

Equivalence: Some Moral Perplexities

Maryann Ayim

The University of Western Ontario

What does “equivalence” mean? In what sense could life experience be equivalent to a university course? Who gets to decide what “equivalence” should mean and whether it exists in specific instances? How is the social/political context of the evaluator likely to affect her judgments? What potential for moral mischief exists in making such judgments? These are only some of the intriguing questions raised in Davison’s paper. In this response, I shall further explore two specific problems connected by Davison with judgments of equivalence. The first problem is that of the *judgment* of uncredentialed learning as equivalent (or not) to formal university requirements; the second problem is that of *advising or assisting* students in describing their uncredentialed learning. I shall develop a specific example of each problem.

THE PROBLEM OF JUDGING

Davison refers to this first problem as an “ethical minefield,” presumably because of the social/political parameters of any such judgment. Judgments of equivalence “are immersed in site-specific politics and purposes, inextricable from other personal assumptions, beliefs and motives.” I offer an example to illustrate my agreement with this point. The judgment that Smith’s experience as an autobody repair person is equivalent to a course in informal logic will depend strongly on the evaluator’s interpretation of the nature of the work performed by an autobody repair person as well as the nature of the learning acquired in an informal logic course. The background of particular evaluators may render them more amenable to a positive judgment of equivalence.

For example, I lived next door to an autobody repair man for over ten years and on numerous occasions listened to him discuss the nature of his work. He described diagnoses he had made about *when* damage had been incurred, which led him to assess particular insurance claims as fraudulent — in other words, my neighbor could often analyze the evidence available to him to establish beyond any reasonable doubt that damage which the car owner claimed to have resulted from a specific accident had, in fact, occurred at least a year earlier. He described his role as an autobody worker with passion and reverence, exemplifying a strong component of critical analysis, adherence to general logical principles, and avoidance of hasty and fallacious thinking. Were I personally asked to assess equivalence of his autobody repair work experience to a university oriented course in informal logic, I would probably be more inclined to make a favorable judgment than someone not privy to these sorts of conversations or someone from a professional or white collar rather than a working class background such as my own.

However, I think that the complexity of a judgment of equivalence, its immersion in “politics and purposes” and its inextricability from “other personal assumptions, beliefs and motives,” is by no means peculiar to comparisons between uncredentialed learning experiences and formal university credit courses. The

equivalence judgment is subject to the same conditions when two different university courses are being compared, the same course offered by different instructors, or even the same course offered by the same instructor to two different groups of students.

I would like to push the complexity of equivalence judgment one step further and claim that, even in cases like the “ $8 + 2$ ” and “ $7 + 3$ ” equivalence that Davison offers as a kind of paradigm of clear equivalence, there may indeed be grounds for genuine doubt and controversy. Retaining the general formula but altering the specific numbers, consider “ $300 + 300 + 300 + 300 + 300 + 300 + 300 + 300 + 300 + 300 + 3000$ ” and “6000.” As bare numbers governed by the function of addition, these are equivalent. But if we assign any context at all, the equivalence in terms of leading to “the same results or consequence(s)” may well be ephemeral. For example, consider person A, say Maryann, who consumes 300 calories in day 1, 300 calories in day 2, 300 calories in day 3, and so forth, followed by the inevitable 3000 calorie binge on day 11. Then consider person B, say Maryann’s younger (and slimmer) sister Lynda, who seldom pays any heed to her calorie intake but performs a rough calculation at the end of one day of what she could actually remember having eaten and arrives at a minimum quantity of 6000 calories. These two arithmetically equivalent sets of calories led to visibly and drastically different consequences; the fuller context of bodily metabolism renders the two apparently equivalent calorie counts quite different. In other words, even an enterprise so straightforward as reckoning calorie intake and weight loss is in fact subject to complexities of context.

Davison puts forward a promising avenue for beginning to defuse the ethical minefield of equivalence judgments when he appeals (fairly loosely) to community standards. He says, “translation of an applicant’s experience” must be presented to and accepted by the communities in question. I would have welcomed a more detailed discussion of what it means to have been “accepted by those communities,” who the relevant community members are, how we determine *what* the community judgment is and, even more important, when and how individual faculty members or applicants might justifiably challenge such community judgments.

THE PROBLEM OF ADVISING OR ASSISTING

This problem is presented in the form of a dilemma by Davison. Faculty members may be in a position to assist applicants in describing their experiences in a style or format more likely to be accepted by the university because the faculty members are familiar with the university “lingo” and likely to have some fairly clear idea of the sorts of descriptions that would favorably impress selection committees. A faculty member, in the interests of helping the applicant may, therefore, be inclined to recommend changes of wording in the student’s application. Ironically, the helpful faculty member engages in a behavior which jeopardizes the applicant’s autonomy and authority in an attempt to assist the applicant gain admission to an institution which is at least in its rhetoric directed at augmenting the student’s autonomy and authority. Not to help in this way offers no escape from the dilemma, for then, in the interests of not interfering with the applicant’s own autonomous voice, the advisor knowingly behaves in a way likely to result in the applicant’s rejection.

As Davison describes this issue, I am less concerned than he is that it presents a serious moral problem. I think its moral seriousness is mitigated by the fact that the faculty member presumably does not arbitrarily substitute her own words for those of the applicant, but rather provides the applicant with a more accurate inside picture of how equivalence judgments are made, leaving the ultimate choice of words and style with the applicant. Nevertheless, in certain specific contexts, I think the moral seriousness so disturbing to Davison does arise. The context I have in mind occurs when the faculty member advises the applicant not simply to *describe* her experiences in a certain style, but advises the applicant to *omit* certain experiences. This second case is of greater moral concern, as it entails advising the applicant to withhold actual experiences from the selection committee, perhaps even to deceive the committee.

Let me illustrate this claim with the example of a young faculty of education graduate applying to boards of education for a teaching position. The applicant was a gay man who had suffered a traumatic breakdown when he himself had come out as gay during his adolescence. His covering letter referred to his sexual orientation, the trauma he had experienced, and continued to make what I thought was a strong argument that a teacher such as himself could be enormously helpful to adolescents in the school who were going through similar identity crises. I firmly believed that, as a teacher, he could have had a profoundly positive impact on many students, helping homosexual adolescents to achieve a better understanding of both their sexual orientation and the reality of homophobia, as well as helping the heterosexual students to recognize and hopefully ameliorate the homophobia and heterosexism manifested in their own behavior. Nevertheless, when this young man asked for my advice on the draft of his covering letter, I advised him to omit all references to his sexual orientation. The reason behind my advice is, I think, obvious — I felt certain, although perhaps I wrongly underestimated the school system in harboring this assumption, that he had no chance of being hired if he openly identified himself as a gay man. Even though my advice was an attempt to help him accomplish his own personal goals, however, there can be no doubt that I advised him to conceal his true identity from the school boards; thus, in effect, I advised him to deceive his potential employers.

On balance, my advice to the student seemed to me to be both strategically and morally good, but I was (and still am) uncomfortably aware that this judgment was less than crystal clear. Thus, I agree totally with Davison that advising or assisting an applicant in describing her/his uncredentialed learning may, indeed, place a faculty member in a troubling moral context. In short, I agree strongly with almost all aspects of Davidson's paper. I hope that the elaboration of examples and details provided in this response helps to extend the important discussion of what equivalence means and how it can be conscientiously applied to the comparison of uncredentialed learning with formal academic requirements.