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Media Review of College organization and professional development: Integrating moral reasoning and reflective practice

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Review of College Organization and Professional Development: Integrating Moral Reasoning and Reflective Practice

St. John, Edward P. (2009, March). *College Organization and Professional Development: Integrating Moral Reasoning and Reflective Practice*. New York: Routledge. 252 pp. ISBN: 978-0-415-99212-1 (\$45.95 paperback).

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Edward St. John's book *College Organization and Professional Development: Integrating Moral Reasoning and Reflective Practice* is underpinned by a worthy aspiration: to encourage thoughtful dialogue about moral reasoning in professional education and the professions, and to challenge faculty to redesign graduate education so that ethics and moral reasoning are paramount aims of the learning endeavor. The conclusion of the American progressive period of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, St. John argues, has ushered in a time of limited resources, environmental decline, and staggering inequalities. He writes, "Building the capacity to educate aspiring professionals as reflective practitioners who are conscious of the moral dimensions of professional action is critical" (p. 231). St. John is at once pessimistic about the capacity of educational professionals to think creatively and morally about current problems, yet hopeful in his tone. New learning among up and coming leaders, St. John argues, can yield big dividends for a more just and humane world.

St. John hopes to attract faculty to adopt his book for graduate courses in higher education and student affairs programs because they "bear the responsibility to their

students for encouraging them to center judgments in moral reasoning, rather than merely rely on and follow the rules—the knowledge, skills, and methods—of their professions” (p. xix). While the book appears ripe for an organizational theory course, it is arguably more appropriate as a capstone text. Faculty and their students, however, are not the single target audience of the book; St. John hopes senior professionals will use the text as a catalyst for searching out solutions necessary to address the paucity of moral reasoning used in professional practice. The interdisciplinary approach to complex social problems offered by St. John is sorely needed in graduate education classrooms. Even though the text can be dense with philosophical diversions, case studies, and reflection, activities afford readers the opportunity to translate theoretical ideas into practical applications. The text’s inclination toward big questions lacking easy answers makes it a solid bet for drawing out substantive dialogue.

St. John’s book is divided into three parts. Part one, “Moral reasoning in the professions,” encompasses four chapters aimed at introducing readers to the foundations of moral reasoning, and offers a compelling rationale for more thorough incorporation of such in professional practice. St. John persuades professionals to be more intentional and deliberate in uncovering the truth in critical social situations, instead of what is often commonplace—relying on untested beliefs and practices that emerge from rules of the profession. Although Kohlberg’s theory of moral development is the most often articulated framework when considering moral reasoning, St. John argues that it is not well suited for professional education. Instead, St. John leans heavily into action science and critical theory. Drawing on the work of German philosopher and critical theorist Habermas concerning moral learning, St. John suggests, “Creating opportunities to test assumptions about actionable situations is crucial, especially when there are critical social problems overlooked by policies and commonly held assumptions” (p. 21).

Some of the most thought-provoking ideas in this book are found in Chapter 2’s discussion of social justice. Effective professional practice, according to St. John, necessitates reflection about values and belief across faith traditions and other perspectives that influence one’s thinking. Accordingly, the author guides readers through common foundations for values, especially religious faith traditions, science, political paradigms, and other theories of justice. Readers are pressed to explore the gap between their actions and espoused values and whether these gaps demand attention. Moreover, St. John advocates for a “post-progressive stance,” especially around two critical issues: “(1) growing inequalities in access to quality education, health care, and other human services since the late 1970s create a context of regress rather than progress; and (2) failure to recognize the links between declining global resources and the daily practice of professionals and lived lives of all global citizens contributes to the context of environmental regress” (p. 56).

Part two of St. John's book explores how organizational cultures inform practitioners' understandings of professional practice. The articulated aspiration is for these ideas to reshape graduate and professional education so that students can embrace practices of reflection, organizational cultural analysis, and skill development to better engage learning that advances moral practice, justice, and sustainability in organizational life. St. John aims to "illuminate not only the strategies practitioners use to intervene when addressing critical challenges in practice, but also how organizational strategies can provide an environment for practitioners which can enable them to develop and apply interventions" (p. 94).

In part three of St. John's book, he offers three rubrics for framing teaching and learning about social responsibility and change, and reiterates his challenge for graduate and professional education to be reformed. St. John calls for developing educators who put moral reasoning into action, engage in professional development that enhances moral complexity, and thus influence organizational norms.

Perhaps the greatest strength of the book is the collection of organizational case studies provided to encourage grappling with new ideas. From dilemmas related to alcohol consumption with students to the complexities of university royalties, readers are asked to engage real organizational problems, dissect underlying assumptions, unearth moral problems, and explore possibilities for rethinking personal and organizational obligations for improving learning and the nature of human interaction beyond the walls of college and university life.

Overall, St. John's book is a worthwhile read, especially because it draws professionals toward the following important questions. What is the nature of moral problems facing people, and, more importantly, what is the responsibility of the institutions charged with making the world more humane and just? St. John's book does not provide easy answers, but he does pose many questions that practitioners and scholars alike must join together to discern if our colleges and universities are to stay the course for changing the world.