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CONVERSATIONS ON EDUCATION

Trainee teachers as role models in moral reasoning and ethical behaviour

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JNUSTA: *In your experience teaching a course on moral values, could you share with us your thoughts about what course approaches or activities had proven effective in driving home lessons about values?*

Chua Tee: We do not have a course on the sole teaching of ethics per se. The teaching of ethics and moral development is part of the Educational Psychology course for all trainee teachers at the National Institute of Education, Singapore.

Taking the cue from the Chan article, I can think of specific aspects that may have generic relevance across disciplinary domains. I would think that ethics can be taught through various methods, be it “tacitly transmitted” or “overtly taught within a seminar on professional practice”, or infused into the curriculum as in the design juries of the architecture course conducted each semester. Architects need to make decisions in terms of design, purpose, utility and the impact of the building on human life and activities, thus affecting the quality of life. Ethical decisions naturally come into play. The methods discussed in the article were apt. In fact, I am of the view that none should be excluded if time permits, for the teaching of ethics is important and difficult.

At the tertiary level of education, the teaching of moral reasoning is an imperative. Understanding the interconnectedness of the world today, that humanity breathe the same air, drink the same water, eat the same food, share the same economy, suffer the same disease(s), etc., would enable the mature student to appreciate the connections to others, and would encourage him/her to be guided by that knowledge. The question of why one should act ethically needs to be thoroughly discussed, and the moral state of the students should not be assumed or taken for granted.

Chan suggested that “the teacher of ethics [should] educate himself or herself (Callahan, 1980, p. 71)”. This is necessary if the teaching of ethics is to be effective. Human beings are basic agents of their thoughts and actions (Westerhoff, 2013, p. 34), and if the teacher is not well-grounded in ethics, she/he cannot teach that which she/he does not understand effectively and serve as a credible role model.

When teaching ethics to trainee teachers at NIE, we hope that they will be able to teach their students in turn and that they acquire ethical behaviours themselves and become good role models to their students in due course. As such, moral theories and ethical systems are explicitly featured and discussed in our curriculum so that the trainees would have both the content knowledge and the pedagogical methods. Moral theories covered typically include Kohlberg's Theory, Piaget's moral theory, and Gilligan's theory. We employ stories to teach moral character and facilitate discussions about moral dilemmas, consciously engineering volitional and virtues development with teachable moments, moral reasoning, understanding consequences and responsibilities, role play, etc.

For postgraduate teachers, ethics teaching and research are usually centred on themes of moral motivation, volition, moral thinking, moral emotion and actions. Ethics review for research proposals are required of postgraduate students and thesis examinations also need to be substantiated with reports covering academic integrity (i.e. plagiarism).

In short, we employ both overt training about ethics and role modeling. It is only when the teachers themselves have acquired ethical principles and behaviours that "tacit knowledge" of ethics may be more readily transferable to students.

REFERENCE

Westerhoff, J. (2013, February 23). What are you? *New Scientist*, 217(2905), 34-36.