

The Pedagogy of Relationship: Applying Levinasian Ethics to the Classroom

The subject of ethics is peculiarly absent from modern pedagogical discourse in America. Ethics courses in K-12 education are seldom taught and instructors hardly encounter the topic outside of legal ethics. Since our modern, western culture places such a premium on individualistic values, it seems we only focus on ethical paradigms that are most concerned with individual rights and liberties, for example Constitutional liberties. While these rights and liberties are foundational to our society, and should continue to receive extensive focus, they lack adequate attention to the alarming need for teaching students the value of service and building connections as part of the overall mission of our educational system.

One way to incorporate ethics into the classroom is the implementation of an ethical paradigm to pedagogy itself. For instance, by using the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, teachers can consider shifting their approach and relationship with students. In 1961 when Emmanuel Levinas wrote *Totality and Infinity* he suggested an ethical approach supremely rooted in the notion of the “Other,” re-establishing the way in which we view the interrelatedness of human beings. Within his philosophy is the inescapable desire and calling that all people offer service to one another. To philosophers like Levinas, the interrelationship between separate individuals is paramount- it is the very essence of life itself -and, therefore, in pedagogical application it transcends the white noise of knowledge for its own sake.

Applying Levinasian ethics to pedagogical theory is thus a relationship-oriented approach and internationally it is not unpopular. Many teachers around the world today use his ethics within their own personal pedagogical philosophy. It is in this

application that I believe it has the most use for modern education. Below I will try to explore the possibility of applying a more Levinasian approach to pedagogy, as well as to discuss how it may be beneficial to both students and teachers alike. I contend that Levinasian ethics, as applied to modern pedagogy, empowers the student and teacher, it fosters students' potential for compassion and empathy, and it is even congruent with modern neuropsychological research. Then, lastly I will use examples from my own personal experience of teaching to consider what Levinas in the classroom might look like.

A Brief Caveat: Pedagogical Trends, Testing, and Unrealistic Expectations

Modern pedagogy has frequently been scorned by teachers for its ephemeral zeitgeist. Overly benchmarked and prescribed lesson plans have built up academic educational departments with the authority to establish and dogmatize proper educational technique and theory, and teachers can be inundated with “try this” material, countless workshops, and state mandated rhetoric that interrupts the successful methods teachers have already discovered for themselves. While there are more than a few gems within much of this modern pedagogical trend, most teachers can attest that, prior to even learning pedagogical theory, prior to taking one education class, a teacher must approach teaching and one's students with the right attitude, goals, and, most importantly, their own philosophical ideas about human relationships. Teachers arrive from the first day of class with a way of being in the world and way in which they encounter students. This is where the value of Levinasian ethic can be invaluable; it is asking teachers to revisit how they became a teacher in the first place.

Levinasian ethics in pedagogy does not attempt to solve the modern crises of teaching and its looming challenges. The archetypal burnt out teacher who loathes their

students and exudes misanthropic sarcasm is perhaps not such a caricature in many schools. Teaching in America today places unrealistic pressure on teachers, partially due to the fact that the profession is plagued by the expectation of efficacy and efficiency, looming financial cutbacks, and the growing concern of safety. As well, teachers often are the scapegoat for the consequences of social inequality and the challenge of indifferent and absent parents. Teachers are often forced to confront the challenge of being exceptional and efficacious in administrative evaluation, and yet still to be passionate and inspiring to their students daily. While this goal often seems unachievable, thousands of teachers attempt to live up to these expectations every day. Evaluating teachers in terms of Levinasian ethics (instead of test scores and benchmarks), as well as applying Levinasian ethics to students with special needs, might be valuable and worthy of further consideration; however, this is not the focus of this essay, I want to consider how Levinasian ethics can be applied to the actual classroom. The paradigm of efficacy and efficiency which has become pervasive in modern education often stymies teachers from considering the importance of the kind of pedagogy that I will discuss below, a pedagogy that I believe is at the heart of both the teacher and the student's natural love of learning.

Applying Levinas Empowers the Student

Emmanuel Levinas was a teacher for most of his life; he taught and was principal of a Jewish high school in Paris. He was well acquainted with basic notions of pedagogy simply by default of his work. While his writing was not explicit about the application of his ethics into pedagogy in any specific sense. Essentially to apply Levinas to pedagogy is to consider the interrelationship between teacher and student, it is to take his ethical theory and acknowledge how it plays out between the teacher and student relationship,

as well as between the students themselves. Essentially to apply Levinas to teaching is to be interpretive and non-prescriptive, and to value assessment that is mostly centered around the relational aspects of education itself.

A starting point in applying Levinas to pedagogy can be found in brief in George Kunz's book *The Paradox of Power and Weakness*. While the book's focus is not primarily on education, it offers some key insights into the philosophy of education. Kunz writes, "we give knowledge to others so that they can make better choices" (Kunz 71). Kunz lays out a general, yet highly practical and valuable approach which could undergird much of pedagogical change. Essentially Kunz is suggesting that Levinas is reestablishing the goal of the educational process; he contends that education is to empower the student to find the space, method, and means to attend to their "needs and abilities." The classroom can often simply be a place of directives, and those directives are usually geared towards tasks, information, and activities that are not of high value to the student. Kunz suggests that the teacher's aim is to help offer a method towards students' own goals and to promote motivation for the student towards these goals. Kunz calls this the "disclosing" of the teacher, and its process is not commanding, it is a revealing. He also writes of the reciprocal process which teaching itself provides for the teacher; teaching makes the teacher the best student they can possibly be by attempting to teach the student, they are, to use Levinas's own language, commanded by the Other's (or their students') call (Kunz 71-72).

Kunz's discussion above reminds us to consider that pedagogy as a craft precedes any actual teaching technique; pedagogy begins with an approach and a relationship. A teacher needs to be clear about the purpose of their craft. If Kunz's Levinasian approach is employed, then the purpose of pedagogy is to allow the student

to make choices, it is to empower the student. Perhaps the way to frame a ‘Levinasian pedagogy’ is remembering the need to “disclose” information and knowledge, not for a test or for the sake of knowledge, but as to empower the student.

While much of Levinas’s focus is on the call of the Other, Levinas speaks clearly about the importance of home and enjoyment. He argues that an individual needs to be able to be an individual and to possess something to give. The teacher therefore must have the goal to facilitate and foster a student’s sense of home and enjoyment. The teacher can help “disclose” to the students how they can construct their own sense of home, most likely from personalization and fostering curiosity. If a student develops this ability in themselves, then they stand to possess richer gifts to offer the world. They have a personal sense of home and insight in which to enter the outside world, in which to encounter the Other.

It is equally important for a teacher to have a strong Levinasian sense of “home.” This would be akin to the therapists’ mantra of “self care.” A teacher can model a sense of home and centeredness to the students; put another way the teacher can model a way of Being in the world. Perhaps nothing is more powerful for a teacher than to allow students to explore, define, and consider their own Daesin. This kind of self-awareness is at the core of all students’ aptitude to learn.

Important Scholarship on Levinas and Pedagogy

The most useful scholarship that directly applies Levinas to pedagogy I believe comes from: Joldersma, Biesta, and Todd. Canadian scholar and professor of education Clarence Joldersma takes on the tough task of applying Levinas to the teacher and student relationship. As Levinas writes, “teaching is not a species of a genus called

domination, a hegemony at work within a totality” (171). Joldersma warns against a “domination” paradigm between teacher and student, a paradigm that is still far too frequent in the classroom. Joldersma writes that the teacher as an “I” can penetrate “the totality of the student,” and the student, when secure in its being the “I,” can recant and become the “me” as to facilitate the process of infinite encounter. Joldersma realizes that teacher and student are not equals but they cannot be in relationship until they have acknowledged the proper need for the mutual “I” prior to shifting. He explains that this can only happen if the teacher sees the student as an Other first; Joldersma continues on by arguing that within this encounter there can develop a “double trust,” a mutual dependency between student and teacher.

To translate the Levinasian to the everyday, Joldersma states this principle more plainly as such. Believing all students are capable is different than encountering all students as if they are capable (Joldersma 41). Joldersma is stating the simple but also the profound. The interrelational and intersubjective encounter between teacher and student begins with the teacher recognizing the infinite in the student; then in mutual trust they can enter in to a space in which the teacher can then take the lead.

In Gert Biesta’s work he stresses the value of collaborative learning and the encounter between students. Exercises like pair and peer sharing, listening to other student’s reflections, and respectful class discussion are ideal for the Levinasian encounter. While collaborative learning has become a trend in the past 20 years of pedagogy, Biesta is calling not just for collaboration but getting at the fundamental encounter between students. This begs the question, how do students encounter each other when working together in class?

Biesta also discusses the goal of education and the need for epistemological integrity. He writes that it is to “keep open the possibility for genuine questioning.” Perhaps there is no greater goal in the classroom- to value openness and questioning. Biesta also discusses Levinas’s ideas about the ethics of subjectivity, and that the classroom itself is a challenge of intersubjective experience.

In *Learning from the Other*, Sharon Todd uses Levinas to question whether textbook learning actually fosters empathy in students. She writes that students do not work for social justice by reading about the world, because simply reading about a person or place is a very limited encounter, it is a subjective ideation; She argues that real learning can only come *from* the Other, from encountering an Other. Todd argues for a greater focus on the encounter.

Building empathy in the classroom is another very popular and recent trend in pedagogy. Todd argues that Levinas is essential for awakening this kind of awareness in students. She uses two examples that she believes are failed examples of building empathy. One involves children abstaining from eating to understand third world poverty, and another in which students look at pictures of Holocaust survivors and victims to help them attach emotions to their struggle. Todd contends that this is unfortunately a “tactic” and that tactics cannot elicit a true encounter with the Face. A true encounter with the Face is interrelational. She writes poignantly, “in short, the demand for empathy belies a larger demand for how we ought to be together” (Todd 45).

The Intersection of Levinas and Neurobiological Research

Some of modern neurobiological research supports implementing Levinasian ethics in to pedagogy. For instance, David Sousa, who asserted in his TED talk “What

are Teachers?” that “teaching is the only profession that changes brains every single day.” While I am not sure I agree with this claim entirely, Sousa seems to agree with Levinas without being Levinasian; As an educational neuroscientist, he contends that all learning is in fact essentially about making connections. He argues that the brain functions purely on connections; everything is interrelated. Sousa explains that “connections” can have several meanings; it can mean being connected to other ideas, to other students, or the teacher. Brains adapt and work around connections, internally and externally. Perhaps every thought, or every neural pathway is “in relation” as Levinas might put it.

Sarah Bernard, referencing some of Sousa’s work, explains that in order “to enable learning, put emotional safety first” and build meaning into daily lessons. Students feel emotionally safe when they can fully believe that the teacher is ‘on their side’ or is interested in their success. As Levinas would argue, students have to be viewed as the *infinite*; the mind and life of the student, no matter how hard a teacher can attempt to assume or understand, is beyond the teacher’s ability to know. This is one of the hardest things for teachers to accept, that they must have faith in their students for them to succeed and they must resist the daily, if not hourly urge, to totalize students.

Bernard goes on to state:

“Students need a personal connection to the material, whether that's through engaging them emotionally or connecting the new information with previously acquired knowledge (often one and the same). Without that, students may not only disengage and quickly forget, but they may also lose the motivation to try.”

This discussion is not simply one of neurological salience, or of making education fun. It is an important discussion about making meaning and connection primary concerns

in the classroom. This challenge is well understood by Jesuit and Judaic religious schools (such as the one Levinas taught at), or even in many alternatives schools such as Montessori or Waldorf, partly because it is often part of their mission statements. Adding meaning to the classroom is not simply an agenda being imposed on young students, it's one of the most important way that information will stick and how they make connections. Bernard advocates for 'meaning,' and as she may not argue that ethics is simply an ontological fact, her ideas of connection, safety and meaning resonate with a Levinasian approach.

Finding the Face?

Students will learn to encounter the Other when they are taught to see the Face. Moving young people beyond the invasive superficiality of the world around them is no easy task. In a world of selfie's and social media students are getting further and further away from each other. Student's encounters are, much like Todd's argument, encounters that don't include the Other. Mixed messages in the culture allow them to see others but miss the Levinasian idea of the Face. When students are taught the limits of how one can understand others, they can develop a greater sense of reverence, they can see past the illusion that is created by the rampant objectification of people in our culture. Students can learn to encounter others with meaning, they are more able to experience a transcendent encounter, and perhaps even experiencing even just one of these moments is the value of their education. When students are encouraged to do community service, or even when they are forced to, they often report back about the extent to which they felt affected by their encounter. The Other tends to have one of the

most lasting and important effects on students. Levinasian ethics in pedagogy stresses the need to teach students to have meaningful encounters with others.

In My Experience: Finding Levinas in the Classroom

Upon reflection there are elements of my own pedagogy that have Levinasian ethics. I believe the relationship and connection with the students is perhaps the most important part of the whole educational process. An example that I have attempted in my classroom to facilitate a Levinasian encounter is in our 'introductions' class activity at the beginning of the semester (or quarter), sometimes done with a follow up throughout the term. I have students interview one classmate and attempt to be an 'historian.' They conduct an oral interview of the person and then introduce the other person to the class. While I used to use my cliched quote from the Dalai Lama (which I still love) that "all human beings have at least one thing in common," since encountering Levinas I also want students to highlight the differences and the uniqueness between them, or as Levinas would stress- their alterity. I have come to see this exercise as a rehearsal for a discussion of respect, but also one of alterity. I believe in having students see their classmates as unique Others, and I encourage their marveling at each other, and I might ask, "what were you surprised to learn about your partner in this exercise? Do you feel like you know enough about this person to say that you fully know them?" This is my somewhat subtle attempt at letting them consider that their classmate is beyond their comprehension (that is, Levinasian interruption); I want them to grow beyond a passive respect of their peers. This is not always easy, but I have felt the closest to it usually in this first week exercise. Levinas writes, "the Other is a stranger I welcome into my home" (Levinas 182). I like this exercise because it models welcoming and receiving.

Of course the lesson is (in terms of curriculum) built around our discussion of primary and secondary sources and the ambiguity and challenge of gathering information in historical studies; I remind students about what is in fact knowable. Here incorporating Levinasian ethics fits naturally into pedagogy. The activity in and of itself is not new or perhaps remarkable, but when the pedagogical approach is framed within Levinasian ethics it puts a certain twist and intention on the assignment that makes it far more valuable. Although Levinasian concepts are embedded and highlighted in the exercise in fairly subtle ways (without any student knowledge of Levinas), this is an example of Levinasian pedagogy. I wonder how students would respond if I asked them if their classmates are infinite. Perhaps they would totalize me.

Another example of an assignment that in retrospect had a Levinasian ethic underscoring it was a political survey assignment. I had my 8th graders many years ago go to three homes in their neighborhood (safely, during the afternoon and with an adult) to conduct their own political survey. It was a presidential election year 2004, the election for Bush's second term. Students asked their neighbors about their primary concerns for America as well as for the person's definition of freedom. While this assignment centered on valuable socio-political research (albeit conducted by my precocious 8th graders), it afforded students the opportunity to be 'interrupted.' The classroom can be a stale and repetitive place, and when students went out to encounter the Other, they had very personal encounters. Some were turned away or refused, but many shared with the class about the degree to which people opened up to them, the humor they used to connect, and how they loved how the classroom 'existed' outside of school. Interestingly, one student (without their knowing) interviewed Steve Lopez, a fairly well-known journalist from the L.A. Times (writer of the movie *The Soloist*).

Lopez then wrote about the assignment in the L.A. Times saying how much he loved that there was ‘community’ in Pasadena and that there was an ‘agora-like’ quality to students discussing politics and freedom in the neighborhood. I was thrilled that the student had this encounter; he unknowingly touched this journalist and inspired a ripple of dialogue that was perhaps in the end read by thousands of students and readers. I believe this happened because the student and the reporter both saw the Face of the Other, and that an unlikely encounter surprises us.

One last example of Levinasian ethics was leading a “Mix-it-up Day” at the high school I taught at five years ago. One ambitious senior wanted to take part in the national movement to have students mix up their lunch for the day, eating with students they had never talked to and sharing about their backgrounds and interests. In the end we received mixed reviews, and it was quite an ordeal to plan (with over 500 students); however, some students said that it opened up their little nuclear world, that they even forgot to ever talk to students outside of their circle of friends. This to me was one of the better examples of interruption in my teaching career. It was an enforced encounter with students to meet the Other (and some did complain about this), but it was modeling a skill for students of Levinasian ethics, which is to be able to recognize that there is an Other and how that invisible Other is linked to each of us whether we acknowledge it or not. It celebrated diversity, not simply forcing students to admit they are all in the same boat, trapped in a world of high school and awkwardness (one of their favorite words), there was a growing sense of alterity. Alterity was appreciated and the day’s theme was clearly about respect. Those seniors were remarkable to model that to the student body. Some students resisted the exercise; I can only imagine that they were in fear of encountering the Other, or perhaps just feeling forced to do so. This can

be a challenge for teenagers. That is why I was so glad that this event was student led and exemplified their own agency.

Conclusion

Levinas is clearly not only relevant to, but is needed in modern pedagogy. We as teachers are as Sousa wrote, “changing the brain daily,” and what better way to affect students’ brains than to have them more consciously encounter the Other? Empathy is a tough skill to teach, and while few dispute its value, it can be challenging to teach; however, I think Levinasian pedagogy is not simply a discussion about empathy. Levinasian pedagogy rests on and begins with the teacher and is about the teacher consciously incorporating it into the method in which they teach. As Joldersma suggested, it starts with the teacher recognizing the “I” within the student, and from that a chain reaction will hopefully ensue.

Levinasian pedagogy is valuable because it is epistemological. Levinas is not simply saying to ‘feel’ other’s experience and suffering, he’s asking us to acknowledge that the Other is beyond our ability to know. It’s a humble philosophy, one that has an incredible value to the classroom; teachers and students can ask and ponder the question of what is ‘knowable’ and what is worth knowing, and as they do so, they build relationship. This is education, connection and relationship. Levinasian pedagogy is the nurturing of the quality relationships; it is a paradigmatic shift towards service and to a style of teaching which recognizes the infinitude of all students. Levinasian pedagogy is challenging, and perhaps will never show up on the standardized state exams, but it speaks to the essence of what education should be about- the joy of connection.

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