

Cold Case: Reopening the File on Tolerance in Teaching and Learning Across Difference

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Although tolerance was long considered a core virtue for citizenship in a pluralist democracy, it has recently fallen out of favour. In a nutshell, tolerance suggests having to put up with something (or some person or idea) that one would really rather not have to put up with. And while tolerance is obviously better than hatred or overt discrimination, it is, at best, a minimal virtue. Tolerance neither implies nor requires a commitment to social justice, to questioning the status quo, understanding, or having genuine respect for the other. Therefore, in societies committed to the ideals of participatory democracy with equality and justice for all, tolerance simply does not suffice as either a political or moral virtue. However, I wonder whether there are situations — specifically in teaching and learning across difference — in which tolerance might serve a strategic function not as readily achieved by other means. Let me begin by recounting an experience from my own practice that forced me to challenge my understanding of what it means to “meet the other morally” in pedagogical relations marked by radical difference.¹

THE SCENE OF THE CRIME

In various courses I have taught in pre-service teacher education, students repeatedly express a desire to grapple with the kinds of situations and ethical dilemmas they imagine having to face once they are in the field. But, as experienced practitioners know only too well, there are no hard and fast rules or codes of conduct that can spare us the often conflicting moral demands and messiness of classroom life.

In the second week of an undergraduate course on ethical issues in education, we had begun to explore David Purpel’s argument that education ought to be reframed as a vehicle for social justice and social transformation.² I planned to show a video that consists of candid conversations between an off-screen interviewer and several local high school students on issues such as racism, sexism, homophobia, and class privilege. The conversations reveal a wide range of perspectives on the various issues, and the video is intended as a classroom resource to spark conversation amongst high school students. However, upon reviewing the film a few days before class, I recognized one of the students in the video as “Jack,” a student in my class that term. During the conversation about homophobia, Jack stated that, according to the Bible, which he holds to be literally true, homosexuality is wrong, and a sin punishable by death. He said, among other things, that he did not know “how or why people choose to be that way” and that “maybe, in some cases, they have been abused or something.”

I had previewed the video before the course began, but, at that time, none of the students in the film were known to me. Now I was not sure how to proceed. Should I go ahead with the lesson as originally planned? Modify it somehow? Or should I

simply drop my plan to show the video and prepare a different lesson? If I chose to go ahead with it, I certainly needed to speak with Jack first to ask his permission to show it in class. After all, since the interview had been conducted about five years prior, he might have changed his views on the subject, or he might not feel comfortable watching it with the rest of the class. For the better part of the next day, I tried to reach him by phone, and when we were finally able to connect later that evening, I explained the situation. I then asked whether he was comfortable with me using the video in class. He said that he had only a vague recollection of the interview and asked me what he had said. When I recounted his words to him, he said that it was fine if I wanted to use it in class. I then posed the second part of my dilemma. I explained that we were coming to the issue of homophobia from very different positions because I am a lesbian. I told him that initially I had not known how to frame the lesson, but that after giving it some thought, I wondered if he would be willing to work with me. I suggested that we share with the class what had transpired and attempt, as a group, to think through the pedagogical implications of trying to teach and learn across apparently incommensurable difference. He agreed, so I suggested that I prepare an introductory “script” which we would review the following evening. I reworked the lesson plan, shifting the focus from a general discussion about anti-oppressive education to an emphasis on teaching and learning across difference. When Jack and I spoke again the following evening, we went through the plan together and he offered some suggestions as to additional directions he would like to see the discussion go. By the time the next class rolled around, however, I was quite apprehensive about how things would actually unfold.

After the students had settled into their seats, I began by saying that it had become crystal clear to me over the preceding week that when we are talking about ethical issues in education we are not talking about abstract theories of morality and justice, but rather about confronting the ethical dilemmas that are the very stuff of everyday classroom life. I recounted to the class the experiences of the past two days, my uncertainty about how to deal with the situation, as well as the conversations Jack and I had had. I reminded them that the particulars of the situation were just that — particulars — and that a similar situation could have just as easily arisen on any number of axes of difference. I asked them to watch the video with an eye to examining their own social positioning regarding race, class, gender, and sexuality, and the pedagogical questions that might emerge for them in a similar situation. I also emphasized that in our post-viewing discussion we were not going to discuss the moral status of homosexuality *per se* — partly because that question was not something we could possibly resolve in this context, but, more importantly, because I wanted to focus on the pedagogical issues at hand.³

Much has been written about the complexities of classroom dialogue in pluralist societies.⁴ However, the fact remains that, as professors and teacher educators, we cannot simply abandon the attempt to communicate with our students (and to create opportunities for our students to attempt to communicate with each other), even across apparently incommensurable differences. But if we want neither to foreclose on the possibility for dialogue in classrooms marked by difference, nor to remain

naïve about the power dynamics in such classrooms, what conditions, attitudes, or dispositions might be required to make teaching and learning possible across points of radical difference? In other words, how can we move toward receiving and responding to those whose identifications and commitments run counter to our own, and whose identifications and commitments may, in fact, deny the validity of our own?

MORAL DIALOGUE AND THE FUNDAMENTALIST STUDENT

In an essay published twenty years ago, but no less relevant today, David McKenzie addresses the particular challenges of teaching introductory philosophy to Christian fundamentalist students.⁵ While the visibility of fundamentalist students and student organizations on campuses is somewhat late coming to publicly funded Canadian colleges and universities, their presence is now increasingly being felt, and the way in which teacher-student relationships play out in individual classrooms varies widely.

As McKenzie points out, there are both fruitful and fruitless ways of approaching our fundamentalist students. When faced with a student response of, “That’s what the Bible says,” or “That’s what God says,” one might initially be tempted to confront the student with questions about the nature of belief and knowledge in order to demonstrate that the student does not really know what she or he is talking about. However, while that kind of response might give us some immediate satisfaction, it is not the kind of teacher-student relationship most educators would aspire to — at least those of us who hope to cultivate in our students a desire to think seriously about questions of moral significance. After such an encounter, McKenzie says, students will typically respond in one of two ways: either they will remain silent for the rest of the term, or they will take up the implicit challenge by the instructor and see the class as an opportunity for evangelism. Neither response will lead to a positive outcome. In the first case, one can pretty much assume that if the fundamentalist students continue to attend class at all, they will simply tune out the instructor, fulfill the minimum requirements needed to pass the course, and continue on their way with their fundamentalist assumptions intact. In the second case, the instructor is backed into a corner. She must either take up the incessant stream of biblical quotes, faith claims, and arguments (thereby surrendering the intended course content to the student’s agenda) or ignore the outbursts and interruptions, possibly leading the student to think that the instructor is incapable of responding and that the student has therefore “won” by default.⁶ Again, nothing of educational worth is gained.

In contrast, McKenzie suggests an approach of “simple friendship” — a relationship characterized not necessarily by affection, but rather by a “willingness to engage in lengthy and private discussion.” He invites the students for private conversations in which he asks them how they have come to know that the Bible is true. This question can then lead to a deeper exploration of the issue in a non-confrontational atmosphere. His approach, he claims, is one that “respects fundamentalist students as persons but which also focuses critical analysis directly on the core ingredients in their faith, honours these ideals and enhances the possibility of effective communication of the discipline of philosophy.”⁷

Now this may indeed be a sensible, and obviously more pedagogically sound, alternative to ridicule and embarrassment, but it is not without its limitations. While I am somewhat drawn to the notion of the pedagogical relation as a kind of friendship, I question whether the term “friendship” is appropriate when one party denies the very validity of one or more aspects of the other’s identity or subject positions. Returning to the example I cited above, while my identification as “teacher” is an important part of my self-conception, it is not as constitutive of who I am in the world as my identification as “lesbian.” But it seems that in order for my teacher-student relationship to meet the criteria of even a “simple friendship,” I might be required to ease Jack’s discomfort by relinquishing, or at least veiling, my attachment to the identification “lesbian”; and that in order for me to receive him as student-friend, he must do the same around his religious convictions regarding the moral status of those who identify as homosexual. Suffice it to say that there may in fact be situations wherein the ideas and ideals one holds are so constitutive of one’s moral, social, or political identity that they are non-negotiable and a harder line must be drawn. The desire for friendship in such situations, on my view, risks obscuring the educational goals that ought to be at the fore.

Now, this is not to say that the quality of the pedagogical relationship is irrelevant. And, admittedly, there are many stories of teacher-student relationships that have been irrevocably damaged over similarly incompatible beliefs and world-views. But my point is that the dissolution of relationship is not a necessary outcome. While the relationship may not be friendly, or even comfortable, incommensurable moral commitments need not prevent genuine pedagogical engagement. One way in which this has been theorized in recent years is as a “pedagogy of discomfort.”⁸

MORAL DIALOGUE AND DISCOMFORT

Situations of discomfort, Megan Boler says, are an important part of pedagogy and ought not to be avoided:

The path of understanding, if it is not to “simplify,” must be tread gently. Yet if one believes in alternatives to the reductive binaries of good and evil, “purity and corruption,” one is challenged to invite the other, with compassion and fortitude, to learn to see things differently, no matter how perilous the course for all involved.⁹

In a similar vein, Eamonn Callan says that the discomforting experience of “moral distress” is an inevitable consequence of real moral dialogue, especially in pluralist societies where people strongly disagree about what is good and right. By “moral distress” he means “a cluster of emotions that may attend our response to words or actions of others or our own that we see as morally repellent.”¹⁰ These feelings may be provoked by the perceived failings of others, or by a negative assessment of one’s own words or actions, but moral distress is, by definition, “painful and seriously disturbing” (CC, 200).

For both Boler and Callan, this kind of distress is almost inevitable in societies where people strongly disagree about things that matter. It is therefore also inevitable in public school and university classrooms within those societies. Yet despite the discomfort such situations entail (or perhaps precisely because of it), both Callan and Boler claim that there is something educationally worthwhile in

engaging conversations or situations that may shatter the cherished ideal of classrooms as safe spaces.¹¹ As Callan says, while moral distress is, by its very nature, an unwelcome experience, “a discriminating susceptibility to moral distress is a fundamental aspect of virtue, and therefore, that troubling cluster of emotions must be evoked, and suitably shaped, in the process of moral education” (CC, 200).

The problem arises as to how we can profitably take up those moments of distress or discomfort. On Callan’s view, it is indefensible to gloss over moral differences in the name of preserving a comfortable classroom atmosphere:

To treat a topic of serious moral dialogue as something to be subordinated to the value of our interlocutors and our relationship to them is to treat moral questions as if they were external to the constitution of one’s own self and the self of the other, matters of mere volitional commitment that should not distract us from the real business of who we are and why we matter. (CC, 205)

As the situation between Jack and me illustrates, one’s moral position on a particular issue is often not merely a matter of volitional commitment. Our respective stances on the moral status of homosexuality are, albeit in different ways for each of us, constitutive of our moral selves. On the other hand, if any meaningful teaching and learning are to take place, the pedagogical relationship must be preserved. We cannot ignore or gloss over our differences, but neither can we afford to close down conversation.

Due to constraints of space, I have not done justice here to either Boler’s or Callan’s very thoughtful arguments, but I wanted simply to draw out the tension between an emphasis on classrooms as potential sites for social transformation, on the one hand, and the moral and educational losses that might be incurred by a pursuit of justice and moral truth at the expense of relationship, on the other. I return to this issue below, but first let me sketch the current trend in moral education toward viewing empathy as the key to dialogue across difference.

EMPATHY, SIMILARITY, AND DIFFERENCE

In an attempt to understand moral motivation, and thereby foster increased social responsibility, much research in moral education over the past ten to fifteen years has focused on the heroic altruism of rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust.¹² In the often-cited work of Kristen Monroe and her colleagues, researchers asked the rescuers why they had risked their own lives and well-being, as well as that of their families, for the well-being of another — specifically a stranger who had been so thoroughly demonized and declared the enemy.¹³ The researchers found only one common motivational factor: recognition of the essential sameness of all human beings and a self-perception as part of this common humanity. These individuals did not see the stranger at the door as someone who was irreconcilably different, but rather someone who was basically just like them, and, therefore, someone whose misfortune (save for contingent differences) could just have easily befallen them. And it is largely on the basis of this claim that moral educators have increasingly come to see empathy as *the* pivotal moral emotion and a necessary precondition for dialogue across difference. However, while there is much to be said in its favour, I share the concerns of those theorists who are wary of an apparently uncritical

embrace of empathy as a cure for the challenges of moral dialogue in a pluralist society.¹⁴

My own concerns arise from the commonsense understanding of empathy, which is based on an imaginative projection of oneself into the experiences of another. If I can only come to see, the thinking goes, that in all significant respects, the other is basically just like me, then I will be able to understand how or why that person thinks, feels, and acts the way she does, even if her life experience is very different from my own and/or if we hold widely disparate views about matters of conscience. However, perceiving the other as a fellow human being rests in turn on one's conception of what it is to be human — a conception that is inevitably historically and culturally constituted. In the example I am drawing on here, Jack's conception of a human life worth living does not include a homosexual life. When the moral domain includes only those persons and situations into which one is able, imaginatively, to project oneself, one need only deny the other possession of the requisite set of human qualities in order to reasonably deny his or her status as a being worthy of moral concern.

A second, related problem is that by focusing so strongly on similarity, I worry that we will lose sight of the importance of perceiving the other *as other* — that what we are advocating is, in effect, an erasure of difference. To put it another way, if we constantly focus on the idea that “beneath the skin we are all just the same” we seem to be implying that difference (one's Aboriginal heritage, or identity as a Jew, gay man or lesbian, for example) is not finally that important, even though, in the context of our own particular lives, those identifications may be central to who we think we are, and not so contingent that we can easily surrender them in the name of essential similarity.

In light of these concerns, as well as the salient critiques that Boler and others have raised, I am not at all convinced that empathy provides the best way in to addressing the complexities of teaching and learning across radical difference. Let me return, then, to the notion of tolerance with which I opened the paper. Specifically, I want to begin to explore how we might use tolerance to facilitate dialogue in classrooms marked by significant moral disagreement.

REVISITING TOLERANCE

As I said at the outset, tolerance implies putting up with something or someone that one would rather not have to put up with; but, more positively, it also means a recognition of the beliefs and practices of others despite disagreement over the worth of those beliefs and practices. As a rule, tolerance is only required in situations of conflict where the parties neither seek agreement nor consider such agreement possible. But what kind of disagreement are we talking about here? What degree of conflict must be reached before tolerance is required? A disagreement over something of minimal consequence — whether or not Margaret Atwood should have been on the list of candidates for the Greatest Canadian, for instance — is not the kind of disagreement that necessitates tolerance. In such a situation, one can simply resign oneself to the obvious cultural ignorance of the other, or at least feign indifference.

Disagreement over the moral status of homosexuality, on the other hand, is a significant disagreement, especially in the context of a pre-service program that leads to teacher certification for public schools.

Tolerance walks a fine line between acceptance and rejection. We only demonstrate tolerance toward that which we have, presumably for good reasons, rejected. And yet, in tolerating someone or something, we are also giving it space. In an address to the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences in 2002, Jürgen Habermas departed from his typical emphasis on rational discourse to distinguish the requirements tolerance makes in situations of competing religious claims from what is required in situations of reasonable disagreement. Tolerance is especially difficult, he says, where one party derives his or her moral convictions from religious doctrine that lays claim to universal validity.¹⁵ This is precisely the nature of the conflict between Jack and me. For Jack, a person who identifies as homosexual is not just different, but fundamentally and fatally mistaken.

In a pluralist democracy, Habermas suggests, all that can be expected in a situation of conflict between fundamental convictions is a strategic appeal to peaceful co-existence wherein what is asked of the believer is not a concession of his particular conception of the good, but rather an agreement not to act on his religiously-derived claims to truth.¹⁶ The material effect of tolerance, then, is that it simply renders an ongoing conflict latent:

The conflict continues in the sense that tolerance does not do away with the source of the conflict, because the subject of the dispute remains; but it is in a state of latency because even if the cause of the conflict is still there, its antagonistic power has been virtually cancelled out. If the source of the conflict disappears then tolerance is unnecessary; if the conflict flares up then tolerance no longer exists.¹⁷

As an educator, however, I cannot rest easy with a veneer of peaceful co-existence in classrooms marked by fundamental disagreement over matters of moral consequence. The moral losses incurred in opting for tolerance may not, in fact, be insignificant, especially for Jack's future students and colleagues. And, since Jack was only one of thirty-seven students in the class, I needed to consider my responsibilities to the others as well (especially, in this case, the sexual minority students). That said, however, I want to suggest that we look at tolerance from a slightly different angle.

Callan criticizes Nel Noddings for elevating the maintenance of relationship over the pursuit of moral truth in the face of conflicting moral commitments. The requirements of caring relationship, Callan argues, seem to suggest a world in which ethical differences amount to little more than "a matter of varying talents, strengths, interests, and ethnic colour" — a position which obscures the serious nature of real moral pluralism (*CC*, 206–209). However, I am not sure that Noddings's emphasis on maintaining caring relations does, in fact, preclude the kind of genuine moral dialogue that Callan is after. Specifically, I wonder whether we could foreground relationship, introducing tolerance strategically — as a way of keeping a foot in the door, so to speak, and thereby keeping open the possibility of genuine moral dialogue somewhere down the road.

Since Jack and I have had only minimal contact since the course ended over three years ago, I do not know the “end of the story” from his perspective. I do know, however, that the encounter has stayed with me, and has caused me to think and re-think how best to facilitate teaching and learning across such a contested point of difference. In working with students whose conceptions of right and wrong are derived from faith rather than reason, I wonder whether tolerance (or at least a refusal to refuse the intolerant) might create a kind of cognitive dissonance that ultimately disturbs long-held notions of good and evil, saints and sinners. Therefore, while I agree that tolerance ought not to be seen as a virtue or moral ideal, it may be time to reopen the file, and to investigate whether a measured use of tolerance might, in fact, serve a strategic function in classrooms marked by apparently incommensurable difference.

1. I borrow the phrase “meeting the other morally” from Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 4.

2. David E. Purpel, *Moral Outrage in Education* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999).

3. The question of whether lesbian and gay teachers ought to come out to their students remains a contentious issue even at the post-secondary level. For contrasting views, see Didi Khayatt, “Sex and the Teacher: Should We Come Out in Class?” *Harvard Educational Review* 67, no. 1 (1997): 26–143; and Mary Mittler and Amy Blumenthal, “On Being a Change Agent: Teacher as Text, Homophobia as Context,” in *Tilting the Tower: Lesbians, Teaching, Queer Subjects*, ed. Linda Garber (New York: Routledge, 1994).

4. See, most recently, Megan Boler, *Democratic Dialogue in Education: Troubling Speech, Disturbing Silence* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004).

5. David McKenzie, “The Fundamentalist Student and Introductory Philosophy,” *Teaching Philosophy* 7, no. 3 (1984): 205–216.

6. *Ibid.*, 208–209.

7. *Ibid.*, 209, 214.

8. Megan Boler, *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 175–203.

9. *Ibid.*, 175.

10. Eamonn Callan, *Creating Citizens: Political Education and Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 200. This work will be cited as *CC* in the text for all subsequent references.

11. The ideal of classrooms as safe spaces has been critiqued by several theorists, but it still holds currency in many teacher education programs. See, for example, Elizabeth Ellsworth, “Why Doesn’t This Feel Empowering?” *Harvard Educational Review* 59, no. 3 (1989): 297–324; Boler, *Democratic Dialogue*; and Suzanne de Castell and Mary Bryson, eds., *Radical In<ter>ventions: Identity, Politics, and Difference/s in Educational Praxis* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997).

12. See, for example, Lawrence Blum, *Moral Perception and Particularity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Eva Fogelman, *Conscience and Courage: Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust* (New York: Doubleday, 1994); and Arne Vetlesen, *Perception, Empathy, and Judgment: An Enquiry into the Preconditions of Moral Performance* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1994).

13. Kristen R. Monroe, Michael C. Barton, and Ute Klingemann, “Altruism and the Theory of Rational Action: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe,” *Ethics* 101, no. 1 (1990); and Kristen R. Monroe, *The Heart of Altruism: Perceptions of a Common Humanity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

14. See especially Boler’s chapter on the risks of empathy in *Feeling Power*; and Zygmunt Bauman, *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 62–63. See also Susan Verducci, “A Conceptual History of Empathy and a Question It Raises for Moral Education,” *Educational Theory* 50, no. 1 (2000): 63–80.

15. This address has not yet been translated from the German, but the ideas cited here come from the summary of his talk by Antonia Loick, "Tolerance Makes Great Demands. Jürgen Habermas Shows What Is Involved," <http://www.goethe.de/kug/ges/phi/thm/en24456.htm>.

16. Ibid.

17. Mark Hunyadi, "Tolerance: A Philosophical Contribution Taking the Drama Out of Difference-Based Conflicts" (paper delivered at the First Intercultural Forum, (Re)Thinking Stereotypes: Constructing Intercultural and Inter-religious Dialogue, Sarajevo, December 2003), 6.