Integrating Graduate Quality #5 -Ethical responsibility- into the UniSA School of Education curriculum

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Abstract

The University of South Australia (UniSA) has a set of seven measures of graduate qualities known as the Graduate Qualities Framework. These qualities form the range of skills, abilities and dispositions that a UniSA student is expected to graduate with. It is this framework that informs the aims and objectives, assessment, and the teaching and learning arrangements of every UniSA course. They also align the UniSA strategic and corporate objectives as they are heavily informed by the various professions that are connected to the various courses. Each Graduate Quality can potentially be assessed through a range of differing and flexible forms of assessment. Clearly, the significance of the graduate qualities depends upon the formulation of clear and operational definitions of the individual qualities. For it is only with such definitions that it is possible to embed the qualities into the curriculum, and indeed to measure them. Not surprisingly, Graduate Quality #5 (a commitment to ethical action and social responsibility as a professional and as a citizen) has proved particularly difficult to pin down. While a range of articles exists on integrating ethics into the engineering, computing, medical and business curricula, the literature on embedding the quality of ethical responsibility into the curriculum in university schools of education is sparse. This paper is an attempt to demonstrate a pathway for embedding Graduate Quality #5 into the UniSA School of Education curriculum and to evaluate the effectiveness such an approach.

Keywords: graduate qualities; ethical justification; evaluation

Introduction

The University of South Australia (UniSA) has a set of seven measures of graduate qualities known as the Graduate Qualities Framework. These qualities form the range of skills, abilities and dispositions that a UniSA student is expected to develop prior to graduation. It is this framework that informs the aims and objectives, assessment, and the teaching and learning arrangements of every UniSA course. Each Graduate Quality can potentially be assessed through a range of differing and flexible forms of assessment. Clearly, the significance of the graduate qualities depends upon the formulation of clear and operational definitions of the individual qualities. For it is only with such definitions that it is possible to embed the qualities into the curriculum, and indeed to measure them. Not surprisingly, Graduate Quality #5 (a commitment to ethical action and social responsibility as a professional and as a citizen) has proved particularly difficult to pin down. This point has broad implications, given that that the overall aim of any set of such qualities must be an ethical one, namely, the good of society. As Bowden et al (in Barrie, 2006, p. 217) argue, graduate attributes '…are qualities that…prepare graduates as agents of social good in an unknown future'.

Within the literature, there are general discussions about graduate qualities which include brief sections on the embedding of ethical practice into the undergraduate curriculum to complement technical competency. Moreover, while a range of articles exists on integrating ethics into the engineering, computing, medical and business curricula (see, for example, Fleischmann, 2003; Ghafarian, 2002; Martin and Huff, 1997; Braunack-Mayer, 2001; Harris and Bretag, 2003; Bishop, 1992; Cowton and Cummins, 2003; Oddo, 1997; Brown, 1994), the literature on embedding ethical responsibility into schools of education curricula is sparse. Perhaps it is assumed that schools of education, sitting alongside or within the social sciences and humanities, would as a matter of course have ethics embedded within their curricula. Yet, there seems little reason to see the field of

education as more naturally ethically-rich than those of medicine or business. Indeed, we shall point to data which suggest that not only do current school of education curricula within Australia lack an explicit focus on ethics (Collins, 2005), but also that such curricula do little to develop a sense of ethical responsibility in students. Clearly, this point is important given the widely accepted view that '…the development, practice and assessment of attributes is most effectively achieved within the context of discipline knowledge' (Bowden, et al., n.d.).

A notion of ethical responsibility

The aim of this paper is to provide a definition of the concept of ethical responsibility which is sufficient to yield clear pathways for the embedding and measurement of Uni SA Graduate Quality #5. The first task is to develop a robust theoretical notion of ethical responsibility. To begin with, it is important to distinguish ethical responsibility from other forms of responsibility, most importantly here, legal and professional responsibility. The latter notions can be fully spelled out in terms of adherence to the codes of conduct laid down by the relevant professions or the law. But these codes must themselves be subject to ethical scrutiny. Such scrutiny relies on general principles quite independent of particular professional and legal codes of conduct; principles general enough to guide *all* judgements and associated actions which affect others. It is important to note that we take the term 'others' broadly here, referring not just to other human beings, but to all sentient beings, i.e. all beings capable of feeling pleasure and pain. The task of explicating the notion of ethical responsibility then, becomes one of answering this question: What is involved in taking responsibility for those judgements and associated actions which affect others?

A necessary condition must surely be that in coming to ethical judgments, individuals apply appropriately the processes of rational ethical justification. Although there is continuing philosophical debate about the nature of these processes, there are strong and widely accepted arguments which rule out certain commonly held approaches to ethical justification. One of these is the process of appealing to a moral authority – the church, the law or the mores of society (or of a profession): homosexuality is morally wrong because the Church condemns it; cloning of human beings is morally wrong because the law forbids it; killing animals for food is morally right because it is part of our way of life; securing profits for shareholders, whatever the cost to wider society is morally right because business codes of conduct count the interests of shareholders as paramount. Yet, as is well known, appeal to authority alone can never constitute adequate justification. Regan (2000, p 259) puts it clearly:

> Even if there is a moral authority, those who are not … authorities can have no good reason for thinking that there is one unless the judgements of the supposed authority can be checked for their truth or reasonableness, and it is not possible to do this unless what is true or reasonable …[is] known independently of what this supposed authority said. An example …might make this point clearer. A plumber proves his "authority as a plumber" not merely by what he says but by the quality of his work … **After** we have come to know, on independent grounds, that a particular plumber's judgement is reliable **then** [and only then] we have reason to rely on his judgement in the future. The same is true of the authority of one's judgement in, say …morality (emphasis in the original).

What is more, justifying ethical judgements or decisions on the basis of mere appeal to moral authority brings with it very real social dangers. History provides countless examples of ideas which were cruel and absurd, yet were followed to the point of death by the people. Think of Nazism, the Sarin gas attacks or the London Underground bombings.

A second widely practised approach to ethical justification, that of ethical relativism, is just as dangerous. Ethical relativism is the view that ethical justification is impossible, that we cannot say that one moral judgement is better than another. An ethical relativist points to the obvious and widespread moral disagreement both within and across cultures, arguing that we cannot condemn another individual's ethical judgement just because it differs from ours. According to relativism, if we disagree over a factual matter, say, whether smoking is harmful, we at least agree on the sort of evidence that will decide the matter: it is *factual* evidence about the effect of tobacco on lungs and blood vessels. But it is less clear what kind of evidence could be appealed to, to show say, that abortion is morally right, that whaling is morally wrong or that men and women should have the same opportunities and rights within the broader community. Perhaps there is no evidence to draw upon in such cases. And in the absence of evidence, we must simply accept the fact of moral difference. We must be tolerant, accepting and respecting all values. We cannot condemn any moral practice, whatever that practice may be. And if we focus on particular examples, this seems to be an enlightened attitude. In a multi-cultural society, we find many different cultural practices: different food practices, different ways of caring for the aged, different family systems, and society is undoubtedly the richer for it. But suppose the focus shifts to other examples: honour killings, a racist social group such as a neo-Nazi group, bullying in the workplace, compromising safety or the environment for shareholder profit, or scientific fraud.

Surely these are examples of situations in which ethical responsibility demands that ethical judgements be made. It seems clear that the successful imbedding of Graduate Quality #5 would equip Uni SA graduates with the skills and disposition to exercise ethical judgement in such cases. Why do we feel confident that ethical judgement is necessary here? The answer seems to lie in the *significant harm* that such practices bring. Here we find a form of *evidence* on which to base ethical judgements. Generalising from these examples, it seems plausible to argue that ethics is grounded in good and harm (suffering); moreover, that human beings, and indeed all sentient beings, share common capacities for suffering and for happiness.

Of course this is too simple. Maximising profits, whatever the wider costs, results in shareholder happiness. However, the long lasting harm caused to the wider population far outweighs this happiness. It is also necessary to *weigh up* suffering and happiness or harm and good here. This insight provides an *ethical yardstick*, a principle which forms the basis of rational ethical justification. It does not in itself deliver a procedure for making ethical judgements or decisions. But we can also draw on some other well established elements of ethical justification, such as considering as fully as possible the consequences of one's behaviour, taking circumstances into account, empathising with others, and ensuring consistency between one's beliefs and between one's beliefs and actions. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the complex interplay between these elements, it is important to note that these are *necessary* features of rational ethical justification.

If, as has been argued, the development of ethical responsibility is tied to rational ethical judgement, it follows that the development of Graduate Quality #5 depends on supporting students to move from basing their ethical judgements on mere appeal to a moral authority; to move too, from the relativist belief that anything goes, that ethical justification is impossible. Further, students must be supported to develop the skills and dispositions necessary for rational ethical justification. Embedding Graduate Quality #5 into the UniSA curriculum then, and more particularly into the UniSA School of Education curriculum, means ensuring a curriculum which provides ample opportunities for students to develop these skills and dispositions. What then, does this mean for curriculum design?

The implications for curriculum

Importantly, there is a substantial body of research within cognitive psychology demonstrating that the development of justificatory reasoning, including justificatory reasoning in ethics, progresses through a common developmental sequence. We can offer only a brief summary here, but a fuller discussion can be found in Knight & Collins (2006). Researchers have typically used structured interviews to identify three broad stages of approaches to justification; three levels of epistemological development. The earliest stage has knowledge as simple, consisting of relatively unconnected facts, certain and absolute; handed down from authority or deriving from observation, observation which speaks for itself. On this view, knowledge claims require no justification beyond appeal to authority or to observation of facts, both of which are deemed irrefutable. Kuhn describes individuals at this stage as *absolutists*. At the next broad stage, individuals become aware that authorities not only differ in their views, but change their views over time. Beliefs are then held to take on the status of personal possessions, to which each individual is entitled. The result is that all views are taken to have equal legitimacy and one's own view may be as reliable as that of an authority. Relativists take the very act of holding a belief as justification for the belief. In other words, justification is held to be neither possible nor required. At the final *evaluativist* stage, individuals also deny the possibility of certain knowledge. They deny too, that knowledge is made up of discrete bits, instead seeing knowledge as a web of belief. But *evaluativists* understand that viewpoints, even ethical viewpoints, can be compared and evaluated on the basis of reason and observational evidence. They acknowledge the possibility of genuine interchange with those who hold conflicting opinions, and the possibility that they themselves might come to modify their views as a result of rational argument. It is this developmental endpoint which must be reached before individuals can be said to have developed a sense of ethical responsibility.

Yet *Epistemological Levels* research shows that on the whole, current forms of education fail in the task of cultivating evaluativist reasoning. Education is shown to correlate with epistemological level, but the evaluativist stage appears to be attained by only a small fraction of those studied (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997). Ordinary-degree students, even at the end of their programs appear to remain at the absolutist or relativist level of reasoning (King & Kitchener, 1994; Kuhn, 1992; Meyer, 2006). Such findings have served to direct a burgeoning cross disciplinary research effort to investigate whether curriculum change can lead to the widespread development of evaluativist reasoning. Research findings, although far from definitive, are encouraging.

Theoretical and empirical work from within both philosophy and cognitive psychology (reviewed in Garcia-Moriyon et al, 2005 and Collins, 2005) point to the effectiveness of engaging individuals (of all ages) in dialogue with their peers about complex, real world issues, including ethical issues. The dialogue here is not mere discussion, but discussion disciplined by the procedures of rational, in this case ethical, justification. Further, students' attention is drawn to the procedures of reason-giving and evaluation; they are afforded the opportunity to apply and practise the relevant skills in the company of their peers and under the guidance of their teacher, so that they gradually come to understand and appreciate for themselves the power and value of ethical justification. The collaborative nature of this dialogue is important too. Reason takes the form of dialogue; reasons are advanced, counter examples raised, reasons modified in the light of counter examples. This process can be carried out by an individual, but as Vygotsky (1978) has shown, the process is more fruitful when it becomes a dialogue between members of a *Community of Inquiry*, a methodology pioneered by philosopher and educator, Matthew Lipman, in the early 1970s (Lipman, 2003). For this to work, participants must value and respect the contributions of others, even when these contributions run counter to their own. This does not mean simply accepting the opposing view, even it is the view of an authority figure; nor does it mean adopting the attitude that all views are equally acceptable, equally likely to be true. It means instead focussing on the reasons participants

advance for their views, and a commitment to assessing these reasons in the light of the criteria of rational ethical justification.

Despite disciplinary differences, we find related views expressed in the literature on embedding ethics into the curriculum of other disciplines. For example, Sims and Sims (in Farnsworth and Kleiner, 2003, p.130), in discussion of a course in business ethics, argue that a grounding in ethics should stimulate

> …the moral imagination, developing skills in the recognition and analysis of moral issues, eliciting a sense of moral obligation and personal responsibility, and learning both to tolerate and resist moral disagreement and ambiguity.

Particularly interesting here are the points relating to 'developing skills in the recognition and analysis of moral issues' and 'eliciting a sense of moral obligation and personal responsibility'. Developing skills in the recognition and analysis of moral issues can only be achieved through getting students to see and understand more than one side of a moral issue or a moral dilemma, *before* making a decision, surely one of the goals of ethics in tertiary education being to move people away from purely opinion-based and/or 'authority-driven' decisions. To 'elicit a sense of moral obligation and personal responsibility' can only go hand-in-hand with the aforementioned skills of recognition and analysis of moral issues, in seeking to act on moral principles. According to Farnsworth and Kleiner (2003, p.134), the use of 'real world' examples and case studies helps students to understand the process of recognition, analysis and finally decision making in the process of unravelling moral issues.

As Kuhn and Udell (2003) note, extended engagement in Community of Inquiry style dialogue, even in the absence of further instruction, appears to be sufficient for the improvement of justificatory reasoning. Yet, this research effort has been hampered by lack of an efficient standard instrument to measure justificatory reasoning abilities. Various research tools have been used: argument mapping schemas, elaborate coding systems and structured interviews, as well as overly simple questionnaires. For reasons of cost and efficiency, the questionnaires alone have the potential to be used widely as assessment tools, but they have attracted criticism from within the field for lack of specificity (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997). Large-scale assessment of the dialogue-based approach awaits the development of an instrument which is both effective and efficient.

A way forward?

Assessment of justificatory reasoning in relation to ethical issues has been a topic of interest locally for more than a decade, as a number of undergraduate courses developed and taught within UniSA's School of Education over this period have centred on a dialogue-based approach with the aim of improving ethical justificatory reasoning. In these courses, tutorials are transformed into communities of inquiry, and the complex ethical issues from the field are raised and discussed across the semester. While casual observations of students' responses, both in class discussions and written assignments, have long suggested the gradual development of a sense of ethical responsibility over a semester, it was deemed important to develop more formal evaluation and assessment instruments, an importance underlined by the introduction of UniSA's Graduate Quality Framework.

This task has been the focus of researchers within the School of Education's *Cognitive Technologies in Education Research Group*. To date, researchers have developed and trialled two distinct tools designed to measure developments in students' ethical justificatory reasoning. The first of these is a directed questionnaire designed to provide a fine-grained identification of

individuals' approaches to ethical justification, measuring not only their epistemological levels, but also the extent to which they apply the elements of rational ethical justification described earlier. A pilot study using this questionnaire has recently been conducted in an intervention study of approximately sixty third year undergraduate pre-service teachers enrolled in a UniSA core education course employing Community of Inquiry methodology. While the data are currently being analysed, we can report on preliminary findings. Students in the third year of their program are approximately twice as likely to adopt relativist or absolutist responses to ethical justification than they are to engage in rational ethical justification. This points to the need for curriculum change in order to ensure the embedding of GQ #5 in education programs. Encouragingly, on completion of the intervention core education course, these third year students showed significantly fewer relativist responses and significantly fewer absolutist responses, than at the commencement of the core course. Further findings of this study will be reported as they become available, along with the findings of a forthcoming large-scale doctoral study (Meyer, 2006).

The second evaluation tool takes the form of a 'Student Perception Survey', which was administered (at the end of the current semester) to students enrolled in a second year pre-service teacher curriculum course, also employing community of inquiry methodology. (The cohort of third year students described previously had not undertaken this second year course.) The survey invited students to indicate ways in which the course had contributed to their personal development of UniSA's Graduate Qualities, including GQ#5. It was suggested that students refer to specific examples of course content and methodology to demonstrate the ways in which their knowledge, skills and dispositions had developed during the course. Again, the data are in the process of being analysed, but it is possible to capture the main thrust of students' responses in relation to the extent to which the course contributed to the development of a personal and professional sense of ethical responsibility. Overwhelmingly, students reported that the course had:

- raised their awareness and understanding of ethical issues
- shown them the importance of looking at all perspectives on ethical issues
- encouraged them to take an ongoing interest in social issues; to shoulder social responsibility as a citizen; helped them to grow as a person and citizen
- supported them to develop and apply the skills and dispositions required for ethical decision making (e.g. taking circumstances into account, acquiring knowledge of the relevant facts, caring about the effects of their actions on others, skills of justificatory reasoning)
- helped them to understand the importance of supporting their own students to be ethically responsible

Conclusion

In this paper an attempt has been made to outline a concept of ethical responsibility which is sufficient to yield clear pathways for the embedding and measurement of Graduate Quality # 5, within the UniSA School of Education. The concept developed here rests on the notion of rational ethical justification, a concept spelled out on the basis of work within both philosophy and cognitive psychology. The resultant notion is robust, with clear implications for curriculum and methodology and which has enabled the development of much needed evaluation instruments. A great deal more needs to be done, but the direction is promising and well worth pursuing.

Notes on contributors

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