"Did I do Good?": The Teaching and Learning of Ethics

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We often assume that students will simply understand specific ethical requirements as they progress, but in reality this does not happen. Students need instruction in ethics. With adherence to the Tri-Council's ethics policy now mandatory for university research with human participants, understanding of ethics is a necessity. We need students to be empowered to understand and appreciate ethics. This article explains an interactive discussion model, based on teaching experience. Students are assigned readings, with guiding questions, and come to class for a discussion of ethical issues and principles. Details and examples of discussions are given. More must be done to help students develop true understanding of ethics and their application, and engagement in discussion is a crucial tool to achieve this end.

> "Virtue being of two kinds, intellectual and moral, intellectual virtue derives both its origin and its growth mainly from teaching (wherefore it requires experience and time), while moral virtue is the fruit of habit" (Aristotle, 350 BC/1963, p.28).

Ethical principles are important in all aspects of life; from day-to-day interactions with others to discipline-specific ethics codes. In research, the government of Canada now requires all institutions with government funding, such as universities, to have a formal Research Ethics Board (REB), which evaluates proposed research. It is thus necessary to adhere to ethical standards even if only from the purely practical perspective of having research approved and funded. The Canadian government's main grant funding bodies, the former Medical Research Council (MRC), now the Canadian Institutes for Health Research (CIHR), the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC), and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) came together as the "Tri-council" to produce an over-arching policy statement on research ethics, the policy on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (CIHR, NSERC & SSHRC, 2014). This policy must be followed for any research funded by grants from any of the three agencies. Not only faculty members and research scientists, but also students need to follow these guidelines and standards. Currently in Canada student research projects must also be evaluated, either by the full REB itself or by a Student Research Ethics Review Panel (SRERP).

With so much attention now being given to ethical principles in research and in professional practice we need to understand how such ethical principles are acquired. We often assume that students will simply come to understand specific requirements as they progress through university, but in reality such "learning by 'osmosis'" (Bicknell, 1985, p. 25) just does not happen. Students need instruction in ethics, particularly as it relates to codes and requirements. With adherence to the Tri-Council code of ethics now mandatory for any university research with human participants, understanding of ethical principles is no longer something that would be good to have but is now a necessity (The Expert Panel on Research Integrity, 2010). Interestingly, as Woody (2008) has noted, our ethics codes have no direct requirements for teaching

of ethics. Even in many universities there is a lack of instruction in ethics. Whilst some instruction regarding ethics occurs, there are few courses in ethics per se, and still fewer specifically dealing with research ethics. It seems that ethics are given a cursory treatment in a lecture or two near the beginning of some courses, but little more. Students then are left with little understanding of real ethical principles and the need for ethical regulations, and often question the relevance of the REB or SRERP. We need students to be empowered to understand and to appreciate ethics, both in the abstract and the specific required principles.

There is thus a need for understanding of ethics and ethical principles, but often any discussion of ethics relating to students focuses more on issues of student misconduct, such as plagiarism by students (Devlin & Gray, 2007; Stephens, Young, & Calabrese, 2007). What is lacking is teaching with the aim to inculcate understanding of ethical principles and the need for such principles. Sierra and Hyman (2008) propose that "instructors (and university administrators) can help to develop their students' sensitivity to ethical dilemmas" (p. 61). Students need to learn about ethical behaviour and why issues such as falsification or fabrication of data are unethical – not only for their undergraduate work but also because our students are the population from which future scientists and clinicians arise. Students need to fully appreciate why a behaviour is considered unethical before they themselves conduct research and submit papers for publication, or engage in professional practice in areas such as psychology or medicine.

As noted above, we cannot assume that students will simply absorb ethical principles as they pass through their undergraduate years – as many have noted, there is need for explicit training in ethical practices (e.g., Bicknell, 1985; Woody, 2008). Teaching of ethics must be practiced, and in such a way as to engender ethical thinking and true adoption of ethical principles by the student. I would argue that an interactive approach, encouraging critical thinking and depth of understanding is crucial. One way in which to achieve the necessary understanding is to discuss ethical dilemmas, using these to illustrate application of ethical principles and relevant codes of conduct. The discussion and engagement model of application of ethics to situations aids student understanding of both ethical principles and codes of ethics.

This paper explains one method of engaging students in a discussion of ethics, previously offered as a workshop at the 2016 annual meeting of the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE). Although there was no formal feedback, attendees were engaged in the workshop and appreciated the insights gained.

Description of Method

Teaching of ethics can be in a lecture-based format, but discussion of situations and application of principles leads to fuller engagement and deeper understanding by students (Plante, 1998).

Learning Objectives

As outcomes of the discussions, participants should be able to: describe concepts underlying ethics and relate these to application; understand the necessity for concepts of ethics and codes of conduct for practice; discuss their own perspective of ethics; describe the benefits of an active learning approach to ethics; and develop their own abilities to discuss ethics with others.

Discussion Structure

After a brief introduction to the issue(s), students are divided into small groups (four or five persons) for discussion. Participants then engage in discussion of a situation and applicable ethical principles, in an interactive classroom discussion (approximately 20 minutes). Students then engage again as whole group for further discussion, when ideas and comments from small groups are collated, and further discussion ensues (10 to 15 minutes).

Participant engagement is encouraged in two ways. First, in a small group discussion; this "break

out" into smaller groups allows students to feel more comfortable for initial exploration of concepts. Second, by a larger, whole-room discussion when information from the small groups is shared with all present.

Being asked to speak in front of an entire class can be intimidating for students, and having to explain an ethical principle or justify a position may be difficult if done "cold". With the small group/whole group structure students have time to first consider concepts and to "try out" ideas in a more comfortable atmosphere, before explaining to the whole room.

In my courses, students would be given readings in advance – anything from excerpts from classic works such as Aristotle's "Ethics" to a recent journal article on ethics in clinical practice – with some guiding questions. Students come to class bringing their copies of the readings and answers to the set questions, prepared to engage in discussion. Some additional questions are set at the class discussion, particularly for lower-level students (see examples, below). These questions are usually more exploratory in nature: to foster discussion of situations, or of themes with no real "right" or "wrong" answer. The discussion itself follows the format outlined above. Students are free to explore ethical concepts and issues in their discussions, the only rule being that we as a class expect an atmosphere of respect. As with the saying attributed to Voltaire: "I may disagree entirely with what you are saying, but I will defend to the death your right to say it". Thus, a student is free to hold an unpopular opinion and may not be called "stupid" (for example) for doing so, but will be expected to explain and to defend their position rationally, as will all students in the discussion.

At the end of the discussion, students will have explored (an) ethical principle(s) in the abstract, considered their own held ethical principles, and been exposed to other interpretations/understandings of the principle(s) in question.

Examples

From practical experience in the classroom, this discussion format appears to work well for students in a variety of courses and at different levels of their university career. For lower-level courses one would set less difficult (and, frankly, shorter) pieces for reading, and with appropriate level of questions. Students in earlier years of their degree progression

Readings
Lanphier, E., Urnov, F., Haeker, S. E., Werner, M., & Smolenski, J. (2015). Don't edit the human germ line. *Nature, 519*, 410-411. LePage, M. (2015). Editing human embryos is genetics' new battleground. *NewScientist,* 16 March, 2015, n.p. Retrieved from https//newscientist.com/article/dn27166-editing-human-embryos
Instructions
1. Briefly outline each of the two articles. 2. What are, in your opinion: (i) the main benefits and (ii) the major negative issues arising, with gene editing of embryos?
Additional Questions – Given in Class
Assuming that gene therapy and gene editing become readily available: What are the ethical and practical issues arising from allowing parents to "design" their children?

Figure 1

An example discussion from the Introduction to Child Development class

will require more support and guidance than those in upper years, but all are expected to think for themselves. To illustrate, I provide here two examples, one from a second-year course (Figure 1) and one from a course taken by third and fourth year students (Figure 2).

Introduction to child development (primarily second-year students)

General instructions include asking students for each article to discuss the answers to a set of questions in a few lines to a paragraph each, noting that this is not meant to be an essay. Students are directed to use their own words as much as possible. In addition, students are directed to leave space between each of their typed answers in which to write their commentary from the discussion. Students are directed to take notes during the discussion regarding the points raised which they had not previously considered, the different ideas proposed, and additional information provided from the discussion. Student groups are asked to indicate when all members agree on the main points; i.e., that they have no new insights to note. Students are required to also write down any additional information from the overall class discussion, when information from the small groups is collated (see figure 1).

Ethics in psychology (third and fourth year students)

In the first discussion for this class students examine the different ethics codes. The subsequent four discussions require students to read their course materials and/or particular article(s) and write a paper answering the set question(s) (see figure 2). The overall length of each paper should be at least 650 words, not including the cover page/title and any references. As with the second-year class, students are told to use their own wording where possible and to clearly denote and properly reference any quotations.

Readings

Read the relevant information in the coursepack; particularly the articles by Bostrom and Sandberg (2009) and Chatterjee (2007).

Bostrom, N. & Sandberg, A. (2009). Cognitive enhancement: Methods, ethics, regulatory challenges. *Science and Engineering Ethics, 15*, 311-341.

Chatterjee, A. (2007). Cosmetic neurology and cosmetic surgery: Parallels, predictions, and challenges. *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics, 16*, 129-137.

N.B. These are not necessarily the sole references; you may find that there is useful information on this issue in the CPA and APA codes.

Questions

1. Summarize the pro/con arguments in this situation and discuss which ethical issues arise.

2. What ethical principles (generally and from the ethics codes) most apply and why?

Figure 2

An example discussion from the Ethics in Psychology Course

Students are directed to come to the discussion classes prepared to discuss the set questions and related issues. During the discussion class students are advised to make notes of the main points, different ideas proposed, and other ideas raised during the discussion. Students append these notes to the typescript of their answers.

The above examples not only show the preparation for the discussions, but also how the level of difficulty and "scaffolding" given change, both with the level of course and specificity of the course. Both of these discussion examples relate to issues of genetic modification of humans (not all discussions are analogous, these two were chosen for comparative purposes), but the second-year students read shorter, simpler articles and engage in a more "general" level discussion.

Conclusions

An understanding of ethics and practice of ethical behaviour are expected of students, researchers, and in professional practice, and formal ethics codes exist outlining expectations of behaviour. Students, however, receive little direct instruction in ethical principles. This lack has been noted for some time (e.g., Sierra and Hyman, 2008), and more must be done to increase not just factual knowledge but also development of true understanding in this area. This development must be a more conscious aspect of courses at our universities, and engaged, guided, discussions are an important way of developing sensitivity to, and understanding of, ethics and ethical principles – understanding which students can then take beyond the university to their everyday lives and into their future careers. Inclusion of active discussion of ethics in multiple courses and at all levels of the university will inculcate what I like to call an "ethos of ethics" in our students.

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Biography

Anne Barnfield, PhD., is an Associate Professor of Psychology at Brescia University College, affiliated with Western University. She teaches a variety of courses, including Introduction to Child Development, Psychology Applied to Sport, Research Methods, and Ethics in Psychology. Her research interests include: Behavioural and Cognitive effects of sport participation with a focus on child/youth participation; Effectiveness of Therapeutic Riding (TR) for children with special needs especially cognitive-behavioural aspects; and Ethics in Psychology – the need for teaching of ethics in Psychology and the impact of legislation (primarily governmental, but also via professional organizations) on ethical practice.