

Teaching ethics in social work classroom. The challenge of socratic method of education.

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Abstract

As clearly stated in 2004 by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), the purpose of the work of IASSW and IFSW on ethics is to promote ethical debate and reflection. The article argues that the role of dialogue in promoting ethical awareness could be strengthened by adopting a «socratic» model of education. For these reasons, this article is structured in three parts: 1) an introduction to the crucial meaning of education and the contemporary background within which teaching ethics takes place; 2) a brief investigation of the etymological origin of the term «awareness» and its relevance in social work ethics; 3) third and final point concerns promoting ethical awareness in social work students and the focus here will be on the socratic model of teaching.

Keywords

Social work education, ethics, socratic method, awareness

Education as a space of heterogeneity

What does to teach really mean? What deep relationship is actuated between a teacher and a student? And what dynamic is installed between learning and transmitting?

Some theoretical insights of Deleuze can help to answer these questions. The famous French post-modernist philosopher claimed that philosophy is all about thinking differently, in an unorthodox, non-commonsensical way; that is why various scholars — as noted by Snir (2018) — have examined the relation of education and thinking in his writings. According to Deleuze, the problem is that we are accustomed to think of education in a hierarchical view: «According to this infantile prejudice, the master sets a problem, our task is to solve it, and the result is accredited true or false by a powerful authority» (Deleuze, 2004: 158). Thus, to think of education on a deleuzian way, as Hroch suggests,

we should be able to consider «learning as a process of transformation, the process of students' coming to think differently, thereby becoming-other in the process, and supporting thinking differently from the norm, producing a diverse range of critical and creative ideas, and experiencing the joy of expressing one's capacities» (Hroch, 2014: 57)

This deleuzian model of education is particularly crucial in the training of social work students, as proved by Moffat (2000: 339): «Social work students, teachers and practitioners have historically attempted to gain a sense of ego mastery and control by the acquisition of theory to enhance skill-based practice expertise. [...] We argue, however, that the social work identity is enriched when social workers allow their selves to be in a state of disassembly in the presence of the other. When social workers experience their selves as complex and dialogical, they are more open to the influence of the other». Let's examine in detail this learning process and the creative, though disquieting state of disassembly it produces.

In his introduction to *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze dwells upon outlining the field of pertinence of the educational act, laying stress upon its implicit relational quality: «The reproduction of the Same is not a motor of bodily movements. We know that even the simplest imitation involves a difference between inside and outside. [...] Learning takes place not in the relation between a representation and an action (reproduction of the Same) but in the relation between a sign and a response (encounter with the Other)» (Deleuze, 2004: 25). The teacher is one who makes a sign to the pupil requiring a (free) response, that is to say a repetition that is no longer that homogenising response of the Same (the sign is not in fact reproducible as such, as happens when we portray ourselves in abstract an action to be performed); the response, in contrary fashion, is a repetition that implies difference both because it takes place in the encounter with the Other who teaches and because it brings out a distance (a «heterogeneity» says Deleuze), that is to say an inevitable rejection due to the singular way in which the sign is from time to time imitated. This, in the view of Deleuze, constitutes the troubling, intrinsically risky, aspect of education: given that the response of the pupil is not the reproduction of an input, «we never know in advance how someone will learn: by means of what loves someone becomes good at Latin, what encounters make them a philosopher» (Deleuze, 2004: 205). This is to say that the relationship that goes from the sign to the response is not a mechanical movement but a «living move» which consists of «passions» and «encounters». For that matter, «We learn nothing from those who say: «Do as I do»» (Deleuze, 2004: 26), that is to say with those who do not convey their otherness as teachers in a tie, in an educational space that includes the risk of an unbridgeable and unpredictable gap between sign and response. «Our only teachers — Deleuze goes on — are those who tell us to «do with me,» and are able to emit signs to be developed in heterogeneity rather than propose gestures for us to reproduce» (Deleuze, 2004: 26).

Consequently, we can conclude that learning is an «infinite task» (Deleuze, 2004: 206), not so much in the rather banal sense that there is always something to learn, but in the sense that the educational encounter with the Other is a permanent, untamed condition

of human life. This does not mean we do not need knowledge and professional expertise, especially in the case of social work training students. But the key point is *relationality*, which really matters and must be part of that «disassembled» expertise, i.e. a new professionalism which incorporates doubts and uncertainties constructively (Cabiati, 2017).

It is therefore not difficult to imagine why the Deleuzian model of education has been recently considered particularly promising in social work: «It gives us a better place to start from in relating to others, a place that may acknowledge differences and give us a way of acknowledging and relating to aspects of humanity we have in common that may be less than coherent or seemingly irrational. It might make us less afraid of our own vulnerabilities, which in turn might allow us to be more open to learning, which involves experience (and mistakes)» (Crociani-Windland, 2017: 260).

The contemporary crisis of education

One could at this point read the contemporary crisis of education as the outcome of an inability to think of, and therefore to create, the educational space as a space of encounter and thus of radical heterogeneity. This crisis has two complementary aspects:

1. The penetration of technocratic logic into the educational field (Mehta, 2013);
2. The role consumerism plays in student learning (Harrison & Risler, 2015)

As for the first aspect of the crisis, the situation, as argued by Goldstein, is worrisome: «Influenced by the growing obsession with student outcomes on state-wide standardized tests, teacher education has grown increasingly technocratic as accountability, standards, and measurable outcomes have replaced more humanistic and nuanced concerns in the preparation of professional educators» (Goldstein, 2004: 34). But we know from Deleuze that the more one tries to govern the educational relationship technically, removing the troubling dimension of the encounter with the Other, the more there emerges the space of reproduction of the Same which, as Deleuze says, is not a relation between a sign and a response: it seems more like a relation between a service provider and consumer. Indeed, the technocratic logic tends to interpret the educational relationship as a mechanical transfer of knowledge, where what is transmitted exactly corresponds to what is received. As a result, «students become positioned as consumers of a private commodity that exists to facilitate their personal economic advantage» (Harrison & Risler, 2015: 67).

And that leads to the second aspect of the contemporary crisis of education: «Technocratic education in the post-industrial age promotes the mastery of skills for productivity» (Trifonas, 2018: 5), not the value of thinking critically and differently.

Let us now examine this consumer-capitalist approach to education, which has a tremendous impact on teaching ethics in social work classroom.

As is easy to imagine, the capitalist system tends to produce a capitalist educational system, which is particularly hostile to teaching and learning ethics. Nietzsche has already

figured that out. In 1872, he gave five public lectures on education at Basel's city museum. «Let me tell you — Nietzsche argued — what I think characterizes the vital and pressing educational and pedagogical questions of today. [...] Expansion is one of the favorite national-economic dogmas of the day. As much knowledge and education as possible — leading to the greatest possible production and demand — leading to the greatest happiness: that's the formula. Here we have Utility as the goal and purpose of education, or more precisely Gain: the highest possible income. From this point of view, education essentially means acquiring the discernment that keeps a person «up to date», tells him all the ways to most easily make money, gives him power over the various channels along which individuals and peoples conduct their business» (Nietzsche, 2016: 27).

It sounds like it was written today. Indeed, teaching ethics within this capitalist framework is not an easy task. And this political factor is especially relevant for social work: when we live in a context where values are tolerated only insofar as they do not challenge or disturb the cause of making money, it becomes difficult to teach that caring for vulnerable people has value as a crucial element of citizenship and a contribution to social justice. Here again Nietzsche helps us to diagnose the symptoms of this educational drift: «The true task of education, in this view, is to form people who are, as the French say, «au courant»—the same way a coin is courant, valid currency. The more of these «circulating» people there are, the happier the nation is as a whole. And that is the goal of the modern educational institution: to make everyone as «current» as it lies in his nature to be, to train everyone to convert his innate capacity for knowledge and wisdom, whatever it might be, into as much happiness and income as possible» (Nietzsche, 2016: 27).

Nevertheless, the task of ethics education for social workers, in spite of all contextual difficulties, is an irrevocable commitment. In 2004 the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) approved a joint statement on ethical principles. In the preface, we can read that «ethical awareness is a fundamental part of the professional practice of social workers. Their ability and commitment to act ethically is an essential aspect of the quality of the service offered to those who use social work services» (IFSW and IASSW, 2004).

The term «awareness» has an interesting etymology, which helps us to challenge the habit of considering awareness as reducible to consciousness. The point is that awareness is not only an intellectual skill, based on knowledge acquisition. What etymology reveals is the practical, operational meaning of awareness. Actually, the adjective «aware» comes from Proto-Indo-European **worós* («attentive»), from **wer-* («to heed; be watchful»). Evidence for its existence is provided by Greek ὁράω (*horáō*, «see») and Latin *vereor* («fear»). The antonym, the opposite meaning is carelessness: the horror of indifference.

So, what does *ethical* awareness mean, at this point? In a nutshell, one could say: standing on guard for others, being worried about vulnerability. That is why this wakefulness for others, or sensitivity for vulnerability, is the cornerstone of ethics in social work: «a fundamental part of the professional practice of social workers» (IFSW and IASSW, 2004).

Besides, ethical awareness involves the ability to swiftly react to another person's need, and this commitment is «an essential aspect of the quality of the service offered to those who use social work services» (IFSW and IASSW, 2004). Consequently, ethical awareness needs to be strictly combined with strength and courage.¹ Therefore, our responsibility, as teachers, is upholding and fostering ethical awareness, combined with courage. So, the question becomes: how do we achieve this educational goal?

Socratic method in social work ethics classroom

The answer is again in the preface of the joint statement on ethical principles: «The purpose of the work of IASSW and IFSW on ethics is to promote ethical debate and reflection in the member organizations, among the providers of social work in member countries, as well as in the schools of social work and among social work students» (IFSW and IASSW, 2004).

The idea is unequivocal: «Social work educators — as noticed by Ferreira & Ferreira (2015: 511) have the responsibility to help social work students understand and espouse the values of the profession, not merely by having them recite the values of social work, but also to enable them to discuss, review, debate and eventually practice within an ever-changing context».

This is a clear reference to socratic method of reasoning by question and answer (Avci, 2017). As it is known, Socrates' disciples ask questions about ethical issues, repeatedly. Questions such as the following: Who gives us the truth about the human condition and mortality? Who knows the best way to live with others in community? What is the right thing to do when we are faced with ethical dilemmas, tricky alternatives (for example, between the wellbeing of different people)? So, what is Socrates' response to all this?

There's a famous passage in Plato's *Phaedo*, where Socrates reveals the rule of dialogue: «You must seek among yourselves [*allélon*]» (*Phaedo*, 78 a-b)². The imperative then is to seek to know oneself through the other, by mutual questioning (Derrida, 1981: 121). Consequently, the truth about human condition is not a possession, it is an endless process of self-verification, testing and being tested by and against each other, in the

¹ That is exactly what is represented in a famous Eighteenth Century allegory of Fortitude and Vigilance, by Corrado Giaquinto (Palace of Caserta, Naples). This allegorical work shows two women: first female figure on the left, holding an oil lamp, which is the traditional symbol of vigilance; on the right, the second female figure depicted as a woman warrior is fortitude. The meaning seems clear: vigilance without fortitude is useless, ineffective; and fortitude without vigilance is a mere exhibition of power, narcissism, megalomania.

² The phrase «among yourselves», or «one another», usually represents the Greek term «*allélon*» (from *állos* = another); in this context, the «*allélon*» principle becomes the methodological key for discussion.

mode of mutual contestation. This means two things. Firstly, what we can call «anxiety»: during this dialogical process no answer could be considered a foregone conclusion, nor definitive, but only temporary and revisable. Secondly, the antidote to this anxiety (*phobou pharmakon*) cannot be the intellectual arrogance, but the humble practice of «doing-with»: that is why Socrates does not present himself as the master of knowledge, but as a fellow pupil, «willing to seek with» (Meno, 81d5) his disciples.

That is the socratic, non-inculcatory model of teaching (Brune, Gronke, Krohn, 2010). At first glimpse, this model has absolutely nothing in common with the dogmatic model and the neutral model of teaching. The dogmatic model, as you would expect, results in indoctrination: the assumption is that the teacher is «omniscient», so critical questions are not heard or allowed. Each dissidence from this hegemonial universalism of truth cannot be tolerated. The neutral model is an overreaction to the dogmatic model. So, it is not a real alternative: the assumption, in this case, is that ideas, values and norms are incomparable and, as a consequence, not debatable. The rule is laissez-faire, «live and let live». That is the formula for tolerance as indifference. Here again, as we saw for dogmatic model, critical thinking is banned. Consequently, «such neutrality might reinforce student prejudices, as it gives the appearance that all ideas are of equal value and even that truth itself is a matter of personal choice or taste. The right to one's opinion is mistaken for the ability to create one's own set of convenient facts» (Fluss, Frim, 2017). The risk, then, is to legitimize any form of discrimination, oppression and violence.

That is why Socrates tries to justify a truly relational model of education, where «knowledge is associated with the ability to engage with others in the reciprocal exchange of giving-and-receiving of a logos within the dialectic process of question-response-refutation» (Magrini, 2018: 79-80).

As we can immediately see, this confrontational model stands in stark opposition to the technocratic-capitalist model of teaching and learning, and for this very reason it can function as an alternative to the contemporary crisis of education. In fact, what happens if we follow the socratic rule of dialogue in the classroom?

We might say that what happens is that we stimulate students to engage into a deliberative space, which is unquestionably a space of «passionate participation» (Barnes, 2008), contributing to our students' development as civic-minded individual and ethically aware citizens. In fact, deliberating means giving reasons on values (against relativistic neutrality) and accepting to put one's beliefs at risk in a situation of interpretation (against dogmatic indoctrination). Furthermore, deliberating means developing student's emotional and intuitive skills, in dealing with ethical dilemmas.³

Briefly, the precious result of taking part in the socratic dialogue is an increase of respect for the opposite view and the acceptance of the views of others and «this would

³ From this «emotional» side, the use of role-playing as a teaching tool can be very useful (Banks, Rifkin, Davidson, Holmes & Moore, 2014).

prepare student to have an effective participation in the democratic process and social commitments» (Hajhosseiny, 2012: 1363). On the contrary, when education «is almost exclusively about the GDP»⁴, the consequence — as we have said before — is that students become positioned as private consumers of knowledge and «we are well on our way to producing a nation of employees, not citizens» (Slouka, 2009: 33)

Conclusion

That is the main educational challenge we are faced with, in this technocratic era of commodification of knowledge. There is a typical «civic indicator» that characterizes a social work ethics classroom that relies on socratic dialogue: students tend to remain in a state of *perplexity*. Clearly, it cannot be considered as a state of trivial confusion. We could claim that perplexity is the socratic word for disassembly, the deleuzian state of thinking and becoming differently, which we mentioned above. As argued by Chappell Deckert and Koenig (2019: 163), «perplexity [...] encourages the recognition of uncertainty, honors the dissonance between past assumptions and new understandings, and creates opportunities for meaningful relationships, personal growth, and social reform».

Not surprisingly, perplexity is a major theme in Jane Addams' *Democracy and Social Ethics*. As Seigfried (2002: xxv–xxvi) notes in her introduction, «perplexity refers to someone's personal involvement in a situation that baffles and confuses her, because her usual understanding and responses are inadequate to explain or transform a troubling situation. She can either continue to hold on to her assumptions or begin to call them into question. But in order to resolve the problematic situation in fact and not subjectively, she must first undergo a painful process of rethinking her presuppositions and values».

We are now able to affirm that this ethical and political ability to call our assumptions into question is only developed by the constant application of the socratic rule of dialogue. In this respect, perplexity is not the end of deliberative process. It is a sort of «way station, through which one passes on the way to an effort to move forward, doing things differently in experimental fashion. Perplexity is the crucible of creativity and dynamism» (Schneiderhan, 2013: 425).

Developed and fostered through the constant rehearsal of deliberation in the classroom, the ability and the courage to dwell in perplexity becomes a vital requisite for the professional practice: perplexity, as both an approach and worldview, challenges routine professional actions and involves non-habitual responses. In some circumstances, this requires us to go beyond the comfort zone of familiarity. But it is only in this uncanny

⁴ The idea of giving students financial incentives is starting to gain traction in US, with schools in New York City and five states experimenting with cash-for-grades. The district's schools chancellor, Michelle Rhee, says the rationale is simple: «This is exactly what life is about. You get a paycheck every two weeks. We're preparing children for life.» (Falk, 2008)

space that the practice of care can be ethically justifiable and performed. More precisely, there are at least three implications for social work practice, as Chappell Deckert and Koenig suggested (2019: 174-175): first, perplexity in social work practice challenges the sterile rigidity of personal-professional boundaries and requires a stepping into liminal space of transformation. Second, perplexity requires openness, and a willingness to take a risk to be vulnerable. And finally, perplexity involves taking risks to learn and grow along with the people with whom we work, as clearly demonstrated by Jane Addams's work at Hull House, continuing and renewing the socratic art of the common search of truth.

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