The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at
**www.emeraldinsight.com/0957-8234.htm**



# Conceptualizing moral literacy

Nancy Tuana
*Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania, USA*



## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this research is to provide an overview of the fundamental elements of moral literacy. Moral literacy involves three basic components: ethics sensitivity; ethical reasoning skills; and moral imagination. It is the contention of the author that though math and reading literacy is highly valued by the American educational system, moral literacy is extremely undervalued and under-developed.

**Design/methodology/approach** – In this study the author uses her vast knowledge of moral literacy to break the subject matter into specific and defined sub-categories. She then explains each sub-category explicitly using real-life examples to assist the reader in understanding the gravity and meaning behind each separate facet of moral literacy.

**Findings** – Moral literacy is a skill that must be crafted and honed by students, and with the aid of teachers who are well-versed in moral subject matter. It is a complex and multifaceted skill set that is interconnected and must therefore be learned completely in order to be used properly. Teaching students about moral literacy is truly necessary if schools wish to produce productive and responsible citizens.

**Originality/value** – The study furthers our understanding of moral literacy and how it can play an absolutely vital role in our educational system. The paper not only explains what moral literacy is on a theoretical level, but it puts that theory into specific examples so that the reader can more clearly understand the benefits of acting in a morally literate fashion.

**Keywords** Ethics, Imagination, Communities, Social values

**Paper type** Research paper

Christine Pelton, a biology teacher at Piper High School near Kansas City, discovered that almost twenty percent of her students had plagiarized their semester projects (*CNN Student News*). Two Hartford Union High School students were charged last October with making a bomb threat causing the high school to be evacuated and classes cancelled (Benson, 2006). Roy Espiritu and Cameron Johnston died from drowning when the car Espiritu was driving skidded out of control and crashed through a sea wall into Elliott Bay. Seventeen year old Espiritu had just left a party where he was seen drinking (*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 2006).

The children and teens in our public schools face an increasingly complex array of ethical situations. When made angry by the bullying of peers, how should they respond? When they are faced with a looming deadline, is it ever acceptable to purchase answers to a problem or buy the basic research for a term paper from the vast array of internet sites, like *Google Answers*, set up to provide such services? If a student suspects that a friend has an eating disorder, what should he do? If a teen sees that a friend who has been drinking plans to drive while under the influence, how should she respond? What if a sophomore finds out that a classmate cheated on a test; should she tell anyone? An eighth-grader sees a good friend buying drugs behind the middle

Journal of Educational Administration
Vol. 45 No. 4, 2007
pp. 364-378
© Emerald Group Publishing Limited
0957-8234
DOI 10.1108/09578230710762409

The author's on this paper has been greatly enriched by very helpful comments from Paul Begley and an anonymous reviewer.

school playground; what should he do? These and a myriad of small and large ethical decisions face our children and teens on a regular basis both inside and outside the school context.

We see our public schools as a place where our children are to receive an education in those skills they need to lead a responsible and rewarding life. A recent US Department of Education report *Answering the Challenge of a Changing World: Strengthening Education for the 21st Century* explains that education is key to innovation, to "creating a more productive, prosperous, mobile and healthy society". The report underscores the importance of literacy in the areas of reading, science and mathematics, and foreign languages. The report argues that "innovating and improving education is critical not only to America's financial security but also to our national security". Literacy is thus seen as the best way to sustain the American quality and way of life. Programs like *Reading First, Math Now,* the *High School Reform Initiative*, the *American Competitiveness Initiative,* the *National Security Language Initiative* and many other programs, including *No Child Left Behind*, are all designed to develop and ensure literacy for all students in the USA, but nowhere in any of these reports is moral literacy mentioned.

The absence of moral literacy is a glaring omission from our national efforts to strengthen education. US Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings, referring to the *High School Reform Initiative*, explains that enhanced education is not just an "education issue". It is also an economic issue, a civic issue, a social issue, and a national security issue". If we have learned anything at all from the economic impact of the ethics violations of companies like Enron (Brewer and Hansen, 2004) or the social and civic impacts of the recent Congressional ethics violations (Feldmann, 2006), we should certainly have learned that to fully answer the challenge of a changing world, we cannot ignore the essential role of moral literacy in our children's education.

Living an ethical life is an achievement, and one that must be carefully and continuously cultivated. I thus use the concept of "literacy" here to reflect the fact that the skills and knowledge specific to making ethical choices in life are learned capabilities requiring skills in which individuals can be more or less competent. Indeed, none of us believe that our children's moral development is something we can take for granted. We share our values with them and teach them right from wrong. We encourage our children to develop good character each time we talk with them about why dishonesty is wrong, try to instill compassion toward people in need, or ask them to think about how it would feel to be the brunt of another's teasing as a means to change their behavior toward their sibling. The phrase "literacy" reflects the fact that ethical behavior requires complex abilities and skills, but it also is used to emphasize that the development of these abilities and skills can be and should be enriched through education.

Just as math skills or reading skills can be developed and sharpened far past the basics of comprehension, so too moral literacy is an ability that is best developed with careful instruction and practice to develop basics, but that also is enhanced and honed with additional training and practice. This is not to minimize the role of parents, family, religious institutions, and community in helping children develop these important skills. Indeed, just like language fluency, and math and reading literacy, children first develop the rudiments of these skills at home and in the communities of which they are a part. Education is seen as reinforcing and enhancing the skills begun

at home, and it is hoped that home and community environments will continue to support and augment the learning that is happening in the schools.

Moral literacy should be no different than math or reading literacy. Since all of us as individuals, as professionals, and as citizens will need to make numerous moral decisions throughout our lifetime, what stronger argument can there be for making moral literacy a component of our formal educational experience? What better way to help strengthen education for the twenty-first century? In this essay, I will provide an overview of the fundamental elements of moral literacy. These involve three basic components: ethics sensitivity, ethical reasoning skills, and moral imagination (see Figure 1).

While I have, for the purpose of discussion, separated these components of moral literacy, it is important to realize that all of these abilities interact and mutually reinforce one another. The development of an understanding of ethical reasoning skills can serve to heighten ethics sensitivity, and so on. While there is no fixed formula for the order in which these traits are taught, what is fixed is that moral literacy requires the development of all three of these competencies. Hence, education for moral literacy must include them all.

## Ethics sensitivity

Ethics sensitivity is a key element of moral literacy. It involves at least three major components:

(1) the ability to determine whether or not a situation involves ethical issues;

(2) awareness of the moral intensity of the ethical situation; and

(3) the ability to identify the moral virtues or values underlying an ethical situation. These abilities are complex and require training and practice to master.

The ability to determine whether or not a situation involves ethical issues is crucial to moral literacy. Students can be taught the various ethical frameworks, can be given a case study that is identified as involving an ethics violation and be asked to sort through the process of moral reasoning about the case, but still be unable by themselves to identify whether or not a situation involves an ethical issue. Without this ability, students will not only misidentify ethical situations, perhaps thinking they involve only personal choices – she feels comfortable doing that, but I do not – they will also be unable to evaluate another's claim that a situation does or does not involve an ethical issue. Curriculum that does not include ethics sensitivity, then, is missing an important element of moral literacy.

Ethics sensitivity is not an inborn talent and given the fact that not all the communities of which we are a part will live up to the highest ethical standards, one's sensitivity can become blunted. For example, practices that have become

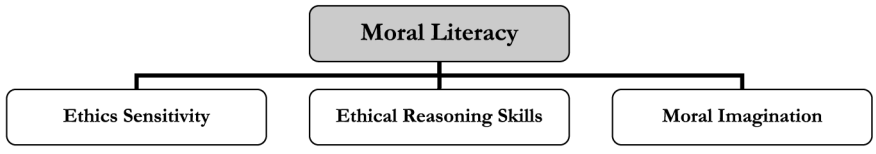



**Figure 1.**
The elements of moral literacy

common-place, such as downloading music from the internet, can become so routine that some youngsters do not even question its acceptability. Cheating to get good grades is, unfortunately, another instance of the dulling of ethics sensitivity for many current students. One way to begin to offer students training in recognizing when a situation involves ethical issues is to work with them to identify virtues, the character traits seen as emblematic of ethical individuals. Indeed virtue ethics is one major approach to ethical theory and I will discuss further in the next section[1].

While ethicists debate whether or not any virtues are universally embraced, for the purposes of developing moral literacy, providing students with the opportunity to identify virtues common to their community is an excellent beginning approach. Students very quickly come up with a list of shared virtues, typically honesty, compassion, fairness, and courage. They can then see how traits group around a common or related virtue, for example, a broader virtue like trustworthiness can be shown to be linked to being honest, being reliable, keeping promises, not betraying confidences, and so on. While students will not necessarily agree on all virtues, they do begin to see that they agree on many of the character traits they see as a component of a moral person. For more advanced curriculum, students can be asked to think about and study the character traits that are expected in various professions, examining those that are common to all and those that are more emphasized in some professions than others (e.g. physical courage for police officers), as well as those expected of citizens of the USA[2].

An understanding of the virtues provides students with a good lens to examine particular situations and determine whether or not they involve ethical issues. For example, having agreed that honesty and fairness are characteristics of a moral person, it is easier to see that a case of downloading music involves ethical issues. Would an honest person take something that does not belong to her? Is it fair to enjoy the music that groups have created without compensating them and providing them the resources needed to continue making music? Students may not yet have the ability to work through these questions and develop a full analysis of the situation, but they are better able to "ethics spot" – to identify issues in need of further analysis.

Training in ethics sensitivity should also be designed to help students develop their ability to judge the moral intensity of an ethical situation. Moral intensity is often linked to the seriousness of the harm and/or the urgency of a response or action. For example, if in a moment of anger, we unjustifiably yell at a friend, we have acted unethically and should do what we can to ameliorate the situation. But imagine now that we do so in a context and in such a way that their reputation is seriously damaged. Here the moral intensity of the situation is higher than in the former instance in that we have caused far greater harm to the individual.

Sensitivity to the moral intensity of a situation is a crucial skill in that there are often competing ethical demands. So, for example, a student has promised to tutor a classmate to help him prepare for a big quiz the next day, but just when he is about to leave for the meeting, he gets a call from his best friend who really needs to talk because she has just found out that her parents are getting a divorce. He is caught in the dilemma having to decide whether or not it would be more acceptable to break his promise to the classmate, who is likely then not to do as well on the quiz, or to help out his friend who really needs him. While these situations can be very complex,

attentiveness to the moral intensity of the choices is a key element in making a responsible decision.

Providing students with the ability to weigh the moral intensity of ethical issues also provides them with a much needed skill they will need in their professional careers. For example, codes of ethics for engineers include two basic rules which are frequently in tension, namely, "Hold paramount the safety, health, and welfare of the public" and "Act for each employer or client as faithful agents or trustees." It is often the moral intensity of the situation that determines the ethical response. Consider the situation in which an engineer discovers a problem with a waste management plant and the employer asks that the engineer allow the company to deal with the situation and not report the problem in order to avoid damaging publicity or unwarranted fears by the public. If the moral intensity is low, namely, that the problem is minor and is unlikely to cause harm to the public should it not be dealt with properly, then attending to the wishes of the client is likely to be the ethically correct response. But if the engineer judges the moral intensity to be high, namely that the problem is serious and could result in harm to the public, then the engineer may have to violate the wishes of the employer to respond ethically in the situation.

The moral intensity of a situation is a complex variable and has to do with a variety of factors. It is linked to the magnitude of harm that could result from an ethical violation or conversely the amount of benefit that could result, as well as the likelihood of those results, but it also has to do with how central the underlying virtues or principles are to the community or to the individual involved with the decision. The latter component of moral intensity is particularly salient when communities hold significantly different beliefs or values. So, for example, in a Buddhist community, the decision to kill animals for food or other uses has a different moral intensity then this action typically has in a Protestant community.

Training in ethics sensitivity therefore can not only enable individuals to better determine the ethically responsible choice in complex situations, it will also serve to help them understand the basis of ethical disagreements between individuals or groups. Such conflicts often involve either a disagreement about the values relevant to the issue and/or a difference of opinion regarding the moral intensity of the problem. Take the case of clashes between environmentalists and loggers. Environmentalists and loggers may, for example, disagree about the ethical status of endangered species. The environmentalists may claim that those species have rights or that humans have a duty to preserve rare species, and the loggers may deny such claims. But another possibility is that the loggers may agree with the environmentalists that the species in question have rights or inherent ethical value, but disagree instead concerning the moral intensity of the situation. The loggers may point to the harm done to humans and argue that it is more pressing than that being done to the endangered species.

Training in ethics sensitivity leads to professionals and citizens who are better able to adjudicate between ethical controversies and who are better able to understand the reasons why individuals or groups disagree. This is a key ability in many instances, including cross-cultural contexts in which individuals or groups may hold different values or have different judgments about the moral intensity of situations. Given that our global economy is resulting in many more of us interacting with individuals from different cultures, the development of this ability should be an important component of any robust education. Possessing this ability can enable an individual to help disputing

groups see that the disagreements between them are actually smaller than they believed them to be, but it helps, in all cases, to enable disputing groups appreciate the sources of their disagreements.

As I have demonstrated in this section, the first component of moral literacy, ethics sensitivity, involves three skills, all of which can be enhanced through including ethics curriculum in the K-12 setting (see Figure 2).

While ethics sensitivity is not sufficient for the full development of moral literacy, it is a necessary and essential component. If our students cannot determine whether or not a situation involves an ethical issue or weigh the moral intensity of the issue, they will not be able to react responsibly. However, educators cannot stop here; the next step is the development of ethical reasoning skills, the second component of moral literacy.

## Ethical reasoning skills

Ethical reasoning skills also involve at least three different abilities. They involve:

(1) an understanding of the various ethical frameworks;

(2) the ability to identify and assess the validity of facts relevant to the ethical situation, as well as assessing any inferences from such facts; and

(3) the ability to identify and assess the values that an individual or group holds to be relevant to the ethical issue under consideration (see Figure 3).

### *Ethical frameworks*

Ethicists frequently make a threefold division of ethical frameworks: utilitarian or consequentialist; deontological or duty-based thinking; and virtue ethics. More recently feminist ethicists have argued for a fourth ethical framework, namely care ethics. While any comprehensive examination of ethical theorizing would cover the detailed structure, the strengths and weaknesses, the historical articulations[3], and the major modifications of each framework, such an approach is not required to enable students to understand that they need to develop moral literacy.

An integrated ethical model is an excellent way to offer students training in the ethical frameworks. Certainly those wishing more sophisticated training may wish to pursue the history of ethical theory, but just as math literacy does not require number theory, moral literacy can be developed without this historical understanding.

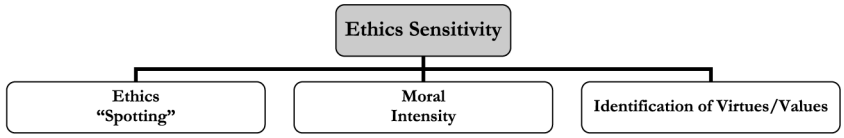



**Figure 2.**
The components of ethics sensitivity

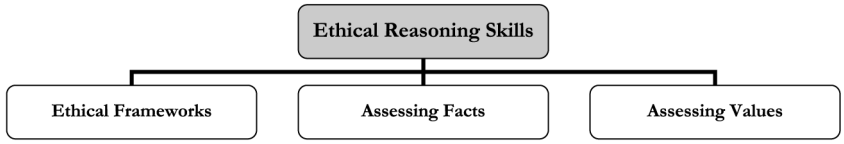



**Figure 3.**
The components of ethical reasoning skills

Furthermore, although the different ethical theories are often presented as if they were competing ethical frameworks, in fact they are not inherently incompatible[4].

An integrated approach to ethical reasoning includes the basic components of each of the traditional approaches to ethics. It helps students understand the relevance of the consequences of actions, the nature of duties and corresponding rights, the importance of attention to the interests and needs of individuals as well as the ethical import of certain types of relationships. It also continues the attention to virtue and values initiated in the curriculum on ethical sensitivity.

Consider the utilitarian component of an integrated curriculum. It asks that students reflect on the consequences of actions, a utilitarian approach, and provides them with the skills needed to think about which type of consequences matter. Students can be given exercises that help them think about the meaning of the principle "greatest good for the greatest number". They can reflect on the meaning of the term "good" and develop skills in thinking about various types of consequences (local v. global, present v. future, etc.). As they develop their skills they can begin to think about how to deal with issues of uncertainty concerning consequences of actions. As may be clear from the examples I have discussed, this type of curricular module will link back to earlier discussions of the moral intensity of ethical situations since these are features that contribute to moral intensity.

The notion of the good is a particularly complex component of utilitarian frameworks. Whether defined as "happiness" or "utility," there is seldom agreement on the meanings of the terms when individuals are asked to unpack them. Conversations designed to investigate the meaning of happiness will often uncover various intrinsic goods, such as knowledge, health, liberty, friendship, or love. As students realize that not everyone agrees on what will best promote happiness, they come to see the complexity of this seemingly simple principle of acting so as to bring about the greatest good.

Many of our contemporary economic and environmental issues provide an excellent context for thinking about the *scale* of consequences. Global warming, for example, raises the issue of our responsibility to future generations since the impact of greenhouse gas emissions will be far less severe for current generations. And issues concerning species extinction or ecosystem degradation raise the question of whether consequences to nonhuman animals should be considered morally relevant. Such examples can also be used to provide students with the ability to think about the implications of consequences being uncertain. In addition, it can introduce them to notions such as the precautionary principle, which argues that if an action has a high probability of leading to serious harm, the burden of proof concerning the safety of the action should fall on those wishing to engage in the action.

Another important skill that students need is the ability to sort through the relationship between consequences of actions and intentions. For example, students would be provided with case studies designed to think about the relationship between ethical responsibility for the consequences of actions and the intention of actors. So, if one student intended to help their lab partner by putting the finishing touches on their experiment and accidentally slipped and ruined the experiment, we would not hold the student responsible for the consequences of their actions. Indeed, this is exactly the type of instance where a teacher will provide the lab team extra time to redo the experiment or some other compensation, but if a student intentionally ruined the

experiment in order to cause the lab partner to get a bad grade, she would be held responsible for her actions.

This type of exploration also helps students see that there are instances where they may not have been intending harm, but where they will be held responsible for their actions. This is a perfect instance, for example, to raise the issue of driving while under the influence to help high school students understand that there are actions for which they will be held responsible regardless of their intentions. In this way our schools can help our teens understand the reason why it is so ethically problematic to drink and drive, and thereby help them fully understand and reinforce the legal sanctions. In this case, augmenting moral literacy can go hand-in-hand with anti-drinking or drug campaigns like DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education).

A deontological or duty-based ethical framework focuses on duties and rights as the grounding of ethics. According to this framework, actions are ethical not because of the consequences of so acting, but because there is a duty to so act. Such a framework also attends to the intentions behind actions and argues that they are ethically relevant. In this instance, and unlike focusing solely on the consequences of actions, students learn that even if their actions resulted in good consequences, if their intention was bad, the action is unethical. Take the instance of a student who is hoping to harm the odds of a classmate winning the election for class president by using email to send out pictures she shot during gym class, but the pictures end up being very popular and actually helped him win the election. In this case, although the consequences of the action actually benefited the classmate, a duty-based framework would argue that since the intentions were in violation of our duty to be fair and respectful, the action was unethical. Combining attention to consequences with attention to duty reinforces the importance of the role of a person's intention in acting. Although intention alone will often not resolve the ethical acceptability of an action, it is often an important element in determining whether or not an action is in fact ethically acceptable.

A duty-based approach also provides students with the opportunity to understand the concept of rights and to examine what are held to be fundamental rights, rights enjoyed by individuals in virtue of being human and regardless of their particular citizenship or any other particular such as religion, ethnicity, or sex. Rights such as life, liberty, and security of persons are taken to be fundamental human rights[5]. Given that the United States Declaration of Independence embraces the existence of three inalienable human rights – life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness – moral literacy is also an important tool for understanding the founding of our country and a key element of the vision of our democracy.

Care ethics differs from the principle-based ethics of utilitarianism (act so as to bring about the greatest amount of good) and of duty-based ethics (act so as to best protect and respect the rights of all involved)[6]. It is a richly situated ethics that argues that humans are embedded in a complex network of relationships in which caring relationship is unique. Thus what is the ethically acceptable action in one relationship may not be the right action in all similar cases. Unlike a duty-based ethic where our particular relationships are seen as ethically irrelevant, care ethicists argue that we have greater responsibilities to those for whom we care, and thus, care ethics includes the belief that partiality is an ethical good. Furthermore, rather than the emotional detachment often encouraged by duty-based or utilitarian frameworks, care ethics embraces the emotions as an important component of ethical behavior. In contrast to

consequences per se or duty, a care ethics views the specific needs and interests of individuals as key to ethical behavior.

A caring relationship is one in which an individual is both attentive to the specific needs and interests of another, as well as acting to advance them. It is also seen as an interactive relationship in which the one caring attends to the responses of the one cared for and modifies their efforts to care based on how the other responds to their actions. Because of these features, care ethics holds communication to be a key component of ethical behavior. It is through verbal and nonverbal communication that we come to understand the particular needs and desires of those we care for and develop mutual trust, which in turn strengthens the relationship.

Care ethicists have noted that many of our relationships are not between equals but rather between individuals in very different positions – parent/child, doctor/patient, teacher/student. Based on this, care ethicists have argued that our ethical frameworks would be best constructed not from contract models which often assume relatively equally positioned individuals or theories that deny the inevitability of human interdependency, but rather from models that recognize the range of relationships possible between what Nel Noddings calls the "one-caring" and the "cared-for" (Noddings, 1984). Acknowledging the centrality and ever-changing nature of dependency to human life, then demands a reassessment of issues of equity and justice that takes both dependency and the complex natures of care relationships seriously.

A virtue ethics framework is based on the view that ethical actions are those based on moral character and a fundamental attention to the type of person we should strive to be and how to live. A virtue ethics framework focuses on the development of one's character, not on particular actions. So for example, someone who is honest would not avoid plagiarizing not because they do not want to get caught cheating, but because it would be in fundamental conflict with their basic values; such an action would be a violation of what they hold dear, namely honesty. And this disposition would apply to other realms – deceiving their parents, lying to their friends, etc. Even in cases where it might be difficult to tell the truth or where it's against one's interests to do so, the virtuous person would not be tempted to lie.

While being a virtuous person is certainly an aim, virtue ethics recognizes the importance of developing virtues and choosing wisely the people and institutions that we interact with so that this development is heightened or at least not hampered. I would argue, for example, that the "cheat codes" that our teens use to move to the next level in their video and computer games can easily hamper their ability to fully develop the virtue of honesty and integrity. The "cheat codes" that get one so easily to the next level can habituate acceptance of "just a little bit of cheating" on the test to get that needed "A." This is the same reason that parents worry so about the friendships their children develop, trying to ensure that they are "hanging out with a good group of kids." They are worried that spending time with children who think it is alright to cheat or to drink or to lie will habituate and normalize such behavior in their own children.

While each of the above stresses a different approach to ethics, an integrated approach in which students are taught to consider all of these aspects of ethical decision making provides them with the richest framework to determine what is ethical in a particular situation. Furthermore, it is often the case that there is a convergence of the frameworks where, regardless of the approach, all lead to the same interpretation of the situation. Bringing together the resources of all of these frameworks within the

educational context provides students with a rich conceptual and practical context for ethical decision-making.

I would thus argue that a robust approach to moral literacy asks that once students have identified an ethical issue, they think through the appropriate response by considering questions like the following:

- What would be the likely consequences in acting in this way? Have I anticipated the effects of this decision on all who are involved?
- What duties are relevant to this situation and which rights should I be attentive to? If I put myself in the position of any of the other individuals involved, would I see the action as just?
- What would a virtuous person do? What kind of person would I be if I acted in this way? Does this decision uphold my basic moral values and have I been attentive to and respectful of the values of others involved?
- Does my decision nurture good relationships and address the particular needs and interests of those relationships? Do certain individuals or groups have a greater stake in the outcome either because we have special obligations to them or because they have greater needs?

*Assessing facts and values*

While the above set of questions provides a good template to offer to students as they develop their ethical reasoning skills, there are two additional skills required for moral literacy, namely, assessing facts and assessing values[7]. Moral literacy is only complete if one is able to both determine whether or not a situation involves ethical issues and identify the values underlying that situation, as well a*s* having the skills needed to identify the morally correct choice in that situation, or in the cases of complex moral dilemmas, determine which choices are morally unacceptable and which are morally preferable[8]. While the ethical frameworks provide a basis for determining the morally correct choice, they are not sufficient for they have to be appropriately applied to the situation and doing that requires other skills.

Ethical reasoning skills also include critical reasoning skills, for a faulty argument in support of an ethical stance or an ethical judgment based on faulty evidence is an unacceptable foundation for making an ethical decision. Although it may seem commonsensical, teaching moral literacy includes reminding students that they must start with as robust an understanding of the situation as possible. An assessment of the ethical acceptability of, say, stem cell research, cannot begin without an understanding of the relevant facts, for an ethical assessment is flawed if it is based on a faulty grasp of the subject matter. Thus an important step in developing moral literacy is to understand the importance of developing a rich understanding of the issue. Ethical reasoning involves evaluating one's own and other's beliefs to ensure that she or he has a firm grasp of all of the facts relevant to the ethical issue or, at a minimum, knows which facts are uncertain. Furthermore, moral literacy includes not only identifying the relevant facts, but making sound inferences from those facts. While these skills are not unique to moral literacy, they are a part of moral literacy, just as math literacy is a part of scientific literacy. Unfortunately, far too many ethical disagreements are in fact merely disagreements about the relevant facts or appropriate inferences from those facts. Moral literacy, then, must be seen as strongly linked to the

skills of critical reasoning. Hence, the inclusion of moral literacy within our K-12 curriculum will augment and be reinforced by efforts to teach critical reasoning.

Moral literacy also includes assessing values. While ethics sensitivity includes the ability to identify which values are at stake in an ethical problem, ethical reasoning skills builds upon this skill to provide students the ability to assess those values. Ethical reasoning skills enables one to develop a clear understanding of all of the values relevant to the ethical issue, evaluate the relevance of posited values and weed out those that are extraneous or only weakly connected to the issue at hand, and identify and remove biases.

Moral literacy includes the ability to assess what is held to be valuable in a context. Students often say that what is valuable about getting an education is that it will enable them to make a lot of money when they grow up, but this value is often in competition with, for example, the value of education enhancing an individual's appreciation of great literature. In the former case, students are likely to see doing what they have to do to get a good grade (and only that much) as sufficient, while in the latter case the focus is on what is learned. While assessing values is not easy and often not clear-cut, it is a crucial skill that can be developed with practice.

Identifying unwarranted biases or values is another key element of ethical reasoning skills. This component of ethical reasoning is difficult to master given that prejudices often result in the widespread acceptance of false beliefs or unsound values, thereby making it difficult to even see that a belief or value must be questioned. It is this aspect of ethical reasoning that is perhaps the most difficult, but also very important since prejudice can lead to unethical behavior. Since students' curriculum includes the study of the history of various prejudices, e.g. the Holocaust, the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, etc., teachers can use these resources to enable students to begin to think about the components of prejudice – stereotypes, discriminatory treatment, poor weighing of values, and so on. Instances of prejudicial action against individuals provides a basis for considering the categories that students use to understand people or the world – gender categories, racial categories, or even the division between humans and other animals – and allows them to think about how prejudice has in the past led to unethical actions. In this way, students are provided with tools that will help them avoid the harm of prejudice in their own actions.

While there are many complex ethical situations in which decisions about what is the best action or which are the most relevant values are very complex and where there will be a lot of disagreement between individuals, it is also the case that even with the most complex ethical issues, there are some choices that are either clearly wrong or at least more difficult to defend. Furthermore, there is value in understanding how differences in values, even if not resolved, can lead to very different decisions about what is ethically acceptable and provide insight into the reasons why people from very different cultures or religions disagree about seemingly fundamental issues.

## Moral imagination

The final component of moral literacy is the cultivation of children's and teens' moral imagination. In his book by this title, Mark Johnson (1993) referred to moral imagination as the "ability to imaginatively discern various possibilities for acting in a given situation and to envision the potential help and harm that are likely to result from a given situation". The moral imagination refers to the blend of affective and

rational processes that contribute to the imagination. Imaginative processes are not simply rational – either deductive or inductive – but neither are they irrational. Rather, they blend reason and emotion through attending to what is taken for granted, what is left out of a situation, how possibilities could be otherwise envisioned.

The moral imagination is difficult to teach, but is central to an individual becoming an ethical agent. Simply because one can identify that a situation involves an ethical issue and be able to employ ethical reasoning skills to provide an analysis of what would be a good or bad action in the context, does not mean that they experience the action as ethical or feel any personal investment in the situation or in trying to respond ethically. Moral agency requires a rich and affective commitment to being ethical. The moral imagination is a key component of this commitment to being ethical.

The moral imagination includes a wealth of abilities. It includes empathy for the feelings and desires of others, efforts to imagine ourselves in the situation of another, imagination aimed at "thinking outside of the box" and considering creative alternatives, the ability to develop an aesthetic attunement to the complexities of the situation, a robust appreciation of the humanity of others, the ability to develop trust and be able to act in ways that are and are perceived as helpful, an appreciation of the suffering and joys of others even when they are quite different from our own, a sensitivity to nonverbal cues that help us better understand others and the situations they are in, and a personal "ownership" and habituation of ethical behavior that includes a felt sense of responsibility for our actions, the desire to cultivate virtuous habits, as well as what Bell Hooks (1990, p. 27) referred to as a "yearning" for justice.

While moral imagination is not easy to teach and cannot be taught in any formulaic fashion, there are many techniques that help cultivate the moral imagination. The most common pedagogical technique is the use of narratives and stories. Part of the reason we ask our children to read books like *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *To Kill a Mockingbird,* or *Cry the Beloved Country* is not only to teach them about a particular historical period, but because in imaginatively putting themselves in another's position through the process of reading, children experience the harm that can result from prejudice, get a sense of what it feels like to be treated unjustly, and so on. They experience all aspects of the moral imagination.

The moral imagination is fundamental to appreciating that we are ethical agents. The lived experience of being an ethical agent involves not just a rational acceptance of the belief that we are responsible for the consequences of our behavior, but owning and experiencing that responsibility.

## An integrated approach to moral literacy

It should be clear from this analysis that moral literacy is a complex ability that we develop and improve over a lifetime. To bring together into one framework all the components of moral literacy I have mentioned in this short paper, consider the following enlarged diagram of an integrated approach to moral literacy (see Figure 4).

This diagram illustrates all the components that are a part of this important literacy and offers a "worksheet" for approaching an ethical decision. While there is no correct place to begin this process or move through the steps, providing our students with such a model helps them see all that goes into making a choice of how to act in any one of the complex ethical situations with which I opened this essay. Using this diagram, teachers can assist students in working through case studies of the types of situations

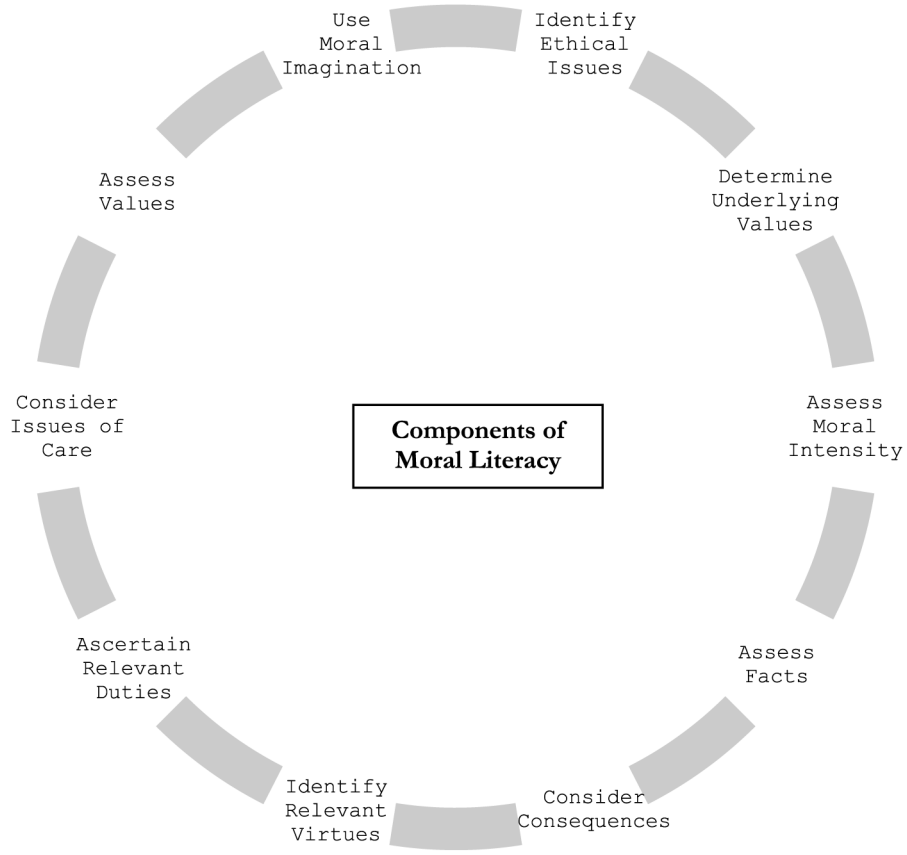



**Figure 4.**
Moral literacy

they are likely to face in their life. Students will learn that responding to ethical situations requires a complex set of skills, and will come to appreciate the need to take time to work through their decisions about ethical issues when this is possible, but also to "practice" this skill for those instances when we have to make a decision quickly. Education of this sort provides students the opportunity to develop the skills they need to be ethical professionals and responsible citizens of a just society.

Moral literacy involves a multifaceted set of skills that can and should be enhanced through education. Just like reading and math literacy, while we certainly hope that moral literacy is developed and reinforced in out-of-school contexts, a critical component of our children's education should be to ensure that they have the opportunity to strengthen these skills and refine these abilities as they grow and mature.

I am delighted to partner with the scholars who are part of this special issue of *Journal of Educational Administration* to offer insights on how we can best integrate moral literacy within the contexts of our educational settings. And I am pleased to be part of a project designed to inspire the moral imagination of a new generation of teachers. Thanks to the insights and hard work of scholars like these, I can imagine that the next time the US Department of Education publishes a report on how we might

best strengthen education for the twenty-first century they will include another literacy, moral literacy, as an essential component of any effort to innovate education and answer the challenge of a changing world.

## Notes

1. See, for example, Carr and Steutel, 1999; Darwall, 2003: Foot, 1978; Hurka, 2001; Hursthouse, 1999; MacIntyre, 1984; and Swanton, 2003.
2. This approach to moral literacy is sometimes labeled character education. However, given the complex history of this term and the various meanings ascribed to it (Howard *et al.*, 2004), a comparison of the approach to moral literacy outlined in this essay to character education would require a separate essay. I would, however, say that any approach to character education that involves transmitting or instilling preselected values would not be consistent with the approach I advocate. This said, I recognize that the term character education covers a far broader range of approaches to ethics education.
3. Utilitarianism is often traced to John Stuart Mill's (2002) *Utilitarianism*. Deontological or duty based ethics is see as originally articulated by Immanuel Kant (2002); see for example his *Grounding for a Metaphysics of Morals*. Virtue ethics has been traced back to Aristotle's (2002) *The Nicomachean Ethics*. And credit for care ethics is often traced to the work of Nel Noddings (1984), particularly *Caring*.
4. It is commonly assumed that theories like duty-based ethics or utilitarianism that are based on rational decision-making are incompatible with those, like a care ethic, which are seen as based on appeal to emotion or to sentiment. But many contemporary theorists are explicitly denying such incompatibility, for example R.M. Hare (1997) in the case of deontological ethics and utilitarianism and Virginia Held (2005) in the case of ethics of duty or justice and ethics of care.
5. These are the three rights delineated in the United Nations (1948) Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
6. Care ethics includes Baier, 1991; Gilligan, 1982; Held, 1993; Kittay, 1999; Noddings, 1984; Ruddick, 1989; and Tronto, 1993.
7. For the purposes of this paper I will assume a distinction between empirical facts and moral values. I do realize that this distinction is controversial. Some would argue that relevant values are facts in the sense of being objective and verifiable. Others would argue that what is taken to be factual is itself a function of the values that we embrace. While I do not wish to deny these complexities, for the purposes of articulating this framework, I believe it is sufficient to embrace the typical folk theoretical distinction between facts about the world and normative values.
8. I do not want to claim that moral literacy entails always being able to accurately determine the one correct answer to all ethical issues. It is a hallmark of ethical dilemmas that choices are complex, and aspects of the situation are unclear or there are competing ethical values. Just as scientific literacy does not entail knowing the answers to all scientific questions, moral literacy provides one the skills needed to act responsibly even when faced with an ethical dilemma where it is difficult or even impossible to accurately determine the single most ethical response.

## References

Aristotle (2002), *Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Baier, A. (1991), *A Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume's Treatise*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

Benson, D. (2006), "Two students charged in Hartford High School bomb threat: criminal", *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, October 11.

Brewer, L. and Hansen, M. (2004), *Confessions of an Enron Executive: A Whistleblower's Story*, AuthorHouse Publishing, Bloomington, IN.

Carr, D. and Steutel, J. (Eds) (1999), *Virtue Ethics and Moral Education*, Routledge, New York, NY.

*CNN Student News* (2002), "Teacher resigns over plagiarism fight", available at: http://cnnstudentnews.cnn.com/2002/fyi/teachers.ednews/02/07/plagiarism.dispute.ap/index.html

Darwall, S. (Ed.) (2003), *Virtue Ethics*, Blackwell, Oxford.

Feldmann, L. (2006), "Scandal in congress: the political fallout of rep. Foley's resignation", *The Christian Science Monitor*, available at: www.csmonitor.com/2006/1002/p03s02-uspo.html

Foot, P. (1978), *Virtues and Vices*, Blackwell, Oxford.

Gilligan, C. (1982), *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

Hare, R.M. (1997), *Could Kant Have Been a Utilitarian? Sorting out Ethics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Held, V. (1993), *Feminist Morality: Transforming Culture, Society, and Politics*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.

Held, V. (2005), *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, Global*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Hooks, B. (1990), *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, South End Press, Boston, MA.

Howard, R.W., Berkowitz, M.W. and Schaeffer, E.F. (2004), "Politics of character education", *Educational Policy*, Vol. 18 No. 1, pp. 188-215.

Hurka, T. (2001), *Virtue, Vice, and Value*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Hursthouse, R. (1999), *On Virtue Ethics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Johnson, M. (1993), *Moral Imagination*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.

Kant, I. (2002), *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT.

Kittay, E. (1999), *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency*, Routledge, New York, NY.

MacIntyre, A. (1984), *After Virtue*, University of Notre Dame Press, Indiana, IN.

Mill, J.S. (2002), *Utilitarianism*, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis, IN.

Noddings, N. (1984), *Caring: Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.

Ruddick, S. (1989), *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA.

*Seattle Post-Intelligencer* (2006), "Loved ones hold vigil at crash site", *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, September 26.

Swanton, C. (2003), *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Tronto, J. (1993), *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*, Routledge, New York, NY.

United Nations (1948), "Universal declaration of human rights", available at: www.un.org/Overview/rights.html

**Corresponding author**
Nancy Tuana can be contacted at: ntuana@psu.edu

To purchase reprints of this article please e-mail: **reprints@emeraldinsight.com**
Or visit our web site for further details: **www.emeraldinsight.com/reprints**