Another Look At a Feminist Ethics of Teaching

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Abstract

By drawing on feminist epistemology, ethics and pedagogy this paper articulates some aspects of a care-based ethics of teaching. Understanding teaching as a species of caring, it explores some consequences for teaching practice of the attentiveness, responsiveness, and responsibility characteristic of caring professionals.

Résumé

En tirant de l'épistémologie féministe de l'éthique et de la pédagogie, cet article exprime clairement certains aspects de l'enseignement de l'éthique basée sur les soins. En comprenant que l'enseignement est une espèce de soin, il explore certaines des conséquences de la pratique de l'enseignement du soin apporté au travail, de la réceptivité et de la responsabilité caractéristique des profesionnels qui ont de la compassion.

From Care Ethics to an Ethics of Teaching

For nearly twenty years I have been a teacher of philosophy in a liberal arts college for women. Ours is not an elite institution, but one whose mission is to educate women who might not otherwise consider a college education - women of color, first and second generation immigrant women, women from working class and poor families. We have our share of high school valedictorians, but we also have many students burdened by deficient educational backgrounds. Whatever their learning needs, my colleagues and I try to hold our students to high expectations, and to provide the support they require to achieve them. Many influences have shaped my choices about how to relate to these students and how to teach them; one of the most important is my reading of feminist philosophy.

I believe that a feminist ethics of care provides the best foundation for an ethics of teaching, and in this article I want to explain how feminist ethics and epistemology, feminist pedagogy, and my practice with my students have informed my view of what and how I ought to teach. In thinking about the domains of teacher responsibility, I will draw on the work of Joan Tronto on professional responsibility, and in considering the implications this has for pedagogy, I will turn to the work of Goldberger *et al.* in their 1996 volume, *Knowledge, Difference and Power: Essays Inspired by Women's Ways of Knowing*.

Given some well-founded suspicion of a feminist ethics of care, it is with some trepidation that I propose an ethics of teaching situated within that tradition. Varieties of an ethics of care were developed by a number of feminist philosophers, among them Nel Noddings, Sara Ruddick, and Joan

Tronto; and some of the sharpest criticisms of this approach have come from feminists themselves (Cole and Coultrap-Quinn 1992; Gilligan 1972; Kittay and Meyers 1987; Noddings 1984; Ruddick 1989; Tronto 1993). In most general terms, an ethics of care focuses on care as a central moral category, and suggests that a coherent focus of an ethical theory can be attention to how we might best care for one another in concrete situations. Feminist critiques of ethics of care objected to the essentialist claims in early formulations about the moral reasoning of all women, to what seemed like the valorization of specifically feminine virtues, and to the somewhat simplistic opposition between the ethics of care and the ethics of justice. As a result of two decades of critiques of care ethics, some refinements of this approach have been articulated, so that in proposing an ethics of care for teaching, I can say what I do not mean: such an ethics of care would not require accepting the existence of or advocating the adoption of "feminine virtues"; it would not rest on universal claims about how all women think or reason morally; it would not take mothering, especially mothering in patriarchal cultures, as the paradigm of ethical behavior (in such a way that good mothering is tied to either servility or supererogation); and it does not propose an ethics of care as exclusive of and superior to other ethical approaches, such as an ethic of justice. What care ethics does offer, as does its "cousin," virtue ethics, is the emphasis on the ethical requirements that arise out of practices in particular circumstances or domains.

Some early writers in the care tradition suggested that an ethics of care ought to be restricted to the private sphere, leaving the sphere of politics and public life to be governed by justice, with its emphasis on duty, obligation and rights. Instead, following Joan Tronto, I suggest that the four components of caring - caring about, caring for, care giving and care receiving - can help to illuminate the responsibilities of professionals (Tronto 2001).

Tronto defines caring about as being attentive to others' need for care, caring for as taking on the responsibility of responding to that need, care giving as the response itself, and receiving care as openness in one's need to the assistance of others. Tronto's account is helpful because she reminds us that care giving is more than an intuitive and untrained response; it requires competence and reflective practice. At the same time, professional competence is incomplete without the attentiveness, responsiveness, and responsibility called for in a caring relationship.

In an article entitled "Does Managing Professionals Affect Professional Ethics?" (2001) Tronto wrote about the increasing tendency for managers to "survey and control" the activities of professionals, in ways that appear to compromise the professionals' autonomy. While Tronto does not have much to say about college and university faculty in this article, complaints by faculty about the growing intrusion of administrators into how and what they teach are increasingly heard in academic circles. Tronto acknowledges that professionals have based their claims to autonomy on their professional expertise and competence, but she says these claims sometimes take the exaggerated form of insistence on immunity from scrutiny by the institutions and publics they serve. Tronto calls for a reconsideration of the responsibilities of professionals by adding the requirement of caring to the possession of expert knowledge and the provision of competent service. Echoing Tronto, in what follows, I will explore what adding caring to competence in the act of teaching might look like.

Framework for an Ethics of Teaching: Attentiveness, Responsiveness, Responsibility

If as competent teaching professionals we are called to take up the responsibility for being attentive and responsive to our students, and our students were women, would we teach in different ways to meet their needs, as many in the

tradition of feminist pedagogy have suggested? In 1986, in *Women's Ways of Knowing*, Belenky *et al.* argued that traditional courses in higher education were not designed with female students and their learning in mind, but foregrounded the teacher's knowledge, and focused on questions and issues central to academic and professional disciplines. But questions that women students may have, because they arise out of women's experience, may not intersect with the questions in the mainstream of the discipline as the teacher presents it (Belenky *et al.* 1986). Effective learning experiences for women would build on what women know and how they acquire knowledge. Effective and caring teaching would thus not be focused on the teacher and what she knows, but centered on the student and her learning.

In a collection of essays reflecting on the impact of *Women's Ways of Knowing* ten years after its original publication, feminist scholars argued that the revolution in pedagogy and curriculum design called for in that work has remained incomplete. Several of the authors raised concerns about the idea that women know and learn differently that are similar to concerns that have been expressed about the ethics of care. Claims about a distinctive way of knowing for women, if not framed carefully, may appear essentialist, create a new feminine ghetto for women, and fail to do justice to the variety of women's experiences (Goldberger *et al.* 1996). In response to these concerns, Sara Ruddick suggests that *Women's Ways of Knowing* is itself part of a collective project of feminist epistemology, the project of articulating "connected knowing," a way of knowing that arises out of particular social circumstances most often occupied by women in our culture (Ruddick 1996, 255). Connected knowing is opposed by Ruddick to impersonal procedural knowing, which treats the knower and her circumstances as irrelevant to how she goes about acquiring knowledge and to claims she makes about what she knows. If we assume with the project of "connected knowing" that where we stand makes a difference to what we know, then it is not irrelevant to women's knowing that women in our society still do the majority of domestic labor and have the dominant responsibility for child-rearing and the care of the dependent, and that many occupations and professional fields are still gendered, in that their practitioners are more likely to be one gender than another. Because of women's social position, women's knowledge is often characterized by attention to particular relationships, objects and persons; it avoids the separation of the emotions and bodily experience from knowledge; and it includes the capacity to appreciate as well as to criticize (Ruddick 1996). Recognizing that this is the kind of knowing that women may bring to the classroom, what does being attentive to and responding to women's learning needs require?

Frame Within the Frame: Attentiveness and Responsiveness in Teaching Practice

Over the last several decades, an attentive and responsive feminist teaching practice has developed based upon assumptions about these processes of women's identity formation and knowing. As part of an ethnographic study of feminist teachers in women's studies programs and elsewhere in higher education, Frances A. Maher and Mary Kay Tetreault identified four themes in feminists' reflection on their teaching - mastery, voice, authority and positionality (Maher and Tetreault 1996). Positionality refers, as has been said here, to giving consideration when designing learning to how students' identities are shaped by their social locations and the relationships in which they find themselves. Mastery is concerned with re-examining what the students are supposed to learn, both in terms of disciplinary content and of how that content relates to where students are coming from and what they aspire to become. Voice refers both to strategies for empowering student expression and to constructing a community of expression in which student voices can be developed. Authority in feminist classrooms is

treated as something to be negotiated between students and teacher, rather than vested solely in the teacher by virtue of her own disciplinary mastery and institutional power.

Each of these dimensions of feminist pedagogy has been vital to my own practice as a teacher. I will explain how in being attentive and responsive to our students we need to take into account positionality, mastery, voice and authority in teaching and learning.

Taking Positionality into Account in Practice

Positionality is a special concern for me as a teacher, given who my students are - over half of my students are the first in their families to attend college, and 40% are women of color. Being attentive to the social location of these students means recognizing that, because many are members of groups that have historically been underrepresented in or absent from higher education, they may have feelings of estrangement or alienation, may be uncertain about what succeeding in higher education will ask of them, or may lack confidence in their ability to do intellectual work. Being attentive also means being aware of my own epistemological authority, and of the social status that advanced degrees and a career in higher education confer. While in previous decades, students were more likely to defer to teaching faculty, the response of students to my position may range from deference to dismissal, and these attitudes may have more to do with what I represent than who I am. Miriam Kalman Harris, an associate professor of English, in an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* entitled "We are Smarter than Our Students," expresses frustration with her students' lack of respect for her disciplinary expertise. In response to a student's accusation that she is an intellectual snob, she asks herself, "Who do they think we are? What kind of professor, with or without a PhD, isn't 'smarter' than his or her students? And if we aren't smarter, then what in heaven's name are we doing teaching?" (Harris 2002). Harris attributes the failure of today's students to learn to respect others, to follow proper procedures, and to communicate effectively to their lack of respect for the epistemic authority of their professors.

But, as Lorraine Code pointed out when examining epistemic authority in *What Can She Know*, knowers and knowledge claims do not operate in a vacuum. Our claims to knowledge and expertise are not just statements about our personal history, but depend for their justification on a complex web of claims about the legitimacy of the institutions that shaped us and the social standing conferred on us by our education (Code 1991). Our students recognize that they have to "get past us" to win their own degrees; we occupy the social status they seek. While in the earlier, better times that Harris longs for, students willingly paid the price of deference in order to study with master teachers, students today are more cynical about authority (as, frankly, we all are) and may feel that our position is not earned but arbitrary, the result of race or class privilege, or just plain luck. If our relationship with our students is one of estrangement, our response must not be a bald reassertion of our authority, but an acknowledgment of its foundations and its limits. For instance, I acknowledge and explain to my students the difficulties of intellectual work for women, especially working class and poor women and women of color. I share my own successes and struggles as a woman who is trying to live an academic and intellectual life. My students may need assistance and encouragement to enter into academic culture; that culture may pose some serious risks for them, in terms of threatening their established identities and relationships (Lugones 1989). These risks - of changing identity, of straining ties with home and community - are very real not just for students from marginalized groups, but for any of my women students. If there exists a gulf of alienation between ourselves and our students, it is not likely to be closed by a remote posture, but by sharing something of our humanity and our own circumstances with them.

Fostering Disciplinary Mastery in Practice

The authors of *Women's Ways of Knowing* suggested that a curriculum that helps students to achieve disciplinary mastery needs to be designed with the needs of the students, not the teacher, in mind (Belenky *et al.* 1986). So being attentive to students requires a curricular response, rethinking the relationship between our students' lives and what they study with us. In our small liberal arts college, there are never more than twenty students who have declared a major in philosophy, and of these, only a handful consider graduate study in philosophy. My philosophy colleagues and I earned doctorates in philosophy programs that emphasized broad coverage of the history or problems of philosophy. We have the expertise to model our curriculum after our own graduate studies, but we have made a collective decision to change our focus. We have asked ourselves, what use are our students likely to make of their studies in philosophy? How can their philosophy studies contribute to a full and satisfying life in whatever careers they pursue? Our aim then is not to survey the history or problems of philosophy, but to teach the discipline of philosophy as a way of learning, as a disciplinary practice, rather than as a body of knowledge. (I have written in greater detail about this approach in "Teaching Students to Practice Philosophy" in a volume of essays written by my Alverno colleagues, *Disciplines as Frameworks for Student Learning* [Engelmann 2005]). Teaching texts and issues in philosophy becomes a vehicle for student learning about the uses and benefits of doing philosophy, and an occasion for practicing the discipline. This also means that the curriculum has to change with changes in the student body - the demographics of the students, their career goals and life experiences.

We believe that doing philosophy has enhanced our own critical thinking, our response to the social and political issues of the day, and our engagement with the arts and culture, and so we want our students to actively engage in the practice of the discipline, rather than looking on while we and others philosophize. But being attentive to our students also means that we must recognize that the practices of philosophy and the culture of the discipline have arisen within a particular historical and social context, and that these practices may be foreign to our students' experiences. For instance, bell hooks has written about the way in which academic philosophy privileges writing and speaking that is more abstract and full of jargon, and scorns philosophizing that is more widely accessible (hooks 1994). Although it has set itself the goal of exploring the concerns of everyday life, this hierarchy exists within feminist philosophy as well. My students, whatever their home communities and styles of communication, often find philosophical discourse and problems foreign and unhelpful in addressing the issues in their lives. Faced with this gap, I try to close it by selecting those texts and issues closest to students' experience, by helping students translate philosophical discourse into their own terms, and by explaining connections between philosophy and their own learning goals. In addition, philosophy may seem like an especially inaccessible culture for my students because they are women and many are women of color, for they may not see themselves and their communities reflected in the practitioners of mainstream philosophy. So, in designing learning experiences, I make a special attempt to work with texts produced by women and women of color.

Encouraging Voice in Practice

As a teacher of philosophy, I know that the practice of my discipline has historically been dominated by a model that views the pursuit of truth as an intellectual contest (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Moulton 1983). Ideas are brought into a public forum to be critiqued and thereby strengthened, and philosophers write and speak in response to the objections they anticipate from others. But I must consider whether my students' ideas are ready to be publicly challenged, and whether it is my task to prepare them to meet

this challenge. Does the prospect of the critique of their ideas affect students differently depending on the degree of their sense of entitlement to academic citizenship, so that some are doubly silenced, both by the competitive culture of higher education, and by a disciplinary culture of contest? Do some students have an advantage in the contest because of background and prior education, and are they unaware of these privileges? Being attentive to my students' relationship with my discipline's ways of producing knowledge entails a responsibility to make this mode of knowledge production itself a subject for study, as well as to explore alternatives to this model of philosophizing.

Feminist pedagogy has been sensitive to the issue of developing the voices of students, recognizing that being historically relegated to subordinate positions has silenced women and people of color. Being attentive to students means creating an environment in which women's voices are heard and accorded respect, creating communities of discourse in which knowledge is produced through dialogue as well as through debate. So, I need to determine the differences in individual students' styles of communication, and the differences between their styles and my own, and offer a variety of learning experiences that give students opportunities to share their views and develop them in discussion with their peers and myself. I also understand that the historical emphasis on feminine receptivity over agency has not necessarily made women better listeners, and I treat students' development of active listening skills as a necessary component of their ability to dialogue. Practical strategies for encouraging students to voice their views include having students think and write in response to questions before they are asked to respond publicly, and providing opportunities for small group dialogue for students who feel more comfortable in face to face interactions than they do in addressing large groups. Ultimately, however, my goal is for all my students to develop facility in expressing their views in a public forum; as a political philosopher, I see my philosophy courses as a setting for fostering the development of students' citizenship skills.

Being attentive to my students' need to find their voices also means that I have an obligation to be vigilant about the way my own biases and opinions may subtly - or not so subtly - rob students of their voices. For example, as a middle class woman, I have been socialized to value hard work, persistence, a concern for appearances, and a certain kind of intellectual and physical tidiness, not to mention deference to one's betters and a willingness to take their direction. To what extent is the possession of these values and habits really necessary to academic and career success, and how does the presence or absence of these in my students affect how I respond to them?

I believe that attentiveness to students and encouraging the development of their voices allows for a range of acceptable practices in regard to advocacy of a teacher's views in the classroom. If the teacher is honest with herself and her students about what constitutes advocacy, and if she does not penalize or silence those who disagree, she should be free to teach out of her own ideological perspective, understanding that the university is the scene of the free exchange of ideas, and that in a setting of liberal education, students are exposed to a variety of viewpoints. However, as a teacher of philosophy, I believe that the practice of the discipline commits me to present a multiplicity of views, trying to present the views of all in the best possible light, and assisting my students to formulate their own views. For many students, leading with my own philosophical views might stifle their developing voices. Of course, I have my own passionate opinions about social and political issues, and evenhandedness is difficult to achieve. Self-awareness requires me to be honest with students when my passion about issues makes it difficult to present views fairly. But my goal is to provide a safe environment in which to dialogue with one another, and to disagree.

Reconfiguring Authority in Practice

In keeping with feminist pedagogical theory and practice, I have painted a picture of a classroom that is governed by democratic ideals in regard to access and discourse. As an attentive teacher, I am responsible to create a hospitable learning environment, welcoming students to the study and practice of philosophy and to my classroom. I have emphasized already the need to acknowledge the sources, scope and limits of my power as the teacher. Meeting students as whole human beings also requires that I share my own humanity; I do this through the use of personal examples from my own life, by talking with students informally as much as possible inside and outside the classroom, by getting to know students individually, by trying to listen carefully to each person, and by bringing humor into our conversations.

Focusing in curriculum design on student learning needs and creating a hospitable environment in which each student feels valued both help to establish a more democratic learning situation. Through collaboration with colleagues in my institution, I have discovered the power of another strategy that democratizes education by sharing authority and responsibility for learning with the students, rather than reserving it to the teacher. This strategy is the creation of explicit learning outcomes and assessing student learning in light of these outcomes. Alverno College has had a curriculum based on students' demonstration of learning outcomes for over thirty years, and we have produced a body of research which attests to the effectiveness of this approach (Mentkowski *et al.* 2000). In my courses, making the outcomes for learning public in advance, and basing the outcomes on what is required to practice philosophy effectively, makes it possible for more students to succeed, and makes evaluation of student performance less about what I prefer as an individual instructor, and more about what learning in philosophy requires. In fact, when my colleagues in philosophy and I take turns teaching the same course, for instance, an introduction to philosophy course, we agree to use the same learning outcomes for our students, but each of us chooses our own learning materials - books, essays, and films. We are able to share expectations for what students will learn, and for the quality of their performance, because as a department we have collaborated to create the learning outcomes for the philosophy major and the courses within it. Each of us also asks students to assess their own learning, and to engage their peers in assessing one another's learning, which encourages the students to take greater ownership of their educational goals and activities. Our evaluation of their learning as teachers, while based on disciplinary expertise, and ultimately having more weight, nevertheless becomes one evaluation among many, not the least of which is the student's perspective on her own progress. In my courses at the advanced level, I ask students to create their own learning goals, which either tailor the existing learning outcomes to their needs, or represent the unique integration of each student's learning. This decentering (not abdication) of the teacher's authority for evaluation complements a curriculum and a learning environment that are student-centered, or more accurately, student learning-centered.

Taking Collaborative Responsibility for Learning

As Leslie Pickering Francis has pointed out in her article, "Sexual Harassment: Developments in Philosophy and Law," "Academics tend not to think of themselves as having defined professional obligations. There is, for example, no enforceable code of professional ethics for faculty members beyond that enforced by contract in their institutions or other obligations of state or federal law" (Francis 2002). My own attempt to define some professional obligations for teachers in higher education - to offer an ethics of teaching - builds on Joan Tronto's suggestion that we apply an ethics of care in analyzing the ethics of professionals. As Tronto has noted, professionals claim their expertise is best exercised under conditions which maximize

individual autonomy, in the usual sense of the term, and minimize the interference of managers and governing bodies. But she reminds us that professionals invariably depend on other professionals to accomplish their tasks, and that the relationship between clients and professionals is almost never a dyadic one. From this she concludes that professional competence is not an attribute of individuals, but of teams (Tronto 2001). Professionals rely on one another for certification of their competence, and the exercise of their competence always occurs in institutional settings where collaboration is required to achieve the institutional mission.

If as teaching faculty we were to adopt this view of the competence required to care appropriately for our students, we would be responsible to take steps to overcome the relative isolation that has been the hallmark of college and university teaching. Lorie Roth describes this isolation very succinctly in an article published in the *AAHE Bulletin* entitled "Sex, Drugs, Rock and Roll and the American Professor: What American Novels Tell Us About Teaching."

> The novels themselves [Jane Smiley's *Moo*, Michael Chabon's *Wonder Boys* and Richard Russo's *Straight Man*] give us an answer. Teaching is the most private and solitary act in academic life, and teaching is almost always done behind closed doors. In these novels even the sex is more public than the teaching…teaching is always private, unseen, invisible, imperceptible to the general academic community.
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> (Roth 2002)

One factor in keeping teaching private is interpreting academic freedom as providing protection not only for what a faculty member may say, but also for how he or she may say it in the classroom. Based on this interpretation, faculty are often heard to raise the rallying cry, "No one can tell me how to teach in my own classroom." This interpretation of the protections of academic freedom falsely portrays professors as independent contractors of learning, and the university as the general contractor. In this metaphor, faculty just show up to put in the plumbing. I believe that Joan Tronto and Lorie Roth would agree that this reduces teacher competence to disciplinary expertise and works against shared responsibility for the learning of students. Collaborating, even across disciplinary boundaries, to design curricula and learning experiences and to improve teaching is part of our responsibility as teaching professionals.

Taking Responsibility for the Circumstances of Learning

If, in order to exercise the competence of professional teachers, we need to be engaged in a collective enterprise of fostering student learning, would this commit us as faculty to speaking out against practices in our institutions that are not conducive to student learning? At the risk of seeming completely idealistic and out of touch with how colleges and universities actually work, I'd like to re-examine two nearly universal practices in higher education that seem to violate the principle of being student learning-centered that is at the heart of feminist pedagogy and of the ethics of teaching I have proposed. These two practices are the large lecture classes common in freshman general education and gateway to the major courses, and evaluation through grading. Large lecture classes are justified on the basis of cost. They are economical because a single senior faculty member can deliver instruction to hundreds of students, assisted by low wage part-time instructors and graduate student teaching assistants. But is delivery of instruction the same thing as learning? It is nearly impossible in courses of this size, even with the addition of study groups, to make students and their learning needs the focus of the design of curriculum and learning experiences, or to create learning communities that welcome and value each student's contribution. While universities and colleges express concern over freshman retention rates, don't these

courses really serve to weed out those who are insufficiently prepared or committed to higher education?

In a similar fashion, the system of grading that is ostensibly about recognizing and evaluating student learning primarily serves a social sorting purpose. Yes, it may provide a quick, if not always reliable, means of predicting the quality of a student's later performance in jobs and professional studies. But as Alfie Kohn argued in "The Dangerous Myth of Grade Inflation," widespread concerns about grade inflation in higher education mask the true problems with grading. Kohn argues that, by pitting students against one another in the pursuit of a scarce commodity, the "A," grading all too often directs students' attention not to learning, but to winning. "The number of peers that a student has bested tells us little about how much she knows and is able to do. Indeed, such grading policies may create a competitive climate that is counterproductive for winners and losers alike" (Kohn 2002). There are processes other than grading for evaluating student performance which recognize the unique character of each student's learning, such as giving narrative feedback in relation to learning outcomes, and creating portfolios of student work. At Alverno, we do not give grades, but do give narrative feedback, and every student maintains an electronic portfolio of her work. We know from our practice that these can be very rich sources of data for predicting our graduates' subsequent performance, and they do find jobs and enter professional programs at rates comparable to their graded peers. If both large lecture courses and grading are justified, it is not because they contribute to learning, but because they are assumed to be the only strategies for delivery of instruction and evaluation feasible on a large scale. Perhaps feminist teachers and proponents of student-centered learning should be working to find creative and cost-effective alternatives to both.

Another Look at an Ethics of Teaching

In this paper I have drawn on feminist epistemology, ethics and pedagogy to articulate some aspects of a care-based ethics of teaching. While I have focused largely on the needs of women students (and my own practice has been shaped by my experiences in a liberal arts college for women) the student-centered approach I have advocated allows for making the needs of any students central to teaching and learning. Understanding teaching as a species of caring, I have explored some consequences for teaching practice of the attentiveness, responsiveness, and responsibility characteristic of caring professionals.

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