

Seminar on Leadership in Education
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Digging Deep: Looking Underneath Knowledge and Skills

What do we expect out of our community? What does it mean to be an educated person? How does one become an educated person? A community of learning clearly includes knowledge and skills, the overt signs of schooling. But underlying all schools should be the implicit teaching on developing a moral judgment about how to use these knowledge and skills. I seek here to describe what underlies our community; the backbone of judgment which guides our decision making, actions or inactions. This decision making can not only include our interpretation of what is learned in school, but our reactions to the social constructs of our community. Inherent within is a series of cascading processes all which lead to the formation of a better community. One might say this is a cynical viewpoint that presumes that the world is currently not good. On the contrary, it simply states that there is improvement to be had when citizens of a community develop a shared morality. Four critical points exist that define an educated person: definition, experience, improvement and dialogue. The final outcome must only be a more positive world within the current context of multiple cultures.

In a learning community, we see knowledge and skills practiced and experienced in a variety of ways. But fundamental to this learning community is how these knowledge and skills are interpreted. By definition, each member of the community must learn to see that every judgment has moral implications. No matter how simple, any decision has long-term consequences. This includes a simple interpretation of a lesson in math to an analysis of a complex work in history. Analogous to common systems thinking in social endeavors or chaos theory in the ecological

world, each decision, even if temporally far apart, will result in some moral implication. Every action is part of a greater whole. It is relevant to revert to the practical: our school community. Students make decisions, informally and formally, at home or at school. Part of our role in guiding young people to adulthood is to provide framework to interpret the world so that decisions are not made in a vacuum. At our school, it appears on the playground, in the classroom, at community meetings and in conflict mediation. It appears as a reflective practice, conscious decision making and thoughtful discourse over content areas. What was the result of your decision? Did you see the long term consequences? Do you believe what you are reading? Over time, these varied experiences lead to a cognitive collection of judgments about action and result.

Through these experiences, an educated person would begin to build patterns. These patterns consist of recognition, of cause and effect, and of long term consequences which allow one to evaluate decisions from a moral perspective. This then leads to each member of a community collectively “funding” (in John Dewey’s words) their own moral judgment. As the individual moves into new communities, it provides a lens through which to interpret the world. This could include relationships, understanding media or understanding differences. One might ask what defines a moral decision as good or bad. Initially, cultural and family norms establish moral baselines, but over time, a collective or shared morality develops in an adult in a functioning community. The challenge remains when you have two conflicting moral foundations regarding rights and wrongs. How do we determine a shared morality? This evolves so that a shared morality must lead to a collective good.

Consciousness regarding morality and collective experience in situations both lead to the development of an individual morality. But the role of improvement must be assessed. Dewey asserts that an educated person “is on the lookout for good not already achieved (Dewey, 273).” In moral discussion, individual morality must move to collective or shared morality with an outcome of a more positive community. This is different from a common morality, which is prescribed or stated. Part of this is reflected in Buddhism, where all actions should be compassionate, defined as “the humane quality of understanding the suffering of others and wanting to do something about it (wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn).” The shared morality is a result of not only the intention of the common good, but also the openness to communication about the common good. This leads to the inevitable hypothetical question regarding shared morality in the face of brutality. We approach these ideas not from a sense of moral high-ground, but from the intent of a shared morality. It is the goal of the community, and the leader within the community, to guide a thoughtful dialogue. Over the course of human history, brutality and other various modern malaises have been interpreted differently over time. Different from relativism, a shared morality is dependent on time and place. What is convincing in one millennium may not be convincing in the next. Regardless, the best outcome for the most people must be considered, but in relationship to the current context.

A community, built on individuals, which in our global society is as diverse as it will ever be, constrained neither by political or geographic boundaries, must have a foundation of dialogue. This dialogue is a result of all individuals in the community thoughtfully reflecting on their own moral judgment and then, when cultural norms contradict one another, dialogue to build the new culture or the new shared morality. An example from a colleague is best used here. Two student

groups have opposing views on a social norm. One group believes in an aspect of the social norm on the argument of free association and the human rights, while the other, founded in cultural beliefs of an established institution, operates on a common morality of the institution. A community of educated people would embrace this controversy and allow for open dialogue. A leader might ask, are you “on the lookout for good not already achieved?” By maintaining the dialogue, we trust that the process itself will lead to a dynamic, but shared morality.

The role of the leader in such a community is to allow that conversation to continue and react to an action that falls outside of the perceived shared morality. In a global place we have only this philosophical route to follow. With the blurring of boundaries which in the past were clear and increasing access to information and contact, the need for the formation of a shared morality within formed communities will be at the forefront of our cultures. These four central tenets: definition, experience, improvement, and dialogue are the foundations of the development of a shared morality. With patience and openness, leaders within a community will help to guide those individuals within a community to perceive the awareness of a shared morality that must underlie all content and skill outcomes.