A Kohlbergian Approach to Teaching

Goal Two Reflective Essay: Human Development and Practice

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American psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg devised six stages of moral development. While there is a wide spread of moral maturation among all ages, most individuals of secondary student age have reached between the fourth and sixth stage of Kohlberg’s theory or moral development. Those stages are referred to law and order orientation, the social contract legalistic orientation, and finally the universal ethical-principle orientation (Kohlberg, 1973, p. 630). The aim of this paper is to relate teaching strategies to an understanding of Kohlberg’s theory. Every student in the secondary classroom is at a different point in their moral maturation process. Effective instruction meets students where they are in that process, and supports them in their advancement within. This paper aims to aid in identifying students’ moral development stage, and suggest strategies for engaging students in each stage.

Kohlberg’s theory is about moral development, the mental framework of discerning right from wrong. Therefore, it makes sense to relate his theory more specifically to classroom management, instructional strategies notwithstanding. This is right because a safe and responsive classroom is the first step in good learning. Without this foundation, students will not learn.

The first three stages in Kohlberg’s theory are generally surpassed by of age secondary students. Many students however will not have surpassed stage four, which is the authority and social order obedience driven stage. Morality is dictated by an outside force, and in the classroom, this is the teacher. According to Kohlberg, most students—in fact most members of society—remain at this stage of moral development. Therefore is our job as teachers, to strain for the progression of students’ development, and help in their advancement to the next stage. However, this is a good place to start for a secondary classroom. Students at this stage will respond to authority, so it is important to establish authority and respect in the classroom. As a student teacher, this has been the most difficult for me. I instinctively want to befriend my students, to reason with them, to relate to them. If I do that, I have to play catch up in the authority department. Most students respect authority, but they will always question it and challenge it. As a teacher you have to be diligent, and put your foot down when needed.

The fifth stage of Kohlberg’s theory is the social contract stage. In a Harvard article, Kohlberg and Professor Rochelle Mayer (1972) emphasize “the view that educating consists of transmitting knowledge, skills, and social and moral rules of the culture. Knowledge and rules of the culture may be rapidly changing or they may be static. In either case, however, it is assumed that education is the transmission of the culturally given” (p. 453). These “rules of the culture” is often a huge heartache for students. Culture in schools among students can be cruel, as was my personal experience in middle school. But the classroom is the teacher’s responsibility, and teachers have the opportunity to create their own classroom culture. Some classrooms can be safe, fun and uplifting places for students to learn. A way to do this is by developing what my school district calls a social contract. This is also known as norm setting. This is done at the beginning of the school, where students generate answers to the following questions: How do you want to be treated by me (teacher)? How do you want to be treated by each other? And how do you think I (teacher) want to be treated by you? From a discussion, students generate a social contract that is posted on the classroom walls, and it is signed. The words on this social contract are cold, hard evidence that adolescents have the ability to morally reason this way. With the social contract, individuals have rights that have been agreed upon by the whole classroom and written in ink.

The sixth stage of moral development is what’s known as the universal ethical-principle orientation. In this stage, what is right is in accord with ethical principles of justice and the equality of individual rights. For example, a law that aids some people but hurts others would be considered wrong. This is the highest level of moral reasoning according to Kohlberg, and it is the most difficult to teach. A text in my sophomore English class that deals heavily with this stage of moral reasoning is the play *Antigone* by Sophocles (441 BC). In the play, Polynices dies and King Creon refuses to give him a proper burial because he was a traitor. Antigone, Polynices’ sister defies the king and buries Polynices in secret (l. 385-386). Her defiance of the king’s verdict, under pain of death, is a great example of this type of moral reasoning. The universal ethical-principle orientation argues that if one is to be just, they must oppose unjust laws. Antigone believes that despite his betrayal, Polynices still has the same fundamental rights as all individuals, and she opposes this unjust law.

Every day in the same class we respond to writing prompts that relate to the material we’re reading. These can be thought-provoking questions, quotes, or video clips. Following the written response time we have a discussion. Various stage of moral reasoning can be taught this way, when the response or discussion is directed toward questions of morality. I believe discussions can be most powerful if the students are able to relate the ideas to their own life. For example, while studying *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding (1954), I asked my students if Ralph was innocent or guilty for the murder of Simon (p. 153). They wrote about it, arguing both sides, and then we had a classroom debate. Most students engaged with deep ideas such as being guilty by association, sins of omission, and individual rights in a kill-or-be-killed society. The rich discussion challenged students’ concepts of right and wrong, and many encountered stage six thinking. Activities such as these can serve to accomplish the teacher’s task: to meet students where they are, and support them in their advancement.

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