

## Teaching and Practicing Values in Higher Education

*by*

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What are values? We can define them as appreciation for some way of behaving, or guiding principles for individual choices, desirable transsituational goals that vary in their importance as guiding principles in people's lives.

From antiquity values have received attention of philosophers and politicians.

We are in the country where three important values were expressed together: *liberté, égalité* and *fraternité*.

Even criminals have values. In other words, values may change according to groups. But some values are intended to be universal: are included in the Human Rights declaration.

We have now also the Children Rights Declaration.

But I miss one important value followed in almost any culture: *reciprocation*. When we receive something from a person we feel obliged to correspond in the same way and in the same amount. We say "I owe that person a favor", for instance. It is well known that many people in the past sacrificed animals or even persons expecting deities to reciprocate.

So the Human Rights Declaration might be complemented with another important value (since research show that values are acquired in the infancy years): all rights mean also an obligation, a duty, a responsibility.

Example: children have the right to be feed, but they should have the duty to eat healthy food. Obesity is becoming a world wide public health problem. This value of course would not be supported by many companies.

Another example: youngsters have the right to go to college or university, if they show required abilities, but they have the duty to undertake efforts to pay attention, do their home work and so on. In other words, they have the privilege of attending institutions of higher education, therefore they have the responsibility of profiting from this fact. Percentage of dropouts is a great problem in many countries, mainly in the developing ones. If we could measure resources wasted (time, effort, money, and more important, talents, etc.) each year from attrition, I am sure we would be astonished. In public universities these resources are supported by tax payers, at least partially. An important value here is that students have the moral obligation to take advantage of the opportunity of attending school. In my

own experience, when delivering some lecture to students and parents in induction courses I talk about *per capita* annual costs and the audience becomes amazed about the figures.

There are also ethical issues related to attrition: is it morally acceptable to waste scarce resources? When students leave school, they squander assets that might be allocated to other people or goals (health, for instance). Therefore, students, parents, and authorities should be aware of this.

Of course there are many factors associated with attrition but perhaps the one opposite is another value: persistence even in the presence of debilitating factors. Students at risk should receive support in order to enhance perseverance.

In view of these arguments, a proposal is presented: to set a task force to analyze each right and state its correspondent duty or responsibility and to take this initiative to the UN in order to spread the bill of duties all over the world. In this way values will be enhanced.

Another proposal, coming from my teaching experience, is to include in each theme of the course syllabus the corresponding ethical or value issues that may arise in practice. Nowadays in many business schools, for instance, they have included in the curriculum a course on ethics. Perhaps some well known incorrect behaviour by chief executives in important firms have settled the stage for these new developments. However, these courses are isolated from many practical issues in the everyday affairs. Therefore teachers should be trained to present brief *vignettes* or cases on these problems where values may be at risk and to discuss all intricacies with their students and then to take a stance on these problems. Also in the textbooks I have written I have included in each chapter questions on values in order that students reflect on these and make decisions on them.

Another exercise is to ask students to check on the ethical code of their profession to be sure their decisions comply with principles stated in that code.

Also my students are asked to analyze and discuss the Human Rights bill and to verify that the professional problems posed and the decisions students make are in line with Human Rights as well as the appropriate legislation.

Fortunately there is an increased movement towards companies becoming certified in Social Responsibility. As a matter of fact the International Organization for Standardization has set a task force in order to design criteria and ways of assessing firms are adhering to values and regulations.

In the meanwhile students may be asked to get information on this issue and decide whether or not to buy from companies still not certified in this matter.

Last but not least we should recall the idea of ‘the hidden curriculum’, that is to say: in schools we should declare and practice values. Exemplar behaviour from authorities, professors and administrative staff, no doubt, is a magnificent way of teaching values.

As can be easily seen there is ample room for our students, leaders in the future, to learn and practice values.

This is the challenge laid ahead of us.