

Improving Teacher Education Students' Ethical Thinking Using the Community of Inquiry Approach

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This paper describes an Australian university teaching development project aimed at improving the quality of student thinking about and for values and ethics in the profession of teaching.¹ The project involves the design, development, implementation, evaluation, and refinement of the teaching methods and materials of a compulsory undergraduate subject for teacher education students at Griffith University. The subject, called Values in Education, uses philosophical inquiry as its core teaching method and draws upon theories and ideas from the study of applied ethics for its content.

Over the course of a semester, students enrolled in this subject are required to evaluate the possible contributions of teachers and schools to achieving greater ethical and moral coherence in both the personal and social aspects of human life. The following features of the teaching method and materials are central components in our attempt to improve students' thinking about this issue: promotion of the value of inquiry and the skills and attitudes essential for inquiry; engaging students in inquiries within the supportive context of the collaborative group; having students reflect on the meta-normative basis of their inquiries; and the evaluation of various components of their inquiries through self and peer-assessment. The next section of the paper describes the rationale that supports these claims.

DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

The problem

Many students possess deep-seated but naive belief systems about morality and ethics that preclude the notion that values or ethical principles or claims can be critically evaluated (Momeyer 1995, Hughes 1996, Gampel 1996). This poses a problem for teachers of ethics concerned with educating their students about the possibilities of ethical evaluation that arise out of the rich tradition of ethical theory. But we know from educational research that this problem is just one instance of the more general problem that students' prior beliefs act as 'alternative frameworks' to the 'accepted frameworks' of current best theory and practice (Biggs 1991). What this research also tells us is that these alternative frameworks can be maintained by students even though they might manifest in the university setting

the formal knowledge about, say, values and ethics that is required by their subject or course. These alternative frameworks can then become activated in 'real world' settings displacing the accepted frameworks from the arena of decision-making. All is not lost, however, for Biggs (1987) suggests that the use of teaching strategies that encourage students to adopt a deep learning approach rather than a surface learning approach will help ameliorate this problem.

Deep-learning

We have adopted three strategies in order to develop deep-learning in the students enrolled in our subject. Firstly, in common with other approaches to ethics education, we use carefully designed ethical dilemmas or problems in order to reveal the pre-existing features of students' ethical frameworks. Secondly, these dilemmas are studied cooperatively by small groups of students. This allows for the critique of students' ethical frameworks against those of their peers as well as the standard frameworks learnt in lectures. Our third strategy is to have students evaluate the characteristics of their critical and communicative practices as together they inquire into ethical problems. In this way students are encouraged to critically reflect on their experience of the ethical features of cooperative problem-solving in order to more deeply appreciate how embedded are the ethical elements of human life.

The vehicle we use for integrating these three strategies is the community of inquiry. This is an approach to co-operative learning based upon a teaching model, first developed by Matthew Lipman, that is widely used in schools and known as the Philosophy for Children program. Lipman's aims were to strengthen children's reasoning skills, especially in the areas of comprehension, analysis, and problem solving across all curriculum areas (Lipman 1988, Lipman, Sharp, & Oscanyan 1980). The idea of the community of inquiry is to provide a cooperative group learning context within which the thinking of students can be shared, tested, and improved on, and one that promotes the valuing of inquiry (Splitter & Sharp 1995). While Lipman's approach utilises novels that raise philosophical issues as the basis of whole class discussion, we develop our communities of inquiry through the creation of small collaborative learning groups (CLGs), which focus on inquiring into the ethical dilemmas that are provided to them, and by allocating whole-class sessions to the staged development of skills that can support the cooperative activities of the CLGs.

Supporting reciprocity

Apart from providing a vehicle to achieve the benefits of deep learning through cooperative learning activity (Slavin 1980), our approach to the community of inquiry also stresses that reciprocity is both a central feature of co-operative activity and an important element, perhaps the most important, in the development and nurturing of the ethical person (Singer 1993). However, reciprocity is not automatically achieved in discussion groups, it needs to be supported by the teaching and learning process. For example, Ballantyne (1993), in the evaluation of an earlier project, has identified the need for the facilitation and management of student group interactions so that students «feel free to participate and are not 'drowned out' by the vocal minority». This problem arises especially whenever ap-

proaches to teaching and learning involve the discussion by students of controversial issues. We attempt to explicitly address this problem by focusing on certain skills and attitudes we think necessary to developing the reciprocity of exchange that underpins the cooperative character of the community of inquiry: listening to others; building on the discussion points of the previous speaker; identifying assumptions; questioning assumptions; recognising contradictions; making distinctions and connections; correcting one's own thinking; caring for the procedures of inquiry; and being committed to searching for truth or the best position.

The role of assessment and evaluation

The evaluative character of the skills being developed, and their setting within the community of inquiry, directs students to focus on considering the group and its accomplishments. Skills-based activities are devised to accomplish this by emphasising group processing, such as encouraging awareness of the individual's role as a participant in a group, so that participants become self-correcting. Participants learn to reflect upon the ways in which they participate by completing self- and group assessment checklists. These activities help promote individual responsibility for the functioning of the group, thus fostering the sort of climate required for a community of inquiry - a climate of group reflection, self-reflection and self-evaluation that aims to encourage «a willingness to modify behaviour for the well-being of the group as a whole» (de Haan, MacColl & McCutcheon, 1995, p.36). By reflecting on group process participants are able to concentrate on how they and others operate rather than on what was produced and the reflective exercise is on process not on criticising the person. The emphasis on peer and self-assessment is a particular strength of our approach to the community of inquiry as a vehicle for learning about ethics. As the subject progresses, the students as a group can assess whether they have gained a deeper understanding of the technical and ethical skills that are required for good discussion. And the teaching staff can assess the degree to which students are achieving coherence between their ethical and moral viewpoints and their involvement in the processes of group inquiry.

In the next section we describe our teaching method in greater detail.

DETAILS OF THE TEACHING METHOD

The teaching method is supported by teaching materials and the means of processing these materials. Each of these is discussed in turn below.

Teaching Materials

Two sets of teaching and learning support materials have been developed for use in regular, flexible or open learning contexts: *Engaging with Ethics* and *Ethical Problems in Education*.

Engaging with Ethics offers strategies directed at helping students develop and maintain communities of inquiry. These strategies include thinking skills activities and practical exercises to be used in conjunction with a summary of those ethical perspectives that reflect the most promising theories currently discussed in philosophical and educational circles. In addition, checklists or analytic frames are provided so that students can evaluate their groups strengths and weaknesses as a community of inquiry. In discussing different ethical perspectives we do not advocate any particular moral point of view. Although the perspectives we present to students - viz., consequentialism, non-consequentialism, virtue ethics and an ethic of care - represent some basic options about ethics, these perspectives are by no means exhaustive of the options within ethical theory. However, we consider that our introduction to these perspectives is sufficient for students to understand some of the issues surrounding the study of ethics and to be able to develop an adequate conception of ethics in the course of initiating productive exchanges about how ethics should be dealt with in light of institutional realities and possibilities.

Ethical Problems in Education consists of descriptive portrayals of values issues or problems located in educational settings. These are grouped in sections covering different problem types. Students will be required to analyse these problems for alternative 'solutions'. Example analyses are provided at the beginning of each section. We consider that the study of cases is an effective means for demonstrating the application of ethical principles or considerations; a way to teach practical ethics.

The aim of the case method is to help students become better ethical decision-makers by raising ethical questions within a framework of realistic situations. Each case is a short scenario containing characters depicted in situations with which students can clearly identify. Rather than merely present abstract scenarios, as many values clarification programs tend to do, we have constructed actual situations that take into account contextual particularity.² The main reason for using characters and situations that closely resemble the students' own experiences is to ensure students are able to recognise or discover some of the subtleties that actually exist in real-life ethical problems. Such an approach also permits an understanding of cause and consequence which engages compassion and tolerance to distinguish ethical deliberation derived from actual dilemmas in their contextual particularity from morality based on abstract scenarios. By taking into account contextual particularity, i.e., supplying additional or missing information that may be relevant to abstract scenarios, students judgments are shifted «away from the hierarchical ordering of principles and the formal procedures of decision making» (Gilligan, 1982, p.101).

Most moral dilemma approaches involve scenarios that provide students with starkly presented morally salient features, with few contextual markers, and then go on to show students how to deal with these situations. We find that the problem with this model is that students are unable to recognise these same features when present amidst the complexities of real-life events. Unlike these models of ethical case study, our approach is designed to prime an ethical response, that is, for students to be able to recognise for themselves the morally salient features of their daily activities as beginning professionals or during periods of practice teaching in schools. To achieve this, initially we begin with simply depicted accounts that contain morally problematic elements, presented in much the same way as the standard approach to moral dilemmas. This allows us to introduce students to the structural elements of our

approach to classroom dialogue (see below) and as an initial introduction to the four ethical perspectives. With this initial grounding in the mechanism of dialogue, and ethical theory, students are able to engage more fruitfully with other accounts containing an increasing order of complexity and that therefore demand of them greater degrees of insight or moral recognition.

Classroom dialogue

Apart from the distinction drawn above, our approach differs in two other ways from other approaches to the study of ethics. Firstly, whereas traditional approaches to moral dilemmas point to the subject matter for learning within descriptions of moral dilemmas, our approach draws attention to the embodiment of the subject matter of ethics within the processes of classroom dialogue. That is, students come to appreciate that good ethical inquiry possesses ethical qualities, for example, respecting others' contributions, caring for the procedures of inquiry, being committed to searching for truth or the best position. Secondly, we place much emphasis on the building of a community of inquiry through students' engagement with a series of thinking skills activities, and practical exercises, which scaffold upon one another via an intelligible, logically-linked sequence of steps. Classroom dialogue takes place in whole class discussion and independent collaborative learning groups (CLGs).

CLGs are used to introduce students to the ethical dilemmas, and to raise questions about ethics which act as a springboard for whole group discussion for the purposes of engaging in thinking skills activities. Whole class discussion refers to the participation of all individuals of the community or class in the community of inquiry. Whilst ultimately the community of inquiry will take place in whole class discussion, if class sizes are too large it may be more effective to have each CLG act as a nominal individual for the purpose of simulating a smaller class. When this takes place we call it inter-group discussion. In this case, students acquire the requisite skills of philosophical inquiry through scaffolding on 'thinking skills activities' in their CLGs.

The skills learnt by students engaged in the 'thinking skills activities' are: learning to appreciate others' contributions; cooperating and communicating; getting across ideas and asking questions; and recognising and formulating reasons. The activities are arranged such that the scaffolding of skills acquisition takes place. This involves students attending to a skill, e.g., learning to appreciate others' contributions, whilst engaging in small group discussion over some aspect of ethical subject matter. Subsequent episodes of discussion incorporate additional thinking skills in the same way. For instance, in being introduced to the next skill, viz., cooperating and communicating, and attending to this skill in the discussion activity, students are reminded to attend also to the previously learnt skill. This results in students building a repertoire of thinking skills. These episodes of classroom discussion should be followed immediately by group assessment. Group members provide formative feedback on each other's and the group's performance within a community of inquiry. Formative feedback operates as an ongoing indicator as to whether the requisite skills and dispositions become more apparent in student discussion over the duration of the subject.

As we mention above, the CLGs are used to introduce some of the ethical dilemmas that students are likely to experience as professionals. At the end of each chapter additional information is supplied

that might alter the circumstances of the dilemma. In addition, the case study and cases in each subsequent chapter develop in complexity so that students gradually experience the subtleties and nuances involved in ethical decision-making. Students are encouraged, as part of the development of their moral imagination, to examine the repercussions of applying the different moral theories outlined in *Engaging with Ethics* to the dilemmas and to compare the outcomes of employing the various perspectives.

The following is suggested for using the case method with CLGs. Firstly, we begin by asking students what issues they consider the case raises. Secondly, we have students, upon a closer inspection, identify the relevant factors. They then may find that some of their issues may have dissipated under this closer observation. Thirdly, we have students develop a list of options and then, fourthly, test out these options. Students can do this by drawing on some of the methods and concepts used by various ethical perspectives (consequentialism, virtue ethics, etc.) in order to evaluate options. Students can compare how each of the different perspectives might give alternative solutions or bring about different problems. It is noteworthy that this test is not necessarily decisive. Instead the purpose is to bring notice to any relevant considerations. It is also a way to introduce moral theories into decision-making, and to help students think about how practical problems may impinge upon their own moral beliefs. Finally, each student discusses and reviews the issues with other members of their group in the context of speaking to their peers in pairs, in small group discussions and in whole group discussions. This is done within the context of philosophical inquiry so that theoretical considerations can guide reasoning as part of the process of ethical inquiry.

Using the case method to develop ethical character requires practise. But once students become acquainted with the method it provides a safe and realistic environment in which to experiment with ideas and various approaches to ethics.

CONCLUSION

The teaching materials and methods are intended to be innovative and practical solutions to the problem of advancing teaching, learning, and assessment within ethics and values education. Although our project focuses on the education of pre-service teachers, because all professions possess a moral dimension (Fenstermacher 1990) the project outcomes may also be of relevance to university and college teaching in other fields of professional studies. The project can be distinguished from most approaches to ethics education at the tertiary level in two ways. Firstly, it seeks to emphasise the link between the content focus of student learning (i.e., ethics and values education) and the process focus on students' own ethics and values as these become activated by the teaching and learning approach taken. Secondly, we have adapted in a novel fashion the community of inquiry approach from its most common setting in elementary schools. Although the use of this approach in higher education is untested, it has successfully been used in elementary schools around the world to improve the quality of student thinking about important open-ended issues, such as those found in the ethics and values arena.

The teaching and learning arrangements developed in this project involve strategies that demand reflection and struggle on the part of students as they bring prior belief systems to the tasks of problem-solving and the active construction of meaning. The community of inquiry engages students and improves their ethical reasoning and judgment in ways that a more didactic approach or various values clarification programs cannot. Students are encouraged to reason about ethics as a public undertaking in which reasons are appropriate, insofar as they can see the impact of ethical reasoning on themselves and others during discussion in the class. We hope that, as prospective professionals, students will come to understand that ethical decisions must consider everyone who might be affected by these decisions.

NOTES

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2. Cases have been written from real-life accounts obtained in an empirical research project that looked at the ethical decision-making in schools undertaken by Dempster, Freakley & Parry (1998).

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[Back to current electronic table of contents](#)