

Christina Bain

Ethical Decision- Making in Art Education



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Editor's Introduction

As a doctoral student in Philosophy of Education at The Ohio State University, I taught a course required of all education majors. The title—*An Introduction to Philosophy of Education*—suggested that students would learn about various philosophies guiding educational policy and curriculum. Instead, the course was aimed at providing future teachers with knowledge and skills required to engage in professional decision-making.

Working with articles and op-ed pieces that one might find in educational magazines or press, students learned to identify, analyze, and critique an author's position. They learned to spot ways authors use language to persuade readers, such as metaphors, slogans, and other rhetorical devices. Students developed skills in recognizing concepts and terms that need to be clarified before one can reasonably take a position. Finally, students explored ways writers use faulty reasoning to persuade readers. They learned about ad hominem arguments, appeals to pity and fear, begging the question, and other informal fallacies. Students developed proficiency in language, concept, and argument analysis. They became proficient in uncovering

hidden assumptions and challenging positions with reasonable counterarguments.

I loved teaching this course because each term, I witnessed transformation. Prospective teachers entered the class nervous about their ability to question what they read. They left with the inclination to challenge the content of articles and the positions taken by others in oral discussions. They were empowered not only to address issues in education, but they told of newfound courage to enter conversations with family members, spouses, and friends about all kinds of subjects. This was the late 1970s, and my classes were filled with mostly women, many of whom were living within a long tradition of staying silent and allowing the men to do the serious talking. I believe this transformative course was successful because it provided names for those moves taken with language and logic, and it offered strategies for recognizing and challenging them in discussions about education and other topics.

Over the years, I found ways to incorporate critical-thinking strategies into the art criticism and art education classes I taught at

Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, but I never had the opportunity to teach that course again. When I created the *Art Education in Practice* series for Davis Publications, I envisioned a text that would do for prospective art teachers what that course had done for my students. I was thrilled when Christina Bain approached me to propose a text that would address the ethical issues and dilemmas educators encounter in their professional lives. This book will provide the same vital grounding for preservice and in-service art educators.

Teachers engage in internal conversations throughout the course of each workday, responding to a continuous stream of events, behaviors, and comments: “What’s the best way to do x or y (for example, glaze a pot or store used paint)?” “What should I do next?” “How should I help that student?” and “What am I forgetting?” In addressing these issues, teachers draw upon what they know and have learned through professional study and past experiences. In *Ethical Decision-Making in Art Education*, Christina Bain reminds readers that some situations in teaching seem weightier than others, challenging teachers to draw upon their values, beliefs, principles, and moral codes. “What is the *right* thing to do?”

or, more specifically, “What is the *morally* or *ethically* right thing to do?” is different, in kind, from so many of the questions that emerge in teaching. The author admits that teachers typically are not prepared to sort through the issues that call for ethical decision-making. To make her point, throughout the book, she provides many real-life examples of situations where educators must consider the right or ethical thing to do.

Bain also reminds readers that ethics have tantalized thinkers around the globe since the earliest times. The book references different ways that philosophers and others have theorized about knowing and doing the right thing. The focus of this book, however, is not how others have thought about ethical decision-making. The goal is to empower prospective and in-service educators to recognize situations that present ethical dilemmas and to use strategies to decide what to do. The author provides useful vocabulary and language to help readers recognize situations that call for ethical decision-making. She offers a strategy for addressing such situations and gives multiple examples drawn from her own and her students’ real-life experiences. Sidebars throughout the book offer prompts and activi-

ties to encourage readers to reflect on their own experiences. The appendices provide resources for practicing reasoning skills and ethical decision-making, including the highly engaging *Extrapolate!* game developed by the author and Dr. Joana Hyatt.

I anticipate that *Ethical Decision-Making in Art Education* will be greatly valued by those who spend time with it. Those who practice making decisions with others and use the vocabulary and strategies found in this book will witness many transformations. Prospective and in-service teachers may enter apprehensively into the world of ethical decision-making but will emerge with confidence in their ability to recognize ethical situations and decide how to answer the question, “What is the right thing to do?”

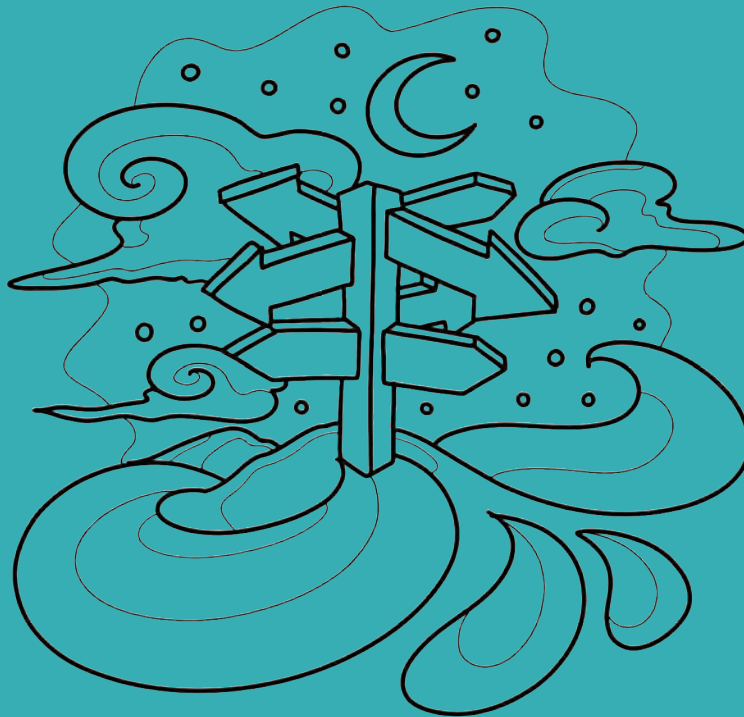
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Author Biography

Dr. Christina Bain is an Associate Professor and the Art Education Program Chair at The University of Texas at Austin. She earned BFA and MS degrees from Syracuse University and a PhD in Art Education from the University of Georgia. Her K–12 art teaching experience in New York and Texas shaped her research interests in preservice preparation, curriculum, games, collaboration, and ethics. In addition to publishing in *Studies in Art Education*, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *IMAG*, *Art Education*, *Visual Arts Research*, and *Translations: Theory to Practice*, her research appears in *Matter Matters* (2012), *Remembering Others* (2000), and *Revitalizing History* (2017). Bain has conducted more than 150 presentations at state, national, and international conferences. She has received numerous teaching awards, including the prestigious University of Texas Regents Outstanding Teaching Award (2015), the COFA Teaching Award (2013), the Texas Art Educator of the Year Award (2011), the TAEA Higher Educator of the Year Award (2005), and the NAEA Student Chapter Sponsor Award (2009). She serves on the National Basketry Organization board and has exhibited her fiber artwork across the United States.

Introduction

Ethical Navigation for Art Educators



1.1 Signposts by Rebecca Borrelli

Art education training typically covers many practical facets of the job—classroom management, writing a lesson plan, demonstrating how to properly slip and score a clay pot—but rarely does it comprehensively address the many ethical challenges art teachers face. This is an unfortunate oversight. Teachers’ decision-making is directly connected with ethical thinking as their actions have the potential to help or harm those with whom they interact. In their daily work routines, teachers often find themselves in situations in which they ask, “What is the *right* thing to do here?” Although teachers might not realize it, they are engaged in philosophical inquiry. The goal of this book is to help teachers practice and apply ethical thinking strategies so they are able to stay true to their ethical compass. It includes many true stories of everyday scenarios to contextualize how ethics can and does apply in school settings.

Defining Ethics

Ethics scholars broadly define ethical behavior as treating people, animals, organizations, and the environment in the way one would like to be treated. Interestingly, decades of psychological studies indicate that most individuals tend to perceive themselves as *more* ethical than those around them. So, if most people consider themselves to be ethical, why isn’t the world a more fair, safe, and harmonious place?

Treating people with kindness, respect, and fairness sounds simple in theory, but what does ethical behavior look like in reality? What does it mean to live a good life, and who determines if actions are categorized as good or bad? Should ethical decisions be based on what is best for an individual, for other people, or for the greater good of society and the environment? Scholars have debated these and many other ethical questions for thousands of years. The answers to such questions are influenced by cultural, philosophical, political, religious, spiritual, and personal values. Ethical questions and discussions can emerge at any time and may take place anywhere—from the loftiest academic environment to around the dinner table with family and friends. They can also occur in the

context of teaching as educators grapple with what it means to abide by teachers' codes of ethics. And while philosophical discussions about what is good or bad, right or wrong are important, the purpose of this book is to help educators move beyond discussion and into practice. Through the strategies and scenarios in this book, educators will learn to apply ethical reasoning skills to dilemmas that occur in their professional lives.

The Need for Ethical Reasoning

The following episode is one example of how ethics can play out in an everyday classroom situation. A student teacher, Ms. W., is leading a lesson for a class of seventh-graders without the teacher present. She is struggling to get the students engaged. Perhaps they don't understand the topic, the questions might be unclear, or maybe they think the lesson is dull. Whatever the case, Ms. W.'s frustration escalates until she speaks harshly to a student.

One of the cornerstones of the educators' code of ethics (explored in detail in Chapter 4) is **ethical conduct toward students**. In the students' minds, Ms. W. crossed a line with

her behavior. While she didn't physically harm the student, she clearly embarrassed him, and some might argue that her actions were unethical because they caused emotional distress.

A classmate passes a note around urging "Justice for Ron! Silent strike tomorrow!" The next day, Ms. W.'s English lesson is a failure; the students refuse to utter a word. From a middle school mentality, the class felt that the student teacher deserved this treatment for embarrassing their peer. However, the class's

TEACHER TALK

Don't Jump!

It is easy to jump to conclusions if you hear only one side of the story. Ethical decision-making is most effective when you pause, gather facts, and consider the situation from multiple viewpoints before taking action. It requires considering how your actions could impact yourself *and others*.

Can you think of a situation in which you gained a better understanding of a colleague's or student's actions after speaking with them?

Why is it important for teachers to avoid jumping to conclusions?

Ethics, Morals, and Values

Ethics has been defined in many ways by a wide variety of scholars and philosophers. The Greek word *ethikos* means “expected behaviors.” According to ethics scholar Deni Elliott, “ethics is the study of how people *should* act toward one another, other species, and natural systems.”¹

Ethics are

- more than simply following a set of moral rules
- decision-making that requires reasoning
- for the survival or good of society

Morals comes from the Latin word *mores* meaning “customs” or how people usually behave.

Although the terms *ethics* and *morals* are sometimes used interchangeably, it is important to note how they differ.

Morals are

- relative to a society or culture
- rules that every member is expected to follow
- for the survival or good of the individual

Values are determined based on an individual’s identity, experiences, and beliefs of what is most important to them. Values serve as our personal inner compass, guiding our decisions and actions. As we encounter new experiences, our values may change or they may remain steadfast throughout our lives.

Values

- are individually determined
- help us make decisions and motivate us

response caused the student teacher significant emotional distress.

While a teacher should never intentionally embarrass a student, can Ms. W.’s actions be excused as a rookie mistake? Every teacher can likely recall incidents from their tenure when they said or did things in class that they regret. How we *want* to treat others and how we *do* treat others don’t always align. In addition to considering what is “right or wrong”

or “good or bad” in any situation, ethics also examines related topics, such as core values, group values, and fairness. Ethics provides a framework for teachers to examine how ethical reasoning informs their professional expectations and actions. It also helps educators understand why there is no one-size-fits-all answer to ethical questions. Teaching environments and scenarios are complex and multifaceted, and solutions are based on what is best for each specific setting.