



# VALUES AND ETHICS IN EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

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## USING MORAL AND ETHICAL FRAMEWORKS AS INSTRUCTIONAL TOOLS IN HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR ENGLISH CLASSES

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### *Addressing Moral Literacy from a Critical Pedagogy Stance*

Over the course of seven years, I have employed numerous literature texts in teaching at all four high school levels of the English program in Pennsylvania classrooms. While doing so, I have challenged my students to bring their lives to our work, much in the way advocated by Freirean Constructivist pedagogy. Defined, "Freirean Constructivism demonstrate(s) that not only can all people learn (Piaget), but that all people know something and that each is the subject responsible for the construction of this knowledge and for the redefinition of that which is learned" (Gadotti, 1998, p. 2). My students typically interact with each other in collaborative inquiry into a literature text with the intent being a recasting of an issue or theme into new models for further learning.

Such an approach, while radical in the sense that it pulls away from the traditional banking approaches of direct instruction, has not proved incompatible with current US educational reform efforts such as the US Federal No Child Left Behind legislation<sup>1</sup>. I have been able to readily blend this approach to teaching and learning with the current demands for accountability in preparing students for standardized tests and other traditional academic benchmarks. Moreover, my experience reconfirms my conviction that risk-taking by teachers in the classroom has value and significant potential as an important component of school improvement efforts.

<sup>1</sup> The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001), located electronically at <http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/index.html>

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Such an affinity for risk-taking is a hallmark of my classroom. Students learn to expect new and radical approaches to literature, and this expectation usually allows me to engage students in quite different ways. Whether seniors are engaging in literature circle discussions about glory in the literary representations of war and revolution as they read Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun* (1939), Wiesel's *Night* (1982), Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1946), and Hersey's *Hiroshima* (1989); or if they are constructing debates on whether our society should reclaim and redefine pejorative remarks for the sake of cultural tolerance, the limits on where learning happens in my classroom are few. Hopefully, my attempts to foster curiosity lead to acceptance by my students of the notion that ambiguity of interpretation is not only possible in studying literature, but characteristic of life and worth further investigation (Short & Burke, 1991).

My students engage in many activities that illustrate my intent to teach to the "zone of proximal development." Vygotsky's term, defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86, as cited in *Zone of Proximal Development*, 2007), becomes the bridge between learner and text. The learner, in this case a high school student, interacts with the text through activities designed to prompt discussion, writing, or other expressions of understanding that lead to future cycles of development as the academic experience progresses. Rarely is there an end to such a constructivist approach, for critical literacy requires an ethic of mutual development where learning is dialogic and continuous (Shor, 1997). Proliferating this ethic is my objective as an educator, and one that I continually seek to improve upon as a form of professional development.

During this quest, many doubts arise as to whether true Freirean constructivism and critical literacy are no more than romantic ideals. Questions about students' capabilities to achieve in traditional academic contexts when engaged solely in constructivist settings are valid, as the ethic of mutual development in its purest sense assumes a democratic approach. While I may believe that intrinsic equality and internal commitment are key components of a democratic environment (Dahl, 1998; Fullan, 2001), my role in a modern educational climate

replete with testing requirements and the diverse demands of a heterogeneous student population affect how purely democratic the construction of the classroom can be. In these critical moments as a teacher seeking a dialogic experience, my own moral and ethical beliefs are challenged as I design instructional materials for my classes.

My dilemma of wanting learning to occur in a certain way juxtaposed with the accountability I have to external stakeholders can generate challenging moments. In these moments, the morality of the learning that happens tends to trump other justifications for my practice.

### ***Moral Literacy and the Morality of Learning***

Starratt (2007) posits that each student has "an intrinsic moral agenda that belongs to them as full human beings" (p. 4). Additionally, he notes that schools assume their agenda for learning is more important than the personal and civic individual agenda of the student. I must confess that, at times, my own agenda mirrors the greater organization at the expense of the individual facing me each day. At these times, my justification for action is that suspending my own morality (Begley, 2005, as included in Begley, 2006) for the sake of making a decision will get me what I want as a teacher. Rather than pass this off as an immoral action, my position as the classroom teacher allows me the leverage and power to act in unilateral ways that are socially uncontestable. I am not particularly proud of such power, but there are moments when I wield it to escape uncomfortable situations.

This last statement, of course, challenges the genuine and democratic relationship I seek with my students. Starratt says very clearly "a genuine relationship is impossible under manipulative or dishonest conditions" (2007, p.7). This great quandary is a great obstacle facing modern school culture, yet is one for another paper.

My classroom, when operating as I intend it, is a place where relationships are built through the literature we study. When I am working to forge genuine and democratic relationships with students, we engage in highly collaborative activities with personalized outcomes. Thanks to the opportunities afforded in the study of literature, presenting moral dilemmas as the basis for classroom activities is directly tied into our reading. This approach of couching literacy education in moral dilemmas is a popular concept in moral education

(Murray, n.d.). The work my students and I engaged in for the sake of this paper is an excellent example of using moral dilemmas as the framework for moral literacy in the high school classroom.

In such a moral education classroom, the teacher becomes the moral leader. The main concern of a moral leader focuses on “the nature of the relationships among those within the organization, and the distribution of power between stakeholders both inside and outside the organization” (Leithwood et al., 1999, p. 11). Such an approach leaves an incumbent responsibility on the leader to assure that relationships are democratic whenever possible, and facilitates the input of many regarding actions, policies, and norms. This can result in a struggle concerning individual ethics. Hopefully, the moral leader recognizes this struggle and employs effective strategies when confronted with ethical failings, inconsistencies, and masquerades (Begley, 2006).

Some examples of conceptual frameworks that can be applied as strategies for addressing ethical and moral dilemmas are the Value Audit Guideline, Values Syntax, and Arenas of Influence, as designed by Begley (2006). Leaders may find at various times in their practice that the application of each of these frameworks can lead to a more crystallized approach to a dilemma. At such moments, actions and decisions may be influenced at the proper levels, leading to more ethical outcomes.

In an experimental venture reported here, the aforementioned conceptual frameworks are applied to an Academic English 12 class at Mountain View High School in Kingsley, Pennsylvania. Using this work as an extension of the existing research on moral literacy and moral leadership, high school seniors apply the frameworks to literary characters in canonical texts. Such an approach is an amalgamation of Freirean Constructivist pedagogy, critical literacy, moral education, and ethical leadership studies. The objective of the learning is to foster dialogue and the resulting consideration by the students of ethical decision-making and their own values as they prepare to graduate from high school and enter their adult lives.

In undertaking this project, my own values as an educator become reinforced, and the students and I regained a sense that learning about morality incorporates an intrinsic morality necessary to consider the possibilities of the incorporated texts and their

potential effect on our own lives as learners. I am integrating myself into the “we” pronoun at this point, as our classroom experience has become a shared experience, where learning is much more communal and constructed.

Several important and critical questions frame this unit of study. Some of these questions were prompted directly by Begley’s work (e.g. 2006), while I generated some as the unit progressed. They are:

1. Are high school students cognitively mature enough to disseminate graduate-level ideas and concepts about ethical and moral frameworks?
2. Will attaching moral and ethical frameworks to commonly taught texts by Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Golding result in a more enriching and effective classroom experience for high school seniors?
3. Can students develop a critical awareness of their own ethical and moral beings and apply this awareness to their own development as young adults?
4. What implications might a deeper experience with teaching moral and ethical frameworks have for a student of educational leadership?

### ***Teaching Moral and Ethical Frameworks in Senior High School English***

The objective of this endeavor is to apply moral and ethical frameworks from educational leadership research to literacy education at the high school level. For this work, we read Geoffrey Chaucer’s “The Knight’s Tale” (1994), William Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (1992), and William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* (1954). Choosing these three works was a blend of circumstance and intent.

Chaucer’s piece was the next in the chronology of our school year, and we had already begun reading it. Adapting our study of “The Knight’s Tale” from a more traditional text-based study to one incorporating ethical frameworks required a new discourse and understanding of vocabulary. The “Value Audit Guideline” (Begley, 2005, Appendix A in Begley, 2006) became the basis for our study (copies of the guidelines can be obtained by contacting the author directly). This will be referred to as the value audit from this point forward in this paper. The unfamiliar terms of the value audit became the first

point of instruction in class.

Students helped form working definitions for terms such as stakeholders, arenas of practice, values in conflict, turbulence, degrees of commitment, ethical action, ethical dilemma, avoidance, suspended morality, creative insubordination, and taking a moral stand. In order to form these working definitions, we supposed some meanings, which were further developed and made more meaningful as our work progressed.

We linked our understanding of the terms from the value audit to our study of “The Knight’s Tale,” with the task of identifying values in characters as the resulting focus. Arcita, Palamon, Emily, and Duke Theseus, the main characters of the tale, each make decisions and execute actions that are quite telling of their values and beliefs. Students were assigned the task of choosing a character and identifying the values exhibited in that character’s actions. In completing the writing task, students considered many prompting questions regarding their own value formation as they considered the values of their chosen literary character. The questions that best guided the writing were:

- When we observe the choices of others, what do we consider when forming judgments of these choices?
- Based on your critical literacy skills, how would you describe the value systems of these characters as they make decisions regarding their critical incidents? You should refer to specific moments when the characters invoked various beliefs or morals as they contemplated action.

Student writing centered on the values for love and compassion exhibited by Palamon, the values for winning and love exhibited by Arcita, Emily’s value for chastity and peace, and Duke Theseus’ values for justice and adventure. The resulting essays were generally well written, with attention paid to values on a meta- level. Students tended to set aside their own values as they wrote, remaining detached and allowing the textual examples to support their conclusions about character values in “The Knight’s Tale.”

Some examples from the essays on “The Knight’s Tale” of statements regarding character values were:

- “Palamon is driven by his love for Emily. After first seeing Emily, Arcita and Palamon argue, and make each other their rivals. Palamon goes on to fight Arcita to the death and praying to Venus for Emily’s love. Palamon puts love above all other needs and wants, no matter what the consequences are.”
- “Based on Palamon’s actions after the incidents, you can draw conclusions on how his values of love, desire, and religion take precedence over his values of family and responsibility.”
- “Arcita experiences a human desire that directs his actions toward satisfying this yearning. Pride is Arcita’s motivation. Although it appears that he truly wants to gain Emily’s love, through his actions it is evident that pride is his main goal, and Emily’s love is just an extra incentive.”

Responses from students in whole group discussions were more telling as we investigated the value of continuing the study of ethical frameworks in subsequent texts. Students admitted that they rarely consider what their own values are in daily decision-making. Many students also revealed that they took for granted the importance of being ethical in their own decision-making. Both of these realizations on students’ parts became very important as the class transitioned to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.

During our study of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, students began a much more comprehensive journal of critical incidents and character analysis than they had during “The Knight’s Tale.” Entries were kept along the lines of the value audit, with care taken to note critical incidents, values in conflict, turbulence created by conflict, motivations/degrees of commitment, and analysis of the action taken, including whether the character acted ethically and what strategy was employed to justify any unethical actions taken. These last two elements, which constitute Steps 2 and 3 of the Value Audit Guideline, have been the focus of our most intensive discussion and analysis to date in the unit.

The following list of “critical incidents” represents the decisions students have analyzed and evaluated using the value audit throughout the reading of *Hamlet*:

1. Horatio and friends see ghost of King Hamlet in Act I, scene i, must decide whether to tell Prince Hamlet or not interrupt his grief over his father’s death

2. Hamlet's response and actions from his first meetings with King Claudius and Queen Gertrude in Act I, scene ii, as well as Hamlet's response to Horatio's story of the ghost.
3. Laertes and Polonius give Ophelia advice. Her decision and action regarding this advice in Act I, scene iii.
4. Hamlet's decision and action when the ghost presents himself in Act I, scene iv, and his actions upon hearing the news that Claudius is the murderer in scene v.
5. King Claudius and Queen Gertrude each make significant decisions regarding Hamlet's behavior and actions throughout Acts II and III. Students chose one monarch and analyzed the action from that perspective.
6. Hamlet's decision regarding killing Claudius in Act III, scene iii and his actions after his discussion with his mother in scene iv.
7. King Claudius' decision to send Hamlet away to England and his actions regarding the threat that Hamlet poses to his secret in Act IV, scenes i-iii.
8. The Queen's dilemma of devoting her loyalty to Claudius or Hamlet throughout Acts IV-V.
9. Ophelia's reaction to her father's death at the hands of Hamlet, and her subsequent actions regarding her relationship with Hamlet in Act IV, scene v.
10. Hamlet's final actions after all other stakeholders seem to have betrayed him in Act V.

As students complete their journal of critical incidents, they developed an understanding of how people uphold and betray values and morals when faced with ethical dilemmas. Along the way to this understanding, some powerful moments of clarity arose. Two significant class periods led to a climax of learning.

Dr. Paul Begley came to Mountain View High School on Wednesday March 28, 2007 to present "Values and Ethics: The Habits of an Inquiring Mind." This presentation encompassed much of the research Dr. Begley has compiled to construct the Value Audit Guideline we have used as our main instructional tool throughout the unit. Students had a valuable opportunity to engage with the research on values and ethics separate from their reading.

On Thursday March 29, we had a follow-up session. We

re-addressed Dr. Begley's questions, "Do we want to be consumers in a competitive marketplace, or citizens of a community with rights, privileges and responsibilities?" and "Will environment trump character?" An initial step for this discussion was to clearly define terms such as consumer and citizen.

Hamlet's most famous soliloquy, "To be or not to be..." (Act III, scene i) fits the discussion pitting consumerism against citizenship. Hamlet's motives for committing suicide, which is analogous to consumerism for the sake of this discussion, become secondary to his motives for fighting for justice and courage, a parallel idea to citizenship. We took the speech apart piece by piece, identifying motives of consequence, consensus, preference, and ethics/principles concerning whether death would be a desirable end within the passage. This level of discourse with Shakespeare extended far beyond the normal functioning of a high school classroom. This bordered on graduate level English work.

Another conceptual framework we used in our work was the Values Syntax (Begley, 2004, Figure 2 in Begley, 2006). To help understand the magnitude of actions and decisions as they relate to understanding the values of others, we devised an illustration with the Values Syntax on the projector screen. I took a yardstick and simulated making a wedge into the graphic, as if I were cutting out a piece. We used this as a way of illustrating a moment when someone does something out of character. The graphic as a whole represented the whole person, while the wedge became the incident. The bigger and deeper the wedge, the greater the magnitude of the incident. The meaning here is in how we interpret the motives/values/ethics/personality of others when they do things we do not understand. The more we know the person, and the deeper our relationship with the person is, the more we can judge an action or attitude as an isolated incident that may or may not be reflective of the person's true self. If we know someone less, a similar incident might cause us to assume more about the deeper levels of a person. The implications here are that as citizens, we have the responsibility to work at understanding the deeper levels of people before rendering judgment.

For a final assessment piece for *Hamlet*, students wrote an informational essay in which they examine decision-making processes in the play. They arranged this work around self-generated conclusions. To aid the formation

of these conclusions, students used Bloom's Taxonomy to ensure that they are developing mature ideas beyond simple comprehension of terms and characters. Through a rigorous effort to develop and support conclusions at Bloom's highest levels of Synthesis and Evaluation, students revealed more about their own values and morals as we seek to apply their new understandings to their own lives.

In our study of Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, students continued to study ethics and values using the Values Syntax (Begley, 2004, Figure 2 in Begley, 2006) as a more graphical way of analyzing these issues. Due to the very specific narrative detail Golding gives each of the important characters, constructing a whole syntax of values is possible. Main characters like Ralph, Piggy, Simon, and Jack have actions, attitudes, values, understandings, motives, and representations of self that can be charted. Once students have done so, our objectives turn to examining conflict and identifying common leadership traits and speculating on how the presence or absence of these traits impacts the effectiveness of the leaders.

To meet these objectives, students used the common Venn diagram format, pitting the various characters against each other to determine comparisons and contrasts. They finished the activity by writing responses to prompts addressing characters' capacities as leaders, the tragic flaws of those characters that suffer downfalls, and a speculation on the effect of adding or removing one quality to various characters.

Our final section of the unit on using moral and ethical frameworks with high school students was a self-analysis component. In the tradition of Moral Education pioneers such as Kohlberg, students responded to moral dilemmas throughout the week. Results of students' reactions were tallied and discussed in class. The resulting written piece was a response to four questions, asking students to list their most notable values, discuss and rationalize inconsistencies with their moral stances as compared to the majority, explain their use of alternatives to ethical actions in particularly difficult choices, and comment on any changes in their ethical stances as a result of this unit.

My own rationalization for addressing self-analysis using moral dilemmas harkens back to the introductory pedagogical stance of this paper. If students have the

opportunity to recognize and model their own ethics in a controlled environment such as a class activity, hopefully they will carry this behavior into their lives. Such a belief that learners develop their own *conscientizacao* is a basis of Freirean praxis (Freire, 1970). Modeling critical awareness and consciousness is an effort that, as I explained in the beginning of this paper, draws students away from the text of the literature and into their own lives, creating dialogue that is more authentic and meaningful.

This hope of mine readdresses the question of *Citizenship* and *Consumership*. My students were asked as a part of this last unit section if they felt more ready to address their opportunities to be citizens as opposed to simply consumers. Many students expressed in their responses a newfound desire to ask questions of their surroundings, to pause and reflect on their decision-making in difficult situations, and to consider the effects of their actions on others. It is a proud moment as a teacher to have students express themselves sincerely on questions about such material with such serious and long-lasting implications.

### ***Presenting at PSSC***

Dr. Begley's involvement with the Pennsylvania School Study Council (PSSC) allowed us a forum to present our work with ethical and moral frameworks for a formal audience. Four students and I attended the conference, held May 22, 2007. The activity of the unit was structured using the framework of a typical conference research paper presentation, allowing for each of the four students who attended to present on the following areas of the unit:

1. Identifying character values in "The Knight's Tale" by Geoffrey Chaucer
2. Analyzing decision making in *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare
3. Evaluating leaders and followers in *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding
4. Self-analysis using new knowledge and moral dilemmas as Moral Education

This conference provided a legitimate and appropriate cumulative point for the classroom unit. Although only four students presented the material at the conference, the presentation was collaboratively developed and designed through the individual responses of all students involved throughout the unit.

## ***Discussion and Implications***

In this section, I will address the four critical questions presented earlier as important points to consider.

1. Are high school students cognitively mature enough to disseminate graduate-level ideas and concepts about ethical and moral frameworks?

From essays written about identifying character values in “The Knight’s Tale” through discussions of motives and ethics in decisions made throughout *Hamlet*, students proved again and again that the material on ethics and values is not beyond the capabilities of high school seniors when presented logically and effectively. Defining terms as they are being used, modeling the process of using the value audit, and demonstrating patience as students struggle with the unfamiliar position of being questioned for their morality and ethical beliefs rather than their memorization abilities are requisite skills for the teacher who undertakes this effort.

2. Will attaching moral and ethical frameworks to commonly taught texts by Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Golding result in a more enriching and effective classroom experience for high school seniors?

Since I have never taught seniors before, an explanation of this question is limited to how I may have prepared an instructional unit if I had not undertaken this effort. I can attest to other literature texts I have used in my English classes before, and I know that students usually engage in meaningful activities that challenge their thoughts and understandings of the world constructed around them.

This unit, however, took my normal pattern and stretched it. The students and I became much more reliant on each other to attach meaning to the texts relating to moral and ethical frameworks. Students wrote in more formats than normal units entail, and developed their own methods of recordkeeping for the critical incidents in the reading. A general sense of increased self-efficacy as students of literature was apparent as we progressed.

3. Can students develop a critical awareness of their own ethical and moral beings and apply this

awareness to their own development as young adults?

While speculation here is all I can provide, as these students are only recently removed from our active study of moral and ethical frameworks, my best guess is that yes, students have started to apply their new awareness to situations surrounding them. But, the best evidence of this is probably yet to come.

I have noticed a level of apprehension in the students concerning fully giving themselves over to the study of ethics and morals. This may be because they are able to hide behind the characters in our reading, and that our discussions and classroom activity have not yet fully engaged the ethicality and morality of the students. But, evidence from student writing shows that the concepts are rooting themselves deeper and students are considering their implications more consistently.

4. What implications might a deeper experience with teaching moral and ethical frameworks have for a student of educational leadership?

I have become much more familiar with my own moral and ethical consciousness as a result of this unit. I have gained a grasp of the ethical and moral frameworks far beyond that which I had previously. This increased awareness of said frameworks allows me to consider situations that are happening in my current school environment with a new perspective. Many decisions I may have previously made out of a concern for protecting myself I now consider differently. This does not mean that my problem-solving skills have been honed to the levels that more experienced educational leaders have attained. This can probably only come with experience. Again, students involved in the unit have not yet had the experiences of applying moral and ethical frameworks to the experiences and activities they encounter in an official sense. If I were to teach from this perspective again, this is an area I would address much earlier in the timeline of the unit.

## ***Conclusion***

Overall, our unit on using moral and ethical frameworks for teaching literature has been successful. Students are reading the texts with care and intention beyond the normal levels of understanding we seek with such texts. For the purposes of improving instruction through new and innovative means, the unit has held up well.

High school students are generally able to separate their own ethical postures from those of literary characters after discussions and presentations of ethical and moral frameworks. Those that struggle with this tend to show stubbornness and a reluctance to fully engage with the material. These types of students are rare for this experience, however.

Finally, this unit has been a tremendous source of professional development for me, not only as a teacher but also as a student of educational leadership. My exposure to the texts, character, ethical dilemmas, and material is as fresh for me as for the students in some cases, as I have never read these specific texts from the perspective of moral and ethical frameworks before. This experience has restored some of my faith in the ethical opportunities of teaching. Students can indeed be trained in or introduced to citizenship as a better way to live as adults, without the teacher being accused of being a moralist or posturing in a power dynamic. An approach grounded in research, easily manageable graphical and conceptual frameworks, and connection to our own ethics and morality can prove to be quite successful.

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