

## Teaching Morally and Teaching Morality

By Gary D Fenstermacher,  
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Student achievement is not the only topic of conversation in teachers' lounges, parent-teacher organizations, and teacher education classrooms. There is also much discussion of the moral features of teaching and learning. Sometimes this talk centers on such issues as prayer in schools, sex education, and whether there are just grounds for teaching intelligent design as an alternative to evolution. At other times, the conversation is about a teacher's own moral values and whether or not these values should be communicated to one's students. When the talk turns to a teacher's own moral values, it often becomes entangled in whether it is even possible to provide a thorough and adequate education in the absence of certain moral values, as well as whether teachers are and should be the proper agents for the transmission of such values. These are thorny issues, which all too often get pushed aside because of their complexity and the ease with which they seem to foster disagreement. We believe there are ways to sort through these issues, ways that are not only helpful in resolving many of the tensions in the moral education debate, but ways that enable more powerful approaches to teaching and learning.

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To make our argument we introduce what we believe is an important distinction between teaching morality and teaching morally. In P-12 schools, the moral education debate often focuses on character education programs or other moral curricula. Such programs and curricula are championed as a means of *teaching morality* and transmitting moral virtue from one generation to the next. They are also derided as programs that have no place in the school curriculum because of the concern that morality is a matter of personal preference, religious conviction, or cultural commitment. Although this concern is worthy, it has, we believe, blocked us from attending to the more subtle ways that teachers, the larger society, and the state bring moral matters into the classroom, even when they do not adopt specific moral curricula. We understand these other ways of attending to moral matters as *teaching morally*.

Is there any difference between teaching morally and teaching morality? We will argue that there is, and that there is much we can learn from exploring this difference. There are, however, many complexities and subtleties encountered in the course of distinguishing teaching morally from teaching morality. Our hope is that the value of this article will be found in its attempt to describe these complexities and subtleties, and to explain why they are important to our understanding of how teachers assist or impede the moral development of their students. The argument will lead to a number of vexing places, places where we have only questions and no answers. Perhaps there are readers who have answers and will contribute them to the growing study of the moral dimensions of teaching.

### **Distinguishing between Two Forms of Teaching**

To teach morally is to teach in a manner that accords with notions of what is good or right. That is, to conduct oneself in a way that has moral value. To teach morality is to convey to another that which is good or right. In the first instance, the teacher is being a good or righteous person; in the second instance, the teacher is providing to another person the means for becoming a good or righteous person. Once distinguished in this way, the difference between teaching morally and teaching morality seems clear. Unfortunately such clarity does not last long, for there are a host of questions that follow from this distinction.

The first of these pertains to modeling, as when a teacher conducts herself in a way that is morally good in front of her students. An observer might say that she is modeling good conduct for her students. In the case of modeling, might we say that the teacher is both teaching morally and teaching morality? That is, might she be teaching in a morally upright manner and also conveying to her students a model of morally upright conduct? If it is indeed so, then it seems the distinction between teaching morally and teaching morality is a hard one to maintain with any degree of clarity.

Perhaps the distinction could be preserved if we determine whether the teacher is actually trying to impart moral lessons to her students. Under these circumstances

it seems appropriate to claim that the teacher is engaged in both teaching morally and teaching morality, as she is acting in a morally upright manner and making her manner an object of instruction. Now suppose the teacher makes little or no effort to have her students take notice of her good moral conduct nor does she encourage them to emulate it. Could we say in this instance that the teacher is teaching morally but not teaching morality?

Exploring this question reveals an interesting facet of teaching. Consider a different example, a teacher with a peculiar speech accent. He never intends for the students to acquire his accent, but suppose the students do. Do we want to say that the teacher modeled the accent for the students? In this case we are likely to inquire into the intentions of the teacher, asking whether or not he intended that his students acquire his accent. We could also examine his practice, checking to see if he asked students to pronounce words as he pronounces them, or if he appeared to attend more carefully to students whose speech sounded more like his own. In other words, this teacher's intentions and how they were made manifest in his behavior would most likely make a difference to us when pondering whether he served as a speech model for his students.

In the case of the accent in speech, the intention of the teacher seems to make a difference whether or not we believe he modeled the accent for his students, but in the case of morality, we seem more prepared to say that the teacher is modeling morality whether or not she intends to do so. We believe the difference here has something to do with our general sense that a person who teaches, at least in any paid or professional sense of the term, must, in some way, be morally engaged with students. There is a moral aspect to our conception of teaching, such that cultivating the moral dispositions of one's students is part of what we mean by *teaching*. This point has been made repeatedly and well in explorations of the moral dimensions of teaching (see especially Hansen, 1995, 2001). If this line of reasoning is correct, then a teacher is modeling morality whenever that person teaches, regardless of whether one has such conduct consciously in mind when going about the work of teaching. Having arrived at this point, what are we now to say of the difference between teaching morally and teaching morality? It may seem as if there is no difference, at least no important one. However, as we try to show below, the distinction is an analytically useful device, even though it does not cleanly divide the actual activities of teaching into two neatly distinct parts. To demonstrate this point, we must further examine the notion of teaching morality.

### **Teaching Morality as Manner and as Content**

There are probably quite a few ways to teach morality in the context of the school, but only two of these will be explored here. The first is by some form of example; the second, by specifically addressing the topics of morality in the course of instruction. The first approach we call *manner*; the second, *content*. Manner refers

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to the traits or dispositions the teacher exhibits in the course of doing something, while content refers to the material that is the subject of the relationship between the teacher and the student. Consider the case of teaching history. In doing so, one conveys the facts of history and the interpretations of historians, and perhaps weaves connections between past and present lives as well as among past, present, and future events. These are features of the content of instruction. At the same time, the teacher provides this content in ways that are fair, tolerant, compassionate, respectful, and so forth. These features make up the manner of instruction. They describe the teacher's conduct in the course of seeking students' understanding and mastery of the content of history.

Following this distinction, one might teach morality via content by bringing matters of moral significance to the attention of students, making these the actual subject matter of instruction. In these instances, the teacher is not simply attending to history, or science, or language arts, but to moral rules, stories, or ideals. Thus teachers can bring moral content into the classroom by interjecting their own moral convictions or expectations, by adopting a curriculum or program designed to teach morality (e.g., character education and life skills programs), by exploring the moral issues within the academic curriculum itself (e.g., war policy, literary characters, species extinction, welfare), or by building capacities necessary for morally good conduct (e.g., empathy, moral reasoning, and perspective taking).

We now have two ways of teaching morality, through manner and through content, and a variety of ways to do it through content. Because the distinctions can become hazy rather quickly, it may be helpful to repeat it. A teacher who acts morally teaches morality through his or her manner. Modeling is the most prominent form of teaching morality through manner. In this case, the actual topic of instruction is typically a subject such as science, history, music, or language arts. Somewhat differently, the teacher who makes moral matters the topic of instruction is also teaching morality by calling the attention of her students to her own moral ideals, rules, and expectations, by pursuing a program specifically designed to instruct in moral matters, by addressing moral content that is somehow embedded within the academic curriculum, or by developing capacities necessary for morally good conduct.

With these distinctions in mind, imagine a teacher who is either not morally well-developed or does not know how to evidence critical moral dispositions in her instructional practices. What is the likely outcome when this teacher makes moral matters the content of her instruction? It seems as if it can be done, under certain limited circumstances, but it is not likely to be successful in any durable or substantial way. On the grounds of logic alone it appears that moral manner is an important precondition for engaging in moral content, else the teacher is in a similar situation to the instructor whose avowed aim is to teach his students the traits and dispositions of critical thinking but whose own thinking is based almost exclusively on memorization and obedience to the authority of text. Students, even the very young, perceive the deceptive and contradictory features of such instruction

and seldom give it serious consideration except for whatever is required to move through the levels of the system.

The claim advanced here is that manner appears foundational to content in fostering the moral development of the young. We make this claim with some reservations, as our argument for it is not as strong as we would prefer. Yet we shall present it as best we can. The central premise of this argument is that morality taught through content in the absence of moral manner on the part of the teacher will ring false to students and likely not be seriously entertained by them. The next section expands this premise and explores it in more depth.

### **Moral Culture and Moral Manner**

In the United States of America it is becoming increasingly common to witness calls for moral content in schools, particularly in the form of the moral education curriculum. Lickona (1991, 2004) is among the more well-known advocates for this position, but there are others, including President George W. Bush (Bush, 2002; see also, Bennett, 1993; Benninga, Berkowitz, & Kuehn, 2006; Berkowitz, 2002; Greer & Kohl, 1995; and Ryan & Bohlin, 1999). In marked contrast to these moral content advocates, Hunter (2000) argues that school-based moral education programs do not work in the absence of specific creeds, convictions, and what he calls “god-terms.” Hunter contends that a culture or society must have morality as part of its fabric, built in, as it were, and that this feature is evident when a society attends to what is special, particular, local, and different about its composition, particularly to the creeds and covenants of its sacred institutions. Societies that are not “thick” with what he and others call the “particularities” of various associations, communities, cultures, and religious identities, cannot adequately engender moral character among their young, even if they set out to do so as a matter of teaching morality as specific content. In short, programs of moral education do not work very well in the absence of being embedded in morally attentive societies.

If one accepts Hunter’s case, and other, similar arguments (see, for example, Durkheim, 1925/1973; Goodlad, 1997; Green, 1999; Putnam, 1993; Tocqueville, 1848/1969; Walzer, 1994) then it is unlikely that one can teach morality in the absence of moral persons who are themselves sustained in morally grounded communities, associations, and cultures. On this basis, it seems reasonable to argue that manner is foundational to content. If such a contention is accurate, one might question whether moral education curricula are needed at all if moral manner is in place and functioning well. That is, if we have teachers whose moral manner is well-developed, is it then necessary to have moral education curricula at all? What a fascinating question this one turns out to be. To address it, we would like to divide the analysis into two parts. The first part addresses the presumed value of moral education curricula. The second part places the question in the larger context of the role of the school within the political state or government.

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To take up the first part, we offer an interesting finding from our study of manner in teaching. This study took place over three years, in two schools. One is a K-5 elementary school in a small city; the other, a K-8 school in a large urban area. The K-5 school has a mixed racial population, although somewhat more White than other races, and a parent community that ranges in wealth from poor to middle class. The K-8 school is in the very heart of a poor section of the large city; it is a public school of choice based on an African-centered curriculum and has a 100% African-American student body (for more on these schools, see Richardson & Fenstermacher, 2001). The K-5 school had previously adopted an externally prepared, school-wide moral education program, consisting primarily of explicit attention to such virtues and life skills as fairness, tolerance, responsibility, courage, honesty, and cooperation. The K-8 urban school also had an explicit moral curriculum, but evolved within the school, grounded in its mission of exploring and supporting notions of what it means to be of African descent living in the United States of America.

As we studied these two schools we found that although the teachers in our study implemented the moral curricula very differently, they were all aware of their roles as moral stewards and expressed their strong commitment to guiding the moral development of their students. Our inference from our extensive observations of, and discussions with the teachers in both schools, is that having an explicit moral program or curriculum within the school signals the teachers that moral matters are an important part of the work of teaching, and attention to such matters will be valued by colleagues and superiors. The adoption of a program of moral content, either in the form of a “pre-packaged” curriculum, or as an organic product of the mission and philosophy of the school, served as a form of permission-giving to the teachers, as if to say, “Moral development is valued here; we want you to attend to it.”

Just how the teachers attended to moral matters became more apparent as we examined the connections between moral manner and moral content more closely. We sought to “see” the ways they imparted moral ideas and ideals to their students. We encountered six methods used by most or all of the teachers as they went about the work of teaching their students. They are: (1) the construction of the classroom community, (2) showcasing specific students, (3) design and execution of academic task structures, (4) calling out for conduct of a particular kind, (5) private conversations, and (6) didactic instruction (Fenstermacher, 2001). These six methods suggest how the moral traits and dispositions of teachers might be reflected in their practice. They also suggest an important interplay between moral content and moral manner.

For example, in the African-centered, K-8 school, the teachers were quite relentless in their pursuit of academic subjects with their students, but constantly setting moral expectations for the students and admonishing them quite publicly (calling out for conduct of a particular kind) when the students failed to measure up to these expectations. The setting of these expectations was a matter of both moral content prescribed at the school level and of moral manner displayed by the

teacher. In such instances, our sense was that we were observing a situation where support for moral education within the school served as a form of encouragement for the teachers to consider their moral manner central to their work as teachers. In the case of the African-centered K-8 school, the academic press and public admonishment seemed to strongly illustrate at least the first of the six methods mentioned above—the construction of classroom communities centered around norms of academic achievement and African-American identity.

In both schools, the adoption of a moral education curriculum appears to act to facilitate conscious attention to teachers' moral manner in the way in which they carry out the activities of teaching. As such, an adequate moral education seems to come not so much from attending to moral curriculum itself, but from having the teacher in a relationship of moral engagement with the student. A moral curriculum can become the occasion for creating and sustaining that relationship, but it is no substitute for the moral relationship itself. Hence, moral content can be important and useful insofar as its adoption in a school serves as permission for attention to a relationship of moral engagement and provides organizational encouragement to teachers to morally engage their students. There are dangers lurking here, however, for moral content may be subject to abuse.

### **The Abuses of Moral Content**

Above, we argued that moral curricula can provide occasions for teachers to attend to the moral manner of their relationships with their students. In this second part, we offer some reservations on the adoption of programs of moral education by the teacher, the school, or the state.

Let us assume for the moment that Hunter (2000) is correct in his assertion that moral character has its roots in “god-terms,” in sacred texts and creeds, and in strongly-held convictions within a community. When moral content is brought into the school or classroom, how much of it reflects particular religious sects or moral ideologies? If the answer is, “Quite a bit,” then the risk is that some moral views will be favored more than others; this means that the moral views of some students and teachers will be confirmed while those held by other students and teachers will be ignored or denied. If we are to be sensitive to the various creeds that make up a diverse society, such that we do not carelessly or even purposefully privilege some views over legitimate others, then we must be cautious about what moral content is brought into the classroom and how it is brought there.

It seems that if the teacher, the school, or the state favors some moral content over other moral content, it risks creating advantage for those who subscribe to the favored view, while generating disadvantage for those who do not. In this way, it is possible to abuse one's position as educator (e.g., classroom teacher, administrator, school board member, etc.). The issue arises not only on religious matters, but also on matters of gender and culture. We can, for instance, hold certain moral views

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about how males are different from females, and on the basis of such views, offer advantage to one sex (usually males) and disadvantage to the other (typically females). An example of how the abuse might occur in a cultural context can be seen when examining a difference between many American Indian (Native American) tribes and White Americans who are descendants of Western Europeans. While the former tend to place a high value on community adhesion and cooperation, the latter tend to place a high value on independence of person and competition among individuals. Any adoption of moral content that favors one position over the other risks abuse to those whose creeds and moral convictions are not in harmony with the adopted content.

There are a number of ways to surmount this difficulty. One of these is for the state to permit explicitly religious or cultural-identity schools to flourish, such that there is no official state challenge to bringing explicitly religious or cultural content into the schools. In the United States, this approach creates great controversy because it is believed that the government must be neutral with respect to religion, and thus government (public) funds should not be expended in support of any particular religious belief, particularly when such support may lead to religious majorities limiting the educational pursuits of religious minorities. Hence, in this country, the government seeks to avoid the possibility of abuse arising from the adoption of any particular version of religiously based moral content by adopting a position of religious neutrality (in accordance with the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment). One might believe that such a position of neutrality would prohibit moral content from entering the public school, assuming that only the actual, explicit god-terms of established religions are sufficient for that task. We believe, on the contrary, that moral content successfully enters through three different doors, independent of the use of religious doctrine.

The reader who has followed the argument to this point may have guessed the first two doors. The initial point of entry is the moral manner of the teacher. Recall the discussion of modeling at the beginning of this article. The teacher comes to the classroom with moral traits and dispositions, and she or he cannot help but put those traits on display in that they influence or govern his/her conduct related to any activity of teaching. The second point is through the moral content necessary in running a classroom, as when a teacher lectures on injunctions against cheating or plagiarism or extols the benefits of sharing, losing gracefully, and showing empathy for the difficulties faced by others. A school may have no explicitly-adopted moral program or curriculum and may even stand steadfastly against having such a program, yet moral instruction will go on in that school as teachers bring their own moral traits and dispositions to bear in the course of their teaching. Indeed, Richardson and Fallona (2001) suggest that many teachers we regard as especially accomplished in their work gain their virtuoso status through the elegant integration of moral codes and principles with techniques of classroom organization and management.

### **The Moral Basis for Civic Competence**

The third point of entry for moral content into the curriculum is through the state's interest in the development of civic competence and civic identity on the part of its future citizens. To be a good citizen, especially under forms of government that vest considerable power in their citizens, one must exhibit certain traits. Many of these traits are moral in character, such as justice, equality, and respect. In the name of promoting civic competence, a government that claims neutrality with respect to religion may still bring a broad range of moral content into the school. Even governments that permit publicly-funded religious schools typically insist that these schools promote the virtues necessary for sustaining the state. Hence most, if not all, governments expect their schools (whether directly funded by the government or not) to engage in the cultivation of some form of civic competence and, in the course of doing so, foster certain moral traits and dispositions pertinent to the interests of the state.

It is interesting to speculate whether certain conceptions of civic competence are not simply religious or cultural convictions dressed up in different clothing. One might speculate that the fundamental moral traits that are common to the world's religions are among the very traits that many governments support for the creation of a civic commons or public arena where the business of government is done (and these might also overlap with the moral content necessary for effective learning environments in classrooms). It is no easy matter to draw a clear line where a distinctly religious or cultural morality stops and a civic or public morality begins. Despite the ambiguity of the line, there are a number of very powerful arguments why we must struggle to draw it (Green, 1999; Levinson, 1999). We will not enter that struggle here, but instead note that there is risk of abuse in the domain of civic competence just as there is in granting a privileged position to a particular religion or culture.

For example, a government may adopt a fixed and determinate position on the formation of civic identity among its citizens, and may zealously pursue the promotion of that identity, not for the purpose of enabling thoughtful, informed citizens, but for maintaining loyalty and conformity to governmental will. Repressive regimes are the most notable instances of this phenomenon, but it is important to note that it can occur more subtly as well. It is not always clear where governmental interest turns from a willing patriotism to a repressive indoctrination, from the cultivation of stories, symbols, pledges, and traditions that induce national identity to propaganda and enforced indoctrination intended to cultivate mindless loyalty.

The points made in these last several pages were provoked by an earlier question. That question was whether moral education curricula were necessary if school children were already part of a morally good society and were taught by teachers of good moral manner. There have been a few twists and turns in the argument since that question was posed, all of them seeming to point to the finding that some form of moral curriculum is always present in the schooling of the young. Whether in

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the form of specific programs for moral education or as efforts to build national identity and ready the young for the responsibilities of citizenship, or implicitly, through the inevitable modeling of conduct through a teacher's manner, some form of moral education will be in place in schools—even in states that claim a high level of neutrality with respect to moral ideologies or codes. The unavoidable presence of moral manner and moral content should lead us to a state of constant vigilance, where we are always careful and considerate of whose views are being privileged and whose are being ignored or belittled. Though moral manner and moral content may be unavoidable in any setting for the purposeful education of the young, we have an obligation to understand the forms they may take, how they occur in practice, and what benefits and dangers they pose.

#### **A Distinction with a Difference for the Education of Teachers**

By drawing the distinction between teaching morally and teaching morality, we have opened up an inquiry that exposes many interesting facets about the moral work of teachers. One of these is the insight that when one teaches morally, one is teaching morality in some form, but that one can (at least for awhile) attempt to teach morality without teaching morally. That is, one could instruct in a moral education curriculum and act as if one were a moral good person in the role of a teacher, without *being* a moral person. One could also instruct in a moral education curriculum without knowing very much about how to meaningfully express one's moral manner, or without understanding very much about the moral functioning and moral development of students. These observations lead us to wonder about the place of moral manner and moral content in the training and continuing education of teachers.

How do we assist teachers in understanding both how moral content makes an appearance in classrooms and schools and how their own manner is part of the moral matter of schooling? Likewise, and perhaps even more profoundly, how do we seek to ensure that those who teach possess a moral manner that is proper and appropriate for the tasks of teaching, and that they learn how to employ this manner properly and appropriately in the course of instruction? Parts of these questions have been addressed in recent scholarship regarding the emphasis placed on moral dispositions in teacher education programs—specifically the debate surrounding the definition (Damon, 2005, 2007; Murray, 2007; see also Freeman, 2007; Raths, 2007), place (Sokkett, 2006; see also Burant, Chubbuck, & Whipp, 2007; Oja & Reiman, 2007; Wasicsko, 2007), and assessment (Diez, 2006, 2007a; see also Wilkerson, 2006) of dispositions in practice. And, while the scope of this article does not permit us to enter the dispositions fray in any substantive way, the argument in this article does have important implications for teacher education and research on teacher education that go beyond simply requiring teachers to possess moral dispositions or moral manner of a certain kind.

These implications include valuable insights into how teachers attend to moral matters in the classroom, how such attention is infused with moral manner, and how moral manner is connected to methods of instruction. More research is needed on the interplay between moral content and moral manner, but it behooves teacher educators to address this interplay in a way that at least grants teacher candidates permission to consider their moral manner in relation to their work in classrooms.

Course offerings in educational foundations that explore purposes of schooling and personal philosophies of education seem particularly appropriate for such content. But it is likely to have more impact if infused across the teacher education curriculum—in a methods course that suggests a connection between manner and content; in a multicultural education course that critically examines the favoring of one culture over another; in an educational psychology course that explores moral functioning and how moral development in students occurs; in an educational philosophy course that attends to what morality entails and to the ethics of teaching; or in a classroom management course that discusses the integration of moral principles with techniques of classroom organization.

These are dimensions of teaching that gain very little attention in most teacher education programs in the United States. However, they are features of teaching that, as we have seen, are at the very center of what we understand teaching to be and why many teacher enter the profession in the first place (see Osguthorpe & Sanger, 2008). They are features that should be far more prominent in programs for the preparation and continuing education of teachers than they are at present. Such preparation, done well, goes beyond having a certain kind of manner or covering particular moral content; it also suggests a knowledge of the moral psychology of students and the skills of teaching morality effectively, so that teachers can deploy moral content and moral manner in a way that positively influences the moral development of their students. While we suggest some places in the curriculum where these issues might be addressed, we know very little about the most effective ways to help candidates gain the necessary understanding and skills within programs of teacher education. Thus future research is needed on teacher candidates' conceptions of morality and moral psychology as well as on the development of a framework for connecting teacher candidate beliefs to these emerging features of the moral work of teaching.

One of the key, and thus far implicit benefits of exploring the notions of moral manner and moral content, and the distinctions that can be drawn between teaching morally and teaching morality, is that they open up the possibility of our attending to the moral dimensions of teaching without becoming hopelessly entangled in specific moral questions and particular moral creeds. Moral creeds and moral ideologies cannot be avoided altogether, and we would not want to contend that they should be. Rather, we are in need of ways of describing and analyzing the pedagogical features of morality in teaching, of having some concepts and distinctions that permit us to talk about what is taking place morally in classrooms without becoming lost in

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one particular moral position or another. Equipped with such tools, we then have means to explore the moral work that all teachers are engaged in every day in our nation's classrooms.

From seemingly simple distinctions, quite large and complex ideas may follow. That certainly seems the case here, for so much has followed from the drawing of a simple distinction between teaching morally and teaching morality: from the manner of the teacher as he or she teaches a lesson in a subject matter such as history or science, to the adoption of a moral education curriculum by a school or school district, all the way to the interest of the state in the civic identity and competence of its citizens. Moral matters are an enormous part of what it means to be formally engaged in the education of the young. Such matters must be far better understood than they have been. Perhaps this modest distinction between teaching morally and teaching morality will offer some assistance in our efforts to understand.

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