the audience how to create character formation but then generalizing that the Spirit will do the work. While that may not be the position Jung is trying to take, it could come across this way to the audience. It is as if, in one paragraph the importance of learning management systems is being discussed, and in the next paragraph, the divine inspiration of the Holy Spirit is now the topic of conversation. These appear as two different entities, and perhaps the message of the book would be more readily accepted if a stronger connection was made. There is certainly room—indeed, a strong need—for both teaching principles and faith integration to be in college classrooms, but this idea just seems to pop up as an underdeveloped thought.

Jung skips back from a discussion of faith integration into the benefits of online courses. These benefits, such as less semester preparation once the course is up and running, more time then to create a positive environment, and the ability to share online courses with faculty for feedback and insight, are presented in a well and thought-out manner. However, there is no further mention in this section of faith, and the reader is left wanting to see that stronger connection between the two.

Jung moves forward in explaining what an online course is and how to set one up, shifting her audience now to that of a professor who is brand new to online teaching or potentially teaching in general. The explanation of course assessments and ratemyprofessor.com does not seem to contribute to the overall idea of character formation for students. Jung informs the reader, "In the online course, your pedagogy and the knowledge of your discipline converge and are communicated through the means of technological instructional practices" (p. 27). But *how* is this done? An effective explanation does not appear.

Jung also points out that students need a social presence to feel connected to a course. For the instructor audience, perhaps it is more beneficial to give time management tips to implement when teaching an online course so as to provide better social presence rather than just stating the need for social presence as fact and moving forward. Instead, several pages are spent discussing learning management systems and how to use them. Yet, no explanation is given as to how to use an LMS to create character formation. Explaining what a homepage is and how to edit announcements is information readers can glean from an LMS tutorial. It does not seem to have a place in this book.

It is in Chapter 3 that the audience shifts yet again, and course designers are now the focus of the text. Qualifications of a skilled course designer are listed almost like a resume. It is unclear to the reader if this information is directed at a professor who is searching for a course designer or if this is a checklist with which course designers should measure themselves. Perhaps this section is for administrators who make hiring decisions. Either way, a paragraph or two connecting the importance of a good course designer in relation to student character formation would be more beneficial to all audiences than pages of course designer qualifications. In a very frustrating moment, Jung feels the need to tell the reader, "Almost every LMS also has a Help button built into the program where information can be readily accessed by professors and students alike" (p. 45). Why is such a simplistic statement included in a book about character formation in online learning? The topic seems to be forgotten, and the reader is left struggling with what to expect next.

In an unexpected turn, Jung discusses how to create a loser course, which provides humor for the audience. While it is beneficial to see what *not* to do, Jung leaves the first section with a promise that the following chapters will address what one *should* do, and it appears the audience has shifted back to professors.

PART 2: ELEMENTS OF ONLINE CHARACTER FORMATION

Jung opens part two of this book with a compelling illustration of faith integration and explanation of what it truly means to have a "heart" for something. It appears that Jung has hit her stride as she connects formational learning with the aspect of the heart. As she further develops this idea, Jung states, "Formational learning requires emotions to be involved, bringing greater value to what we understand, which prompts change" (p. 54). Again, the audience appears to be reflecting on the instructor now, and excitement resonates in the reader as it seems the following pages will give insight on how to reflect heart in the online environment, reach into students' lives, and catapult a change that is worthwhile and meaningful.

But, that is as far as the connection goes. Suddenly a discussion emerges about the soul and Christian history. Yes, both of these are very worthwhile topics, but the stable connection to online learning that was given for the heart is not reflected as strongly here. Jung says that understanding the soul "allows us to address it with greater discernment" (p. 55). This seems like a logical point to delve into methods of addressing the soul in online learning, thereby participating in character formation, but alas, that will not be happening at this part of the book. Instead, Jung adds one sentence to tie in character formation with this substantial discussion of the soul: "This kind of reflection in online classes is possible through well-framed questions" (p. 57).

Unexpectedly, the topic of the entire book seems too simple, and the information leading up to this point appears less relevant if well-formed questions are the key that opens the door to character formation.

The discussion around a well-framed question proves beneficial for the reader, drawing together the focus of the soul, the character formation of the student, and the learning activities that facilitate this process. If every section of this book were so well developed, the tone of this summary would be vastly different. While the examples given for well-framed questions focus on course content that fits better for a religion course, Jung does expand on what creates a meaningful question, allowing professors from other disciplines the opportunity to extrapolate these words into more course-specific assignments.

As Jung moves into chapter 5, the text is still focused on professors, but the topic changes to methods that facilitate a collaborative learning environment. The use of small groups is suggested, and readers are encouraged to prayerfully consider the formation of groups based on gender, discipline, etc. While the author does not disagree with this approach, this is yet another area that appears to be thrown in to cover faith integration bases. As a matter of fact, on the following page, Jung states, "There are many interesting people we have not had the pleasure of knowing because our first visual impression of them hinders our openness to initiate a conversation" (p. 65). It appears this would be a place to naturally insert faith integration in the context of unfair judgments and pre-opinions. But it is at this point that Jung decides to include an analogy to *Tootsie*, the 1982 Dustin Hoffman movie. While humorous, the undercurrent of faith integration would seem more genuine if expanded on in the same manner as this movie scene.

However, not all hope is lost as Jung explores the idea of transformational discussion posts and shares practical prompts and ideas for further engagement. An instrumental discussion rubric is included as well, although this rubric could consist of aspects of faith integration to drive the character formation of the student. Jung continues to offer examples of character-forming coursework, but it is all in a religious/faith-based course, which seems a little easier to accomplish.

Yet, in what this reader determines as one of the most significant parts of this text, Jung provides suggested dialogue for a video conference, dialogue that genuinely engages students in character formation and allows instructors a foundation for applying learning activities to multiple courses in multiple disciplines. Jung urges students to discuss the differences they see in themselves since starting the course or how their love for people has grown, as well as other insightful, reflective questions that can apply to any discipline.

As the book progresses, it appears there are a few opportunities for the author to make a stronger connection between learning and character formation. Jung states, "The virtual atmosphere created by professor and course designer and the in-class atmosphere created by the professor are both indispensable contributions to the learning environment" (p. 83). The author uses this statement to indicate the importance of the classroom environment that should be replicated in an online atmosphere, but by drawing out the connection of the learning environment to character formation, this chapter would appear to stay more on task. Instead, the author discusses the use of smartphones and collaborative documents in a hybrid classroom; while these are useful student tools, they appear slightly out of place when not addressed in the context of character formation.

In what is another useful aspect of this text, Jung provides practical application of character-forming questions to various disciplines. She also stresses the importance of professor involvement with students, even in an online capacity. It is snippets like these that illustrate the core of this book, even though the theme does not clearly reflect throughout every chapter.

Unfortunately, the section on social media leaves the reader puzzled. Jung delves into various social media platforms but does not indicate how each one can contribute to character formation. So why expend so much effort on describing social media platforms that may or may not be relevant at the time of publishing? This chapter would be better spent explaining the effects and challenges of overall social media on character formation. Jung also appears to oversimplify the use of social media and the ramifications it can have on student lives. In just a few pages, suddenly faculty can:

> …witness changes in students' thinking processes, a greater attentiveness to their own integration of faith and learning, changes in their biblical worldview, and reflections on applied knowledge that transforms their own character…. (p. 110)

Is it possible for the use of social media to be a catalyst for all of these changes? The support provided in the chapter does not provide a strong enough foundation to believe this.

PART 3: BUILDING BETTER OUTCOMES

Jung closes the book with a chapter on assessment and attempts to tie this idea to stewardship in what seems like another far reach for faith integration. The audience is yet

again focused more toward professors, but this topic seems almost an add-in at the last minute to maintain expectations of educational literature to address assessment. The book then comes to an abrupt conclusion, although finally character formation is the main focus again.

CONCLUSION

While the lofty ideas put forth in this text are certainly what faith-based instructors should strive for, the reader is left wanting on how to obtain actual character formation within an online (or in-class) experience. Confusion lends itself to who the target market of this book really is. Occasionally the author is addressing professors, at times the instructional designers, but rarely the same audience throughout and with no clear organizational plan.

It appears as if most of the subject in this text could work online or in the traditional classroom. Still, the online application is mentioned offhandedly throughout the text almost as if to make sure the book contents accurately reflect the book title or to sell more copies by addressing the newer, shinier landscape of education.

Jung sets out with the right idea at the beginning of this book, and throughout the text, one can catch a glimpse of that intention. However, the support is not as strong as the reader would hope when reading through a book devoted to character formation.

REFERENCES

Jung, J. J. (2015). *Character formation in online education: A guide for instructors, administrators, and accrediting agencies.* Zondervan Academic.