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Duffy, Kate (2011) Changing moral attitudes of female educators in Further Education and Work-based learning. In: International Conference on Moral Education Cultivating Morality: Human Beings, Nature and the World, 24 - 28 Oct 2011, Nanjing, China.

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# Changing moral attitudes of female educators in Further Education and Work-based learning

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Draft Paper for International Conference on Moral Education

**Cultivating Morality: Human Beings, Nature and the World**

**Nanjing International Conference Centre, Nanjing, China**

**24 – 28 October 2011**

## ABSTRACT

Further Education (FE) for young people and adults after their compulsory schooling in the UK is focused by government policy towards a narrow skills based agenda. Viewing the purpose of FE as purely economic leaves little space for teachers and trainers in the sector to explicitly consider the opportunities for a moral education as part of this agenda nor for them to consider the morality of their practice (Coffield 2008, 2009). This auto-ethnographic study aims to illuminate the experience of one teacher educator's practice to create the spaces for FE teachers and trainers to envisage a moral imagination (Narvaez 2006) for themselves and the sector. The FE teachers are students on a part time degree in Education and Training as part of their professional development. This paper focuses upon a teaching and learning activity, 'The concept map', that was used by the teacher educator to encourage dialogue between the teacher and student as a way of strengthening their relationship and develop their critical and caring thinking (Noddings 2003). The teacher educator's journal, artefacts (student's concept maps) and reflections from the students form the data for this paper. Through thematic analysis it highlights possible mismatches between the intentions of the teacher and the experience of the students raising the concerns that approaches to moral education for FE teachers may be hindered by their expectations of assessment and the role of the teacher educator.

Key words: Teacher Education; Moral education; Auto-ethnography

## CONTEXT

A clear political focus on teaching moral development in FE has been limited in recent years with commissioned reviews such as the Moser Report 1999; Tomlinson 2004; Foster Review 2005; Leitch Review 2006; Wolf 2011, placing the focus on a narrow skills agenda for employment and prosperity being economic in perspective. With funding for FE being ever more squeezed, the explicit teaching for moral development of students in FE has become more implicit in their vocational courses and left to the FE teacher to lead this. Therefore the training and development of FE teachers in moral education has not always been seen as an important for the sector. The emphasis now on increasing literacy and numeracy skills in adults (Moser 1999), increasing basic functional skills and tailoring programmes of study and curriculum prescriptive to local workforce skill requirements, '*...education in terms of extrinsic utility rather than intrinsic worth...*' (Pring 2005, pg53). The liberal studies programmes in FE where a wider view of prosperity and becoming a contributing citizen could be explicitly explored, were almost gone and were virtually non-existent in vocational education programmes (Evans 2000). Worse still, New Labour's call to make those spending public money more accountable rooted in their neo-liberalist approach to policy making increased the pressure of competition between providers of further education and created extensive methods to capture the effectiveness of FE. Organisations, managers and teachers were left with little space to explore the wider implications and outcomes from engaging in learning with their students beyond the prescriptive skills for employment (Ball 2003, 2008, Popper and Wilson 2003). The focus was on ensuring that they were meeting the targets set and demonstrating efficiency and effectiveness in doing so. The language of business overtook the language of learning (Coffield 2008) in the FE sector and those teachers that did try to maintain an element of moral education in their curriculum were often 'burned out' by the pressures of system (Zembylas 2003).

In the context of meeting targets and the 'terrors of performativity' (Ball 2003) that FE teachers experience it is questionable as to whether it is possible let alone desirable for FE educators to explore, inquire and question the morality of their practice. FE reform is again on the government agenda (New challenges, New chances BIS 2011) and the new Coalition asks as Andrew Foster did in 2006, "what is the purpose of FE?". The coalition strap line of 'Freedom, Fairness and Responsibility' (Cameron 2010) within the vision of the 'Big Society' (Coalition vision 2010) where individuals are encouraged to contribute to their society by taking more responsibility for their lives echos the views of Bob Fryer and his committee for lifelong learning 14 years ago. Currently the view of responsibility is seen as taking 'economic responsibility' as subsidised post 16 education becomes a thing of the past beyond the age of 19 (Browne 2010). However, this could also be an opportunity to review the FE curriculum and see how it can best contribute to the

creation of this responsible society beyond the narrow skills agenda that it currently is favoured for (Coffield 2008) . In order to review the curriculum and ask these questions FE educator's need a voice to speak the truth to power (Coffield).

The majority of FE educators are dual entering Further and vocational education organisations with their expertise in their vocational area and then developing their practice 'on the job' during in-service teacher training programmes. The theoretical education studies degree programme (explored within this paper) that students can continue on to after successful completion of their initial teacher training, aims to develop their academic skills of critical enquiry and practitioner research into practice. Moral education for these students must include a two tiered approach, the knowing how to explore the moral decisions of their practice as well as knowing the why of the action made (Lapsley and Narvaez 2006).

This paper aims to evaluate the effectiveness of a pedagogical activity aimed to foster dialogue between a teacher and her students. To establish how useful the activity was in building positive relationships between them as Nodding (1984) would advocate. The paper will draw upon the teacher's reflection of the activity and contrast it to the student's reflection of the activity. The overall aim is to establish to what extent the teacher's intention to foster moral education with her students, if received by them.

## **CAN MORALS BE TAUGHT?**

Morals are concerned with the principles we follow and live our lives by and highlight the distinction between right and wrong. Aristotle concluded that the best human life requires the exercise of virtue (Fallona 2000) and that excellence or virtues are the qualities that make life admirable (pg 681). Philosophers like Socrates and Aristotle have questioned 'what is it to lead a happy life?' and describe a happy life as being one that practices the virtues of ethics such as honesty, justice, truthfulness, bravery and friendliness (Fallona 2000) to name a few. Aristotle concluded that practicing reason was the best way to ensure that you live by these virtues and he believed that reason could be taught.

To refer to moral education as something that can be undertaken assumes that it is possible for us to learn morals and become educated (perhaps experts) in them. It also assumes that there are experts out there who are able to teach us. Gilbert Ryle (1972) followed Socrates' lead and believed that we can learn morals and learn to be moral, they are not just in our nature and that there are people out there that can help us do this. He did not explicitly see these people as teachers in employment as we would perhaps better understand the term and he stated that often those who are 'teaching' us morals are perhaps unaware that they are doing so and being 'looked up to' in that way. In this example it is easy to see why if we follow this argument, as indeed he does, that it is also possible that we can learn to be immoral or choose to follow poorly informed judgements that become immoral choices and actions. He suggests that we need to observe moral behaviour in the first instance then practice being moral whilst being guided and then to ultimately, choose, when it counts, the morally right way. If we apply this argument directly to teaching today then we could surmise that a teacher's role, in order to educate students in morals, would be to model moral behaviour and allow students to practice demonstrating this moral behaviour with accountability by both the student and the teacher. Wilson (1990) and Fish (2010) had some serious concerns with this view and questioned 'whose morals?' would be held as the 'right' ones and how could teachers and students hold each other accountable. Fish (2010) was also very aware, as Ryle (1972) was, that if people could be educated in morals then they could also learn the 'wrong' way to conduct themselves and with specific reference to higher and professional education, he states that teachers should not teach morals directly and should be explicitly amoral in their approaches and curriculum. Wilson (1990) also saw problems in asking teachers to teach what he saw as 'their interpretation of what it is to be moral' and he, like Fish felt that education as a whole was there to teach the skills to be able to make your own moral choices but certainly not to directly state what they are. This view echoed Aristotle's view that it is possible to be taught how to reason and learn the virtues of intellect, however virtues of character are acquired through habit and practice (Rackham 1996).

The view as to whether we can teach moral principles of virtue beyond the skills of reasoning is still a key debate within moral education and writers such as Lickona (1991) and Noddings (1984) twenty years ago, were challenging this view with their perspectives on character education. They believed that the explicit teaching of morality was a key aim of education and should not be left to chance in assuming that children will know the distinction between right and wrong in order to reasonably make choices. Kohlberg in the 1970's took a cognitive approach to moral reasoning based upon Piaget's stages of development and began to design programmes for schools that were based around the explicit teaching of morality through creating cognitive conflict in order to encourage students to reason through dilemmas to make the moral choice. As the research into the effectiveness of this approach to develop moral reasoning was only collected from boys, Carol Gilligan (1982) challenged this view that cognition was the only way to develop morally. She used the same dilemma's that Kohlberg had used with the boys to elicit the views of young women, finding that women drew upon their interpretation of the relationships within the dilemma's to inform and justify their reasoning for choices – she felt they had a different voice when it came to moral reasoning.

Approaches are more likely to conclude now that a mix of both cognitive reasoning with values clarification is appropriate and Narvaez and Rest (2008) and Halstead and McLaughlin (1999) propose this view. Halstead and McLaughlin refer to expansive and non-expansive approaches to moral education explaining that just focusing upon only teaching morals is non-expansive and limits the opportunity for students to think for themselves and be able to make their own moral choices within varying contexts, while on the other hand, an expansive approach to moral education would have its primary focus on helping students develop the processes to reason well in order to apply them in context. Narvaez and Rest (2008) also advocate an integrated approach and propose a model called an Integrated Ethical Education (ICE). In the ICE model it is designed to give teachers a step by step process to teaching ethically and also refers to the building of relationships (in step 2). Whilst it is an important recognition that the building of relationships should feature so prominently in the programme, it makes an assumption that the teacher sees this as their role – Fish (2010) perhaps would not see this in terms of a moral education – and that external factors and individual teachers manner and approaches will support this (Fallona 2000, Fenstermacher 1990).

## METHODOLOGY

The methodological approach adopted here is auto-ethnography. Its purpose is to draw out individuality over generalisability (Ellis 2004, 2010) and enable ‘thick description’ (Geertz 2000) of the relationship and dialogue between teacher and student in fostering moral development. The aim of this study was not to generalise about the success or failure of teaching practice but to understand more deeply how the intentions, both pedagogically and emotionally, of the teacher affected the students. Using a qualitative methodology will show the uniqueness of the

The themes emerge from my reflection on the first study task issued to students – *The Concept Map*. In my Journal entry I reflect upon the pedagogical decision to use this activity and together with artefacts of student’s work and email correspondence, I ‘hold a mirror up to the reality of the every day’ (Spry 2001). This process, supported by Muncey’s (2010) auto-ethnographic view that ‘a truth can be found that can be verified against external sources’. However, in this project my goal was not to portray one truth or simply facts about the relationships between teacher and student and its potential impacts and consequences but to convey the meanings that we attach to the experience...to tell a story that readers could enter and feel part of. (Ellis 2004, pg 116).

Following an ethic of care as both a researcher and a teacher educator (Ellis 2004, Gilligan 2011), the first readers of my narratives were the teachers and trainers in the class. Kearney (2003) suggests that increasingly ethnographic research is more collaborative in nature and students gave their consent to become ‘visible’ but anonymous within the research. Names were changed where requested and transcripts were shared. Ellis reminds us that there is a care giving function to auto-ethnography and we ‘...constantly have to consider which questions to ask, which secrets to keep and which truths are worth telling.’ (Ellis, 2009, pg 317). In thematic analysis of the artefacts and journal entry I aim to identify the approach to moral education visible in my practice and illuminate the reality of how it might be contributing to moral education of my students.

## DATA COLLECTION

### The concept map

The first activity that is planned for the students is for them to create a concept map of an area of their practice that they wish to research for their final module ‘The dissertation’. The aim is for them to think about that area of practice from many perspectives such as the, psychological; philosophical; historical; biological; sociological; political. The aim is then for me to annotate and engage in a ‘dialogue’ with them.



### **The diary**

The diary entry was completed by me after each teaching session and was a reflective journal that systematically recorded key events or incidents as identified by the researcher-participant in the study.

#### **Dairy Entry – October 12<sup>th</sup> 2010**

I handed back the concept maps this evening. As I suspected, they all took my comments as gospel – if my response is more than a 'tick' it sends them into panic – engaging them in dialogue about their work takes time to get used to. Comments such as

*'so what do you want me to do then...?'* and

*'I knew that my idea was rubbish – I really don't know what I want to do now..!'*

were shared with me and amongst themselves and I feel that it will take some time to get this group used to challenging me and taking control of the work they submit. Jane's had been difficult to comment upon as it was too vague – she wants to explore everything!! She seems lost now. She caught my eye and asked for a few minutes with me to get clarification on some of my comments. As I talk her through the questions I had posed on her map I am conscious that the noise and chatter is rising from the rest of the class. I know they are comparing my comments and with one ear on my conversation with Jane and the other straining to listen in to their conversations, I hear

*'I was so pleased that I only had a few comments on my work – John's had half a page worth! I nearly died until I saw mine with a few lines'*

(I find it difficult to balance in time for their self reflection and independent -although with me there- time to chat with peers about their ideas). I feel students need this unstructured space but I am aware that their time is precious and they are only with me for a few hours a week – this adds pressure on me to be directing every minute of the session purposefully as they have paid for those hours of my time – I sometimes feel guilty if I am not 'performing' for that time.)

Some of the students were happy to mull the feedback over – they don't speak to you straight away and you know they are either not happy with the fact that you have challenged any part of their ideas – they were looking for a large red tick. These students tend not wait behind after class but go home and voice their annoyance to their partners then compose an email at later date trying to get me to give them the answer and tell them the direction to go – I will of course resist as long as I can – they will eventually get there.

However for some the whole process can knock their confidence, I need to watch out for these students. Talking to Jane I couldn't observe these reactions – the clues to how to they have taken my first 'feed-forward' with them.

I feel I might have hurried Jane and we agreed that she should focus on teacher professionalism – I was keen to get back to the whole of group and sensed that there was a queue forming behind me of eager faces wanting clarification – I cover myself with Jane by saying

*'Look for the literature first, see how easy it is for you find and get a handle on, then we can refine it again if needs be'*

She seems happy with that for now – I turn to see the queue....

As I turn, I notice Gayle and Evelyn leave the class without saying anything – Gayle’s map was another that I had raised lots of further questions for her to become clearer in her ideas. I must remember to drop her an email, she has been quiet all night apart from those few comments early on and I get a sense that she isn’t settling into the group at the moment.

### **The student’s narrative reflections**

The next session after the diary entry was one week later. Although there are issues in delaying data collection this was the earliest time available. I gave the students an A5 piece of paper so they were not identifiable by their note paper but also so they were not daunted by feeling a pressure to write long narratives – the paper only allowed room for approx. 100 – 150 words. Each student was also issued with an envelope that I asked them to secure their narrative inside. It was up to them if they wanted to leave me with it. It was intended that this attempt to anonymous their contribution would encourage them to express their feelings more freely. I explained the context of my research and questions and asked them to participate in the following reflection;

### **Some active research...**

- On the A4 piece of paper, can you identify whether you are male or female (nothing else).
- Using only one sheet, please comment upon the following question...

*How did you feel about compiling your concept map and how did you feel when you got the feedback and comments on it?*

- You do not have to share this with anyone but I would like to collect them in – please secure them in the envelope and decide later whether you want to pass them to me.

### **ILLUMINATIONS**

The concept map was the first stage in the programme for me to get to know the students interests and passions (Noddings 2006). I had asked them to explore their practice from a wider perspective and some began to question what the implications might be. I use a conversational tone in the written dialogue and ask them further enquiring questions about ‘why they think that might be..’. In the majority of cases my comments are encouraging them to consider the *value* of their practice and its impact upon them or their students and I regularly use phrases like this. Here I reflect align with Halstead’s and McLaughlin’s (1999) view of Expansive Character Education (ECE) where moral reasoning and discourse are primarily concerned with moral responsibility and democratic virtue rather than the formation of character.

Dilemma: However, Kristjansson (2002) may support the view that my comments are directing students to a moral area of their practice that is defined by me in the role of teacher educator. This transmission model of moral education is viewed by Halstead and McLaughlin (1999) as non-expansive character education (NECE) where the virtues and ethics of the practice is pre-determined and directed. Much of the literature and theory around these two approaches are in the context of school children and the practice of moral education in compulsory schooling. My dilemma is whether the practice of moral education for FE teachers should involve a stronger emphasis of non-expansive models or could this prevent the development of their moral imagination within their contexts?

Narvaez (2006) Integrated Ethical Education (IEE) attempts to bring both ideals of ECE and NECE together and offers a significant difference in terms of considering emotions and relationships as integral to moral education. The first in the 5 step model suggests teachers should build relationships with their students. I have used the map as my initial step towards this however, I also take care to ‘notice’ the reactions of the students in order to tailor my approach to motivating, caring for and developing each individual student from a relational care theory as Nel Noddings (2008) would advocate as being important to creating a safe space for moral education to grow and students to question and explore the morality of their practice (Gilligan 2011, Tomkins 1996). My students make moral decisions every day (as seen in part in the email correspondence) and have other roles to play beyond those of students and teachers (Gilligan

1982, 2011), building a dialogue with them about the particulars of their practice I can help them to *'refine the traits they were originally spoon-fed'* (Aristotle in Kristjansson 2002). However, my dilemma is that at this early stage the data and artefacts suggest that the relationship between us at this stage is more akin to Noddings (2008) 'natural care theory' as they expect me to offer the answers, direct them and take responsibility for their development – the natural care theory of 'I am doing this for your own good' feels more aligned to the views of non-expansive, virtue ethics of character education rather than an expansive and personally enriching experience as advocated by Katayama (2007), Garrison (1997).

## STUDENT NARRATIVES

Through the analysis of the narratives, the following themes emerged. My justification for asking students for discrete data in the form of their gender was to see if the students were approaching the task and therefore would reflect upon the task differently (Gilligan 1982).

Although my intention had been to engage in dialogue with the students around their chosen ideas for research, it appeared that the students saw my 'dialogue' as assessment and a method of checking their work against what I expected. This was counter to what I had hoped the task would encourage and only 2 out of the 22 students saw this process as being *'good to have a conversation about my work and ideas'*

8 out of 10 female and 6 out of 12 male students began the task with a high degree of uncertainty. The females were uncertain as to whether they could think deeply about their ideas and from the variety of perspectives but were comfortable with the openness of the task. However the male students were more uncertain of the process of the task rather than the whether they could think deeply. All students who started the task uncertain were fearful of the feedback and of not doing what was expected of them.

The remaining students began the activity feeling confident and positive. However, after receiving their map back with my thoughts and ideas included, they saw it as 'feedback'. Where my intention had been to be encouraging and challenge them further in their thinking, they saw as a failure on their behalf to not have known what was expected of them and they would say 'I didn't do it correctly'. The Female students (4 out of 10) noted a dip in their confidence that they could or would improve on next time. This is in contrast to the male students (8 out of 12) and this might suggest that as the female students were so uncertain at the start that they had low expectations of themselves whereas the more confident males were not expecting to need to work on their ideas.

## REFLECTIONS

There was a mismatch between how I perceived the outcome of the task as a relationship building activity. It became another assessment task where the issues of fear and uncertainty about ability were prevalent. Student expectations of assessment and the role of the teacher conflicted with my intended focus to develop a moral education through an ethic of care. There were subtle differences between male and female but mainly in procedural issues as they both experienced fear in anticipation of the task, concern over not meeting MY standards or expectations and dips in their confidence are all typical of outcomes of assessment. I had underestimated how much the assessment process would over-ride my intention of building positive relationships and engaging in dialogue with students. This does however, as Scott (2010) would state, perhaps show that relationships and building the conditions for shared dialogue takes time and practice. Helping my students see all my assessment as dialogue would help re-position the process in their minds and enable them to feel more open, in time to trusting their own voice.

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