

Student Character Sheets

Since suggesting a [5-room dungeon approach to lesson planning](#) last Fall, I've continued to think about how practices from tabletop role-playing games can improve teaching.

Recently, a colleague dropped me an email because she caught a Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) reference in the [Chronicle of Higher Education](#). It was just a brief mention of a faculty member who created a D&D-style character sheet for his students to reflect on and rate their skills. What a great idea! Let's think about this.

A Character Sheet

In Dungeons & Dragons, players create the character they will play. There are lots of rules about this you don't need to understand, but ultimately each player ends up with a character sheet that displays their character's vital statistics, and perhaps their backstory and other information. [Here is a link to an 11th-level character I am currently playing](#), for example. (He is a librarian for a sentient, interdimensional library that grants him magical powers. You really should try D&D if you never have.)

You'll want to make a character sheet for your students far less complicated. Let's think about what elements of a D&D character sheet might be useful for a student character sheet.

Attributes

Attributes can be considered broad abilities that have a variety of uses in different contexts. The core D&D attributes are Strength, Dexterity, Constitution, Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma. Don't use those, because some of them may not be relevant in your course, and for real life they are too reductive.

I think an attribute like Persistence (or Resilience, or Grit) might be a good one for a student character sheet. You want students who are willing to work hard, recover from mistakes, and keep at it. Just as importantly, you probably want students to think of Persistence as a key attribute of a successful student.

An attribute like Teamwork (or Cooperation, or Relationship-Building) may also be a good choice, especially if you use group work or team projects in your course.

Leadership could be a good choice as well, as could many others, perhaps Analytical Reasoning, Creativity, or Organization. At this point, just identify a small number of core attributes that relate to being a successful student in your course.

Assigning Attribute Scores

In D&D, the player usually assigns the attribute scores to their character, according to set rules. Similarly, students should assign their own attribute scores to their student character sheet. This already makes the character sheet a good tool for student self-reflection.

In D&D, attribute scores cover a wide range, where 3 is very low, 20 is extremely high, and more than 20 is supernatural. For a student character sheet, you probably want a more limited range, perhaps 1-5.

Put limits on how students assign their own attribute scores. Otherwise, you might have overconfident (or truly exceptional) students giving themselves high ratings in every attribute, and underconfident students rating themselves low in everything. If you imagine four attributes with a minimum rating of 1 and maximum rating of 5 for each attribute, you might give students 12 points total to assign to the four attributes. A student who thinks they are equally good at all four things would give themselves “3” across the board, but more likely you will see students claiming stronger and weaker attributes.

You may worry that students will be inaccurate in their assignment of attribute scores. That might be the case, but it is still very valuable for you to know how students perceive themselves, even if that might be an inaccurate self-perception. It’s also valuable for students to do some self-reflection. Of course, if you ultimately determine this process is not good for students, don’t do it.

Skills

In D&D, each attribute contributes to many elements of the game, often combined with more specific skills a character may be proficient in, like Athletics, Persuasion, or Survival.

Likewise, your student character sheet might have students identify some number of specific skills with which they are proficient. Choose some concrete skills relevant to your course. Examples may include writing research papers, editing audio/video, creating study guides, organizing meetings, or whatever makes sense for your course. You could let your students claim proficiency in as many skills as they think they are actually proficient in, or you could limit them to choosing just a few and hence staking a claim about what they think they are best at.

You can also let students identify their own skills, to maximize student autonomy. Or you could use a hybrid method where you offer a standard list of skills from which students choose two (or more), but also have them add one skill (or more) to their sheet that wasn’t

on your list. This lets students do some additional self-reflection and identify some things they are good at.

Backstory

Sometimes a character sheet has a place for players to describe their character in more detail, and in ways that don't impact the mechanics of the game. This is where you learn where a character came from, why they took up adventuring, and things like that. Since it is fairly common practice to ask students to share something about themselves at the beginning of the semester, often in a survey or as part of an icebreaker, you might as well have them share such material on their character sheet. Have students respond to a few questions, such as: why are you taking this course? What do you hope to do with the skills you learn from this course? What do you hope to be doing in five years? Or respond to more fun questions like: what superpower do you wish you had? What (non-human) animal do you most identify with? Do you prefer cake or pie?

A specific idea you might borrow from D&D is to have your students identify an ideal, a bond, and a flaw. An ideal is something they deeply believe in, that helps explain why they do what they do. A bond is something they care deeply about, often a person, place, or even an object. A flaw is something that often causes trouble for them. If your students are willing to share these things about themselves, you will gain great insight into them.

What to Do with the Character Sheets

Primarily you can use the student character sheets as insight into your student's self-perception. It could let you know where you need to give your students extra resources or a little push, or where you can let them be confident in their own abilities.

As mentioned above, you can choose attributes and skills that relate to success in your course, thus offering students insight into what it will take for them to do well.

Beyond that, you can use the sheets to form well-functioning groups for projects or other tasks. Make sure every group has someone good at Leadership, for example. Or form groups such that each attribute or skill necessary for the project to succeed is possessed by at least someone in the group. This is similar to what the [CATME team-maker](#) is designed to do.

You could also introduce a level-up mechanic to your course. If any of your students successfully complete an assignment, project, or task in your class that calls upon one of the attributes you defined, you can let students add a point to that attribute. If a student reveals a relevant skill during the course, have them add it to their sheet. You could give your students control over the leveling-up process. Perhaps after every major unit, you let

your students increase one attribute score, and they choose the attribute they think they have improved the most during the unit. This might emphasize a [growth mindset](#) on the part of your students.

Build Character(s)

I hope this idea encourages you to learn about your students and gets your students to reflect on their strengths in a way that is fun. Try to build something that helps your students grow and succeed in your course.

Since you will be creating a customized list of attributes, skills, and/or backstory, there isn't a character sheet template I can point you to. But Microsoft Copilot worked up this [example template](#) based on my parameters without too much fuss. With a little time, you can do better.