

“*Being Equal versus Becoming Equal: Some Tensions*”

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Who can argue with a “moral education for contemporary democracy” that promotes an ethic of justice as well as an ethic of care, along with norms of respect, tolerance, and inclusivity? Because I am quite sympathetic with Victor Worsfold’s aims, I am interested in extending his project not by asking *whether* these are the appropriate ends for moral education, but rather *how* educators are to achieve such ends.

Worsfold proposes that students will “learn the justice perspective” in large part by making their own choices; as moral educators respect the choices that students make, students will learn the moral lesson of “respect for all.” Achieving the desired end of “equal respect for all” requires two central approaches to student choices — reciprocity and fairness. The practice of reciprocity asks educators to abolish, as much as possible, “the asymmetry that suffuses so much of the typical educational relationship.” Fairness, in turn, “demands the fullest engagement of all students the teacher can offer.” Although these aims appear straightforward and rather easy to achieve on Worsfold’s account, I will share a couple of brief anecdotes that convey the complexity of abolishing asymmetries within teacher-student relationships.

The first anecdote comes from case study research that I conducted at a high school with a mission of civic education. At this school, students participate in a democratic Town Meeting every Friday afternoon. Town Meeting is a forum where resolutions involving school policy, or local and national politics, are debated and voted on. In order to invest students in the process, teachers at the school have instituted processes for student input regarding the weekly agenda. One week all students were polled as to what topics they would like to address in Town Meeting. The top choices from the poll included two resolutions to the effect that: (1) all students should have a lap top computer, and (2) the school day should be shortened. In identifying these two topics as central concerns, students participated in an initial step in democratic choice making — they selected topics of collective interest for the agenda of procedural debate. The choices they made were clearly important to them, and to the school. But the choices were also problematic.

In order to identify the problematic aspects of these student-initiated agenda items, let us revisit Worsfold’s account of the role of student choice. Worsfold tells us that “the moral education classroom must honor both the intellectual and moral dimensions of teaching, so that there is a balance between the inequality in the teacher-student relationship generated by the students needing to learn the intellectual standards their teachers are already presumed to possess and the equality in the teacher-student relationship that the moral dimension of that relationship supposes for the responsible teacher.” He emphasizes an “equality of respect [which] requires that all individuals in the class have their own choices acknowledged by teachers regardless of whether they are the choices the teachers would have made for them.”

The tricky examples of students choosing lap top computers and shortened school days suggest a couple of gaps within this account of student choice. First, we might ask what it means for teachers to acknowledge choices that they would not have made themselves. Should either of these student choices, if approved by a student majority, be honored by the faculty? In the first instance, school funds would have to be allocated to honor the choice. In the second instance, the academic integrity of the school day is put at the mercy of majority rule by teenagers. Would Worsfold's sense of "acknowledging" student choices require teachers to create a budget line for lap tops or to shorten the school day?

Second, we might ask whether intellectual knowledge is the only ground for inequality between teachers and students? Tensions between student choice and majority rule in schools with fiscal and educative responsibilities suggest that inequality between teachers and students is not rooted only in differential knowledge of "intellectual standards" within academic disciplines. Rather, knowledge and capacities surrounding what a good educative practice is and what morally responsible behavior is may also separate teachers from students. Teachers and students are not unequal as *persons*, but they may well be unequal in terms of the rational capacities and moral virtues that they possess and are able to put into practice. This suggests that students need some guidance in terms of what sorts of choices will be educative, and appropriately educative at that.

Worsfold acknowledges that a guiding role is appropriate for teachers. He explains that equality of respect requires not merely trivial choices; rather, teachers will work out with students "what sorts of choices they should have and why." I would argue that this aspect of student choice making is central to his project of moral education. Without clear guidelines as to *what choices* they exercise control over and *why*, students may well learn lessons opposite from those that Worsfold endorses. The example of high school students choosing to debate a shortened school day within their Town Meeting forum provides a case in point.

Students passed a Town Meeting resolution to shorten the school day by one-half hour, and they convinced the school's Board of Trustees to approve the resolution. Faculty at the school, however, had not expected that this would be the type of choice subject to student control. So they implemented this new policy with a stipulation — students who completed all of their homework each week would earn the privilege of leaving school early; all other students would need to stay in school the extra one-half hour to complete their homework. According to one student, this policy was "totally discouraging." He believed that faculty had only allowed the shortened day resolution to be included on the agenda in order to "get [students] to stop from bothering them."

This experience with student choice-making leads me to conclude that a step that might be called "clarifying jurisdiction" is central to Worsfold's project of moral education for democracy. In order for students to experience a sense of ownership over their choices, it is crucial that the range of issues over which students will have jurisdiction, or which will be subject to negotiation or student choice, be

made clear to students and teachers alike. A constitution or contract between teachers and students could set parameters for the types of choices subject to student authority. Such a constitution would protect teachers' educational prerogatives from the majority rule of students as well as protecting students from arbitrary teacher authority. Students would also know what sorts of issues they claim control over so that they could practice defining and addressing issues that they care about, as well as learn valuable lessons from having to live with the consequences of both individual choices and democratic processes.

A second anecdote that I would like to share is taken from Lisa Delpit's essay entitled "The Silenced Dialogue." Worsfold's construction of moral education around dual ethics of justice and care "requires [that moral educators] be 'catalysts for collaboration' [who are] willing to strip themselves of their position of privilege in the classroom [and co-create] with students a shared set of goals." Delpit's anecdote points out that cultural differences surrounding expectations of teacher/student roles complicate the notion that a willingness to strip ourselves of positions of privilege in the classroom will necessarily abolish asymmetries or communicate equal respect for all. Delpit shares the following feedback from an African-American student who took a course from a White teacher who employed a process orientation, including peer response, to the teaching of writing:

I didn't feel she was teaching us anything. She wanted us to correct each others' papers and we were there to learn from her. She didn't teach anything, absolutely nothing....Maybe they're trying to learn what Black folks knew all the time. We understand how to improvise, how to express ourselves creatively. When I'm in a classroom, I'm not looking for that, I'm looking for structure, the more formal language....Now my buddy was in [a] Black teacher's class. And that lady was very good. She went through and explained and defined each part of the structure. This [white] teacher didn't get along with that Black teacher. She said that she didn't agree with her methods. But I don't think that White teacher *had* any methods. [emphases in original]¹

This student's frustration with a teacher who may well have viewed herself as one willing to abdicate a position of privilege suggests that moral educators need to think carefully about what types of privilege are legitimate and necessary to good teaching. In this instance, the student very much wanted the teacher *to teach* some concrete skills, not simply to act as a "catalyst for collaboration" around writing processes. Worsfold's model of "teacher-as-catalyst" may not alone result in the ends he identifies — student realization and student learning. Rather, this model may need to be supplemented with other models such as "teacher-as-information provider" and "teacher-as-skill builder." The pivotal question remains: how do we minimize power asymmetries in schools and classrooms while preserving the sense that teachers have something to teach?

Abolishing asymmetrical power relations in classrooms will not necessarily lead to the cultivation of dual ethics of justice and care in future democratic citizens. The educative purposes of schools, as well as cultural heterogeneity within such institutions, complicate the identification of legitimate contexts, as well as concrete practices, for realizing the promise of this goal. Nevertheless, moral education for contemporary democracies must rise to the challenge of preparing students to act as

equals in any number of asymmetrical contexts. And Worsfold's project sets out both principled guidelines and specific methods that provide moral educators with an appropriate sense of direction.

1. Lisa Delpit, "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children," in *Beyond Silenced Voices: Class, Race, and Gender in United States Schools*, ed. Lois Weis and Michelle Fine (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 127.