

Ethics Education for Professionals in Japan: A Critical Review

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Abstract

Ethics education for professionals has become popular in Japan over the last two decades. Many professional schools, especially those of engineering and of nursing, now require students to take an applied ethics or professional ethics course. In contrast, very few courses of professional ethics for teaching exist or have been taught in Japan.

In order to obtain suggestions for teacher education, this paper reviews and examines practices of ethics education for engineers and nurses in Japan that have been successfully implemented. We will discuss the history of these programs, their teaching methods as well as the difficulties and shortcomings of such ethics education programs in the Japanese context.

The paper concludes that difficulties in professional ethics education in Japan are caused by the fact that both teachers and students lack experience in leading and participating in discussion-based-classes and misunderstand the effectiveness of a case-based pedagogy. It also suggests that we need to offer teachers systematic opportunities to be trained to be proficient in enabling students to be active and critical in class. Furthermore, we argue that there need to be professional ethics courses in teacher education programs, not only because of the benefits a case-based pedagogy offers but also because such ethics education will promote further professionalization of teaching.

Introduction

Ethics education for professionals has become popular in Japan over last two decades. Many professional schools, especially those of engineering and of nursing, require students to take an applied ethics or professional ethics course these days. On the other hand, very few courses of professional ethics for schoolteachers have yet been taught in Japan.

While various programs for professionals have offered ethics courses, it seems to us insufficient that students learn ethical theories and ethical codes as the main goal without developing their own ethical judgement through the course. Better programs try to use a case-based method of teaching that focuses on discussion but even those have shown to be less effective. Thus, we have to ask what difficulties the teaching of professional ethics poses and how to improve ethics courses for professionals.

In order to answer these questions and obtain suggestions for teacher education, we will review and examine practices of ethics education for engineers and nurses in Japan as the most successful cases, in terms of introducing professional ethics education, programs. We will focus on the teaching methods used and difficulties that each of these fields have encountered and then offer suggestions for improvement of professional ethics education in Japan in general and for schoolteachers in particular.

1. Rise of New Professions

A “profession” is a specific category of occupations. According to Parsons, professionals are “neither ‘capitalists’ nor ‘workers,’ nor are they typically governmental administrators or ‘bureaucrats’”(Parsons, 1968, p. 536). How do professions differ from other occupations? Parsons lists three criteria of professions: (1) “the requirement of formal technical training accompanied by some institutionalized mode of validating both the adequacy of the training and the competence of trained individuals”; (2) that not only a cultural

tradition, which the formal training leads to some order of learning, must “be mastered, in the sense of being understood, but skills in some form of its use must also be developed”; and (3) “that a full-fledged profession must have some institutional means of making sure that such competence will be put to socially responsible uses” (ibid.). Managing to be trained institutionally to master an exclusive culture and higher skills, professionals form their own organizations to assure their qualifications to society, which in return respects their efforts and competence and allows them to have higher income, higher prestige and greater job autonomy. Society also expects them to be more responsible and ethical at the same time.

Workers of various occupations desire to professionalize because of those benefits. Some of them have won the recognition as professionals and others are only half way there. Roos classifies professions into four subcategories: (1) the classic or status professions of medicine, law, clergy and university teaching; (2) the newer professions, such as dentistry, engineering, accounting and architecture; (3) the marginal professions such as pharmacy and chiropractic, and the semiprofessions such as nursing, public school teaching and librarianship; and (4) paraprofessional occupations, e.g. paralegals and physicians’ assistants (Roos, 1992, pp. 1552-1553). In order to obtain the full recognition as a profession, the professionals in the second and third subcategories are striving to accomplish the process of professionalization:

First, people begin to work full time at a specific set of tasks that will form the new occupation’s core jurisdiction. Second, those in the occupation establish a university-affiliated training program, and some incumbents undertake the responsibility for training new generations of practitioners. Third, practitioners and teachers combine to form a professional association that identifies the occupation’s core tasks and makes claims regarding skill jurisdiction. Fourth, occupational incumbents seek to protect their jurisdictional claims by political means. Professionals lobby for legal protection, in the form of licensing and certification requirements, to generate labor market shelters that ensure their monopoly of skills. Finally, incumbents develop a formal code of ethics that embodies rules to protect clients, eliminate the unqualified, and spell out the occupation’s service ideal. (Roos, 1992, p. 1553)

The classification of professions and the process of professionalization may vary among different periods and cultures. In Japan, for example, university teaching is not a status profession and engineering may be a semiprofession as well as nursing and public school teaching. Most of these professionals do not work independently but work for bureaucratic organizations. As to the process of professionalization, engineers and nurses have gone further than schoolteachers in Japan. Public schoolteachers have organized as a union but do not have any professional associations while engineers and nurses have. They also have the status of public servant and are not allowed to engage in any political activities.

Ethics education is an important element that characterizes a profession. Different professions, however, may require different contents and methods of professional ethics education. In order to come up with suggestions for ethics education for schoolteachers in Japan, we will first consider the reasons why ethics education was introduced into engineering and then nursing programs. The American situation cannot be ignored in this context because many areas of Japan, her economy, culture, educational system and others, have been influenced by the United States since the end of the Second World War. Professional education is no exception.

2. On Ethics Education for Engineers in Japan

2-1. Social Background and Reason for the Introduction of Ethics Education for Engineers

Two waves of citizen’s movements in the US, one after World War I and the second in the 1970’s, both based on a sense of social justice for the socially vulnerable person’s rights, caused the development of engineering ethics education in the United States.

After World War I., electrical products, cars, high rises, and traffic transportation systems developed rapidly in the United States and caused accidents concerning engineering projects, such as defective boilers and defective vehicles. The second wave was caused in the middle of the 1970's as a consequence of the civil rights movement, environmental pollution and defective products due to industrialization. Citizens, who didn't have technical knowledge, inquired into business and product liability and consumers started to criticize enterprises and engineers.

In Japan, engineering ethics education was introduced not by protests of citizens against industry and government, but by the leadership of industry and government. Preceded by several accidents due to engineering faults in the latter half of the 1990's, the Asia Pacific Ocean Conference (APEC) requested the training of Japanese engineers to be at an international level.

At an APEC working group meeting in 1994, Australia proposed that the qualification of an engineer in each APEC country required completion of an education program for engineers that is publicly recognized, includes business experience, continuing education and training and the observance of the ethical code for an engineer. The Japan Accreditation Board for Engineering Education (JABEE) was established in 1999 and the law of engineers (Gijutsushi-hou) was revised in 2001 (see Sugimoto, 2006, pp.1-13), creating a process of accreditation by an external organization of the education programs for engineers, including the subject of engineering ethics, in institutions of higher education.

2-2. Program and Methods of Ethics Education for Engineers

The new "Engineering Criteria 2000", which were adopted by the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) since 2001, require that an engineering education program needs to demonstrate that all of its graduates have "an understanding of professional and ethical responsibility." JABEE also has been specific, requiring the "ability to be conscious of responsibility to society as an engineer, for example, understanding and responsibility of which the technology has an impact and effect on society and nature" as one of the aims of an engineering education program.

Compared to the Japanese programs, the engineering ethics education in the United States does not adopt "presentation of the exemplary attitude of engineers to be conscious of the moral character of the profession" but rather the training of better judgement, e.g. to enable engineers to deal with two conflicting values, as a method of professional ethics education. In contrast, the engineering ethics education in Japan aims at the promotion of the "ability to think ahead to anticipate possible consequences of their actions as professionals" and "ability to think effectively about consequences of their actions as professionals and to decide what is ethically right."

The pedagogy of engineering ethics in Japan is modelled on the case method which was initially adopted in engineering ethics education in the United States. The following educational methods are valued: Training engineers' moral judgment by case method and discussion, and "Getting the indicator of action from reflection in relation with the situation."

Especially the case method which trains problem solving by using cases of various and realistic ethical dilemmas, is a popular approach. 42 books on engineer ethics, including translated books, have been published in Japan by July 2007. Forty of those books have been published after 1999. Moreover, a collection of cases are appended to all those books.

Three different types of cases can be found in the engineering ethics education literature: Cases of real events, virtual cases and fictitious cases which the student creates by himself/herself. In all three types of cases, it is not important to be "analyzing and evaluating the case as the third person" but "thinking how we respond as a real moral actor". Therefore, it is necessary to integrate the following methods into a course: group and panel discussion and role play. Furthermore, to encourage the learner's independent ideas, the student is to investigate and analyze the facts and to write a short essay in which she has to declare her opinion. (Fudano, p.13)

2-3. Problems of Ethics Education for Engineers in Japan

However, the reality is different from the ideal (see Ueno, 2006, p.31f.). In spite of imitating the method of the engineering ethics education of the United States, the present engineering ethics education in Japan amounts to only the presentation of an exemplary attitude of the engineer to be conscious of the moral character of the profession.

Since engineering ethics education was imposed by government and industries in Japan, a paternalistic attitude is dominant: “This is what you should learn!” “Do as your teacher says!”

But if a critical and independent viewpoint is not encouraged, students will value *result* more than *process* of discussion and work. They will prioritize knowing only the “correct” answer and will deem it the best solution. Although the advantage of a discussion-based case method is to encourage students to have creative ideas, the process of consideration through discussion is often omitted because both students and teachers think that it is time-consuming.

In addition, there is the serious problem: training teachers to use the methods of case study and role playing which, we believe, requires special training. Furthermore, there are usually too many students taught in a large lecture room. If teachers are required to use the case method and role playing, they should be aware that this is only effectively done in a small group and not with hundreds of students.

Another serious problem is that an objective method to evaluate the ethical judgement of students has not been established and that standards for judgements of evaluation are not uniform. Each teacher is left with whatever type of evaluation he or she chooses, for example, measuring the knowledge of the ethical code or measuring the analytical ability of an ethical case in a paper or the result of a portfolio concerning an ethical dilemma.

3. Ethics Education for Nurses in Japan

3-1. Social Background and Reason for Introduction of Ethics Education for Nurses

In the United States, the training for the advanced practitioner nurse has been completed in the 1990's. The American Association of Colleges in Nursing (AACN) lists the following items of professional ethics for advanced practice nurses in a master's course: “Ethics and legal problems are included in a general core curriculum of the graduate school”, “Working interdisciplinary is one of features of the nursing practice in millennium in the future” and “Critical thinking, problem-solving ability, cooperation and communications skills are indispensable to promote such practices” (see Hong, 2002, p.43f.).

Nursing ethics education in Japan was introduced in the first half of the 1990's. In fact, many faculties of nursing in universities and 4-year colleges of nursing established this to improve the specialty of nursing. There are currently 156 universities with a faculty of nursing in Japan.

The challenge for the faculty of nursing for the four years system was to elevate the specialty of nurse, who had been treated as “a mere assistant to doctor” and “a factotum in the hospital”, and to build up their position as a profession. As a general reason, it came to be acknowledged socially that nurses need advanced knowledge and technology in order to respond to an ever more complex medical environment. The real reason for the greater professionalization of nursing, however, were the result of political demands by the Japanese Nursing Association. As a matter of fact, the movement toward establishment of faculty in universities after the 1990's was influenced strongly by “The Law concerning the promotion of employment for nurses” which was approved in June 1992 (see Hashimoto, 2000, p.47).

Certified Nurse Specialist (CNS) is one of the qualifications for the advanced nursing practitioner in Japan now. She has to demonstrate her qualification in excellent practice, consultation, coordination, ethical consideration, education, and research activities, and to either do a master's degree or have clinical experience in defined areas. Nursing ethics education was introduced to the faculties of nursing as one of the most effective methods for improving a nurse's speciality under such new social conditions.

3-2. Program and Methods of Ethics Education for Nurses

The basis of nursing education is the following: “Development of character and ethics as a nurse”, “Promotion of flexible sensibility and intellectual thinking ability” and “Basic study of problem-solving methods” (Nakao, 2005, p.1080f.).

The nursing ethics education also imitated the practice of nursing education in the United States. For instance, the “Model theory of ten stage step” by Joyce E. Thompson & Henry O. Thompson and “Decision making model of nursing” by Sara T. Fry & Megan-Jane Johnstone are frequently cited.

The purpose of ethics education for a nurse in Japan was to improve the specialty of nursing as already described. Specifically, it was aimed to refine ethical judgment in caring which is at the centre of activities for a nurse.

Nursing in Japan is also the profession which has difficulty placing its ethical decisions on some objective ethical validity. This is different from the ethics education for doctors and lawyers which assumes their decisions to be based on some general – even standardized - principle to be the refined whereas solving a specific problem is considered beneath them.

Actually, nursing is considered to be a profession that does not have its own distinct scientific foundation nor applied technology. A nurse has been given the position as the profession in an ideal world. However, a nurse encounters the dilemmas of an all-round player in the hospital who has to work at complex relations. Moreover, a nurse could be required to do something that is not ethically justified. There are few actions in the daily practice of nurses that are simply corresponding to some abstract ideal of ethical validity which does not consider context. Accordingly, the nursing ethics education in Japan has emphasized “Training for better judgment”. This had not been adopted just as the method of ethics education but also as the method of training for communication skills. This is favoured instead of a “search for the standard to vindicate an act objectively” by recognizing a patient’s demand in a specific and interpersonal relationship.

The case method has been adopted as a method of nursing ethics education as well as the engineering ethics education in Japan because it makes students pay attention to specific contexts and interpersonal relationships in the situation where an ethical problem can arise and it doesn’t require only answer to enhance their ability for creative judgment. Many textbooks, which are used in the class of nursing ethics education, cover a lot of pages to collect dilemmas which nurse faces in a clinical situation.

3-3. Problems of Ethics Education for Nurses in Japan

There are three advantages to the case method where students take up dilemmas in a clinical situation. Firstly, students can apply what they learned to an actual scenario, and they are able to make a judgment from a selection of possible solutions, even if it is not the best. Consequently, good services to the patient are achieved. Secondly, students gain confidence as future nurses if they are required to discuss with two or more peers about various aspects and senses of values. Thirdly, the study of nursing ethics has the possibility to change the quality of nursing care.

On the other hand, there is also a limit to the success of the case methods. In nursing ethics education, this method can be a failure if it becomes a fixed pattern of problem solving. Because students are implicitly induced to think about their actions as an “ideal nurse,” and because the case method encourages them to consider many sides of a problem, it is inevitable that they become overwhelmed by the varieties of judgements they can potentially make. In reality, clinical scenarios where nursing care is requested are individual, uncertain and complex and it is no exaggeration to say that the same situation never exists twice. As such, there are no patterns of decision making to be learned nor applied.

Another problem with the case method for nurses might be that it would be helpful for them to consider viewpoints other than those of the nurse in solving a problem. But the material used in the case method in nursing education is based on clinical practice wisdom of nurses from the start and thus does not consider any other perspective than that of the nurse.

4. Ethics Education for Schoolteachers in Japan

While programs for engineering and nursing education have successfully adopted professional ethics into their curricula in Japan, programs for teacher education have not yet done so. Schoolteachers have not yet been recognized as full professionals. Before the end of World War II, schoolteachers were trained not in universities but so-called Normal Schools. They were respected in society because they were intellectual and ethical enough to be teachers. Their income, however, was low. The 1946 U. S. Education Mission to Japan recommended that schoolteachers should be trained in universities. Thus, teacher education programs, which are to be completed four years, consist of the following three main areas: general education, professional courses related to the subject matter being taught, and professional courses related to the practice of teaching. The history of ethics or ethical theories can be taught in the area of general education. There has been no room in the curriculum, however, for a course of teacher-specific professional ethics so far.

Indeed, influenced by the United States, the claim for the recognition as professionals was made as early as the 1950's. In the dispute over ideas about schoolteachers, professionalism was introduced as well as the Confucianist idea as clergy and the communist idea as worker. Ohgiya, as early as 1954, insisted that schoolteachers have to win the recognition as professionals from people by establishing the professional ethics of teaching (Ohgiya, 1954, p. 6). When scholars discussed the professional ethics of teaching, they recommended teachers to have codes of ethics for teachers, just as the US teacher's union NEA. Yet despite the fact that there has been a code of ethics for teachers in the US for a long time, Strike and Ternasky wrote in 1993, "Despite more than half a decade of interest in professional ethics, we have found only a few articles, and even fewer books and courses, that seem analogous to the kinds of enterprises in teaching ethics to practitioners that have sprung up in medical schools, law schools, and business schools" (Strike & Ternasky, 1993, p.2). The traditional Confucianist idea of the schoolteacher is still powerful in Japan. This implies that the ethics of teachers should come from their personality, their character. Teachers are expected to devote everything they have to work and children. Thus, this Confucianist ideal actually hinders ethics education for schoolteachers: the ethics of teachers is not something to teach but it is considered an inborn character.

While many people in Japan still believe that only an ethical person can and should be a teacher, they are coming to realize that teaching has become quite a bureaucratic job in reality. Schoolteachers seem to be service agents of the Ministry of Education. Those who are concerned about teacher's dependence on the bureaucracy are fighting to protect teachers' autonomy as professionals. They also try to learn from the professionalization process in other semi-professions, such as engineering and nursing.

As we have noted above, US teacher education has not fully accomplished ethics education into its programs despite an established code of ethics for teaching and a long tradition of pressure from professional associations to make teaching be recognized as a full profession. While the Confucianist ideal of an innate ethical teacher may have had a detrimental effect on introducing ethics education into teacher preparation programs, we need to realize that ethical judgment is something that has to be developed and honed. Furthermore, we can no longer assume that future Japanese teachers all have similar ethical character traits. We consider it crucial that teachers examine and reflect on their ethical beliefs and attitudes as a mark of professionalism. Whether this takes place in a separate course of ethics education or whether ethics becomes a focus and is integrated into various professional education classes is not as important as changing its pedagogy.

As we mentioned above, the curricula of teacher education consist of three main areas and any courses in them are held by lectures or in practices, neither of which is suitable for substantial ethics education. Students are not expected to be active in classroom. It is almost impossible for them to think deeply enough to have transformative or attitude-forming experience in class.

What we educators should learn from engineering and nursing is the lessons from their current difficulties in the process of professionalization. Mere import of contents and methods from foreign countries is not sufficient. Even though the case method is an excellent approach to ethics education for professionals,

Japanese students are not accustomed to class discussion and Japanese instructors do not know how to lead class discussion because they have no experience in participating in case discussions. One of the keys to introduce ethics education into the curriculum is training discussion leaders who know not only how to lead class discussion but also how to encourage students to attend discussions. Since we lack such experience, we need systematic opportunities to be trained as discussion leaders.

Conclusion

Both professions of engineering and nursing in Japan have successfully stepped up the process of professionalization. One of the features is adopting professional ethics courses into their programs. By importing effective methods from the United States, these professions have made considerable advances in their preparation of professionals. However, our review of the literature indicates that teachers do not use them effectively because they have no experience in taking classes in which the methods were used. What we need in general is to offer teachers systematic opportunities to receive training in the pedagogy of these methods so that they can structure and organize their classes that enable students to become active and critical, to discuss and to develop professional judgement. In teacher education in particular, where there exist no professional ethics courses, substantial ethics education together with appropriate pedagogical training should be introduced. We believe that the professionalization of teaching can be promoted by introducing professional ethics courses into teacher education programs.

Notes

1. On September 30, 1999 an accident happened at a small fuel preparation plant operated by Japan Nuclear Fuel Conversion Co. (JCO), a subsidiary of Sumitomo Metals and Mining, in the village of Tokai-mura, 130 km northeast of Tokyo. Two workers died as a result of radiation exposure. The particular JCO plant at Tokai was commissioned in 1988 and processes up to 3 tonnes per year of uranium enriched up to 20% uranium-235 (²³⁵U), much more than in ordinary nuclear power reactors (see Sugimoto & Taki, 2001, pp.67-73).
2. The concealment recall by Mitsubishi Motors disclosed by the accident of damage of the tire hub of the trailer. On January 10, 2002 the tire came off from a large-scale trailer that carried heavy equipment, it knocked against the walking housewife and she died. Two sons who had been walking together also received a light injury. The cause was the damage of the tire hub of the trailer. It was generated by 57 in total after 1992, and the wheel dropped out by the hub damage accident of the large-sized car by 51. Mitsubishi Motors kept consistently saying that the cause were poor maintenance on the user side (see Sugimoto, 2005, pp.167-170.)
3. "Development of human resources with advanced specialization" in HP of the Japanese Nursing Association. Accessed August 10, 2007. Available at <http://www.nurse.or.jp/jna/english/nursing/development.html#administrator>

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