A Model for Teaching Ethical Meta-Principles:
A Descriptive Experience

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Abstract

As students, educators, outreach and community service experts enter their distinct professional worlds, each will be compelled to make a wide variety of decisions. The shaping of peoples' ethical beliefs occurs through personal experiences as well as family, culture, religion and peer pressure. In order for these students, educators, outreach and community service experts to make decisions needed as they join or continue in the workforce, college and university professors must endeavor to instill in them high ethical standards. This paper will introduce a model for teaching the five ethical meta-principles using video, reflection and case studies and will describe the results of using this model.

Keywords: Ethics, Teaching Ethics, Ethical Examples

Introduction

In order to teach ethical meta-principles, this teaching model begins by asking and answering the question "Can an individual be professional and yet be unethical?" The authors define professionalism as the skills and knowledge that determine an individual's performance. It is also a demonstration of that individual's competence in their particular field. There are two definitions of ethics in the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (2008): Ethics is the discipline dealing with what is good and bad and with moral duties and obligations. Secondly, it is a set of moral principles, a theory or system of moral values. For the purpose of this teaching model, the authors define ethics as the study of the general nature of morals and the specific moral choices individuals make in relation to others. In the work world, ethics are rules or standards of conduct that govern members of a profession. Ethical behavior is that which conforms to accepted principles of right and wrong and that which governs our own professional conduct. There has been much written about ethics and how to apply ethics to different problems or concerns. The establishment of more voluntary codes of ethics or best practice standards along with more ways of encouraging and monitoring compliance is one way of bolstering ethical concerns (Rhode, 2007). Nevertheless, what is an ethical dilemma or concern? Kelley Ross (2005) indicates that scores of moral dilemmas are dilemmas because of the type of discord between the right or wrong of the actions and the good or bad of the price of those actions. Therefore, an ethical dilemma takes place when an individual is faced with two or more seemingly equally acceptable or sensible alternatives (Kitchener, 2000). However, because there are many facets to consider when attempting to make decisions, the ethical meta-principles seem to fall between considering the outside forces and personal information affecting the situation.

When faced with an ethical issue, there are many methods of deliberating and deciding what to do. Regardless of the steps involved and the order in which those steps are considered, there must be a foundation on which to base such decisions. The influence of Beauchamp and Childress's (1979) work in bioethics and medicine as well as Kitchener's (1984) adaptation of their ideas for psychology, one common foundation for many professionals today may be the ethical meta-principles of autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, justice and fidelity. These five ethical meta-principles have significant implications for practice in professional work, which should supplement and complement everyone's professional codes of ethics, policies and procedures as well as state and federal laws. People's values will interface in some way with these five ethical principles and will affect how each principle is considered and evaluated in an ethical dilemma (Werth, 2002). Therefore, when a professional is faced with the need to make the best possible decision in a particular set of circumstances, then they should follow some sort of decision-making model and the importance of consultation with another person cannot be overlooked (Werth, 2008). There are many different ways of interpreting each of the meta-principles depending on the point of view of the individuals involved. In order to set the stage for our model of teaching the meta-principles, a short description of the meta-principles follows.

Nonmaleficence is usually considered the most important of all the meta-principles. This principle deals with the idea of doing no harm or minimizing the harm to as many of the parties as possible. When considering doing no harm, one must take

into account the various values or cultural backgrounds that might affect the interpretations of the issue being considered. So when considering nonmaleficence, the bottom line is that professionals should keep the goal of minimizing harm in mind while realizing that their own personal opinion of what constitutes harm may be incompatible with what others view as harm (Werth, 2008).

The second ethical meta-principle is beneficence or the responsibility to do good. Often, beneficence is considered with nonmaleficence because the issues of doing good and of minimizing harm must be considered together. As with nonmaleficence, individuals who do not take into consideration cultural values or do not consult with others may minimize the probabilities to do good. The "Golden Rule" can apply here with an individual having the moral responsibility to do good to others. This duty is internally based and is mostly a moral one. Friction occurs when considering the principles of doing no harm and acting to benefit others especially when we need to attain balance between individual harm and benefitting society.

Autonomy is the third meta-principle and includes the quality or state of being self governing (Merriam-Webster, 2008). This principle is closely associated with the idea of respect for the person. Even in the most restrictive environment, the right of self-determination is a foundation for the way critical issues such as providing informed consent and assessing decision-making competence have been interpreted by the courts and implemented in practice. It implies the right to participate in the democratic process of governance and to influence one's future, politically, socially, and culturally. In order to maximize autonomy and not ignore cultural issues, a professional should examine the decision-making process itself instead of only the result of that process (Grisso & Appelbaum, 1998).

Fairness regarding treatment of others and providing equal access to services and equal quality of services to all those with whom we come in contact, describes the next meta-principle: Being Just. Matters of justice should be at the forefront of a professionals mind today given discrimination in services such as the large number of individuals without health insurance and the high cost of all health services. Some of the most difficult decisions today involve making decisions of who should receive treatment, what type of treatment, where, when and for how long. All these questions revolve around the principle of justice. Although difficult, if professionals responsibly work toward reducing the impact of these issues, they would also be maximizing the first three principles (Werth, 2008).

The last meta-principle is fidelity or being faithful. Although there is some debate as to whether fidelity is really a meta-principle, Kitchener (2000) indicates that it should be given the same level of importance as the other principles because of the roles that trust and loyalty play in professional relationships. When a professional enters into a trust relationship with the patient or client, the professional is expected to maintain and enhance their patient's or clients trust. One way to enhance that trust is by maintaining confidentiality and truth-telling (Wirth, 2008).

These five meta-principles form a foundation for decision-making for professionals. They should be used to supplement professional codes of ethics, organizational policies and procedures and state and federal law. In any situation that involves strong emotions, these five ethical meta-principles help minimize harm, maximize good, respect autonomy, maximize justice and enhance fidelity (Wirth, 2008.

Strategies and Models in the Literature

It is with these principles in mind that we now turn to strategies and models that are found in the literature for teaching these five meta-principles. Rhodes (2007) encourages universities to emphasize "well-designed ethics" coursework that help students develop their own capacities for moral reasoning and urges her colleagues to engage in serious empirical work about the application of ethics and leadership in the real world. Linda Hill (2006) recognizes that most students are still in the early stages of their moral development. Others have indicated that students are in various stages of their development. Therefore, the challenge for educators is to prepare students to be able to take charge of moral development. The teaching of "decision theory" is about how people decide to take a type of action they believe has the most value for them. There are many ways to teach students about "how to do it". There is an experienced-based model where a learning unit is developed to teach students about ethical decision-making as a critical thinking process thus integrating the students' knowledge and experience of values, ethics, policies, and research during their final year of study (Gray & Gibbons, 2007). The advantage of using experiential assignments to teach ethics is that they can be designed so that students evaluate their own value systems in context of those of business organizations; experiential approaches also help students apply ethical analysis to real world management decision-making (Sims, 2002). This approach also encourages students to consider moral questions and conflicts that are personal in nature which are often not discussed in the workplace. The classroom environment can be designed to promote comfortable and useful exploration of such topics (Laditka and Houck, 2006).

Anonymized reflection (AR) was employed as another innovative way of teaching ethics in order to enhance the students' ability in ethical decision-making. Anonymized reflection is the process of clarifying the meaning of an anonymized experience or situation with a view to developing new insights through small-group discussion and reasoned argument to enhance ethical decision-making. AR as a teaching method ensures that an ethical dilemma is personal and meaningful and encourages students to participate in decision-making (Kyle, 2008) There is consensus in the literature that reflection is a dynamic process linking an experience with knowledge. Reflective learning, as a constructive and situated method, helps students find meaning in an experience, especially an ethical situation, and contemplate new ways of being and responding. This approach is not new in the least but a part of the work of Dewey, the first educationalist to write about reflection (Dewey, 1933.)

Kolb (1984) conceptualized adult learning in two ways: abstract conceptualization as opposed to concrete experience and reflective observation as opposed to active experimentation and developed the Learning Style Inventory to identify adults preferred learning styles. Transformative learning is another way of teaching ethics that requires individuals to engage in critical reflection and personal involvement in order to become autonomous thinkers (Grabove, 1997).

The learning of critical thinking is necessary in ethical decision-making to foster creative solutions to dilemmas. In 1983, Blid promoted study circles as one approach to adult learning styles and the development of critical thinking by group discussions of

ethical dilemmas. Discussion of vignettes and answering questions about those vignettes were seen as most helpful for learning the ethical content areas. In Pettifor, Estay and Paquet's *Preferred Strategies for Learning Ethics in the Practice of a Discipline* (1996) there was a near-unanimous rejection of traditional requirements for writing essays and studying for exams contrasted with the positive ratings assigned to other strategies. For learning the codes of ethics, discussion of vignettes were the most helpful, followed by answering questions after lectures, discussing film clips about ethical situations and reading relevant literatures. Writing essays and studying for exam was the least helpful approaches for learning the ethical codes. For learning ethical dilemma decision-making process, discussions of vignettes were most significant followed by discussion of film clips and answering questions after lectures. For self-awareness of ethical issues and behaviors, discussing ethical vignettes and reading relevant literature were the most helpful approaches.

In order to give background information to a topic or to provoke discussions, many faculty members search and use film clips or films. Using a film increases student participation. The communal or group experience of viewing a film breaks down barriers and builds trust between class members, allowing for open discussion and allowing for risk-taking. Film empowers students as they are comfortable with it and engage it confidently and critically. Students see film as part of their culture and thus feel a sense of ownership over the material so it makes them partners in the course (Marshall, 2003). A combination of traditional and nontraditional strategies appears to be the key in integrating knowledge, skills and self-awareness.

Bernard and Jara (1986) conclude that the problem for training is not how to communicate the ethical principles to students more effectively, but rather how to motivate the students to implement principles that they apparently understand quite well. Case studies offer a multitude of learning opportunities regarding ethics. One such example is the online cases offered by the Online Ethics Center for Engineering and Science entitled "Professional Ethics in Engineering Practice: Discussion Cases" (Nichols, Nichols and Nichols, 2007). One of the greatest challenges in teaching ethics is to establish relevance and one strategy to do so is the use of case studies. It is important that the case studies used not be cases that are viewed as abnormalities or of high visibility because students are apt to view these cases as unlikely to confront them in their daily practice (Craig, 2006). Using case studies to teach ethics has several advantages. Case studies are interesting and increase the relevance of the principles being taught. Secondly, case studies are practical, illustrating to students how the principles are applied to real life situations. Third, case studies are realistic. Case studies powerfully illustrate the difficulty of certain ethical decisions and help students confront the absence of clear right and wrong answers in some situations (McMinn, 1988). The relevance of ethics is always an issue for students until they actually see or participate in an ethical dilemma.

Training models can encourage awareness of personal emotions and concerns that arise during ethical dilemmas. In presenting case scenarios, the instructor can ask about students' emotional responses. Many theorists suggest that emotion serves as a form of knowledge that directs attention and motivation (Carver & Scheier, 1990). Betan and Stanton (1999) suggests that the first step in motivating ethical action is

promotion of an awareness that personal emotions and concerns do influence the decision making process.

Barnet indicates that the general principles of the American Psychological Association's Code of Ethics are based on the underlying meta-principles of beneficence, nonmaleficence, fidelity, autonomy, justice, and self-care as described by authors such as Kitchener (1984) and Thompson (1990). Several models may prove helpful to psychologists for ethical decision-making. Rest's (1984) model is based on moral reasoning and has the goal of illuminating the processes involved in the production of moral behavior. This model assists in interpreting the situation in terms of how a persons' actions affects the welfare of others; formulates a moral course of action by identifying the moral ideal in a specific situation; selects among competing value outcomes of the idea, the one to act on, execute and implement what a person intends to do. A second practice-based model includes the following steps: interpret the situation, review the problem, determine the standards that apply, general possible courses of action, consider the consequences of each, consult with one's supervisors or peers, select an action by weighing competing values, plan and execute the action, and evaluate the course of action (Cottone & Tarvydas, 1998).

Professions develop codes of ethics to guide the behavior of their members in the practice of their discipline. The underlying values of codes of ethics reflect the cultural values and mores of the society in which they are formulated and therefore significant conflicts between personal and professional values normally would not occur. All professional codes of ethics address, in one way or another, the issues of respect, rights, confidentiality, informed consent, diversity, well-being of consumers, competency, professional boundaries, conflict of interest, honesty and responsibility to society (Pettifor, Estay & Paquet, 1996).

Rational for our Model

Because ethical behavior among decision makers, educators, and persons with leadership responsibilities is a continually relevant topic, a model for discussion and the teaching of ethical behavior is very timely. The intent was to design a model that could be applied across disciplines and across professions. While ethical behavior is imbedded in many course curricula, an attempt was made to design a standalone curriculum. Guided by the core principles in ethical behavior, the ensuing model was crafted to appeal to various learning styles and audience diversity.

The model as designed is applicable to a variety of professionals, paraprofessionals and students at various educational levels. The instructional components were modified to be relevant to the participants by using appropriate and job related reference. The model was successfully used with paraprofessionals in university and public school settings. Professional faculty in university settings and classroom teachers in middle and high school environments were also targeted. In addition, other senior level professionals such as university presidents, provosts, deans and individuals directing community-based organizations were included in the populations targeted. Graduate and undergraduate students also participated in the process.

Delivery Method

The foundation of the model was the need to introduce students/participants to the concepts of personal and institutional social responsibility and social responsiveness. The emphasis was on relevance, application, and the importance of interactive experiences. Cognizant of the value of multiple teaching strategies and learning styles, the model uses several delivery methods that are described in the order the process used to implement the model.

The process begins with an introduction and discussion of each meta-principle. These short lectures allow the audience to come to a personal understanding of the principle as they examine their own value system. Examples of the work related relevance to the audience becomes an interactive process during this discussion.

Following each lecture and discussion of a principle, the authors use award-winning films to bring emphasis to the ethical behavior being discussed. Clips from these movies are used to reinforce the discussion on the essence of each of the meta-principles. The use of examples from pop-culture taken from films is very powerful with some groups as evidenced by participant evaluations.

Following each movie clip, the students/participants are given an opportunity to reflect on situations in which they may have faced a similar ethical dilemma. Documenting these reflections for follow-up discussions was key to the teaching process. These reflections remain private to the individual and are shared only when the participant wishes to do so.

At this point in the process, the model makes available a suggested guideline by which to engage in decision-making when faced with an ethical dilemma. Various ethical guidelines can be found in the literature and a summary of those is presented for students/participants to consider. Each step in the guidelines is discussed in an interactive format.

Once ethical guidelines are discussed, participants are randomly placed in circle groups to engage in further discussion using the case study method. The value of using ethical dilemmas as portrayed in a case study format is well researched. Using case studies enhances the discussion, expands the perspective of the individual, and underscores the complexity of moral behavior faced by individuals. The authors have selected a variety of case studies to bring greater emphasis on applicability and relevance.

The concluding piece of the process is the comparison of perspectives brought forth from the various circle groups on the steps taken when facing the ethical dilemma presented in the case study. The emphasis again being placed on the complexity of decision-making an individual faces when dealing with two or more seemly equally acceptable or sensible alternatives (Kitchener, 2000).

Results

Following each session, which ranged from three to four hours in length, participants provided feedback on the model and its delivery process. There were four different categories of participants: Students included graduate and undergraduate level and numbered 50. Para-professionals described as support staff at the secondary

and post-secondary levels numbered about 90. Professionals were faculty members at the secondary and post-secondary level and numbered 50 and the last group of senior level professionals that included superintendents, provosts, principles, vice-presidents and others. This last group of senior level professionals numbered about 40. A general impression of the total model was solicited from each of these groups along with participants understanding of the value of teaching ethics.

Table 1: Ranking of Delivery Methods   1=highest   5=lowest by category of participants

Delivery Method	Students	Para-Professionals	Professionals	Senior Professionals
Short Lecture & Job Relevance Discussion	3	5	2	1
Film Clips	1	1	1	2
Reflection Activity	5	2	3	4
Ethical Guidelines for Decision-Making	4	4	5	5
Case Studies and Discussion	2	3	4	3

Anecdotal information from senior level professionals with many years of experience suggested the use of different film clips that would not be as graphic as the ones shown. This group also expressed dissatisfaction with the 4-hour long seminar; mostly stating that the presentation could have been just as effective without the film clips. In addition, senior level professionals felt that the discussion on the relevancy of the topic was much more important than the seminar itself.

The younger and less experienced professionals, paraprofessionals and students believed the films were not only appropriate but they were better able to understand the principle being taught. Furthermore, the leap from theory to personal reflection was difficult for the younger, less experienced professionals; however, once into it, this group was much more involved and spontaneous in the reflection discussion. This same group, while grasping the film clip examples, was not as familiar with the older films used and suggested current films to teach some of the principles.

In conclusion, the model or process presented in this descriptive paper worked well when implemented with students, paraprofessionals, professionals and faculty. The model seems to be efficient across disciplines as well as across professions.

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