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Educators jump on the bandwagon without understanding implications

Some problems with values clarification

By Robert Craig

Values clarification, which consists of a series of practical exercises to aid the student in clarifying his or her values, has received a great deal of attention in the past decade. It is quite devoid of theory and what theory there is often is contradictory or ambiguous. In *Values Clarification: A Handbook of Practical Strategies for Teachers and Students*, Sidney Simon, et. al., describes four approaches to the clarification of values. The only one they accept is their own.

The first approach is termed moralizing. They define this as the "inculcation of the adult's values upon the young."¹ They find two problems with this approach. In the first place, there are a number of conflicting sources for value input—parents, the church, the peer group, etc.; and the young do not know which source to use when determining their personal values. Secondly, moralizing results in a dichotomy between theory and practice, for the individual verbally accepts the value of the authority but does not carry the prescriptions out in actual practice.

Yet there is a difference between moralizing and indoctrination. Moralizing need not necessarily be indoctrinating. Likewise there is a difference between an authority and authoritarian. Quite often we accept the opinions of authorities without having those opinions inculcated in an

authoritarian manner. In fact it is often necessary to listen to the advice of experts such as clergymen and teachers, for their experience can aid us in making viable moral decisions. The term moralizing is used in a pejorative sense by Simon and his friends, and this need not be the case. They never define the term, although they give examples of it.

We often say that a novel has a moral or we suggest that the moral to X type of behavior is such and such. This is using the term moral in a positive sense, and the suggestion is being made in ordinary discourse that it may be beneficial to learn from such moralizing. Thus moralizing need not be the indoctrinating affair Simon, et. al., say it is, and deriving morals from different sources is a valuable method of values clarification.

Secondly, Simon suggests that some teachers and other adults adopt a laissez-faire attitude toward the transmission of values. They base this laissez-faire attitude on the assumption that values are relative and that the teacher or parent should not intervene in the process of value selection. The result of such a process, Simon suggests, is confusion and frustration on the part of the student. Without defending the laissez-faire position, it is evident that it is closer to the values clarification approach than Simon imagines. The laissez-faire approach is similar to the values clarification approach for two reasons.

1. The emphasis of values clarification is on ethical relativism—values reside within the individual; they are subjective. This characteristic of values clarification will be criticized shortly.

2. Simon tells teachers not to intervene in the process of value selection. The students should be free to choose their own preferences without teacher intervention. This would seem to lead to the same confusion and frustration he claims is part of the laissez-faire approach because the student would have no basis except his own preferences when deciding values. What if the student comes to the conclusion that smoking marijuana is morally acceptable. Shouldn't the teacher point out such facts (not moral opinions even, yet a type of justification nevertheless), that smoking it may be dangerous to the student's health, that it is against the law, that organized crime is often involved in its growing and distribution, etc. Without teacher intervention how can the student make an intelligent moral decision. So the laissez-faire view which Simon condemns is quite close to the values clarification process he advocates; and there are numerous problems with his positive suggestions that student's values are subjective and that teachers should not intervene in the student valuing process.

The third notion of valuing Simon and his friends condemn is modeling. This means that the teacher ought not to present himself or herself as a model for students to emulate, to describe modeling negatively. Simon again suggests that modeling leads to confusion because the student has so many models to choose from: parents, teachers, and so on. He even mentions movie stars as a positive source of modeling. The values of some movie stars do not seem to be positive nor do they lend to the building up of the human community. They are materialistic and individualistic. It is unfortunate that Simon isn't more selective in his examples of modeling behavior.

What can we say about modeling as a method of values inculcation? First, there is the work of Bandura and Walters on modeling in which they demonstrate that group modeling is a positive instrument in changing negative behavior to that which is more acceptable. When students experience another group exhibiting rewarding

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behavior they tend to want to emulate such behavior and to develop the positive values which accompany it. Secondly, the work of Lawrence Kohlberg suggests that students viewing the moral reasons for action on the part of individuals at a higher moral stage than their own intuit that the reasons and moral actions are actually preferable to their own. So they model the moral actions of those individuals at a higher moral level than their own. Lastly we can use our own experience to demonstrate that Simon is incorrect: that modeling has a part to play in moral growth. Haven't we all had teachers who were moral models for us so much so that we desired to work harder in their classes to please them? Haven't there been adults who have been moral models to us and have helped our moral growth? This is largely an empirical question, but the answer is in the affirmative in this writer's experience.

Lastly, let's examine some of the aspects of the values clarification approach as enumerated by Simon. We will find that both its theory and practice are misleading and even harmful. Philosophers have not come to any agreement concerning the definition of the term value. The theories concerning the nature of value cover a wide area from natural law theories which view value as an objective property to an existentialistic ethic which suggests that values are personal choices. The values clarification people list seven criteria of values which are supposed to cover its necessary and sufficient conditions. Valuing is composed of seven sub-processes.

1. prizing and cherishing
2. publicly affirming, when appropriate
3. choosing from alternatives
4. choosing after consideration of consequences
5. choosing freely
6. acting
7. acting with a pattern, consistency and repetition²

As John Stewart suggests, the values clarification approach is quite superficial and misleading. Simon says the values clarification approach leads to an indepth examination of values.³ The truth of the matter is that opinions and feelings are what are examined in the valuing process and not values at all. Stewart mentions four weaknesses with the Simon approach to values. First of all, they commit the "error of reification of hypostatization."⁴ This means that the values clarification people convert the idea of value into a concrete entity. Thus values are viewed as independent entities existing apart from persons. Values are not things, but they indicate a deeper conceptual system about the world which includes notions of good and bad. This makes the values clarification notion of values very superficial.

Stewart's second criticism of the values clarification approach suggests that its proponents emphasize the content of values instead of the "relatively more important underlying structure of one's thinking and valuing."⁵ Content is concerned with what one thinks; structure is concerned with why one thinks it. It is certainly the case that the cognitive developmental psychologists such as Piaget and Kohlberg see content and structure interrelating. The values clarification exponents abandon structure in place of content and much of the content dealt with is trivial at that.

Thirdly, Simon commits the error of separating content from process in his discussion of moral education. He identifies process with indoctrination and thus tries to

rely solely on the content of valuing. This contention is misleading at best.

Lately, it is evident that the values clarification people's theory is involved in ethical relativism, as was previously mentioned. This means that everyone is right about his or her values. Ultimately it leads to the view that only opinions and personal preferences matter in making moral judgments. Ethical relativism means that no values can be proven better than others; that disagreement about the rightness or wrongness of moral actions is to be avoided. If ethical relativism is true, the values of Adolph Hitler are as defensible as the values of Jesus Christ. There is no way of telling which values are better than others; and the values clarification strategy leads to such a conclusion.

Two other problems with the values clarification approach are brought out by Alan Lockwood. He notes that the exponents fail to distinguish moral from non-moral issues. Thus students are asked to clarify their values on such widespread issues as their favorite occupation to capitol punishment. Since a value is defined in relation to one's personal tastes and preferences there is no way of sorting out these preferences from issues or actions that affect the welfare of human beings. In other words, the distinction between moral and non-moral values collapses. As Lockwood says:

A decision to support policies involving the termination of human life is different from a decision involving one's preference in entertainment. Decisions of the former type are moral value decisions, while the latter are non-moral value decisions.⁶

Lastly, many values clarification activities tend to jeopardize the private rights of students, for many of the strategies get students to disclose information about themselves and their families. Much of this is private information which could cause hostility in the family. Many of the techniques of values clarification are of this nature and students are told to disclose anything from their sexual preferences to their family relationships. In our age of mass information we are especially in need of privacy rights.

There is much more that could be said about the values clarification strategies. It is evident from the above that the values clarification program lacks a secure theoretical foundation and that there is a paucity of research to support its use. It is just another bandwagon educators have jumped on without thoroughly understanding its implications. It is true that moral education is extremely important and that the schools should have a place in such education, but values clarification is not the way.

Footnotes

1. Sidney Simon, et. al., *Values Clarification: A Handbook of Practical Strategies for Teachers and Students*. (New York: Hart Publishing Company, 1972), p. 16.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
4. John Stewart, "Problems and Contradictions of Values Clarification," in *Moral Education: It Comes with the Territory*, Edited by David Purpel and Kevin Ryan, (Berkeley, California: McCutchan Publishing Corporation, 1976), p. 137.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 138.
6. Alan Lockwood, "What's Wrong with Values Clarification," in *Innovations in Education: Reformers and their Critics*, Edited by John Martin Rich, (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1981), p. 277.