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Our University – Excellent Teaching and the Moral Fabric

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Our University – Excellent Teaching and the Moral Fabric

Seventh in a series on teaching excellence

Possibly the most important thing that excellent teachers pass on to students is the sense of a prevailing moral fabric resembling what someone gains from a healthy family situation, religious teaching, or association with organizations that purport to be moral or hold to a mission with high moral and social purpose.

Like a university.

Some of my associates are saying that, *“It is not my job to teach morals, and it certainly is not the job of the university.”*

In fact, it is critical to any teaching setting, and important to engendering professionally appropriate values in students.

Is there any morality in mathematics? There certainly is the striving towards elegance in proof and originality in expression. To deny the underlying morality in elegance and originality contributes to the larger social condition of relaxed standards of right and wrong. Further, all good mathematicians understand this morality, and see it as critical to the teaching environment.

It is a high standard and great teachers replay it endlessly - even in the apparently value-free world of mathematics – and because of that a student may even become a good mathematician. Science historian Carl Boyer suggested that *“Mathematics is as much an aspect of culture as it is a collection of algorithms.”*

If mathematicians do not teach the importance of a moral fabric, who will?

In sociology and history the importance of teaching right and wrong may go even deeper. In Mao’s China intellectuals lamented that they were not worried about the future but about the past. *“We understand what the nation is becoming; it is the past, our history, that keeps changing on us, and for that we are most concerned.”*

If teachers in the human arts and sciences do not teach the importance of a moral fabric as a basis for decision making, who will?

Teachers who rewrite history in their own image, or tell only part of a story in sociology, psychology, or anthropology, create misunderstanding and moral vacuums where right and wrong exist only in relative states. Students are shown that it is acceptable to create history as Mao did, rewriting and purging from one situation to the next.

This is true in rocket science and biology too. The teacher has the power to portray a principle as fact even though it be fiction. A lie shrouded in scientific method is no less a lie, and in a teaching environment the most insidious form of manipulation.

Teaching the infallibility of a point of view rips the moral fabric of the professor and the university. John Stuart Mill argued that, "*All silencing of discussion is an assumption of infallibility.*"

If physicists and biologists do not teach the importance of a moral fabric, who will?

And then there is the overarching idea of general morality. What is the morality of representing someone's work as your own? Or nearly as errant, not crediting the effort of others in your own work? These lapses are far too frequent on college and university campuses and the cost is unbearably high.

People lose trust in a teaching organization when professors walk, or in some cases run, away from the fundamental responsibility of teaching right from wrong. These basics transcend nearly every belief system on earth.

Not mine. Not yours. But ours.

Simple moral teaching, acknowledging the needs of the greater body, can be taught in every class at every level, and cannot be comprehensively covered in a specific course on morality. It must be lived action by all professors who claim to be excellent regardless of subject matter.

Such a perspective is the nature of excellence; without this view, true excellence will ever be absent in any university, and our social value undermined.