EDUC 269: The Ethics of Teaching

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Contact information: The best way to catch me is through e-mail. If you don't get a reply within 24 hours, then pester me: mark your message as urgent and e-mail me again. I'm happy to meet students outside class at mutually convenient times. My e-mail is ecallan@stanford.edu

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The purpose of this module is to help students to gain some basic preparation for the ethical problems they will routinely confront in their professional lives. Recognizing and addressing these problems adequately is as important to teaching well as keeping control in a classroom or maintaining up-to-date knowledge of subject matter. You will become more thoughtful and precise in reflecting on ethical problems that would be familiar to any experienced elementary school teacher. That is as much as can be accomplished in the short time we have together. But the accomplishment is nonetheless fundamental to your professional integrity.

Like many other responsibilities in teaching, our ethical tasks have an important collaborative aspect. Good teachers will learn to exercise their capacity for moral judgment as members of educational communities, comprising colleagues, students, and parents; they cannot responsibly act as solitary individuals accountable only to their own conscience. They will often be morally required to show leadership in their school community, even if they do not have a formal leadership. And finally, teachers in public schools have to learn to discharge their ethical responsibilities as public officials of a democratic state in which legitimate laws and policies are not always the ones we think best for our students and fellow citizens. All these things greatly complicate the ethical content of the teacher's professional role. But they are also part of what makes teaching such an exhilarating and worthwhile career. At any rate, much more than thoughtless goodwill or familiarity with a code of professional conduct is needed if teachers are to be equal to the moral challenges their work will pose. Teachers require ethical sensitivities and understanding that will develop haphazardly – or not at all – without some systematic study in the ethics of teaching. That is the reason for you are required to take this module.

By the end of the module, students should have a command of the basic skills of ethical reasoning, some familiarity with the most important ethical concepts that apply to their work, and an ability to apply these skills and concepts in the analysis of case studies. An assignment will be distributed to the class at the beginning of December. This will be due a week before we meet again for the last time in winter quarter. I will let you know what the date is as soon as I have worked out what would be appropriate in consultation with my colleagues in STEP.
Some of you may in the coming weeks become interested in learning more about the ethics of teaching through further academic study. (In fact, I hope that happens to all of you.) I am not suggesting that you pursue such study during our module or the sake of the final assignment. No need for that and you are busy enough already. My point is that if you are a lifelong learner you might appreciate some direction about where to go a little later on in your life if any of the questions from this course linger in your mind. By far the best recent book on the ethics of teaching – and educational leadership – is Kenneth Strike, *Ethical Leadership in Schools: Creating Community in an Environment of Accountability*. Strike has written other books on educational ethics, but this is by far the best one. If you become interested in some of the ethical concepts (rights, justice etc.) and theory (consequentialism, etc.) which I might occasionally allude to in class, then a very good place to begin is the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, which is a wonderful free online resource with good to outstanding essays on all the important concepts in ethics, and much more besides.