Teaching Notes

Technoethics

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I was correcting 1000 word argumentative essays. One student wrote that "disagreeing with a U.S. government position is proof that you have been brainwashed by the Russians." Another stated that Cable News Network has proved that it "has what it takes." A third relied on evidence of organic brain differences between the sexes to prove sexual discrimination against girls in classroom computer use, then concluded that boys and girls should be treated exactly the same. Clearly, although mine is an English Composition class, I need to teach argument, not just mechanics, sentence structure and style. In fact, after 14 years it has become clear to me that my most important job is to teach ethics and reasoning and their relationship to language.

This does not mean I should preach particular doctrine or values. Instead, I must make students aware of the systems of ethical belief they employ in the process of opinion formation, the foundation of the argument which ultimately appears on paper, and make that value system accessible for scrutiny. Writing mechanics are skeletal; the flesh of an argumentative essay is passionate conviction, and a clear awareness of what the position is and where it comes from. Then the students can proceed to design an appropriate argument and command language to express their belief.

Yet most students not only don't know why they think as they do, they don't know what they think at all until they try, as Billy Budd, to frame their words, usually with the same result. As Leon Botstein, president of Bard College, has said,"...one rarely knows precisely what one thinks before one tries to formulate it."[1] The result is

inevitably bad writing because the language itself is being strained to perform two functions simultaneously: to allow the student to discover what he thinks as he searches for language appropriate to express his feelings, that is, translate feeling into thought, and also to persuade others to adopt the thought which is not even yet clear to the writer. Student dismay at their poverty of idea content is expressed as generalization, ambiguity, incoherence, and abstraction. Students frequently leave class feeling they know less than when they entered because now they realize that they don't know what they thought they did. And once you rule out the various informal fallacies, rhetorical questions, and abstractions, many students no longer know how to express anything at all because these have been their only models. As the semanticist Edward Sapir said, we "are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for [our] society."[2]

It is vital to remember that this problem is not one of a lack of mechanics or ignorance of argument construction; it is from lack of a clear idea, position, judgment, before the pen ever hits the paper, or the daisywheel hits the fanfold.

The reasons for this vacuum are many. For one, how often in daily life are we forced to make ethical judgments which engage our most deeply-held beliefs, to clarify for ourselves what goes against our nature and what is congruent? These times are painful, excluding others and forcing our innermost selves to the surface for public exposure. We must declare who we are, and conversely who we are not. We cut oursleves out of the herd. So,

more and more, especially among the young, we adopt the language of television or advertising or journalism; we talk of "computer whizzes" and "slayings" and "yuppies" and we are "baffled" by the "feats" of "burgeoning industries." We are up to our necks in language sludge that clogs our channels of thinking because how we conceive something linguistically controls how we can think about it. When that language is debased by electronic media, thinking changes. Donna Woolfolk Cross reports that "there is a growing body of evidence that long-term exposure to the language of TV news is detrimental to a person's thought processes. Seven out of ten people now get their information about the world **exclusively** from TV. Yet one recent study revealed that these people can no longer give even **one** reason to justify their choice of a particular candidate or policy."[3]

The education system may be the most inflexible language bureaucracy of all, spending years perfecting cursive writing while its students gallop home after school to their keypads and VDT's. Exposed for years to that enclosing and rigid an environment, students are not prepared for the flash and quicksilver of contemporary adult experience.

Today, technology defines the ethical questions and places them suddenly before us. How do you define "privacy" in a world increasingly interconnected by modems, personal computers, and data banks? A conference at the Monterey Institute of International Studies decided that the **concept** of privacy has become obsolete.

Our dictionaries are filled with **new** words, too. One is "bioethics." Technology forces us to deal with complex ethical questions that arise only because the technology creates the situation. For example, today when a pregnant woman dies it is sometimes possible to keep her body functioning for weeks as a host for her foetus until the child can develop enough for a Caesarean section. This is a complex ethical dilemma for the doctors and the family,

one which is presented only because the technological capability is there. Dr. Willard Gaylin, president of the Hastings Center, says, "Everyone is confused. No one is quite sure what the rules are. Doctors get into trouble when one virtue conflicts with another virtue. People of good will can come down on opposite sides."[4] And Hastings director Daniel Callahan says, "My general impression is that people who make actual decisions base it on religion if they have a strong faith, or else they grab a principle from the current culture that they can use for their purposes. This is rarely preceded by systematic thinking."[5]

Is it any wonder, then, that students writing argumentative papers have trouble formulating a clearly identifiable judgment around which to build a thesis statement? As a teacher, some of the most valuable experiences I can give my bewildered students are access to meaningful facts, prior knowledge of imminent issues, and the necessity of applying their value systems to new ethical predicaments.

The tool I've devised I call Technoethics. It's simply a listing of several ambiguous situations, some speculative, some actual, about which the student is forced to make a choice. Once the choice is made, the student must then trace back what ethical value he is expressing and where it came from. For example, the students are asked, "If you could save your unborn child from a genetic disease, would you allow genetic alteration of it? Why or why not?" The next question is "If you could improve your unborn child's talents or abilities, would you?" In other words, where do you draw the line and why? Frequently, students will answer yes to the first question but no to the second on the grounds of "tampering with nature" or "letting nature take its course" or the desire not to "play God." The contradiction can help a student illuminate a murky value system.

Other questions can defamiliarize emotional issues and make them more accessible for examination. At a con-

ference on critical thinking at Sonoma State University, one participant expressed frustration about the difficulty of tackling hot issues without provoking unconscious, prefabricated positions. Asking about abortion in a classroom is to ask for a half-hour psychodrama. But you can ask "What should be done with the orphan embryos?" The students can then rationally engage the questions of when life begins without the hindrance of cultural and emotional blocks.

Some other useful questions:

If you had an incurable disease, would you allow yourself to be frozen? How about just your head (for future cloning)?

Should there be restrictions on direct satellite broadcasting?

If conflict could be eliminated through subliminal commands, should it be done?

Would you accept a xenotransplant?

If a person has a renewable body part which could save someone's life, should the person be notified?

If college course content were in pill form, would you take the pill?

New evidence suggests chemical and genetic bases of behavior. How do you then define "freedom"?

If homosexuality is a function of which hemisphere of the brain is dominant, can it then be considered abnormal? Might it be treatable? If so, should it be treated?

Naturally, Techno-ethics is an evolving exercise. You can add new issues to it constantly just by opening the morning newspaper. Observing students gain insight into their own value systems can be a serious and instructive enterprise. One student's opinions about genetic modification were formed by his employment as a nurse on a ward with genetically diseased children. Another student pointed out that xenotransplants are a good idea because there would be less chance of someone "dying sooner than necessary so somebody could get their organs." He noted that the determination of death in Louisiana must be made by a doctor who is not part of a transplant team. Of course, another student objected to xenotransplants because of the potential cruelty to animals.

The hardest part of the exercise is getting the students to find the sources of their values. Most students find their values to be indistinguishable from themselves. But in one case, that unity was literal. The question was on artificial insemination. One young woman wrote, "I am definitely in favor of artificial insemination because without it, I wouldn't be here." For her to argue against artificial insemination would be to argue against her own existence. And for the teacher, nothing can make the consequences of technology more real than when one of them gets up and hands in her paper.

Notes

[1] Leon Botstein, "Why Jonathan Can't Read," **The New Republic**, Nov. 7, 1983, pp. 22.

[2] Edward Sapir, quoted in **Speaking of Words**, eds. James MacKillop and Donna Woolfolk Cross, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston), p. 82.

[3] Donna Woolfolk Cross, **Mediaspeak**, (New York: Coward, McCann and Geohegan), p. 68.

[4] Barry Seigel, **Los Angeles Times**, Jan. 6, 1985, p. 1.

[5] **Ibid.**

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