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Integration of Ethics with American Pedagogy

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Abstract

The United States has established itself, for better or worse, as the single most powerful country in the world. The American school system was not designed to familiarize its students with the language and concepts of ethics they will need as heirs and future leaders of a nation with ever increasing global reach and influence. This article proposes a program for the integration of ethics consciousness and vocabulary with standard American pedagogy. Practical examples of techniques and materials are proposed for utilization by intentional teachers of students from pre-K through college level.

Introduction

The United States has established itself, for better or worse, as the single most powerful country in the world. This means that future generations of Americans, the majority of whom will receive their primary education in U.S. public schools and colleges, will shoulder the vast and growing responsibility of world leadership. Young Americans, heirs of a great nation, will be the political and business leaders, consumers, workers, and voters into whose hands will fall the growing issues, future planning, strategic thinking, and human relations throughout the world. The current pedagogy at the heart of the American school system in 2006 was not designed to provide its students with knowledge of ethics principles or language, tools they will inevitably require as they face a demanding global future.

The Americans of tomorrow, facing global issues, will be forced to make decisions that will build or destroy tolerance, make or break peace with other nations, and protect or ignore the value of the world's natural resources. If the young Americans of today are to act as world leaders of tomorrow, if they are to make decisions that will benefit humanity and the Earth, they must be equipped to recognize not only the business and political potential in domestic and world situations but the ethics involved in complex scenarios. Only then can they fully evaluate complex

situations and open critical dialogues between diverse parties toward cooperation and peace.

Proposed herein is a practical plan that will result in the integration of just such an understanding of the most basic universal ethical values with standard American pedagogy from the preschool to college levels. This phased approach can provide a long-term strategy to foster more balanced, globally minded, and ethically aware Americans. By integrating ethical concepts and language within the teaching units executed as part of standard curricula, teachers will provide their students with a new, critical ability. Given a basic understanding of ethical principles, students will be able to articulate ethical concerns and open dialogues related to world and domestic issues. It is acknowledged that the codes of ethics and behavior by which future generations of Americans are thus educated will naturally and rightly encompass many other factors and be individualized and self-determined in accordance with the principles of American democracy. Thus, this program will serve to embellish and broaden American dialogue and interaction at home and abroad with language beyond the traditional strategic vocabulary based in the American ideals of capitalism, individualism, consumerism, and democracy.

If the United States continues in its current superpower role, ethics consciousness and the ability to identify and articulate ethical issues should not be optional for Americans. The hope is that with these valuable techniques, future generations of Americans will not be recognized only for the stuff of current headlines. This article discusses current pedagogy, provides support from experts, and offers practical suggestions based on field observations for achieving a basic level of ethical consciousness within the current structure of preschool, primary, secondary, and college level academic programs.

Thesis Background

Few would disagree that a clear understanding of ethical concepts and language in all Americans would be most valuable. At the least, students and children with an understanding of beneficence (the responsibility of human goodness one to another), nonmaleficence (the responsibility to do no harm to another), justice (fairness), veracity, and autonomy would likely exhibit behavior that would make the jobs of their parents, guardians, and teachers, if not more enjoyable, at least less stressful. One

would expect that children armed with ethical language might be equipped to articulate ethical questions that would open doors to much meaningful and educational discussion.

In the early colonial schools of America, male students were essentially trained to read and write, using a paddle book that included excerpts of prayers and, later, the Bible *(Grenet 2004, 1)*. The Christian principles inherent in these materials reinforced the religious beliefs of the families of the predominantly white male children being educated at the time. Dame schools, which were based in private homes and taught by women, rarely had access to paddle books and the like, so the curricula of such schools varied from one community to another according to the level of education of the mother or maiden aunt that taught the classes. The underlying principles or ethics that evolved in such early classrooms were certainly limited to the more pronounced religious influences of the community.

Other schools were patterned after ancient foundations of teaching. One example is the Boston Latin School,

> . . . the oldest public school in America with a continuous existence. The school was founded April 23, 1635 by the Town of Boston, antedating Harvard College by more than a year. The curriculum of the school is centered in the humanities, its founders sharing with the ancient Greeks the belief that the only good things are the goods of the soul. Edmund Burke referred to America as exemplifying the "dissidence of dissent." From its beginning, Boston Latin School has taught its scholars dissent with responsibility and has persistently encouraged such dissent. *(Andrews 2002, 1)*

Contemporary professor and author Bell Hooks writes about the powerful quality of dissent in modern American classrooms. In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, she writes, "I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions—a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom" *(Hooks 1994, 12)*. To that end, the integration of ethics with standard pedagogy can be thought of as coming full circle, once more equipping and encouraging students to participate in an atmosphere of scholarly dissent and ethically charged argument.

Integrating Ethics Consciousness with American Pedagogy—Theory in Practice

Can children at early ages and throughout their development benefit from the incorporation of ethics education into the standard curriculum? The work of Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, and Carol Gilligan indicates that even very young children, as well as older ones, can indeed absorb and eventually apply ethics language, vocabulary, and concepts. All three renowned theorists of moral development describe defined stages through which humans normally proceed during which certain characteristic levels of learning are possible and in which particular observable trends in behaviors manifest themselves. The thesis of this article builds on the work of these theorists by suggesting a long-term approach that develops ethical consciousness over the course of the entire educational experience in a manner appropriate to children's capabilities of learning at each stage of maturity from preschool through college.

To provide a student with the proper ethical language, concepts, and vocabulary from an early age and throughout his or her academic career is to equip that child with the tools necessary to achieve a higher level of moral and ethical consciousness. Over time, as such a student reaches each new level of moral maturity, he or she would be better equipped to pose new, ethically based questions in discussions, negotiations, or arguments. In making a decision, discussing an issue, reviewing a chapter in history, arguing over a current event, or undertaking any other type of work in the classroom, the preexisting vocabulary of American thought provides such usual questions as: What are the costs? How much time is involved? What are the risks? What are the expected economic impacts? How will the community react? The ethically educated child would be able to transcend these questions. A ready vocabulary of ethics and a familiarity with ethical concepts would motivate such a student to consider and to ask: What ethics are involved? Who is harmed? What possible good can result? Is truth represented? Are the rights of individuals considered? What of fairness? One can only imagine the depth and impact of such capabilities in every student, and later every adult, in the classroom, the school systems, the communities, and the world at large.

Practical application of the thesis presented here is intended to achieve the integration of ethical concepts, language, and vocabulary into the American classroom. In time this will produce

a new generation able to identify the ethical context of each life decision and maintain it against the myriad of other bases upon which decisions in an adult world must be made. Optimally, every teacher and professor would examine current educational subject matter and ascertain where ethical language and concepts can be included to provide an additional texture, another layer of learning to the fabric of every lesson plan. Existing knowledge of ethics acquired by teachers through their own academic careers or additional instruction or self-study can be augmented through continuing education classes focused on integrative methods of ethics consciousness and similar workshops. Naturally, it is proposed that integrative methodologies, strategies, and techniques become a standard part of the academic preparation for teachers and offered as part of advanced education degree programs. As was stated earlier, the future of the world rests upon the shoulders of Americans educated primarily in U.S. public school systems and state colleges. It is important to note that this confers an even greater responsibility on the teachers, professors, principals, superintendents of schools, school boards, academic deans, and others that interact with and empower the educational milieu of this great nation. These powerful individuals are ultimately responsible for ensuring the independence of thought and clarity of ethical understanding of their students, those who in years to come will bear responsibility for the Earth and the future of human life upon it.

Practical Classroom Activities K-12 and Beyond

At the preschool and kindergarten level, students participate in many group activities, and much learning takes place within this dynamic. The introduction of new words and concepts is an everyday affair, which throws wide the door to the introduction of simplified versions of the core concepts of beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, veracity, and autonomy. A board book written in a style typical of those commonly used in pre-K and kindergarten classrooms is *Still a Cat (Pittella 2004)*. Each of the first eight pages of the book introduces a particular cat, his or her looks, personality, likes and dislikes, fears, and special skills. Each page reminds the reader and listeners that what the page describes is “still a cat.” The last page of the book reviews the types of cats described and the diversity of their morphologies and natures. The final words of the book remind the reader or listener that the fluffy, funny, nasty, adventurous, and timid

creatures described, each both different from and the same as the next, are all "still cats."

Incorporated into the discussion that normally follows such readings can be questions and ideas posed by the teacher. These questions are intended to inspire the children to consider the cats described from a very basic ethical perspective and to start learning to identify ethical aspects of the story. The discussion might include some or all of these questions: Which cat do you like best and why? Which cat is the one you like the least? Are the cats a lot alike? Are the cats a lot different? Would it be better to have only one type of cat in the world (the identified favorites)? Why? Why not? What about people—are people all alike? Are people different? Would it be better to have only one kind of people in the world that all look alike and act the same way? Why or why not? Ultimately, the intentional teacher in this scenario can utilize simple stories involving familiar characters to engage even the youngest children in a meaningful conversation that extends beyond the stories themselves to the simplest level of ethical thinking upon which other reinforcements can be built. It should be noted that most board books designed for reading aloud to children at this age, and in fact most fairy tales, make perfect platforms for such application. The intentional teacher armed with a basic knowledge of ethics can identify and utilize the characters, themes, conflicts, and outcomes of even the simplest stories to illustrate ethical concepts. In doing so, such teachers will enhance the texture of the story for the student and extend the return on investment of the time spent in reading circle.

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A different or additional way to approach the use of the reading circle for introducing and reinforcing ethical concepts and vocabulary is the "Look Further" strategy. This technique, patterned after a treasure hunt, taps into the natural curiosity and playfulness of children at the pre-K and kindergarten levels

and encourages them to "hunt" for the ethical words or ideas embedded in stories. The playlike character and festive nature of this activity draws students' interest and desire to participate. Prior to reading the selected book aloud, the teacher will ask the children what they perceive as "goodness." The teacher writes the word "goodness" on the blackboard or whiteboard and asks the children to listen to the story and "hunt" for parts with something or someone that makes them think of goodness. The teacher reads the book aloud, then asks questions about the content of the story as described above. The teacher then asks the children to identify where they "discovered" goodness in the story and writes these "discoveries of goodness" on the board. The teacher tells the children that in future reading circles she will be asking them to let her know about other "goodness" they have "discovered" in the readings. The goal of this type of exercise is to introduce the concept of goodness as a facet of reading circle stories. This will enable the children to include beneficence (goodness) with other standard criteria when enjoying and evaluating their age-appropriate stories.

An ethics art project for pre-K and kindergarten is a good example of a simple activity, in this case an arts and crafts project for children at early ages, that with only minor alteration can inspire even the youngest students to think carefully about the meaning of their work. In addition to creating a thing of beauty, practicing the use of art supplies, and participating in teamwork, this type of art project leads each student to consider such terms as "goodness," "doing no harm," "truth," "fairness," and "independence" and to creatively find ways to express one or more of them in his/her art. For example, in an art project that requires a collage of pictures of animals, a child might be inspired to highlight one picture, such as one of a small child petting a dog, and describe it as an example of a child being "good" or "not harming" the dog. Even the youngest children seem to instinctively understand or have an innate ability to grasp such simple ethical concepts when exposed to them. When given the opportunity and language to express them, as in an age-appropriate art project, young children can articulate or demonstrate their understanding of such concepts.

Another primary school activity involves the students' replacement of traditional classroom rules with equivalent yet more powerful classroom ethics authored by the students. This

can be successfully implemented in grades 1 through 8, and by its very nature sets the tone for the ethical classroom. For example, in a typical second-grade classroom, the rules posted might include "No Pushing." The students and teacher discuss the reasons that a rule such as this is important, then compose another rule that better reflects the ethical reasoning behind it. "No Pushing" might become "In this classroom, we are patient with each other, and never touch each other in an unfriendly way."

By reviewing the classroom rules with students, deciphering their ethical origins in age-appropriate terms, and replacing them with classroom ethics about which students feel ownership, the intentional teacher accomplishes much. The typical classroom is transformed from a rules-based environment to an ethics-based place of learning. The posting of the classroom ethics by the students symbolizes their own acceptance of the ethical boundaries within which they have committed themselves to work and learn. The teamwork involved in preparing the classroom posters reinforces the communal acceptance of and agreement to the classroom ethics, which will be further confirmed by the teacher where possible in subject matter and will reinforce all other ethics integration methodologies.

Age-appropriate story analysis is a way for intentional teachers to help students hone their ability to distinguish the ethical elements embedded within assigned stories and literature. This equips them to determine the ethical facets of information they may hear or read and to better recognize ethical issues therein. Thus students develop the habit of evaluating the ethical context of a story read in a classroom, a newspaper article read at home, or a newscast about world events.

The reinforcement of ethics language and concepts can be included in what might seem unlikely subject matter, such as grammar school mathematics. The pairing up of math buddies and the encouragement of a math buddy team or teams to help each other in a communal effort of learning emphasizes and reinforces valuable ethical concepts. In such an environment, all can celebrate the successes of any particular student; conversely, the special needs or challenges presented by math to any one member of the student community can be met and resolved by all. Such protocols and noncompetitive, nonadversarial behaviors set a positive tone that can only assist teachers in their objectives with such units while showing ethical concepts in action. Thus, a

math class can unite students and create bonds between them, rather than separate the excellent math students from those who may be struggling. A child asked to do a math problem on the board at the front of such a classroom goes there knowing that his or her classmates will help with the completion of the assignment and that he or she is not competing with the last or next child at the board. Corporations and government organizations spend countless dollars to promote and develop team building within their ranks. Such institutions, and society in general, will benefit from children imbued with such skills from their earliest school years.

A program of ethical behavior recognition is a simple way for teachers to illustrate appreciation and admiration for students who display an understanding of ethical concepts and language presented in the classroom setting. In such a program, students whose behavior includes acts of kindness, fairness, honesty, and a healthy respect for others are identified and recognized by their teachers and/or nominated by their peers. In a society wherein most citizens view behavioral boundaries as set by the law and/or the threat of litigation, it will bode well for the future to create classrooms in which behavior is driven proactively by a communal understanding of ethical concepts and language. Recognition of such "ethical students" reinforces such behaviors, which may be viewed as the antithesis of those associated with school violence, drug abuse, and truancy.

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The intentional teachers of secondary school students can use ethics discussions to engage and intrigue students at an age of budding maturity. Such forward-thinking teachers, after providing an overview of the ethical concepts and vocabulary, will act as catalysts for discussions of standard secondary school subject matter by posing provocative, open-ended, subject-relevant questions. The momentum of such classes will be intensified by the teacher's presentation of ethics as the basis of timely, real-world

paradigms, which can instigate lively and meaningful participation by students. The goal of such efforts is to help students see the ethical dimension in each of their courses, and eventually in the world beyond the classroom. This objective can also be furthered through a creative activity in which students identify and express their own personal codes of ethics through the written word and artwork. For students at the ages and levels of maturity common in secondary school, this exercise may provide their first opportunity to consider, let alone define, their own personal philosophies of life. The activity will provide them with a process and period of time during which they can recognize and explore what they perceive as their own unique and personal code of ethics.

At the college level, courses often include a multifaceted approach that reflects the professor's particular perspective, experience, or preferences with regard to the core subject matter. This is manifested in the fact that, for example, no two Modern Literature courses are presented in precisely the same way, necessarily use the same books, or include the same content. This accepted personalization of college courses by instructors lends itself to the relatively easy creative inclusion of an ethical perspective within college courses.

What is most significant at the college level is the student's comprehension that amid and beyond the historical facts, data, statistics, and experiments upon which much learning is based, lie the traceable and identifiable ethical paradigms upon which human interactions and decisions were, and are, made. Knowledge of the basic concepts and language of ethics enables students at this level to articulate ethical opinions and ask questions to illuminate ethical issues. This capability can only enhance and expand their depth of knowledge and the impact of the academic experience, as well as the efficacy of college and university professors. For example, a discussion of Manifest Destiny or the Triangle Trade should include the respective ethics of each of the major groups involved in these significant points in the history of America and of the human race. Discussions of the motivations of each group, and how members of each group might have defined "goodness," "truth," "fairness," "respect for others," and "harm," bring the people involved out of the mists of history. College students thus equipped, young adults for all intents and purposes, can act as thoughtful agents of dissent in the classroom and beyond it as they ready themselves to take positions of responsibility and possibly leadership in the world.

Conclusion

If one believes that there is hope for the world and human society, and that the fate of mankind is not sealed, then one must seek and support ways to bring about positive change. In 2006 it is nearly impossible to miss the heavy negative impacts of ethically unconscious behavior and decision making on the Earth and its peoples. The introduction and integration of basic ethical language and concepts described herein is a small step in what may prove to be the right direction for a better future. Perhaps more important, ethical consciousness in the classroom has an inherent and profound potential, the value of which few educators would deny: "To teach in a manner that respects and cares for souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin" *(Hooks 1994, 13)*.

It is the nature of American pedagogy to evolve and change to accommodate the needs and responsibilities of the American people now and in the future. Thus it must expand to include the integration of ethical concepts and language within American schools and so equip the America of the future to navigate paths to global peace and partnership.

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About the Author

• Rosanna Pittella, lifelong educator and ethicist, focuses her enormous energy on bringing the language and concepts of ethics as they apply to everyday life to her many audiences. Rosanna dissolves the mythology and loftiness of ethics, and engages the interest of educators, parents, and students in the power and practicality of their application. In addition to the integration of ethics language and concepts with American pedagogy, her work has encompassed the development and presentation of ethics in a variety of topics, including

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