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'The Ethical Student': Teaching Ethics for Critical Thinking in the Undergraduate Curriculum (0040)

Outline paper

> "Going about our daily affairs … we need moral knowledge and skills more often, and more poignantly, than either knowledge of the 'laws of nature' or technical skills." (Bauman 1993: 16-17)

> "Educators need to give greater attention to the teaching of ... ethics as part of our contribution to the education of responsible citizens." (Hay & Foley 1998: 169)

In an increasingly competitive education market, universities have progressively focused upon defining the distinctive characteristics of their graduates (Barrie 2004; 2006; 2007). Barrie (2004) has identified 'Ethical, Social and Professional Understanding' as one of five key graduate attributes. This attribute means that "graduates of the university will hold personal values and beliefs consistent with their role as responsible members of local, national, international and professional communities" (Barrie 2004: 270). This graduate attribute relates to the need to prepare students for 'supercomplexity', where "the very frameworks by which we orientate ourselves to the world are themselves contested" (Barnett 2000: 257). Learning to think through ethical issues develops critical thinking skills for dealing with supercomplexity, as the frameworks the students use to consider ethical issues are contested and likely to change. Graduates need these skills in an uncertain world to enable them to negotiate increasingly dynamic professional and social lives. Yet, we might question whether universities actually produce graduates who are prepared "for practical and ethical engagement with their scholarly, professional and personal worlds" (Boyd *et al.* 2008: 38). This paper focuses upon a tutorial-based intervention in the geography undergraduate curriculum at the University of Chester, UK, and the impact this had upon students' understandings of ethics.

For many students their contact with ethics relates primarily to the ethics of undertaking research (Boyd *et al.* 2008). Going through ethical clearance procedures has in many cases become relatively mechanistic, after which students may give ethics little further consideration. However, in terms of a graduate attribute, ethics is more concerned with the broader skill of *thinking* ethically in all parts of their lives, not just in research and we would contend that universities have an important role in facilitating this.

However, the nature of the ethical issues and ethical thinking varies between disciplines. For example, the ethical issues pure scientists face when testing on human subjects or undertaking animal experiments are of a different nature from those dealt with by social scientists when interviewing or observing people. However, in terms of critical thinking, many ethical issues are multidisciplinary in nature, for example assisted suicide may be studied from many different disciplinary perspectives, yet the ways in which students might approach and think about such topics may differ between disciplines.

This research analyses an intervention to teaching ethical issues. For this pilot project the intervention was implemented in geography. An advantage of choosing geography is that it

crosses the pure and social sciences (and some of the arts). This enables exploration of teaching approaches which have potential for application in a wide range of different disciplines (Escámez *et al.* 2008).

Case study: Geography and Ethics in Higher Education

Ethics is defined here as ethical ways of thinking, as opposed to higher levels of conceptual ethics or theorization (Boyd *et al.* 2008). It is teaching for *critical thinking* rather than teaching of prescriptive ethics. This means developing an ethics education which emphasises the significance of ethical consciousness in autonomous individuals (Hay 1998) rather than one structured around a set of 'rules' for moral behaviour (Hay & Foley 1998). This form of teaching supports individuals to become ethically accountable for their own choices and actions whilst situating them within a supportive ethical community.

Smith (1995) argues that moral issues are often marginalised within contemporary education, and that the discipline of geography is particularly well positioned to address this deficiency. Geography deals with many "inherently controversial subjects, from population control to environmental change" (Vujakovic & Bullard 2001: 276), providing a significant range of contemporary topics in which to situate ethical discussion. For example, 'sustainable development', a contested concept which underpins many contemporary geographical debates, is replete with ethical questions. The geography benchmark statement claims that "Geography fosters a range of personal attributes relevant to the world beyond HE, which will promote geographers' ability to engage in lifelong learning, to consider ethics and values, and to contribute to the wider community" (QAA 2007: 3). The benchmark statement emphasises research and field based studies in relation to ethics, but also recognises "the moral and ethical issues involved in debates and enquiries" within the discipline (QAA 2007: 5).

The project had 3 main stages:

1. At the beginning of the academic year all students, in each undergraduate year group, studying in the Department of Geography and Development Studies were requested to complete a questionnaire. The questionnaire explored students' ethical understandings and assessed their level of ethical development by incorporating Clarkeburn *et al.*'s (2003) Meta-ethical Questionnaire (MEQ). This questionnaire was rigorously developed and tested with a cohort of 478 Life Studies students at the University of Glasgow and the findings published in *Studies in Higher Education*. 198 students responded.

2. The second year tutorials module was re-designed to include an ethical discussion strand. Over the course of the year students were introduced to progressive ethical problems based upon real life examples. In the final tutorial, the students discussed and explained their own choices with one another and the tutor. 30 students participated in the tutorials.

3. To evaluate the impact of incorporating explicit ethical teaching into the tutorial programme a second round of the questionnaire was given to the students who participated in the tutorials, alongside a focus group which discussed the effectiveness of the teaching strategy and student perceptions of teaching ethics through this method.

The findings from the analysis of these three data sets will be explored in the presentation including the differences in the perceived relevance of ethics to physical geographers (scientists) in comparison to human geographers (social scientists), thus illustrating some of the discipline specific differences in teaching ethics for critical thinking to undergraduates.

995 words

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