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Teaching citizenship with a collaborative computer game

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This article deals with the potentials of computer games in teaching morality as part of citizenship education.

A finding of recent research on morality is that people do not act from a unified morality that tells what is right and what is wrong in all situations: on the contrary action is related to situation. The assumption made by Jean Piaget¹ and Lawrence Kohlberg (1967) that morality develops in natural stages where every new stage represents a higher morality does not apply. Such thinking has led to the idea that morality can be transmitted to children by teachers. This might have been possible in a homogenous society with a consensus on what to transmit and where teachers could act with moral authority, but the situation in the European countries of today is totally different.

Drawing on Lev Vygotsky², researchers like Bagnall (1998) and Crawford (2001) criticise modernist morality, which is described as ‘...an ideal of non-contradictions, an ideal of a single, unitary, universal ethical code...’ (Bagnall, 1998, p 7).

As life in post-modern societies is characterised by moral ambivalence and competing moral discourses (even within one individual) children meet a variety of moral standpoints. Morality varies with sex, social class, ethnicity, religious belief, and not least between age groups. One can speak of ‘living in different worlds’ (Sjodin, 1995) when describing the morality of teachers and their students. This implies that people meet with conflicting morals and rely on the morality of their specific group. From a post-modern perspective morality is seen as socially grounded, implying that every time, society and societal group has its own kind of morality. Morality is constructed everywhere and all the time, outside and inside the school, independent of an explicit agenda. Morality is discussed, questioned and shaped by social interaction and moral discourse is frequent in students’ everyday life, as is shown by research on spontaneous speech. The moral impulses in natural interactions seem even more influential than any interventional program, and students’ morality influenced less by their teachers and much more by their mates (Sjodin, 1995).

Moral situationalism

In this situation, teaching has to recognise morality as local, intuitive, spontaneous, open, uncertain, inter-subjective, fragmented, and pluralistic. Building among others, on the works of Martin Buber, Zygmunt Bauman and Sayla Benhabib the Australian researcher Richard Bagnall (1998) has developed an educational response to the post-modern challenge on moral education which he calls ‘moral situationalism’. The basis for moral situationalism is ‘the culturally grounded, individual acceptance of moral responsibility for one’s actions, unrationalised by the intrusion of rules, codes or principles constraining or restraining individual action. It consists in facing the ‘...challenge for the Other, which is the challenge of responsibility for the Other’” (Bauman, 1995, p 1).

¹ Piaget, J. (1932/1968).

² Vygotsky, L. (1926/1992).

The task of moral education is to make children act according to what they instinctively know is right. To do this, education must not preach a set of universal rules, but focus on actions and the understanding of these actions (Bergman, 2004). Benhabib suggested an ethics based on 'a moral conversation in which the capacity to reverse perspectives, that is, the willingness to reason from the other's point of view, and the sensitivity to hear their voice is paramount' (1992, p 3). To act like that involves a range of capabilities, including those of contesting realities with others without that contestation leading to closure or violence.

Transmitting morality

Schools in many European countries, including Sweden, are still mandated to transmit national (or eventually European) citizenship values to students. Teachers still try to transmit a package of values and norms by means of a teaching largely based on the assumption that teachers have the leading role in the development of children's morality (Torrance, 2001). The effects of the teaching seem, however, insufficient.

As an example, of four successive Swedish national evaluations of citizenship education, the first study in 1989³ showed that a majority of eleven year old children gave answers that were consistent with the values given by the curriculum. There were no significant differences between girls and boys. The children, however, could not explain their choices (Svingby, 1992). The result can be related to the assumption, made by Vygotsky and others, that children are born with instincts of sympathy towards other humans, which will develop into morality through interaction with other people in a specific social and historic context. In contrast, the answers of 15 year old students in 1995 and 2003 did not show the same morality. Their answers varied according to the specific situation. The more abstract, distant and general the situation was, the more the answers harmonised with established moral rules and curricular values, whereas answers to specific, and familiar situations were loaded with 'situational morality'. The well-known Kohlberg dilemma, for example, where Harry considers stealing medicine to save his sick wife, was followed by the proposition that Harry did not love his wife, and then followed by a situation where the sick person was a foreigner. (We also introduced the reversed situation with Harry being ill and Mary the actor). The answers clearly revealed that empathy was dependent on the level of love – and on the sex of the actor – with a majority of answers not in accordance with universal moral rules. In a set of classroom dilemmas, the students could choose to 'act' in favour of those in need or refrain from doing so (help from the teacher, time with the computer, extra help to those in need). A majority of boys gave themselves most of the benefits and their answers were strongly dependent on the specific situation. Girls' answers, in contrast, varied less with situation and were on the whole more in accordance with societal norms (Svingby, 1998; Axelsson & Persson, 2005; Oscarsson & Svingby, 2005). The teaching was described as factual transmission mixed with 'discussions', with few possibilities to try out different moralities in action. Teachers expressed a need for teaching methods better adapted to the teaching of morality in a post-modern world. Both students and teachers saw the opportunity to try out actions in authentic dilemmas as a promising way of learning morality.

³ The sample consisted of 6000 children, who answered a broad range of dilemma questions individually, in pairs and in groups.

Even if the theory presented by Bagnall takes its theoretical stance in post-modernism, with an emphasis on moral responsibility and empathy, the theory differs from the radical type of post-modernism, where nothing is stable and anything goes. Like Vygotsky, Bagnall sees interaction with others by means of play and simulated realities as an important way of developing the needed moral sensitivity, which involves situational sensitivity. Such an attempt involves understanding of the communicative processes themselves, a reflexive understanding of what it means to tolerate and respect otherness, and of what it means to understand and respond sympathetically to the particularities of lived events.

Students can learn this by undertaking or being part of an action and by reflecting on the assumptions underpinning the action. This involves the effort of understanding the culturally constructed nature of those assumptions, and the limitations that these assumptions impose on human action as well as the relationships of power, domination and oppression that are immanent to human actions.

Lived situations

What sort of educational experiences may contribute to moral sensitivity? We assume that teaching has to change (Ross, 2002). Instead of teachers transmitting values, the need of lived situations is obvious. Such situations could be embedded in the discourses and the lives of the students. By using lived situations the learning would be experiential in its fullest sense. The experiential engagement may be both direct, through involvement in lived events, or it may be simulated (Andresen et al., 1995). In the case of simulated situations, these may locate the learner in situations, which are authentic interpretations of the situations-as-lived or which are truly fictional. This can be done by dramatic reconstruction, literature, or interactive computer games, as has been argued by, for example, Nussbaum (1990).

Computer games are part of the everyday life of many European children, and they already invite children to act out various types of morality. In line with the above reasoning schools could capitalise on this interest, and use ready-made games or develop games themselves. This might be seen as hazardous. Moral uncertainty rises in response to new technological developments. There is a multitude of games, but the morality involved seems to be rather one-sided. When playing computer games, children enter virtual worlds where winning in many cases is the result not of empathy and tolerance, but of strength, ruthlessness and lack of empathy. Research is also scarce on the effects of playing the games (Bergman, 2005).

To meet the requirements of teaching aimed at the development of moral sensitivity, the student should see the situations as authentic simulations of real life. A central question if computer games are to be used as means to teach morality, is whether the players are engaged in the virtual world of the game in a way that meets the requirements of an authentic interpretation of the situations-as-lived. Gander (2005) studied players of a computer game, through an agent interacted in a virtual world. He was interested in what perspectives the players adopted for events they remembered from having participated in the story. Gander showed that the participants referred to the computer game character in a way similar to personal experience, that is, by using the pronoun I. When people spoke of events from a fictional text, in contrast, they took the perspective of an observer looking at the event from the outside. Gander concludes that the game players adopted a

perspective on events and actions from the story that was similar to that of personal experience. The finding is in line with that of Wilhelmsson (2001) and gives an indication that computer games have the potential for giving the players the feeling of actually participating in a lived situation.

The Ethics game

Building on similar findings, we developed a computer game on human rights versus animal rights and have started exploring the possibilities it offers students for developing morality by acting in a virtual world (Svingby, 2005). The choice of moral problem was influenced by the intense interest by many young people in the Animal Rights Movement and by a recent study indicating that Swedish youth does not see humans as of more value than animals and considers the rights of animals as equal to that of humans. The requirement of participation is met by our game.

The computer game, called the Ethics Game, invites players to participate in the development of a virtual world with the intention of letting them truly interact with the story. The game offers players a series of situations in which they can choose different ways of acting. The players continually meet the consequences of their choices, and meet with other actors who act from different positions. The players have to stop and learn their arguments, and try to persuade them by their own arguments, and by using all that they have learned. The game confronts universal human rights with universal animal rights in a virtual city with a lot of health problems. By having students working in pairs, interaction is built into the situation. The pair of players becomes part of the city ethic committee, and is involved in decisions on what to do when acute health problems occur. Every problem can be dealt with in several ways leading to different consequences. The decisions taken by the players will in various degrees violate or support human rights and animal rights, while the 'permanent' members of the ethic committee question their decisions along a continuum from exclusive human rights over animals to equality of man and animal. Every action will have consequences for those living in the city, men and animals, and they will become happy, angry or ill. Playing the game means to take decisions in a series of situations where moral sensitivity can be played out. The game does not of course provide any ready-made answers to the question of whether rights are restricted to humans or whether they should include other living creatures.

A preliminary study in 2004, with eight students aged 16, showed students to be engaged in playing the game and also engaging in vivid discussions on what is right and what is wrong in the specific situations. We observed that the players tended to act spontaneously and inconsistently; that is their actions varied with the specific situation. Girls and boys, however, acted differently. The pairs of girls discussed much more while playing than did the boys. The girls more often than the boys expanded the arguments for a specific action outside the situation, thus starting to build a sort of generalised moral rules. The players spent 30 to 40 minutes with the game. In the interviews following the game, the students said that the game was fun and interesting and that it made them reflect on the complexity of the relation between animals and humans. Even if the game presented a range of difficult and realistic situations, the students wanted the game to present still more difficult conflicts. The game has been revised and a new study is being undertaken in June 2005 with 20 students playing in pairs. The students will be given a net questionnaire before starting the game on their values and knowledge of the issue of animal rights. The game-playing will be video-filmed, the students will be interviewed, and they will answer

a second questionnaire after having played the game. The actions chosen will be studied in relation to the collaboration and the dialogues in order to find the types of morality involved in the actions and the verbalised rationalities accompanying the actions. This will be understood in relation to students' knowledge and attitudes, as expressed in questionnaires and interviews, and in eventual changes in these. Building on the emerging theory presented above, our focus will be on the situational or rule-based type of morality and on the level of situational sensitivity expressed.

So far, we conclude that the computer game may be a valuable means to teach morality as part of citizenship education in a post-modern situation. Through the use of simulations a computer game offers possibilities of trying out moral sensitivity in a variety of life-like situations. If players are participating in the story as if it was real, by using the agent as a Game Ego, they can act spontaneously and can then reflect on the effects of their actions in discussions with their co-player or in the classroom. A game can be played more than once, and it will not be the same game. In playing again, a player can choose different actions and meet with different consequences. A game can thus mirror a variety of moral stances, and the player can try out a variety of moralities, and hopefully, as a result, develop greater moral sensitivity.

In doing so, teaching may contribute to the goal formulated by Bauman, Benhabib and others and expressed by Bagnall as 'Moral situationalism ...involves the freeing of the moral impulse from the strictures of modernist moral precepts; and it involves the development of moral judgement and action to the point of highly sophisticated expertise, informed intuitively by the wisdom of individual experience'(1998, 7).

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