

Applying Social Cognitive Domain Theory for Moral Education: An Overview

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I want to thank you for this opportunity to share some of the outcomes from our ongoing analysis of the results of our work integrating moral education into the educational activities of middle school history classes. In this paper I will describe the basic framework of our project. We will then hear from two of the participating teachers, Morgan Kirschbaum and David Minhondo, who will share some of their experiences and perspectives. Deborah Powers and Michael Creane will then present the research outcomes of our work applying what we refer to as Domain Based Moral Education (DBME) in the two papers that follow. Because these papers are all inter-related we will hold questions until the end.

Project Goals

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A central goal of this project was to test the efficacy Domain Based Moral Education applied to classroom instruction. Our prior work had been limited to small-scale experimental demonstrations using graduate student teachers to implement strategies, or to demonstrations of lessons applied in classrooms by individual teachers.

Within this basic goal our specific aims were first to impact the development of students' moral reasoning, their concepts of societal convention, and their capacity to coordinate socio-moral judgments in multi-faceted contexts. In this regard, we did not cast our educational goals as moving toward an end point defined by principled moral reasoning. Instead our goal was to contribute to the capacity of students to address social situations entailing moral complexity from a moral perspective.

As we will address in this symposium moral complexity arises in part from developmental factors associated with early adolescence. In our view, an evaluative

moral stance is available throughout the course of development, and the ways in which morality is engaged is impacted by development. There is, however, no developmental end-point where morality trumps non-moral considerations in all multi-faceted contexts.

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A second aim of the project was to gain increased understanding of the classroom processes and discourse dynamics associated with social cognitive development.

A third basic aim of our approach was to contribute to development while also connecting with the goals of the teachers and schools for academic instruction – what we refer to as a 2 for 1 approach to moral education. This goal of combining academics and moral development was tied into our fundamental concern that our educational interventions achieve sustainability. What we were trying to address was the history of the decontextualized application of moral discussion in classrooms that was one of the factors that led Lawrence Kohlberg to say about his own efforts, “The operation was a research success, but the classroom patient died.”

Conceptual Framework: Domain Theory

SLIDE 4

The conceptual approach undergirding our work was social cognitive domain theory. Just by way of review, domain theory posits that our judgments about morality center around issues of harm, welfare, fairness and rights, and are conceptually distinct from our conceptions of social convention that are the norms established by consensus or authority that serve the functions of social organization and coordination of interactions within a given social system. Morality and convention are in turn differentiated from our understandings about issues of personal choice and privacy that primarily impact the self.

Finally, domain theory acknowledges that many social events that include moral components are multi-faceted and require the application of understandings and judgments from more than one domain. By way of analogy consider the task confronting four children who have worked together and earned \$10 delivering newspapers and now must decide how to divide up the money. This task certainly involves an understanding of basic mathematics as it entails taking a quantity “10” and dividing it up 4 ways. However, this is not simply a math problem as the decisions about how to conduct that numerical division will rest upon a set of moral decisions as to what is the best/fairest way to do so. In this one context then, the children confronting this situation must apply their conceptual frameworks from two distinct domains: math and morality. No educator would advocate that we raise math scores solely by focusing upon moral dilemma discussion. No moral educator would advocate reducing moral education to the learning of mathematics. We do not make this mistake because we understand that math and morality are two distinct conceptual systems requiring domain concordant educational experiences. Similarly within our Domain Based approach to Moral Education we address the development of morality and societal convention as distinct conceptual frameworks requiring differentiated instruction.

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Our focus in the project was on stimulating conceptual development in the moral and conventional domains. The age-related changes in social convention associated with our target age group were originally defined by Elliot Turiel (1983) in his account of seven Levels of development of social convention spanning childhood to adulthood. Our student population employed reasoning about social convention within the following

three levels defined as Levels 3 -5 in Turiel's framework that we relabeled Levels 1 -3 for our purposes.

Level – 1 Students at this level affirm the importance of convention but without a connection between conventions and the social system.

Level 2 Typical of middle school students treat conventions as “nothing but” the dictates of authority.

Level 3 – See the emergence of an understanding of the relationship between conventions and social groups and institutions as systems. Reasoning at this Level is typical of about 50% of ninth grade students.

One of our educational goals was to stimulate growth of students toward the Level 3 understanding of convention that would allow the students to understand the function of conventions within social systems. This is a critical component for understanding much of the dynamics of history, and essential to the capacity of individuals to participate within civil society and democratic institutions.

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The development of moral judgment employed in this project was estimated using the description of changes in moral reasoning presented in recent work by Nucci and Turiel (see Nucci, 2014) employing a coding scheme developed at UC Berkeley by Alona Roded. The levels that we tracked are not viewed as hard stages because the moral judgments of individuals are not independent of context. What we focused upon are a set of changes typical of late childhood and adolescence. We estimated those changes in

this project using a single context. These levels describe changes in the ways in which individuals weigh competing moral elements within a situation.

As with convention there are three levels:

5 MINS

Level 1 Simple/Straight Forward – At this level individuals evaluate right and wrong based upon the salient moral elements of a given situation.

Level 2 Uncoordinated/conflicted - At this level there is an appreciation of moral ambiguity and the recognition of grey areas of morality. However, there is difficulty in coordinating the ambiguous moral elements to arrive at a moral decision. Level 2 is the modal form of moral reasoning of middle school students.

Level 3 Coordinated – At this level the potentially confounding elements of a moral situation that lend complexity “grey areas” are weighed, balanced and brought into coordination. For the particular issue used in our assessment Level 3 reasoning is normative for roughly 70 percent of 16 year olds.

In our assessments that will be described in Michael Creane’s paper we examined conceptual development in each domain separately as well as student’s modal form of coordination across domains. Michael will provide examples that will illustrate these forms of reasoning and cross-domain coordination.

Educational Principles

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The principles that guided our educational approach are outlined in this next slide. First, the issues and materials used to frame lessons were derived from contexts involving morality, convention, and personal issues that were embedded within topics covered in the regular curriculum.

Second, consistent with the research just mentioned, classroom discourse and written assignments were aligned with domain: that is to say, domain concordant.

Third, classroom activities were directed toward fostering transactive student discourse (Berkowitz & Gibbs) that contributes to social cognitive growth, and also fosters a pattern of “conversational responsiveness” in which the moral principles of equality are enacted through conversational acts (Laden, In press.) That is to say that the enactment of classroom conversations was in and of itself directed at fostering moral relationships among the participating students.

Finally, classroom discussions and activities were linked with reflective written assignments. The discussions within our approach were not simply disembodied conversations, but were tied directly into the instructional aims of the class. Moreover, the act of writing extended the cognitive engagement in the reflection upon morality and convention raised in the classroom discourse and deepened their educational impact.

Project Participants and Context

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The participants in the project were from three middle schools in the Oakland Unified Public School District. All three schools serve lower to working class multi-ethnic student populations. The schools were suggested by the district coordinator for social studies as places with administrators and teachers likely to be open to our project. There were a total of 8 participating teachers across grades, and three control teachers: one from each grade. The control teachers were similar to the participating teachers – and were in fact nominated for the project by the participating teachers. There were 254 students total.

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The lessons were drawn from 6th grade World History from ancient civilizations to the medieval period; 7th grade world history covering the middle ages up to the middle of the 20th century; 8th grade American History.

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Our project took place in the year prior to a set of initiatives in the district that will frame our curricular focus within the broader district aims regarding social, emotional and moral growth and eventually civic engagement at the high school level. Because we were able to begin more quickly, we have been able to assess the impact of our approach without concerns about the possible contribution from the SEL program.

Teacher Preparation

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Prior to our preparation of the teachers to engage in moral education, we sought to establish a picture of each instructor's teaching style. We conducted two to four baseline observations, depending upon the teacher's availability, with the target classroom. The teachers were all aware that they were going to participate in a program that would help them to integrate issues of morality and social justice within the regular curriculum. Therefore we asked them to let us observe them teaching a session in which the focus would be on the connections between justice and human welfare and the history they were covering. In essence we wanted to see how these teachers would go about the task of integrating attention to morality within their teaching of history without our input.

Following the baseline observation period, we provided a series of three two-hour in-service workshops during early evenings in one of the school sites. All of the teachers were given complementary copies of "Nice is not enough: Facilitating moral development." Teachers were paid at the district rate for their time at the sessions. The first session covered the basics of social cognitive domain theory, including age-typical development of social conventional and moral reasoning in the middle school years. The second workshop focused upon lesson construction and transactive discussion. The final session was a hands-on workshop in which the teachers brought in their initial attempts at constructing a lesson. A fourth session was held late in the Fall semester close to the Winter break to share lessons and to provide mid-year feedback to the project staff.

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Following the workshops the teachers engaged in lesson construction. Teachers created lessons throughout the academic year. As each lesson was completed the teachers would send the lesson plan by email to the DBME team. The DBME team was comprised of experienced classroom teacher graduate assistants. They provided feedback and comments that were then reviewed by team leader before returning to the teacher. The teacher then taught the lesson.

The feedback that we provided to teachers included such things as directing teachers to identify the domain-based goals of the lesson, and insuring that discussions were directed around domain concordant considerations. The teachers became much better at doing this on their own over the course of the year.

The teachers were paid for completed lessons each month based on a standardized estimate of the time it would take them to create a lesson plan. A sample of up to 5 lessons taught by each teacher was observed and classroom discussions audio recorded. We used audio rather than video at the request of the schools.

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Lesson Topics

A total of 48 lessons were completed and implemented by the eight participating teachers. The topics covered a wide range of events in world and American history. This slide presents a sampling of them.

Lessons that focused upon social convention, such as the lesson on West African Family Roles explored the functions of conventions and customs in organizing social institutions such as the family. Students in this lesson compared the conventions

of West African families with the roles and norms that the children and their parents followed in their own daily lives in Oakland. Through this comparison they considered how their own family life would differ if those conventions were altered.

Lessons that focused upon morality in contrast centered the discourse around considerations of fairness and human welfare. In teaching about the well-known events of the Boston Tea Party, the 8th grade teacher very cleverly brought in the events that these Oakland students were quite familiar with regarding the property damage that had been caused in their city's downtown by demonstrators aligned with the Occupy Movement. The teacher centered the lesson around two issues: first, were the perceived injustices experienced by the participants in the Boston Tea Party and the Occupy Movement justified in using property damage to draw attention to their grievances. Second, can one make the case that damage to property is acceptable given that it does not entail direct harm to persons. In Deborah Power's presentation you will see a sample of the discussion generated in this lesson.

The lessons looking at issues of overlap such as the issue of child labor began by focusing upon the issues of convention and then integrating them with moral considerations – in this case looking at the shifts in societal conventions brought on by the industrial revolution as families moved from an agrarian society to the city. The conventions that included children as workers alongside their families in the farm setting now posed new serious dangers to children as they were incorporated within the factory workforce.

In the presentation to follow by Morgan Kirschbaum you will see how the students were engaged in these lessons and how teachers worked to connect these moral issues from history with their own day to day personal interactions.

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Project Data and Assessments

We gathered multiple sources of data to measure the project impact.

These include the following:

- Observations of control and project classrooms
- Baseline and post-inservice observations of project classrooms
- Time series checklists + audio recordings of discussions
- Essay assessments of student moral and conventional levels and coordination of mixed domain (morality and convention) issues - pre and post for project classrooms; year end for control classrooms
- Copies of student written work associated with project lessons
- Teacher lesson self evaluations
- Teacher evaluations of project - questionnaire and focus group
- Student evaluations of lessons and classes
- Teacher self-reports of engagement in lesson use and lesson construction post-intervention.

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Final Slide

I would like to thank our project sponsor the Steven D. Bechtel Foundation for their generous support. You can find out more about our approach and examples of lessons created the teachers by following us on the Domain Based Moral Education web site. –

Thank you