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Elias Schwieler^a & Stefan Ekecrantz^a

^a Centre for Learning and Teaching, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden

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Normative values in teachers' conceptions of teaching and learning in higher education: a belief system approach

Elias Schwieler* and Stefan Ekecrantz

Centre for Learning and Teaching, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden

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The effects of teachers' normative values and emotive reactions on teaching in higher education have received relatively little research attention. The focus is often on descriptive beliefs such as conceptions of teaching and their inter-relations with practice. In this study, which is illustrated by a heuristic model, a belief system approach is used in which normative values and emotions are also taken into account. Through a series of naturalistic interviews focusing on normative values, a dichotomy of normative perspectives is proposed: moralistic versus non-moralistic views on teaching. Suggestions for future research and a discussion of possible implications for academic development are also presented.

Keywords: normative values; emotions; belief system; university teachers' conceptions of teaching

Introduction: developing the descriptive beliefs and practice paradigm

A substantial part of the current body of research on individual university teachers' conceptions of teaching and learning deals with what could be called descriptive beliefs – the ontology and epistemology of teaching and learning (e.g. Kember & Kwan, 2000; Norton, Richardson, Hartley, Newstead, & Mayes, 2005; Prosser, Martin, Trigwell, Ramsden, & Lueckenhausen, 2005; Samuelowicz & Bain, 2001). Such conceptions are often said to influence teaching practices, although this causality is often implied or inferred indirectly, and empirical studies of actual teaching practices in higher education are still scarce (Kane, Sandretto, & Heath, 2002). Nevertheless, the potential causal link between teachers' descriptive beliefs and teaching practices is arguably an important rationale for this line of research. In addition, several studies have shown correlations between teachers' conceptions and student approaches to studying, which in turn relate to student learning (Gibbs & Coffey, 2004; Trigwell, Prosser, & Waterhouse, 1999).

This growing body of research on teacher conceptions is divergent but much of it focuses on what is here labeled as 'descriptive beliefs', e.g. more or less articulated ideas about how things 'are': What is teaching and what is the role of the teacher? What is knowledge? What is learning and when do we know that someone has learned? To further develop this research paradigm, a more multifaceted view is suggested here. Using a belief system approach, common in many political and social

*Corresponding author. Email: elias.schwieler@upc.su.se

sciences (Festinger, 1957; Holsti, 1962), normative values and emotions are added to a pragmatic, heuristic model. In doing so, the spectrum of conceptions of teaching is expanded to include moral reasoning and ideological core values, as well as feelings associated with teaching and assessment. While *descriptive beliefs* are in essence about how things ‘are’, *normative values* are about how things ‘ought to be’. What is just and fair? How should students behave? What is good and bad? What is important? *Emotions* are associated with teaching, such as feelings of joy, frustration, indifference or satisfaction.

The notion that declarative beliefs such as personal theories of learning correlate with approaches to teaching and student learning is well established. The exact nature of this relationship, however, is less well researched. When normative and emotive perspectives are added, a multitude of alternative causal links emerge that need to be considered (Figure 1).

The present study concludes the first of two parts of an ongoing research project on researchers’/teachers’ beliefs, values and emotions. The smaller qualitative interview study presented here also functions as a pre-study to a subsequent international quantitative survey on the same topic, involving more than 100 experienced educational developers from six countries (Ekecrantz & Schwieler, forthcoming). In these two studies much of the available data do not fit into the picture whereby a ‘descriptive belief’ is the most plausible explanation for ‘practice’. An espoused tradition of practice could lead to descriptive and normative constructs in order to rationalize and support such practice. Alternatively, normative values could appear to function as the foundation for descriptive beliefs, which in turn seem to lead to new normative values.

<i>Normative values</i>	<i>Descriptive beliefs</i>	<i>Emotions</i>	<i>Practice</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Moralizing over student presage• View on discipline, punishment and reward• Like/dislike of students• Ideological core values• Etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ontology and epistemology of teaching/learning• Personal theories of learning• Views on assessment methodology• Self-efficacy beliefs• Etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Frustration and anger• Satisfaction and joy• Reactions to conflicts: aggression, fear• Indifference• Sense of commitment• Etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Teaching practices• Research• Assessment and grading• Decision making and planning• Interaction with students, peers and others• Etc.

Figure 1. Researcher’s/teacher’s belief system: a heuristic model.

At other times there was reason to believe that emotions such as frustration or dislikes could lead to the formation of normative values, which in turn are rationalized as descriptive, factual beliefs, and so on.

Research on how emotions influence cognition and behavior is an expanding field within organizational theory (Hartel, Zerbe, & Ashkanasy, 2006), as is educational research on emotive aspects of student learning (Värlander, 2008). The study of teacher emotions has received some attention, mainly focusing on school teachers (Sutton & Wheatley, 2003). Some include emotive factors in their analysis but much is still left to be done when it comes to the potential importance of the individual teacher's emotions in higher education (Åkerlind, 2003). In sum, general emotion theory strongly supports the idea that emotions such as affection, joy, cynicism or contempt influence teacher–student interaction – an interaction that is known to influence student learning.

To some degree, the related concept of personal normative values is another non-rationalistic component in university teachers' conceptions that has received relatively little attention. The phenomena of positive and negative normative values have been discussed by John Biggs in terms of a 'blame-the-student' perspective, along with its more positive alternatives (Biggs & Tang, 2007). Empirical studies on such reflected and unreflected personal values are relatively scarce, however, and often not the main focus (Einarson & Clarkberg, 2004; Edström, 2008; Goh Swee-Choo, 2008; Retna, 2005). In contrast, in political science normative values are often viewed as imperative to the way individual decision-makers perceive reality – not just what they want from this reality (Jervis, 1998). It is reasonable to assume that more research from this perspective can enrich our understanding of teachers' conceptions in higher education too, and that the way a researcher/teacher values teaching and thinks of students matters. In addition, it is possible that such complementary perspectives may improve our understanding of how and why successful academic development activities work.

Method

The aim of this study was to investigate the nature of individual researchers'/teachers' normative values, and to outline possible similarities and differences. To do so, eight scholars – three women and five men – from different humanistic disciplines at two Swedish research universities were interviewed using naturalistic 90-minute interviews, which were recorded and transcribed. In order to maintain a focus on individual rather than institutional differences and similarities, a relatively homogenous group of informants was selected through purposive sampling using the following criteria:

- (1) Mid-range regarding age and experience. For the purpose of this study, it was vital that the subjects had enough personal teaching and research experience to draw from, as well as a substantial time period in the profession before retirement.
- (2) Similar academic background. All informants were lecturers with doctoral degrees in their respective humanistic discipline, but none had yet reached the level of full professor.
- (3) Had completed mandatory teaching and learning courses. All informants were, as a result, to some degree familiar with academic development discourse.

The interviews were thematic, but less structured than most semi-structured formats (Kvale, 1996). The aim was to let the informants speak as freely as possible about their thoughts and feelings concerning their professional life, while at the same time letting them react to similar situations. One line of questioning was quite general (e.g. how and why they became researchers/teachers in their respective fields). Another strategy was to use more probing types of questions, focusing on potential problems, conflicts and worries. Causality was not studied directly, but the informants' reasoning gave rich insight into the plausible interplay between emotions and descriptive beliefs, and how they may relate to practice – the ways in which they teach, assess and interact with students and peers.

One major methodological concern was that the informants would adapt to what they might perceive to be a student-centered discourse, making potentially controversial views less visible. Some studies building on researchers'/teachers' self-reported values in research-intensive universities give the impression that teaching is valued more than research (Astin & Cress, 2003). Such a view is clearly at odds with the notion of a dominating research paradigm and the work of Boyer (1990) and others (Fairweather, 2005; Gamson & Finnegan, 1996). In order to minimize this bias, no explicit questions about normative values were posed. However, the interview format itself allowed for ample spontaneous moral reasoning. For example, an open question about marking and grading could elicit elaborate reasoning on issues of justice and fairness, as well as personal reflections. Direct questions about possibly problematic scenarios produced even more lengthy reflections, often with clearly normative implications.

The interviews were analyzed at length through argumentation analysis, reconstructing underlying normative and descriptive premises along with explicit arguments. Using these methods, a discussion about student presage and heterogeneity could build on clearly normative views of higher education as a means for selection. For example, it could be evident that the informant held the view that undergraduate education should be used primarily as a means to identify the brightest and most deserving individuals for higher-level studies. Or, a seemingly descriptive reasoning about time and resources could unveil views on how research was valued in relation to teaching. For validation purposes, the interviews were first analyzed separately by the authors; once directly after the interview and then again after four to six weeks. That way it was possible to first approach the interviews with a recent memory of situational and non-verbal aspects, while the later analysis could focus more on the transcripts as texts. Thereafter the four analyses of each interview were compared. The comparisons did not reveal any significant disagreements.

Results

Each individual expressed a multitude of beliefs and ideas that, when taken together, represented two main perspectives: moralistic or non-moralistic. Before describing these perspectives, it is important to stress that these findings say nothing about whether the informants would uphold these perspectives over time, or to what degree they are of a more shifting and context-dependent nature.

Speaking plainly, the best way to characterize the moralistic perspective, as it emerged in the interviews, may be that it represents a defensive view of teaching. This perspective was expressed as reasoning about how teaching tasks in general interfered with more valued work of research, and that research had to be defended from outside

threats of different kinds – students and teaching being among those threats. Students were described as something fundamentally external, sometimes in opposition to the integrity of the subject matter and the teacher. From this perspective, moral reasoning and emotions were often intertwined when students in general were described as problematic and sometimes even as a general source of frustration and indignation. When particular problems were discussed, there was limited room for reflection on possible shortcomings in teaching. From a moralizing outlook, problems were almost consistently placed outside the teacher's sphere of control. The teacher's own expertise of the subject matter could be seen as a norm which students would fail to live up to. In addition, assessment and grading were seen primarily as an instrument for selection, as well as a means to reward and punish.

From a non-moralistic perspective, on the other hand, problematic teaching scenarios were described more in terms of problem-solving. The non-moralistic perspective was that students were mainly seen as equal parties, and these teachers could almost effortlessly apply a student's perspective to their own teaching when necessary. Problems were not the focal point when teaching in general was discussed but, when asked directly about potential problems, these were sometimes seen as being within the teacher's control, but other times, not. Difficulties could be discussed in terms of how pedagogical development might be a solution, rather than summarily rejected because of time constraints or lack of resources. As for the concept of 'non-moralistic', it is important to stress that this is not to be understood as non-normativity. To reject a moralizing view is obviously a normative position in itself, but is still in essence a neutral perspective and to some degree represents a more distanced view.

One aim of this project was to possibly unveil a larger number of normative categories, as would normally be the case in ideology studies, but in the transcripts two perspectives stand out as clearly dichotomous. The informants as individuals all represented rich and complex belief systems, and none of them would assume one of the two described perspectives exclusively. Nevertheless, at the time of the interviews they all showed clear inclinations to assume either a moralistic or a non-moralistic perspective toward both teaching and students. Of the eight scholars interviewed, four were more prone to a moralistic view. As a result of the size and non-probabilistic, purposive nature of the sample, no generalizations can be drawn from this particular observation.

The two perspectives that frame the results are not chosen as a matter of simplicity, as there are obviously not merely two types of belief system and certainly not only two types of researcher/teacher. What the results may suggest is that, regarding perspectives, at a given time, one may either assume a student's perspective as a way of empathic enquiry, or one may not. If that is the case, it is not all that surprising that the two general normative outlooks presented here resemble similar constructs in research on the descriptive beliefs domain, specifically concerning conceptions of teaching. Much of this research also demonstrates variations of two basic categories: teacher/content versus student/learning, or transmissive versus facilitative conceptions (Kember & Kwan, 2000; Trigwell & Prosser, 1996). In some studies these categories are developed further into elaborated subgroups or hierarchies, but with the overarching dichotomy ostensibly intact (Postareff & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2008). The possible interplay between such descriptive conceptions and the dichotomy of normative categories presented above needs to be examined further, but the analytical framework of this study is based on the assumption that, at least sometimes, normative core values can be the basis for *ad hoc* personal theories of learning and similar constructs.

Table 1. Examples of moralistic and non-moralistic perspectives.

Moralistic perspective	Non-moralistic perspective
<p>Moralizing over presage</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students' prior knowledge as a source of resentment. Main focus is on what the students do not know. Students as incompetent for the task. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students' prior knowledge as a non-moral/neutral pedagogical starting point. Adapting to heterogeneity is a natural part of teaching.
<p>Moralizing over process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student behavior is problematic more often than not. Students do not prepare for class, for reasons outside the teacher's control. Student behavior must be managed and disciplined. Assessment and grading are used to deter and reward. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student behavior is seen from a learning outcomes perspective and is not judged per se. Problematic exceptions are not the focus of attention.
<p>Moralizing over product</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students' results in general are a source of indignation. Students are not able and/or not willing to perform well. Students' poor learning makes lowering of standards necessary. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students' results are seen as products of teaching and learning, with shared responsibilities. Normative ideas regarding assessment primarily concern fairness and power relationships.
<p>Relationship between research and teaching</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A tug-of-war perspective whereby any time spent on teaching hinders research. Research is more valued. Teaching is important but less so. Pedagogical development is summarily rejected because of time constraints. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Research and teaching as two sides of the same coin. Time and resources may be lacking, but this is partly a time management problem. Pedagogical development is considered in problem solving.

In order to highlight the normative values component, the described dichotomy is discussed based on salient examples of contrasting data summarized in Table 1. This is followed by a discussion of how the suggested belief system model, in addition to being a research perspective, could be useful for academic development work and intervention.

Moralizing over presage: students' abilities and prior subject knowledge

In some of the interviews, students' lack of prior knowledge was seen as a major problem, and was sometimes described as the main reason for why any attempts to improve teaching were redundant. One teacher bluntly stated that he was against the whole idea of discussion-based seminars and tutorials because he 'personally, very quickly get[s] bored by students and their stupid statements and interpretations'. Instead, he advocated large lectures, where he can make sure that the content is dealt with properly and the students 'don't have to think for themselves'. The latter is necessary because, according to him, students these days are unable to think independently. Another teacher approached this problem by stating that the only solution would be to get rid of students with sub-standard prior subject knowledge by significantly raising the requirements for enrolment.

A contrasting view was that the notion of students' limited prior subject knowledge was an important and exciting part of a teacher's work. One informant concluded

that some literature was unsuitable for beginners because it required too much historical context knowledge in order to perform a certain kind of text analysis. Rather than focusing on the students' lack of historical context knowledge as a problem, he described the joy of trying to find the best selection of texts which would work in that particular context without lowering standards. Another teacher did not discuss students' lack of prior subject knowledge at all when describing his work, but after several questions addressing the issue he stated, as a matter of fact, that his students did not know much about the content covered when they enrolled. He described this situation as something 'normal' and a natural part of teaching. One teacher argued that the current curriculum should be rearranged so that the content that had proven to be too difficult in the beginning was instead covered later on in the program. This was seen as a pedagogical necessity in order to align the curriculum with the students' experiences and prior subject knowledge, and was presented as a way to ensure that important content could be covered at a more appropriate time.

Moralizing over process: student behavior

From a moralizing outlook, an array of unwanted student behavior was elaborated on, such as failure to fulfill a number of requirements, passivity during seminars, poor preparation for class or non-attendance. These issues, sometimes expressed explicitly in terms of blame, were in fact the focal point when discussing teaching and students in general, and were an ever-present topic during the interviews with several teachers. Two informants stated that they needed to use marking and grading to discipline students and manage behavior. One teacher stated frankly that she did not read extra assignments, but just used them to make sure no one got through too easily. Another teacher described how students who worked hard and made an effort were given a higher grade than the results themselves warranted. Consequently, other students with the same level of knowledge were given a lower grade, a practice at odds with the standards-based grading system used.

From a non-moralistic perspective, student behavior and associated classroom management issues were seen differently. Deadlines were created to ensure that both teacher and student time were used effectively, and students failing to meet them were not the main focus of attention when thinking about teaching. In sum, creating classroom rules and formal requirements – and getting students to comply with them – were approached as a practical matter. One teacher described how hard it was not to reward a student who had improved significantly but still had not met the requirements for a higher grade. He said it was necessary to be professional about such matters. And he made sure that these students' accomplishments were acknowledged through feedback, with apt information explaining that they were on the way to improved grades.

Moralizing over product: students' assessment accomplishments

Several informants who took a moralistic perspective complained that students today achieve less and less, and that demands are constantly being lowered as a result. One teacher came to the conclusion that it is best to just look at the language and grammar of essays and take-home examinations, because then at least you can uphold some kind of standard. Frustration with students' inabilities and poor results seemed to be the reason why these teachers were in fact lowering standards by focusing their assessment

and grading on aspects of less relevance to their stated learning outcomes. Answering questions about the relationship between language mistakes and the quality of a textual analysis, one informant said that some students, if their analysis proved to be good but their language poor, were given the opportunity to rewrite their essay in order to improve the language quality without being graded on it. She stated that she thinks it is, 'justified to do it that way, when you think the student is able to understand and learn more about it... It's very much a question of whether you think it's someone who both wants to and has the ability to learn.' Thus, apart from different abilities, students were categorized as either willing or unwilling to learn. The able and willing were graded more leniently when it came to language and presentation and were allowed to correct mistakes, whereas students seen as unable and unwilling were graded solely, and more strictly, on the formal qualities of the written assignments.

From a non-moralistic perspective, failure and poor achievement were not the focal points of thoughts on assessment. In addressing the question of why some students fail, one informant replied that it was simply because they had not achieved all the learning outcomes: 'Or, you could say that I haven't achieved all learning outcomes, if you will.' Student failure was unfortunate, but not a source of resentment. Rather, it was a problem that in principle could often be solved. When discussing different difficulties in teaching and assessment, two of the informants problematized active participation with a lack of substance. Sometimes students complied with demands about being active in seminars, but they both acknowledged that quality had to be put before quantity. The same line of reasoning was seen when they discussed student writing.

The relationship between research and teaching

Many academics in higher education struggle with the dual nature of their work as researchers and teachers (Robertson, 2005). Research is often perceived as more valued in academic careers, while the major part of the actual work, for many, consists of teaching. There are problems associated with this potential conflict. From a moralistic perspective, teaching may easily become a necessary evil that has a negative impact on the more important tasks such as research – but not the other way around. To what degree a teacher prioritizes teaching is an oft-neglected perspective when teachers' conceptions, approaches and strategies are discussed. If a teacher has sufficient pedagogical knowledge to implement a certain reform but is not motivated to do so, this knowledge will obviously not translate well into practice. One of the informants in this study explicitly stated that he first and foremost was a researcher and that he only wanted to 'get by' as a teacher, setting very modest goals such as avoiding problems and complaints from students. He, and two others, stressed throughout the interview that teaching and student-related issues took too much time from the more valued task of research.

From a non-moralistic perspective, the same potential problem was approached differently. When teaching took time from research, this was primarily discussed in terms of time management; that is, the tasks were not inherently in conflict but the practicalities of teaching sometimes grew out of proportion. One idea put forth was that things would work better if only the teacher could manage to separate teaching and research in time – not necessarily as a way to protect something good from something bad, but rather as a way to improve conditions for both. Another informant was more troubled by the fact that teaching at times required his attention beyond the time

he had set aside for it, but concluded that his responsibilities to his students made it necessary. From that perspective, he identified it as a problem, but not in the sense that something he valued more had to be sacrificed for something he valued less. Rather, it was a conflict between what he saw as his own interest versus the interests of others, and the students were not seen as to blame for this.

Discussion: potential practical implications of a belief system perspective

Academic development literature often describes the adoption of a student/learning perspective as being about conceptual change and paradigm shifts (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Biggs & Tang, 2007; Ramsden, 2003). It is possible that a focus on such a perspective as a primarily intellectual position can be insufficient to facilitate change on an individual level. In much research, teachers' conceptions and approaches are seen as degrees of ontological and epistemological sophistication (e.g. Åkerlind, 2007). It could be argued that, if this is used as a main framework for academic development, it would build on the premise that all researchers/teachers value teaching equally. Genuine, intrinsic motivation to prioritize the improvement of teaching may be taken for granted and, consequently, any and all problematic teaching practices could be interpreted as symptoms of pedagogical lack of awareness.

However positive and optimistic that may seem, we would like to suggest that a belief system approach may encompass a fuller range of researchers'/teachers' experiences and beliefs. For example, if certain university teachers' teaching is characterized by little or no student interaction, a harsh and controlling learning climate and a strict summative measurement approach to assessment, it is likely the students will not learn as much as they could. In trying to help these teachers, it may be useful to keep a broader belief system in mind:

- *'Descriptive beliefs' as a dominant factor?* Are their teaching and assessment practices designed in this way mainly because they assume that, when learning has occurred, it is because an expert has – literally – transmitted information to a novice? If so, knowledge of pedagogical research and alternative learning theories could be an effective way to facilitate a revision of the way they think about teaching and assessment.
- *'(Traditions of) practice' as a dominant factor?* Are they merely reproducing a teaching and assessment tradition, without really subscribing to the inherent theoretical implications of it? Maybe they just do it in the same way things were done when they were students, and in the way their senior colleagues do it, without really advocating these practices in comparison with other alternatives. If so, meeting others from other traditions and discussing teaching and assessment practices with them may be what is needed to acknowledge them as traditions rather than objective truths.
- *'Normative values' as a dominant factor?* Is the most important foundation of their beliefs that their task as a teacher is to weed out an unfit majority and identify a small, deserving minority – in which case, making it harder for students to learn would not necessarily be a bad thing? Do they see a majority of students as potential troublemakers who threaten the integrity of the subject matter? If so, learning about pedagogical theory or learning about others' work may not make much difference. Discussing, verbalizing and challenging these normative values at length with others might be more effective.

- *'Emotions' as a dominant factor?* Do they refrain from more active learning activities because they fear difficult questions in class? Do they feel insecure in their role as assessors and therefore design the examinations to be exclusively convergent and very precise, with only right/wrong answers in order to avoid the anxiety of having their professional judgment questioned? If so, helping them become more secure in their professional role through various means could be a successful type of intervention.

In reality, there is seldom one single explanation to teachers' predicaments – and not one single remedy. However, it is safe to assume that in each case some experiences and beliefs often explain more than others. Not taking this multitude of possible factors into account could be one explanation for why educational development interventions sometimes fail. But, while conceptual change in academic development may be difficult and require a long-term approach, it is clear that it can work (Gibbs & Coffey, 2004; Postareff, Lindblom-Ylänne, & Nevgia, 2007; Prebble et al., 2004). When it does, it may in part be because a wider range of individuals' belief systems are in fact challenged. A course that appears to address primarily descriptive belief issues, such as student-centered learning theory or teaching methods, may in fact be full of opportunities to learn about others' practices and traditions, to verbalize and challenge normative values and to build professional confidence over an extended period of time.

Suggestions for future research

The analytical framework suggested here is in essence about individuals' belief systems, relating to existing research on teacher conceptions. The purpose of such an approach is to make possible variations visible, e.g. in relation to the realities of students' experiences of different teachers in one and the same context. A closely related research field is, of course, the individual's normative values as part of institutional culture and traditions. A possible direction for future research is to investigate the interplay and possible tensions between individual variations within a common framework, i.e. what happens when teachers with more of a moralistic outlook work together with peers with more non-moralistic perspectives in a certain institutional context? And, how does this variation affect learning climates and student learning? Institutional values regarding teaching and students are another much needed area of research.

As for the individualistic perspective, the possible relationships between the different components of belief systems constitute a vast field that needs to be explored further. When, why and how much do normative values influence practice in different scenarios? When do emotive reactions influence normative and descriptive constructs, and vice versa? Any such research, possibly built on new types of inventory, would need to tread carefully so that genuine normative values and emotions are not confused with discourse. Likewise, great methodological care would need to be taken to differentiate espoused-theories-of-action and theories-in-use. Or, as one informant (an educational developer in the UK) in our ongoing survey on researcher/teacher values and attitudes put it:

There is an issue here, I think, on what academics may reflexively think, [compared to] what they may think if given the opportunity and motivation to consider and reflect more

comprehensively. In terms of the first point, many would immediately operate for [a moralistic reaction]. ... However, I think they would see [a non-moralistic reaction] as reasonable if it was proposed to them. (Ekecrantz & Schwieler, forthcoming)

Notes on contributors

Elias Schwieler, PhD, has a background as a lecturer in English literature, and now works as an educational developer at the Centre for Learning and Teaching at Stockholm University.

Stefan Ekecrantz, PhD, was previously a lecturer in history, and is now deputy director of the Centre for Learning and Teaching at Stockholm University.

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