Ethical Challenges for Teachers

A review of

Teaching Ethically: Challenges and Opportunities
by R. Eric Landrum and Maureen A. McCarthy (Eds.)

Reviewed by
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To paraphrase Mark Twain, being ethical is important; teaching others to be ethical is even more important and less trouble. The contributors to Teaching Ethically: Challenges and Opportunities would surely disagree with Twain’s cynical view of ethics teachers but would agree that this topic is important and challenging, especially for new teachers. The primary purposes of Teaching Ethically are to identify these challenges and provide suggestions for addressing ethical dilemmas. Most chapters in this book accomplish these purposes and should stimulate discussion.

However, these challenging discussions might not be as widespread as they should be. Many doctoral programs continue to do little to prepare graduate students for teaching. Komarraju and Handelsman address this limited preparation in the final chapter. They point out that departments have obligations to constituencies that include undergraduate students and their parents, as well as potential instructors. Competence in practice is a major item in the American Psychological Association’s (2002) “Ethical Principles of Psychologists and
Code of Conduct,” and that is generally understood to mean that psychologists receive appropriate training, followed by supervision and evaluation. When that does not happen, it is not ethical.

Relationships with students is the issue that I have found most concerns new teachers. In part, this is because they are close in age to their students, but the concern also is due to the basic human wish to be liked. Wilson, Smalley, and Yancey discuss the dilemmas that are presented when teachers consider where to draw the line between approachability and unacceptable intimacy. Inviting a student to have wine in your apartment is clearly different from a meeting for coffee in the university student center. And now Facebook is a concern, so watch out for “friending” and being “friended” by students. These authors conclude, “There is a curvilinear relationship between rapport and outcomes” (p. 147).

Is it ethical to show favoritism toward individual students? The answer is no with respect to grading, as Saville makes clear in his chapter. However, what about selecting the “best” students as research assistants or for independent study? VanderStoep and Trent-Brown ask whether “faculty are ethically obligated to involve every student who wants a research experience” (p. 173). We often hear faculty talk about “my student,” which suggests there also may be orphans whom no one wants. In most cases, selection based on merit would be ethical, but not if based on looks or personality.

Undergraduate student advising is an important piece missing in Teaching Ethically. We help students make decisions not only about course schedules but also study habits, time management, graduate school, and career choices. We may be asked for help with students’ personal problems; in responding to those requests, we recognize our areas of competence and avoid dual relationships by not serving as mental health counselors. We also have a responsibility to provide accurate information about careers and graduate school; doing so requires knowledge about suitable options for our advisees that not all faculty have bothered to acquire. I have visited departments in which advising is seen as a burden passed on to staff or graduate students. It is unethical to misinform students and to avoid one’s responsibilities.

Students’ academic integrity is addressed in two chapters, both of which state that integrity thrives in a climate of ethical behavior. Prohaska provides a list of ways to make cheating on exams more difficult; for example, by using multiple forms of a test. These measures are needed to promote fairness, but using them assumes that there are students who cheat, and thus the effect of the preventive measures on the ethical climate is a reduction in respect. The following chapter argues that the honor system is an effective way to reduce dishonest behavior. However, most of the evidence presented for this system’s effect on cheating is more than 10 years old.

All these ethical issues take on a new dimension in online courses. As my mother-in-law used to say, “This isn’t my world anymore.” Messages are posted online that may be seen by anyone in the class and “can be redistributed forever” (p. 57). Elison-Bowers and Snelson say it is unethical to use a “virtual student to spy on students” (p. 58) and
manipulate them. I never imagined that possibility, although my experience with online teaching is limited. There are also special issues with intellectual property; for example, you can show a DVD in class but not stream it online. These authors also taught me a new word, netiquette (p. 61).

People often do bad (unethical) things for money. In their chapter on textbook ethics, Weiten, Halpern, and Bernstein discuss textbook adoption decisions and state, “when money enters the picture, ethical issues are sure to follow” (p. 43). Publishers have offered expensive gifts, fancy dinners, and boondoggle junkets to encourage adoption, especially to faculty and departments that have massive sections of undergraduate courses. The authors’ ethical solution: Do “not accept anything of value from a publisher, period” (p. 46), not even a coffee mug or pen. I must confess to having received at least one of each of those two items. Mea culpa.

The cost of textbooks for students keeps going up. Teachers have a responsibility to help students manage these costs. There are at least two ways to do this: Do not require books that students will not use, and avoid bundling textbooks with ancillary materials. The authors, all of whom have written textbooks, say they would adopt their own books but would donate the royalties.

A typical complaint by reviewers of edited books is the lack of coordination between chapters. Teaching Ethically has five chapters related to research ethics that could have been condensed. Two of these chapters concern the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) movement. The idea is that research on your own teaching should improve it and may be published to help other teachers. This is a hot topic in higher education, but is it an “essential” (p. 28) activity for teachers to be considered ethical, and is it really the “hallmark of a skillful teacher” (p. 69)? Gurung points out that many teachers do not have “the time or inclination to conduct . . . pedagogical research” (p. 69). I do not think that makes them unethical.

The other chapters in this research set are helpful as guides to working with students in research. The issues include learning about research ethics, developing collaborative relationships with students, and resolving questions of authorship. A chapter on working with students in community settings deals with similar collaboration issues.

Ethical issues related to diversity are covered in three chapters. The first of these deals with cultural competency and seems overly prescriptive, including two statements that seem counter to the chapter theme: “Competent teaching . . . requires the use of strategic persuasion to socialize students into a field of inquiry” (p. 101). “Teaching is a process of socialization for entry into an intellectual elite of a particular society” (p. 109). I think we could at least debate whether it is ethical to manipulate students into psychology as part of an elite class.

Contrast that chapter with Chew’s on challenging students’ core beliefs and values. Students may not seek or expect these challenges and may experience personal distress. Chew shows sympathy with students whose religious beliefs may make them resistant to
ideas that psychologists accept, and he recognizes an obligation, not to avoid controversial issues, but to mitigate student distress. The third chapter in this section concerns students with disabilities; one ethical issue is the extent to which social and test anxieties qualify students for special treatment.

One of the objectives of Teaching Ethically is to help teachers evaluate and resolve ethical issues “in a local context” (p. 5). I found no examples, however, in which authors examine how differences in local context might affect ethical decisions. Relationships with students and academic honesty present different problems in large state universities and small private colleges. Faculty teaching loads and research demands vary in different institutions. It may be unreasonable to ask all authors to address these differences, and that is one reason that a summary chapter by the editors would have been helpful.

That missing summary chapter could serve other purposes as well. It could summarize the major ethical challenges that teachers face and list suggestions for each. There could also be discussion of the basic ethical principles that guide our decisions: beneficence (doing good, not harm), respect for the autonomy of individuals, and justice. Or perhaps these summaries should be left to the ethics teacher, whose job really is harder than Mark Twain thought.

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