School Library Ethics—A Battle of Hats

One must go backward to understand the concept of ethics. Originating with the Greek word ethos, meaning character, ethics follows only philosophy in guiding a profession. Philosophy gives a profession its foundation, whereas ethics gives the profession its walls. Most trace contemporary ethics to the writings of Immanuel Kant who wrote, “Treat every human person whether in your own person or that of another as an end and never merely as a means” (in Froehlich, 264).

Essentially Kant was making a case for the Golden Rule.

Professional ethics, however, extend far beyond the “do unto others...” philosophy. Froehlich (2000) reports that “…ethical principles are called into play when deliberating about values, particularly when values may run into conflict ... and when one value may take priority over another.” (p. 267) When one is forced to defend one’s profession and one’s program, it is quite likely that the values of various stakeholders will clash. Karen Adams (2001) defines professional ethics as “rule ethics, as they prescribe an external standard for the conduct of one’s profession.” She continues, “Professional codes of ethics give practitioners material for internal reflection to encourage self-criticism by the practitioner.” (p. 7) Lindsey (1985) finds that a code of ethics is reflective of a profession’s attitude toward service and the responsibility it feels toward the clients it serves.

In the US, the American Library Association (ALA) has established a code of ethics for the profession in the United States. Analogous to the code of ethics established by the National Education Association, or the American Medical Association, this statement of principles shapes the practice of the profession in that political arena. In Canada, The Canadian Library Association has a similar document.

The ALA code of ethics has been revised several times. The latest revision was in 1995 (with an explanatory statement passed in 2001). However the concepts presented in the code are central to the profession and have remained unchanged since 1939, save for changes in wording meant to clarify the concepts to both the profession and to the general public. In fact, the preface of the 1981 version states: “Since 1939, the American Library Association has recognized the importance of codifying and making known to the public and the profession the principles which guide librarians in action.” (ALA, History) These principles are the heart and the foundation of the profession. They are the tenets that one adopts to become part of the profession. Whether you agree with all the political machinery of the Association or not, the foundation principles remain the same. This is what librarianship is all about.

Many Hats, Many Points of View
The school library is not only affected by the ethical code of the American Library Association, however. Both the American Library Association and the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT) are responsible for the national standards set for the profession. Both ALA and AECT have highly considered and carefully worded statements of ethics. While not completely parallel, there are distinct similarities between the two codes. As members of the faculty, school librarians are educators. In fact, many, if not most, school librarians are also credentialed teachers. Since teachers have their own codes of ethics, librarians have now assumed yet another mantle of ethical responsibilities under which to labor. Adding personal and religious ethical values to the mix yields a melting pot of behaviors that may be in total conflict.

Taking on multiple ethical frameworks assumes that all the codes have similar goals and intentions. Since each of these roles has its own point of view, it is reasonable to expect there will be times when the various roles will conflict. What the National Education Association perceives as appropriate behavior for a teacher to follow when communicating with parents, for example, may be diametrically opposed to what the American Library Association endorses as ethically correct practice. The many state library associations and state education groups each has some type of statement of ethical behaviors that may or may not be congruent with that of its national cousin.

Knowing what is the ethical framework of a profession gives members of that profession a playing field and rulebook. Can you imagine the medical profession without the Hippocratic Oath? The entire subset of medical ethics stems from that short, simple mission statement for the profession. Alas, librarianship, and more specifically school librarianship, has no such concise statement. Information Power gives us standards, but it doesn’t give us ethics.

Many people disagree with the code of ethics of the profession. Interestingly, the longer-
acknowledged professions, such as medicine, law, the priesthood, and the military, have far less dissention about ethical baselines than does librarianship. In those professions, generally only new advances in technology produce loud and animated debate about the application of ethical principles. For example, cloning—a cutting edge technology—has stirred extensive debate in medical, legal, and ecclesiastical circles over the ethics of the practice. The law finds ample debate fodder when new technologies are applied to old legal understandings. Apparently business has not arrived at a generally accepted code of ethics when one considers the recent accounting scandals and insider trading reports. Interestingly, in January 1990, Lillian Gerhardt wrote:

The word ‘ethics’ is on every newspaper’s front page and in the lips of every newscaster. This ethical din arises from grand scale thievery by legislators and stock manipulators and all the many commissions created to scrutinize big money scandals. It really ignores the fact that ethics go beyond monotonous, Gargantuan greed. (p. 4)

Ethics is simply the character of the profession. It is what one may count on, what one finds true and right, what one believes. It is the religion of the practice. While even true believers may quibble over the details, the basic concepts stay rooted in the basic belief. This is the ethic of any profession.

There are naysayers in any group. Robert Hauptman has taken the role of one who promulgates a contrarian view of the ALA code of ethics. He believes that one should pay more attention to one’s personal ethical beliefs than to a rigid and possibly compromised code. He states:

To act ethically is to consider basic principles, a course of action, and the potential results, and then to act in a responsible and accountable way. The ethical professional does not simply follow the mandates and fiats of the controlling organization or ethos, especially since the rules are sometimes formulated to protect the practitioner and not the client. (p. 13)

The High and the Low of It

There are several views of most ethical codes. Librarianship is no exception. One might describe them as “high ethics” and “low ethics,” or “preceptual ethics” and “survival ethics.” The profession without question embraces some ethical concepts. Resistance to censorship is generally one of the most accepted. However, along with a resistance to improper removal of materials from the library should go a resistance to adding improper materials to the collection by those who would promote a specific point of view; however, this important distinction isn’t even mentioned in the 1989 Code of Ethics. (Gerhardt Ethical II; p. 4) One might consider that “high ethics” is a broad view of an ethical precept as applied to all aspects of the profession. “Low ethics” would be the application of the ethical principle with a strong dose of reality thrown in. Bodi (1998) finds that ethics is ambiguous because there are wars among competing interests. The fact may be, however, that it is competing ethics that cause the problem.

“Ethics matters because it helps us to act responsibly.” (Hauptman, 139) Not having a standard by which to judge is the ethical dilemma. Without such a standard, we are free to apply ethics from other value systems, other aspects of our lives, and we all view things differently. A shared set of values gives us a basis on which to coalesce as a profession, a community. It also gives us a set of standards against which to judge the professional behavior of our peers. As Lillian Gerhardt wrote: “You can’t accept reproach if you don’t know why what you’ve done is reprehensible.” (Nuts, p. 4)

WORKS CITED


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