

**CONVERSATIONS ON EDUCATION**

**Ethics and the search for values**

Alex IP Yuen Kwong<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Biological Sciences, Faculty of Science  
National University of Singapore

---

Recommended citation:

Ip, Y. K. A. (2013). Ethics and the search for values. *Journal of the NUS Teaching Academy*, 3(3), 105-107.

<https://doi.org/10.24112/ajsotl.33291>

## Ethics and the search for values

**JNUSTA:** *In your view, how ethics could best be taught in school?*

**Alex:** To me, ethics involves “understanding what is right or wrong, and what is good or bad”, and then “doing the right and good things”. Fundamentally, to teach ethics, teachers must focus not only on the economic aspect of education but also the developmental aspect of education, helping students to develop a meaningful value system. Values form the basics of ethical behaviour, because values are basic convictions that give a person judgemental ideas about right or wrong, and good or bad, and ethics is the way the values are acted out. Ethical behaviour is acting in ways consistent with one’s personal values and the commonly-held values of the organisation and the society.

Values are influenced by culture, tradition and religion. Thus, teaching must involve not only the development of the intellect, but also the development of the emotional and spiritual domains of the individual. While the intellect concerns the mind, emotion and spirit fall in the domain of the heart; therefore, teachers must not only teach to the mind, but also touch the heart, of the student. What is right or wrong can be learned, but what is good or bad must be felt by the heart. Hence, an education system that focuses predominantly on the acquisition of knowledge and the development of intellectual skills may not be the best system to produce an ethical (educated) person. Ethical behaviour involves both the mind (intellect) and the heart (feeling); simply put, a person’s behaviour is defined by what she/he does with what his/her mind says and what his/her heart feels. Feeling can only be gained through experience, and therefore, ethics cannot be taught through didactic/rote learning in schools. Rote learning at best can instill conditioned behaviour, but not ethical behaviour which often involves reasoning.

Since values are predominantly acquired through one’s personal experience and they affect the behaviour (the act) of the person, the most appropriate method to teach ethics would be experience-based learning, during which students are guided through concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. “Learning what is right or wrong, and good or bad” involves reflection and abstract conceptualisation based on an experience, and “doing the right and good things” requires active experimentation (practice) of the developed concept (value).

For many students, the fundamental question of ethics is, “What should I

do?” or “How should I act?” Ethics is supposed to provide them with “moral principles” that tell them what to do. With respect to learning theories, here is a dilemma: Should an individual act based on reflex gained through conditioned behaviour, or ethically through social constructivism? I am of the opinion that ethics must be learned through constructivism and the individual must acquire higher-order thinking skills to justify and defend his/her act. In a situation where what is right turns out to be bad, or what is wrong is actually good, or when personal values contradict societal ones, the question “what should I do?” demands critical thinking and decision making, which can only be resolved through higher-order thinking. Therefore, besides helping students to develop a value system, it is absolutely essential to teach them higher-order thinking skills and strategies, so that they can make balanced judgment when confronted with controversy. Only then will students be able to prioritise conflicting values before acting, and to justify and defend their act in a difficult situation. Here, teaching methods like case studies and problem-based learning come in handy. Through the use of authentic case studies and open discussions, students can be stimulated to constantly reflect upon and to examine their values to ensure that they are reasonable and well-founded. It would also ensure a continuous effort on the individual’s part to study his/her own value system and to find ways to help the society develop values that are reasonable and harmonious.

Finally, it is important to take note that a person’s ability to deal with ethical issues is not formed all at once. Just as there are stages of growth in physical development, the ability to think ethically (morally) also develops in stages. Hence, it is important for ethics to be taught throughout all levels of education. Here, we have to differentiate between “learning about ethics” and “learning of ethics”. While students can “learn about ethics” in one module, “learning of ethics” is a lifelong endeavour. And, I personally believe that the best way to teach ethics is to motivate students to think and act ethically at various stages of development with ethics being incorporated into various disciplines instead of teaching about ethics in one single course.