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TITLE: What Makes Teaching a Moral Activity?

SOURCE: The Educational Forum 63 no1 58-64 Fall '98

Ask a group of teachers if teaching is a moral activity, and chances are the response will be immediate and unanimous--"Of course it is!" Ask the same group what it means to say that teaching is a moral activity, and chances are the responses will be neither immediate nor unanimous.

For some educators, the question would raise thoughts about the ethics of the teaching profession (Ungaretti, Dorsey, Freeman, and Bologna 1997; Goodlad, Soder, and Sirotnik 1990; Sockett 1993). For what are teachers responsible? To whom? How does the role of the teacher constrain the person who fills that role? What should be the relationship between teacher and student? What type of labor practices should teachers employ during contract negotiations?

For others, the explanation of why teaching is a moral activity leads to thoughts about moral or character education (Lickona 1991; Wynne and Ryan 1993). Teachers need not be engaged in ethics, character, or religion classes to be involved in moral education. It occurs in moral lessons embedded in the everyday curricula, assemblies, and ceremonies that punctuate school life, posters and slogans decorating corridors and classrooms, and expressions of approval and disapproval that fill the school day (Jackson, Boostrom, and Hansen 1993).

For yet others, explaining why teaching is a moral activity refers to moral dilemmas that teachers face daily (Campbell 1997): Reading in a student's private journal, a teacher encounters information that should be shared with a parent or school authorities. A student's essay has likely been plagiarized, but the teacher has no proof. A student complains, with some justification, about the goings-on in another class. What should the teacher do in each of these situations?

Additionally, there are those who see education as an "ethically contested domain" (Beyer 1997). Debates over what education ought to be inevitably return educational thinking to moral questions. To talk about ends, we must make ethical choices.

Finally, there are many educators who would say that teaching is a moral activity because it is through education that students are both dissuaded from crime, drugs, and sex and persuaded to become contributing members of society. The idea that education is the bulwark against immorality was one of the most persuasive arguments for the establishment of a public school

system (Kaestle 1983), and it seems to be just as persuasive today (Kilpatrick 1992; Heslep 1995) as an argument for school reform.

This array of perspectives on the moral dimensions of teaching might not only prove that teaching is a moral activity but show why. Yet none of these arguments--even if taken together--show that teaching has a moral component any more prominent or pervasive than the moral dimensions of, say, running a supermarket or making a movie. Does teaching have a moral aspect unique unto itself? Is the practice of teaching necessarily a moral activity? Or is its moral coloring merely a reflection of the fact that teaching involves people whose lives are fraught with moral concerns? The importance of such questions goes far beyond the academic satisfaction of proper categorization. If we are to understand and discuss the moral influence that teachers exercise, we must be clear about what kind of claim we make in we saying that teaching is a moral activity.

THE MORAL DIMENSION

Each of these attempts to explain the moral nature of teaching is based on the idea that some elements of a teacher's work are morally tinged, while others are not. The first explanation focuses on a teacher's professional code of conduct, but is not especially concerned with how a teacher writes lesson plans or makes up reading lists. The second explanation looks at the moral lessons punctuating the day and assumes that in between them we could find other kinds of lessons. For example, children observing Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday by discussing civil rights would presumably receive a moral lesson, while the arithmetic class in which children practice changing decimals to fractions would not. For those who focus on dilemmas, the moral dimension of teaching appears with the recognition of the dilemma. When there are no predicaments, there are no moral issues. Similarly, if the presence of debate over educational ends raises moral questions, then the absence of such debates leaves education in an amoral state. The teacher who follows the provided plan without concern for outcomes beyond the students' learning the prescribed material is not, therefore, involved in a moral endeavor. Finally, if the moral dimension of teaching lies in the potential for education to uplift society, then teaching that fails in this purpose or treats other ends is not a moral activity.

Even if we subscribe to all of these perspectives, much of what a teacher does has no moral implications. Indeed, many teachers might find conditions that, for others, make salient the moral aspects of teaching that never arise in their own work. The existence of the moral dimension of teaching seems to depend on the context in which the teaching is done and on the perspective

interpreting that experience. In short, for some teachers--perhaps for all teachers some of the time--teaching is not a moral activity.

Many of us involved in education balk at this discomfiting conclusion, even if we remain unsure about what is wrong with it. We find ourselves instinctively wanting to agree with those who proclaim, "Teaching is inherently a moral activity" (Hansen, in press). What might such a claim actually mean? How is it different from the claims already mentioned?

One of the most compelling answers to this question is simply to say that teaching is a moral activity because education seeks to make people better. It "involves the initiation of others into worthwhile activities" (Peters 1966, 144). By "worthwhile," Peters means that subjects such as science, mathematics, history, art, cooking, and carpentry have an intrinsic value not found in bingo, bridge, or billiards. To learn Newton's laws of motion is to improve one's life in a different way from learning how to hit the 6 ball into the side pocket. The activities of the curriculum, Peters (1966, 159) argued, "illuminate other areas of life and contribute much to the quality of living. They have, secondly, a wide-ranging cognitive content which distinguishes them from games." Teachers who initiate students into science, history, or philosophy are necessarily engaged in changing the students' worldview for the better. Teaching thus implies intellectual and moral growth. Furthermore, "being worthwhile is part of what is meant by calling it education" (Peters 1968, 18). If I say, for instance, that my French teacher taught me how to use the language, I have already made the claim that what she did was worthwhile--any talk of an additional moral component of the experience is superfluous.

For Peters, the key point seemed to be that the teacher changes the student's worldview. Seeing clearly is at least as important as--if not more than--information. Socrates, like Peters, argued that intellectual growth and moral growth are necessarily connected, emphasizing the importance of seeing clearly (Boostrom 1998). As we are taught to see more clearly, we experience moral growth. Our betterment lies not in the acquisition of information, "although goodness is connected with knowledge," but in "a refined and honest perception of what is really the case, a patient and just discernment and exploration of what confronts one" (Murdoch 1970).

On the first hearing, Peters's case seems convincing. Teaching is not an occasionally or a partially moral activity; rather, it is an inherently moral endeavor. The moral domain includes all of teaching, because saying we are teaching someone means trying to initiate that person into worthwhile activities and make that person better. However, no one is obliged to accept this definition of education. A student cannot appreciate that an activity is

worthwhile before having been introduced to it. Peters's definition of "education" has no bearing on how many actually do the work we call "teaching."

Once again, we see the shrinking of the moral domain of teaching. The curriculum is merely instrumental, rather than moral, for those who do not see teaching as the initiation of students into worthwhile activities. We cannot force people to see their curricular domain, much less all of teaching, in that light. The argument that Peters offers can simply be ignored.

A MORAL WORLD

Perhaps there is no one aspect of teaching that makes it a moral activity; instead, many different families of moral concerns may appear throughout a teaching life. Though there may be more than a little truth to this pluralistic view of the moral dimensions of teaching, I would like to suggest another approach to the question. From the point of view of a student, what makes teaching a moral activity?

Adding this qualifier does not, of course, remove any of the moral considerations I have already mentioned, but it does raise an important new one. Whatever else a teacher does or does not do, he or she creates in the classroom a social world. The teacher decides what will be done, how it will be done, and what the doing means. He or she defines the "social quality of conduct," and the "moral and the social quality of conduct are, in the last analysis, identical with each other" (Dewey 1916, 358). To say, of course, that any teacher decides in toto what will be done, how it will be done, and what the doing means is to overstate the case. Yet teachers do, in fact, create moral worlds.

WHAT WILL BE DONE

In any classroom, a great deal of what goes on occurs contrary to the teacher's intentions. Consider this example from a fifth-grade classroom (Boostrom 1994, 54-55):

My reaction to Paul is most interesting. Paul is a troublemaker, a talker. Ms. Stroud moved him from beside his friend Willis within the first five minutes of class. He goes unwillingly, gagging himself.

Five minutes after the discussion of *The Autobiography of Ben Franklin* starts, Paul remembers he does not have his book. Through most of the oral reading, Paul fiddles around, playing

with a triangular ruler, looking at a paperback, trying to mouth a message to Willis....

And I think Paul is a subversive; he knows that when he gets up to sharpen his pencil during the oral reading that he's trying to get away with something. Ms. Stroud tells him to sit--he doesn't need a pencil--and he smirks.

Paul's talking, making faces, and getting up during the oral reading are surely not what Ms. Stroud intended. If, however, we think about the point of his actions, we realize they cannot be understood without reference to official class business. Ms. Stroud has decided to spend this portion of class time on a discussion of and reading from Franklin's autobiography, and Paul's behaviors are responses to this official activity. By deforming his role as student rather than simply ignoring it, Paul acknowledges the official business, even as he defines himself in opposition to it. His mock gagging and his smirk express both his awareness of how the classroom operates and his disdain for it. Paul is not behaving as he would on the playground or at home, where his talking would not be muted and his movement would go unnoticed. He is playing his chosen role of outlaw within the setting of Ms. Stroud's fifth-grade classroom. He does not openly denounce the activity or engage fully in some other activity; instead, he accepts that it is within Ms. Stroud's role as teacher to decide how time will be spent. He is critiquing her choice of how to spend time rather than her authority to make such a choice. He is refusing to play the role of "good student"--but not refusing to be any kind of "student."

It is hard to imagine any classroom in which the teacher would not decide how time is spent. Even efforts to draw students into the choice of activities or the construction of curricula begin with the teacher's decision to offer students that opportunity. After all, teachers are responsible for grading and promoting students; they are hired with the expectation that they will plan courses, select materials, and write lessons; they have the list of student names and access to student records. The teachers, not the students, are held accountable by educational institutions and state governments for what happens in classrooms. Students like Paul may interfere with the smooth implementation of the teacher's plans, but they do not make it any less true that the official business of the class originates with the teacher.

HOW IT WILL BE DONE

I once asked students to write an essay describing a "memorable" teacher

and analyzing that teacher's influence. I graded these papers, wrote comments on them, and returned the papers, telling my students that they might revise the papers to improve their grade. When one of my students, an especially good one, came to me with the revision of her essay, she asked, "Is this more what you had in mind?"

It is useless for teachers to reject this kind of talk. I have tried repeatedly to insist that I have no "perfect paper" template in mind, that my comments are drawn from the specifics of individual papers, and that my only aim is to help students say more clearly, coherently, and cogently what they are trying to say. My standard is not the paper I would write, but the paper the student is striving to write. Yet these protestations, however sincere, fail to dissuade my students from their attempts to please me by writing the paper they think I have in mind. Their interpretation of my critique is that I have established some rules for writing papers and their paper has somehow broken these rules. This interpretation is reasonable. Teachers do, in fact, establish and uphold what Black (1962, 109) called "regulation-sense" rules. These rules "come into effect at certain times, continue unchanged or suffer modification, and eventually cease to be in effect. With respect to this kind of rule, it also makes sense to ask such questions as 'Who made this rule?' 'Who has the power to waive the rule?' 'Who punishes breaches of the rule?'"

In classrooms, the answer to these questions is, of course, "the teacher." The teacher rules on matters from dress and deportment to the care of materials and the procedures for evaluation. Any critique a teacher makes carries with it regulative force. My critique of a student's paper is--from the student's perspective--not a wonderfully informed interpretation; it is an expression of my rules for writing papers. If I told students that whatever they write is acceptable, that would become the rule.

The student who turned in the essay also implied that my rules are different from those she has encountered in other classrooms. "Learning what the teacher wants" is something the "good student" does in every class with every teacher. The fact that my student had other teachers that expected essays to be clear, coherent, and cogent does not tell her everything she must know to succeed in my class, because she has to learn how I interpret these rules of composition.

The words by which teachers express classroom rules may sound the same but, upon interpretation, become aspects of quite different ways of living. The teacher who instructs students to follow a set form for essay writing and the one who instructs students in the use of prewriting and organizing strategies may both rightly say they are encouraging clear writing. However, the student who achieves "clarity" in the first classroom will have a new set

of lessons to learn to achieve "clarity" in the second. Each teacher determines how the business of his or her class will be done.

WHAT THE DOING MEANS

The moral significance of these decisions becomes most apparent when we remember that teachers define the meaning of the doing. They do this primarily through control of language. Here is an example from Mr. Jordan's second-grade classroom:

The children were finishing up the afternoon with an assortment of activities--art projects, math and phonics worksheets, and secret-code puzzles. Mr. Jordan was seated by himself at a large table, checking students' work and answering questions. Suddenly looking up, he rang a bell and said, "Guys, there's a lot of unnecessary chatter. If you're working, you can't be talking to someone else."

Mr. Jordan's brief rebuke tells us a great deal about his classroom. "Chatter" and "talking" are contrasted with "working," which implies that "work" is not a social activity. It is a mainly interior, entirely individual affair, something that happens without comment. Rather than working by communicating with others, students work by themselves. They must be independent to do their work. Furthermore, work is important in this place--necessary in a way that talking is not. When Mr. Jordan observes "unnecessary chatter," he is doing more than simply describing current conditions in the classroom. He is passing judgment on his students, telling them to change their behavior, because they are not doing what they are supposed to be doing.

Now consider how language shapes a different world in Ms. Hamilton's firstgrade classroom (Jackson, Boostrom, and Hansen 1993, 54):

Ms. Hamilton [sitting with a reading group] noticed that Richard [who was at the far end of the room from her] was talking rather loudly to the girl at the desk closest to him. He'd been talking to her about picking out a pumpkin for Halloween.

"Richard! Richard!" said Ms. Hamilton, "are you visiting or helping?" Without a pause, Richard said, "Helping."

"Could you do it in a quieter voice?"

In Ms. Hamilton's classroom, talk makes work possible, because work is a social activity, and it rightly calls for the help of others. Her way of setting off "helping" and "vising" allows something unimaginable in Mr. Jordan's classroom--"necessary chatter." The language these teachers employ shapes the meaning of the doing in these two worlds. Every teacher establishes a classroom language through which a habit of valuing in accordance with his or her own view of classroom life develops. The ways in which teachers define routines, assignments, and standards imply notions of the function of humanity, the aims and ends of personhood, and the bonds and duties of membership in a society. Students learn not only what it means to be a good student but what it means to be a good person. The lesson is localized spatially and temporally; but, within the classroom walls and during the school day, a teacher's definition of the regulative rules governing the business of classroom life bring into being a unique moral world. To be a student is to live within that moral world.

TEACHING AS A MORAL ACTIVITY

Every teacher defines the social quality of conduct, a way of looking at the world, and a social perspective. He or she decides how time will be spent, interprets the rules of classroom life, and establishes the language of the classroom. This dimension of teaching does not depend on a distinction between good and bad teachers, whether a teacher does or does not accept a certain perspective on teaching, or teaching certain subjects, kinds of students, or at a certain level. It does not depend on issues, curricular materials, or methods of instruction. This dimension of teaching exists whether or not teachers think of themselves as professionals or ponder the aims of teaching. Most important, every act of a teacher--from how he or she greets (or does not greet) students in the morning to how he or she grades papers before going to sleep at night--helps to shape what will be done, how it will be done, and what the doing means.

Other moral dimensions of teaching may seem more prominent or more pressing. Newspaper headlines about murders in schools or sexual relations between teachers and students may arouse us to indignation or action in a way that the moral world of the classroom does not. Yet we should remember that these pressing issues and dilemmas draw temporary and occasional responses, while the moral world that each teacher creates in the classroom does its shaping every moment, hours a day, month in and month out. Of course, awareness of this moral bedrock of teaching does not lend itself to quick response or immediate action. To say that teachers define the social quality of conduct does not tell us how to control this power nor at

what ends to aim it. It does, however, tell us what kind of claim we are making when we say that teaching is a moral activity.

ADDED MATERIAL

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