

Dewey, Gilligan, and Gosselin on Learning Responsibility

Ann Diller

University of New Hampshire

What makes our concept of responsibility problematic for teachers, parents, and other educators? How might we better understand its meaning for teaching and learning? Three major worries propel Colette Gosselin's investigation into our understanding of responsibility: first, the frustrations, anger, and resentments that arise when she conceives of "responsibility" as being associated "with what we 'ought' to do...with expectations that must be met to demonstrate commitment and perhaps love" (any of which can lead us to distance ourselves from the recipients of our "responsibility"); second, the tensions which "responsible" teachers experience between their ideas of what it is to be a good teacher and the behaviors of students who do not or will not cooperate with efforts to teach them responsibly; and finally, the helplessness that responsible teachers feel *vis a vis* large scale social problems (abuse, poverty, homelessness) that affect their students.

These three worries lead Gosselin to ask whether there is "another way to conceive of the notion of responsibility? And if so, how is it learned and what does it look like?" In her quest for answers she turns to John Dewey and Carol Gilligan. Gosselin's sub-title, "A Conversation between Carol Gilligan and John Dewey" is a bit misleading, because in this essay we do not so much have a conversation between Dewey and Gilligan, but rather one between Gosselin and Dewey followed by Gosselin and Gilligan. Although she seems to consider Dewey's analyses useful up to a point, ultimately Gosselin judges what Dewey has to say as "incomplete" partly because it lacks "a deeper conversation about this concept of responsibility and its nature within the immediacy of the moment in our intimate relationships," including the relationships between teachers and learners.

Continuing her quest, Gosselin turns to Gilligan's book, *In A Different Voice*, where Gilligan "recounts the painful journey of growth that some women undergo as they wrestle with the problem of an unplanned pregnancy." It is here in Gilligan's accounts of women's transformative journeys of self-knowledge that Gosselin finds the help for which she has been searching.

As Gosselin notes, one approach to the concept of responsibility which Dewey would never consider as viable is the notion that a person's obligation should be to care for the other to the detriment of one's self (a self who, of course, for Dewey is never a fixed entity and is always unquestionably a social creature). In striking contrast to Dewey's clarity on self-care as a "moral duty," the women in Gilligan's study often equated self care with "selfishness" and could imagine no other alternative except selflessness, or some variation on self sacrifice, as entailed in what it meant to be "responsible."

According to Gilligan's narration of their journeys, a number of the women do manage to escape from being caught in this dichotomous construal of their situation — a dichotomy where either selfishness or else selflessness appear as the only

options; and they move into a “third perspective” that according to Gilligan brings “changes in the conception of responsibility.”¹ Women no longer believe in what Gilligan terms the “conventional interpretation” where responsibility has gotten “confused with a responsiveness to others that impedes a recognition of self.”² Instead of this confused notion of responsibility, the “truths of relationship” now “return in the rediscovery of connection, in the realization that self and other are interdependent and that life, however valuable in itself, can only be sustained by care in relationships.”

Gilligan’s recounting of these women’s journeys toward their reconstructed concepts of responsibility alleviates Gosselin’s first two worries, because it reminds her that we do not need to be caught in a dichotomous construal of responsibility which fuels unnecessary oppositional frustrations and resentments. In addition, as with the women who reach the shores of the “third perspective,” Gosselin feels less helpless because she remembers “that it is in remaining connected to ourselves and to the other that we can be our best.”

Focusing on the importance of “remaining connected” diminishes Gosselin’s third worry about the large social, political, and economic problems that beset students in our classrooms. Her shift in focus seems aligned with what Nel Noddings advocates when she addresses the frustrations people experience in the face of the current test-taking mania:

Parents and teachers who deplore the current emphasis on school examinations can at least allow students to express their unhappiness. They can offer consolation for a pain they cannot remove. This is better than constructing elaborate and phony rationalizations for psychological suffering that is almost certainly unnecessary. At the same time, teachers and parents can work openly to control the practice and to reduce the suffering.³

Noddings’s examples of receptive listening and honest “consolation” illustrate crucial ways to “remain connected.”

As I reflected on Gosselin’s essay, I found myself wondering: what were the crucial variables at work in those cases where the women in Gilligan’s study moved beyond their dichotomous constructs into the third perspective? As educators, what further clues can we discover? Why did some women, and not others, manage to move in this direction? What conditions (external or internal), what circumstances or interventions might support this movement? In the search for clues applicable to classroom practices and educational inquiries, I began a short speculative list of possible candidates. For one thing, Gosselin’s essay led me to reflect on the striking difference between John Dewey’s easy clarity about the “moral duty” of self care in contrast to the prolonged struggles Gilligan’s women went through to free themselves from the false dichotomy that equates self care with “selfishness” and confuses responsibility with self-sacrifice. Indeed, the contrast calls to mind John Stuart Mill’s often-quoted comment that he had observed two different moral defects in women and men: women showed a tendency to be self-sacrificing, while men tended to be self-worshipping. This reminds me as an educator of the necessity for making particular manifestations of entrenched genderized socialization an object of explicit critical study for ourselves and for our students.⁴

I would also reinforce what I infer as a suggestion from Gosselin's text, namely that as teachers we facilitate and encourage the practice of what she calls "a learned language of feeling" which I take to be part of a larger endeavor to "foster self awareness...that will help teachers [and students] understand what triggers emotions." This requires creating spaces for such inquiries into feelings.⁵ As Gosselin points out, "the tension in the [abortion decision] situation drives the women either toward a premature decision or a snap judgment that precludes further learning or in the case of others a continuation of inquiry for a feasible and responsible resolution." How can we provide the vital interventions that help us to slow down, to impede the rush into reactive impulsive behaviors on the part of both teachers and students so as to allow for inquiry and to promote more deliberative consideration?

As Gosselin says in her opening quotation from Joyce Carol Oates: "How're we gonna dig out the old memories and replace them with new?" This takes patient prolonged digging, which calls for less hurried time spans. Not only do we need appropriate interventions to interrupt a behavior that does harm to oneself and/or others, we also need enough time and skills to inquire into what's going on. How can we do this interrupting under circumstances that facilitate open, unobstructed, compassionate as well as unflinching emotional archaeology?

Gosselin points out that one crucial step in moving into the third perspective came when women developed feelings of self-worth, and a concomitant sense of safety, that permitted them to keep inquiring ever more deeply into the truth of their situations and particularly into what it meant for them. In my re-reading of their extended inquiries cited by Gilligan I found myself coming back full circle to Dewey's description of deliberation as "an imaginative rehearsal of various courses of conduct."⁶

1. Carol Gilligan, *In A Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 126.

2. *Ibid.*, 127.

3. Nel Noddings, *Starting at Home* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 138.

4. For more practical and theoretical details, see Ann Diller et al., *The Gender Question in Education* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996).

5. For a number of recent essays on this topic, see *Teaching, Learning, and Loving*, ed. Dan Liston and James Garrison (New York: Routledge, 2003).

6. In particular I found astounding parallels between Gilligan's extended quotations from the woman she calls "Sarah," *In A Different Voice*, 90-95, and the passage describing "imaginative rehearsal" in John Dewey and James H. Tufts, *Ethics* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1936), 303.