DEVELOPING MORAL MUSCLE IN A LITERATURE-BASED BUSINESS ETHICS COURSE

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Developing Moral Muscle in a Literature-Based Business Ethics Course

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ABSTRACT

Moral subjectivity (e.g., reflexivity, perspective-taking) is a necessary condition for moral development. However, widely used approaches to business ethics education, rooted in conceptualizations of ethical development as objective and quantifiable, often neglect students' subjective involvement in moral matters. In this case study we investigated subjective aspects of moral development of MBA students in a business ethics course using an alternative pedagogy based on world literature as course material. The findings elucidated that the use of literary narratives stimulated the development of "moral muscle," a dynamic moral capability that needs to be developed through regular reflection and practice. Additionally, the development of moral muscle during the course showed heterogeneity among students, with different starting positions, learning routes, and end states of their moral development. The findings contribute to a new theoretical understanding of moral development as a dynamic process – as moral muscle – with different individual change trajectories, and shed new light on how the use of literary narratives in business ethics education can stimulate this development.

Keywords: *Business ethics; Literature-based course; Moral development; Moral muscle; Individual differences; Moral imagination;*

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, numerous business scandals, rising income inequality, and the perceived failures of globalization and shareholder-focused capitalism have drawn attention to the importance of moral education in business schools (Ghoshal, 2005; Giacalone & Thompson, 2006; Hummel et al., 2018; Swanson, 2004). While business schools and MBA programs have the opportunity to contribute to a better world by educating socially responsible managers and ethically aware business leaders (Carlson & Burke, 1998; Gu & Neesham, 2014), they have instead been criticized for not sufficiently educating their students in becoming critical moral agents (Pfeffer, & Fong, 2002; Rubin & Dierdorff, 2009; Solomon, 2001; Swanson, 2004). On average, business school students have shown to cheat more in educational contexts (McCabe et al., 2006), score lower on empathetic abilities, and higher on narcissism (Brown et al., 2010). Apart from student characteristics and the content of business ethics education (Ghoshal, 2005), more attention could be paid to whether the academic philosophies and teaching approaches of business schools stimulate students' subjective involvement in and subsequent encoding of moral issues, which involves their use of empathy, reflexivity, their grasp of moral complexity, imagination, perspective-taking, and moral awareness. This pertains to the pursuit of new, alternative teaching methods that can stimulate such subjective moral development in MBA students.

The pursuit of alternative teaching methods in the business school classroom has sparked the use of film (Ayikoru & Park, 2019; Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2001) drama (Garaventa, 1998), computer games (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2019; Verzat et al., 2009), and literary narratives (Franco, 2017; Martin et al., 2018). The use of literary narratives, such as novels, books, short stories, and comics, has also been employed in business ethics education (Badaracco, 2006; Gerde & Foster, 2008; Harris & Brown, 1989; Michaelson, 2016; Shepard et al., 1997; Sucher, 2007; von Weltzien Hoivik, 2009). The pedagogical use of narratives

allows students to immerse themselves in a variety of narrative worlds, settings, and

characters, enabling them to engage in reflection, perspective-taking, and empathy

(Michaelson, 2016; Gottschall, 2012). Additionally, novels are assumed to stimulate a more

holistic way of thinking about what it means to live a good life in relation to one's

environment (Michaelson, 2016), confronting students not only with abstract philosophies or

business dilemmas but with the larger moral challenges and the 'grey areas' of morally laden

situations (Garaventa, 1998).

Pedagogical approaches towards business ethics education that are rooted in

conceptualizations of ethical development as objective and quantifiable by focusing on traits,

psychological states, and generalizable developmental steps (Haidt, 2001; Kohlberg &

Hersh, 1977; Rest et al., 1999), neglect less readily measurable elements of moral

subjectivity (e.g., imagination, perspective taking, and reflexivity; Hunter, 2008). While

there is anecdotal evidence that using literary narratives in the business ethics classroom

stimulates such moral development (Badaracco, 2006; Garaventa, 1998; Gerde & Foster,

2008; Kennedy & Lawton, 1992; McAdams & Koppensteiner, 1992; Michaelson, 2016;

Shepard et al., 1997; Sucher, 2007; von Weltzien Hoivik, 2009), studies investigating

student experience and personal development when using narrative pedagogy are scarce. In

particular, the available literature lacks insight into the subjective processes through which

narrative pedagogy has its effects (i.e., *what* changes as a result) and the subjective pathways

through which narrative pedagogy has its effects (i.e., *how* these changes happen).

This study aims to address this gap in the existing literature by investigating students'

moral development during a literature-based business ethics course. This study contributes in

three ways to the field of business ethics education. First, we induced from our analyses the

concept of "moral muscle", which turned out to be central in explaining *what* aspect of

subjective moral development is affected. Moral muscle encompasses moral awareness and

the motivation for daily moral practice, which contribute to gradually building moral

character (Hunter, 2008; Sennett, 1998). The concept of moral muscle suggests a pliable and

dynamic moral capability that can be developed in a business school setting. In contrast,

current approaches often rely on well-established scales that measure stable predispositions

or personality factors in moral reasoning, suggesting these cannot be trained (Brown &

Treviño, 2006; Haidt, 2001; Reynolds, 2006)

Second, the study reveals individual differences in the training of moral muscle (i.e.,

how the desired changes come about). Three heterogenous change trajectories were

identified, showing different starting positions, learning trajectories, and idealizations of

moral muscle development. This finding can be compared with widely applied theory that

describes moral development as a generalizable, step-wise process through universally fixed,

sequential stages (e.g. Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977). Instead, our findings resonate with process-

oriented approaches on how morality comes about (Solinger et al., 2020). Finally, our study

provides new empirical input to an ongoing debate on alternative pedagogies in the context

of business ethics education (e.g., Badaracco, 2006; Michaelson, 2016; Shepard et al., 1997;

von Weltzien Hoivik, 2009). Overall, the awareness of how a narrative pedagogy stimulates

the growth of moral muscle through different heterogenous change trajectories can prove

crucial for educators, offers new theoretical insights into the dynamic nature of moral

development and contributes to a future research agenda in this area.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

We define moral subjectivity as *the totality of mental processes, which produce the*

moral awareness behind a personal stance regarding a moral issue at hand[1]. Moral

subjectivity is thus a psychological and locally constructed phenomenon, comprising mental

processes such as the experience of moral emotions (e.g., Greene et al., 2004), moral

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1 Not to be confused with moral subjectivism or moral relativism, which stipulate that there cannot
be any objective moral truths or standards.

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imagination (Young & Annisette, 2009), several modes of moral reasoning, moral

complexity (Carlson & Burke, 1998), reflection (Booth, 1988), and perspective-taking (Bal

& Veltkamp, 2013; de Waal, 2009; Hoffman, 2001). Relatedly, students' *subjective moral*

development – which we define as students' maturation in the deployment of their personal

moral stance in complex, real-life situations – is therefore of prime concern in the business

ethics classroom.

Our emphasis on the *subjective* aspect of moral development is intentional, given the

widespread quantitative and rational approach to business ethics. In his book "The Death of

Character", Hunter (2008) cogently describes the origin of this state of affairs in how the

inherent complexities of moral subjectivity were quickly compressed by influential

psychologists like Gordon Allport, who effectively stressed the importance of quantifiability

and measurability in business ethics research and teaching. This subsequently meant an

approach to business ethics to date that favors well-established scales that measure stable

predispositions or personality factors in moral reasoning (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Ciulla,

2004; Haidt, 2001), exemplified by constructs such as the Dark Triad of personality, social

value orientation, prosocial orientation, and moral intuition. The problem with this approach

is that measurement of predispositions suggests that ethical behavior cannot be trained or

changed. Moreover, more complex, but less readily measurable modes of moral subjectivity

like moral reasoning, imagination, empathy, perspective taking, reflexivity, and the notion of

moral character have received less attention (Hunter, 2008). These latter aspects of moral

subjectivity form a necessary condition for moral development and, more generally, for

being able to discern what is the 'right thing to do' in morally charged situations, especially

when these situations and issues become complex (e.g., Ghoshal, 2005; Hunter, 2008;

Michaelson, 2016; Sucher, 2007; Young, & Annisette, 2009).

Narrative teaching methods are uniquely positioned to positively impact students' subjective moral development. In business ethics education, narrative pedagogy has become ubiquitous (Michealson, 2016), whereby we define narrative as "the representation of real or fictitious events and situations in a time sequence" (Prince, 1982, p. 1; see also Rudrum, 2005). The most popular narrative method, the use of case studies, was developed to address the limitations of traditional teaching methods, with textbooks and abstract theory (Mari, 2010). While cases have a strong narrative component, they are written to efficiently prompt students to think in a particular direction, or they end with a "decision cliffhanger": the moment where—an often binary—central decision needs to be made (Grafström & Jonsson, 2019; Michaelson, 2016). Therefore, they are less messy versions of reality since "unnecessary" details are left out, and efficiency is deemed crucial (Grafström & Jonsson, 2019). The limitations of cases for business ethics education have sparked the relatively new pedagogical method of using books, novels, and short stories in the classroom, first introduced by Coles (1989). Various studies have proposed that literary narratives facilitate the strengthening of moral subjectivity, involving concepts such as moral complexity, emotional involvement, vivid reading experiences, moral imagination, and reflexivity that allows multiple perspectives toward moral issues (Badaracco, 2006). Michaelson (2016) thus stated that "a good novel is to a case study what case method is to dry lecturing" (p. 595).

Making complexity, imagination, and emotions part of business ethics curricula has been argued to better prepare students to become more discerning and morally aware business managers (Marques, 2019). Moral awareness here refers to "a person's determination that a situation contains moral content and legitimately can be considered from a moral point of view" (Reynolds, 2006, p. 233), which means paying attention to different moral aspects in the organization and one's own place within the larger societal system (Solinger et al., 2020). Moral awareness thereby is dynamic and can be seen as a

complex interplay of personal factors, such as ethical predispositions and moral intuitions (Haidt, 2001; Reynolds, 2006), intersecting with the characteristics of moral issues, such as their proximity and the magnitude of their consequences (Jones, 1991), combined with contextual factors relevant to the situation (Solinger et al., 2020; Trevino, 1986).

Literary narratives can offer learning experiences relevant for business ethics education since they have the capacity to stimulate empathy and moral awareness (Dodell-Feder & Tamir, 2018). Additionally, narratives can function as safe arenas for exploring moral issues (Boyd, 2009) and discussing sensitive, personal, or complex ethical issues in social settings (Canning, 2017). Novels and short stories are often colloquially referred to as "literary" when they are complex, challenging, or thought-provoking—*defamiliarizing* the reader with new language or ideas (Dixon et al., 1993; Hakemulder, 2004). Previous research has hypothesized a variety of ways in which literary narratives can be valuable in the context of business ethics education, which can be grouped in two main streams: literary narratives that offer moral complexity, and those that stimulate moral imagination.

Reading Literature for Moral Complexity

Protagonists in books and short stories often face intricate moral challenges in complex environments, whereby there is no simple solution (Nussbaum, 1998). These are often not clear-cut dilemmas but ambiguous, complex, and hard to immediately recognize, which resembles how ethical challenges often present themselves in real life (Werhane, 2002; Young & Annisette, 2007). When reading a novel, readers have to reconstruct the story in their minds (Bal, 2009). Similarly, moral challenges in novels also have to be reconstructed, and in this reconstructive process recognizing and defining a moral challenge has been considered a valuable exercise for business ethics students (Harris & Brown, 1989; Young & Annisette, 2007; Sucher, 2007). Moreover, possible solutions to moral challenges in literary narratives are also complex, often representing different norms and values, social

contexts, and multiple characters and stakeholders (Singer & Singer, 2005). This sense-making aspect of reading literature, through which the reader has to gradually infer morality instead of being directly told what is right or wrong, can be fruitful for stimulating moral reflection (Booth, 1988). Therefore, the more complex ethical layers in literature can be seen as invitations to ethical evaluation (Nussbaum, 1998).

Another aspect of literature that contributes to its complexity is that novels and short stories extend beyond the realm of business stories and mirror all facets of life (Harris & Brown, 1989). Due to their length, rich detail, character development, and complex storylines, literary narratives offer readers a broad perspective, with stories sometimes spanning different cultures and times—sometimes the whole lifetime of a character. This offers readers a more holistic perspective on how to be as a person and not only on how to act in specific organizational circumstances (Michaelson, 2016; Young & Annisette, 2009). This more holistic perspective is, according to Giacalone and Thompson (2006, p.267), what has been often lacking in business schools, where students are socialized into an "organization-centered worldview," focused on profit-making and materialism. The focused use of literary narratives in a classroom setting can help students to reflect on these market logics, and to critically evaluate them in relation to alternative moralities. Literature can help students ask questions about their own place in the world and the role of ethics: 'What sort of person do I want to be?' (Michaelson, 2016; Young & Annisette, 2009).

Reading Literature for Moral Imagination

The complexity of literary narratives combined with immersive reading experiences can offer a safe playground for business ethics students to develop moral imagination (Nussbaum, 1998; Young & Annisette, 2009). According to Johnson (1994, p. 6), this encompasses the "imagination to discern what is morally relevant in situations, to understand empathetically how others experience things and to envision the full range of possibilities

open to a particular case." Moral imagination allows people to proactively recognize moral

challenges instead of reactively responding at a later stage (Hargrave et al., 2020), to engage

in systems thinking by considering multiple stakeholders and perspectives (Werhane, 2008),

and to act in new ways by being able to imagine multiple possible outcomes (Johnson,

1994).

According to Hargrave and colleagues (2020) morally imaginative sense-making

consists of reproductive imagination, productive imagination, and free reflection. We argue

that literary narratives can contribute to each of these steps. First, while reading novels and

short stories, readers often become absorbed into the story world (Gerrig, 1993) where they

can playfully practice with recognizing a variety of moral challenges (Michaelson, 2016;

Sucher, 2007). Through experiencing characters who are unfamiliar to them, students can be

confronted with limitations in their own experience and knowledge, which can expand their

horizons (Nussbaum, 1998) and extend their repertoire for proactively recognizing different

moral situations in the future (Young & Annisette, 2009). This can contribute to

reproductive imagination, which consists of recognizing what is morally relevant in a

situation, extending beyond one's personal limitations and bias (Johnson, 1994; Hargrave et

al., 2020). The use of literary narratives can also contribute to *productive imagination* –

looking at a morally challenging situation from multiple perspectives (Johnson, 1994;

Hargrave et al., 2020). Central to this ability is empathy—understanding and considering

other points of view (Johnson, 1994)—which has been regarded as crucial for moral

development (Fesmire, 2003; De Waal, 2009). Reading novels has been shown to stimulate

empathy and theory of mind in readers (Dodell-Feder & Tamir, 2018; Ferrari et al., 2013) by

exposing them to different characters and new ways of thinking about moral situations

(Hakemulder, 2000) and by simulating perspective-taking (Hoffman, 2001). Finally, literary

narratives can stimulate *reflection* (Hargrave et al., 2020), whereby people think ahead and

imagine different possible courses of action. This is the most creative part of moral

imagination and should ideally not be limited by reality or personal boundaries, making

fictional narratives ideal practicing grounds (Michaelson, 2016). Narrative experiences have

been labeled "simulations" of real life, stimulating mental processes similar to learning from

experience (Mar & Oatley, 2008), encouraging moral improvisation for future moral

challenges (Michaelson, 2016). Johnson (1994) argues people need both imagination as well

as reason since these are not opposites but complementary to moral imagination and project

different creative solutions onto the future. The immersive experiences offered by complex

literary narratives rely on both cerebral as well as emotional sense-making processes,

strengthening their mutual application in moral imagination processes (Harris & Brown,

1989; Nussbaum, 1998; Young & Annisette, 2009), which has been considered crucial for

business ethics students and managers (Fesmire, 2003; Hargrave et al., 2020).

      The Present Study. Building on research on how literature offers moral complexity

and the opportunity to practice moral imagination, this study aims to investigate whether a

literature-based business ethics course offers MBA students a learning experience that is

different from widely used business ethics courses. While previous studies have argued the

usefulness of literature for business ethics education (Badaracco, 2006; Garaventa, 1998;

Gerde & Foster, 2008; Kennedy & Lawton, 1992; McAdams & Koppensteiner, 1992;

Michaelson, 2016; Shepard et al., 1997; Sucher, 2007; von Weltzien Hoivik, 2009), from the

present work we cannot deduce a central, focal variable around which all elements of

subjective moral development cluster. That is, it is as yet unclear what aspect of moral

subjectivity is impacted the most, as the most potent 'mechanism' of subjective moral

development in the context of a literature-based business ethics classroom. In addition to a

lack of insight into a focal construct that is impacted as a result narrative pedagogy, we also

lack insight into *how* these changes happen. This how-question pertains to the subjective

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pathways through which narrative pedagogy has its effects. The current literature on

behavioral ethics lacks insight into the temporal development of moral development (see

also Harré & Secord, 1972; Tsoukas, 1989). There is a dated but important bedrock of work

on moral development over time by Kohlberg and Hersch (1977) that portrays moral

development to occur in fixed sequences of phases that are assumed to be the same for the

entire population. This assumption does not seem highly plausible, given the fact that there

are differences in upbringings, religious backgrounds, and social contexts. Each of these

formative backgrounds will have an impact on students' starting positions, that is, their

baselines of moral subjectivity before starting the course. If starting positions are distinct, it

stands to reason that there will be different trajectories of subjective moral development that

deserve our focused attention and exploration. Our research question is: *What aspect of*

students' subjective moral development is impacted by narrative pedagogy in a business

ethics course, and what are the different subjective pathways through which narrative

pedagogy has its effects?

METHOD

Research Setting and Educational Intervention

The two problems identified require an in-depth study of students' subjective moral

development, which implies an inductive case study design. Our inductive case study

explored the impact of a literature-based business ethics course at a business school in the

Northeastern United States. Students read one work of world literature per week to reflect—

both on a personal level and in a group setting—on complex ethical decision-making,

business ethics, moral complexity, and moral leadership. The pedagogical approach was

rooted in discovery-based learning, whereby students first explore scenarios before applying

abstract theory (Alfieri et al., 2011). Ethical theory (i.e., utilitarianism, duty-based ethics,

right-based ethics, and communitarianism) was introduced to help students in their intuitive

sense-making process of the literary narratives (Sucher, 2007). The learning goals of the 13-week course revolved around recognizing moral challenge in the stories, engaging in moral reasoning and reflecting on moral leadership.

In addition to the individual reading preparation before class, class discussions were considered a vital element of this course, following narrative pedagogy (Goodson & Gill, 2011; Ironside, 2006) and social constructivist theories of education (Richardson, 2005). The structure of the class discussions was "describe, analyze, judge, and reflect," whereby (1) students would describe different elements of the story (e.g., who are the characters and what is the story setting?), then (2) analyze moral complexities (e.g., what type of moral problem or challenge is presented?), followed by (3) judging and evaluating the story's characters (e.g., how do you evaluate the character's actions and moral decisions?); after that (4) students would engage in a final overall reflection, including exploring links between the story and organizational life (Sucher, 2007).2

In the novels and short stories selected for this course, protagonists were presented with complex moral challenges in multifaceted moral environments. To show the universality of moral challenges and enhance moral imagination, the selected literary narratives revolved around a variety of characters in diverse cultural and historical contexts. Diversity was considered an important topic—five classes in the course were based on stories with female protagonists, and four others raised questions related to ethnicity and cultural change. The final selection of literature consisted of novels, short stories, plays, and autobiographical books, ranging from a deadly feud set in ancient Greece (*Antigone* by Sophocles, 1982), to modern-day leadership challenges (*Personal History*—Katharine Graham, 1998) to the moral predicaments posed to traditional clans in Nigeria when the

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2 More extensive information and/or a full syllabus of the course is available upon request

British missionaries arrived (*Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, 1958). For a full list, see

Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Research Instruments and Procedure

Given this study's exploratory focus on students' subjective moral development, we

employed an inductive case study design with a variety of in-depth qualitative methods

(Silverman, 2016). In line with a social constructivist research approach, theory was induced

from recurrent patterns in the data. This study relied on multiple qualitative data instruments

– interviews, qualitative surveys with essay questions, class observations, and change graphs

– establishing a triangulation of different data sources (Gibbert & Ruigrok, 2010; Pratt,

2009) enabling us to perform a thorough grounded analysis of personal course experience

and individual change trajectories (Gioia et al., 2013). The instruments thus helped to

achieve deeper insights into the two main research objectives: students' subjective moral

development during a literature-based business ethics course and their experienced moral

development.

The interviews were semi-structured, leaving room for extra input from the

participants (Hove & Anda, 2005) with questions centered around personal experience with

a) the literature and the weekly class sessions, and b) whether the participant had

experienced personal moral change during the course. The surveys were distributed online

via Qualtrics, with a pre-survey in the first week of the course and a post-survey in the week

after the last course session prior to students receiving their grades. In the pre-survey,

background characteristics were measured, such as age, gender, work experience.

Subsequently, people were asked in open questions to write about their views on leadership

and their future work self—how they see themselves in their future career (Brokerhof et al.,

2020; Strauss et al., 2012). In the second survey, these open questions were repeated, and

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essay questions about personal experience with the literature, class discussions, and changes in views on moral change and leadership were added.3

Furthermore, all class sessions were attended by the principal researcher, who sat in a corner of the classroom. The researcher did not participate in the discussions but quietly observed and made notes of the interactions and content (see Garcia, 2013). The sessions were audio-visually recorded through the built-in classroom recording devices of the university, allowing further analysis. Finally, in line with our interest in the temporal development moral subjectivity, students were encouraged to draw change graphs (similar to Guillemin & Drew, 2010). These contained on the x-axis the 13 course weeks and corresponding literary works; the y-axis was left blank (see Appendix A, Figure A for the plain figure and B–F for examples of the graphs). Participants were prompted to freely draw their graph in line with their personal experience in accordance with our research aim to inductively explore individual differences in week-by-week course experience (part of the second explanatory program in Cornelissen, 2017; see also Gerring & McDermott, 2007).

In choosing our instruments and procedure, we tried to prevent possible validity and reliability issues. First, we were aware that by conducting an empirical study on a graded course, there is a risk of students displaying social desirability bias (Varner & Peck, 2003). To tackle this, the research project and the course grading were entirely separated (in accordance with the institutional review board of the university) and we communicated this to the students. The principal investigator was therefore also a different person than the course instructor and the principal investigator treated data confidentially. Additionally, during the interviews and surveys, we stressed that there were no right or wrong answers and students were encouraged to answer honestly and take as much time as they needed (see for example also the instructions we gave with the change graphs in Appendix A). Students

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3 More detailed information on the data instruments (i.e. interview protocol and the surveys) is available upon request

could always skip or decline to answer questions or stop the interview entirely. We regarded the candid nature of the responses as an indication that students indeed felt they could be honest in their reflections. Second, since our aim was to explore student experiences during the course we did not want to only rely on retrospective data. Therefore, we complemented the in-depth interviews at the end of the course with class observations during the course, and open essay questions in the pre- and post-surveys. All data were collected before the final grade outcomes were known, which would therefore not affect students' reported course experience.

Sampling and Data Collection

Fifty-eight MBA students participated in the study. Students knew beforehand about the research project, and they received more information about the study during the first class. It was an elective course, and research participation was voluntary. All students signed an informed consent form with the ethical standards of the Institutional Review Board. Of the sample, 61% was female and 39% was male, with an average age of 29 years (SD = 2.8). Participants had an average work experience of 5.4 years (SD = 2.3) and read on average 2.7 novels per year (SD = 0.9). Participation in additional data collection, such as in the online surveys and interviews, was also voluntary. Data saturation approach was used (Trotter, 2012). The collected data consisted of 23 interviews, 26 hours of audio-recorded class discussions, 35 pre- and post-surveys with open essay questions, 22 personal change graphs, and 58 pages of field notes. The interviews lasted 53 minutes on average (ranging between 40–70 minutes) and took place in a private room on campus, where they were audio-recorded and later transcribed.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed according to theory building steps rooted in the method of Gioia and colleagues (2013; see also Corbin & Strauss, 2008), and followed established templates

of coding and data representation strategies (Wright et al., 2018). The coding occurred in

different steps. We coded the interviews, open survey questions, and parts of the class

discussions in Atlas.ti to uncover first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregated

dimensions (Gioia et al., 2013) to reflect on patterns in the data. Based on these patterns we

built new theoretical models. We coded, categorized and worked on these models with four

of the authors. The final two authors critically assessed the final models. Overall, the theory-

building was an iterative process, where we iterated between data, authors, and the model.

For each step, we systematically aimed to falsifying findings (Gibbert & Ruigrok, 2010) to

enhance internal validity.4

For the first objective of this study, we focused on how students experienced the use

of world literature in the business ethics classroom. While this question is admittedly broad,

it does allow students to freely, in an unprimed manner, share what aspect of their moral

subjectivity was impacted in the literature-based ethics course. Our analytical approach can

be considered in line with theoretical induction (Ketokivi & Mantere, 2010) where one is

focused on finding novel patterns of information in the data. On top of this, we also

connected with prior literature by using interview questions used in prior studies (e.g.,

Badaracco, 2006; Gerde & Foster, 2008; Michaelson, 2016; Sucher, 2007). For the second

research objective (i.e., *how* moral subjectivity is impacted over time), we engaged in an

inductive process analysis, first focusing on general outcomes and then on individual

differences in moral development trajectories (Harré & Secord, 1972; Tsoukas, 1989). We

focused on the moral positions students described they had before, during, and after the

course. This allowed us to capture individual differences instead of assuming similar

developmental patterns for all students. We mapped the moral positions students described

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4 Due to the limited space in this article, we cannot publish all of the elaborate data analysis in depth, yet all coding steps and Gioia tables are available upon request

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onto a moral change model, uncovering three main individual change trajectories of moral

development.

FINDINGS

In this section, we first focus on what element of subjective moral development

turned out to be impacted (i.e., *what* has changed) by showing what students said about their

subjective experiences during the course. Then we zoom in on the personal moral change

students reported throughout the course (*how* the changes came about). As for the first focus,

a term that emerged from the classroom discussions was *moral muscle*, which can be

conceptualized as a combination of moral awareness, the motivation for day-to-day moral

practice, and moral character strength. We will discuss individual differences in moral

muscle development by distinguishing three different change trajectories.

Literary Narratives in the Business Ethics Classroom

All students (100%) emphasized that their experience with literature differed

compared to traditional teaching methods, such as textbooks, scientific articles, and even

case studies, which were described as simplified versions of reality:

> *"so compared to like the other typical business school stuff like the cases, I think that it was more content than usual. (...) I think it made it like deeper engagement with some other knowledge. So I think it almost stuck with me more"* (P.11).

> *"[an ethics course with case studies] is sort of more telling us what is the right thing to do, whereas this course is about if (...) how do you approach that situation, how do you think about it, rather than giving a prescription of what to do."* (P.1)

Students expressed that it was the variety of narratives – with different characters, contexts

and moral challenges – that contributed to their learning. First, 69% of the students

considered literary narratives to be more complex and ambiguous as a pedagogy. For

example, participant 18 stated: *"In the books everything is blurry, like the good things are

always somewhat bad, the characters are... no one is perfect (...) so that we're able to

discuss really difficult topics"* (P.18). This ambiguity was, at times, experienced as

confusing and related to sense-making processes: "*It does force you to be more free, you

have to take more risks on your interpretation of events, so literature can be very confusing.

You have to be humble in admitting that you might not understand something" (P.14).

Second, 61% of the students described how the stories also offered immersive narrative experiences. All students explained how they had actively placed themselves in the characters' shoes (100%), feeling emotionally involved with their predicaments (100%). For example: *"I really felt like I got dropped into their world and felt the pain that they felt."* (P.21). Additionally, the classroom discussion was emotionally charged, with one instance of students crying during the class discussion. Students reported that this immersive experienced offered them *"thought experiments"* (35%). Students could experiment with different moral challenges and perspectives, whereby the narratives functioned as safe arenas (69%) to freely explore and discuss moral concepts. For example, participant 10 described how the books offered her *"an easier access to like more people, more ways of thinking about the world, more methodologies to make decisions. (...) you really have time to get in their head, and in the way that they think"* (P.10). Several students (61%) described they acquired life lessons about morality that extended beyond the realm of business, for example: *"It made me think deeply about my place in the world and the person I want to become"* (P.41).

Developing "Moral Muscle"

When asked about whether their experience with the literature-based course had promoted moral change, students explained the course stimulated the development of "moral muscle." This metaphor emerged in the class discussions (introduced by the students, not the instructor), and students kept referring to it in all types of data collected: in the classroom sessions, during the interviews, the change graphs, and in the survey. The concept of moral muscle constituted of students' moral awareness, motivation for day-to-day practice, and the desire to build moral character in the long term (Figure 1 displays the data structure of the

different components of moral muscle5). Similar to regular muscle, students articulated the idea that through heightened sensitivity to the moral angle of situations, and regular practice with moral decision-making in daily life, their moral muscle would become more developed. This growing capability for reflective moral action would help build and maintain moral character.

First, 91% of the students explained how their moral awareness grew during the course. Students indicated a heightened awareness of relatively small moral decisions that they may not have noticed in the past. The literary narratives and the class discussions made students realize that it is easy to miss the moral angle of a situation. Participant 15 said:

> *"I think initially with some of the books, it didn't strike me what the moral dilemma was until we really got into the crux of the discussion. And I think they kind of turned you on to the fact that you never know when these challenges are going to come (...) I think a class like this helps you identify how you think about morality"* (P.15).

This made students also reflect on their own morality: As Participant 42 explained: *"I think about my ethics and values much more now. I am more likely to proactively make ethical decisions."*

The second component of moral muscle students described was the motivation for day-to-day practice (mentioned by 82%). Prior to the course, students had assumed that moral decision-making would be something for "later"—a future in the business world wherein they would be managers with the power to influence events. However, students described they started to recognize that moral decision-making occurs for everyone on a daily basis. Moral muscle is thus built in the present rather than in the future, and can be expressed by anyone at any point in their career. For example, participant 8 explained:

> *"When you're producing a product and making decisions around employment and things like that, there's a lot of moral decisions that come into play just sort of on a day-to-day basis. (...) they're not necessarily going to be big decisions that are really obvious that it's a moral call, but the day-to-day where you're making a moral choice"* (P.8).

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5 More elaborate information on the data analysis is available from the first author upon request.

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Some students already started with this daily practice during the course. Participant 2 for

example described a change in his behavior due to the course based on this principle. There

was an open bill to be paid by the student society. The party in debt had forgotten it and had

not sent any reminder for months. Prior to the course, Participant 2 would have preferred to

let it slide ("it's up to them to ask for the money") or even consider it an unexpected

windfall, but this did not seem fair and he encouraged the student society to pay the bill. He

explained this change in behavior was due to the course.

> *Participant 2:* [after] *everything I've learned about integrity, it's those very tiny actions where you compromise your integrity, where you compromise your values, where you feel uncomfortable, you're like, oh, it's completely fine, it's just a small amount, that will then lead to a bunch of other things. Because if I do it once, I will do it again and again and again, so…(…) now we're taking the right approach. But it took quite a lot of discussions."*

Third, students explained that moral awareness and the motivation for day-to-day

practice would ultimately build moral character (mentioned by 65%). With this they referred

to making moral decisions with a growing ease and cognizance of one's personal moral

code. The moral character element of moral muscle especially taps into a long-term

continuation of moral muscle usage, as participant 15 stressed:

> *"So if you think about building a muscle, you go to the gym the first day, you're not as strong. If you just keep doing it for a really long time, you get really strong (…) morality is like if you keep building it every day, you'll just have a strong like moral code that you can abide by that you can't just like wake up one day and like try to have it when you need it."* (P.15)

The same participant also realized this could be challenging working in a Wall Street

environment after graduation:

> *"I do think I want to strive to be a moral leader both kind of in the business setting, but hopefully also in the way I lead my personal life (…) But I do appreciate the fact that a lot of people probably thought like this when they were younger, and then life hits, or they have a lot of other competing priorities going on, and things start to slip. So we'll see where the journey takes me, but I mean that's the goal."* (P.15).

To build moral character, students mentioned different strategies for flexing their moral

muscle in future jobs, such as consulting other people on moral issues, critically assessing

the morality of their work environment, reflecting on their own roles within the organization,

and exposing themselves to different moral stances by reading literature or joining book

clubs. Students stressed that having built moral character would not always prevent them

from making mistakes, but considered this a worthy endeavor. As participant 23 explained:

> *I'm not saying we should expect ourselves to be perfect, 'cause I think we will all have moral lapses. But I think at the end of the day, if you've deployed moral character, like if you were aware about exercising your moral muscle when you were going through those challenges, I don't think you can ask yourself for more.* (P.23)

Insert Figure 1 about here

Three Individual Trajectories of Moral Muscle Development

After establishing the main outcome of moral muscle development, our grounded

analysis of the interviews, surveys, and change graphs, indicated that there were individual

differences in the expression of moral muscle. For example, when students described how

moral awareness and day-to-day practice would gradually build moral character, the notion

of moral character was by some participants described as having a broader understanding of

different moral stances than their own, and the ability to navigate this complexity, while

other participants emphasized that they were moral relativists before entering the course,

strategic and pragmatic in their moral decision-making, and that for them moral character

consisted of cultivating their own moral stance. We analyzed these individual differences

and identified three individual change trajectories that moved across two main aggregated

dimensions, resulting in five moral positions. Figure 2 shows the grounded structure (Gioia

et al., 2013) and empirical data for these different moral positions.6 The first dimension is

Moral Scope, where participants demonstrated positions ranging from Simple (not much

reflection), Complex (deliberate reflection, awareness of moral complexity), and Integrative

(being able to shift moral perspectives when flexibility is needed while not losing one's own

moral code and beliefs). Within the second dimension, *Moral Reference,* we identified two

poles of Self and Other. When the "Self" was the moral reference point, participants relied

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6 All qualitative data tables and full analyses are available upon request

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on themselves to distinguish right and wrong, while participants in the "Other" pole would

base their moral opinions on the people around them, blending in with the group or authority

figures.

Insert Figure 2 about here

With these two dimensions, we generated the following five moral positions: (1)

Simple Self, where participants feel they themselves know right from wrong and do not

reflect much. Students lean toward moral absolutism and consider their own moral values as

the center of morality. (2) *Simple Other*, where participants rely on other people around them

or authority figures for moral decisions and do not reflect much. They tend to blend in

morally, adjusting their moral opinion to their environment, finding it hard to formulate a

personal moral opinion. (3) *Complex Self*, where participants' moral reference point is still

located within themselves, but they are aware of moral complexity and that other people may

think differently. They realize their own beliefs are not universally right and that there is a

gray area where right and wrong are not easy to define. (4) *Complex Other*, where

participants do not have a strong personal moral code but are aware of the complex morality

of other people, using these insights for building bridges or for strategic purposes, leaning

toward moral relativism. They are aware that they have not developed a personal moral code

and that this would be helpful for moral decision-making, something we labeled

"consciously inept." (5) *Integrative*, where participants are (becoming) aware of their

personal moral compass while testing it against the environment and people with different

moral opinions. This enables them to make morally embedded decisions. While they have a

personal moral compass, they are still flexible in exploring different moral perspectives, at

times adapting their moral code, thereby actively iterating back and forth from their own

moral code toward the moral beliefs of others they encounter.

Via qualitative process analysis we plotted the students' initial positions with regard to the main dimensions of moral reference and moral scope and their change processes during the course on a map, which we labeled the Moral Change Model (Figure 3). Within the general outcome of moral muscle development, we uncovered three main individual change trajectories, representing participants who showed similar temporal patterns of change during the course. Figure 3 depicts the Moral Change Model with the five moral positions and the three change trajectories. Table 2 gives an overview of the three trajectories and illustrations of empirical data. We want to stress that the five different moral positions in the Moral Change Model are not a hierarchy; different moral positions can be useful in different situations and contexts.

Insert Figure 3

Insert Table 2

Change Trajectory One. In this individual change trajectory, consisting of about 31% of the participants, students started from *Simple Self* and moved toward *Complex Self* during the course. Participants in this trajectory began the course considering their own moral values to be the center of morality, believing in one universal right versus wrong and leaning toward moral absolutism. Students reported they had thought that morality was simply a process of looking inside yourself—"knowing" right from wrong—and that the course would uncover this more clearly. They explained how they realized during the course that morality is not universal and that there is a gray area of morality, where right and wrong were no longer perceived as clear-cut and simple. The movement toward moral complexity was evident in self-reports of deep reflection on the gray areas of morality (where the right way to resolve a moral challenge is not apparent or where conflicting moral principles defy easy choice-making) and an awareness of different ethical perspectives and the intricacy of

right and wrong. For this group, moral muscle growth represented most strongly moral awareness in complex situations. While at the end of the course students in this trajectory had more empathy and understanding for other people's moral views, they continued to believe that distinctions between right and wrong did exist and did not integrate change in their personal moral compass.

An illustrative example is Participant 5. When she started the course, she was convinced that *"There's a right and a wrong."* When reading the first narratives, she thought that her interpretation was clear and sound; however, the insights of classmates broadened her perspective: *"I read it and walked away with very clear opinions about who was right and who was wrong, why they acted the way they did, why they didn't. And then hearing my classmates disagree and hearing people have very different reactions about why they think someone did something, how they viewed the action was both eye-opening and just it really brought, I guess, brought to the front of my mind that everyone does have different, very, very different judgments."* This gave her a deeper, more complex understanding of morality: *"So I think in some ways that blurred a little bit for me and made me understand just how much complexity is, how much complexity is out there."* At the end of the course, she had gained more empathy for other people's moral opinions and no longer believed in one universal right versus wrong. While she described an increased acceptance of the complexity of morality, she ultimately held on to her initial beliefs: *"there's like a lot of that gray in the middle, which I think I'm more willing to accept. But there is, I think there is still a right versus wrong for me."*

Change Trajectory Two. In the second and most common trajectory, with about 53% of the participants, students ended the course in the Integrative field of the Moral Change Model—reflecting on other people's moral perspectives while being aware of their own moral compass. As a starting point, all these students believed morality was located within

themselves (self as moral reference point). However, their moral scopes differed: some moved from Simple Self via Complex Self to Integrative, and others moved from Complex Self to Integrative. For this group moral muscle development consisted of a more profound appreciation for other people's moral views and they were actively seeking balance between their own moral code and other moral viewpoints (represented by the scales pictogram in the model). This group stressed the importance of interacting with people who think differently, who could present them with alternative points of view. Some participants in this group moved further into the Integrative field and described how they actively placed themselves in the shoes of others while not losing sight on their own beliefs. They were ready to change their own moral views but only if they believed this was based on compelling arguments or new insights. Thereby they felt able to make morally embedded decisions.

An illustrative student who went through this change trajectory is Participant 9. Initially, she entered the course with the convictions of right and wrong, comparing her personal moral code to a pie chart—some things were always right, others always wrong, and there was a small part of "gray" in the middle that bothered her. In fact, by taking the course she hoped to gain even more clarity on what is universally right and wrong: "*what I wanted to achieve through the course was to narrow that gray area, but that wasn't what the course was about. Like if anything, I feel like my gray area has expanded a little bit, but it's more so that you don't need to have this set list of things that are always wrong and always right."* Moving to the moral position of Complex Self, she discovered that moral challenges are not as clear-cut as she expected. Additionally, she realized that changing one's moral stance can be acceptable, and through the class discussions she sometimes integrated other people's perspectives into her moral compass. She started to critically assess her moral beliefs and actively contrasted them with other perspectives and different moral frameworks: *"you should always be reexamining that, not just the gray area, but the list of things that you*

think are always right and the things that are always wrong. (...) You want to be constantly challenging yourself and challenging your assumptions." After the course, she wanted to keep challenging her moral code by critically assessing her own beliefs and by regularly asking other people for moral advice.

   Change Trajectory Three. The third, least common change trajectory, with about 16% of the group, was distinct from the first two trajectories. Students in this trajectory started the course not with themselves but with other people as their moral reference point. Students in this change trajectory moved from the Simple Other through the Complex Other to the Integrative. Most started at Simple Other, but some at Complex Other. They had no strong personal moral opinions, looked to others to adjust their moral opinion, and often blended in with the moral opinion of their social group. In the Simple Other position, they would almost automatically blend in with little reflection like "chameleons", while participants starting in the Complex Other position used this as a conscious strategy, sometimes labeling themselves as morally strategic or relativist at the start of the course. Thought experiments, especially the ones in fictional narratives, were helpful to explore moral concepts and challenges. Through reflection and classroom discussions, they realized that having a personal moral compass matters. All participants who followed this change trajectory expressed that at the end of the course they were developing their personal moral compass, looking for their moral self, and while they felt they would remain open to other people's perspectives, they wanted to avoid getting lost in moral relativism. While in the first two trajectories the core change was toward gaining more complexity in understanding other moral perspectives, the third trajectory shows an opposite movement, from an "everything goes" moral relativist point of view toward the desire to develop a stronger moral muscle.

   An illustrative example is Participant 18. He entered the course with no strong personal moral opinions, thinking there is no such thing as "right or wrong," only what

people would label as such: *"when I started the class I had no clue, everything was relative..."* He would describe himself as strategic and able to understand and connect with people from diverse moral backgrounds. However, during the course, he had realized moral relativism could be problematic: *"saying: 'everybody has a valid point of view and good and bad don't really exist. Let's forget about this' that leads to moral disengagement, which is the holocaust or other things that happen like this."* He realized he felt consciously inept at personal moral decision-making and wanted to develop his own personal moral code. While drawing his change graph, he explained the ascending line throughout the course as *"How ready do I feel to articulate my moral code?"* He felt he was not there yet and would need to work more on developing his moral code, but he was able to consciously reflect on what *he* thought morality is about. While still being open to the validity of other people's beliefs, he would not merely adopt those but contrast them against his own developing moral compass.

DISCUSSION

Previous studies have theorized about the pedagogical usefulness of literary narratives in business ethics education which could offer an alternative teaching approach to address moral issues around business school education (Bennis and O'Toole, 2005; Ghoshal, 2005). This qualitative case study explored student subjective moral development with a literature-based business ethics course. The findings contribute to a new theoretical understanding of moral development as a dynamic process – as moral muscle – with different individual change trajectories, and shed new light on how the use of literary narratives in business ethics education can stimulate this development.

Theoretical contributions

The concept of "moral muscle" emerged in the study as a main course outcome. Moral muscle is a dynamic concept, uniting several elements of existing moral development theory. Based on our findings, we define moral muscle as *the dynamic individual capability*

for reflective moral action, characterized by moral sensitivity and sustained practice, in order to build and maintain moral character. The first part of this definition stresses the dynamic nature of moral muscle. This can be contrasted to moral dispositions that are relatively stable over time or even trait-like (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Ciulla, 2004; Haidt, 2001; Treviño, 1986). Furthermore, moral muscle is characterized by moral sensitivity, which we conceptualize as moral awareness—the quality of being watchful, which means ability to interpret moral challenges in diverse situations and identify possible solutions (similar to Hannah et al., 2011, p. 666). This element of moral muscle has strong ties with the concept of moral imagination (Johnson, 1994; Fesmire, 2003; Hargrave et al., 2020; Werhane, 2008), which stresses recognizing moral challenges, becoming familiar with diverse perspectives on these challenges, and exploring various possible responses (Hargrave et al., 2020; Johnson, 1994). Moreover, it encompasses the mental components of moral decision-making expressed by Rest and colleagues (1999) and the work on moral capacity by Hannah and colleagues (2011), who group moral capacities into two categories of moral maturation and moral action. Moral muscle is in comparison with moral awareness a more encompassing umbrella term and refers to individual's general moral diligence, capturing the necessity of maintenance and sustained practice, extending beyond the momentary nature of moral awareness and moral intention for action. Examples of this practice aspect were found when students applied their moral muscle outside of the course environment, making different decisions than they would have made prior to the course. Similar to going to the gym for building physical muscle, students explained how moral muscle practice requires genuine and sustained moral motivation. This proclivity to "act ethically" is often hard to achieve in a business ethics classroom (Watson, 2003, p. 93) and can be contrasted with "sham ethics," whereby students merely focus on ethical impression management and keeping up appearances (Ghoshal, 2005; Giacalone & Thompson, 2006).

Additionally, similar to muscles having a certain functional and aesthetic ideal when trained, moral muscle contributes to building and maintaining moral character as a moral ideal, indicating a long-term focus on development toward an ideal that continues in the future. Students stated the desire to gradually gain experience with moral issues in different contexts and developed personal, distinctive ways to respond to those. Students articulated, for example, that they should start *now* with training their moral muscle to be ethically "ready" in the future. Similarly, students considered gradually building moral character to be essential for acquiring an ease with taking reflective moral action, a capability they would need to exercise for moral leadership in future management positions. Building moral character requires time to develop and might even corrode over time (Sennett, 1998). This idea is in line with Selznick's (1957) notion of moral character, whereby people gradually develop their own distinctive way of looking at complex moral issues that they encounter in organizations. Yet, as argued in Selznick's (1957) seminal piece, moral character requires active maintenance and is always in danger of becoming diluted by institutional pressures (see also Solinger et al., 2020). It is this dynamic quality of the moral character ideal that makes it a suitable concept to be included under the moral general umbrella of 'moral muscle'.

Finally, this study also reveals heterogeneity in the moral learning trajectories in moral muscle development. When participants entered the course, they varied in their moral reference points (placing the locus of morality within the self or in other people) and moral scopes (simple, with little reflection; complex, with reflection; or integrated, consciously integrating their personal moral code with the social context). During this study, students were *in flux* over three distinct change trajectories on the Moral Change Model (see Figure 3). These dynamic patterns expand existing theory as moral change resembled a journey rather than a fixed position, which is in contrast with trait-based approaches to behavioral

ethics and with widely applied theory on moral development, which portrays moral

development as taking place through a fixed progression of phases and that are assumed to

be the same for the entire population (for example Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977). What was

especially insightful in this regard, was that there was not a limitless variety of trajectories or

starting positions. Rather, we found that starting conditions varied with the notion of moral

reference point (whether one places the locus of morality within oneself of in the other). This

provides a parsimonious foothold for future research into the temporal aspects of moral

(muscle) growth. Future research will want to replicate the trajectories of moral muscle

growth found in this study.

Another theoretical inference from the concept of moral reference point, is that it

expresses an inherent tension between students' personal moral code and the social

environment, which implies that moral muscle development is not purely about having a

vigorous moral code or "muscle strength", but also about suppleness and poise, being able to

integrate one's own moral code with a social context and vice versa. This suggests a more

process-oriented approach toward moral development where effective moral conduct implies

a continuous conversation between one's own moral code and those of others in the

organizational environment (Solinger et al., 2020). Notions like moral scope (Figures 2 and

3) and the related (lack of) suppleness of moral muscle might be used to explain situations of

'moral entrenchment' (Solinger et al., 2020; or Simple Self in Figure 3) where cooperation

between stakeholders breaks down when they fail to bridge their different moral views on

issues at hand. Conversely, moral agents who behave as 'pragmatic politicians' in Solinger

and colleagues' (2020) terminology are akin to students with a "Simple Other" orientation in

our model; they have a flexible moral orientation and look to others for moral guidance and

take no clear moral position themselves. Neither Simple Self, nor Simple Other types of

moral orientations are likely to be effective in organizations. Yet, it showed in our data that

many (not all) students responded to a literature-based ethics course by developing the 'suppleness' of their moral muscle and moving out of their "Simple" moral orientations toward more refined (complex and integrated) forms over time.

Practical Implications

Findings indicate that using a literature-based business ethics course stimulated the development of moral muscle as a focal construct of interest. In line with previous studies, students described literature as less clear-cut and more complex than regular teaching methods, including case studies (Michaelson, 2016; Young & Annisette, 2007). They also felt emotionally absorbed into the story world, the protagonists' lives, and their moral predicaments (Gerrig, 1993; Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008), which stimulated deep reflection (Brokerhof et al., 2018). On the basis of this study, MBA programs could be advised to include the development of moral muscle as an end term when using literary narratives in their business ethics curricula. Applying the concept of moral muscle in the business ethics classroom could offer a process-oriented perspective towards moral development, whereby students are better able to recognize moral challenges, are motivated to practice their moral decision-making on a daily basis, and gradually build moral character as a developmental ideal.

Our findings thus suggest that reading and discussing literature pushes people to adopt a variety of – at times uncomfortable - moral positions, expanding people's horizon while stimulating moral imagination (Johnson, 1994; Coles, 1989), increasing moral awareness. Immersive reading experiences also offered students thought experiments and life lessons, resembling processes similar to learning from experience (Mar & Oatley, 2008), which taps into the sustained practice element of moral muscle. This would allow educators to discuss the gap between *knowing* and *doing*, whereby knowledge of ethical theory does not necessarily translate into moral behavior (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011). Comparing

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moral muscle to physical muscle would highlight the need for attention and sustained

practice, and – in its absence - the possible atrophy of moral muscle.

The individual change trajectories in moral muscle development are also relevant for

business ethics teachers to take into account as they suggest that not all students will learn

and develop in the same way. A mix of different narratives could therefore be used to

address the learning needs of different groups of students. The variety of the literary

narratives—taking place in different social contexts, cultures, and historical periods—made

students aware of the pervasiveness of morality in *all* domains of life, which could contribute

to a broader, human-centered worldview (Giacalone & Thompson, 2006), addressing the

critical debate surrounding business ethics education (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Ghoshal,

2005). While we propose different literary works could be used, perhaps also tailored to the

specific context, we suggest that they should present students with complex moral challenges

in multifaceted moral environments. The literary works in Table 1 could serve as an example

of a varied selection of narratives. Our study suggests that not reading these narratives in

isolation, but discussing them in group sessions could further expand students' horizons,

whereby instructors could guide the discussion by stimulating students to describe, analyze,

judge and reflect on the moral challenges in the literary narrative (see also Sucher, 2007).

Beyond the business school, literary narratives could be used as a means to keep the

moral muscle of employees and managers active. Reading about a variety of moral

challenges and discussing these with people who come from different perspectives, or

positions in an organization, could generate new insights for all people involved. While our

study took place in the MBA classroom, the central elements of using a variety of literary

narratives addressing complex moral challenges, and discussing these narratives in group

sessions could enhance employees' moral awareness and promote mutual understanding.

Introducing the construct of moral muscle could also make subjective moral development

more tangible in the workplace.

Limitations and Future Research

A first limitation is that one cannot infer an efficient causal impact of narrative

pedagogy from our inductive case study design. Understandably, future research will want to

focus on the testing the efficacy of narrative pedagogy in randomized, controlled study.

However, before such a field experiment can be conducted, one first needs to establish what

elements of moral subjectivity are most prominently impacted and how this impact is likely

to unfold over time. Our findings show that 'moral muscle' is a useful concept for future

research to focus on. We recommend future research to capture the dynamic development of

moral muscle with measurement instruments. If this is possible, the efficacy or narrative

pedagogy can be established with the use of field-experiments. In that regard, the

development of moral muscle could also be stimulated via other types of pedagogies (e.g.,

Ayikoru & Park, 2019; Mayfield & Mayfield, 2019; Verzat et al., 2009), which could be

studied in the future. But even without any definitive proof of causation in the use of

literature, our induced construct of 'moral muscle' may prove theoretically useful and

applicable in a wide range of educational and business settings, and beyond.

Second, given the lack of control in our research methodology, we cannot determine

whether changes occurred due to the reading of the texts, group discussions about them (or

other issues), the students' being familiarized with ethical theories, or some combination of

these components. Future research might focus on what it is exactly in those texts that

triggered reflection; was it, for instance, the fictional nature of some of them; was it a

particular aspect of their literary quality; or something in how moral dilemmas were

presented (Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015). Testing them in both laboratory and field

settings would benefit both theory and practice. The same holds for the group discussions

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and the instructions about ethical theory: we need to determine which elements are most effective in training moral muscle, or in its maintenance.

Further, our sample was based on a student population. In future studies other groups of participants, such as managers, could expand the understanding of individual differences in moral development in different contexts. Additionally, in the current study students chose the course as an elective, indicating a perhaps higher-than-average motivation for working on their moral development (Ferrer-Caja & Weiss, 2002). A group of less motivated students might have yielded different outcomes, perhaps showing less moral development (see the study of Harris & Brown, 1989). In the case of a less motivated group of students, certain classroom conditions have been suggested to promote motivation, such as high group interaction and engaged faculty, who stress learning and reflection over course outcomes and grades (Ferrer-Caja & Weiss, 2002). The pedagogical approach suggested in this study can provide these classroom conditions. Additionally, the constructivist course design, whereby students explore concepts instead of being instructed how to think, can also promote learning and motivation in less motivated students (Alfieri et al., 2011; Fink, 2013). Future research could investigate the generalizability of moral muscle development among less motivated students by using a random sampling method, for example with a non-elective, mandatory course for all business school students.

During the course, moral development was *in flux*. However, long-term effects need to be investigated to ascertain whether training one's moral muscle actually works similarly to training actual muscle. Students in this study suggested that moral muscle would deteriorate without regular attention and practice. Thereby the moral change students experienced through this course could be reversed without regular exercise, making people eventually return to their departure points. As previous studies have shown that the transfer of soft skills from a training environment to the workplace can be difficult (for a review see

Botke et al., 2018), this might lead to moral muscle atrophy. For a successful transfer of skills, personal motivation helps (Botke et al., 2018). Future studies could investigate different ways to flex one's moral muscle, inside and outside organizational contexts, to keep the dynamism of the moral development *in flux* (e.g., reading literary narratives in a group setting) or to shed more light on the long-term effects of moral development.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated a pedagogical method for business ethics education using world literature to simulate real-life complexities, whereby complex moral concepts could be understood, applied, and communicated. Students displayed different change patterns, indicating diverse trajectories of moral development, suggesting that there are alternative paths of moral development rather than fixed developmental stages. Moral development resembled the growth of moral muscle, a pliable and dynamic moral capability that can be taught and learned in a business school setting, whereby people gradually build moral character by practicing recognizing moral challenges and making moral decisions in their day-to-day lives.

> *...one of the takeaways as well from the class is that it's like a moral muscle that you're flexing on a day-by-day basis. It's not like ten years down the road when you're officially in a leader position and you make a big decision. You're making decisions on a day-by-day basis.* (Participant 12)

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Short Biographies

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FIGURE 1
Data Structure on Moral Muscle

Data Sample   **Component**   **General Course Outcome**

The first central component of moral muscle student mentioned was "the muscle of awareness" (Participant 23), their moral horizon was expanded (Participant 2) and they better recognized the moral angle in situations. Students stressed it is important to "be aware of that in order to better identify them [moral challenges]" (Participant 38), because "at the surface [certain decisions] might not seem moral decisions, but if you really double-click on them, sometimes they could have moral implications." (Participant 15).

Moral Awareness (91 %)

A second essential component students mentioned was "exercising your moral judgment and your moral reasoning on a day-to-day basis" (Participant 5). After recognizing the moral angle in decision-making it is "the day-to-day where you're making a moral choice" (Participant 8). Similar to physical muscle this training is essential and "using that moral muscle in like a small situation. And I can only see myself using that moral muscle more and more as I progress and work." (participant 12)

Day-to-day Practice (82 %)

Moral Muscle

The third main component of moral muscle is building moral character. Students described how the course made them reflect on "the person I want to become" (Participant 41). Participants described having moral character as someone who is morally aware has developed a strong moral code and moral will power by practicing moral decision-making. While moral character is something to strife for, it is not something you can have after a few weeks, but when you have it and can live by it this is "really fulfilling" (participant 20).

Build Moral Character (65)%

Note: this shows the grounded structure of the main outcome of the course labelled as "moral muscle". Underneath each component is the percentage of students mentioning this component. Additionally, 41% of the students literally used the term "moral muscle", 47% referred to all three components, 29% mentioned two components, 15% mentioned one component and 9% did not refer to any of the components.

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FIGURE 2

**Schematic Overview of Concepts, Themes and Dimensions
of Individual Moral Development**

Academy of Management Learning & Education
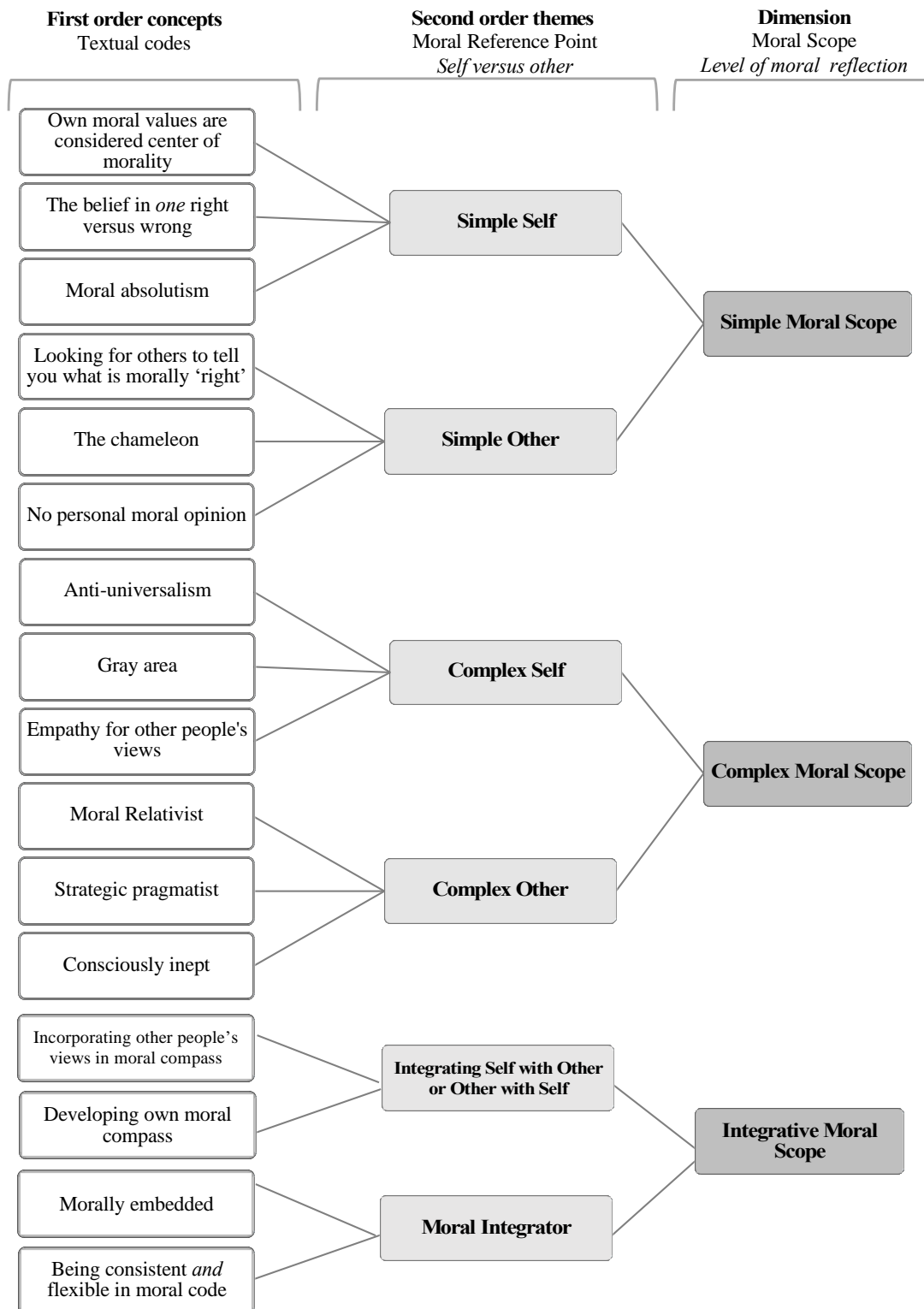
FIGURE 3.
Moral Change Model

Figure Legend
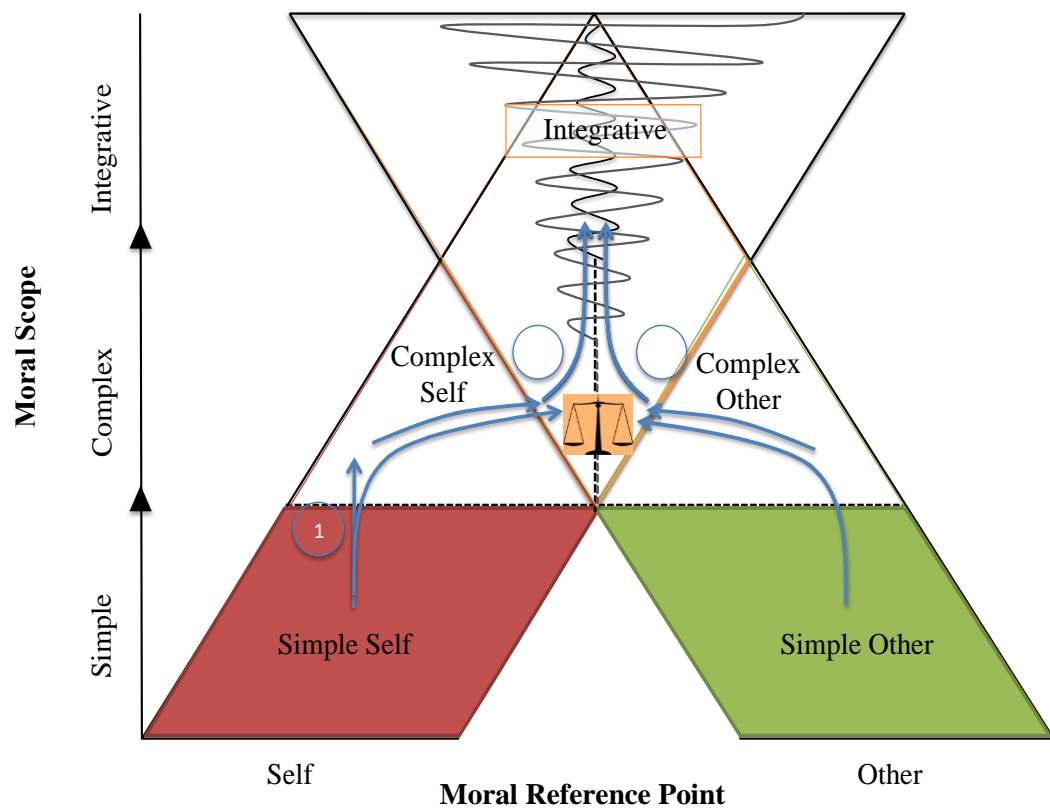
Moral Position	Description
Simple Self *Moral Absolutist*	Believes in objective 'right' and 'wrong' and that he or she (deep down) knows what this is. Does not critically reflect on own morals or values.
Simple Other *The Chameleon*	Believes that others (often people with authority) know right from wrong. Tends to blend in seamlessly with environment. Does not want to stand out.
Complex Self *Reflective Partisan*	Is aware of own moral compass and knows how this relates to other moral philosophies/ frames. Is aware of the complexities of morality and the grey area of right and wrong.
Complex Other *Reflective Pragmatist*	Is aware of other people's moral beliefs and the complexity of morality. Does not have a strong personal moral compass, but is smart in building bridges between different moralities. Can lean towards moral relativism.
Integrative *Moral Integrator*	Actively keeps evolving personal moral compass in contact with others and environment. Reversely, can apply own moral compass in different contexts. The higher in the model, the more comfortable the person is with exploring the tensions between maintaining a strong personal moral code, while still at times adapt this to different environments and other perspectives (zigzag). The scales represent the need for guidance when integrating moral self and other (e.g. asking for advice).

This figure shows personal change during the course with on the x-axis the participant's moral reference point and on the y-axis the moral scope. Each number reflects one of the three change trajectories. The line in the integrative area depicts the tendency to actively shift between the moral reference points "Self" and "Other";

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TABLE 1
Literary Narratives

Week	Literary Work	Pedagogical Aim
1	The Use of Force – William Carlos Williams *A doctor is confronted with a young patient's resistance of co-operating in medical research that is crucial for her health.*	Students read about different moral challenges (e.g. right-versus-right dilemmas) in various social, historic and cultural contexts.
2	American Ground: Unbuilding the World Trade Center - William Langewiesche *Moral decision-making in a chaotic situation where a small group of city bureaucrats and engineers came to manage the "unbuilding" of the World Trade Center.*	Students discuss these intuitively in the classroom, becoming aware of different types of moral challenges and how hard it is to recognize these.
3	The Theban Plays (story of Antigone) – Sophocles *Right-versus-right conflict (competing rights) in ancient Greece* Blessed Assurance - Allan Gurganus *A young white insurance collection agent is torn between helping his black clients and his own needs for employment*	
5	Things fall apart - Chinua Achebe *An Iba clan confronts the arrival of Christian missionaries and British colonial authorities*	
6	Trifles – Susan Glaspell *A play wherein two friends must decide whether to help a farm wife accused of murdering her husband*	Four ethical theories (utilitarianism, duty-based ethics, right-based ethics and communitarianism) are introduced and applied to the stories.
7	The Sweet Hereafter - Russell Banks *Four individuals respond in the aftermath of a school bus accident*	
8	The Remains of the Day - Kazuo Ishiguro *A butler reckons with the consequences of a life in service to a British lord*	In the class sessions students explore topics like agency, obligations, assumptions from multiple perspectives.
9	A Man for All Seasons - Robert Bolt *Sir Thomas More looks for a way to reconcile duty to King, religion, family and self*	
10	The Prince – Niccolò Machiavelli *Pragmatic a-moral leadership manual, which mainly focuses on ways to remain in power*	Students focus on moral complexity of people in leadership positions, using novels with a real-life base, such as autobiographies, to stress decision-making embedded in the real world.
11	Personal History - Katharine Graham *The leadership of Washington Post publisher Katherine Graham during the investigations of the "Pentagon papers" and Watergate*	
12	Just and Unjust Wars - Michael Walzer *US president Harry S. Truman's decision to use the atomic bomb and its consequences*	In the class sessions students explore topics like moral legitimacy, power, moral courage, moral impact.
13	This Child Will Be Great: Memoir of a Remarkable Life by Africa's First Woman President - Ellen Sirleaf Johnson	

Course grading consisted of class participation (60%) and an essay (40%). For more details on the pedagogy and the two moral texts see Sucher (2007).

For alternative selections of literary narratives for business ethics education see for example: Gerde & Foster, 2008; Kennedy & Lawton, 1992; Martin, Edwards & Sayers, 2018; McAdams & Koppensteiner, 1992; Shepard, Goldsby & Gerde, 1997).

TABLE 2
Empirical Data linked to the Three Change Trajectories

Change Trajectory	Illustrative Empirical Data	Description	How common?*
CT 1			
From Simple Self to Complex Self	It made me realize how **my own biases can influence my judgement of situations around me**. (Participant 38) There's like **a lot of that gray in the midd**le, which I think I'm more willing to accept. But there is, I think there is still a right versus wrong for me. (Participant 5) I used to think that I had a very strong moral compass. I felt like I had very clear delineators for right or wrong, but I couldn't really verbalize as to why I thought that thing was right. I just felt like it was universally right. Now there is obviously things like the framework. So sometimes when I talk to people now and they have a different opinion, I'm like okay, why does this person think that the person is right? Maybe, I don't know, I'm coming from a utilitarian perspective, and this person's coming from a Kantian perspective. So at least that, now I'm in full realization that both people could be right. **I might still perceive mine as more right from my own angle, but I can see why they think it and why it's valid**. (Participant 12)	Participants in this trajectory entered the course in the Simple Self area, with the expectation that there is one right versus wrong and that they would learn how to clearly assess this and decrease moral uncertainty. At the end of the course, they gained a more nuanced understanding of morality and the 'gray' area of right and wrong, they evaluated their own values more critically with increased moral awareness, while their moral reference point still remained deeply rooted in the self.	Quite common: 31% of the participants could be categorized in this trajectory
CT 2			
From Simple or Complex Self to Integrative	I now think more about the impact I have on other people and try to be more cognizant of understanding their motives. (…) **I should strive and understand the people I am not aligned with and not proactively fight or dismiss them**. (Participant 44) I think before the course, going into it I thought about moral code, and you have a very defined set of things that are right and wrong, and you stick to that. And you demonstrate more leadership by being consistent in sticking to that moral code. But in fact that's not necessarily, there might be some situations in which you should deviate or reexamine, and that part of moral leadership is **the ability to constantly reexamine your assumptions about morality**. (Participant 9)	Participants in this trajectory entered the course in the Simple Self or Complex Self area, so with either little or some personal moral awareness and critical reflection on their own values and moral compass. At the end of the course they moved to the integrative field: they could actively contrast their own moral beliefs with those of other people and see the value in adjusting their moral opinion in some instances.	Most common: 53% of the participants could be categorized in this trajectory

CT 2 (continued)	Illustrative Empirical Data	Description	How common?
	I realize at the beginning of the class when we introduced other theories, that I was kind of picking and choosing some theories just when they kind of supported what was my intuition or my first reaction. (...) forced me to open up and kind of use those theories not to just confirm what I initially thought, but really to change my mind. **And I changed my mind for some of the questions just [by] incorporating the others' views**. (Participant 10)	They emphasize active listening to others and the continuous process of testing their assumptions about morality.	
CT 3			
From Simple or Complex Other to Integrative	I just reflect on the negatives or always try to please everyone, that's just a recipe for failure. And you can never succeed if you're going to measure your success by everyone else's standards or measure your happiness or what's right. I think there is a basic level, and sure, we should all respect that. But after that, y**ou need to develop your own moral compass and live by that.** At least that's what those three books show me. (...) A lot of the business decisions that we have to make are not black and white. A lot of decisions that I make in my life and even at [business school] are not really that simple, so how do I navigate it? And **I feel that what this class provided me was in a way a compass that I can follow, my own values, which are not very crystallized just yet. But at least I know that I can now start to look for that**. (Participant 2) When I started the class I had no clue, everything was relative... (…) [[pointing at upwards line in the change graph] I guess you could describe this line as **'How ready do I feel to articulate my moral code**?'" So that's how my moral view changed for this class. But it's definitely not over. I feel that this class kick-started my thinking (…) there is more work to do (Participant 18) I see moral leadership now as far more flexible and not as an aspirational habit/character **- I am now more comfortable in picking my own side when deciding on difficult things**. (…) I reflect more and I think I got a deeper understanding about myself (Participant 36)	In the beginning of the course, participants in this trajectory resided in the Simple Other or Complex Other area. Their moral reference point was located in other people, whereby they flexibly adjusted their moral opinion to blend in or strategically used other people's morality. Through the novels and short stories and class discussions the value of a personal moral compass was discovered, which they started to develop, while they still remain sensitive to context and the outside environment. In the end of the course, they integrated their own moral compass with their environment.	Most rare: 16% of the participants could be categorized in this trajectory

APPENDIX A
Change Graph
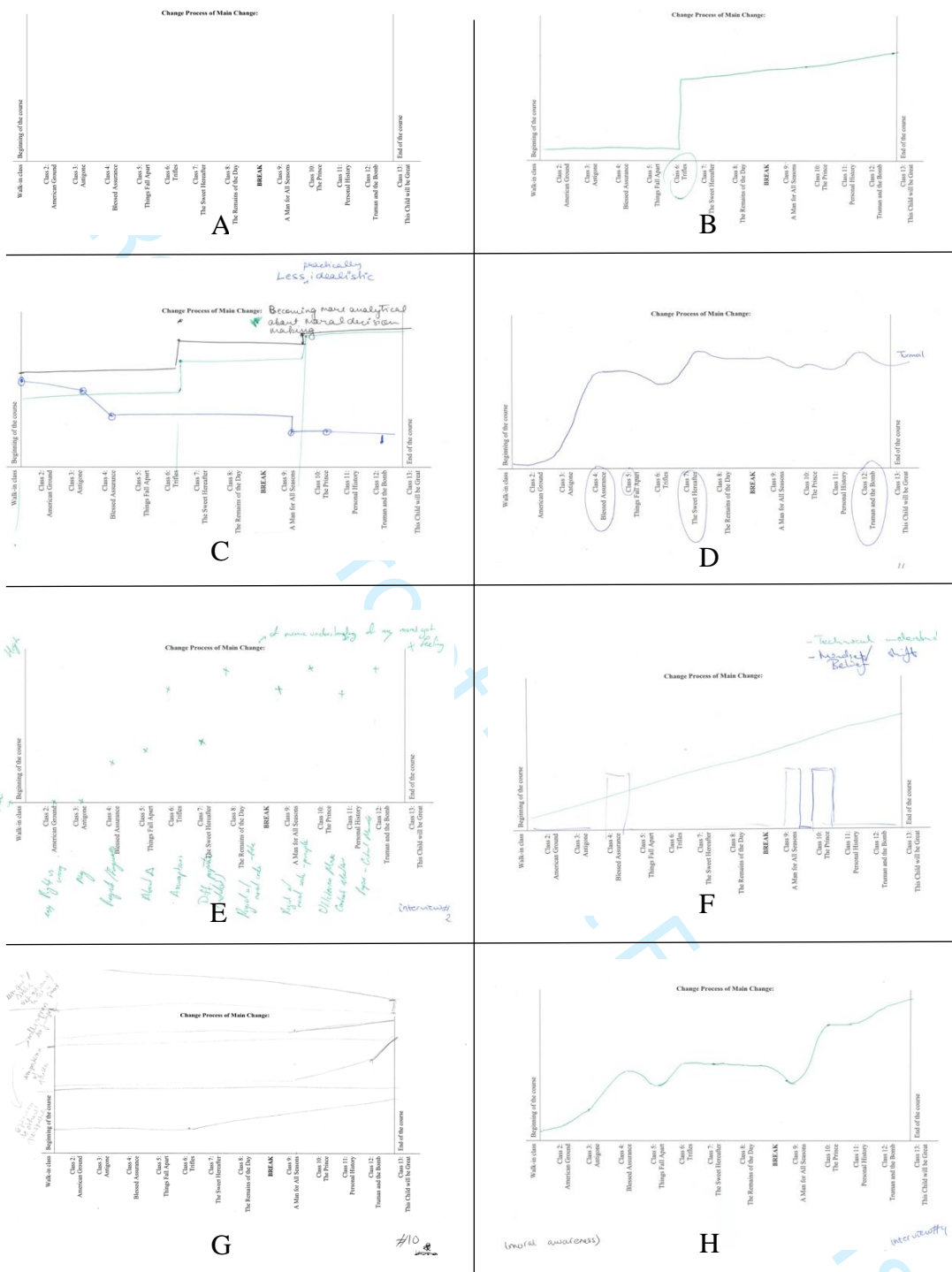
Instruction: "Please draw your own personal experience with regards to the course over these last 13 weeks. On the left is the beginning of the course and on the right is where you are now. You are completely free to draw what you want: the graph can consist of either one line or multiple lines, block charts or other shapes; you may have experienced one principal change or more than one type of change; some things may have increased during the course, some may have declined and some things may have stayed the same. There is no right or wrong, just draw how you experienced these weeks."