

**A Gentle Discussion on Moral Literacy and Moral Education**

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### **Introduction: From Literacy to Moral Literacy**

As a civilized society, morality is to be concerned as one of the most important issues in education, societal life, human behaviors and so on. We want to build a society that is not only literate, but morally literate, and this can mean a variety of things: to understand morality and ethics, to be literate in reading materials involving moral judgment and challenges, and also to be capable of overcoming moral challenge and dilemmas in real life. The society cannot function well without the majority of its members having a good level of morality.

The concept *moral literacy* describes the set of characters, traits, and skills people need to live life morally and deal with moral challenges. However, moral literacy as a concept is not very well researched yet, although it should be regarded with its great importance in education and influencing people's lives. In general, moral literacy is important because it better prepares future teacher researchers in academic settings, and in general it prepares the society for better citizens. Although this essay focuses on moral literacy, it is always good to start with literacy first.

At the individual level, being literate is an important part of being civil. A literate person can read and write in their lived situation, and the word "literacy" refers to the social practice, actions, and conceptualizations of reading and writing. "Speech makes us human, and literacy makes us civilized," as remarked in the 1970s by cognitive developmental psychologist David Olson. Language is a mediation tool, with which one gains literacy which brings them to a situated social practice: to converse, to read, to write down ideas, etc. The late twentieth century literacy scholar and anthropologist Brian Street proposed a well-known, versatile definition for understanding literacy: trying to define literacy across disciplines, he took an objective approach

to examine the technical and neutral characteristics of literacy (i.e. what it is, as a neutral technology/tool and as a property), and the consequences of applying literacy in our cognition; he proposed the natural, or autonomous component and model of literacy (Street, B. V., 1984). That is to say, the autonomous model views literacy without any social interaction and only with a focus on literacy's inherent properties.

Alongside, Dr. Street suggested the counterpart would be anything that is “ideological”. Interpretations of literacy that follow, derive from, or are based upon specific ideologies—systems of ideals usually for economic or political theory, such as democracy—are supposed to be in the other category known as the ideological model in which literacy is understood and realized in terms of concrete social practices, i.e. the presence of social structure is the defining factor. In this regard, we can say that moral literacy is ideological because it is concerned with morality and ethics in the real world, with its relevant content/materials on the topic of morality. In the broad sense of literacy, moral literacy is at a “void” of what it can be defined into. Moral literacy means the skillset, knowledge, or simply capability to address and confront ethical challenges and dilemmas.

To bring our sight toward education, moral education, in parallel, is what *builds* moral literacy in us. It is the combination of moral lessons which one learns throughout their educational journey. For example, the history and English classes may bring to the student a good amount of how to “be moral” or “do the things right”, as students read through classical literature and other historical artifacts. Learners combine what they read to evaluate moral positions held by characters in the story. Gaining such kind of perspectives, or “out-of-body” experience, usually through reading, is beneficial and it provides especially young learners what they cannot get in real life. We may read about President Abraham Lincoln on his courage to

help the slaves fundamentally and his dedicated service to people; we may also learn about Nelson Mandela's endurance for the goodness of his fellow people. These pieces of stories and characters accumulatively form one's moral education, as the learner perceives artifacts into their own conceptualizations. Overall, the moral education is an encapsulation of relevant skills and experiences for the student learner, and such education as a literacy will be embedded into the learner's competency for them to take on day-to-day challenges. In this essay, we will discuss how the education builds and strengthens moral literacy.

### **Review of Literature**

Let us take a glance at what moral literacy could be defined at different levels. Basic moral literacy could refer to a minimal capability to make right-or-wrong decisions (Clifford, 2011), and it could be decomposed into ethics sensitivity, ethical reasoning skills, and moral imagination (Tuana, 2007). Moral literacy presupposes ethical paradigms (Lowery, 2020) in the leverage of school leadership, aiming to reconcile and polarize incompatible views in education (Leonard, 2007). We may henceforth see that "moral literacy" does not necessarily in itself require reading or writing (Collins and Blot, 2003). According to Collins and Blot's introduction, moral literacy was coined by a former Secretary of Education who called for it—it consists of conservative character traits such as prudence and self-reliance (Bennett, 1996). According to philosopher Herman (2007), moral literacy differentiates individuals and autonomy from a social conception of moral self, and it is because we as moral beings cannot be "wholly social or wholly free" (p. 128).

In a 1992 work by McGinn titled *Moral Literacy*, the author derives and relates morality to freedom; it suggests that ultimately people would like to be free to pursue their goals, and morality steps in here to specify the conditions under which people can be free (McGinn, 1992).

He also compares two types of morality being taboo (absolute morality without a reason) versus rational morality (with reasons for judgements and prohibitions), suggesting to replace the former with the latter (p. 11). And because morality limits freedom, the pursuit of morality is inherently involved with a “conflict of goods” since freedom is good (p. 15).

In terms of what moral prototypes to pursue while building moral literacy, it is argued that people need both types of heroes who suffer with laughter and who suffer with weeps and sadness (Elliot, 1987). Besides, C. S. Lewis (1962) pointed out that to provide students with “moral experiences” is a form and way of moral education.

### **Methodology**

In this essay, my methodology consists of discussion, review of literature, and qualitative interview/survey. In the last part, in order to better understand the notion of moral literacy and its implementation in practice in teaching, I conduct a qualitative interview with an English and history teacher in Philadelphia at the high school level. The interview consists of three components, for which the first component is about the general concept of morality as to how it is communicated and understood in the interviewee’s teaching environment.

The second component is about how we define moral literacy, and what are some essential components of such skill. I was able to have a close discussion with the interviewee about what kind of skillset that moral literacy refers to, when talking about it beyond reading skills. We spent most of our interview time on the third part, which is a rating on a variety of disciplines on their importance and contribution to moral literacy. In this component, I ask the interviewee to examine eight categories of knowledge, or disciplines, and then provide rationale and rating (with range 1 to 5) for each of the disciplines by how much they contribute to students’ moral literacy skills.

After the questions, I collect notes from the conversation especially about the rationales of the ratings of each discipline.

### **Findings**

We will address the three components of the qualitative interview here respectively. We first discuss how morality is communicated in classrooms. Take teaching English as an example, students are to investigate morals in their classes, and when students are assigned reading tasks, they are expected to get something out of the reading about morality and moral skills. Students in history classes for example will put themselves in moments of history, such as the fall of the Roman republic and post-World War One Germany, to think about what they would do and how it looked like for them. With a sense of responsibility to teach such content, in practice time is also limited to cover the entire curriculum while content is substantial.

Next, we come to the definition of moral literacy. We discussed that the concept is hard to pin down because it is not necessarily a reading skill, but rather an interpretative skill in a social way. The student's moral literacy may be measured by evaluating a moral dilemma, a situation that is not easy to answer. In these complex contexts, moral literacy will let us think about morality and how to answer those difficult moral questions. As the saying goes, "there is always good with bad, and bad with good." A lot of students are also overwhelmed by their worldview when confronted with challenging moral questions.

Lastly, we discuss across a variety of disciplines on their contribution/importance to moral education, which is organized as follows (rating scale is from 1 to 5):

**Social Sciences:** 4 out of 5. Sociology, psychology, and government studies are traditionally considered as social sciences. They reflect the larger body of people as well as individuals, and are important for how we see the world through a "moral lens".

**Geography:** 2 out of 5. We can learn a lot through geography, but what we really learn from it is more scientific than moral.

**Literature, Nonfiction:** 5 out of 5. It is one of the extremely important elements of moral education. According to the interviewee, when students are given anything to read, it is something to be internalized in the readings about morality. So, when assigning readings to students, we should think about what we want students to internalize in them so that they can apply them later.

**Philosophy:** 3 out of 5. Philosophy is sometimes used as a means for students to be engaged in history, how people used to think. If for adult learners, philosophy might be rated higher but for high schoolers it is less important as compared to history.

**History:** 5 out of 5. We can say any good history teacher is trying to teach about lessons the past, and is not just facts. History is good for moral education as it is what the students can learn from.

**Art History:** 2 out of 5. It can do some of what general history does, but more with a focus on aesthetics and is not about critical views of the history.

**Natural Sciences, Mathematics:** 2 out of 5. If we exclude the part of history and personal narratives in science, natural sciences are just about the scientific rules and are not about evaluating what is right or wrong. Students could learn about environmentalism and such, but generally it is only about how things work and formulas.

**Language and Culture:** 3 out of 5. Languages are not necessarily about morality, and just quite the opposite it is very autonomous in that it focuses on grammar, language rules and such, which does not really speak to morality. Sometimes, it disallows us to focus on the moral stance because it needs to be neutral.

### **Discussion: Building Moral Literacy Through Education, and Its Importance**

As we discovered in the interview study above, moral literacy can come from a range of disciplines. At the core of moral literacy, it is what we most admire as traits of character which we want young people to possess (Bennett, 1988), and the key question is “how does education form character and help students achieve moral literacy” (p. 30)? The knowledge we need to form character and build moral literacy comes from the very disciplines discussed in the methodology section, ones which we examined to be contributing to a student’s moral education. Although moral education is what schools prepare the young to become morally and ethically mature adults (Ryan, 1986), little of such moral education is implemented in lesson plans and curricula. Since there is no simple curriculum of a “morality class”, the moral education received by the student is a combination of multiple disciplines.

Moral literacy can be taught by reading stories. Reading virtue stories is a pillar of moral education, and readers are active meaning makers in their interactions with the world (Narvaez, 2002). Students read novels, have discussions, and develop their reasoning through the characters in their readings and form their conceptualization of their moral stances. Historical fictions could teach students about equality and justice, and moral stories let young people learn how to save energy and resources. In addition, because literacy is crucial to moral education, it is highly correlated to the building of moral literacy. Although readings are assigned to students for comprehension and not for literacy training, a good literacy skill can enhance the learning of morality from reading. In other words, morality is learned through literacy, and working on literacy skills can help enhance moral literacy skills.

Moral literacy and education are better centered at people rather than events. Morals reside in people’s everyday lives, and hence education needs to direct people to love living and



learn how to be a better man: integrity, kindness, courage, and so on. Moral education is also based on students and their learning trajectories, in that it should focus on students' growth and character building. By focusing on people, students learn from the good characters in their readings and attempt to look up to those who they admire.

A good moral education needs to be rooted in real life, which is what moral literacy finally serves for. What students learn from readings should in this regard resonate with their understanding of real life. Through moral education, the notion of love, virtue and freedom are propagated in students' lives, and they subsequently learn to behave accordingly to live up to their moral expectations. Also, lived experiences can teach us about moral practices, because our characters are built through practices, which in turn provide feedback to our moral abilities. Moral literacy is best developed through combining education and practice.

By scope, moral education takes place not only at schools, but also in family and in society. Parents are meant to be the very first teachers to the young, especially upon moral values; a lot of literacy learning experiences take place at home, and family discourse is a key component of a child's language environment. Halstead (1999) elaborates the issues of political approach to "family values", a prominent term in public policy in United Kingdom, as diversity in family is revealed and it contributes to the moral development of children (p. 266).

For academic settings, morality is extremely important as early collegiate level students rely their morals on what is build beforehand. If we have a generation of good students who are equipped with good moral values and moral literacy, through education, they can and will become the educators and researchers of tomorrow with integrity. There are a lot of academic misconducts in the college setting, and by and large they are due to a lack of moral literacy skills before the students even enter college. Hence, it is important to build the moral literacy for

students at an early stage, prepare them for tomorrow's moral challenges, and let them become ready for disciplinary works in their own fields. Sanger (2008) discusses the disconnect between the moral nature of teaching practice and teacher education, which points out that although general teaching methods are taught in US colleges for teacher training, the study of the "moral nature of teacher's work" is not well considered (p. 169). This brings us to consider the preparatory process for future teachers as when moral education comes in, collegiate level students will be better equipped at moral skills and literacy so that they would not miss out the moral component of their work. Scholar Campbell (1997) regards teacher as "moral agent and exemplar", and such moral agency "characterizes many of the unintentional forces of teaching". That says teachers as moral agents in their role help students construct their own morality.

A scientist or researcher will do "good science" if and only if they are equipped with a minimal level of moral literacy: being honest, provide rationales in their work, and communicate properly about their findings. In addition, a good moral literacy enables scholars to make right research decisions, to select research topics that are more urgent with ethical and moral importance, and not merely following the trend. Academic people "become prestigious by doing good science, not popular science," as quoted from the famous computer scientist Donald Knuth. The pathway of doing scholarly work with morality is a hard one, but it is more rewarding. A higher standard for moral literacy in scholars should expect a healthier, more communicative academic environment in which scholars exchange ideas while preserving their moral boundaries.

### **Conclusion**

We will encounter moral problems that evoke our morality, and thus skills and strategies are necessary to engage these problems. Moral literacy is a competency and skill that can be

achieved and built through moral education, which is multi-faceted through a variety of ways. It is important for academic setting and for teacher preparation, because the academic atmosphere needs a good level of moral literacy and skills of its constituents. Teachers are moral agents who will help their students construct their morality, and hence a minimal level of moral literacy is necessary for teacher training.

Morality is the backbone of our society, and for citizens moral literacy is an essential asset. Through years of immersion in materials of moral lessons and lived experiences, we all are up to a certain level of moral literacy. Building moral literacy takes sustaining efforts and training. Rather than viewing moral literacy as a skill, we may want to view it as a building process of moral knowledge and competencies. Such process is accumulative, with a majority in secondary school education as students read and get exposed to more advanced materials. In the end, with moral literacy, we will become more confident, more driven, more capable of unraveling moral situations, and more successful in what we do.

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### Appendix: Qualitative Interview on Moral Literacy and Education

My qualitative interview consists of two parts. In the first part, I ask about how the concept of morality is communicated in the interviewee's teaching environment. Secondly, I inquire into the general definition of moral literacy, and what are some key elements of moral skills. Then in the third part, I propose a set of disciplines of knowledge that could contribute to moral literacy and education, which I invite the interviewee to rate and provide reasons and explanations.

1. How has "morality" been communicated in your experiences, or taught in your classroom?
2. How would you define "moral literacy"? If such literacy/competency refers to the ability to confront and overcome moral and ethical challenges or dilemmas, could you exemplify several key elements which you think are essential to such skill?
3. For the following categories of disciplines and knowledge, and for secondary/K-12 level, give a rate of importance for each regarding its weight and **contribution to the student learner's moral literacy** (1 being the least important, and 5 being extremely important):

|  |   |   |   |   |               |
|--|---|---|---|---|---------------|
| Social Sciences                                  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 (Important) |
| Geography  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 (Important) |
| Literature, Nonfiction                           | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 (Important) |
| Philosophy                                       | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 (Important) |
| General History, U.S. History, and World History | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 (Important) |
| Art History (on aesthetics)                      | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 (Important) |
| Natural Sciences, Mathematics                    | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 (Important) |
| Language and Culture                             | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 (Important) |