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Reflective Ethical Inquiry: Preparing Students for Life

Donna M. Qualters • Tufts University
Melissa McDaniels • Michigan State University
Perrin Cohen • Northeastern University

Abstract

Although universities often teach ethics courses, they do not always teach students how to apply ethical course content to ethical dilemmas they encounter on a day-to-day basis. The Awareness-Investigation-Responding (AIR) model of ethical inquiry bridges this gap by scaffolding the reflective process and empowering students to make more caring, compassionate, ethical choices in their disciplines and in life. AIR can be adapted to any discipline and any learning environment.

During a class assignment to interview a former teacher, Jerry observes his friend making up the dialogue the night before the assignment is due. When Jerry inquires why his friend is doing this, his friend replies that life is too busy and the assignment is only worth 10 points, so no harm is done. While Jerry is uncomfortable with knowing this, he doesn't say anything as he doesn't want to confront his friend. In another instance, Amanda is student teaching and notices teachers and staff routinely taking school supplies home. She is uneasy knowing this but is afraid to talk to her supervisor for fear that it might affect her placement and any future references. These hypothetical situations are based on real occurrences that the authors have encountered as educators. A quick reaction for our students is often to ignore, disengage, or avoid dealing with these situations, leading to increased stress and sometimes costly mistakes.

Higher education institutions typically depend on specific disciplines to provide students with ethical grounding. There are courses in moral philosophy, religion, professional ethics, character education, and values clarification—all of which provide students with important content and critical thinking skills in a classroom environment. But, as in the examples above, this approach is often inadequate to help students face real-life ethical dilemmas that arise in their day-to-day lives. In fact, a study by Peppas and Diskin (2001) found no difference in ethical values between students who had taken an ethics course and those who had not. Although this finding is not surprising, it should be troubling. We all experience similar cases where our students encounter complex and ambiguous ethical challenges and often react uncritically. Their responses emerge from interactions with strong external influences in their lives such as peers, the media, family, or religious traditions.

Concurrently, there is also a misguided reluctance by discipline faculty to discuss ethical challenges in class. Sisola (2005) provides evidence of faculty feeling unqualified to respond to issues or not feeling that the issues are important. We have found in our own work that our colleagues are uncomfortable having these discussions for similar reasons (Cohen, McDaniels, & Qualters, 2005). Faculty members are often torn because they struggle with advocacy and feel that their personal views should be kept out of the course (Hanson, 1996). Other reasons given include: (1) the belief that values are formed in childhood, and changing behavior or beliefs is impossible; (2) the assertion that faculty cannot themselves agree on what is "ethical," and (3) the belief that no one has the "right" to tell anyone else what is ethical or not ethical (Mathieson & Tyler, 2008). Hanson warns that the methodologically neutral teacher can often create the opposite effect by making the material so boring as to not engage students, leaving them with no new tools and forcing them to solve issues through their current uncritical lens.

As educators, we struggle with how to address this delicate area with students. Do we leave our students adrift in dealing with ethical issues? Do we hope they will "do the right thing" when faced with ethical quandaries in our fields and in life? How do we prevent students from becoming desensitized to ethical issues and thus avoid them? If we do take action, how do we address students' perceptions that they have the responsibility to address ethical concerns but not the knowledge, resources, and support to do so? We suggest

faculty incorporate reflective ethical thinking into their course, using the Awareness, Investigation, and Responding (AIR) model of ethical inquiry. This approach encourages students to address authentic ethical issues that exist in the discipline or are encountered in real-world situations within and outside the university context.

AIR: Teaching Awareness (A), Investigation (I), and Responding (R)

As in the examples given, students who experience pressure to succeed often avoid dealing with everyday ethical concerns, particularly gray areas related to cheating, harassment, privacy, and injustice. Although this disengagement with ethical concerns allows students to meet short-term goals and deadlines, it comes with long-term costs that often go unnoticed. Examples include increased mistrust, damage to reputations and careers, inefficient use of time and resources, and increased "mistakes." The AIR model of reflective ethical inquiry (Cohen et al., 2005) is an antidote for this ethical disengagement and for minimizing its costs. The model provides students with three types of reflective ethical activities—**A**wareness, **I**nvestigation, and **R**esponding—that they can learn to incorporate into their everyday lives. When these AIR reflections are put into practice, they keep students ethically curious, empathic, and ethically engaged in an ongoing way. This reflective process empowers an ethical "mindfulness" that sustains trust and goodwill and that maintains students' ethical bearings in the face of daily pressures.

Implementing AIR

The first step in implementing AIR is to prepare students for the type of conversation that will occur. According to Perry (1970), college-age students are often in the duality mode, looking for either a right or wrong answer. The goal of AIR is not to determine the "right" answers but to provide a framework for considering resources and options for making the "right" decisions. AIR prepares students for the richness and diversity of the discussion that often leads to multiple solutions.

In order to effectively implement the AIR model, faculty need to create a learning environment where students are able to access their own visceral and emotional experiences. Students need to resist the urge to immediately "respond" or "fix" ethical situations they encounter. They must embrace ethical inquiry PRIOR to ethical action and respond to ethical situations in compassionate and sensitive ways.

Prior to developing AIR, we repeatedly heard students describe moments in their cooperative education placements and lives where they had a "gut" feeling that something was not quite right. Students often discounted these visceral reactions because they did not yet intellectually understand the situation that prompted this feeling of unease. Implementation of the AIR model requires faculty to support students in engaging in "embodied or somatic learning"

(Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). This approach embraces the idea of the body as a place for learning or source of knowledge in its own right. While this is counter to western approaches to learning that favor the mind as the primary place for learning and source of knowledge, acknowledging the emotional components of learning allows for subject matter content to become more meaningful for students (Dirkx, 2001).

Because this type of learning may be threatening to both students and faculty members, it is important for the instructor to create a safe space in the classroom, characterized by four general principles:

(1) Establish clear ground rules regarding confidentiality and group interactions: Instructors should engage students in defining what makes a safe environment for discussing complex and uncomfortable topics. Faculty can help students to discern what and how to share experiences they find confusing or troubling.

(2) Provide an overview of the characteristics and aims of reflective discussion: Some students have never been given the tools to engage in active listening and reflective response. Instructors can ask students how they hope others would listen and respond. In keeping with the embodied approach, we introduced students to the concepts of active and generative listening. Active listening requires you to reflect back what was heard, while generative listening requires reflecting what you have felt as well as heard as the conversation advances.

(3) Model and heighten awareness of the ground rules: As soon as students observe an instructor interrupting or breaking confidentiality, they will be less inclined to uphold these principles themselves. We have found that posting the guidelines during discussions reminds and reinforces them for everyone.

(4) Serve a facilitative teaching role: Instructors must empower students to think about ethical issues in creative and empowered ways. By acting as a facilitator rather than an authority, the teacher validates student feelings and concerns, challenges them to think more systematically about the issue they are examining, and guides them to critically assess all aspects of possible solutions. The AIR model was specifically designed to guide teachers in this type of practice.

Employing the Pedagogical Tool Kit

A faculty member can draw upon a variety of pedagogical tools designed to cultivate questioning and inquiry and to prevent students from reacting to an ethical situation. We have guided students through the following prompts to help them gain clarity (building upon their "gut" responses) about the dilemma they are facing.

In general, these tools involve asking students to describe an ethical dilemma/concern in-depth. We do this by probing students for a description of the full context of the dilemma, their affective reaction and feeling at the time (and later), and the reactions/feelings of others present. Next, we ask students to create a stakeholder map—identifying who is impacted by this dilemma and which stakeholders are involved. Similar to a concept map, this type of mapping puts those who are directly involved in the situation in the middle, but then continues to probe students to think about who else not directly involved in the situation might be affected by how the student proceeds. For example, in the hypothetical school case mentioned in the opening, families of those who have been taking supplies are added to the map, as is the school principal, as both may be affected if this issue comes to a public forum like the school committee. We follow by asking students what they perceive are the specific underlying ethical issues. Then—and this is the most challenging component—we ask students to reflect on the assumptions/beliefs that trigger their reactions to and feelings about the situation. Raising tacit beliefs is never easy, but we have found through practicing this model that students become more facile at identifying their own belief systems. This progression naturally leads to asking what steps can be taken to investigate these assumptions and beliefs.

The instructor can support the students in continuing to be in a reflective space, moving on to investigate other perspectives, beliefs, and assumptions about the situation. There are many interdisciplinary resources and tools available for investigation. We often direct students to professional guidelines or codes of conduct within the discipline. Although some of these have mandated response protocols, we also encourage students to consult with a variety of legal and policy position papers, scholarly resources such as journals or reports, family members, and spiritual sources, if appropriate, to clarify and refine their thinking.

Once students have investigated an ethical dilemma and are aware of its impact on stakeholders and their own beliefs and assumptions, faculty members can model how AIR can prepare them for practical action. Too often, students only identify two options: non-response or formally reporting incidents within a bureaucratic structure. Although these are two equally valid responses, reflective learning occurs when students and faculty are aware that a much wider variety of responses are possible and that practical action can take many forms. We call this identifying the "third" option, including self-care, sharing and conversing with a trusted family member or peers, learning more about an issue, re-evaluating career plans, removing oneself from a situation, or reporting an incident.

Applying AIR

The following exemplifies how the three reflective elements have been incorporated into a course for psychology and behavioral neuroscience majors, *Ethics and Psychology: Maintaining Ethical Bearings* (Cohen, 2013), offered in the Psychology Department at Northeastern University.

Reflective Awareness

Teaching Example: The instructor introduces reflective ethical awareness by telling the class: "For the next class, identify one or two ethical concerns/issues related to research, teaching, or another professional activity. It should be something that is of particular interest to you and that you are uncertain or unclear how to address. The issue(s) should be something that is fairly specific and has personal meaning. As part of this written exercise, include a brief description of a possible scenario of the conditions under which you are likely to experience such a concern; bodily sensations, assumptions, thoughts and feelings that are likely to arise in that moment; and the possible short- and long-term impact of the experience on you and others. During our next class, everyone will have a chance to reflectively discuss their issue(s) so we can use them as a starting point for reflectively understanding and responding to ethical concerns that you experience on and off campus."

Teaching Guideposts: Instructors help students to agree on ground rules that support reflective ethical awareness and discussion. This includes "active and generative listening" mentioned above, respect for confidentiality, and use of "I" statements. For example, instead of students saying "your example is biased" to a classmate, a student would say "I feel uncomfortable with your example and wonder if we can explore it more." Instructors also help students to acknowledge everyday ethical uncertainties and confusions in their lives by pausing and reflectively "befriending" concerns. In this way, students learn to step back and identify, accept, talk about, and rest with the concern before judging oneself or others or doing anything about it (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 • Group Norms that Support Reflective Thinking.

- Maintaining confidentiality
- Open-hearted, generative listening
- Openness to learning
- Asking questions
- Supporting others to clarify and refine ethical thinking
- Non-judgmental, respective attitude
- Agreeing to disagree

Reflective Investigation

Teaching Example: Habermas's (1984) three "domains of knowledge" are used as a framework for helping students empathically explore what is knowable about a particular issue in technical (e.g., scientific and analytic approaches/information), social (e.g., social/cultural values, spiritual/religious teachings), and emancipatory ways (self-understanding, including personal biases and aspirations). Consider, for example, the hypothetical situation of witnessing cheating which was presented at the beginning of the paper. A student exploring what to do would be encouraged to: (a) look at the university or class codes of conduct, student handbooks, and research on the consequences of cheating; (b) have discussions with trustworthy sources such as family or clergy, or consult

academic pieces on society values around cheating; and (c) examine their own assumptions and beliefs about the role of cheating in education. Students culminate their investigations with a scholarly research paper that concludes with their "best" ethical thinking at that time.

Teaching Guideposts: Students reflect on what is knowable about their issue and what would allow them to empathically explore it in an interdisciplinary way. They use tools and resources to help explore their concern from different angles; they do so in a way that cultivates trust and goodwill and honors their individual strengths and interests.

Reflective Responding
Teaching Example: Students are asked to use their "best ethical thinking at this time" to develop a detailed, skillful response to their ethical concern (e.g., social networking, social action plan, a practical alternative, artistic communication, self-care). They are also asked to describe how that response evolved from their reflective investigation, why they think it is a good first step in addressing the issue, and how the response might be used in a practical way.

Teaching Guideposts: Students consider how their "best ethical thinking at the time" might be converted into a skillful action that is as harmless, honest, fair, and respectful as possible. Given the context, they reflect on possible responses and how they draw upon personal strengths and interests (e.g., creative, social, analytical, spiritual). Students are reminded that self-care (e.g., stress reduction, yoga, meditation, and talking with friends) is also a legitimate response.

Faculty can apply AIR to provide students experience in analyzing authentic ethical issues and dilemmas within a discipline. For example, in teacher education we created cases that ranged in seriousness from teacher gossip to potential child abuse. In engineering, faculty created situations that had students grapple with the ethics of creating products that could potentially cause hearing damage or might not meet code specifications. Using the AIR tool kit, faculty walked students through the case, asking the reflective questions listed above and creating a stakeholder map. For the investigation or "I" component, students were asked to find as many sources as possible to assist the potential teacher or engineer in making the decision. The next day the class discussed what they found and then worked together to generate as many possible ways to handle the situation that reflected their beliefs, respected those involved, and provided a caring, compassionate response. Additionally, AIR has been used successfully by discipline faculty in a hybrid model class. In this format, students were able to engage collaboratively in reflective ethical thinking while still in the field (Cohen, 2010).

Conclusion
While discipline faculty are not ethicists, they do have the pedagogical tools necessary to guide students in translating the theories and practices of ethics courses to real-life situations. Awareness, Investigation, and Response (AIR) is a practical and simple three-step process that provides students with a lifelong tool and framework to think through challenging ethical dilemmas. AIR is not about ethics but is about ethical inquiry, and it serves as a means to transfer ethical knowledge from course work, family, and experience to life situations. By having students think deeply about authentic or simulated situations, faculty provide a concrete method for students to respond to their "gut" feelings of unease and to prevent them from ethical disengagement or a quick ethical fix, especially when they encounter situations directly related to the discipline. Helping students to understand the ethical challenge they face (Awareness), demonstrate the many resources available to process the dilemma (Investigation), and review the pros and cons of the possible outcome give students the ability to make the most caring and compassionate choices of the difficult situations they will face in their careers and in life.

Donna Qualters is Associate Professor and Director of the Center for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching at Tufts University; Melissa McDaniels is Assistant Dean, The Graduate School, and Director, Teaching Assistant Programs, at Michigan State University; and Perrin Cohen is Associate Professor of Psychology and founder and past director of the Northeastern University Ethics Education Center (NUCASE). They began working together on ethical inquiry while at Northeastern University and as members of NUCASE when the issues discussed in the paper were arising with more frequency for students on their cooperative education placements. The model received its name of AIR when a student in one of the first cohorts using this reflective inquiry tool told us that, after using this model to understand issues in his workplace, he felt like he had "come up for air."

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