PROFESSIONAL ETHICS IN TEACHER EDUCATION

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A teacher is more than a teacher. Because a teacher is entrusted not only with educating students but also with helping them grow and develop as human beings, the effective teacher must be not only skillful at promoting learning, but also a model of ethical behavior.

In social studies education there is a concept called the hidden curriculum, referring to the unintended learning that is fostered by a teacher's actions that are not part of his conscious teaching. Students learn from more than the teacher's prepared lessons; they also learn from observing a teacher's behavior. For example, if the teacher believes he is fostering democratic values in the classroom but unintentionally allows students no voice in decision-making, the hidden curriculum is actually teaching the values of an autocracy. If a teacher stresses the importance of ethical behavior to students then engages in unethical behavior, this is another example of the hidden curriculum, of unintended teaching.

Teachers are observed very intently—scrutinized—by students for many hours each day. And for all students, teachers may be revered and seem larger than life. A teacher is more than just a teacher, and as long as this is so, ethics education should be part of teacher education.

Professional ethics has become more important over the years. As we become more specialized in our occupation, the issues become that much more complex – and hard. Professional bodies have increasingly been at work developing, revising and refining
professional codes of ethics. Professionals themselves ask for more detailed codes so as to have greater guidance. There is no longer a deference to the authority of experts on the part of the public or of the client group. The standards for professional conduct keep drifting higher. Where safety and health are at issue, the regulators are under more pressure to act when professional groups do not act. Frankly, it is a sign of maturity, and of professional pride, when a professional group is operating under a code of ethics.

Statement on Professional Ethics was first adopted by the Association in 1966. For example, ethical controversies in recent years have involved research on cloning and genetic engineering, informed consent of human subjects in social science research, potential conflicts of interest due to the greater role corporations now play in university research, the use of the Internet for research and distance education, procedures for reviewing and mediating ethics complaints by disciplinary associations, sexual harassment and racial discrimination, and the necessity of training graduate students in research ethics.

What is Professional Ethics?

Professional Ethics concerns one's conduct of behaviour and practice when carrying out professional work. Such work may include consulting, researching, teaching and writing. The institutionalisation of Codes of Conduct and Codes of Practice is common with many professional bodies for their members to observe.

Any code may be considered to be a formalisation of experience into a set of rules. A code is adopted by a community because its members accept the adherence to these rules, including the restrictions that apply.

It must be noted that there is a distinction between a profession such as Information Systems, and controlled professions such as Medicine and Law, where the loss of membership may also imply the loss of the right to practice.

Apart from codes of ethics, professional ethics also concerns matters such as professional indemnity. Furthermore, as will readily be appreciated, no two codes of ethics are identical. They vary by cultural group, by profession and by discipline. The former of
these three variations is one of the most interesting, as well as controversial, since it challenges the assumption that universal ethical principles exist. In some cultures, certain behaviours are certainly frowned upon, but in other cultures the opposite may be true. Software piracy is a good case in point, in that attitudes towards software piracy vary from strong opposition to strong support - attitudes that are supportable within a particular culture. At the end of these pages is a section called Cultural Perspectives, where we hope to point you to alternative perspectives of ethical standards, attitudes and behaviours.

Issues

Codes of Ethics are concerned with a range of issues, including:

- Academic honesty
- Adherence to confidentiality agreements
- Data privacy
- Handling of human subjects
- Impartiality in data analysis and professional consulting
- Professional accountability
- Resolution of conflicts of interest
- Software piracy

The Advantages and Disadvantages of a Code of Ethics

A Code of Ethics enables us to:

- Set out the ideals and responsibilities of the profession
- Exert a de facto regulatory effect, protecting both clients and professionals
- Improve the profile of the profession
- Motivate and inspire practitioners, by attempting to define their raison d'être
- Provide guidance on acceptable conduct
- Raise awareness and consciousness of issues
- Improve quality and consistency

On the other hand, we must also consider:
Whether the so-called standards are obligatory, or are merely an aspiration
Whether such a code is desirable or feasible
Whether ethical values are universal or culturally relativistic
The difficulty of providing universal guidance given the heterogeneous nature of the profession
What the point is of specifying responsibilities, given the limited regulatory function of a code.

Following are a few thoughts on several other issues of professional ethics, some more critical than others. They may not be as newsworthy as scientific misconduct, sexual harassment, or lying to students, but they are issues of the type that concern almost every faculty member on a daily basis. This is not intended as an exhaustive list of issues within the profession, nor does it reflect the views of the Committee on Professional Ethics. I simply want to highlight some of the ethical considerations that underlie our daily interactions with students and colleagues.

Another aspect of professional ethics that challenges us on a daily basis is the fair and equitable treatment of others within the academic community. As full-time tenure-track jobs have become scarcer and standards for gaining tenure and promotions have grown more demanding, the pressure to produce research, win grants, and publish has increased accordingly. This puts tremendous strain on faculty, especially those just entering the profession. If we believe that faculty should set standards for tenure and promotion, then we must set realistic goals for our peers. It may not be unethical to have higher expectations for a new generation of scholars, but we shouldn’t apply higher standards or a lengthened timetable just for their own sake or because administrations demand it. Similarly, when faculty review the work of other faculty for publication, promotion, merit pay, grants, fellowships, or post-tenure reviews, the highest standards of professional ethics and responsibility should prevail. As internal and external reviews multiply and accountability continues to be a requirement for much of what we do, the necessity for responsible and fair reviews by peers and department chairs assumes even more importance. The contentious subject of "collegiality" has become another minefield
of potential abuse, yet we should remember that the word "collegial" literally means shared authority among equals, among colleagues. The real question is: who are our colleagues?

Much the same can be said for graduate students, especially those who take on responsibilities as teachers and research assistants, trying to make a living while they prepare for future careers. Many disciplinary associations, including the Modern Language Association and the American Historical Association, are grappling with the problems that confront graduate students. Is their training really preparing them for the reality of the jobs they seek? Is it ethical to allow students to believe there will be jobs for them when they complete their degrees? Should we provide counseling in alternative careers or reduce the number of graduate students in our institutions? Are faculty exploiting graduate student labor so that professors can devote themselves to research or travel to conferences instead of spending time in the lab or the classroom? We must be responsible mentors, supporting graduate students in their roles as apprentice scholars and employees and upholding their right to organize for purposes of collective bargaining. We could also ask the tough question of academic institutions: is it ethical to charge full tuition when students are actually taught by cut-rate teachers?

One sentence in the Statement on Professional Ethics warrants special attention: "Professors accept their share of faculty responsibilities for the governance of their institutions." This critically important responsibility is too often dismissed as taking time away from important research or classroom duties. But if professors want to safeguard academic freedom and tenure and maintain faculty authority for setting academic standards, then they have an obligation to participate actively in shared governance. Service on a faculty senate or committee should never be dismissed as a waste of time; responsible professional service is crucial to the functioning of our institutions and to upholding the highest standards of our profession.

REFERENCES:


