



## The Ethics of Teaching and the Teaching of Ethics

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Teachers' work covers many things: ethics is one of them. For teachers, ethics is more than just a code of ethics which does no more than codify a set of principles and rules which serve aspirational and/or disciplinary purposes. Teachers, as professionals, are engaged in one of the most ethically demanding jobs, the education of young people; thus it is that teachers need to constantly reflect on the ethics of their activities to ensure that in their work they exhibit the best ethical example possible to those they are morally educating.

If teachers are to be ethically aware then there is an important place for the inclusion of ethical content in pre-service teacher education programmes. But, as I have found out, addressing ethical issues in teaching is no straightforward matter; disputes and disagreements are to the fore. My experience covered two related aspects: the ethics of teaching and tackling that which student teachers need to confront, and the teaching of ethics – dealing with professional ethics in the academy arising out of a commitment to the ideals of academic freedom and of raising ethical considerations above the mundane (e.g., the ethics of what a teacher ought to do if she finds a \$5 note on the floor!).

I lecture in a compulsory paper for third year BEd (Tchg) students in a pre-service primary teacher education programme. One component of the paper is on the ethics of teaching which I have responsibility for. My focus is on what does a beginning teacher need to know about ethics and the ethics of teaching. Over a four week period I cover the following:

1. Social ideals, institutional values and the ethical teacher: codes of ethics and ethical theories.
2. Understanding teacher-student relationships: respect for persons, impartiality, inequality, trust, privacy, confidentiality, cooperation and competition.
3. Tensions in teacher-student relationships: rights, student freedom and autonomy and teacher authority, discipline and punishment.
4. Pedagogical issues: equality and grouping students, intellectual liberty and curriculum censorship, fairness and assessment, evaluation and appraisal of students.

The unit clearly polarised students. Here are some responses from the end of Semester course evaluation:

- *Thought provoking.*
- *Being stimulated to think is good.*
- *Thought these lectures were brilliant. It finally brought a realistic view on teaching with real life contexts, not contexts with a class of complete 'angels'. Really was good to talk about such situations and how they could be dealt with fairly and ethically.*
- *I though it was wonderful that someone finally decided to tackle the sensitive issues. I have been worried about how to react to a child telling me to 'fuck off' for a long time and now I feel much more confident about going into teaching experience.*

On the other hand:

- *This was highly inappropriate.*
- *I feel some of the subject matter referred to was not at all appropriate to be included in a compulsory lecture. Subject matter was offensive. I don't believe it is appropriate to swear and use crude examples in an educative and professional setting such as a College of Education. Some of us do not think or speak in that manner so why should we be subjected to that at our formal education. Ethics will always be a controversial area, but care should be taken that lectures are delivered in a professional manner. Would you deliver the same material and subject matter to a lecture theatre full of principals or other school members? I would not feel comfortable doing so. What image does it give the college?*

These views reflect some deeper philosophical disputes which have long characterised teacher education, and I very much doubt that they will be easily resolved.

## **TEACHER OR EDUCATOR**

For most students in the pre-service teacher education programme, the whole purpose of their engagement is in acquiring the skills, attitudes and knowledge which can equip them as a teacher to go into the classroom and do the job they are employed to do. They demand no more and expect no less. Some even go on to become very competent teachers. But as I point out to students, there is nothing at all that remarkable about being a teacher: as part of the human condition we all learn and we all teach so the professional teacher is only an extension on what we all do anyway. And to drive the point home: Fagan was a good teacher; he taught his pick-pocket boys very well indeed! No, I want more than teachers, I want educators.

Students enter a College of *Education* and undertake a programme in teacher *education* and graduate with a Bachelor of *Education*. The word *education* is constantly to the fore, but appears to be largely ignored. It ought not to be! Above all else, we should be preparing our students to become educators so that they in turn can educate children. (This of course means that

teacher educators themselves also need to be educated and who 'educate' rather than merely 'train' students.) So, what is it to be educated? I offer no more than some pointers. I begin with Socrates: 'the unexamined life is not worth living'. Here are some ideas: critical, rational, autonomous, creative, responsible, open-minded, reasons, learning for its own sake, problem-solver and on we could go. In short, I do not just want teachers who teach children things, I want teachers who can open minds, offer new insights, create opportunities, extend visions, challenge authority, and become ethical citizens in a socially-just democracy. Of this, I demand no more and expect no less. But it is a difficult task in an age when being educated counts for less than being trained.

### **PRACTICAL OR THEORETICAL**

Teacher education is like the Roman god Janus: it must look both ways, to the practice of the classroom and the theory of the academy. It cannot be one but not the other; it is both. To paraphrase Kant, practice without theory is blind, theory without practice is empty. Students often say they want more practical and less theoretical learning. Up to a point one can understand this, for practice is their practice. But we should heed Dewey's warning that nothing is so practical as a good theory. Our practice is not theory free – what we do is guided by our theory, what we hold to be true, good, right or proper. A student who does not want to engage in theorising about practice is a student who does not want to change their practice. We improve our practice when we begin to theorise about our practice in different ways, to see things in a different light, to see the world in ways we saw it not before. For teacher educators, the trick is to help students see how the theory links to their thought and to their practice. So, theory and practice do not constitute a mutually exclusive dualism but are mutually interdependent.

### **CLASSROOM COCOON OR POLITICAL CONTEXT**

Students often have a very naïve picture of classrooms – they are nice 'warm' places bounded by four walls where teachers and children work in harmony, enjoy each other's company, and 'life is wonderful'. Here, the outside world does not intrude at all to disturb the idyllic experience. Now, students can be forgiven for thinking such things, especially when teacher educators profess similar views - according to a senior New Zealand educational researcher, 'I strongly believe that politics and reading should not mix. We are dealing with young children whose educational future and employment prospects largely depend on their grasp of the alphabetic principle and their ability to comprehend (their knowledge of words and the world). Keep politics out of reading' (Anonymous reviewer). Politics, in the sense of deeper values about the good life, the sort of society we ought to have and the sort of life we ought to live, permeates everything, including classrooms and reading!! No facet of our lives is immune from this political influence. So, students need to be made acutely aware of the politics of teachers' work so that they are adequately prepared for

the challenging experiences they will most certainly have to confront and ethically deal with.

### **CONSERVATIVE OR LIBERAL**

The conservative–liberal divide runs deep, in society generally and among teacher education students in particular. We might be able to persuade most students that as teachers they are, first and foremost, educators. We may be able to correct their conceptual misunderstanding about the nature of and relationship between theory and practice. We may even get them to see that they cannot escape political forces, however much they might wish it were otherwise! But, as one student wrote on their Course Evaluation form: ‘Everyone gets so wound up – the students aren’t going to relent on their opinions’. I think this is absolutely right. On so many matters, educational and otherwise, the positions taken are consistent with the underlying value stance – if we are liberally inclined then we tend to see things by our lights; if we are conservative, likewise. This divide divides us deeply and on the ethics of teaching, as with the ethics of all else, students will be polarised. Some will be offended, others not. Some will be devastated, others delighted. So be it.

### **ACADEMIC FREEDOM OR PROFESSIONAL CENSORSHIP**

Academic freedom is an essential feature of university life; to be able to test ideas to determine their truth. This requires the robust challenge of all ideas, be they from those in authority or those subject to it. There are, of course, some limits to academic freedom, but professional censorship is not one of them.

In my lectures on the ethics of teaching I said some things which caused some offence to some students and some staff. Complaints by both were made to the Course Coordinator, my Head of Department and to the Director of Teacher Education. We met and the issues were aired in an honest and frank exchange of viewpoints.

What did I say that caused such offence? Amongst the things I said were ‘kids may tell you to “fuck off” whilst in the context of a discussion on drawing the social and ethical boundaries of appropriate and inappropriate relationships, I made reference to three sexual practices with actual real-life examples (from recent NZ newspapers), albeit of a non-educational nature: paedophilia, bestiality, necrophilia. Some thought these words were unnecessary and were deeply upset. At the time I felt aggrieved; now I feel vindicated. On the expression ‘fuck off’ two things are worth reporting: as quoted earlier, one student reported now having the confidence to deal with being told to ‘fuck off’, and a second student, just returned from teaching experience, literally fell apart emotionally over being told ‘fuck off!’ As for the three unmentionables, an article in the *Sunday Star Times*, titled ‘School computers in porn check’ (Ross, 2004), had this to say: E-crime forensic director Chris Budge was reported as saying the prevalence in schools of extreme objectionable material such as, and I quote, ‘images of paedophilia, bestiality or necrophilia’ was ‘very small’, but E-

crime was called in to deal with incidents of computer misuse in schools about once every week.

Student teachers, and some teacher educators, may want to put their heads in the sand about such matters, but as the ostrich found out, this is not a sound strategy for appropriately and professionally dealing with such objectionable and obscene moral and ethical issues. In short, in the teaching of ethics I put truth first, with personal sensitivities and institutional reputations second, and that is the way it should be.

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

As a philosopher in the spirit of Socrates, I have confronted the ethics of teaching front on. It comes at a cost, as I found out. Fortunately, unlike Socrates, my accusers did not hand me a chalice of hemlock. Their mistake, perhaps, because like Socrates I too shall continue to 'corrupt the youth' in the interests of education, theorised practice, political engagement and a liberal search for social justice. This, after all, is what the ethics of teaching is all about.

## **REFERENCES**

Ross, T. (2004) School computers in porn check. *Sunday Star Times*. July 4. A14.

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## About the Author(s)

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