

## The role of directive moral teaching:

### Reply to Michael Hand's 'Moral education in the community of inquiry'

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#### Abstract

In this commentary on Michael Hand's paper 'Moral education in the community of inquiry', I argue that Hand is right to call for the Community of Inquiry method to include directive moral teaching. I do so in the light of having worked with this broader conception, or something very like it, in the writing of the NSW Primary Ethics Curriculum. Using examples from this curriculum, I aim to show the necessity of a broader Col, and to argue for a process that involves even more direction.

#### Key words

classroom examples, community of inquiry, directive teaching

How should we teach ethics? In his challenging and tightly argued piece, *Moral education in the community of inquiry*, Michael Hand (this issue) makes a case for a philosophy-based pedagogy employing both directive and nondirective teaching. Central to this conception is *moral inquiry*, described as 'the investigation of the nature of moral standards ... of how subscription to such standards might be justified, and examining the strength of suggested justifications' (2020, p. 4). Moreover, Hand argues, there is more to moral education than moral inquiry:

[E]qually important is *moral formation* ... cultivating in children and young people of the intentions, feelings and habits that constitute moral subscription to basic moral standards: prohibitions on killing and doing harm, stealing and extorting, lying and cheating and requirements to treat others fairly, keep one's promises and help those in need'. (Hand 2020, pp. 4, 8)

But teaching for moral formation is directive: in the classroom teachers ‘*will aim to bring it about that pupils understand and accept the justification for subscribing [or not subscribing in the case of unjustified moral standards]*’ (Hand 2020, p. 6, my emphasis). In other words, ‘*the teacher tries to persuade pupils that they should subscribe (or should not, in the case of unjustified moral standards)*’ (Hand 2020, p. 6, my emphasis). And, Hand argues, ‘... in a coherent program of moral education, moral inquiry ... supports moral formation by helping [pupils] grasp the justification for subscribing to these standards’ (2020, p. 8).

Hand (2020) notes, however, that when dealing with *controversial* moral standards; that is, ‘those to which the arguments for and against subscription are inconclusive’ (p. 6), there is no room for persuasion. As he puts it: ‘When teaching controversial moral values (e.g. do not eat meat; vote in democratic elections), [teachers] will aim to bring it about that pupils understand the arguments for and against subscription and can form considered views on them’ (p. 6).

On Hand’s view then,

[M]oral inquiry involves a mixture of *directive* and *nondirective* teaching. The teaching of justified and unjustified moral standards is directive, because the teacher tries to persuade pupils that they should or should not subscribe. The teaching of controversial moral standards is nondirective, because the teacher refrains from persuasion and tries only to acquaint pupils with the arguments on each side. Facilitators of classroom moral inquiry must therefore shift back and forth between directive and nondirective aims, depending on the moral standards whose justificatory status is under scrutiny. (2020, pp. 6-7, emphasis in original)

And so we come to a provocation: Hand’s notion of directive teaching is at odds with the pedagogy employed and promoted almost uniformly by practitioners working within the influential Philosophy for Children sphere. It is of course the so-called ‘Community of Inquiry’ (CoI) approach generally attributed to Matthew Lipman, the founder of the Philosophy for Children Programme. As Hand (2020) describes it, ‘The CoI method is non-didactic, collaborative and dialogical: the role of the teacher is not to convey information or supply answers, but to facilitate a form of collective inquiry that is constructive, critical and self-correcting’ (p. 5) And, as Hand points out, ‘While the nondirective aims appropriate to teaching controversial moral standards harmonise perfectly with the CoI method, the directive aims appropriate

to teaching justified and unjustified moral standards seem jarringly discordant with it' (2020, p. 7).

Loath to abandon the CoI method, Hand (2020) sets out 'to argue for a more expansive understanding of the CoI method—one in which there is, after all, room for directive moral teaching' (p. 8). He does so by identifying three 'principal sources of resistance to directive teaching in the CoI literature, and push[ing] back against each' (p. 8). The first is the idea that imparting moral beliefs is indoctrinatory; the second that questions discussed in the CoI must be 'open', and the third, the idea that teachers must be 'philosophically self-effacing'.

I'm convinced by all three of Hand's arguments, whose conclusions are:

First (indoctrination), 'insofar as they [teachers] try to impart *warranted* moral beliefs, and use rational means of persuasion to do so, they are breaching no norm of either education or philosophy' (Hand 2020, p. 10, emphasis in original).

Second (open questions), that the inquiry does not depend on questions being 'open' but rather on the answers being 'difficult to come by and not yet known to the inquirers' (Hand 2020, p. 11).

Thirdly (epistemic equality), 'The teacher in the classroom CoI does not, and should not, meet her pupils as an epistemic equal; she does not, and should not, lose sight of her pedagogical responsibility for her pupils' learning; and, where she knows the answer to the question under discussion, she does not, and should not, refrain from helping her pupils to find it' (Hand 2020, p. 17).

Here I want to turn from theory to practice. Not only do I agree with Hand (2020) when he argues that 'we should broaden our conception of the classroom CoI to allow both directive and nondirective aims' (p. 19), I have worked with this broader conception, or something very like it, in the writing of the NSW Primary Ethics curriculum (<https://primaryethics.com.au/>). The program encompasses 73, three-to-four lesson topics, and is designed for children in Kindergarten to Year 6. The program serves as an alternative to scripture in NSW public schools and, prior to the pandemic, reached some 45,000 students.

For now, I would like to use some examples from the Primary Ethics curriculum to demonstrate this broader conception of the classroom CoI, one that encompasses both directive and nondirective teaching. I'll start with a topic entitled 'Understanding Diversity', aimed at students in Years 3 and 4.

To build children's thinking about diversity we must build their knowledge of diverse beliefs, cultures, values and circumstances, and of the complex relationships between these factors. And we must also build their understanding of the fundamental similarities that underlie such diversity. More particularly, we must encourage children to investigate the possibility that common moral principles or values can underlie quite different sets of moral rules.

The topic has a number of clearly stated aims designed to support students to develop:

- An understanding that common features of humanity underlie many observed cultural differences, including differences in customs, differences in moral codes and practices, and differences in understandings of the world;
- A recognition that circumstances influence the areas of knowledge that are valued within a society and the moral rules and practices which are adopted; and
- An understanding that common moral principles or values can underlie quite different sets of moral rules.

It is clear that teaching for moral formation plays a big part here. The teacher's goals are overwhelmingly directive and as we work through the topic it becomes clear that the pedagogy has all the hallmarks of Hand's directive teaching:

We impart warranted moral beliefs using rational means.

We take inquiry to encompass questions whose answers are 'not yet known to the inquirers'.

We see the teacher's role as taking 'pedagogical responsibility for pupils' learning' so that 'where she knows the answer to the question under discussion, she does not ... refrain from helping her pupils to find it' (Hand 2020, p. 17).

Now to the detail.

We pursue our goals through an extended example relating to traditional Inuit life. In attempting to cultivate the skills and dispositions that make for good ethical reasoning, we must, at the same time, build in necessary background knowledge. One of the great breakthroughs in understanding the development of children's thinking is the recognition that, counter to Piaget's influential view, children *can*

engage in so-called 'higher-order thinking', but to do so they must have appropriate background knowledge. Background knowledge is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for enabling critical thought within a given subject matter (Bjorklund 1997).

In the first lesson then, we aim to equip students with some understanding of the world in which the traditional Inuit lived. We do so using a combination of both teacher and student questioning and student-to-student discussion, with the teacher filling in the gaps.

We move on (in the next lesson) to think about rules and punishment and particularly about the way the Inuit determined the relative severity of crimes and penalties. Here students are faced with three instances of stealing within the Inuit community and asked to rate them: bad, very bad, or very, very bad, and to explain their choices.

- Aputi has never stolen anything before. But yesterday she stole a fish from her neighbour. Her neighbour had spent many hours fishing out on the ice, and now he has many, many fish—lots more than Aputi has.
- Nuvuk has stolen all his neighbour's fish, and has left his neighbour with very little to eat. And Nuvuk has done this before to someone else.
- Oki has stolen his neighbour's fishing equipment. So now his neighbour cannot catch fish to feed his family.
- Is Oki's crime worse than Nuvuk's? Or is Nuvuk's worse? Or are their crimes equally bad?

This exercise is non-directive: students engage in small group discussion before feeding their decisions back to the class. The teacher's role here is simply to take responses, ask how each of the decisions was made and to encourage whole-class discussion by asking the following procedural question:

- Did any other pair reach the same—or different—decision? If so, can you tell us how you reached your decision?

And then the teacher intervenes, revealing that in real life, the traditional Inuit decided how serious a crime was by thinking about how much harm it had caused,

and whether the thief had stolen before. Then some more questions, followed by discussion:

- Is that the way you worked it out? Or did you think in a different way? (Non-directive)
- What do you think the Inuit would say about the three crimes? Would they say they are all equally bad? Or that some are worse than others? What makes you think that?

At this point, students should have enough information to deduce that the Inuit would rate some of the crimes as worse than others. And where they are unable to do so, the teacher will ask the following series of directive follow-up questions, to be used as necessary:

- Aputi stole a fish from her neighbour, and her neighbor had plenty of fish; Nuvuk stole all his neighbour's fish. Did Nuvuk cause more harm than Aputi? Or did they each cause the same amount of harm?
- Had Aputi ever stolen before? Had Nuvuk?
- Would the Inuit see Aputi's and Nuvuk's crimes as equally bad?
- Or would they see one as worse than the other?
- Oki stole his neighbour's fishing equipment, so that his neighbour couldn't catch fish to feed his family. Who caused more harm: Oki or Nuvuk? Or did they each cause the same amount of harm?
- Do you think the Inuit would call Oki's crime Bad or Very bad or Very, very bad?
- What about Nuvuk's crime? And Aputi's crime?

And then to punishments. The teacher begins with these non-directive questions:

- Should all those who stole be punished?
- If so, do you think they should all be given the same punishment? If not, who should get the harshest punishment? And who should get the lightest?

And then the teacher again:

In real life, the Inuit would give Aputi the lightest punishment—perhaps just make her apologise and give her neighbour another fish—or maybe two. And they might punish Nuvik by ignoring him until they were convinced that his behaviour had changed and he would not behave in that way again.

They would give Oki the harshest penalty. He might be made to leave the group. And that would make his life very, very hard. He would have to work all the time, just to survive. And he would have to do that until the group decided that his behaviour had changed. And then he would be invited to return.

Then the following questions (mixture of directive and non-nondirective):

- Do you think the punishments are fair? Are you able to say why you think that?
- Think about Aputi's punishment—having to apologise to her neighbour and to replace the fish. Now think about this: Suppose you have never been in trouble at school. And you've certainly never taken something that does not belong to you. But you notice that the person next to you has a pencil that is just the colour you need to finish your drawing. So you lean over and take it—and you don't give it back. But the teacher notices. What will happen?

*Follow-up questions (only if necessary)*

Will the teacher tell you to give it back?

Will she ask you to apologise to the person next to you?

Is that a bit like Aputi's punishment? Or is it different? And do you think it's fair?

- What about Oki's punishment? He was expelled from the group until it was decided that his behaviour had changed. Can you think of any punishments that are a bit like that in our society?

*Follow-up questions (only if necessary)*

In our society, what happens when someone commits a serious crime—like hurting someone or robbing a bank?

Why do we put people in jail? And do you think it's fair?

The Inuit didn't have prisons—they didn't put people in jail. Why do you think that was?

Is putting people in jail a bit like expelling Oki from the group? Or do you think it's different? ... What makes you think that?

- Now what about Nuvuk's punishment? He stays in the group but no one is allowed to talk to him. Do you think that's fair?
- Can you think of any punishments that are a bit like that at school, or at home?

*Follow-up question (only if necessary)*

If you keep on talking to the person next to you and mucking around and distracting the other kids, what might happen?

And now the last lesson: back to Oki ...

Teacher: What if Oki wasn't the only one to steal his neighbour's fishing equipment? What if Pakak did too—his crime was just the same as Oki's. Pakak was the best hunter in the group. He was the strongest and the cleverest, and he always led the hunt.

- What sort of punishment do you think the Inuit would have given Pakak? (non-directive)

Teacher (after student discussion): The Inuit didn't give Pakak the same punishment as Oki. Instead, they gave him the 'being ignored' punishment—a much lighter punishment.

Teacher: using procedural questions *only* to facilitate a discussion (Non-directive):

- Why do you think Pakak got a lighter punishment?
- Do you think that was fair?

Teacher again: Is this the way our laws and rules work? Let's look at some examples.

Students discuss a number of scenarios. This is one of them (abbreviated):

Suppose that Matt is the best T-ball player in the school team. The team has made the grand final and it is the last practice session before the match. During practice, one of the kids fumbles what should have been a very easy catch, and Matt makes fun of him. The coach notices and says 'you know the put-down rule Matt. I'm



afraid you won't be playing in the grand final.'

- Matt is the best player in the team, and it's the grand final. Should the coach have let Matt play, even though he'd broken the rule? Or should the same rules and consequences apply to everyone in the team? Why do you think that?

Back to the Inuit:

Here the teacher uses procedural questions only to facilitate a discussion around the following questions:

- Was it fair that the leader of the hunt got a lighter punishment than Oki?
- Why do you think the Inuit gave a less severe punishment to Pakak, the leader of the hunt?
- If you were one of the Inuit trying to work out whether or not to give the leader of the hunt a less severe punishment, how would you decide?
- Do you think it was the right thing for the Inuit to do?
- Could it be that it is the right thing for the Inuit to do, even if it's not right for the T-Ball coach to let Matt play in the grand final?
- Is it possible for something to be right but not fair?

END OF TOPIC

This topic illustrates a number of Hand's (2020) key claims. First, the teacher sets out to impart a set of warranted moral beliefs, clearly articulated in the topic's aims. Secondly, as a facilitator of classroom moral inquiry, she 'shifts back and forth between directive and nondirective aims'; as Hand has it, 'depending on the moral standards whose justificatory status is under scrutiny' (p. 7). Thirdly, she does so in the form of questions, many of which are *settled* even though her students 'are not yet familiar with the argument and evidence that settles them, [leaving] ample scope for collaborative and critical inquiry' (p. 11). Fourthly, the teacher employs what Hand calls *rational means of persuasion*. It comes about when the teacher 'believes a basic moral standard to be justified, on the strength of the decisively good reason there is to subscribe to it' (p. 9). In such a case, Hand argues, her belief is epistemically warranted. Further, 'if she persuades her pupils that the standard is

justified by drawing their attention to the decisively good reason for subscribing to it, she is imparting an epistemically warranted belief by rational means' (p .9).

Finally, here the teacher does not (and should not, according to Hand) 'meet her pupils as epistemic equals; she does not and should not, lose sight of her pedagogical responsibility for her pupils' learning; and, where she knows the answer to the question under discussion, she does not, and should not, refrain from helping her pupils to find it' (Hand 2020, p. 17). In addition, the teacher imparts no contentious beliefs of her own, and does not, as Lipman, Sharp and Oscanyan fear, 'abort the children's thinking before they have had a chance to see where their own ideas might lead' (cited by Hand 2020, p. 9). In short, I see the pedagogy displayed in this topic as one element in a 'more expansive understanding of the Col' (Hand 2020, p. 4).

More particularly, I take it to involve a number of elements: one is Socratic questioning—the logically structured style of teacher questioning that has been handed down to us from Socrates, most famously in the dialogue with the slave in Plato's *Meno*. A second is a method championed by Dewey: 'making the difficulty of new problems large enough to challenge thought, and small enough so that ... there shall be luminous spots from which helpful suggestions may spring' (Dewey 1922/1916, p. 164).

A third pedagogical component comes from the Russian psychologist Vygotsky: the now well-supported idea that learning is enhanced when children engage in dialogue with their peers. It is this three-pronged teaching strategy that I refer to as 'Community of Inquiry'.

Michael Hand has argued for a teaching method that includes both moral inquiry and moral formation; one in which teachers move back and forth between directive and non-directive methods. But the example I have given is more directive still. Discussion plans are ready-made, as are follow-up questions, and now I would like to defend those restrictions. I'll do so by using another example, this time a shorter one.

In a Year 5-6 topic on drugs in sport, students are in the midst of discussing the topic's big question: 'Should the ban on performance enhancing drugs be lifted?' The focus right now is on the question, 'When is an advantage unfair?' The teacher is working with a pre-written discussion plan—a logically sequenced series of

questions, standardly called ‘substantive questions’. Suppose the discussion plan begins like this:

Question 1: Coaches and athletes make sure they keep up with the latest scientific discoveries about the way diet, or what we eat, affects performance. Science has shown that ‘loading up’ on carbohydrates (pasta, especially) before a race improves your performance. *Suppose a swimmer loads up on pasta before a race. Is this unfair to the other athletes? Give your reasons.*

Question 2: Having big feet is an advantage for a swimmer. Ian Thorpe’s feet are size 17. This gave him an advantage over swimmers with smaller feet. *Is it an unfair advantage?*

Question 3: Now suppose surgeons work out how to safely increase the size of athletes’ feet. *Would it be unfair if a swimmer with small feet had an operation to make his feet bigger?*

And then we get to altitude training and oxygen tents and EPO.

Let’s return to Question 2:

Having big feet is an advantage for a swimmer. Ian Thorpe’s feet are size 17. This gave him an advantage over swimmers with smaller feet. *Is it an unfair advantage?*

Suppose students respond emphatically with ‘No!’, but are then unable to come up with much in the way of a reason. To help them do better, the teacher needs to ask another question. But what question? She has to come up with it on the run. And to make it a good (i.e. helpful) question she probably needs to have thought through this whole issue for herself. Suppose these conditions are met and she decides to see whether, underlying the students intuitive answer, is the idea of a *natural* versus—in some sense or other—an *un-natural advantage*. And she responds with this:

*Thorpe’s big feet are a natural advantage, just like being tall is a natural advantage for a basketball player. Does that mean that his advantage is not unfair?*

Suppose now that students agree—that’s it—Thorpe’s big feet are a natural advantage, and so the advantage is not unfair. And then the teacher decides to take the matter further. She offers a counter argument:

*Thorpe's big feet are just a matter of luck—they have nothing to do with hard work. And swimmers with small feet can't do anything to make their feet grow—it doesn't matter how hard they train. Could this mean that Thorpe's advantage is an unfair advantage?*

I take it that this is the level of questioning required in order for students to come to grips with the question, 'When are advantages unfair?' But as Hand (2020) has pointed out, 'there is ... a problem about teachers in the Col guiding pupils towards the answers to moral questions' (p. 13). But in the absence of teacher input, can we expect students themselves to engage in such questioning? And can we expect our teachers—whether volunteers in the case of Primary Ethics, or trained teachers in other contexts, even those with some P4C training—to have the relevant philosophical arguments and principles at their fingertips. And can we expect either teachers or volunteers to deal in this sort of depth with every question students raise in response to an initial stimulus? Can we expect them to formulate follow-up questions like those I have described? Surely the answer has to be 'No', in both cases. Even trained teachers are not trained in *moral reasoning*. And were they to implement a moral education program based in moral philosophy, they too would require either very substantial training or the kind of support our curriculum provides.

And that is why, in the Primary Ethics curriculum, we include detailed advice for teachers—every topic begins with a 'Background for teachers' section in which we sketch the philosophical arguments and the developmental findings on which the topic is based. And it's why we have such detailed discussion plans which, when implemented by the teacher, help both teacher and children discover these arguments, principles and criteria. It is also why, although all of our topics begin with a stimulus, we rarely ask children to come up with questions about the stimulus, questions that will, to a large extent, determine the structure of the topic.

Of course this is a trade-off: in being more directive, we may stifle creative thought and miss some insights students might otherwise have reached. But on the other side, we increase our chances of succeeding in the task of developing students' capability for moral reasoning. And I've decided to take the latter path.

To close, I would like to make a remark about the advantage a *curriculum* has over shorter, less sequential forms of philosophical teaching materials. As is obvious, a curriculum spanning (say) years K-6 allows us build skills and understandings in a sequential manner. But more than that, unlike less sequential programs, we are able to work with a spiral curriculum, 'moving back and forth between what is known

and what is problematic', as Dewey put it. For example, we can begin with a topic on 'Fairness' in Year 1, noting that children of that age are already thinking about articulating and/or acting on principles of fairness, most likely strict equality rule or an effort-based principle. So in this early topic we invite children to think for themselves about these two principles: *Does fairness mean giving everyone an equal share? Does it mean getting back what you put in?*

We have two other topics focused directly on fairness. The next comes in Year 4, and introduces the idea of distributing goods on the basis of need—an idea that demands that people be treated unequally. These questions pave the way for a more detailed discussion of the concept of equal opportunity in the Year 6 topic, 'A fair society'.

In conclusion then, I agree with Hand's arguments for a more expansive understanding of the CoI method—one in which there is room for directive moral teaching. And I have argued for a further directive, this time for ready-made discussion plans and follow-up questions, formulated by philosophers who have some understanding of moral theories and who are prepared to come to grips with both child/adolescent development, and the Philosophy for Children program.

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