Limitations of the Case Study Approach to Pedagogical Ethics Education

David P. Burns, C. Leung, L. Parsons, G. Singh, & B. Yeung, Kwantlen Polytechnic University

Authors' Contact Information

David P. Burns,
Faculty, Department of Educational Studies,
Kwantlen Polytechnic University,
12666 72 Ave, Surrey, BC, Canada. V3W 2M8
email: dburns@ualberta.ca

All other coauthors are undergraduate research assistants in the same department.

Abstract:

The ethical education of teachers is an important element of their professional preparation. Despite this, ethical issues are given little time in many teacher education programs. This reality has given the methods that ethics instructors use a particular level of importance. One common method is the case study approach, prominently embodied by Strike and Soltis' The Ethics of Teaching. This paper will argue that this approach fails to address the crucial capacity of practical ethical reasoning and that Strike's theoretical justification of the case study approach is too cautious.

Key Words:

Ethics; Education; Teacher Education; Professional Ethics; Philosophy; Case Studies; Phronesis; Student Teachers.

Introduction

The ethical education of teachers is unavoidably difficult. While it appears now to be common philosophical sense that moral educators in primary and secondary schools ought to ensure their *entire* school environment teaches sound moral lessons, post-secondary professional ethics teachers are typically restricted to a single course (if such a course exists at all). Much must be done in very little time. It follows from this situation that the way in which pedagogical ethics instructors use this time is of critical importance.

One popular way to make good use of such courses is the case study method, which has become popular across the professions and in teacher education specifically (Ray, 2007). One prominent text in this area is *The Ethics of Teaching* by Strike and Soltis (2009). This paper will discuss one important shortcoming of the approach embodied by *The Ethics of Teaching* and more fully explicated in one of Strike's book

chapters, entitled "Teaching ethical reasoning using cases"(1993). We will argue that, while valuable teaching outcomes may be satisfied using a case study approach, one deeply valuable outcome is left largely unaddressed and perhaps even hampered. We will begin by discussing what a case study is and what Strike's particular vision of this approach looks like. We will then draw an analogy to scientific modeling and discuss it in light of a familiar Aristotelian argument about *phronesis*. We will conclude with an assessment of two proposals.

Case Studies

At the most basic level case studies provide a context for ethical dilemmas (McWilliams & Nahavandi, 2006). Students are presented with a paragraph or other short piece of writing that contains a dilemma the teacher wishes to discuss (Fisher & Levinger, 2008). In some cases the student is asked to take on the perspective of the person faced with the dilemma and decide what he or she would do if placed in the given position (Winston, 1999). These cases may be taken from texts like Strike and Soltis', but some argue that the most effective case studies are authored by students themselves (Brislin, 1997).

There are at least two main goals evident in the case study literature. The first is to help students bridge the gap between theory and practice (Ray, 2007). In using case studies students take the ethical theories and arguments they have been studying in the classroom and apply them to a situation that either did happen or could plausibly happen. In doing so the students are given opportunities to practice identifying relevant principles and problems and to apply various sorts of ethical analyses. Strike and Soltis (2009) encourage students to apply both consequentialist and nonconsequentialist reasoning to their cases. In their chapter on punishment and due process, for example, they discuss how a consequentialist might be less strictly attached to punishing only guilty students than a nonconsequentialist would.

The second main goal of the case study approach is to foster an increased level of interest and engagement (Delatte, 1997). Since case studies provide a certain level of understanding of the risks and stakes involved, students are given an opportunity to more fully invest themselves in the situation and the dispute contained within it. Students are more likely to do this, it is argued, when they can gain a level of vicarious experience of the dilemma (Griffith & Laframboise, 1998). This is thought to be especially true of case studies drawn from actual events (Fisher & Levinger, 2008).

From a moral educational perspective these goals are uncontroversial. Constructed as an attempt to foster contextually sensitive moral reasoning and engagement, it would seem that case studies are an obvious choice for pedagogical ethics courses. Significant difficulty arises, however, when one examines the extent to which one might reasonably expect these goals to be accomplished by the sort of case Strike and Soltis offer. Do case studies provide opportunities to bridge the theory-practice gap? Do they provide real engagement? Answering these questions requires an examination of the theoretical background Strike provides for his case study approach.

Dialogical Competence and the Strike Approach

It is unreasonable, Strike argues, to expect a pedagogical ethics course to develop good character or caring dispositions, as the circumstances are too constrained (1993). Such a course simply does not provide the required amount of time to meaningfully influence a person's dispositions. Instead, Strike seeks a more modest contribution. If his students enter the profession knowing what certain key principles are, and how to discuss and examine them in teaching practice, Strike argues progress will have been made. He thus argues that pedagogical ethics courses ought to aim at developing a certain kind of analytic and deliberative capacity.

Strike (1993) refers to this capacity as *dialogical competence*. It is defined as "acquiring facility with the concepts that regulate our public life. It involves mastery of a form of discourse that integrates moral intuitions, moral principles, and background conceptions into a dialogically achieved reflective equilibrium" (Strike, 1993, p. 111). Summarizing Strike's position, Husu and Tirri (2003) note "the task is not so much to acquire appropriate stances as it is to allow the moral discussions to become objects of conscious reflection. Consequently, the process also enhances the sophistication of the employment of stances. In such learning, the basic purpose is not so much to discover 'moral truth', as it is to uncover the web of educational decisions and actions in particular cases" (p. 350). The goal, put simply, is to develop the capacity to intelligently examine and discuss ethical issues.

In pursuit of this goal *The Ethics of Teaching* is surely a valuable resource. The chapters each deal with an important category of pedagogical ethics: punishment, due process, intellectual freedom, diversity, democracy and professionalism. Each chapter gives several case studies that provide context for dilemmas based on the conflicting principles in that chapter's theme. The authors then provide a sample debate between two interlocutors about the issue in a given case and proceed to explain relevant ethical principles and theoretical insight from consequentialism and nonconsequentialism.

Students who study this text, and engage in meaningful class discussion around it, will be provided with a set of valuable principles, analytic methods, and hypothetical examples with which to consider several key ethical disputes. It is also the case, we argue, that the cases and explanations are designed to foster essentially the same debates over the same issues each time they are used. Why might this be so? To find the answer one must look outside the text to Strike's explanation of his approach.

Strike (1993) argues that a good case is built around principles and particular desirable discussions. One begins with set of principles or issues that need to be covered and builds a set of contextual facts around it. These contextual details are to be limited to the amount required to foster the desired discussion. Strike explains that:

> … too much detail can be confusing and distracting. Material that is not relevant to the moral principle involved should not be included. Cases are more like diagrams in a science text than literary works. Their point is to simplify the world so as to focus attention on relevant facts and issues. (Strike, 1993, p. 113)

> Good cases should hint at directions for analysis without asserting them. (Strike, 1993, p. 113)

It is here that Strike identifies what we take to be the chief limitation of his approach. In comparing a good case to a diagram in a science text (a scientific model), we believe he has formed a misleading analogy with pernicious implications. It is insufficient, we argue, to engage in a kind of moral education whose primary connection to experience is the sort of case Strike outlines above. While we agree that his *dialogical competence* is valuable, we argue that it is insufficient to the task of preparing teachers for ethical practice and that Strike's approach is too cautious.

The Scientific Analogy

To fully explicate this point let us examine what a scientific model is meant to achieve. As Strike points out, models are meant to pull away all extraneous variables so that a simplification of some form can be authored. They are ideal conceptualizations that, by definition, do not exist. So when a science teacher explains how fast a ball will fall if it is dropped from a particular height, the science teacher is not referring to any extant thing. The ball, the location, and the anonymous ball-dropping agent are all abstractions meant to allow the student to focus on the single causal mechanism being discussed. It is not expected that this situation will ever occur in the world. It may be hoped, however, that the student may see this idealized causal mechanism at play in the future in some actual event which is necessarily much more complex. The difference between these two expectations is highly relevant. If the student is to see this causal mechanism at play in some real situation she will be employing a capacity not fostered by the model-based instruction alone. She will be engaging in a kind of scientific perception, which allows her to discern when a particular model provides explanatory assistance and when it does not.

For example, imagine a student has recently been taught a lesson using a ball-dropping model of gravity. One day this student comes across a leaf blowing about in a field in unpredictable ways. It moves up and down, left and right. This directly contradicts what the model she was recently taught predicts. The leaf *should* fall down, but it does not. If this student realizes that the wind moves the leaf with enough force to sometimes overcome gravitational pull, this realization will not come from anything the model indicated. The wind was an extraneous variable. The realization that wind pushes leaves up in spite of gravity comes from having *experienced* how wind and leaves behave. As a result of having both the experience of observing the behaviour of leaves, and of having learned about a gravitational model, the student can intelligently reflect on the use of this model in the given situation. She has used both the theoretical or technical aspects of her science lesson *and* a kind of practical discernment. Only in combination with this discernment can the model have any practical effect on her thinking and behaviour. The alternative is to fill science textbooks with an infinite set of specific contextual variables.

Models are intentionally limited. They provide the capacity to calculate and understand various forces given ideal conditions. Notably, a model already contains all relationships and dynamics relevant to the abstraction. Once the student is given the correct variables the problem essentially becomes a mathematical one. Crucially, the most difficult scientific tasks have already been done. The formula has been discovered and the extraneous variables have been eliminated. The student is left, given a set of

abstracted conditions (values), to follow the reasoning to its only logical end. There is strictly no discernment involved.

This most certainly forms a disanalogy with the requirements of ethical professional life. There are no set formulae with which to make ethical decisions. There *are* a number of rival theories of how one might come to ethical decisions, but these theories are neither so definitive nor widely agreed upon. Thus, if pedagogical ethics courses are to adequately prepare teachers for the issues they will confront in schools, these teachers must be somehow taught to determine or evaluate the relevant formulae for themselves. This is not possible if they are taught primarily with case studies constructed as models with some of the variables filled in. If a case is constructed by "hinting" at how to examine a set of predetermined principles, the student is being handed a context that is built to reduce the disagreement to such a fundamental level that no actual situation could ever resemble it. Most of the serious moral work is already done.

This approach makes a great deal of sense, however, if one begins with the premise that all teacher educators may do is foster an increased capacity to discuss ethical ideas (dialogical competence). If one accepts this premise the plausibility and complexity of the cases under discussion is secondarily valuable at best. In the interests of time it becomes desirable to construct cases like scientific models. Case studies conceived of in this way direct students to the discussion one wishes to foster and provide them with those contextual details required to feed that discussion. Additional context simply takes time away from the lesson plan. This premise, we argue, is a poor one.

Teachers clearly need practice determining what the ethically relevant facts are and when something is an ethical issue and when it is not. By providing these two key variables – the ethically relevant facts and the identification of the problem – Strike has done the truly difficult work for students already. What if the problem is not so clear in a classroom? If students are ethically educated using cases in which certain fundamental principles are largely self-evident, and in which there are no pieces of superfluous information, to what degree may they be expected to understand the complex dynamics of the classroom? How may they realize that wind sometimes pushes things up?

To further explicate this point a specific example is in order. The cases provided in *The Ethics of Teaching* are typically between one and two pages in length, and as such are too long to reproduce here. Strike does, however, provide a shortened example in a previous piece that is reproduced in larger form in *The Ethics of Teaching*.

A teacher is called out of the room. When the teacher returns, it is discovered that a student had done something that might have endangered the safety of his class. The teacher thinks it is important to find the perpetrator. However, the perpetrator is unwilling to confess, and no one else will turn in the perpetrator. The teacher decides to put the entire class on detention. (Strike, 1993, p. 102)[1]

While this excerpt is much shorter than the cases in the text (2009), it does provide a useful example to demonstrate the point under discussion. First, the student knows that

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[1] In Appendix A we provide a contrasting case study of comparable length.

this is an ethical dilemma without having to perceive this to be the case. It might seem like an obvious problem, but it must also be recognized that not every ethical issue is self-evident. Working with a case like this one does not advance the student's capacity to discern dilemmas from non-dilemmas. Second, the case is clearly authored to direct students to a discussion of appropriate circumstances for punishment and class safety. Once again, to discern that these two issues are at play in a real situation would be a considerable ethical achievement unto itself. This is especially true for a teacher flooded with decisions and left with precious few seconds in which to make them.

So it would seem that the *dialogical competence* fostered by these examples extends only to situations that conform to fairly restrictive and abstract calculi. Given a limited set of clearly relevant facts and a pair of competing principles, the student would be able to discuss and analyze the situation and hopefully come to a defensible choice of action. While there is certainly more than one possible answer (unlike in the case of scientific modeling), much of the work towards an answer has been done. If this competence transfers to real situations this move would be the result of these skills *and* the crucial addition of some capacity for moral perception and discernment. What Strike's argument, and Strike and Soltis' cases, seem to lack is the kind of reasoning that sorts through the complex reality of actual context – irrelevant details and all.

At this point it is important to note that Strike does not claim that his dilemmas have a single answer. Indeed, a chief strength he identifies in his approach is that at least two plausible arguments can be made in each case (1988). Similarly, he does not argue that one ought not to practice discerning when to apply certain principles. Indeed, he expressly argues that "we are usually called upon to determine the relevant ethical principle or principles that apply to a case, to ascertain the relevant facts of the case, and to judge the facts by the principles" (Strike, 1988, p. 156). One would expect, then, that the argument presented thus far for a kind of ethical discernment would be largely agreeable to Strike. Where this paper's position differs from Strike's is on the question of whether ethical cases, conceived of as scientific models, can achieve this goal.

A Familiar Argument

The reasoning that allows an agent to cope with the rich complexity of real situations is often called *phronesis*, an Aristotelian concept identified in *Nicomachean Ethics* (1140a25). Aristotle's *phronesis* is the virtue that allows an agent to discern what action constitutes expression of the other virtues in particular contexts (1107a1). In other words, it is the practical, contextual reasoning that allows one to sort out the complexity of actual life. Dunne explains that *phronesis* "… is not contained in a set of formulable premises…" but is rather "… an acquired resourcefulness whereby one can recurrently discern what is to be done – that is, what counts as noble – in each situation as one meets it" (1999, p. 59). This sort of reasoning is typically contrasted with *techne*, which Aristotle describes as a kind of technical or craft skill (1140a1).

Returning to Strike and Soltis' case studies, it would certainly be an exaggeration to label them as merely fostering *techne*, as there is always a central moral dilemma deliberately built in. Conversations about how to resolve this dilemma are not reducible to technical reasoning. To follow the scientific metaphor, while it is clear that many ethical variables are already set in such cases (such as the identification of the relevant

information), the central dilemma always leaves a key decision to the student. "Should the teacher sacrifice just punishment in the interest of student safety?", for example. It is clear, though, that while this level of decision-making is important, it also falls short of fostering *phronesis.* Too much of the ethical work has already been done.

This line, however, would likely fail to compel Strike. Indeed, it appears likely that a supporter of Strike's position might merely reiterate his skepticism about fostering virtue in pedagogical ethics classes. If one has but a single semester with a few hours per week it seems implausibly ambitious to suggest that true *phronesis* could be meaningfully taught or fostered. Thus, the more humble goal of providing students with the ethical concepts and analytical skills plausibly taught in a formal setting, remains the most viable goal.

Indeed, it would be difficult to advance an argument that proposed that a single semester course could result in meaningful attainment of *phronetic* virtue. Higgins (2002), in a paper dealing with the role of *phronesis* in teacher education, concedes a similar point. After discussing a series of arguments about technicism in education (including a reference to something very near the scientific modeling connection discussed here), Higgins concludes that *phronesis* has a central role to play. He notes, however, that *phronesis* requires experience to develop and hence cannot be taught separately from the gaining of that experience. Ultimately, he recommends that the best that can be done is to remove barriers to the development of *phronesis.* As Kerdeman (2002) later pointed out, his proposal largely avoids the question of how it might be fostered directly.

So Strike is clearly on solid ground when he sidesteps the question of *phronetic* development in favour of his less contextual notion of *dialogical competence.* But if it is true that case studies foster dialogical competence, and teachers need dialogical competence *and* the ability to practice contextual *phronetic* reasoning, the question of what might be done to foster both capacities deserves another look. If *phronesis* cannot be meaningfully impacted by teacher education, teacher educators will be in the dubious position of having little to do about what may very well be the key ethical capacity for new teachers.

Proposals

The skepticism in Higgins' argument is based on the conclusion that an instructor simply cannot *provide* experience, and hence cannot positively foster *phronesis.* This is only partly true, we think. Schools of education are almost universally in the business of providing at least some experience. Programs leading to a Bachelor of Education or teacher certification typically involve some level of practical experience under the label of student teaching. Such efforts already aim to foster the sort of contextual practical reasoning Aristotle identified and it is only a slight addition to add attention to ethical questions.

A student teacher working alongside a mentor is sure to encounter ethical dilemmas in the course of the practicum experience. Such an experience is a rich opportunity to utilize the *dialogical competence* Strike envisions *and* to practice the more contextualized capacity indicative of *phronesis.* If a pedagogical ethics course were

situated after such practical terms, or between them, the class could draw very profitably on the richer situational data of the practical experience *and* the case studies provided by Strike and Soltis. In this way the student would be given an opportunity to both have practical experiences and reflect on them in a supervised environment.

If one turns to the case study literature another less ambitious proposal presents itself. One could do precisely what Strike (1993, p. 113) claims not to do and utilize literary case studies (Griffith & Laframboise, 1998). In such projects the students could examine a novel that detailed the life of an educator or other person in a pedagogically relevant situation. With a more extensive and complex narrative to examine, students would be forced to engage in the two activities we argue Strike avoids – identification of ethical problems and the discernment of the ethically relevant from the ethically irrelevant. While such an option would surely take time away from the conventional case studies Strike and Soltis provide, this approach would be a valuable addition to their proposed method.

If we turn back to Aristotle it seems that such proposals might fit rather well with the vision expressed in *Nicomachean Ethics*. Helping teachers to develop good ethical discernment early in their careers is very much in line with the Aristotelian emphasis on early habituation (*NE*, 1103b20). When Aristotle argues that the habits one develops in youth are of central importance, he says so because those early habits come to reinforce themselves. Bad habits dispose us to bad actions, and those actions thereby further habituate us into those same bad habits. The road to vice is so paved. Much the same can be said of a teacher's ethical disposition. If ethical instruction is limited to *dialogical competence,* teacher educators have effectively abandoned the task of helping teachers to form good habits early in their career. With no intervention at this crucial stage new teachers are left to engage in their early teaching experiences with little guidance as to the practical, *phronetic* requirements that so powerfully define daily life as a teacher. If, on the other hand, ethics instruction was more closely tied to practicum experiences, or at least more closely tied to richer contexts (as in literature), teachers would receive at least some practice that could lay an early groundwork for future *phronetic* development. It would be an exaggeration to say that *phronesis* was thereby taught, but these pedagogical interventions would at least contribute to its growth.

Higgins is most certainly correct in his assessment that *phronesis* is both important to teacher education and resistant to teaching. Strike is also correct in arguing that virtue simply cannot be meaningfully taught in a pedagogical ethics class. Neither of these positions, though, precludes the proposals advanced here. While we cannot teach *phronesis* in a conventional sense, we can lay the groundwork for it in teacher education programs so that future teachers have an opportunity to tie their *dialogical competence* to their early experiences as student teachers. If Aristotle is correct that early habits are of central importance, and it seems he is, we cannot afford missing the opportunity to lay the foundation, however modest, for the development of future *phronetic* capacity. In the end we would argue that Strike is not wrong, but in this respect is simply too cautious. We should indeed lay the groundwork for virtue.

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Appendix A

The sort of case study we argue is needed is, of course, far too large to fully reproduce in this context. We do wish, however, to give one illustration of our imagined approach. In the below excerpt a student-teacher would need to actively engage in the process of determining which of the given details are morally or pedagogically relevant. Many details, such as the religious composition of the community, or the duration of the friendship in question, are not self-evidently significant. The reader must make a series of judgments regarding what exactly ought to be considered. While this excerpt certainly does not embody the full narrative we hope to encourage, it does serve to illustrate the difference between a case study constructed with only the necessary details and one constructed with details of ambiguous relevance. This example forms a stark contrast with the previously quoted case in Strike (1993, p. 102).

Sample Case Study Excerpt

Katie is a 14 year-old female attending a Vancouver public school in a predominantly evangelical Protestant neighborhood. She comes from a religious family who opposes homosexuality and she openly expresses these views in the classroom setting. Katie is an honour student who is involved in multiple student clubs. Stephen, who comes from a liberal religious family, has been Katie's best friend for five years. He is an average student who is quiet and shy. He is generally cooperative but prefers not to be involved in extracurricular activities in school. Recently, Stephen openly identified himself as homosexual. Stephen and Katie's social circle, which consists entirely of heterosexual males and females in the same grade, is divided in its support. Furthermore, there is an absence of gay-straight alliances at this school, and the counselor, although she is available, has never knowingly dealt with LGBTQ (Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender-Queer) issues before. Stephen approaches Katie at school in search of support. Katie overtly expresses her disapproval. She yells, "I can never be friends with you again! Homosexuality is wrong. It says so in the Bible!" She slams the locker door and storms off. Stephen is left humiliated and immediately leaves.

You, as a teacher, walk by and notice the crowd of students in the hallway. As the crowd disperses, you pull a student aside and ask him what happened. The student tells you about the incident. What do you do?