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Why Teach Moral Development?

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I will first say that I do not teach philosophy or ethics as defined by philosophers. I work with students in the interdisciplinary area of educational studies. It is a major at Colgate and, while we offer a very small number of students certification in elementary or secondary education, our faculty also look at education with a broad view and our majors study education from foundational areas of psychology, philosophy, history, policy, and cultural studies. It is in this department that I offer a course titled Moral Development and Education, and it is in this context that I respond to the question guiding this forum.

In the introduction to this forum, Bernard Prusak asks, Is virtue teachable? He thinks about that and compares learning virtue to learning language. "[N]ot only do language and virtue not develop simply naturally; they are also not picked up first and foremost through formal instruction, which is to say in the classroom. Instead, they develop through what we, in English, somewhat infelicitously call habit – repeated doings, in give-and-take with others of our kind, that call on and give shape to our natural powers and interest." He then goes on to ask: "Crudely put, what good are lectures and what good is Aristotle's book as it has come down to us?" (Prusak 2013, 16).

That is a useful question, but I want to distinguish two aspects of classroom instruction and argue that reasoning about moral issues can be taught in a classroom, although perhaps not in lectures. The two aspects of a classroom that I want to distinguish are curriculum and pedagogy. Curriculum is the material that we teach in our classrooms. If it is delivered to students in a lecture format, it cannot teach virtue or moral reasoning. But the way we teach – our pedagogy – can provide instruction in this area.

Before discussing why this distinction is important, I want to be clear on what I mean by "moral." We must understand what is meant by the word in order to decide whether teaching it at the college level is worth doing; it does not have only one meaning. I often ask my students to define moral, and they provide multiple definitions. While the answers are varied, they do cluster around certain themes. Students say that morality consists of rules that help us know how to make decisions, or ideas about fairness, or how to be a good person.

When I use the word "morality," I mean to call into question ways in which we make decisions about how to treat one another. By moral, I mean treating others with care – being responsible for the consequences of how we deal with others. I attempt to make my class a laboratory for thinking about this. I began to become interested in how we think of each other in relationships when I was confronted with a cheating incident in a class (see Johnston 1991). The details of this have been written elsewhere, but the lesson I learned was that students in a class need to learn to think of themselves in relationship to one another. They need to learn to pay

what Iris Murdoch, borrowing from Simone Weil, calls “just attention” (Murdoch 1970). Students need to learn to think about this in addition to thinking about the content of what is taught and about their relationship with their professors. This means that students have multiple responsibilities in their classes.

I also want to call into question who is considered an “other.” I have been influenced by Maxine Greene’s ideas about unknown others (Greene 1988), and have written about her ideas elsewhere (Johnston 1996). For the purposes of this paper, however, I summarize her ideas by saying that she wants us to think about people in the world who are not personally known to us. In other words, we are responsible morally not only for how we treat just those we know, but we must think about the consequences of our actions as those consequences ripple out into the world beyond our known world.

Making these responsibilities explicit is crucial to teach in classes called ethics or in classes called moral development. We must learn that we are *not* educated merely in order to do better than everyone else in a class, although that is what education can look like in this age of high-stakes testing. We need to learn that education is as much a collective as an individual endeavor, and we need to learn how to engage in the collective endeavor in classes designed to teach that.

Thus, when I teach Moral Development and Education, I want my students to examine their behavior as they think about what is at stake for themselves and those with whom they are in relationship, as well as for those whose lives are not familiar to them. I want them to question what they mean by relationship and by being responsible in relationship.

This is what I attempt to do in my pedagogy. I agree with Kohlberg that we cannot expect our students to think as we do and that we should not set ourselves up as role models (Kohlberg 1981, 406–407). He calls these false expectations for educators, and I think they are. I, however, believe that development of both the intellect and the person should be the aim of education (see for example Kohlberg and Mayer 1972, and Johnston and Ross 2007). What, then, do I mean when I ask my students to examine how they think of themselves in relationships? How does that connect to pedagogy, and what does it all finally have to do with the question, “Is virtue teachable?”

The class

Before I attempt to answer those questions, I want to describe briefly how I teach moral development and why I teach the class in that way. I will also connect my ideas about this single class to ideas about why teaching a class like this is important – why, in fact, teaching students to think of themselves as moral actors is an important responsibility of colleges.

When I began to teach moral development, I had recently worked with Carol Gilligan in graduate school. I was hired at Colgate University, and one of the courses I was charged with teaching was Moral Development and Education. I first taught this course as a kind of contest between competing claims about what morality was. In the mid–1980s when I began teaching this way, the literature in moral development was structured in this way also. Was Kohlberg

right? Were there really gender differences? Can care be a moral orientation? Were Gilligan's ideas essentialist?

In graduate school, I did a fable study with adolescents in which I demonstrated that the ideas of a justice orientation and a care orientation were known to and evaluated by both males and females. This was not the only research to demonstrate this (see for example Gilligan and Attanucci 1988 and Ward 1988), but in my study I asked an important question: Is there another way to see the problem? I asked this question after presenting each interviewee with a moral dilemma embedded in a fable which the interviewee initially solved. After the initial solution, I asked the interviewees for other solutions. All but one person interviewed were able to think about these moral dilemmas using both the care and justice orientation. Thus, it became clear that moral reasoners had at least two ways to think about moral dilemmas.

Kohlberg's initial sample consisted only of men, and he used these data to develop his stage theory about how moral reasoning becomes more complex and more adequate. Gilligan did not set out to interview women (see for example Gilligan 2000), but because she interviewed women and took their moral considerations seriously, she identified what she called a different voice. Following her work, others continued to develop the theory by talking with people whose experiences and life history were different from those who had been previously interviewed. Interviews were conducted with African Americans (see for example Ward 2000 and Siddle-Walker and Snarey 2004), and these findings expanded our understanding of moral reasoning in the context of specific moral dilemmas. The process of the research is detailed elsewhere and is not the focus of this paper (see Gilligan, Ward, and Taylor 1988 and Johnston 2006). What I want to emphasize here is that I changed the structure of my course to focus on how researchers learn from the past and consciously or not work together with those who have worked before them. In the process of writing this paper, I have come to understand that I began to change the emphasis of my course to thinking about *how researchers are in relationship*. The relationship that researchers have with each other is not only a relationship of seeking more complete answers to research questions, but is also a relationship of collaboration. Rather than structure the course as an argument between two opposing views, I structured my course as a demonstration of how research builds on the past and how the research becomes more complex and complete as different people are included in the work that builds the theory.

The pedagogy

In addition to changing the way I present the curriculum in the course, I also began to be deliberate in my attempts to give everyone in class the opportunity and the responsibility to think aloud. I had always thought of myself as a teacher who wants to facilitate discussion in class, but now I began to think that this discussion had the potential to change behavior outside of class.

Thus thinking aloud about the material under consideration and listening to the ideas of other students began to become the dual focus of my teaching. It is not that I ignore or give less value and time to theory – in fact, we spend our class time discussing the theory described above. But I also insist that students build upon what they each say and not simply wait to talk or to make

their point. This kind of teaching can be called feminist pedagogy or constructivist teaching, but the focus of it is to make the students articulate their understanding of content and of each other's comments upon that content.

Why is that worth teaching? I have been teaching a long time, and I am struck by the fast pace with which we live our lives and with which my students grapple daily. One of the changes that have occurred in the time since I began teaching is the use of technology in everyone's lives. Much has been written about how technology affects us (see for example Turkle 2011), and again technology is not the focus of this paper. It does, however, connect in an important way to my point about pedagogy that attempts to develop habits of reflection and listening in students.

In a graduation address, Eric Schmidt of Google told Boston University graduates about how important technology is in their lives: "You're connected to each other in ways those who came before you could never have dreamed of." However, he also said to "turn the thing off [thing being technology] at least one hour a day to have real conversations with friends and family, to experience the world around you through your senses and not just a screen" (Schmidt 2012).

I was struck by Schmidt's idea. One of the ways that I think technology affects students is that instant information is always available. It is only a matter of typing in a name, an idea, or 140 characters, and we can learn a lot. We cannot, however, use these amazing tools to develop morality; this, as Piaget said, is developed in relationship (Piaget 1965 [1932], 136). Thus it is in the context of the relationships developed in a classroom that we teach morality. We have the opportunity to insist that students take the time to be present not in a virtual moment, but *in the moment* in class and to listen to each other – to pay "just attention," as Murdoch put it – and try to understand others' points of view and the reasons that they hold those points of view. This takes time and patience, which is something that my students have commented on as "different" from their daily habits.

Returning to the idea of habits that Prusak discusses in the introduction to this forum, what I am trying to do in the classroom is to foster a habit of reflection in my students. Why? In a world that is as fast paced as our world is, the time for reflection, for listening, for, in Schmidt's words "experiencing the world around us" is limited if not sometimes obliterated. Yet that time to think and work through ideas is so important in even beginning to attempt to solve the problems that we face in this world. If we, like Dewey, see education as life and not as mere preparation for life, then we should be educating for reflective interaction, for the habit of being reflective, and for the habit of experiencing the world around us.

Robert Kegan has observed that modern life is so complicated that many of us are "in over our heads" when we try to deal with the experiences of our world. He is mainly concerned about the world that adults face as we try to parent, partner, work, and negotiate all the competing demands in adult life (Kegan 1994, 5). I believe, however, that Kegan's analysis can be extrapolated to a suggestion that both adults and adolescents are expected to meet expectations and obligations that they are not prepared to meet. His analysis dates from almost 20 years ago, so I would suggest that, if it was true in 1994, it is even more true today. This makes it

imperative that we work to help young people evaluate the competing demands they face and to develop a habit of thinking through those demands.

As I said, I try to enact pedagogy that makes my class a laboratory for developing these habits of reflection and of listening, of learning to think through ideas from multiple perspectives, and taking responsibility for doing just that. I was curious about how my current students thought about this laboratory and how they would answer the question, What difference has this class made in the way you live your life? So recently, at the end of a class, I asked them if some of them would be willing to take a minute and write the answer to that question. Their answers were illuminating to read. Here are some examples quoted verbatim:

> This class has made me more cognizant of moral decisions in all areas of my life – from in the classroom to my personal life – to thinking about moral dilemmas in my future professional life.
>
> It has helped me when thinking about others and understanding where they might be coming from or how they are thinking about things.
>
> I think moral education helps us to realize our power and be aware of how what we do really does matter to a grander scale.
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> It makes me think about morals in everyday life – college is where I am going [in order] to become the adult after graduation. I want to constantly be thinking morally and be a good person.
>
> Classes on moral development address the notion that we, as people, are not all the same. We are able to hear and understand other's experiences and perspectives.
>
> It teaches you to role-take peers and teachers. Since this class I have been able to see that a lot of my decisions are selfish. I am also learning skills that help me reach others.
>
> This class has gotten me to actively think about being a bystander and ways to be an upstander. I believe that the way to not be a bystander is to just be more cognizant (in most cases).
>
> I became aware of how my actions, good or bad, have a moral implication on my relationship and my being/humanity.
>
> I began to reflect on moral decisions that I make on a regular day-to-day situation and see how others around me deal with dilemmas.

> I think this class has made me think about my own agency in the multiple relationships I have in life, both with myself and with others. I certainly thought about these relationships before, but I don't think that I thought much about my own responsibility in making decisions.

I found these ideas illuminating. I may not be getting my students to think through ideas about reflection and responsibility to unknown others, but they are thinking about their own agency as moral actors and their responsibility in relationships. Dawn Schrader wrote that students often do not see that they have a moral point of view (Schrader 1999). Carol Gilligan wrote that talking with young people in an interview situation can help adolescents discover that they do in fact have a point of view (Gilligan 1988). I believe that teaching moral reasoning and teaching students how different theorists have thought about moral reasoning connects students in these kinds of classes to not only the theorists' ideas, but also how these theories make sense in their own lives. This connection of text to self is the connection that may allow a student to think about his or her work outside the boundary of a classroom and take ideas from the classroom into the world outside (see for example Vacca et al. 2009).

Beyond the classroom

John Dewey taught us that school is connected intimately to society. At the present time, we are in danger of not seeing that schools have the potential to transform society. One might believe that achieving higher test scores will transform society, but I see absolutely no evidence for that. The potential to change society is located in the way that we behave in the world around us. Teaching moral reasoning illuminates that potential for students. Note that the students above see that their actions and ideas have consequences in their real life. This ability to take theory into action – praxis – is the reason to teach topics like moral reasoning or ethics. Certainly it matters that students are exposed to ideas that interrogate what is moral or ethical, but it matters more that they see their own perspectives on these ideas and the perspectives that others bring to the discussion.

In a recent article in *Academe*, Chad Hanson argues that "[e]ducation is a social institution." If I understand his argument, he would like us to develop a "social and cultural conception of colleges and universities" (Hanson 2013, 16). He writes that "spending time in class is one of the more important elements of becoming an educated person" (Hanson 2013, 17). I completely agree, but I would argue that *how* we spend our time in a class is important. Students need to learn as the students quoted above are learning that people have different ways to think – that "difference is a marker of the human condition rather than a problem to be solved" (Gilligan 1993, xviii). They learn that by listening, by paying "just attention" to the ideas of their classmates.

If students can learn these habits in a class, then I think they might take this learning into the fast-moving world in which they live. In *Schooling America*, Patricia A. Graham writes that schools need to develop character and wit. She writes that "wit is a more inclusive term for

knowledge than academic achievement. Character includes the secular traits of integrity, ingenuity, and hard work, both individually and collectively, that our democracy needs" (Graham 2005, 253). Our democracy needs the hard work that is involved in listening, in reflecting, and in taking responsibility for others. Teaching ethics education and/or moral development and reasoning is therefore more than "a good idea;" it is a necessity.

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