

## Moral Dilemma Discussion Revisited – The Konstanz Method

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### Abstract

The classical Blatt-method of dilemma discussion to foster moral-democratic competencies is discussed and compared with the new Konstanz Method of Dilemma Discussion (KMDD). The KMDD is better teachable, easier to be applied and has higher effect sizes.

In a democracy, the rule of a king or a dictator has been replaced by the rule of moral principles of human conduct and interaction. Therefore, it is highly important that citizens do not only hold high moral and democratic ideals (which, according to the polls, most citizens do) but that they also possess a highly developed ability to apply these ideals in everyday-life, and solve inevitable conflicts through discussion and moral discourse. Especially when we are confronted with a conflict situation, we need the competence to make judgments in accordance with our moral principles and act upon them as well as to enter a moral discourse with our opponents rather than use violence and power to solve the conflict (Kohlberg, 1964; 1984). Indeed, moral and democratic competencies seem to be very important for various fields of behavior: low moral judgment and discourse competencies may be a cause of criminal behavior, may keep people back from acting upon their moral ideals of helping and compassion, and may get into the way of learning (Kohlberg, 1984; Sprinthall et al., 1994). In experimental studies it was found that people who have learned how to solve conflicts between opposing values and principles can learn better, allow others to help them learn and apply what they have learned in every-day contexts (Heidbrink, 1985; Lind, 2003).

These moral abilities or competencies are not inborn nor can they be instilled through simple lectures but must (and can) be educated (and self-educated) throughout the life-cycle, that is, from early age through childhood, youth and adulthood (cf. Lind, 2002). Moral and democratic competencies are acquired in various places like family, school, university, workplace and in the public domain through neighborhood activities, political participation and engagement in universal community building. In the early years, children's learning depends heavily, yet not solely on the assistance of caring and competent educators like parents and teachers. Children would not learn if they were not, from the beginning, active learners themselves. Later in life children learn more and more through self-monitored activities, which must be encouraged and fostered rather than regarded as disturbing.

The best known way to foster moral and democratic competencies is to provide proper learning opportunities in which s/he feels safe to freely express his/her moral ideals and arguments and in which s/he also respects others and their right of opinion. Such a learning opportunity is provided by the teaching method of the moral dilemma discussion, first suggested by Blatt (1969) and his mentor Kohlberg (Blatt & Kohlberg, 1975), and later improved by Lind (2003).

The method of moral dilemma discussion is well-founded in the philosophy of education and in psychological and educational research, and its effects have been thoroughly analyzed in

well-designed studies (Higgins, 1980; Leming, 1985; Lockwood, 1978; Lind, 2002). From the beginning, the dilemma discussion has shown to have a substantial effect size ( $r = 0.40$ ); hardly ever were negative effects reported. It has shown to be highly effective in various age-groups, from ten-year-olds to adults.

Teachers of all subjects can be trained to use this method effectively in their classrooms on various age-levels, starting from grade five upward. Critical reviews of three decades of intervention studies using the Blatt method (e.g., Berkowitz, 1981; Berkowitz et al., 1980; Lind, 2002; Walker, 1983) tell us that dilemma discussion and other methods of moral and democratic teaching work most effectively if two basic conditions are met:

\* First, mutual respect and free moral discourse in the classroom. The teachers must see him- or herself as a facilitator not as a master of students' learning. Especially in regard to the moral and democratic domain of learning, the teacher must not use his or her authority to impose his or her aims and pace of learning onto the students but tune into their moral ideals and their pace of development. This tuning-in is supported by a good understanding of the basic processes of teaching and learning. Yet, ultimately it must be achieved by engaging in a free discourse with the students in the sense of Habermas' (1983) discourse principles. In a dilemma discussion session, everybody is respected equally and has one vote and one voice regardless of power and status.

\* Second, high level of persisting attention. Learning takes place most effectively in situations in which the level of attention of all participating students is kept up as high as possible throughout the session. This is achieved best in sessions in which cycles of support and challenge alternate in a certain rhythm. Through challenges students get emotional and attentive, eager to solve a problem or to ease bad feelings. Yet, challenges must never last for too long or get too strong so that emotions don't raise too high and prevent learning. Over-excitement can be avoided by switching from phases of challenge to phases of support, in which the individual is reassured and his or her emotions can calm down to allow again intellectual activities and reflection to recuperate.

Yet, the Blatt-method left room for improvements. They are much more teacher-directed than one would expect and those who run dilemma discussions frequently report problems with keeping up students' attention. Although the Blatt-method of dilemma discussion has generally a very strong impact on students' moral development, this method has some severe drawbacks:

\* The core rationale of the method, the so-called "+1-convention" has attracted much criticism (cf. Berkowitz, 1981; Berkowitz et al., 1980). With this the teacher is required to confront students always with arguments one stage above their own. This requirement is not only difficult to meet but also seems to be more in line with classical socialization theory than with the cognitive-development theory by Kohlberg and Piaget, which recommends that the teachers only stimulates development but does not try to model it. In a series of very thoughtful laboratory experiments, Walker (1983) found that counter-arguments are just as effective for enhancing students' moral judgment scores as "+1"- arguments, implying that +1-arguments do not work because they "model" the reasoning of children but by challenging it like counter-arguments do.

\* Presenting several dilemmas in only one 45-minutes session seems to be effective, yet

this practice leaves little room for the students to understand the nature of the dilemma and to develop a high level of reasoning. Therefore it is not surprising, that the effects sizes crumble some time after the end of the dilemma discussion program.

\* To discuss one or even several moral dilemmas within 45-minutes leaves too little room for students' active reflection and discussion activity. If the students (rather than the teacher) are to produce some number of good and challenging moral arguments, they need more time (I recommend 80 to 90 minutes) to fully understand the moral core of the dilemma and to think of all arguments they are capable of.

\* Too many sessions within a short time span don't make such programs more effective. On the contrary, fewer sessions spread over a longer period seem to have the same immediate effect and besides a more lasting effect. As the meta-analysis by Lind (2002) and also other practical experiences suggest, a good time span for a dilemma discussion is one session every two or three weeks.

\* The role of the teachers should be that of a facilitator rather than a master or moralizer. If the teacher gives reasons "one stage above" the students' stage of reasoning, the hidden message is that the teacher knows it better and the students must follow the lead of the teacher not only in matters of fact but also in moral matters. This hidden curriculum is certainly not in agreement with moral-democratic education as we understand it.

\* Programs to foster moral and democratic competencies must be evaluated as adequately as possible. This means that instruments for measurement are needed which tap the competence aspect of moral behavior rather than attitudinal aspects. Kohlberg's moral judgment interview does this to some degree. Yet it does not clearly define what the moral task is and its indexes (stage score, MMS) confound the competence and the attitudinal aspects.

In the Konstanz Method of Dilemma Discussion (KMDD) two major innovations were introduced aiming at a more effective use of dilemmas for moral education and a more valid evaluation methodology (Lind, 2003): First, to create an optimal environment for moral and democratic learning, KMDD employs semi-real, 'educative' dilemmas as tasks. Semi-real dilemmas are dilemmas which do not affect anyone participating in a dilemma discussion, but are on the one hand likely to cause real conflicts between the moral ideals of a person, and on the other hand also cause controversies between the participants, thus triggering real moral emotions. 'Educative' is a dilemma, if it triggers moral emotions enough to stimulate learning, but not too strongly to prevent learning. The role of those dilemmas then is similar to a vaccination, in which weakened viruses are injected into the body to stimulate its ability to resist the real virus. Educative moral dilemmas are not so real that they kill off moral-democratic learning, but real enough that they cause the individual to develop his or her cognitive-affective capacities (Lind, 2003; <http://www.uni-konstanz.de/ag-moral/> ).

Furthermore, KMDD has been designed to facilitate free moral deliberation and discourse through several features:

- a) sufficient time is allowed for the clarification of the dilemma;
- b) the teacher withholds his/her opinion on the dilemma and even gives up the discussion chair; and
- c) participants built up solidarity in small group meetings.

d) Finally, to keep the attention and learning motivation at an optimal level, a dilemma discussion session is kept on a proximal level of learning through alternating phases of support and challenge, which rhythmically change about every ten minutes.

Special features of the Konstanz method are:

- a) sufficient time at the beginning of the session to bring out and clarify the different perceptions of the presented problem by the participants,
- b) a dilemma or a phase in which participants rank the arguments of their opponents, and a concluding phase of session evaluation asking the students questions like What have you learned.

Was it wasted time or would you like to do it again sometime. etc. The KMDD is described in detail in Lind (2003) and on this web-site: <http://www.uni-konstanz.de/ag-moral/> (in German, English, and Spanish).

Second, we devised a new measure of moral judgment competence, the Moral Judgment Test (MJT) which is described in more detail in Lind (2004). Now the relative effect sizes are  $r = 0.70$  and higher. The absolute effect sizes increased from 6 points per year for the Blatt-method as evaluated by the Moral Judgment Test to more than 13 points with the Konstanz method. This indicates that the Konstanz method of dilemma discussion makes successful use of the two basic conditions for effective moral and democratic education, mutual respect and high level of attention. Moreover, teachers reported that after attending dilemma discussions the students are more motivated to learn.

Biographical Note

Dr. Georg Lind is professor of psychology at the University of Konstanz, and has been visiting professor at the University of Illinois, the Universidad the Monterrey, Mexico, and Humboldt University, Germany. Since thirty years he is involved in research of the development of moral-democratic competencies, and for twenty years he trains teachers and teacher students in moral and democratic education. Presently, he advises the Colombian government in citizenship education and the reform of teacher training. He edits a much visited web-site on moral and democratic learning: [www.uni-konstanz.de/ag-moral](http://www.uni-konstanz.de/ag-moral).

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