Engaging Students in the Processes of Rational Ethical Justification: A Way Forward for Social and Environmental Education?

Dr. Carol Collins & Dr. Sue Knight
School of Education, University of South Australia
Carol.Collins@unisa.edu.au; Sue.Knight@unisa.edu.au

Abstract
It seems clear that the fundamental goal of social and environmental education is one of helping students to develop the skills and dispositions to participate fully as citizens in a just democratic society. We argue that making significant progress towards this worthy goal depends crucially on engaging students in the processe of *rational ethical justification*. Yet, on the whole, teachers of social and environmental education are rarely prepared or equipped to go beyond research-based classroom lessons. This paper outlines a way forward.

Keywords: Rational ethical justification; ethical inquiry; social and environmental education

1   Introduction: rational ethical justification

This paper outlines one strand of an ongoing research project we have called 'The Cultivating Reason-Giving Project', grounded in both philosophy and cognitive psychology. The project's aim is the development of a programme for fostering the skills of *rational ethical justification*, as well as the *disposition* to apply these skills widely. Part of this research effort involves work within the field of *social* and *environmental* education. It seems clear that the fundamental goal of the *Society & Environment* learning area (as it is known in South Australia) is one of helping students to develop the skills and disposition to participate fully as citizens in a just democratic society. We argue in this paper, that making significant progress towards this worthy goal depends crucially on ensuring that, as part of their *Society & Environment* curriculum, students of all ages are afforded regular and ongoing opportunities to engage in the processes of *rational ethical justification*.

Although there is continuing philosophical debate about the nature of these processes, there are strong and widely accepted arguments which rule out certain commonly held approaches of rational ethical justification. One of these is the process of appealing to a moral authority – the church, the law or the mores of society: homosexuality is morally wrong because the Church condemns it; cloning of human beings is morally wrong because the law forbids it; killing animals for food is morally right because it is part of our way of life. Yet, as is well known, appeal to authority alone can never constitute adequate justification. What is more, justifying ethical judgements or decisions on the basis of mere appeal to moral authority brings with it very real social dangers. History provides countless examples of ideas which were cruel and absurd, yet were followed to the point of death by the people. Think of Nazism, the Sarin gas attacks or the London Underground bombings.

A second widely practised approach to ethical justification, that of ethical relativism, is just as dangerous. Ethical relativism is the view that ethical justification is impossible, that we cannot say that one moral or judgement is better than another. And if we focus on particular examples, this seems to be an enlightened attitude. In a multi-cultural society, we find many different cultural practices: different food practices, different ways of caring for the aged, different family systems, and society is undoubtedly the richer for it. But suppose the focus shifts to other examples: honour killings, a racist social group such as a neo-Nazi group, or bullying in the school yard. Although time does not permit detailed defence of the argument here, it seems plausible to suggest that our confidence in the moral wrongness of these practices stems from the *significant harm* that such practices bring. Here we find a form of *evidence* on which to base ethical judgements. Generalising from these examples, we argue

that ethics is grounded in good and harm (suffering); moreover, that human beings, and indeed all sentient beings, share common capacities for suffering and for happiness.

Of course this is too simple. The long lasting harm caused to victims of bullying far outweighs the happiness or satisfaction felt by the perpetrator. It is also necessary to *weigh up* suffering and happiness or harm and good here. This insight provides an *ethical yardstick*, a principle which forms the basis of rational ethical justification. It does not in itself deliver a procedure for making ethical judgements or decisions. But we can also draw on some other well established elements of ethical justification, such as considering as fully as possible the consequences of one's behaviour, taking circumstances into account, empathising with others, and ensuring consistency between one's beliefs and between one's beliefs and actions. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the complex interplay between these elements, it is important to note that these are *necessary* features of rational ethical justification.

We should note here that our goal is not merely one of equipping individuals with the skills of rational ethical justification, but more than this, to foster a readiness to employ these skills widely. In other words, we are aiming at the inculcation of a *disposition* to engage widely in the processes of rational ethical justification. The foregoing discussion demonstrates that fostering such a disposition depends not only on the development of the appropriate skills, but also on the development of certain epistemological understandings; more precisely, an understanding that justification of beliefs, including ethical beliefs, is both possible and necessary (that is, that such justification matters).

In the field of social and environmental education, where the primary goal is to help students develop the requisite skills and dispositions to participate fully as citizens in a just democratic society, it seems clear that making significant progress towards this worthy goal depends crucially on engaging students of all ages in the processes of rational ethical justification, to equip them to make considerable progress in answering complex ethical questions such as, 'Is the off-shore processing of asylum seekers morally right?' and 'Should we allow tourism to expand in Antarctica?'. Yet, a review of the literature and associated curriculum materials in reveals that *Society & Environment* (in Australian primary classrooms at least) is all but void of opportunities in which to raise and deal with relevant ethical questions and to foster the skills of rational ethical justification and the disposition to apply these skills widely.

2 Society & Environment: an ethics free zone?

Wide-ranging research indicates that the vast majority of classroom questions, including questions from within *Society & Environment*, call for little more than clarification, recall or facts acquired through research-based activities, that on the whole, very few ethical questions are raised in the classroom by either teachers or their students (Collins, 2005, Harrop & Swinson, 2003; Myhill & Dunkin, 2002). In particular, two Australian empirical studies (Collins, 1998; Lucas, 2000) specifically targeting the area of ethical questioning in *Society & Environment* lend direct support to the more general findings. While the primary school teachers surveyed in these studies overwhelmingly agreed that ethical questions *are* worth asking in the primary school context, only a tiny minority indicated that they would consider ever asking those questions cited, even if teaching parallel topics as part of their *Society & Environment* programmes. In these studies, the questions related to the topics of 'food' (for example, 'Is it acceptable to keep battery hens?' and 'Is it ever OK to eat whale or kangaroo meat?'), and of 'Indigenous Australians' (for example, 'Should Australian government members apologise to Aboriginal Australians over the stolen generation?' and 'Should mining companies ever be allowed to mine on sacred sites?').

The reasons for such widespread reluctance among teachers to raise and discuss ethical questions as part of their programmes are well-known, ranging from concerns that attempts to

answer them will lead to indoctrination, to concerns that asking controversial questions may offend some students, their parents, or the school administration (Brown, 1991 and Newmann & Onosko, 1990). Such fears and concerns may well be generated primarily however, by a general lack of understanding that there *are* well-established procedures within philosophy for making progress in answering ethical, and even highly controversial ethical questions; procedures which may well help to avoid and allay teachers' fears and concerns. In other words, teachers themselves appear to lack the epistemological understandings we would argue underpin a readiness to engage widely in the processes of rational ethical justification. Even where teachers do recognise the importance of raising and dealing with ethical questions in their classrooms, they will in all likelihood lack the knowledge and skills to do so effectively. After all, engagement in the processes of rational ethical justification is not common within contemporary Australian teacher-education programmes (Collins, 2005).

Moreover, the social and environmental education curriculum resources do relatively little to counter such a shortfall in teachers' knowledge of how to foster the skills of rational ethical justification in their own students; on the whole, authors either abstain from mentioning the possibility of raising ethical questions in primary classrooms, or they acknowledge the seriousness of current controversial issues, recommend teaching *about* these issues, but offer little or no practical advice on how to deal with such complex and controversial ethical questions or issues once they *have* been raised in the classroom. There are noteworthy exceptions of course. Paul, Binker and Charbonneau (1987) and Paul, Binker, Jensen and Kreklau's (1987) handbooks for remodeling social studies lessons are helpful at least in raising the embedded ethical questions in standard *Society & Environment* topics, while various teaching associations with a focus on social justice provide lesson plans which raise ethical questions relating to current social issues, even if they offer few guidelines as to how ethical inquiry should proceed in the classroom (Bigelow & Peterson, 2002; Preskill, Vermilya & Otero, 2002). Many of the exercises and discussion plans available within the burgeoning collection of Philosophy for Children curriculum materials too, are relevant to social and environmental education (Lipman & Sharp (1985); Cam (1995). But unless teachers are au fait with the content of these curriculum materials and trained in the pedagogy of conducting teaching for the development of the skills of rational ethical justification, they will be unlikely to see the connections between philosophy and *Society & Environment*, ill equipped to adapt them to their empirically-based *Society & Environment* curriculum units and as a result, be unable to implement them effectively.

In summary, the *Society & Environment* learning area (in Australian primary schools at least) is driven by a strong empirical research emphasis; the learning area appears to be lacking the ethical inquiry approach most likely to affect real progress towards achieving the central aim of *Society & Environment*, that is, to foster the skills of rational ethical justification and the disposition to apply these skills widely. We argue that making such progress depends on transforming the *Society & Environment* curriculum area from its current empirical research platform to a learning area which encompasses and deals effectively with *both* the empirical and the ethical components of existing and emerging social and environmental topics. We turn now to an account of what must be involved in designing a programme for teaching *Society & Environment* aimed at on engaging students of all ages in the processes of rational ethical justification.

3   A way forward?

The *Society & Environment* learning area encompasses a vast range of possible study topics drawn from a number of disciplines and fields; no attempt at representing them here could do justice to the virtually inexhaustible array of relevant topics. Moreover, a wide range of possible factors is likely to direct the process of selecting suitable topics for inclusion in any

Society & Environment programme. Yet, the more fundamental question of why *any* individual topic ought to be included in *Society & Environment* remains to be asked. What do we hope to achieve by teaching students about oceans, or ancient Egypt, or about the lives of asylum seekers? What is our underlying aim? Such questions are surely crucial in the beginning stages of preparing a unit of study, and we should try to be explicit in our attempts to answer them. The following example should help to illustrate the point.

Suppose we were to ask a middle-level primary teacher why her class is studying 'Rainforests' in *Society & Environment* this term. She might respond in a number of different ways:

> It's an interesting topic – children are curious about the natural world and rainforests are part of their world so they will be curious about them too. And I'm interested in them as well; rainforests are remarkable because of the large numbers of plant and animal species they harbour, and the sheer size of some of the trees and insects and so on.

We should not dismiss the teacher's arguments altogether of course; we certainly would not want to dismiss children's curiosity, or the importance of fostering it. But we could reply that there are many other things in the world that her students would be even more curious about. We could say (truthfully) that the students will be *more* curious about and interested in their computer games, and go on to ask why computer games would not be a better topic for them to study. Her response here might be that:

> Studying rainforests will (while studying computer games will not) enhance the children's research skills and their problem solving skills. And it will help them learn to work collaboratively.

But again, there is an easy response. Studying computer games *may well* enhance the students' research skills: they will need to find the 'cheat sites' for example, or research details about the characters in the games, or the media techniques used to create them. What is more, playing many of these games clearly requires the use of problem-solving skills, to say nothing of the potential for collaborative activity in both playing and sharing the games.

We cannot justify teaching 'Rainforests' rather than computer games by pointing to the former topic's potential for enhancing research or problem-solving or collaborative skills. Nor is the topic's intrinsic interest sufficient to justify its inclusion in the teacher's *Society & Environment* programme: there are many other topics the children find decidedly more interesting than rainforests. Yet surely there must be some way to justify teaching 'Rainforests', some reason why the teacher has included this topic, rather than the topic of computer games in her programme. Why is it important for children to study rainforests? Perhaps the following line of argument will provide the justification we are looking for.

It is important that children study rainforests because they need to understand both the rate at which rainforests are being destroyed and the importance of rainforests to the environment: their role in counteracting global warming, as well as their role in maintaining biodiversity. Once children understand all this, they will come to realize the need to plant trees and to reduce their use of rainforest products (actions they can take now), as well as the need to lobby governments to restrict or halt logging in rainforests and to cast their votes accordingly (actions they can engage in as adults). In short, we hope that the knowledge children gain from studying rainforests will cause children to think and act in such a way as to make society better. We hope that children will take with them a commitment to caring about the conservation of the earth's rainforests. Teaching 'Rainforests' then, is aimed not so much at individual betterment (in the way that numeracy and literacy teaching are), but at the

betterment of society. The aim is ethical in nature. And we ought to be able to follow a similar explicit chain of reasoning whenever we attempt to justify the inclusion of a particular topic in our *Society & Environment* programmes. We teach about child labour for example, because we want students to understand the significant harm caused by such practices, in the hope that they will make responsible choices when purchasing garments; and we teach about reducing, re-using and recycling waste products in the hope that students will come to understand the consequences of their own consumption and disposal practices and modify them for the sake of the environment.

But of course, having even a deep understanding of the empirical content of a topic is not in itself sufficient to bring about a commitment to the betterment of society. Understanding the important role rainforests play in the global ecosystem, together with an awareness of the consequences of wide-spread logging, will not in itself be enough to foster an ongoing commitment to conservation. There are after all significant *benefits* which come from logging rainforests. Logging might enable South American farmers to grow more crops for example, and this may well help to protect their families from starvation. How are we to decide whether this seemingly positive consequence of logging is outweighed by the environmental harm caused by the practice? How are we to find a solution to this complex real-world ethical issue? In addition to being explicit about the aim of the topic we are teaching, and asking appropriate *empirical* questions about rainforests (or child labour, or recycling), it appears that we also need to unearth, ask and try to answer the *ethical* questions that underpin the topic at hand. In order to have grounds for the ethical commitment we are after then, students need to work towards answering important ethical questions about the topic. We need then, to work out *which* questions to ask..

As indicated earlier, looking to current practice in *Society & Environment* primary classrooms is, on the whole, unhelpful in this regard. Teachers rarely raise or deal with ethical questions as part of their *Society & Environment* programmes. Rather, they develop or adapt empirically-based curriculum units on particular themes or topics comprising sets of activities and research tasks in which children find out about and present information on the topics at hand. All in all, connections between the activities appear tenuous and it is often unclear how these activities and research tasks will help students to think well about the topic they are studying. Rob Traver puts it well:

> Many cherished school curriculum units are intellectually weak and fragmented because teachers and students really do not know what students are supposed to learn. Consider for example, the typical elementary unit on ancient Egypt. In this curriculum, kids learn about the pharaohs, the pyramids, Egyptian myths, and geography. They examine hieroglyphs, view the video Treasures of Tutankhamen, and make papyrus-like paper. This hopping from activity to activity goes on until the teacher decides it is time to study something else. Unfortunately, the intellectual outcome is a group of youngsters who recall pieces of information: perhaps a pharaoh's name, a strange custom, or a mental picture of the Sphinx. When these students and teachers are asked what they've been doing for the past few weeks, the answer is usually, "We've studied the ancient Egyptians." But one can study forever and not get anywhere when the goal of learning is not clear. Regardless of how carefully the individual activities and lessons are crafted, on close inspection, the…[curriculum units] reveal a lack of intellectual focus and coherence because the goals of study are not explicit. (Traver, 1998, p. 70)

Under this model, a study of our rainforest topic would involve a research project in which students are required to access and present information about a particular region of rainforest, directed by a set of guidelines, lessons and activites on the topic. Clearly, such a study could

be of interest to some students; it might well bring about understanding in relation to the ecological concepts they have been taught; it may extend students' general knowledge and in the future, help them to recall important information about rainforests; it might even inspire some individuals to care about the conservation of rainforests. But, studying rainforests via a set of loosely connected or disjointed activities (no matter how interesting or "hands-on" they might be), and doing so with little or no understanding of *why* the it is important to learn about the topic, is unlikely to bring about the ethical aim we are after in *Society & Environment*. We need to find a better way of developing and teaching curriculum units, and, Traver suggests that we should begin this process by formulating 'guiding questions' to direct classroom studies:

> A guiding question is the fundamental query that directs the search for understanding. Everything in the … [unit]is studied for the purpose of answering it. As a result of this function, guiding questions can direct the curriculum author's choice of ideas and activities and can transform the often disparate topics from a scattered survey of the subject, problem, or theme, into a logical, coordinated instrument for attaining knowledge. (Traver, 1998, p. 70)

Traver's notion of the guiding question provides a significant first step in the process of transforming the *Society & Environment* learning area. On this model teachers need firstly, to be explicit about their empirical and ethical goals for the topics they teach, and secondly, they must formulate both empirical and ethical guiding questions to direct *Society & Environment* units of study. The very purpose of these units will then be to support students in making progress towards answering the guiding questions, and in so doing, bring them closer to meeting the broader aim of the learning area, that is to foster the disposition to engage in rational ethical justification in relation to real-world social and environmental issues.

The task ahead seems clear: it is that of developing and implementing *Society & Environment* curriculum units based on coherent and logically sequenced sets of lessons and activities designed to enable students to make progress in answering guiding ethical and empirical questions. While the constraints of the paper prevent us from including examples of such curriculum units, much work has been undertaken in South Australia on developing as well as implementing them in the primary school settings (Collins, 2005 and Burgess, 2006). And, several curriclum units have been trialled in a recent large-scale study involving more than two hundred upper primary students, the findings of which demonstrated the model's effectiveness in fostering the skills of rational ethical justification as well as the disposition to apply these skills widely (Collins, 2005). We can it seems, be optimistic about transforming the *Society & Environment* learning area to one based on the processes of rational ethical justification, and in so doing, come closer to meeting the goal of supporting students to participate fully in a just democratic society.

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Dr Carol Collins teaches and researches in the fields of social and environmental education, ethics and Philosophy for Children, in the School of Education, University of South Australia. Her recently completed doctoral research focussed on the development and evaluation of a dialogue-based educational programme designed to foster logical and ethical thinking, and which fits within the existing 'Society & Environment' curriculum. More generally, her work is concerned with the development of evaluativist thinking across all levels of schooling including teacher education contexts. Carol has served for many years as chair of the 'South Australian Association of Philosophy in the Classroom', is co-editor of 'Critical & Creative Thinking: The Australasian Journal of Philosophy in Education', and is actively involved in the newly formed 'Ethics Centre of South Australia'.

Dr Sue Knight has a PhD in philosophy from Adelaide University and teaches and researches in the fields of ethics and Philosophy for Children in the School of Education, University of South Australia. Her focus is on teaching all branches of philosophy in primary and secondary schools. At present she has a special interest in ethical inquiry, the teaching of reasoning skills and values education. Her areas of specialisation within philosophy are metaphysics and the philosophy of science. Sue was the founding chair of the 'South Australian Association for Philosophy in the Classroom', and inaugural chair of the Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia, Philosophy Advisory Committee. She is co-editor of 'Critical & Creative Thinking: The Australasian Journal of Philosophy in Education' and is active in the newly formed 'Ethics Centre of South Australia'.