

***‘That doesn’t feel right.’***  
**The Development of Moral Feeling through the  
Study of Literature, History and Social Science**

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**Abstract**

This article shows how, through the study of Humanities (History, Literature and Communications, and Social Science), students can develop their moral reasoning. Bishop Young articulates ways in which lecturers can help students to further their feelings of empathy for others. He argues that the development of moral feeling is the responsibility of all tertiary institutions and especially a Catholic one.

**Introduction**

Right behaviour, I understand, is based on natural law and not on feelings. People must learn (so we are told by moral philosophers), to understand, and follow the correct principles of morality whether they *feel* good or not. My concerns are rather how people can know that something is right, but do little to defend it, know that something is wrong and still choose to do it, and also feel no revulsion for what they have done.

In PNG, behaviour is sometimes defended using the term *kastom* - a covering term, which resolves a value conflict in favour of kinship or traditional relationships over or against the common good. People often do things that they know to be against the law and against the teaching of their faith and claim that *kastom* requires them to do so. (Although if *kastom* is seen as too costly it can still be abandoned in the name of being modern - compensation payments, for example). *Kastom* actions can include gross violations of human rights by international standards, such as payback and misappropriation of large amounts of the people’s money. This is a true value conflict, not a matter of finding a harmonious solution.

In this paper I want to argue that the acquisition or development of moral feeling at tertiary level is achieved through growth in empathy, the recognition that others have feelings not unlike my own. We have tried the opposite approach, that some people do not feel with the same depth as ‘we’ do, do not feel humiliation as ‘we’ do, do not miss their children as ‘we’ do, and the consequences have been terrible. We can agree with Kohlberg that people are ends not means, but we must add that their depths are as deep as ‘ours’.

It is also important that moral thinking not be seen as a ‘religious’ topic isolated from or tacked onto the mainstream of life. This idea is evident when you hear people remark that it is good for students (or businesses) to ‘have a bit of ethics’. In fact, the integration of moral thinking into all tertiary disciplines

is essential, not an optional extra. It is necessary for the integrity of all these disciplines and also for the proper study of ethics itself.

### **Humanities**

The Humanities, dealing as they do with people in relationships, have an important role to play in the development of moral feeling. Science (dealing also with relationships) can also do this, but it would take me too far afield to explore this fascinating topic.

In any moral problem, a multidisciplinary approach, drawing on a range of resources, seems the most useful. In the humanities, we can consider the feelings of others, real and fictional. It would seem to be the aim of art to generate an affective response in the audience. Some have gone as far as to suggest that if the response is revulsion, it is still good art for having generated such a strong response! We can also objectify cases and dilemmas to explore very personal problems from a literary distance. We are able to examine our myths, stereotypes, prejudices and biases. Any serious study of the world can generate a love for the beauty beyond goodness and a hatred for the evil beyond vice, as the philosopher Hannah Arendt has argued. This way of presenting the idea that Good is more than doing something good and that Evil is more than the sum of all bad things, speaks to the modern mind, especially in the face of the Holocaust.

We encounter sacredness and the innate dignity of human beings, what Gaita prefers to call their 'preciousness' in every tale of selfless love in history, in stories, and in everyday reality.

### **History**

History units can expose student to indigenous, black and feminist history - history from the underside - and they are empowered to reclaim and to write their own histories. This process can result in several important insights.

In the first place, it develops a feeling for **precedent**. In a sense, there is 'nothing new under the sun' as the philosopher, the author of Ecclesiastes, grumbles. Yet, every generation insists on making its own mistakes. I doubt if the study of history can prevent this, but it can provide one with a compassionate understanding of this insistence, and possibly with clues about how to get out of the latest version of a rather ancient mess.

It develops a feeling for consequences. We know by now that there are, for example, principles of good governance. These include processes such as transparency and accountability. We know that if these are ignored or abused, there is war and famine. I think that we have sufficient historical evidence that famine is primarily the result of bad governance, not climatic changes.

The study of history further develops a feeling for truth. Truth and reconciliation commissions in several countries plagued by civil war have

shown that even if reconciliation is not in fact achieved, at least lies can no longer be told.

All that a truth commission can achieve is to reduce the number of lies that can be circulated unchallenged in public discourse. In Argentina its work has made it impossible to claim, that the military did not throw half dead victims in the sea from helicopters. In Chile it is no longer permissible to assert in public that the Pinochet regime did not dispatch thousands of entirely innocent people.

(Michael Ignatieff, cited by Boraine 1998)

Glendinnen (1999) cites examples from Australian history, where the role of history is to tell 'true stories' to combat the use of historical lies for political purposes. The concept of *terra nullius* is the most pertinent example. The legal fiction that the continent of Australia was not in any sense 'owned' by its inhabitants is just that - fiction. We might also look for some true stories from PNG history to challenge established myths, for example that the Australian colonization of PNG was essentially benign. Glendinnen reminds us that 'significant historical events' are basically a matter of consensus among historians. Whereas European historians usually opt for the first flag raising as an event indicating major transition, an indigenous historian might site rather the first voluntary act of submission - the first Aboriginal or Papua New Guinean to choose to depend on the white man.

Finally, the study of history can develop a feeling for justice. No student of twentieth century history can avoid grappling with the meaning of genocide, in its degree and permutations. In doing so the student discovers the important principle that there is evil beyond vice. The Holocaust and other acts of genocide are not simply a collection of unfortunate but understandable and discrete acts of violence. They are, as Gaita insists, attacks on the preciousness of the human person. Crimes committed against individual people or groups can also be 'crimes against humanity'. In PNG where crimes such as rape and murder are understood as a conflict between individuals or autonomous groups, and may therefore be resolved by those groups without the interference of the state, this much broader sense of a threat to our common humanity may well be an essential component of nation building.

### **Literature and Communications**

Literature introduces students to Papua New Guinean and other post colonial writers as they reflect on the contemporary issues of rapid social change, corruption, and of course, racism.

We do not discover the full humanity of a racially denigrated people in books by social scientists, or not at any rate if those books merely contain knowledge of the kind that might be included in encyclopaedias. If we discover it by reading, then it is in plays, novels and poetry, in other words not in social science but in art. For such books to be published, however,

and for them to reach a reasonably wide audience, the days of that kind of racism must be numbered.

(Gaita 1999:67)

Literature and Communications must provide students with a vocabulary for moral thinking and talking. Will that language be 'philosophical', esoteric or abstract? Or will it be in plain language, part of common discourse and concrete? Even the term 'morality' requires urgent deconstruction as it has come to mean for many people a pre-packaged set of instructions - the opposite of what it should mean. It can thus obscure the issues and processes of real decision-making faced by people in the modern world.

Versatility in language can help the student to make fine distinctions, but it is also important to give the right name to offences. When does 'taking' become stealing and when does 'helping *wantoks* (relatives)' become corruption?

Creative writing, especially poetry, enables students to explore their feelings and give expression to them. This can be a healthy and non-violent outlet for anti-authority feelings. Much student writing is an apparent attack on politicians. A couple of examples from DWU's PNG Studies Journal (2000), *Kawawar*, illustrates my point.

The first, by Elvis Balg (2000), is entitled 'Waigani', the Port Moresby suburb which represents the centre of PNG bureaucracy.

Waigani! Wagani!  
Waigani is the one  
That lives.  
You alone burn  
In every heart.  
You are a heaven  
That every man  
Looks upon.

Your head breeds lies  
Your eyes glow like an Eagle.  
Your nose  
Is clean and violet.  
Your mouth is wide  
Like a hungry Pukpuk's  
Your tongue thirsts  
Minute after minute.

Your fat fingers  
Rub your nose daily  
Your shoulders are weak  
As a weary Kitten's.

Your breasts are as dried  
As the El Niño  
Your stomach is more  
Pregnant than a woman's.

Your thighs are hairy  
Like the Polar Bear's.  
Your toes go no  
Further than a snail.  
Your heart  
Is like the Yamaha  
That pumps  
Only with benzine.

You are the sexy whore  
That counts no man.  
Your shirt  
Scares even the flies  
Oh...hhh..Waigani,  
Waigani!  
You live  
While PNG dies.

Patrick Awaiaato's(2000) poem 'Politician' ends on a similar note:

When your riches have  
Shortfalls  
You beg IMF and World Bank  
Like a hungry puppy.  
You become a puppet of IMF  
And the World Bank  
While I become a victim of Mr VAT and Ms TESAS.<sup>1</sup>  
Mr Politician!  
You are the greatest monster  
I have ever met in my life.

Students' participation in conceiving, writing and performing drama and role-plays enables them to enter into other people's worlds, other people's concerns. This is a form of 'empathy', the capacity to 'feel with' other people. I believe that empathy is foundational to the development of moral feeling. Without being able to identify with the suffering of others, it is not possible to develop a sense of a common humanity and the consequent passion to alleviate that suffering. Socio-drama is especially useful in challenging students to understand significant contemporary social issues, to identify with the

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<sup>1</sup> 'VAT' represents the Value Added Tax, which students on fixed allowances or no allowances feel keenly. 'TESAS' represents the Tertiary Education Studies Assistance Scheme, a means by which the government reduced its assistance to most students.

protagonists in these issues, and to search for the stories, images and language that will assist others to properly understand those same issues. Students are empowered to present the moral issues surrounding corruption, social and economic disparities, HIV/AIDS, and other issues facing Papua New Guineans in everyday language in everyday contexts.

### **Social Sciences**

Social Sciences enable students to engage methodically and critically with the same human, social, political and economic concerns that they are meeting in history and literature. Contemporary trends in the study of the human or social sciences (psychology, sociology, anthropology, culture studies, religious studies) allow for more room for passion, for advocacy, for the pursuit of justice, rather than a purely (or supposedly) objective, detached, investigation of facts. Information, which in itself is morally neutral, is actually used to either oppress or liberate. We would like our students to engage with issues that are relevant. We would like them to discover that there is more to anything than meets the eye, and that a critical and inquiring mind is needed for mature moral judgement.

Wojcicki and Convey (1982:127) offer a list of social science topics (with American students in mind), which have a social justice dimension:

Culture, population, poverty, decolonisation, causes of war, limits of national sovereignty, United nations, world law, immigration history, labour movements...liberation movements, developing nations, terrorism, capital punishment, economic imperialism, family values, welfare, work ethic, unemployment, racism, sexism, violence, alienation, consumerism, sexual identity, social engineering lobbying, suffrage.

I found that the students at DWU usually wanted to investigate these and similar issues such as:

- Smoking, drugs, alcohol: Why do people do what they know to be dangerous?
- Status of women on campus and in PNG society
- Law and order, discipline, and punishment on campus and in PNG society.

The study of social science offers a different dimension to character development, one not often considered. I have seen attitudinal conversions take place as students learn social research skills. In particular I would like to mention three areas of development: from naïve simplicity to awareness of complexity, from unawareness to self-understanding, and from self-centredness to empathy.

### ***From naïve simplicity to awareness of complexity***

Often students begin with their own problem about other people's problems. They have an axe to grind (for example appropriate women's dress). As they

learn the skills and techniques of academic inquiry, they learn to avoid leading and biased questions. It becomes clearer that prejudice is the enemy of truth, that every problem is more complex than they had imagined, that there are no easy answers to social problems, and that every answer generates more questions.

What has this to do with character development? I believe that an appreciation of complexity is a mark of maturity, as is the realization that people have good reasons for their behaviour. In fact, they often do the wrong thing for the right reason. Similarly, facts are needed for mature moral decision-making, and these facts can be found in many unexpected places, such as law and economics.

### ***From unawareness to self-understanding***

More directly related to character development, within Social Science we are able to introduce students to the two (still mutually exclusive) traditions of theory and research in moral development:

1. *Psychoanalysis and social learning theory (Freud, Jung)*. Here it is necessary to help students to distinguish convention from morality.
2. *Developmental psychology (Piaget, Kohlberg)*. Students respond to the developmental approach as they see how it corresponds to a traditional understanding of life as consisting of stages. These stages, although based on universal biological stages, differ between cultures in their demarcation and in the tasks expected of each stage. In fact, the social learning approaches, following Freud, are almost reducible to the early stages of moral development according to Kohlberg.

Kohlberg, of course, is not so much concerned about behaviour as about moral reasoning (e.g. people may choose to avoid payback out of fear of punishment or, more nobly, out of a sense of common humanity). Moral development is not about what we do but why we do it. Most 'deterrence' approaches to social control suffer from the focus on the behaviour, threatening excessive violence in order to obtain compliance.

Kohlberg's argument that the development of higher stages of moral reasoning occurs through dialogue with those at higher levels is a challenge to educators. Even at tertiary level, academic staff will find stage one (reward and punishment) levels of moral reasoning. Patience is required to discuss relevant and contemporary moral dilemmas from social contract and even transcendent perspectives. Kohlberg may provide an answer to the question with which I began this paper. People may feel no revulsion about certain behaviour if it is simply not being evaluated at a high enough level. Anything goes if there is no punishment for it.

### ***From self-centredness to empathy***

A clear example of a person developing from self-centredness to empathy is the practical skill of formulating an effective questionnaire or interview

schedule. Students usually begin with leading, moralistic and prejudiced questions. However, as the researchers learn to place themselves in the shoes of the interviewee, they get more meaningful answers. This learning develops as a result of the information that is discovered in the inquiry. The more one knows about addiction, the more one finds empathy for the addict, and is able to propose workable rather than merely moralistic solutions.

### **The ethical ('just') university**

These three areas of study in the humanities - History, Literature and Communications, Social Sciences - occur in the context of the institution. The respective roles of the family and community in character development are well established. What is the role of the institution? It is surely not only the acquisition of knowledge or mastery of skills. I believe that most tertiary institutions in PNG would aspire to the development of well-rounded human beings for whom knowledge and skills are fulfilling instruments in the making of a better world. The institution is, and must become, a community itself.

The essential condition for the emergence of a sense of moral obligation, or better still, moral longing, is the continued experience of relationships of mutual respect, as between equals, based on mutual sympathy and love. The students should find themselves, as Piaget (1932) suggests, in the type of society where people have common obligations based on mutual respect rather than a 'command' society expecting blind obedience.

In this, each university staff member plays a part in the community, by the way they treat others, including students, as adults, and by their willingness to dialogue, and by the way they make decisions. At tertiary level, these decisions are close in kind to those that students will have to make, and students at this stage are now much more conscious of the actual processes of decision-making. Lecturers also influence students by their approaches to their subject matter and to life in general.

There are moral components in every aspect in the life of the institution, including meals, recreation, social events, awards and prizes. The structures of the institution, its processes of accountability, communication and discipline, all contribute to an environment that fosters or discourages ethical decision-making. We know, for example, that Papua New Guinean students are sensitive to hints of favouritism. Here is an area where the positive and negative values in the 'wantok system' of support and assistance, preference and nepotism, can be teased out and clarified. This reflection and dialogue helps to cultivate moral development in the young citizens of PNG.

### **Conclusion**

Much hurt has been done to others on the basis that 'they' do not feel things as 'we' do. In Australia and Canada it was on this basis that aboriginal children were taken from their parents. Even here in PNG I have spoken to people who were beaten or humiliated by kiaps and even missionaries. The perpetrators

would probably be surprised to learn that these people were offended by this treatment. Unfortunately, this 'teach them a lesson' syndrome is still alive and well. One still hears victims of this mentality comment, ' *Wanem samting i stap long bel bilong mi, ol i no save*'. ('They just don't know what is in my heart').

The service of liberating and empowering students for responsible ethical decision making is a crucial task of all tertiary institutions, and especially for a Catholic institution. Such an institution can provide students with an environment and the resources to uncover true history; read, listen, write and perform moral stories; and search and find useful facts. In doing so the institution enables them to participate in a social, economic, and political life that is ethical, not merely prudential or consequential. It fosters a sense of nationhood and of common humanity.

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