

Ethics at the Heart of Teaching in Higher Education

Roland Urbain

Abstract

This paper explores the essential role of ethics in teaching, beyond the mere transmission of knowledge and technical competencies. Drawing on Christophe Dejours' definition of work as the gap between prescribed tasks and actual execution, the author argues that teaching involves a deeply human, relational, and ethical dimension. Through personal reflections and real-life examples, the text highlights the importance of empathy, engagement, and personal responsibility. Teaching is portrayed not as a technocratic act, but as a space for intellectual and personal emancipation, where both teacher and student co-construct knowledge within a relationship grounded in respect, care, and critical reflection. The article critiques the utilitarian drift of higher education towards productivity and employability, advocating instead for a pedagogy centered on human development and social responsibility. It calls for a renewed focus on the ethical foundations of education – emphasizing dialogue, empathy, and the nurturing of autonomous, reflective individuals – ultimately positioning ethics as the core of the pedagogical relationship.

Keywords

ethics; education; dialogue; human development; social responsibility; empathy; higher education; pedagogical relationships; limit of the knowledge economy

Introduction

Christophe Dejours defines work as the gap filled between what is prescribed and what is actually carried out to complete a given task (Dejours 2011). The worker is more than a mere executor following a list of tasks codified in a procedure. They personalize their actions, leaving a trace of themselves in the outcomes of their work. They adapt disembodied procedures, imprinting them with their unique approach – so much so that one can recognize in the completed work a style, a particular way of doing things.

Strictly adhering to procedures, by applying them to the letter, hinders the natural flow of daily activity. “Work-to-rule” strikes clearly demonstrate that procedures alone are not enough. They are merely supports that allow work to flourish – they are essential, but not sufficient.

Ethics emerges in this gap and comes to fill it by humanizing work. For instance, preparing a meal tray for a specific patient in a particular unit, with a defined diet and medications, may follow an established procedure. But nothing replaces the smile and warm greeting of the nurse

or aide, filled with empathy. That simple human touch – though not codified – makes all the difference.

Professor Blascikova, with whom I had the joy and honor of working in Belgium through an Erasmus program, asked me to present and explain the role of ethics in my teaching practice. I thank her for offering me the opportunity to engage in a reflective and enriching return to my own professional experiences.

The aim of my contribution is to show how important it is not to reduce teaching to the acquisition of job-related skills, but rather to place learning processes – those that address the “How” – within the broader context of a pedagogical relationship from person to person, within which something essential is transmitted: the “Why” of my existence in its commitment to serving the common good.

The core of this reflection is to show how I, as a person, gradually allowed myself to be shaped and unfolded, step by step, along an ethical path.

I will attempt to show that, for me, ethics represents the surplus I allow to emerge between what life offers and how I choose to respond to it through my existence. In this perspective, I will explain why I have never limited my act of teaching to the logic of competence and knowledge transfer – these alone, in my view, are not enough for the process of humanization that is ultimately at stake.

It seems to me crucial not to reduce the soul of the pedagogical relationship to a mere act of knowledge transmission. Something more is required for teaching to truly humanize and serve the common good.

A Student Committed to Ethical Action

Christophe was one of my most memorable students. I share this story as an example of what ethical commitment in action means in the context of the gap mentioned earlier – between what is prescribed and what is actually done.

In the 1990s, companies were beginning to automate their production lines. As part of his internship and final thesis (*Travail de fin d'études*), which marked the end of his engineering program, Christophe was tasked with studying and learning about the operation of a machine. The operators working on the machine supported Christophe by teaching him the trade.

Christophe quickly adapted to his new environment and became passionate about what he was discovering. However, one day he realized that the automation of the work station, which he was learning about from his colleagues, would ultimately lead to job losses for the two people with whom he had developed a strong professional relationship. Christophe was adamant that he did not want to be involved in the “social death” of his colleagues.

He came to me in crisis, expressing his intention to abandon the internship because he could not bear the thought of contributing to the loss of employment for the two people who had been training him. He found it particularly cruel and cynical to extract information from his colleagues that would ultimately cost them their jobs.

My response surprised Christophe. I told him that he should remain in the position for two reasons: first, because the person replacing him – who would study the feasibility of automating the machine – might not have the same sensitivity to the situation and its consequences; second, because his perspective could raise awareness among decision-makers about the effects he had observed, potentially leading to support measures for the affected workers.

Christophe stayed on and completed his presentation, inviting the company to consider social support measures for the two operators who were going to lose their jobs due to the automation of their workstations.

Christophe was deeply saddened by the response from the company's General Director, who thanked him for the quality of his work and presentation, but noted that his conclusion was not part of the planned agenda for the presentation.

This moment gave me the opportunity to offer Christophe a final lesson:

“I explained that he had gone as far as he could and should. His actions were valuable because they helped expand awareness, and though he may not have had control over the outcome, his words might have made a difference. Perhaps a member of the management team had pointed out to the Director, ‘The young man is right. We should allocate some resources for the retraining of these two employees.’” (Urbain 2015, 35).

The artisan in philosophy helps to expand consciousness through the questioning they provoke and the questions they formulate. They do not provide ready-made, definitive answers once and for all.

In the surplus mentioned above, ethics consists of receiving the questions, allowing them to resonate deeply within my being, and acting accordingly based on the means available.

This leads me to discuss the way in which I have shaped my professional career by placing the person at the center and, in doing so, grounding my teaching practice in ethical concern.

Ethics as the foundation of the teaching relationship

The prescribed task of teaching is the transmission of knowledge from the teacher to the student, who initially lacks it. This prescription is built on a pedagogical relationship marked by asymmetry.

I have attended lessons given by teachers whose professional posture was shaped by such a prescription. I don't recall much from those sessions, as they were delivered with polite detachment.

On the other hand, I learned and retained much from the teachers who were true “Masters,” not only because of the rich content they shared, which stemmed from their own research, but also because of their attitude in transmitting their knowledge, enriched by their personal experiences. These Masters were deeply engaged in their pedagogy. They left a mark on us students through their respect for us, their empathy, and their kindness. They accompanied us throughout our intellectual development.

As Paul Ricoeur states, these teachers offered a pedagogical relationship imbued with solicitude – one in which they concerned themselves with our growth while encouraging our independence (Ricoeur 1990).

I fully embraced this teaching posture, which regards the student as an active participant in their education. This positions the teacher between high expectations and kindness, thereby demanding an ethical stance grounded in respect for the student’s autonomy.

Philippe Meirieu has shown that teaching is not simply about transmitting knowledge but about fostering intellectual emancipation (Meirieu 1991).

The Limits of a Strictly Administrative or Technical Approach

The logic of solicitude, as described by Paul Ricoeur, is neither shared nor practiced by all.

Higher education has often evolved toward a paradigm of the “knowledge economy.” This is an economic model in which the production and distribution of wealth are primarily based on the creation, dissemination, and use of knowledge. The competencies acquired by students must be immediately applicable in the workforce (Nussbaum 2010).

Operational efficiency takes precedence over critical reflection.

Indeed, preparing competent professionals is an important mission of higher education, but the teaching of competencies requires an ethical framework: who decides which competencies should be taught, for what purpose, and with what social consequences? It is important to avoid the instrumentalization of knowledge for purely economic or technocratic purposes.

Instead, the goal should be to educate responsible citizens who can think critically and understand the world. Universities cannot simply serve a utilitarian function (Habermas 1981). It must be a space for reflection and debate, where students remain, or become, independent thinkers.

The risk of a technocratic approach to teaching is that it may strip the pedagogical relationship between teacher and student of its substance, ultimately dehumanizing it.

Teaching is inherently a human relationship, through which something essential is transmitted from person to person. Pedagogy cannot be reduced to a mere system for transmitting knowledge; it involves a lively interaction between teacher and student (Meirieu 2007).

Certainly, the contexts of higher education do not always favor the development of the person-to-person pedagogical relationship: teachers are often caught between their mass lectures, their research, their publications, not to mention the development of various projects and the race for funding.

However, nothing prevents these overburdened teachers, who are constantly racing against time, from dedicating moments during their courses – during which they are anyway occupied – to encourage students before an exam, to be attentive to the questions raised and provide answers during summaries, to greet the audience at the beginning of a course, thus showing empathy, to offer office hours once or twice a month to address any questions, and to listen, understand, and support students who seek help.

Ethics remains possible despite the often challenging conditions.

Towards an Ethics of Pedagogical Commitment

The ethical approach is essential in higher education.

The challenge is to ensure that universities remain places of intellectual emancipation and not merely factories for producing skills. Beyond the purely technical aspect of the profession, the aim for students is to become autonomous and to continue their intellectual development, enabling them to think and reflect in a fair and thoughtful manner.

I identify in what follows three key moments of an ethics-in-action within my teaching practice. *First of all*, I have never been able to deliver a course independently of my audience. I needed to feel engaged in an interaction with the students.

It often happened that I would stop the lecture if I felt there was no response, and I would then ask the students what was wrong – ranging from disengagement due to a lack of understanding of the material to other issues they were experiencing. We would address these issues together before continuing with renewed energy.

In the same spirit, attention to the realities experienced by students, the empathy shown, and the search for solutions to problems raised during office hours embeds teaching within a pedagogical relationship that goes beyond the simple transmission of knowledge.

This consideration for the other in the pedagogical relationship resembles what Joan Tronto calls the “ethics of care,” which emphasizes attention to the needs of others and responsibility toward them (Tronto 1993). Teaching thus becomes a form of support that takes into account the real-life situations experienced by students.

Next, it is important to take into account the place and role of the participants in the pedagogical relationship.

First, the teacher, who serves as a reference point – even a model – for the students.

Through their attitude, pedagogical choices, and way of managing classroom debates, the teacher embodies a certain ethics of knowledge. They accompany and guide the production of knowledge by demonstrating how to think, how to doubt, and how to construct a line of reasoning. They set the boundaries for the dissemination and use of that knowledge.

Language plays a key role in the construction of knowledge. It enables dialogue among the involved and concerned participants, within which viewpoints are expressed and argued, defined and evaluated, and brought into interaction with others. Each participant is respected in their right to speak. Everyone learns to listen, to speak, and to confront their ideas with those of others.

Then, the student, who must engage in the process of constructing knowledge, gradually making it their own, moving from reproducing what is received to producing what they propose.

This transition from reproduction to production of knowledge can only be successful if the student links the process of their intellectual maturation to the development of their personal maturation.

Such argumentative exchanges are a site for what Habermas (1981) developed as the ethics of discussion.

I have always encouraged the students I've worked with to connect their personal and professional projects and to consider the concrete ways to carry them out – what I call an existential or life project. If there is dissonance, a person torn in two directions will struggle to hold together.

Weaving the thread of one's life, telling or writing one's story contributes to the emergence and unfolding of the unique being that I am. MacIntyre, the initiator of narrative ethics, has clearly shown the importance of such a process (MacIntyre 1981).

It is also necessary to consider the ethical evaluation of the content exchanged among the involved actors.

Thus, the content taught must avoid ideological, political, or religious bias. It must reflect cultural, social, and gender diversity. Moreover, it must promote values such as freedom, equality, human dignity, and solidarity.

It is important to articulate each participant's representations and to recognize that every point of view is situated and shaped by ideology, and by political, social, cultural, or religious affiliation.

Science is partisan, as Gérard Fourez once said (Fourez 1974); it is constructed based on a selection of useful elements. The map of a single territory differs depending on whether it is drawn for a hiker, a soldier, a traveling salesperson, a lover of Romanesque architecture, or a gourmet seeking the best places to eat.

Gérard Fourez recounted the experience of a student coming into his office and asserting that science is objective. He used the example of geography, his own field: "There is only one way to do geography," he claimed, throwing his textbook onto the desk. Fourez leafed through it and pointed out that it contained no photos of slums – the author of the textbook presented the capitals only through their most beautiful neighborhoods.

Finally, assessment involves an ethical responsibility. It is important to clearly define its meaning.

First and foremost, it is a technical act that measures the acquisition and integration of knowledge. It is essential: a bricklayer must be able to place the bricks in the right spot, and an engineer must be confident in their calculations so that the bridge does not collapse. There is a duty to do things properly for all involved – from the teacher, who must first ensure that the essential knowledge is transmitted and acquired, to the student, who must become an honest and responsible professional.

Assessment is also a continuous form of support that goes beyond measuring final performance; it tracks the learner's progress, efforts, strengths, weaknesses, achievements, and shortcomings. Assessment is fair when it is the result of both continuous and final evaluation. It is ethical when it is based on a balance between rigor and kindness, within a framework of educational justice (Dubet 2010).

Conclusion

My decision-makers often told me that I was too close to my students.

It's true that I have always preferred to build knowledge with them rather than impose ready-made content on my audience. I also took into account the personal stories they were willing to share with me, situating their learning progress in relation to their projects – what they wanted to build and achieve.

I very often linked my assessment with their self-assessment, sometimes even having to fight to raise a grade, as students were often harsher on themselves than I was, applying more numerous evaluation criteria. These students had truly understood the process and gradually became more active participants in their own education. They were learning how to learn to learn, thus investing in their personal and professional futures. Others clung to their school-age habits and remained on the sidelines. I would sometimes provoke them by calling them “executor students.”

Thus, I have never reduced pedagogy to a mere administration of learning. I have always integrated the human and relational dimension that, in my view, is the foundation of education. I have always regarded higher education as a place of intellectual emancipation, not simply a factory for producing skills.

I fully stand by this approach and do not regret it in the least.

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Dr Phil. Roland Urbain

<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-2851-3240>

Retired professor

Haute Ecole de Namur-Liège-Luxembourg, Hénallux

Campus Pierrard-Virton (École d'Ingénieurs)

Rue d'Arlon 112, 6760 Virton

Belgium

roland.urbain@gmail.com