

TEACHING AT COLLEGE, A PROFESSION OF SHARING



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The question of ethics has been prominent in western societies that have been living a real crisis in values over the last few decades. It is not surprising therefore, that this issue is of particular concern to the educational environment, given that they are responsible for shaping today's youth and the citizens of tomorrow. In this respect, teachers act as concerned citizens, instructors, and professionals. This article focuses mainly on ethics as they relate to the teaching profession and raises questions that bring about reflections on the subject. The goal of ethics is not to impose solutions but rather help to understand, reflect, choose, and intervene in a responsible manner.

The topics chosen for reflection are the result of research in ethics as applied to the field of education, and extensive practical experience in teacher training. The first part of this article¹ introduces the problematic or reasons for discussing a code of ethics at college. The second part clarifies the debate by defining the often-confused notions of morals, ethics, and code of ethics. The third part defines the components of ethical competency for college teachers through their relationship to knowledge, the students, the human environment, and society. In ending, the fourth part tackles the issue of developing ethics that apply specifically to colleges.

¹ Excerpt from the AQPC 26th annual symposium held in Québec city on June 9, 2006.

WHY DISCUSS A CODE OF ETHICS...AND WHY AT COLLEGE LEVEL?

The concern with ethics and the desire for ethical behaviour are not merely trends adopted by professional or community associations and then conveyed by the media. The various political and financial scandals that have recently shaken our society have demonstrated the high expectations placed on decision-makers and those in power. Unfortunately, these expectations often meet with disappointment. Teachers wield great influence and place constraints on the youth entrusted to them by society. It is a power they find hard to recognize, either because they themselves feel powerless versus management, or because they dispute the very idea of power and confuse it with disdain. We need only consider evaluations to understand that teachers do have real power, or question future teachers on their reasons for selecting the teaching profession to see that, in most cases, the deciding factor was the influence of one of their previous teachers. One reason for using a code of ethics is responsible management of this power to intervene.

In order to maintain the confidence of a population that has entrusted them with their children through the intermediary of education, teachers must not only possess a code of ethics but they must also display it openly and use it collectively. It speaks directly to the credibility and social recognition of the teaching profession, as discussed in debates on the creation of a professional association for primary and secondary level teachers.

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To better grasp the need for a code of ethics for teachers, we can review the characteristics of a profession as defined by *Codes des professions du Québec* and see how they apply to teachers (Gouvernement du Québec). Every profession is defined by the specific knowledge and expertise it provides exclusively to its members. Only they have the ability to evaluate their peers. Because of this knowledge, professionals enjoy a certain autonomy that allows them to make decisions and perform interventions. Teachers possess theoretical and practical knowledge and make decisions that have a significant impact on the personal development and future careers of our youth. Misuse or abuse of this power is unacceptable. Professional associations were created to protect the public by obliging all professions to possess a code of ethics and disciplinary committees to oversee their application. However, these codes have limited authority as they cannot anticipate every situation and therefore, they target major errors only. They can impose penalties but cannot necessarily prevent errors; they respect the principles of justice relative to conviction, judgment and penalty. In fact, only professions recognized by the *Office des professions* have a code of ethics with real influence. A large number of professions or associations do not have a code of ethics or have drawn up a code that has a merely symbolic value. In other words, a code of ethics is not enough to ensure an ethical profession.



These thoughts apply to college teachers insofar as the movement for the professionalization of teaching also involves them. This social movement implies new qualifications, new standards for teaching and a specific code of ethics. Ethical competency is included in the professional competencies listed by the *Ministère de l'Éducation* for primary and secondary level teachers (Ministère de l'Éducation, 2001). For the first time in its history, ethical competency is among the list of competencies needed to teach. Its specific components and the minimal level of mastery required by teachers are now listed. This mastery is just as important for college teachers, even though their students are a few years older. The students are still young and vulnerable, and as they evolve from pupil to student, they are dependant and captive until they reach the age of legal majority. These young students are still in a developmental stage and need adults in this period of their life, as models and for reference. Their teachers are included in these models. College teachers are more than mere teachers; they are educators. They transmit knowledge and techniques to young students through their attitudes and the behaviours they exhibit towards work, others and life itself.

Young students have significant needs and society has high expectations with regard to teachers, at all levels of the education system. These expectations relate as much to a code of ethics as to the college teachers themselves. This explains why the parents of some students felt that creating a professional association of primary and secondary teachers would ensure a better quality of teaching ethics. (FCPQ, 1999).

From this perspective, funding agencies were created by *Comités d'éthique de la recherche* to analyze all research projects on humans undertaken in their institutions, from an ethical standpoint (Government of Canada, 2005). We have yet to conceive and develop a meaning for ethics in university teaching.

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► MORALS, ETHICS, OR A CODE OF ETHICS?

The concepts of ethics and codes of ethics are often confused. Although the concept of morals has been around for some time, the notion of ethics and codes of ethics are more recent developments in the western world, driven by the advent of bio-ethics.

These three concepts have a number of common elements. First, they deal with values, standards of conduct and human behaviour and provide answers to the following questions: "What should be done in the present situation?" or "What could be done better in the present situation?". In addition, morals, ethics, and codes of ethics all desire what is right, the correct action and the right path. Even though morals cover all aspects of life, a code of ethics is limited to professional life and specific trades. A code of ethics is generally defined as the morals of a trade or profession.

Ethics, morals, and codes of ethics are not just ideas targeting a certain ideal; they are guidelines that co-exist more or less harmoniously in society. They have

a significant impact on individual and social behaviour. We should add religion and civil rights to account fully for overall social controls currently in effect in Québec. While religion and morals have a common history, civil rights became more important under the influence of human rights linked to liberal democracy (Desaulniers and Jutras, 2006). Ethics on the other hand, were developed as new social guidelines independent of religion. Codes of ethics were a logical result of specialization in the workplace and the development of professions specific to modern society.

However, these social controls do not share the same justification for their existence and practical application. While religions refer to God, morals to the notion of duty, civil rights to Law and ethics refer to values; codes of ethics refer to professional standards and responsibilities.

Social controls are sometimes contested because of their restrictions on individual freedom. This is their most concrete and sensitive issue.

If ethics are considered social controls, they also imply different levels of specificity and action. On the most theoretical and general level, ethics are an ethical philosophy, an ideal of good living, specific approaches like communication ethics, social justice and concerns; ethics deal directly with individual conscience. On a more practical level, ethics mean values by which to live in relationships with others; this refers to applied ethics and a code of ethics. At an even more basic level, ethics regulate and offer ways to make it easier to live within a value system thanks to a code of ethics and an ethics committee. At the final level, ethics can become disciplinary in nature by pointing out gaps in ethics or ethical errors, which are more rare. When ethics are seen through a



narrow viewfinder, they are definitely limiting and intimidating. This is the view taken by taken by confederations in refusing a professional association for teachers.

Ethics are a reflective process more than a feared system of restrictions. More often than not, they raise questions rather than propose pre-established solutions. They seek solutions for situations that are difficult or involve risk. Ethics state that consideration for others, the consequences of interventions on others, and ethical concerns are inherent in any decision-making process. Ethical judgment must be called into play before ethics can be actualized. With ethics, we can make individual decisions or deliberate collectively and justify our positions. In other words, to be responsible for one's actions before others is the first meaning of the notion of responsibility (Etchegoyan, 1993). Ethics lead to concrete action and ethical behaviour that is specific to each individual situation. This implies creativity and a true commitment on the part of those involved.

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Among the many definitions of ethics, two have been selected to initiate reflection among college teachers. The first general definition is by the philosopher Paul Ricoeur. He considers ethics to be “the search for the good life for oneself and others in fair-minded institutions” (Ricoeur, 1990). The second definition, which is closer to the field of education, comes from educator Philippe Meirieu who considers ethics “the reflection of a person on the impact of their actions

in a relationship with others” (Meirieu, 1991). What can we say about a code of ethics for college teachers except that is up to them to identify and define it? The following components are simple indicators to help in this task, which is their responsibility and theirs alone.

▶ WHAT ARE THE ELEMENTS OF ETHICAL COMPETENCY FOR COLLEGE TEACHERS?

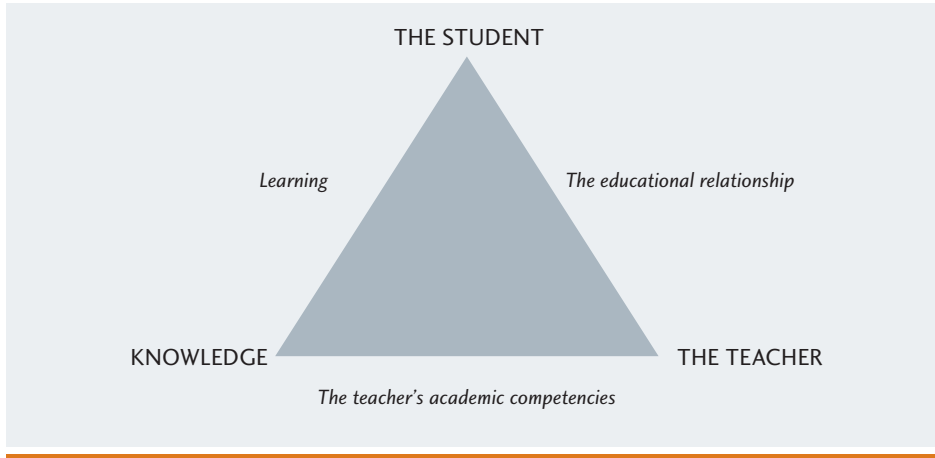
The question of teaching ethics is raised in a context of professionalization that requires that teachers not only possess an ethical conscience but also exercise ethical competency in their interventions. Québec research on applied ethics in professions demonstrates that ethical competency can only be developed in very close relation with the way professionals perceive their role and the way in which society views the institutions or organizations in which they work.

The code of ethics for teachers is linked to the teaching identity; the more teachers are keenly aware of their role in school and society, the more conscious they are of the ethical components of their profession. Conversely, when teachers see their educational and social role as unimportant, the more likely they are to view a code of ethics as being of little concern to them. In fact, the professional identity of Québec teachers usually suffers from low self-image that also affects college teachers. Furthermore, the role of CEGEPs, and their very existence are regularly brought into question. These two elements do nothing to promote collective identity, or social recognition of college teachers. The problem of collectively and precisely defining a code of ethics does not mean that college teachers do not display ethical competency on an individual and intuitive level, which is largely based on educational tradition. However, we are still presently lacking a code of ethics that is explicit, collective, and shared, on which teachers can base their practices and develop their professionalism. This is true for all levels of teaching. When all is said and done, a code of ethics for teaching remains undefined.

On the other hand, it is relatively easy to determine when there is a lack of ethics because it results in suffering and unjust treatment. We all have painful memories on this subject. When teachers in training were asked about their training courses, they spontaneously reported seeing various instances of lack of ethics in schools (Desaulniers, 2002). However, it is much more difficult to identify ethical behaviour and attitudes in professional interventions. It is not an impossible task. We must simply focus on the way teachers perceive their role, their professional identity, and the mission of the institution where they work to identify components of a code of ethics for teaching. It is helpful to refer to the educational triangle described by educational philosopher Jean Houssaye (1988). Three angles, the student, the teacher, and knowledge form this triangle. It helps us understand how the teacher-student relationship (the educational relationship) paves the way for the learning relationship (the student's relationship to the knowledge); this is true insofar as the teacher is an active intermediary between the student and knowledge, because of his own connection to knowledge (the teachers' academic competency). If knowledge is excluded from the triangle, the teacher is seen as an adult in a relationship with a younger adult. If the young adult is excluded from the triangle, then the teacher is only in a relationship with knowledge, as is the case with researchers and intellectuals. Both relationships are essential and a code of ethics plays a role in each one.



THE EDUCATIONAL TRIANGLE (HOUSSAYE, 1988)



THE RELATIONSHIP OF TEACHERS TO KNOWLEDGE

An important part of a code of ethics for teaching is linked to the mastery teachers have of theoretical or practical knowledge. This is the academic competency that teachers acquire during their training, develop during their practice, and update throughout their career. The general rule, whereby professionals who are characterized by their expertise are expected to further their knowledge through continuing education, also applies to teachers.

Even though the knowledge in question varies in volume and complexity from preschool to university, it remains essential at all levels. Moreover, insofar as it is the role of teachers to transmit knowledge, this relationship to knowledge must remain active if they wish to stimulate young students and have them develop a relationship to knowledge. If knowledge is not important to the teacher, there is little chance it will become important to the students. In other words, ignorance points to a missing code of ethics and teaching incompetence.

Furthermore, values such as intellectual integrity, the humility to recognize one's limitations, a taste for research and self-discipline are recognized as essential for teaching. They are not moral values added on after the fact to screen or control teachers, they are values that are intrinsically linked to knowledge in a relationship that defines the art of teaching. They are the basic elements in a code of teaching ethics.

Lastly, teachers are responsible for the knowledge they transmit as well as the knowledge they sometimes neglect to transmit, the words they speak or the ideas they propagate without realizing the impact they may have on young students.

THE RELATIONSHIP OF TEACHERS TO PUPILS AND STUDENTS

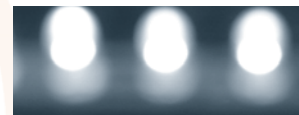
Teachers share a relationship with the youth whom they help to learn and develop. Pupils in primary and secondary schools who were questioned during a study on

professional identity and values, almost unanimously mentioned the teacher's commitment to student learning as the number one value in teaching (Jutras *et al.*, 2005).

In addition to the academic competency already mentioned, teachers display didactical and psycho-pedagogic competency acquired during their training. This competency is consolidated through practice and sharing with peers; and it remains essential, even if not included in the initial training given to teachers and university professors. The paradox is that although teachers generally perceive a code of ethics as a basic requirement in their relationship with students, they receive no corresponding training. We have noticed the sensitivity of teachers regarding this issue as well as their lack of direction when facing relational situations. Young students expect their teachers to be skilled in relational competencies such as respect, fairness, and generosity of spirit. One Canadian researcher includes judgment, humility, courage, fairness, receptivity, empathy, enthusiasm, and power of imagination (Hare, 1993). To these qualities, educational philosopher Christiane Gohier adds consistency and congruity (Gohier, 1997).

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The quality of the relationship with young students is crucial in the teaching profession. There is a level of proximity that facilitates learning and the development of young students. Teachers must adjust their teaching to the age of their students and their own



level of seniority and innate personality. A code of ethics requires that this relationship be reassessed continuously based on the learning and stage of development of the students; not the emotional satisfaction of the teachers. It is necessary to avoid relational errors such as harassment, manipulation, enticement, or abuse of power. Students are not responsible for the teacher-student relationship; the responsibility lies with the teacher.

THE RELATIONSHIP OF TEACHERS TO HUMANITY

The educational triangle comes to life in an environment that includes various categories of employees, beginning with colleagues. The teaching profession is a profession of sharing, which implies a certain collegial structure. Mutual assistance, the sharing of tasks, solidarity, and discretion are attitudes and ethical behaviours that allow all teachers to teach in a professional manner. The respect given to the competencies of other professionals, in teamwork for instance, is another sign of inter-disciplinary codes of ethics. The involvement of the institution with its administrative and management personnel, its relationships with parents and families, sketch the outline of a desirable collective professionalism (Bisaillon, 1993). It is the transition from an individual code of ethics to a collective or institutional code of ethics.

THE RELATIONSHIP OF TEACHERS TO SOCIETY

The teaching profession gets its mandate from society, to which it must report. Teaching is indeed a public service, even though teachers may consider the profession as personal, if not to say individualistic in nature. It is the educational

authorities that determine college teaching objectives and then mandate teachers to put them into action. Therefore, interventions that demonstrate a code of ethics are based on the college's mission: to prepare young students for a technical trade or for general university training. There is no code of ethics without a reflection on the meaning of interventions and their connection to the specifically targeted objectives. These elements show that teaching is a social profession that implies individual and collective responsibilities.

Like all other professionals, teachers have an obligation with regard to means; they must use all available means to promote learning and development in young students. This implies an obligation to be aware of all accessible means, including the most recent ones, and the obligation to intervene with all clientele, without discrimination or negligence. The teachers themselves probably relate recognition for the teaching profession to a greater consideration of its social function.

HOW TO DEVELOP A CODE OF ETHICS IN COLLEGE

A code of ethics is something that is shared and developed by all members of a group. It is the background and reason for professional interventions, and it orients them based on the mission of each profession, making it possible to choose the right ones, explain, and validate them. As a rule, associations handle the work of jointly developing the underlying meaning. The following are methods tested by a variety of professional groups to promote the development of ethical awareness.

- The practice of reflecting on our actions, during and after the fact, that prevents us from behaving mechanically or by rote; and makes it possible to find or rediscover the meaning of professional behaviour.
- The sharing of ethical questions that opens our heart and spirit to all interventions, not only ethical dilemmas.
- The development of ethical sensitivity that focuses on concern for others and empathy in interventions.
- The collective reflection on professional values and their definition in original texts.
- The daily use of ethical judgement, not only during conflicts.
- The practice of ethical deliberation, a collective search for the best possible solution under the circumstances, based on the resolution of value conflicts. This deliberation facilitates ethical decision-making and practical interventions (Legault, 2003).

A code of ethics cannot be imposed from without; it must be self-regulated by each member within the profession. It is up to college teachers to reflect on their code of ethics, to define, share, and experience it. Additionally, methods need to be developed to support professionals who are experiencing difficulties. Specific times and places need to be established to promote its definition and, more importantly, its actualization.



CONCLUSION

Ethics are inherent requirements of the teaching profession, whose commonality is to enhance teaching by developing the professional competencies of teachers. Learning, self-renewal, commitment, asking questions of ourselves, and living the values in our relationship to knowledge, to colleagues and society; these are the ethical requirements for a teacher to develop professionally. ♦

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