EDITORIAL

A Socratic Oath for Educators

IAN WINCHESTER
University of Calgary

For most of the last two thousand five hundred years physicians trained in the West lived under the shadow of the Hippocratic Oath. This oath speaks to the ethical and moral in the conduct of a physician, and though modified somewhat to suit the times, a successor to that oath is taken by most young physicians-to-be. In medicine in our time, ethical and moral issues have become so complicated due to new technological possibilities that affect life and death and even birth that not only do the new generation of physicians take such an oath, but they also mull over all sorts of ethical quandaries and dilemmas while they are students and beyond.

Only our generation, of all previous generations of humans in the last 4 million years or so has had to worry about the ethics of creating life in a test tube, of genetic modifications which may save life, but which may also alter it in unpredictable ways, of the possibility of transplanting fertilized eggs from one person to another, of giving blood transfusions to those with religious objections, and of the possibilities of various heroic operations which have a finite possibility of succeeding and curing a very ill individual, but which also may terminate their life or leave them helplessly crippled or in a coma. And the ethical dilemmas do not stop there. In medicine there are also computer programs, like DOCTOR, which purport to discuss symptoms with a patient and arrive at a tentative diagnosis. Such programs have been praised by patients as the best doctor they have ever had. And yet they are not human doctors, never went to medical school, and never took the Hippocratic Oath.

Nothing so dramatic has happened in education, although it is increasingly possible to turn over the program of learning for a student to a computerized instructor, which tracks all the students trials and

Journal of Educational Thought
Vol. 36, No. 3, 2002, 201-205.

errors and which can, in principle, assign a final passing or failing grade. There are, for example, some splendid programs that help the student learn Chinese on a CD-Rom which give auditory prompts and Chinese writing assistance at very high levels. There are also many shades of this in which partial computer assisted instruction is used. Most educational programs at university now take computer assistance for granted, though usually as an addition to the library function. Some universities, like Acadia, require all students to have portable computers which are hooked up with one another and with central facilities by wireless networks or with plug-in attachments in all classroom. There are now virtual universities which offer degrees entirely on-line, and although the instructors are supposed to be also on-line, it would be possible for courses to be devised in which the role of the human instructor was severely limited.

Of course the role of the ethical in education and of dilemmas posed by technological advances are only a small part of the range of ethical concerns which are posed in educational settings in our own times. For example, there are now concerns which range from the use by teachers of various forms of punishment for misbehaviour on the part of students, to the problems which are raised when pupils fall in love with their teachers or instructors and vice versa, or to the use of a classroom as an opportunity for a teacher to propagandize for her or his own personal religious or political opinions, especially when they are odious or particularly ignorant ones. Indeed, at the university, ethical questions have been raised concerning the conduct of research, of the choice of research topics, of the use of various subjects or of certain kinds of young researchers, and even about the conveying of the results of research of certain kinds to the next generation. For example, in one Canadian case, a professor believed that he had discovered that by a variety of objective measurements, Asian people were more intelligent than Caucasians and people of African descent, and that this was correlated with the fact that on the average the head measurements of Asian people was larger than either those of Caucasians or those of African descent. When he related his results to his students and published them widely there was a storm of protest involving the Canadian parliament and pressure was put on his university to fire him. This led to much ethical and moral agonizing in his university and in other Canadian universities.

Three of our authors for this issue of JET are concerned with the ethical dimension in education in ways that relate to these considerations which are so acute in our time. The fourth raises questions in educational leadership by raising the spectre of the poetical.

And as Wittgenstein remarked in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, "Ethics and aesthetics are one." Indeed, how could a beautiful life fail to be an ethical life and vice versa?

Harro Van Brummelen and Kevin Sawatsky discuss a case involving Trinity Western University vs. the British Columbia College of Teachers. Trinity Western University requires its staff and students to refrain from "homosexual activity." The British Columbia College of Teachers (a recent creation of government policy in British Columbia which is the professional college of teachers in B.C., comparable to a College of Physicians and Surgeons) ruled that TWU's proposal to offer its own final year of its teacher education program was not in the public interest because of the requirement that teaching staff at TWU refrain from such activity. The case illustrates the complications both of the legal and ethical issues involved. It is possible to see the case as one about sexual freedom in conflict with religious freedom. But it is also possible to see it as being about the freedom of private educational institutions to educate as they see fit. So it can be seen as being about academic freedom.

Linda Farr Darling in her article "The Essential Moral Dimensions of Citizenship Education: What Should We Teach?" argues that we should reconceptualize citizenship education as a form of moral education. She argues that citizenship education is a particularly useful way to teach future citizens about moral disagreement and conflict in a helpful way so that they may participate effectively and responsibly in political discourse which has an impact on the moral dimension for all citizens.

Daniel Rice in his article "In Search of an Ethical Imperative: Exploring Medicine's Standard of Care as a Concept for Higher Education" asks by what ethical standards does the professional educator have to guide her or his professional conduct in an age with multiple delivery formats, interactive television, and on-line courses. He suggests a novel approach, namely that of borrowing from the medical profession, the notion of *standard of care* and the ethical obligations it implies. He contrasts the ways in which the medical profession has used tele-medicine and the ways in which which distance education is commonly applied to draw out implications of the application of the concept to the profession of higher education.

Lystra Richardson raises the suggestion that the poetical, which is an aspect of the aesthetic, can enhance the effectiveness of educational leaders by enhancing their ability to read and interpret their

environment and sharpen their communication so that they can manoeuver the rapids of educational change. And the rapids of educational change always involve a central moral and ethical dimension.

Ethical and aesthetic concerns and dilemmas in our time in educational contexts are characteristically without the guiding force of any simple statement of such concerns which teachers, both those in school and in higher education, should have as part of their everyday mental equipment. The Ten Commandments played such a central role in Jewish and, derivatively, Christian and Islamic thought for thousands of years. Oaths like the Hippocratic Oath play a similar role in a much more restricted domain. For the Ten Commandments or their ilk, will not help one with the particular kinds of moral and ethical situations faced by a physician or surgeon and may not even point out that one is treading on difficult moral ground. To take a particular example, the Ten Commandments forbid adultery. As it has normally been interpreted this means that a married man or woman should not sleep with another than their spouse. But it says nothing about an unmarried physician in the company of a young and beautiful patient who is in the physicians power. The Hippocratic Oath places such settings front and centre and suggests that taking advantage of a patients vulnerability in such a way, whether sexually or financially, is wrong.

It seems to me that the Faculty of Education at the University of Calgary is on the right track in requiring its Master of Teaching students, those who are being educated to be professional educators, to be acquainted with a "Socratic Oath." The Socratic Oath used at Calgary has a number of virtues, the chief of which is that it puts into a very short compass general ethical considerations for the teacher in an educational context. Let me quote the Socratic Oath in its entirety.

Socratic Oath

In memory of Socrates, of Confucius, of Hypatia, of Montessori, and all the great teachers of the past, I solemnly promise that:

- If I am unable to carry out my teaching responsibilities with competence and integrity, then I shall summon the courage to leave teaching to others.
- I shall do everything in my power to help those in my care and trust to learn and to advance understanding and knowledge.

- I shall always counsel the disciplined understanding of whatever is at hand and never encourage the irrational and the unwise.
- I shall endeavour to encourage a lifetime love of learning, of wisdom, of texts, and of thought.
- I shall never use the power of my position as teacher for my own personal advantage or to the disadvantage of others.
- I shall always respect the humanity and individuality of those in my care in order to bring out the best in each.

This six-part promise is very simple. But it reminds those in any version of the teaching profession, whether school based or in higher education or for that matter in government or business educational circles, that this is a profession on the side of the sacred, even when it is most secular. It is a profession in which the ethical dimension is everywhere.

> *In elder days of art, workmen wrought with greatest care,*
> *each minute and unseen part, for the Gods are everywhere.*

Such a promise as the Socratic Oath, is not an end. It is only a beginning of the ethical considerations in teaching. But it can function as a quiet, background reminder of the ethical minute and unseen parts of every act of teaching and learning.

Perhaps the authors in this issue of JET are not writing about the minute and unseen parts of th ethical (and the aesthetic) in education. But someone who has thought about the Socratic Oath will have no difficulty following their arguments and discussions.

Ian Winchester
Editor