

# Ethical reading: An overlooked aspect of education

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This article is concerned with a region of educational development tends to be easily marginalised.

## The three kinds of development

There are three kinds of development we need to foster in students

|                                  |   |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Conceptual development           | mastery of the ideas, theories, concepts of an academic discipline      |
| Ethical/professional development | identification with the values, principles, commitments of a profession |
| Practical skill development      | fluency in the skills and procedures of a domain of practice            |

**Focus of your Unit of Study:** Does the unit or module you are delivering develop all three goals (academic discipline, ethical/professional values, practical skills)? Does it emphasise one or the other? Is it in a strand that concentrates more on academic understanding, professional orientation, or practical skills?

## Three kinds of reading

There are three kinds of reading that correspond to the three kinds of development

|                    |   |
|--------------------|---|
| Conceptual reading | reading for ideas, theories, concepts of an academic discipline |
| Ethical reading    | reading for the values, principles, commitments of a profession |
| Practical reading  | reading for the skills and procedures of a domain of practice   |

**Focus of readings:** Do your readings mirror the emphasis of the unit? Or have you focused the readings on one region? eg you might teach skills through practical sessions and not need readings; you might provide ethical experience through visiting speakers and videos. This means you can concentrate your readings on conceptual development.

On the other hand, you might do the conceptual reading in workshop because it is difficult and assign ethical reading for post-workshop because it is mainly narrative and easier to follow.

## ETHICAL READING

**Ethical reading should not be forgotten:** Ethical reading is the Cinderella of the three kinds of academic reading. It has often been sidelined to church, popular magazines and therapeutic self-help books. Or it is thought of as light reading, fictional reading for pleasure and entertainment. But ethics is what drives the goals, values and commitment of students and staff, in fact everyone, in a professional field. Even the drive for money is an ethical principle although not a very good one.

**Ethics and Stories:** Ethical understandings are usually transmitted through stories and narratives. We deepen our ethical principles more through stories about persons and how they act in particular situations than through abstract codes of ethics or lengthy argument about formal principles. Even expository self-help texts rely on lots of stories and scenarios to make their abstractions 'feel real'. Ethics are 'made real' by 'encountering' in reality or vicariously a person who embodies values in their actions and life. So, it is by meeting face-to-face, or by seeing movies about, or by reading stories about professional people, their lives and the way their lives embody a set of values and commitments that we too learn how to be committed and what that commitment amounts to in real life.

**Different ways of presenting ethical experience:** How do you provide ethical texts and experience for students to identify with? Do you present exemplary persons who embody the principles and commitments of your profession by:

- bringing in speakers?
- showing movies or videos?

- assigning narrative texts?

### Further Readings

Ever since the establishment of mass public education as free and secular the notion that education is a training in ethical demeanours and attitudes, not just cognition and skills, has been relegated to the margins. For classical liberalism, a concern for ethics and values is a private matter and liable to the charge of indoctrination. However the dramatic increase of independent schools based on religion and ethnicity has forced the question of ethical education back onto the agenda. In the US the radical Christian Right is pushing 'character education' to replace liberal 'values clarification'.

Recently there has been a upsurge of interest in two areas underpinning the question of ethics in education: *emotions* as forms of reasoning and ways of knowing; *narrative* as a fundamental form of knowing; and *metaphor* as ways of reasoning. All three areas of inquiry are concerned to replace the rationalist (Cartesian) concept of a person as a disembodied cognitive mind and replace it with a more embodied concept of mind, intelligence and reasoning.

In education there is interest in 'emotional intelligence' eg Goleman (1996). And Gilligan's (1982) feminine 'ethic of care' has undermined the dominance of the rationalist 'ethic of justice' deriving from Piaget and

Interest in narrative as a fundamental way of knowing has been foregrounded by Paul Ricoeur (1984-8), Kearney (2002), and Clandinin and Connolly (2000). In an educational context, Jerome Bruner (1986) has always emphasised that there are two complementary kinds of human capacities: scientific theories and narrative.

In management theory, there is a revival of interest in professional ethics, vision and so on cf Senge (1992). Philosophically, the key figure (together with many others) is Martha Nussbaum, a Harvard philosopher with a long established interest in Greek ethics, emotions, and the uses of literature for ethical reflection and cultivation. Her latest offering is *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotion*.

A related development is the focus on 'judgment' in workplace training insofar as judgment is grounded in underlying dispositions and attunements that derive, not from concepts, but from storied contextualised experience. This is a tradition that traces itself back to Kant's notion of reflective judgment and to Aristotle's concept of practical judgement (*phronesis*) and to the more recent tradition of American pragmatism, in particular John Dewey. Two representative texts, one American and one Australian are Schön (1983, 1987, 1991) and Beckett and Hager (2002).

The key authors in exploring the implications of metaphor for reinventing our concept of mind are George Lakoff and Mark Taylor.

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