

The ethics of learning within the research process

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In this paper I explore some implications of taking a virtue theory approach to ethics within classroom-based research. I argue that an ethical dilemma arises around the gaining of informed consent at the very beginning of a relationship with a new class; to the extent that it is not ethical to engage in such research until a classroom culture is established. I argue, secondly, that ethical behaviour as a practitioner-researcher in the classroom is an issue pertinent to every decision, not just something to address at the start of a project. I draw conclusions about ways of developing ethical expertise.

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A man of the highest virtue does not keep to virtue and that is why he has virtue.

A man of the lowest virtue never strays from virtue and that is why he is without virtue. (Lao-Tzu, ~560BCE/1963, p.99)

Introduction

There are three major (Western) philosophical positions concerning ethics. Deontology captures all approaches to ethics that rely on a set of rules (examples include the Ten Commandments or Kant's categorical imperative, e.g., see Kant 1785/1997). Utilitarianism covers the many theories which offer an approach based on some kind of calculation of the likely effect of an action (e.g., see Mill 1871/2004). And lastly there is the tradition of Virtue Theory which can be traced back, at least, to Aristotle's 'Nicomachean Ethics' (~340BCE/1980), in which what is ethical is linked (in what can appear a circular manner) to the actions that a highly virtuous person would spontaneously carry out. Ethics in this view is not so much about the following of set rules as the development of expertise.

The first two approaches to ethics are rational or rule based, and this describes the flavour of institutional ethical guidelines governing research (e.g. BERA, 2004; CIHR et al., 1998; ESRC, 2005). These guidelines effectively give a code for ethical behaviour in carrying out research. For example the *Revised ethical guidelines for educational research* (2004) adopted by the British Educational Research Association state:

Researchers must take the steps necessary to ensure that all participants in the research understand the process in which they are to be engaged, including why their participation is necessary, how it will be used and how and to whom it will be reported. (p. 5)

In this paper I want to explore some implications for research of taking a stance on ethics more in line with a Virtue Theory approach, where the development of ethical know-how is to the foreground. Such an approach is in keeping with a post-modern stance on ethics (see, for example, Bauman, 1993; Edwards and Mauthner, 2003; Noddings, 2005) which views the issue in terms of relationships within the research context and the development of relationships.

Theoretical Framework and View of Knowledge

Before discussing the development of know-how, I need to be explicit about my theoretical framework and in particular my epistemological beliefs. I bring an enactivist stance (e.g., see Varela, Thomson, Rosch, 1991; Reid, 1996) to my research work with the following assumptions.

1) We spend most of our lives in un-reflexive skilled behaviour, including expert ethical behaviour. We frequently display ethical know-how in relatively mundane ways, for example listening empathetically to a friend's distress, or reaching out a hand to steady someone who is about to trip. We perform these actions without recourse to rational reflection or calculation.

2) Rational deliberation, despite what we (rationally!) may think, is the exception rather than the rule in terms of our day to day, moment by moment behaviour. We call on our rational resources at breaks in our skilled behaviour, for example when we cannot decide what to write to a friend who has been bereaved, or when we are stuck on a mathematics problem.

3) Knowledge then, from an enactivist perspective, cannot be separated from effective action; what it means to know something is that, in a given situation we are able to act effectively (as judged by others in the community).

4) The development of knowledge, i.e., learning also has an inseparable link to community - "we learn what we are supposed to be in order to be accepted as learners" (Varela, 1999, p.24).

5) Learning, knowing and action cannot be separated from perception. Part of knowing/effective action and being accepted as a learner is that we develop what we are able to perceive in a situation – a classic example being the palate of a wine connoisseur who is able to draw distinctions imperceptible to most humans.

Taking these ideas together with a Virtue Theory approach to ethics leads to an inescapable conclusion. If ethical behaviour is defined by what an ethical expert would do in a situation, and expertise or knowledge is effective action within a community, then an ethical expert "is nothing more or less than a full participant in a community" (Varela, 1999, p.24).

Implications for research

My research site is an 11-18 mixed comprehensive on the edge of Bristol with an intake below national average and a catchment area including wards with high indices of deprivation. I research my classroom and the mathematics department where I have been teaching for the last 12 years. Since ethical behaviour is linked with participation in a community I will briefly give some sense of the type of community that is enacted in this setting.

A practice I use regularly among the mathematics teachers at the school is to video lessons of one of us teaching and then, at a later meeting, work together analysing a small section of the recording to identify teaching strategies. This in itself says something about the community; but I will use transcripts from one of these teacher meetings to both exemplify the classroom culture that is valued in the school and to raise the ethical issues of concern in this paper.

There were five teachers present (including me) and a student-teacher. A selection of comments related to their view of the classroom culture is below. ('They' in the first two comments refers to the students.)

Transcript notation: (.) indicates a pause of less than a second; (2) indicates a pause of 2 seconds; bold indicates emphasis; [text] gives transcriber comment; // indicates overlapping speech.

TB: there was a long bit
when they were just
kind of talking to each other (.)
amazing
TD: they all seem to occupy themselves
TD: I'm impressed
by how many students **are** involved
with what's going on at the board [1]
TD: there's something about [2]
the kids not feeling they want to move on
TD: there's more to be done
than (.) finish the question [5]
that seems to interest them all [laughs]

These comments create an image of a 'desired' classroom in this department. One in which students are interested in what each other are doing, are all engaged in productive activity in a more or less autonomous fashion, and where they see the study of mathematics as something beyond the gaining of right answers. I interpret these teachers as effectively defining what full participation means in this department – i.e., that as a teacher I am able to establish a classroom culture where students act in the ways described above, with a focus on the mathematics on offer.

There is evidence in the same meeting transcript that such a culture is hard to establish in this school (e.g. in TB's comment 'amazing' above, said in reference to how the students on this video clip talk to each other in a whole class discussion with seemingly little moderation from the teacher). In fact, one of the teachers (TD) viewing the video was the new teacher of the class (the video had been from the academic year '07-'08, the discussion took place in '09). He made several comments contrasting the classroom culture now present in his lessons with this group, to what he observed on the video. For example, in reflecting on how he began the year with this class, TD said:

TD: I think it would have taken a lot
of courage at the start of the year
to go in and take a new class
and be as open as (.) as that
but (.) yet I feel I should have
maintained how they were there
and I don't know

I take this as evidence that the kind of desired classroom culture, described in the teacher comments above, is precarious. This is not a school where students, by default, will converse and interact in an adult and engaged manner. Teachers across the school often comment on having to work hard to keep the language and dynamics of the playground out of classroom discourse.

It is with this background that I am wary of where I direct students' attention in a classroom, for example in the context of gaining informed consent. Every conversation in the classroom not focused on mathematics makes it harder the next time to have that focus.

Ethical Dilemma

Particularly at the beginning of a school year, precisely when I am most interested in gathering data about how classroom culture develops, there are good reasons to believe that norms and expectations can be set up which will give a direction for the

whole year. To engage in a lengthy conversation about informed consent in these early lessons is potentially dangerous, such conversations provoke unhelpful awareness in students *about* the classroom (and e.g., its similarities and difference to others) – mitigating against the desire for focus and engagement on the mathematics itself (see Coles and Barwell, 2007). Such conversations are not consistent with the notion of full participation (and hence ethical behaviour) described by the teachers in the department. Being a full member of this classroom community means engagement in mathematics. Discussions of informed consent therefore cause a dilemma for the teacher. In engaging in these discussions the teacher is either showing him/herself not to be a full member of the community and therefore not acting ethically; or else he/she positions this particular classroom at a slight distance to the community valued in the department – again which is unethical. Yet, these discussions are needed to satisfy the need for ethical research.

There is no solution to this tension; it is important to keep a focus on mathematics in early lessons and it is important that research subjects are consulted about their participation. The only possible conclusion is that it is not ethical to research the beginnings of a relationship with a research participant within the context of classroom teaching. Once a classroom culture is established in which the focus is firmly on mathematics, no doubt this would be robust enough to not be perturbed unduly by a conversation about informed consent; this is unlikely to be the case however at the very start of the school year.

When are we ethical?

A second implication of the view of ethics I am advocating is the question of *when*, for a teacher-researcher, ethical issues arise in the classroom. Institutional guidelines seem to suggest that the burden of ethical behaviour falls primarily at the start of a project. Yet every response of the teacher will have an effect of either strengthening or weakening the classroom culture in terms of its relation to the ‘desired’ classroom. A class discussion that builds in focus and ends with students clear about their next actions will make it more likely students will engage in a discussion the next time. A discussion that loses its thread will have the opposite effect. Hence, every response a teacher makes to a student has an ethical dimension. The complexity of these decisions of how to respond is immense, as can be seen in the comments below.

In the same teacher-meeting quoted above there is a section when teachers describe a sequence of opposites that they see the lesson as steering a path between.

20:29 TA: I don't know if it's you or [.]
it **is** you
but there was something that prompted
you

This comment was in relation to who focused the class at a particular point on finding the area of a shape – is it the teacher? It is the teacher, but he was prompted by a student.

27:41 TD: it feels a bit like
you've got the confidence
to let them take the lesson
but there's more to it than confidence
there is subtle guidance there's [8]
they seem to used to [6]

There is a suggestion that the students ‘take the lesson’ and are therefore in control of its direction – contrasted with the sense that the teacher is offering guidance.

40:08 TA: I didn't

I don't know if that's open
what do you mean / by open
40:13 TD: / well [3]
40:17 TA: because that was very focused [3]
on one particular thing [6]
40:28 TD: I guess letting them work on
what they want to work on
and trusting them to have something
to work on

Just before this section a teacher had suggested that the lesson was 'open'. A difference of opinion arises, on the one hand the lesson is 'very focused' yet also the teacher is 'letting them work on what they want'.

41:08 TC: I was aware there was a lot of richness
in what they were doing
and I was aware that a lot of them
would do some homework
taking things on a bit [5]
so there is a trust but it's not [1]
blind trust
41:42 TA: no [.] it's not blind faith is it
you know [.] you have some [1]
information

And finally the teacher is seen as displaying 'trust' to run the lesson in the way he did – but it is not 'blind trust'.

In his responses to students then, the teacher is seen to be steering a path between a series of dichotomies: making his own decisions/being led by students; letting students take the lesson/giving guidance; being open/being single focused; trusting/not having blind faith. If every decision has these (and presumably many other) dimensions, as a teacher how do I decide on the ethical course of action in every moment? It is clear to me, through introspection, this cannot be via rational calculation. It is in the middle space between these opposites that we display our ethical expertise as teachers.

Conclusion – developing ethical expertise

As described earlier in this paper, from an enactivist standpoint learning cannot be separated from perception. So what it means to develop ethical expertise as a teacher is literally an altering, or expanding, of what we are able to see in a classroom. I am reminded of sitting at the back of the classroom of a PGCE student and noticing an opportunity for mathematical thinking and exploration in what a student said, that was passed up by the teacher. As an expert in the community of the mathematics department I am able to make distinctions that are not yet available to the initiate. The distinctions simplify the complexity of e.g., running a class discussion. I do not need to engage in rational deliberation about how to respond to this student. Their statement (which was a conjecture about the task at hand) literally stands out from everything else going on at that moment; I am aware of rising energy levels inside myself and a motivation to give space to this student's ideas.

The presence of a more experienced 'other' in the process of learning is frequently invaluable. It is easy to talk about staying alive to our perceptions or being vulnerable to the new, but it is harder to do. There must be some disturbance that provokes an awareness that there may be more to observe – that forces us to question whether what we see is the final word on the situation. Aristotle's (~340BCE/1980) advice for gaining ethical expertise was to force yourself to do what an ethical expert

would do spontaneously, until your own desires begin to coincide with what is ethical. Our ways of seeing the world tend to be self-reinforcing – the PGCE student in the story above may conclude that his students are not effective at thinking mathematically. And as experts in a community it is easy to fall into habits that blind us to change.

The development and exercise of ethical expertise implies a continuing stance of learning and questioning with respect to one's own practice. The teacher-meeting from which quotations have been taken for this paper is one mechanism teachers at Kingsfield have found to be powerful in terms of this continual raising to awareness of other possibilities for action. In these meetings we watch a section of around three minutes of a lesson of someone in the department teaching. The sections selected are generally during a whole class discussion, when there are significant contributions from students. Time and again I am struck by how much there is to see in such small clips, and also how differently they can be viewed. The purpose can never be to teach in the same way or see the same thing; but through engaging in trying to see what others see, we are implicitly reflecting on and developing what as a community of teachers we value, and we are in the (unending) process of developing our own capacity to respond ethically in each moment of a lesson.

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