

TEACHING AND THE MORAL LIFE OF CLASSROOMS

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Morals are caught, not taught. They take shape not through precept, but rather through the uncountable ordinary and informal contacts we have with other people. No single event or deed "causes" us to become patient or impatient, or attentive or inattentive to others. We cannot say, "John became a patient person last Tuesday morning," although that may have been the first occasion when we recognized that virtue in him. Rather, these dispositions emerge unevenly -- if they do so at all -- through fits and starts, as we act in environments such as the home, the school, the community. Moreover, the process can work both ways. Over time, a patient person can lose that virtue and become impatient. Regardless of which way the process goes, however, the point is that it cannot be forced. It cannot be preset according to a timetable or schedule. Character and personal disposition materialize over time. They take form through potentially any contacts an individual has with other people.

This familiar viewpoint serves as my point of departure in the present article. My central premise will be that everyday classroom life is saturated with moral meaning. In particular, I will show how even the most routine aspects of teaching convey moral messages to students. I will suggest that those messages may have as important an impact on them as the formal curriculum itself. The latter includes moral education curricula centered upon values clarification, moral reasoning, democratic deliberation, and the like. These curricular endeavors can benefit students, and, by extension, the larger society. However, I will suggest that it is crucial to heed from a moral point of view what takes place in the routine affairs of the school and classroom. Those affairs can strongly influence students' character and personal disposition. I will focus in particular on how teachers, through their everyday conduct and practice, can create environments in which students can "catch" positive ways of regarding and treating other people and their efforts.

My analysis is based on research I began during a field study of the moral life of schools. Over a nearly three-year-long period, I had the opportunity to observe some 400 classes taught by nine middle school and high school teachers, all of whom work in the same urban setting serving a diverse population. Three work in a Catholic high school for boys, three in a coed independent school, and three in a large public high

school. The subjects they teach include English, mathematics, physical education, religious studies, science, and social studies; one is in Special Education. Over the course of those years I became deeply familiar with the teachers' practices. In time, I began to see how their classroom work was infused with moral significance. I will illuminate that significance by discussing their everyday classroom teaching. I will discuss ways in which they begin a lesson; how they handle the need for turn-taking among students; what their typical style of working is like; and how these routines contribute to the learning environment that eventually emerges in the classroom. These activities are not usually thought of as having moral meaning. They are normally described as issues of classroom management, curricular focus, instructional method, and so forth. However, I will show that in actual practice, they embody ongoing moral lessons about how to treat other people, how to treat oneself, and how to regard the process of education.

1. The Moral Meaning in Classroom Beginnings

By "classroom beginnings," I mean the initial moments of a period when a teacher and his or her students settle into their seats, organize materials, greet others, and in general prepare for the day's lesson. At first glance, nothing could be more mechanical than the humdrum business of getting ready to start a class. Every person who has been to school has participated in such beginnings literally thousands of times.

However, I have discovered that classroom beginnings embody moral rather than merely functional meaning. Consider the following episode from Ms. Walsh's eleventh grade Public Speaking class, this in the large public high school in which she has taught English for twenty years. As a matter of personal style, Ms. Walsh mixes a strong businesslike attitude with more casual, intimate remarks and instructions. I will suggest that her actions evoke moral meanings that reside at the heart of her possible influence on her students.

Here is the episode, one "beginning" among many that is typical of Ms. Walsh's classroom:

Ms. Walsh strides briskly into the classroom with papers tucked under her right arm. She straightens some of the seats and surveys the room rapidly as she passes by the blackboard to the teacher's desk.

Five or six of the twenty-one juniors who comprise this class are already in the room. The eyes of a few follow their teacher as she strides over to the desk. Other students are trickling in. A third of them are colorfully dressed in smart-looking skirts and slacks. Another third or so of the class wear jeans, sneakers, and t-shirts. The rest are dressed in the manner known as "punk."

"Good morning, Ms. Walsh!" one student says as he comes over and stands at the teacher's desk. She is bent over looking through materials she carried into the room with her. "Could you tell me the assignment that--"

--"What is it, Thomas?" Ms. Walsh interrupts as she suddenly looks up. "Put that face on your chest!" she admonishes with a smile, nodding down at the photo ID he is carrying in his hand. (All students in the school are required to wear one.) As the boy complies, she looks around the class settling before her. She glances quickly into the open roll-book in her hand. Many students seem to be talking animatedly, at the same time reaching automatically into bookbags for class materials.

"Now, what was it you wanted, Thomas?" Ms. Walsh returns her gaze to the boy still standing at the desk.

"I need to get the directions you mentioned in class yesterday."

"Oh, Thomas, come on!" Ms. Walsh responds good-naturedly. "Ask a classmate that! You know that by now!"

Just then the second bell rings, announcing the beginning of the period. As students continue to talk and to organize materials, Ms. Walsh strides across the room to shut the door. She stands with her left arm out-stretched, hand on the doorknob, as several latecomers hustle by her into the room. She shuts the door and a moment later stands before the two curved rows of seats.

"OKAY EVERYBODY, LET'S GET STARTED," Ms. Walsh announces in a suddenly loud voice. "I'M READY TO GO." She looks down at the papers in her left hand. "PLEASE, I'D LIKE TO BEGIN." In a softer voice she calls to several students by name, waving and pointing with her right arm.

As they hear their names, individual students turn their heads and look at Ms. Walsh, simultaneously shifting in their seats a bit to face her. "YOO HOO!" she calls out to others, bending forward a bit. "STOP, PEOPLE! IT'S NOT EVEN

FRIDAY YET!" Several students in the front row grin and look around the room, Ms. Walsh smiles herself as she waves with her arm and urges with her eyes the rest to come to order.

"PLEASE, PEOPLE," she repeats loudly. She looks down again at her notes. The class quiets down, students look to the teacher.

This episode occupied about five minutes of time: the four minutes between periods, and approximately one minute after the second bell before the lesson for the day actually began. Anyone who has spent time in public high schools will appreciate that a minute or so from the bell to the start of instruction is remarkable. Yet this is typical of Ms. Walsh's classroom. What makes it so, and what makes it morally significant?

As we can see, Ms. Walsh's style is a mixture of business and camaraderie. The way she strides across the room to straighten chairs and close doors, her alternately loud and soft voice, her waving arms to catch students' attention, her good-natured smiles, all combine to form a kind of personal appeal that she issues at the beginning of every class. There is a ritualized aspect to Ms. Walsh's conduct. For one thing, her actions are repeated day after day. For another, they help both her and her students appreciate, without any of them having to say so, that "We're in Public Speaking class now, not in the hallway, not in gym class, not in math, not in history, not anywhere else but here." Rituals often serve this social function of marking off an activity from all others.

However, Ms. Walsh's actions convey the impression that being in her classroom constitutes more than just physical presence. Rather, to be in Ms. Walsh's class means being prepared, attentive, respectful -- in short, it means taking seriously the time, the place, and the reasons for meeting there in the first place. Consider the sheer brevity of this "beginning." Students do not mill about the room nor engage in any stalling or delaying tactics. While they appear to wait for Ms. Walsh's customary appeal before focusing their attention, from the very moment they enter class they take their seats and begin drawing pens and notes from bookbags even while chatting with peers. These are students who have had to negotiate packed school hallways, and, in some cases, have had to come considerable distance through the

large school plant to reach her class (they have four minutes between periods to accomplish this). Many arrive in class with their minds still occupied with previous experiences or events of the day -- the difficult French test, the just finished science experiment, the hallway argument with a friend. Yet they give Ms. Walsh their attention in fairly short order. They complete their social business before the business of the class begins. They participate in a number of seemingly minor yet purposive acts which, taken together, convert the otherwise mechanical moments before instruction into what I am calling a "classroom beginning."

As brief as this beginning is each day, it reveals the students' willingness to cooperate. Their posture illuminates their attitude toward their teacher and their purposes for being there. They acknowledge Ms. Walsh's authority as teacher; notice that the student in search of information walks up to her desk rather than shouting out to her or otherwise demanding her attention. At the same time, the student's actions, and Ms. Walsh's own, indicate that students regard her as accessible -- they can approach her. Moreover, she makes it abundantly clear that the reason she is there with them is that she wants to teach. She is personally engaging, true enough, but her appeals all emphasize that she wants to get down to business. "Let's get started," she says. "I'm ready to go. . . I'd like to begin." She saves time by rearranging desks and chairs herself before the start of class. She hovers by the door as the bell sounds and closes it officiously in order to begin. In effect, she acts as a gatekeeper, signaling every day that punctuality is a virtue. But her conduct implies that punctuality is a virtue not in and of itself, but rather because her classroom is a place worth coming to and there is not a moment to lose. Had I the space, I could show how busy her lessons are with reading, writing, public speaking, and more.

Seriousness of purpose, respect for time and place, respect for one another, a willingness to prepare oneself for work, an implied sense of trust in the fact that what they are preparing for is worthy -- these and other qualities revealed in this classroom beginning illuminate its moral significance. Ms. Walsh and her students do not talk about those qualities in so many words. Rather, they enact them. In this light, although a single episode is hardly sufficient for drawing any conclusions, it begins to show how "moral education" can be seen as an ongoing, built-in dimension of everyday classroom life. This holds regardless of whether teachers or students are self-conscious about that dimension. A look at another routine common to classrooms offers support for these claims.

2. The Virtues in Hand-Raising

Hand-raising is surely one of the most familiar and ordinary sights in classrooms. Students raise their hands to answer questions, to offer comments, to signal that they have completed or are ready to begin an activity. They do so to ask permission to leave the room, or to perform a service for the teacher or class like looking a word up in a dictionary. In short, hand-raising is a social convention learned early in school and evidently never forgotten, as television screens reveal every day in the raised hands of journalists at press conferences, of members of the audience on talk shows, of cabinet ministers at meetings.

However, hand-raising can comprise more than a purely behavioral mechanism for regulating turns and the flow of events. As with classroom beginnings, it can embody moral meaning, conveying messages about how to regard oneself, other people, and their efforts. It can illuminate how the teacher makes use of the power and authority invested in the role -- and this for better or for worse. The messages teachers send through their classroom procedures may not be desirable. A teacher more intent on sheer control rather than on educating the young may enforce turn-taking in a way that signals: "Obey me!" or, more generally, "Obey authority figures!" That same teacher may get class underway in a fashion that emits a very different message than does Ms. Walsh: not that the classroom is a worthwhile place to be and we should come on time and get ready, but rather is a place to sit still and do what we are told. These, too, are moral messages -- albeit negative ones -- which further reveal the possible moral impact everyday classroom practices can have on students.

Consider Mr. Peters's classroom conduct. Like Ms. Walsh, he signals through his everyday actions that he esteems teaching and learning. He was in his second and third years as a teacher when I was a regular visitor to his classroom. He taught religious studies in a Catholic high school for boys. As a teacher, he takes pains during class to make it clear to students that he values an orderly flow of comments in discussion. Particularly at the start of the school year, he repeatedly reminds students to raise their hands, and offers a running commentary on the actions of students who interrupt peers who have the floor: "Mr Jamerson! Please give Mark the respect you would want yourself!" and "Reggie, take it easy. Nobody should have

to talk over someone else's voice. Do you want them to listen when you're talking?" Mr. Peters's comments, and the students' responses to them, would be worth examining in their own right for what they reveal about the moral environment in the classroom. Their moral significance stands out once they are seen as advocating how one ought to regard and treat other persons' claims to be heard and respected.

However, as with the episode from Ms. Walsh's classroom, my intent here is to illuminate a less visible but no less important layer of moral meaning in classroom life. To single out one class among several Mr. Peters teaches, hand-raising is so commonplace in his ninth-grade Introduction to Religion course that whenever he circulates up and down the rows of seats during individual deskwork, his students often attract his attention by jerking their hands into the air, even when he is only a few feet from their desks. Mr. Peters also endeavors to call on new participants whenever they raise their hands during discussion. He will remark: "Robert Smith! What a pleasure to see your hand up!" Such comments call attention to hand-raising itself, thereby reminding the boys of its usefulness as a mechanism for earning the floor. Mr. Peters's comments also send the important message that all are welcome to participate in discussion, and that he will be personally delighted to see them do so.

In the midst of a discussion in April, a number of students raised their hands when Mr. Peters asked what the term "creed" meant. As Mr. Peters called on Steven, a boy who had spoken up already that period, he noticed a normally quiet student who had not yet contributed half-heartedly raise his hand. Mr. Peters blurted out: "Oh! wait, uh--," and looked rapidly from one boy to the other. He acted quickly: "No, okay, go ahead, Steven." The student did so promptly. Once he was finished, the teacher said "Okay" to him, and then, overlooking other hands still up, he called on the new participant: "Jeffrey, did you want to add something?" Jeffrey proceeded to offer his own understanding of the term.

As with the classroom beginning we witnessed before, this event transpired quickly. Despite its brevity, however, Mr. Peters enacted what can be called a "moral appraisal" of the situation. This term highlights the fact that persons in authority, like teachers, sometimes ignore normal turn-taking procedure and attend instead to particular individuals. Teachers often exercise their discretion and call on certain students ahead of, or rather than, others. Their actions embody moral meaning in at

least three respects: (1) they involve an appraisal, however rapidly it takes place, of whose time, needs, or contributions are the most important; (2) they express a judgment of the value of turn-taking procedures themselves, which classroom participants often come to rely upon heavily for stability and predictability; and (3) such actions disclose how the unavoidable classroom requirement of turn-taking raises issues of fairness and consideration of others. As we observed, Mr. Peters wanted to break with the system he had himself helped institute. He wanted to stop Steven, the boy who had been in line and who had a right to speak next, and call instead on the quiet student Jeffrey. The fact that Steven did have a right to the floor, given the procedures the group typically follows, underscores yet another moral dimension of this seemingly routine incident -- namely, the subtle fashion in which issues of rights and obligations, and whether and how others will learn to recognize them, are woven into the texture of everyday classroom life.

Although a single episode is insufficient for conveying Mr. Peters's approach to teaching, the incident illustrates how he has responded to the power and the authority built into the role of teacher. The fact that he called upon Jeffrey is an expression of that power and authority; he could just as easily have ignored the boy. Moreover, the brief exchange reveals that teachers enact moral appraisals of their students on a continuous basis. Indeed, part of a teacher's power is precisely the license, and the burden, to make such appraisals. Such acts involve a judgment of students' circumstances, capacities, needs, and purposes, as well as mindfulness of the particular contexts in which the latter are expressed. Such acts can be a burden because, as teachers would be the first to attest, they often require postponing or even overlooking students' individual desires and expectations.

Classrooms are crowded and busy environments. Not only must teachers constantly appraise their students' doings, but students themselves must deal with the reality that they cannot all have the floor at once. Consequently, they face a number of ongoing moral alternatives, among them whether to be patient, confrontational, or resigned. Those postures imply very different educational and personal outcomes. Patience is a virtue, and it differs markedly from confrontation and resignation. Patience describes the capacity to persevere and to remain self-possessed in the face of delay and obstacle. To be patient means to be prepared to accept the occasional costs of participating in a community. In the classroom, it means being prepared to wait, to attend to others, to forgo sometimes the opportunity to contribute. As

teachers can affirm, for students who wish to take part, who have ideas and views they want to make known, these costs can be keenly felt. Were students to be denied time and again the chance to participate meaningfully, it would not be surprising to see them give up on the classroom -- to see their patience revert to resignation and passivity. In turn, those postures may imply giving up on formal education itself.

The episode described here illuminates how Mr. Peters's actions work against the prospect of students giving up. As we observed, he is attentive to students, so much so that he noted the quiet student's hand up in the first place (an act which may reveal his larger awareness of the boy's needs as a learner). Mr. Peters acted fairly, ceding the floor to Steven, the fellow he had already acknowledged. He was consistent, following established turn-taking procedure, while also accomplishing the additional goal of encouraging participation. "Encouragement" can mean quite literally to help provide another person courage. The latter is a term whose root meaning is "heart." To take heart is not always a thing easily or lightly done; a person may need support and assistance from others. Mr. Peters's habitual conduct in the classroom helps instill courage in individual students, perhaps particularly in those most in need of it. His ensuring that young Jeffrey had a say that morning will likely increase the odds, rather than lessen them, of the student participating more in future lessons -- and, in a larger sense, participating more in his own education. This possibility underscores the moral significance of otherwise routine practices such as hand-raising in the classroom. Through them, teachers are often unknowingly influencing students to take on certain dispositions and attitudes toward themselves, toward others, and toward learning.

3. "Virtue or Vice emit a Breath Every Moment"

We have seen that routines such as classroom beginnings and turn-taking can embody and convey important moral meanings. In broader terms, this holds for the teacher's everyday style of working with students. By everyday "style," I mean the teacher's habitual ways of responding to what students say and do. Style encompasses gestures, facial expressions, tones of voice, and more. These habits, or elements of style, reflect more than personality or conventional behavior. They express the degree of interest in teaching and in students, as well as the

expectations, that underlie the teacher's efforts.

Moreover, a close look at a teacher's style reveals how it provides students over the course of a school year with an ongoing model of conduct, and this for better or for worse. Many readers can (alas) probably remember a teacher whose every gesture seemed to exude dislike for teaching and for students. That teacher may never have articulated that dislike directly. But as is so often the case with people as we get to know them, the teacher perhaps did not need to do so in order for us to form a lasting impression. Such an impression can materialize as the result of a single incident. Much more often, however, it takes form through a slow, unmonitored process as experience with the particular teacher accumulates. We arrive at an impression of the teacher. We cannot force it, at least if we seek to be honest about the matter.

Ralph Waldo Emerson sheds light on what gives rise to our sense of another person. "Character teaches above our wills," he writes. "Men [and women] imagine that they communicate their virtue or vice only by overt actions, and do not see that virtue or vice emit a breath every moment." Emerson means that persons cannot switch their character on or off at will. Individual character is deeper and broader than the person's immediate self-understanding or self-awareness. It comprises dispositions, attitudes, and values acquired over time. Emerson's insight is that a person is always "emitting" his or her character in the course of dealing with other people. As he puts it, character "teaches," or can be seen, in potentially any of a person's public acts. Seeing this takes time; for though we do make first impressions, we also know that these can be misleading, and are often supplanted by a more mature impression as we come to know the person and his or her characteristic treatment of other people.

As mentioned previously, I observed the teachers whose work I have touched upon here for several consecutive years. In time, I began to see how their character was expressed through their everyday classroom styles. I began to see how Ms. Walsh's and Mr. Peters's dispositions toward the young were "emitted" through routines such as classroom beginnings and turn-taking. I started to appreciate what one of the other teachers I worked with at the time meant in saying that "we teach ourselves." This person meant that every practitioner teaches more than just subject matter. Rather, every teacher leaves a personal imprint or signature on all of his or her classroom doings, so that what students are being exposed to is not just subject

matter but also an outlook on life itself. The longer I witnessed classroom proceedings, the more I perceived -- in a literal sense -- the truth of this claim.

In this section, I will share a look at Ms. Smith's style of working in her sixth-grade social studies classroom. Ms. Smith works in an independent school. A twelve-year veteran, she is highly regarded in her school and has earned public recognition for her ability to teach (as have Ms. Walsh and Mr. Peters). Ms. Smith's everyday style of teaching is marked by energy, enthusiasm, deep interest in the subject, and equally strong interest in how students are performing. Her habitual ways of working with students express the message that she cares about her teaching and her students, and that their time together is worth the effort of coming to school every day prepared and focused. In nearly three years of observing her teaching, however, I never once heard Ms. Smith say such things to her students, at least not in so many words. Her actions spoke them loudly enough.

I offer these preliminary observations not to extol Ms. Smith but to highlight again the idea that morals are caught rather than taught in classrooms. Without necessarily intending to do so, every teacher fashions a classroom environment which either enables or hinders moral growth and flourishing. Dewey wrote that "Just as physical life cannot exist without the support of a physical environment, so moral life cannot go on without the support of a moral environment." The environment is itself influential in inviting persons to act in certain ways rather than others -- and, thereby, to move in the direction of becoming certain kinds of persons rather than others. This is as true of the moral environment in classrooms as it is of other settings such as the home, the church, the workplace. A teacher who is well-prepared, attentive to students, and confident of the importance of education, is more likely than not to cultivate an environment that offers students moral lessons worth "catching." Moreover, as Emerson implies, for better or for worse the teacher's own character shines through over time. In this respect all teachers are role models, regardless of whether they choose to embrace this stance or not. All teachers model a version of how to conduct oneself as a person.

Like Ms. Walsh and Mr. Peters, Ms. Smith conveys the impression that classroom time is precious. At the start of each period she launches instruction promptly, calling out loudly over the classroom chatter "All right!" or "Sh!" followed by an immediate question such as "James! What did you learn yesterday?" or "Sandy!

What were the major points we said about how Cro-Magnon man lived?" She constantly channels her twelve-year-olds' energy into cooperative activity. To students who wave their hands too frantically and call out her name in an effort to obtain the floor ahead of others, she responds: "No, Dennis, not if you make all those noises. . . Megan, just relax, you'll get a chance. . . Mary, no! Just hold on!" To students who, in the early weeks of the year, make fun of a classmate by laughing at an answer or by calling out such things as "That's dumb!" Ms. Smith reacts swiftly: "Hey! If you disagree raise your hand and give your own opinion!" Her unhesitant admonishments highlight the importance of self-discipline and self-possession. They invite students to become more aware of the fact that their actions effect other people, and that they need to be mindful of the reality of other people.

Ms. Smith habitually endeavors to keep students focused on their work. She interjects into discussion queries such as "What is the question we're dealing with now?" or "What is the topic we are discussing?" She asks students to build upon others' views: "Burt, what did Mary add that we haven't heard before?" and "Sarah, tell us in your own words what you think Richard was saying. And then -- Tom! -- I'd like you to say if you agree with Sarah's summary." She urges students to call upon one another if they need assistance. Moreover, if a student starts explaining matters to her rather than to the classmate who posed the question on the floor, she interrupts: "No, Peter, explain your answer to Andrew." She corrals misbehaving students by asking them directly, "What are you supposed to be doing?" or "How can you improve your behavior?" or "Mark, maybe you can call on someone for suggestions on how you can learn to pay attention." Further, if a student responds to a question about what he should be doing by simply saying, for example, "listening," Ms. Smith does not stop there. "'Listening' to what?" she asks in one instance. "Listening to the discussion," the boy replies. "No, that's too vague," retorts Ms. Smith. "What's the point of this discussion?" The boy hesitates, then recalls "Well, uh, we were talking about Roman roads." "Right!" confirms Ms. Smith, and promptly resumes the discussion.

Ms. Smith's energetic teaching, her voice that carries over the whole class, her sheer persistence in moving students into the curriculum: through all of these habitual practices, Ms. Smith publicizes the values of concentration, of effort, of learning to think in cooperation with others. Her everyday actions convert her classroom from a setting in which each student, like an individual spoke of a wheel, has a formal

relationship only with her (the "hub"), into an environment where they take on formal relationships with all the members of the group. Through her daily actions, Ms. Smith helps cultivate student awareness of what it means to engage in a purposeful endeavor with other people. Her actions call attention to the kinds of obligations, responsibilities, and virtues, such as patience and attentiveness, that are required to live in the classroom community.

Ms. Smith repeatedly models these qualities. In Emerson's terms, she "emits" them through her routine practices. As often as not, to judge from her own testimony, she models moral conduct without being aware of doing so. For example, during a discussion one afternoon in November Ms. Smith called on a boy named Ben to give an example of what the social sciences are about. (The day before she had described economics, political science, geography, and other disciplines.) Ben looked at her and shrugged, as if to signal he had nothing to say. But then he began looking over what he had jotted down from the previous class. "Hands down!" Ms. Smith announced parenthetically to students waving theirs in the air, and a dozen hands flopped into laps. Ben continued to peruse his notes while the class turned silent. However, other students were poised to speak, and within a few seconds one girl began blurting out an opinion. "SH!" commanded Ms. Smith, nipping her intrusion in the bud. She asked Ben if he could name some of the social sciences. But he simply stared at his notes. Finally he looked up and said, "Geography." Quickly, Ms. Smith followed up. "And how do we use that?" she asked. Met with silence again, she asked softly, "Ben, what is 'geography'?" The boy sat quietly, and Ms. Smith finally avered, "You'll need to study up on this stuff, Ben, and pay attention closely today." A short time later, she returned to the boy: "What have you learned in the last five minutes?" Ben mentioned several points made by other students. "Are you getting a better idea?" Ms. Smith asked. "No," the fellow admitted. "Okay, Ben, we'll continue and you see how you're doing. Do you want to call on someone to summarize what we've been saying?" Ben did so, and later in the period actually volunteered a response to a question Ms. Smith asked, which she promptly built on to move the discussion forward.

At first glance, these acts constitute nothing more than a familiar classroom event: a teacher asking a student a series of questions to see if he understands the material. However, a second glance reveals the episode's moral significance. Ben's honesty in admitting his continued confusion attests to the moral environment in Ms. Smith's

classroom. It suggests that that environment is marked by a trusting relationship between the teacher and her students. Students appreciate that they will not be embarrassed or humiliated, neither for their ignorance nor for their poor behavior. Ms. Smith acts as if both good behavior and good academic habits must be learned, and that she is there to help students learn them. These facts in themselves make the episode of immediate moral interest, for surely experiencing what it means to be able to trust another person -- particularly a person with power, like a teacher -- is a moral lesson in its own right.

Ms. Smith's conduct as teacher during the episode with Ben illustrates what it means to attend patiently and seriously to another human being. She provided Ben multiple opportunities to speak and to participate. Moreover, all the students in Ms. Smith's classroom are potential witnesses to the everyday actions I have described. Her treatment of individual students is usually conducted publicly, in full view of many other people. Indeed, sometimes students other than the one receiving the teacher's attention are better placed to pick up the "messages" being sent. In the episode here, many students attentively watched Ms. Smith's interaction with Ben. The look on some of their faces mirrored what could be seen during other telling moments in her classroom. To single out but one, during another lesson in November Ms. Smith cut short spontaneous reactions to a comment from a student by saying to the class, "Sh! Quiet! I want to understand this." Leaning over the podium where she often sits, she looked intently at the speaker as the girl proceeded with her opinion. As Ms. Smith did so, several students regarded her wonderingly, almost as if impressed that she would be so interested in something one of them might say.

Ms. Smith was not seeking here to "demonstrate" attentiveness. Rather she was attentive. Without any prior intent, she illustrated graphically to her students what it can mean, in practice rather than in theory, to take another person seriously. The fact that students are often attuned to the subtleties of her actions suggests they are positioned to receive the messages they emit. Students may not be able to articulate their awareness of those messages, at least not in so many words. In my experience, they are masters of both moral concision and of moral understatement: "[Ms. Smith's] okay as a teacher" -- "Yeah, I like her okay" -- "It's fun in her class because we do lots of things." But their laconic comments in no way diminish the moral importance of Ms. Smith's conduct. For one thing, it is unrealistic to expect people to provide meaningful reports on their own ongoing character development. Just as we

cannot say of another person, "She became a considerate human being yesterday evening," so an individual cannot say, "As of this moment I am a patient person." The fact that these statements sound so odd to our ears affirms our experience that dispositions and character emerge over time, such that we typically realize only well after the fact that we have become the persons we are.

One reason I learned to attend in the first place to the everyday events I have described in this article is precisely because I began to realize how attuned students were to them. If virtue and vice emit a breath at every moment, as Emerson claims, it seems to me that with respect to classrooms it is here where students might take on virtue and vice. Their character and personal dispositions take shape through their everyday contacts with their teachers and fellow students, and through the examples of conduct constantly being presented to them.

Conclusion: Appreciating the Moral Life of Classrooms

Many educators today espouse the view that teaching is a moral endeavor. In making this claim, they typically have in mind explicit, deliberate attempts to influence students for the good. As noteworthy as those attempts may be, however, I have suggested in this article that moral education can also be seen as an ongoing, inherent dimension of classroom life. The everyday business of the classroom is potentially as rich in moral lessons as are the most ambitious curricula.

Yet most of us usually go about our work in classrooms unaware that our daily actions emit moral messages. We often act unmindful of the fact that our actions presuppose a broader moral framework that says, in effect: this curriculum, this way of teaching, this way of conducting ourselves, and this way of treating young human beings, is better than others. In an important way, this unawareness is both natural and necessary. If teachers sought to be constantly alert to the moral impact of their work, they might find themselves suddenly walking on eggshells in the classroom, fearful that at any moment a single word or deed might morally injure a student. Such self-awareness could breed what Dewey called "a mania of doubt" that would bring meaningful teaching to a standstill. Ironically, then, actual teaching often has to take place "in the moral dark." Rather than looking over their shoulders at their own moral assumptions, teachers must look at what is going on in front of them. When in

the presence of their students, they must teach rather than worry about the warrant for their teaching. We witnessed this approach in all three classrooms visited in this article. In their everyday work, Ms. Walsh, Mr. Peters, and Ms. Smith are far more attuned to their students than to the particulars of their own conduct or to their rationales for teaching.

Outside the classroom, however, they do think about such matters -- regularly and persistently. They have made such reflection a habit. In my view, it is more than coincidental that they reflect critically on their work, and on themselves as persons, and are also able to shape classroom environments in which students are more likely to flourish than to suffer. The three teachers' example suggests how valuable it is for good practice for teachers to ponder their warrant to teach. Underlying that warrant is the person him- or herself who occupies the role. The lessons that that person conveys through his or her everyday teaching can be as morally influential on students as the most explicit curricular efforts. A patient, attentive teacher is more likely than not to develop an environment that invites students to "catch" those same virtues.

If this argument is sound, it follows that deliberate efforts to promote the moral might work best if they proceed hand-in-hand with awareness of the moral potency of everyday practice. To teach someone how to reason well, for example, is not the same thing as teaching the person to be disposed to reasoning, or to be mindful of others while reasoning, and so forth. Those dispositions take form, if they do so at all, through the evolving habits embedded in everyday life. And this includes classroom life, which we all experience for many more years than we sometimes remember. Consequently, teachers would be well-served if they sought to be cognizant of not just their curricula and instructional methods, but also of their very outlooks on life itself. As we have seen, those outlooks infuse the teacher's everyday work with more meaning than first meets the eye.

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