

Chapter 4

Understanding Morality and Ethics: Maneuvering Ethical Dilemmas in Digital Educational Contexts

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides a theoretical base for the understanding of moral and ethical issues in teaching. It outlines how teaching can be regarded as a social, relational and moral endeavor and discusses the moral and ethical dimensions of teaching and learning. Classical ethical frames, such as consequentialism, deontology and virtue ethics, are described and problematized as guiding frames for the process of moral decision-making. Bauman's ideas about ethics in postmodern society are presented, including the notion of moral uncertainty and ambivalence in present-day society. Habermas' (1996) discourse ethics, emphasizing communicative actions, are also introduced. The theoretical frame of dilemmatic space is proposed as an additional means of understanding and maneuvering through the complexities of modern everyday life, where varying norms and values and moral and political positions are taken into account. Conflicting views of how morality develops are presented and challenges for teaching morality and ethics outlined.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this chapter is to provide a theoretical base for the understanding of moral and ethical issues in teaching; more specifically how ethical issues emerge, are constructed and could be dealt with in the classroom. Based on theoretical reasoning on ethics, and research on ethical dilemmas in teaching and learning in relation to digital technologies, the chapter is both theoretical and practical in nature. Although it is not possible to address the full range of ethical dilemmas teachers may encounter here, examples of some moral dilemmas are provided in the chapter. The focus is on ethical dilemmas in digital educational contexts, rather than initiatives within teacher preparation programs aimed at developing

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-1668-2.ch004

professional ethical practices for educators. In this sense, the chapter provides an ethical framework for understanding the other chapters in this book.

Teacher educators do not just have to prepare student teachers their professional task ahead, they also have to ensure that their students acquire knowledge about the moral issues that prevail in today's digital age. A consequence of this is the implication that teacher educators and mentors need to have the relevant competencies to be able to prepare student teachers to deal with the moral and ethical issues that are certain to arise in their coming occupation. Some examples of required skills are: moral and ethical awareness, the ability to address, discuss and problematize moral issues, and a practical and theoretical understanding of morality and ethical theories as a framework for moral reasoning.

When discussing ethical issues it is vital to distinguish between *moral* and *ethical* principles. Although the words have different meanings, they are often used interchangeably, which can be confusing. The word 'ethics' derives from the Greek word 'ethos', meaning character, while the word 'moral' comes from the Latin word 'moralis', meaning custom or manner (Tschudin, 2003, p. 45). Moral refers to an individual's personal stance, principles and values of what is right and wrong, whereas ethics refers to rules, principles, norms and values that are external to the individual, such as the norms and values of a social community, occupational codes of conduct, religious principles, etc. Ethics may also be conceptualized as the philosophical study of morality (Mahony, 2009; Quinn, 2015).

Since people cannot be separated from their social context, their morality is therefore developed in relation to the norms, values and patterns of action with the social contexts of which they are a part. In this regard, the key point is that members of any social community have a wide range of moral positions and may react to and construct a personal morality of their own in relation to similar, shared 'external' social and cultural settings. Thus, any collective of teachers, while relating to a shared, explicit professional code of conduct to the extent that such exists, may express different moral stances and principles. The chapter begins with an overview of some of the moral and ethical issues that are related to teaching and learning. It is important to describe the moral issues that are relevant to teaching and learning, many of which are more apparent than others. In order to understand how moral issues can be understood and dealt with, an overview of some of the ethical approaches that can be used is provided. These include *consequentialism*, *deontology*, and *virtue ethics*. Knowing more about these approaches will help us to understand how moral positions and moral decision-making are played out. However, in real life, most moral issues are complex and need to be maneuvered through. In order to problematize this, Zygmunt Bauman's views of *postmodern ethics* and Jürgen Habermas' notion of *discourse ethics* are introduced. Bauman's postmodern ethics is not an additional ethical theory, but should rather be understood as a discussion of the challenges of ethical codes. Using Bauman's emphasis on uncertainty and ambivalence, it is possible to make a connection with Bonnie Honing's notion of *dilemmatic space*. In simple terms, this refers to the present dilemmatic space within which people have to react in their daily lives. It is also possible to connect the notion of dilemmatic space to Habermas' idea of discourse ethics. Briefly, discourse ethics focuses on communicative actions and the idea of a rational conversation to test arguments relating to different moral positions in order to try to find moral positions that everyone in a certain discourse can agree on. This implies having to negotiate and maneuver through different arguments and positions, which are also central components in the notion of dilemmatic space.

The notion of dilemmatic space has spatial and relational dimensions, which help us to understand moral issues and dilemmas. Concepts such as positions and positioning, relations, powers, negations, constructions, and maneuvering are central to understanding the dilemmatic space dynamic. From this perspective, in everyday life people try to relate to and maneuver within different possible moral posi-

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