

# Essays on Teaching Excellence

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## Fostering Student' Moral Development

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Moral or ethical issues are central to our lives. Our personal relationships can be positive and enhance our lives or be destructive. Societal norms can be based on fairness and ethical values or involve favoritism and disrespect toward certain groups. Ethical behavior is essential in a democracy where, as citizens, we regularly make decisions affecting others.

Since the time of the earliest colonial colleges, American higher education has had a mission to foster its students' moral development. Today, there is concern about a growing incivility and an apparent decrease in level of caring for each other. In addition, some of the highest officials in the land—all college graduates—regularly display unethical behavior that may confuse the nation's understanding of morality. High rates of academic cheating by college students suggest we have a significant moral challenge—and opportunity—for student learning and development.

Now our efforts to foster our students' moral development can benefit from four decades of empirical research, the findings of which can help us have a powerful impact on our students' lives and, through them, society more broadly.

**What Research Tells Us** This essay focuses on aspects of moral development for which there is robust empirical support and sound guidance for teachers. A person's morality is influenced by a variety of internal and environmental factors. In one conception, moral action is determined by four components: (1) moral sensitivity (comprehending moral content when present in a situation), (2)

moral judgment (determining what is the moral thing to do), (3) moral motivation (choosing to do what moral rather than other values dictate), and (4) moral character (having qualities such as strength of ego, perseverance, and courage to act) (Rest & Narváez, 1994; Rest, Narváez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999). (Unless otherwise indicated, descriptions of research and data are drawn from these two sources.)

All four of these components, and perhaps others, work together to influence a person's behavior. Development in one component does not guarantee development in another; all four are necessary for moral action. Of the four components, the second, moral reasoning or judgment, is the most fully researched. It is a cognitive variable upon which we know colleges and universities can have a powerful impact.

The conception of moral judgment used in this essay is based on the pioneering work of Lawrence Kohlberg as modified by more recent research by Rest. Kohlberg hypothesized six different stages or moral philosophies through which people can pass as they develop.

Stage 1: A morality focusing on obedience—yielding to the wishes of those who are more powerful and thus avoiding punishment.

Stage 2: An instrumental morality that seeks personal benefit with little concern for the needs of others. This is the Stage of "The Deal": *caveat emptor*.

Stage 3: A morality that seeks to maximize the quality of relationships. A person does what will gain others' approval.

Stage 4: A morality of law and order: One has a duty to obey the law and maintain the social order.

Stage 5: A morality that focuses on social contract: What is moral is what people have previously agreed to.

Stage 6: A morality that uses abstract, universal ethical principles to decide what is the moral act. Reasoning at this stage respects all people without regard to their ethnicity, age, class, or other personal characteristics.

Comprehension of the various stages is gradually developed, provided one has appropriate experiences. Stages 5 and 6 involve using *principles* to think about relationships among people rather than *rigid laws* given by authority (Stage 4). What is moral is what advances implementation of a principle.

Most people, including college undergraduates, primarily use the moral reasoning of Conventional Stages 3 and 4. Stages 1 and 2 are thus known as Preconventional and 5 and 6 as Postconventional. Many people never develop the capacity for substantial Postconventional reasoning. Although rigid Stage 4 authoritarian moralism and legalism may seem repugnant from a Postconventional *principled perspective*, achieving the shift from the more selfish personal perspective of Stages 1-3 to the sociocentric *maintaining norms perspective* of Stage 4 reasoning is an important moral advance, certainly over Preconventional lawless or criminal behavior.

Developing upward through the various stages, one's reasoning is increasingly concerned with others' needs and less exclusively with one's own. There is a development in capacity to deal with the increasing cognitive complexity and abstraction required to comprehend the reasoning of each successive stage.

Research shows a person can understand not only his/her reasoning currently used when dealing with moral dilemmas but also the reasoning of the stages below, having developed through all of these stages. However, s/he will tend to reject the lower stage reasoning as inferior, too simple, or childlike.

Of the methods of measuring moral reasoning, the most widely used is the Defining Issues Test (DIT), a technically strong, objective paper-and-pencil test. In use since the 1970s, the DIT has been employed in more than 40 nations with hundreds of thousands of people in over 1,500 studies, with around 150 being published yearly. The DIT presents several moral dilemmas to test-takers, who are asked to respond to questions about each dilemma. A P Score, the percentage of Stage 5 and 6 principled reasoning people use in responding to the dilemmas, is calculated from the results and represents their current level of moral reasoning development.

Numerous studies have examined factors that might influence the development of moral judgment. Findings show that although age is associated with stage of moral reasoning, the best correlate is level of schooling. Junior high school students have P Scores that average 21.9 (percent); senior high school students, 31.8; adults in general, 40.0; college students, 42.3; graduate students in business, 42.8; medical students, 50.2; law students, 52.2; liberal Protestant seminarians, 59.8; and graduate students in moral philosophy and political science, 65.2.

Apparently, association with school activities is important for growth. Older people who have completed only high school tend to perform on the DIT like current high school graduates, and older college graduates appear stuck at the level of current college graduates.

Some (e.g., Gilligan, 1982) have suggested women conceive of moral issues in terms of care-giving and relationships rather than justice as in Kohlberg's scheme. But available studies give mixed results (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998), and there are no significant gender differences in scores from DIT samples of thousands of people. Many dozens of studies have examined a possible Western cultural bias of Kohlberg's six stages of moral judgment. Meta-analyses of these studies reveal widespread, possibly universal distribution of these forms and this sequence of moral reasoning.

**What Teachers Can Do** College experiences can have a significant impact on students' moral reasoning. In fact, some of the strongest college effects found in the literature are on moral reasoning (McNeel, 1994). This impact is particularly strong in liberal arts colleges and in disciplines that explore people and values. Students in more vocationally oriented disciplines such as business and education have shown considerably lower DIT score growth over their college experience. In fact, after reviewing research on this issue, McNeel (1994, p. 34) has remarked, "There may be a moral development problem nationally in the areas of business and education," two fields with an enormous impact on society.

Numerous studies in moral education suggest practical tactics teachers can use that will help their students move toward more complex, principled ethical reasoning. Listed here are some methods

consistent with the findings of research on fostering students' moral judgment.

- Have students discuss controversial moral dilemmas. Identify disciplinary issues with moral content—that relate to moral values. Develop cases, problems, or scenarios that involve these values for students to discuss.
- Have students play the roles of and explain the reasoning used by others to resolve moral dilemmas.
- Allow students to discover how various cultural groups reason about moral issues.
- All courses, even in disciplines such as mathematics or statistics that on their surface may appear to lack obviously moral content, offer rich opportunities for helping students develop their skill in moral reasoning. Every course can become a learning community where values of mutual respect, sensitivity to others' needs, and cooperation are emphasized and discussed.
- Ensure all students have ample out-of-class contact with faculty members.
- In addition to high involvement tactics, directly teach Kohlberg's model of six stages of reasoning as one would teach other, disciplinary concepts.
- Use the DIT to help both teacher and students understand their moral reasoning and track and improve program effectiveness.

With such efforts we can indeed foster our students' moral development – for the good of all.

### **References and Resources**

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