



Edwin Fenton

On Moral/Civic Education: An Interview with Edwin Fenton

Ronald S. Brandt

Penetrating questions evoke insightful answers as a veteran educator interviews Edwin Fenton, an authority on the applications of the moral stages theory to schooling. Fenton is Director of the Carnegie-Mellon Education Center in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Brandt: National surveys show that many Americans favor moral education in the schools.¹

Fenton: Well, we'd be surprised if national surveys showed that people favor immoral education. A person's attitude depends on how one defines "moral education." Some people think it means not lying or cheating or stealing. Many of them believe that telling students not to get themselves involved in behavior like that is moral education. So I don't think those surveys really mean that the sort of programs going on in some schools are ones of which all Americans would approve.

Brandt: Your idea of moral education is apparently something else.

Fenton: I don't really like the term. We're involved in a

project based partly on Lawrence Kohlberg's research, which we call a "civic education" project. We've identified five sets of goals. They are (a) improvement of participatory skills—reading, writing, speaking, listening; (b) improvement of intellectual skills, or inquiry skills if you prefer that term—ability to identify a problem, think of solutions, gather data, come to conclusions; (c) development of knowledge, which is certainly a vital part of social studies; (d) personal development—the development of self-knowledge, a positive self-concept, a personal identity; and finally, (e) development of democratic values. Two of these goals—development of democratic values, and development of knowledge about such concepts as "justice"—are pretty clearly related to what Kohlberg calls "moral education."

Brandt: An issue that often comes up in connection with Kohlberg's ideas is the relationship between thought and action. In other words, do people always do what they think they ought to do?

Fenton: There have been several pieces of research that come to roughly the same conclusions. In one of them, a researcher got moral stage scores on a number of people and sent them all a letter saying that she was doing a dissertation and would they please return the questionnaire. Then she included a small check in payment for returning the questionnaire. Now, most people think the

¹ George H. Gallup. "Eighth Annual Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools." *Phi Delta Kappan* 58(2):189; October 1976.

moral thing to do is send back the questionnaire or send back the check. Is that what you think? Because if you don't, the interview's terminated. All right, so that's the moral thing to do. And at each stage, a higher proportion of people returned the questionnaire. All the people who were stage five thinkers returned the questionnaire. A smaller proportion at four, and three, and two. There have been several other experiments with similar conclusions.

But notice certain things about an experiment like that. The moral issue was crystal clear. It is pretty hard to argue that you shouldn't send back the questionnaire. There's no real strain involved. You open up a letter in your house. There aren't any emotional issues. Everyone is acting as an individual; there's not a lot of social influence. And what's more, you have time to think about it.

Now take a case like My Lai where none of those conditions held. The moral issue was not clear. People were at war, and they were told to go into a village and kill people. Men had had their buddies killed by Vietnamese villagers. But, on the other hand, it is wrong to kill. So the moral issue—what you ought to do when you're told to shoot—was not really very clear. People didn't have time to think. There were a lot of other people doing things. There was a lot of shooting going on; there was a lot of modeling behavior. And finally, of course, this was a situation of enormous stress. But there

was one man who didn't shoot who later took a moral interview—and it turned out that he was a stage five thinker.

Perhaps the best way to summarize the relationship between moral thought and action, however, is with a fairly simple observation. One can't act morally unless one is able to think morally. Moral thought is a necessary precondition for moral action.

Brandt: Is it possible that people may reason at one stage about dilemmas that are somewhat foreign to them and their experiences, but reason differently about problems they're personally involved with?

Fenton: There's some evidence that it's true under particularly trying conditions. Kohlberg and his colleagues interviewed a number of people in correctional institutions. They gave them a moral interview to find out what their stage of thought was. Then they gave them sets of dilemmas—some in-prison dilemmas and some out-of-prison ones. No matter what their stage of reasoning on other dilemmas, most prisoners reasoned at stage one or two on the dilemmas set in prisons.

The reason is pretty obvious. Prisons are stage one and two institutions. "If you do something wrong, we'll slam you in the hole and leave you there for fifteen days and then you'll learn how wrong you are." And can you imagine what would happen to a person in a prison if he told a guard that another prisoner had man-

aged to smuggle in some whisky or some pot? He's a dead man. It would be unrealistic to expect people to reason about that kind of dilemma at stage three or stage four, when they know it would mean their lives.

There is similar research with women who are having or have had abortions. Some of the women are simply unable to talk about their thinking while they're in the process of making the decision, but they talk about it all very rationally later.

Brandt: Let's turn for a moment to change in stages. Kohlberg has said that people prefer the highest stage of reasoning they can understand, even when it's above their own.² If that's true, why don't they reason at that stage?

Fenton: Most people don't reason exclusively at one stage. When we get a score on a moral interview that reveals a person's stage of thought, we may find the person reasoning 80 percent of the time at stage three and 20 percent at stage four. What the research indicates is that if there is even a small amount of stage four reasoning, and students are shown a stage three and a stage four response, they'll take the stage four one. They're probably moving from stage three to stage four. There's a difference between being able to generate a response and being able to recognize it.

² Lawrence Kohlberg. "Moral Education for a Society in Moral Transition." *Educational Leadership* 33(1):48; October 1975.

Brandt: As I understand it, though, it's difficult for a person to understand an argument at several stages above one's own. I remember that when I was a principal, I used to talk with students who were chronic rule breakers—and I'm pretty sure they weren't thinking at stage five. But I would try to get them to understand that we have to have rules to operate in society. Do you think maybe I was wasting my time trying to get them to think at stage four?

Fenton: Most fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade students understand stage two arguments. And if I were dealing with them, I would argue with them in stage two and stage three terms. If there's some stage three reasoning, they'll like that higher stage argument. I wouldn't talk mainly in stage one terms because people almost universally reject lower stage reasons as not sophisticated enough—and if you lay stage four on them, they're not going to understand it.

Brandt: People exhibit various degrees of what can be called intelligence, and according to Piaget, they are also at different stages of cognitive development. What's the relationship between cognitive development and moral development?

Fenton: Of all the people on whom we have both Piaget interviews and Kohlberg interviews who reason at stage three on the Kohlberg scale, none is concrete operational. In other



words, beginning formal operational thought is a necessary prerequisite for stage three Kohlbergian thought. Full formal operational thought is a necessary prerequisite for stage four and stage five Kohlbergian thought. However, large numbers of people who are fully formal operational on the Piagetian scale think at stage three or even two on the Kohlberg scale. So the evidence is that certain cognitive abilities are necessary but not sufficient prerequisites for certain stages of moral development.

Brandt: I understand that differences have been found between men and women on the Kohlberg stages. What can you say about that?

Fenton: Not very much that won't get me in trouble. First, there's only a little bit of evidence, but the evidence con-

firms what the theory predicts. A higher proportion of men than women think at stage five, and a higher proportion of men than women at stage four. A higher proportion of women than men think at stage three. But within the same profession, there are no significant differences. That is, the same proportion of men and women lawyers think at stage five, stage four, stage three, and so on. This holds for all of the research that's been done, anyway. When one thinks about it, the reasons are fairly obvious. American society has placed women in positions where they don't get as much opportunity to develop higher stages of thought. What it really indicates is that this is a sexist society.

Brandt: Kohlberg says that higher stages of thinking are better. But as I understand it,



that's a matter of moral philosophy.³

Fenton: I think there are both psychological and philosophical arguments that higher stages are better. Let me give you two common-sense arguments. As people mature, they reason at higher stages. There are, as far as we know, no stage six thinkers under the age of 30. And most people who reach stage five do so in their very late teens or early twenties. Now, if lower stages of thought were better than higher stages, we would have to argue that children reason better than adults. Since I'm now in my fifties, I'm not going to agree with that at all.

The psychological argument is that higher stages solve problems better. You can solve a problem at stage four that you can't solve at stage three.

Brandt: Does that mean

that a person who thinks at a higher stage is a better person than one who thinks at a lower stage?

Fenton: Absolutely not. There is no such thing as a stage three person. There's just a stage three thinker. One person who thinks at stage three may be sweet and loving and compassionate and delightful. Another person who thinks at stage three can be humorless and vicious and nasty. It isn't a character type.

Brandt: Well, as long as we're talking about better or worse, how about society? Perhaps only 5 to 10 percent of adults in the United States think at stages five and six.⁴ Would our society be better if a larger percentage of people functioned at those stages?

Fenton: I'm inclined to think so. The higher up the moral scale one goes, the more

one is likely to act in accordance with one's stage of thought. I'd love to have a society in which there were mainly principled people—people who thought the basic values were life, dignity and worth of the individual, equality, and liberty commensurate with the equal liberty of all others. I think that would be a marvelous society to live in. That is, if people thought that way *and acted* that way.

Brandt: It's unfortunate, then, that there aren't more people at stages five and six. Why do you think there aren't? Is there anything about the nature of our society that keeps most people from moving to post-conventional morality?

Fenton: Well, the percentage of Americans at stage five is probably higher than in other countries. And it's something about the nature of our society that gets us there. It's a pluralistic society.

Brandt: We're talking about variations among societies, which leads us to the question of whether the stages are universal.

Fenton: In a couple of Kohlberg's articles there are implications that the stages are universal. But when you get Larry in a careful moment—and most of his moments are careful—he says that in the societies studied—the nine so-

³ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

cieties—we have identified stage one, two, three, and four thought. We've also identified stage five thought in the relatively advanced societies—United States, Great Britain, Israel, and Canada. Since studies have been done in only nine societies, you really can't say that the stages are universal. What you can say is that the weight of research evidence now indicates a likelihood that they're universal.

Brandt: Some teachers apparently are more effective in raising levels of reasoning than others. What accounts for that?

Fenton: Well, I've concluded that there are four really essential conditions. First, you have to establish a nonthreatening atmosphere. One of the things I always do is put the students in a circle, and I sit in the circle too, so that I don't establish a teacher space and a student space. One must watch very carefully not to threaten students with the questions you ask them or come down hard on them, so they're willing to express what they think. Second, it's very important to promote student-to-student interaction. Third, a teacher has to be able to keep the class moving.

We've found that effective discussion of dilemmas takes place in five steps: (a) presenting the dilemma, that is, getting all the facts clear, which takes a few minutes; (b) getting people in the class to decide what they ought to do, which takes a few more minutes; (c) organizing small groups in one of three

or four different ways; (d) bringing the whole class together in a circle to discuss the dilemma; and (e) a little concluding exercise. Those five steps must be completed in as little as 45 minutes. And a teacher shouldn't do it the same way every time, because kids will get tired of the routine.

Finally, a teacher needs the ability to ask a variety of questions to get at stages. We've identified seven kinds. We have a little exercise worked out that gets at these seven kinds of questions. Now, if teachers can do those four things, they will probably succeed quite well.

Brandt: How about Fraenkel's idea that some dilemmas may be more appropriate for certain ages or stages of development than others?⁵

Fenton: I don't see why that's called Fraenkel's idea; all of us believe it. It's a point he makes, and I think it's quite a valid point. Larry Kohlberg, Linda Rosenzweig, and I are developing a whole set of moral dilemmas for junior and senior high schools. These are dilemmas for which there are clear responses at stages two, three, and four. Let me give you an example from the classic Heinz dilemma—should a man steal a drug to save his dying wife? It's a great research dilemma. But when we tried it with junior high school students, we found that almost all of them said, "Yes, steal the drug." So there was no differentiation on what action to take.

When you think about

why, it's pretty clear. The circumstances make it obvious that Heinz loves his wife a lot, so at stage two one would say, "Well, if he really loves his wife and needs her, then clearly he ought to steal the drug for her. She's nice to him; he's nice to her."

Also the circumstances in the dilemmas we presented indicate that Heinz's neighbors want to help him try to raise some money. So other students would say, "He ought to steal the drug because that's what everyone would approve of." Hence, the Heinz dilemma in its original form simply isn't a good dilemma for junior high school students. So we changed it. Instead of making it Heinz's wife, we made it Heinz's neighbor, and then we got a split.

The dilemmas called *First Things* that have been developed by Bob Selman and Larry Kohlberg for elementary schools are very different from the ones we've used for high schools. It's quite obvious that one needs different dilemmas with different sorts of stage responses for students of different ages. Nobody argues that point.

Brandt: One thing there seems to be some disagreement about is how important it is for a teacher to be able to recognize the stage of reasoning of students.

⁵ Jack R. Fraenkel. "The Kohlberg Bandwagon: Some Reservations." *Social Education* 40(4):221; April 1976.

Fenton: Well, the problem is exaggerated in two ways. In a typical class, most students will be at two stages or at most at three stages. Classes I'm now teaching near Pittsburgh have most students at stages two and three, with a few students reasoning at stage four. So it isn't necessary to recognize all six stages. Second, lots of comments that students make can't be categorized. But what a teacher is able to do, after having led a half dozen dilemmas and studied some of the theories, is get to know typical stage two, stage three, stage four reactions. Eventually you've got a pretty good idea that Johnny over there consistently reasons at stage two and Mary has given stage three arguments several times. Now, Johnny says something and you're really not sure what stage it is. One of the things you can say is, "Mary, what do you think about Johnny's argument?"

You have an idea who to call on when you hear an argument that you think might be stage three, because you can depend on the stage four thinking student to counteract it.

Brandt: Another question often asked is what happens if teachers themselves reason at lower stages?

Fenton: That's another false issue. I've done teacher workshops with literally hundreds of teachers. Now, this is not scientific because we don't have moral interviews, but their comments are consistently at stages

four and five with a mixture of stage three.

Brandt: Kevin Ryan says that teachers should not use canned dilemmas, but think of practical problems from the lives of students.⁶ How do you feel about that?

Fenton: Long run yes, short run no. Once a person learns to spot a good dilemma and learns to lead a discussion, the most effective dilemmas are ones that are going to touch the lives of students.

But for a beginner, I think it's much better to use—let me use the nasty term—a canned dilemma. A canned dilemma is one that has been written and tested and retested in a number of situations. If teachers are well acquainted with a few "classic" dilemmas, like the shoplifting one, they're likely to have a successful experience using them with their own students. After that, they should get dilemmas that other people have written and tried and use them for awhile. Then they can try to write their own, first with groups of people and finally by themselves.

Anyone who has led a moral discussion recognizes right away that students bring up real-life problems analogous to the hypothetical problem you start with. We have a videotape of some eighth-grade students discussing the shoplifting dilemma in which, five times during a 40-minute class period, people bring up cases of shoplifting somebody else was in-

involved in, but I strongly suspect that in a couple of cases they were their own. So you do get some real-life dilemmas.

I don't feel, though, that I have a right to invade a student's personal privacy in a real-life dilemma.

Brandt: Some people say that the cognitive developmental approach neglects the emotional—the affective—side of education.

Fenton: I don't think it does, at least not in our programs. A lot of people all over the country started out with an interest in conducting moral discussions, but now we are trying more and more to tackle the entire environment of the school, setting up what we call in Pittsburgh "civic education" projects, and what Larry calls the "just community" school. I don't like that term because it implies that the rest of the school is unjust, and that gets you in trouble with the principal right away.

We established two units each with two classes of 25 students in the civic education project I'm teaching in. There are 50 students with a social studies teacher, an English teacher, and a parttime counselor. The students take their English and social studies with us and have

⁶ Kevin Ryan. "The Implications of Moral Education: Theories for Classroom Practice." Address delivered at the 30th annual conference of ASCD at New Orleans, March 1975. Cassette tape available upon order from ASCD.

a third period for community activity. Then they take the rest of their classes in the wider school so they can play football, take vocational training, be in the band, take four years of German, and so on. We bring together sophomores, juniors, and seniors—very heterogeneous groups—in common classes, and also in a participatory government.

We agree in advance that we'll obey society's laws and we'll obey the rules of the school board. We can't pass a rule saying it's all right to cut school. But we can handle school cutting and rule breaking in our own way, and we can make up a whole lot of rules that really aren't covered by the school board.

Brandt: As I understand it, the central concern in these participatory governmental units is justice.⁷

Fenton: That's right. I'll give you an example. The courses by juniors in our project are in American history and American literature. We're calling the history course "The Quest for Justice in American Society." We're starting with a one-month unit about women in American society—looking at the role of women in contemporary society and then dropping back to the 17th century. Then students will find out how the condition of women in American society changed over time, and whether their condition today can be described as more just than it was in the past.

The idea is to try to find out how a better conception of justice emerges. We will consider how the principles of justice apply to women, and then how they apply to blacks and members of other minority groups. We'll explore political, economic, and social justice. That's what we mean about organizing a whole course around the idea of justice.

Brandt: What about the time students spend talking about issues that relate to their immediate concerns? Does that interfere with some of the other outcomes you might expect for a secondary school?

Fenton: We are trying to break down the barrier between the hidden curriculum and the formal curriculum. In the community meetings, students strive for a higher understanding of justice as it relates to individuals in their school and rules in the school. During the social studies course, we try to acquaint them with the pursuit of justice in American history.

We all know the enormous power of the hidden curriculum in the schools. It sometimes teaches students that what they hear in civics class just isn't so. What we're trying to do is make the whole school experience more congruent. There is a much greater chance of doing it if you work on the formal curriculum as well as on the hidden curriculum and if you commit resources for a long time. A group of us at Carnegie-Mellon are committed for five years to

the schools at which we're working.

Brandt: If evaluation shows that you have done something significant, what would be the implications for other high schools across the United States?

Fenton: A lot of people in the school are really curious about what we're doing. They're turning up; they're visiting classes. Recently we held a six-hour, in-service program for the entire faculty. So over a long period of time we may be able to humanize the school somewhat and to improve the quality of learning.

If we have two units in each of 100 schools ten years from now, I'll consider that a marked success. I'd be delighted with results like that. But 100 kids in each of 100 schools do not touch the overwhelming majority of students in the country. Well, that's what educational change is all about.

A lot of people want to join our project, and I keep saying to them, "We'd be delighted to have you join—on the condition that you will send two people for an entire semester to

⁷ Elsa R. Wasserman. "Implementing Kohlberg's 'Just Community Concept' in an Alternative High School." *Social Education* 40(4):203-07, April 1976.

For more information on this topic, see: Linda W. Rosenzweig. "A Selected Bibliography of Materials About Moral Education Based on the Research of Lawrence Kohlberg." *Social Education* 40(4):208-12; April 1976.

Educational Leadership Announces Themes for 1977-1978

Manuscripts and/or photographs relevant to the proposed themes for the 1977-1978 issues of *Educational Leadership* are requested. Topics and deadlines for receipt of manuscripts are as follows:

October: "New Challenges to Instructional Curricular Leadership" (July 1, 1977)

November: "Competencies as the Aim of Education" (August 1, 1977)

December: "Near Futures Imperatives—If ... Then" (September 1, 1977)

January: "Curriculum Evaluation: Uses, Misuses, Nonuses" (October 1, 1977)

February: "State/Federal Role in Curriculum Development" (November 1, 1977)

March: "Education of Judgment and Action: Personal and Civic" (December 1, 1977)

April: "Youth Cultures: What Can We Learn?" (January 1, 1978)

May: Non-theme issue (February 1, 1978)

Length of manuscripts should be approximately 1800 words typed, double-spaced (about six pages). General style should conform to that of the journal. More detailed information on the technical requirements of manuscripts is available upon request from the editorial office.

Photographs and other illustrative materials, whether directly related to an article or not, are especially requested.

Manuscripts should be submitted in duplicate and materials to be returned *must* be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope adequate to return material. Decisions on materials will be made as promptly as possible.

Materials should be addressed to Robert R. Leeper, Editor, *Educational Leadership*, Suite 1100, 1701 K St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006. Phone: (202) 467-6480.

work with us." People ought to intern in the project. They should attend one of our staff development seminars so they can get ready to run one in their own school district. They should study the principles behind what we're doing. They should help to write some curriculum materials. With that sort of background, these people could go back to their home district and start a civic education unit there.

Of course, I don't think anybody ought to adopt what we're doing. But they should adapt it. Each school is different; the student populations are different. What we're doing makes a good deal of sense for us, but others will have to change it in a variety of ways. And they ought to look at other civic education projects, and pick and choose among them. Nobody has *the* right answer. People at each school have to work out the right answer for themselves. But of course, that's the real delight in teaching.

Cassette tape recordings of Ronald Brandt's complete interview with Edwin Fenton are available from ASCD. To obtain a copy of the 60-minute interview (#612-20157), which sells for \$6.50, write ASCD, 1701 K Street NW, Suite 1100, Washington, D.C. 20006.



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