College Teaching

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Imagine you're teaching a course at the introductory level, one that is required of all students who want to proceed on to major in your department. And let's suppose that you are approached by a student after the first exam, someone whose performance was much below standard. And that person offers you a considerable sum of money if you'll change a grade on the exam so the student can pass. What is the ethical thing to do in this situation?

Now suppose that it's the same situation, but instead of offering you money, the student pleads for an opportunity to retake the exam because of extenuating circumstances during the first test administration. Now what is the ethical choice?

Now it's the same situation, but this time you are the one who notices that a student who's been working hard in your class and whom you expected to do very well has instead failed the exam miserably. How does this situation compare with those above from an ethical standpoint?

The first of these scenarios seems fairly straightforward, a definite violation of ethics if you were to accept the money to change the grade. The second example is not as straightforward; to what extent should the student be allowed an opportunity that is not available to all the other students? Does providing that opportunity constitute unethical behavior? Or is it just unfair? Or is there a difference? And in the third instance, to what extent should your assessment of a student's abilities counter actual performance? Where do you draw the line in helping students? The most difficult questions that teachers face often have nothing to do with the content of a course or the way it is presented. They focus instead on the ethical issues of teaching, how we relate to our students, our institution, our discipline, and society at large. What are our responsibilities to each constituency and what do we do when they conflict? Unfortunately there are no easy answers to these questions.

What Does It Mean?

This section addresses the issue of ethics in teaching. It is something that is seldom overtly taught, even in matters of scholarship. It is either assumed that "everyone knows what that means" or it is learned in the process of apprenticeship to a more advanced scholar as in the research laboratory or research assistantship. As evidenced by some recent scandals in the conduct of research, it is not always learned very well. It is even more likely that the ethical decisions in teaching are difficult to learn because they are not generally in the public view. The students in an individual's class are usually not aware of the ethical standards that shape an instructor's course policies and teaching practices; they see only the outcomes of those standards. Teaching assistants frequently have to face questions of conflict with students or questions of an ethical nature. Just as frequently they do so with very little guidance.

What is an ethical question in teaching? There are many interpretations of that issue, but in general, ethical standards are intended to guide us in carrying out the responsibilities we have to the different groups with whom we interact. Ethics violations can occur when we are tempted to act contrary to those standards. Ethical dilemmas occur when multiple responsibilities conflict. It is often surprising to consider all the different things that can cause ethical problems for instructors. They range from the obvious bribe attempt described above, to failure to present all legitimate sides of an issue adequately, to accepting remuneration for extra tutoring for a class with which one is connected.

In a 1991 research study of psychologists teaching at academic institutions, Tabachnick, Keith-Spiegel, and Pope reported reactions to various ethical questions involved in teaching at the college level. Respondents were asked to report if and how frequently they engaged in a wide range of various activities and rate the extent to which they felt those activities were ethical or unethical. The activities included things as drastic as sexual harassment to more mundane activities such as teaching material that the instructor had not yet fully mastered. The authors then assessed which items most respondents reported engaging in at some time, which were the most controversial in terms of ethical judgments, and which were extremely rare.

The behavior most often engaged in was teaching when not adequately prepared, although it was not a consistent pattern for most people. The authors attribute this more to busy workloads and rapid advances in the field than to the shirking of responsibilities. Respondents also reported that they tried to teach ethics or values, a practice that could be seen as either positive or negative depending on precisely what is being taught and how.

The rarest behaviors were those related to sexual harassment. Whether this is an accurate reflection of behavior or a reluctance to report such behavior is impossible to tell. Also rare were actual sexual encounters with students. Less drastic but still questionable practices that rarely occur were such things as conflicts of interest with book publishers.

Perhaps the most interesting sources of ethical conflicts for this group were a result of the conflicting roles of mentor/sponsor and evaluator. The respondents had great difficulties in sorting out their loyalties. For example, over two-thirds believed allowing a student's likeability to influence a grade was unethical, but over two-thirds reported doing it at some point anyway. The same sort of dilemma is seen when instructors interact socially with students. On the one hand, the interaction with faculty is reported as vital to student growth by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991), while on the other it raises the possibility of conflict.

How can an instructor decide what is best? The American Association for University Professors has provided a statement of professional ethics dealing with the responsibilities of faculty members that highlights what they consider to be the special responsibilities of one in an academic position (AAUP, 1987). Perhaps using these standards as a guide can help highlight what a faculty member should consider in making personal choices.

Responsibilities to the Students

To Encourage the Free Pursuit of Learning, to Demonstrate Respect for Students, and to Respect Confidentiality

The primary purpose of teaching is to encourage learning; therefore the first ethical responsibility an instructor has is to that goal. What do we do to meet that responsibility? All that we do to prepare and conduct well-designed instruction is part of that effort. The ethical instructor knows the content to be learned, the students who will do the learning, and the methods that could be used to foster that learning. A second part is to protect and encourage the autonomy of our students so that eventually the students no longer need our constant guidance. Ethical instructors also respect the "otherness of students" (Churchill, 1982); that is, the individual and independent nature of the students and the fact that students are at different stages of their lives than are the instructors. That respect implies that the students have a right to privacy in their dealings with us.

There are many ways an instructor might violate these standards.

- The most obvious is to fail in our duties in class preparation. One can't always be in top form, but just as we expect students to come to class prepared, we must make the same effort.
- Another violation would be an insistence that students adopt the same values and philosophies that we hold in areas where there is room for disagreement. We have a responsibility to help students learn how to evaluate a position, but to force a position on them is indoctrination, not instruction.
- A violation of omission rather than commission would be to allow the students to become too dependent on us as instructors. We have a responsibility to help them grow into independent learners.
- When we ridicule a student's ideas or dismiss their questions as trivial, we violate the principle of respect. Any good teacher knows that a question asked by one student probably echoes the questions of at least a dozen others. Failure to respond to genuine attempts at understanding discourages learning.
- Discussion of a student's problems with anyone who does not have a genuine part in that student's education is another violation. Just as there is a confidential relationship between doctor and patient, lawyer and client, there is one between teacher and student. It must be based on trust and that trust should not be taken lightly.

To Model the Best Scholarly and Ethical Standards

A teacher, whether by accident or design is more to students than a content expert. The teacher is a model of all that it means to be a scholar. The teacher is also a model of what it means to be a thinking person. We teach not only what we know but what we are. Part of the ethics of teaching is to realize this responsibility and to become the best models we can be, which requires some serious self-reflection on our personal standards of scholarship and living. For example, the way in which you discuss points of view that differ from your own speaks volumes to the students about reasoned discourse. This does not

imply that you must always take a dispassionate stance; but even, or perhaps especially, when one feels strongly about an issue, it is necessary to demonstrate by your actions that intelligent people can disagree and still remain rational.

To Foster Honest Academic Conduct and to Ensure Fair Evaluation

Perhaps the most obvious ethical problems arise in the area of evaluation of student learning. Instructors are the arbiters of entrance into the profession and are therefore responsible for seeing to it that standards are upheld. However, we are also responsible for guaranteeing that all are given a fair chance at demonstrating their abilities. When we allow academic dishonesty to go unheeded, we violate the rights of all the other students who are abiding by the rules. If we fail to establish an evaluation system that accurately assesses the students' progress, we are abdicating our responsibilities to both the students and the profession.

The conflicts most often occur when this standard is pitted against the first one, that of respecting the individual and fostering independence. The examples that opened this chapter speak to this issue. How important is it that all students be evaluated in the same way? Are we being fairer if we maintain standards and vary conditions of evaluation or if we use individual standards according the special situation of each student? Which factors are legitimate considerations? There is no agreement on these issues. The best we can do is to continue to discuss and deliberate, alone and in groups, because the conditions under which we operate today will not be the same as those in the future. The decisions we make today might be made obsolete by changing circumstances, as has happened in the past.

To Avoid Exploitation, Harassment, or Discrimination

One of the guidelines that should be at the forefront of our thinking about the ethics of teaching is the fact that there is a great power discrepancy between the teacher and the students. Whether we like it or not, whether we seek it or not, by virtue of our position alone, we are invested with a great deal of power over the lives of our students. To make matters worse, many students invest us with even more power than we are entitled to.

It is the abuse of this power imbalance that is at the base of many of the ethical traps that lie strewn across our paths as teachers. The most blatant examples of unethical behavior, those most frequently mentioned in written codes of ethics, deal with the abuse of power, especially in the form of exploitation or harassment of various types: sexual, racial, religious, even intellectual. For example, requiring students to engage in class activities that are unrelated to the educational purposes of the course but that serve our personal ends is an abuse of power. Making derogatory comments about population subgroups is an obvious example of harassment A less obvious example is ignoring the special needs of a subgroup completely, either consciously or unconsciously. An even less obvious example is engaging in intellectual snobbery by setting course standards at levels far beyond the

capabilities of the students in the class ("No one earns an A in my class!"). Perhaps the best way to avoid violations of this standard is to keep the first standard in mind: Respect the students as individuals and keep the purpose of learning primary in all course-related decisions.

Another area of ethical problems involves receiving special considerations or benefits as a result of being in a position of authority, especially when those considerations come from those over whom you exercise that authority. For example, many instructors receive complimentary copies of textbooks in hopes that those books will be adopted for a course. Is it a violation of ethics to adopt a less-than-adequate book simply because of incentive made available by the publisher or to turn around and sell those copies to someone else? Is it a violation to even accept them in the first place? How legitimate is it to accept an invitation to a party or other event as the guest of a student in your class? Does it matter if that student is no longer in your class? Does it matter if the event is somehow connected with the student's academic program, for example, a dinner honoring that student's work? What constitutes "a bribe"or "special consideration"? We must be aware that by our position alone we will sometimes be put in a compromised situation in all innocence on our part or the student's part.

Responsibilities to Colleagues, the Institution, and the Discipline

The AAUP guidelines go beyond those just focused on our role as teacher; they deal with all aspects of faculty life, including relations with colleagues, responsibilities to the institution for which we work and to the discipline we represent. Taken as a whole, however, the same ideas apply. The standards cluster around the issues of promoting and defending free and honest inquiry, showing respect for others, meeting institutional and professional responsibilities, and continuing to grow as scholars throughout professional life.

Ethical failures in this area include examples such as falsification of research results, failure to give due credit to the work of colleagues or students, unwillingness to participate in institutional governance, and unfair or unfounded evaluation of colleagues. More difficult choices might be things like continuing to teach in a situation that does not meet the needs of the students, such as overcrowded or understaffed classes, ignoring the inadequate teaching of colleagues, taking on so much outside work that work with the students suffers, or refusing to teach a sufficient number of service courses to help students graduate in a timely manner.

Making Ethical Choices

The array of possibilities for problems seems endless. How then can we avoid stumbling somewhere along the line? While there are no easy answers, there may be some ways of thinking about our actions as professionals that will maximize the possibility of acting ethically. Following are principles for

evaluating one's actions from two sources, the first five from Brown and Krager (1985) and the last from Schon (1983).

- Autonomy - Am I acting in ways that respect freedom and treat others as autonomous?
- Non-maleficence - Am I causing harm through either commission or omission?
- Beneficence - Benefit the other person rather than myself?
- Justice - Do I treat those for whom I am responsible equitably?
- Fidelity - Do I uphold my part of any relationship?
- Act consciously - What are the assumptions on which I base my actions and are they valid?

It is a great privilege to be a teacher, but all great privileges carry great responsibilities as well. Many of those responsibilities are subtle, thrust on us by the expectations of others rather than sought by us. Keeping these six principles in mind won't solve all the ethical dilemmas you face as a teacher, but they might give you a way to reflect on them alone and with other teachers. That reflection should never stop, because conscious reflection on values is perhaps the cornerstone of the ethics of teaching.

Supplementary Reading

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