Enhancing the Moral Development of the Community College Student

Adjunct Faculty Symposium 2018

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Students at a Crossroads...

• While many community college graduates transfer to a four-year institution, a large number* also proceed directly to the workforce. Thus, the community college may provide the first, and possibly only, opportunity to address the critical issues surrounding ethical reasoning and moral development.

• *27% of survey participants were destined immediately for the workforce.
The Impact of Our Efforts

• In 2013-2014, 1132 community colleges in the United States served over 12.4 million students, representing a full 46% of all U.S. undergraduate students (“American Association,” 2015). And over one million associate degrees were conferred upon students in academic year 2013-2014.
Can Ethics Be Taught?

Traditional ethics curricula include such topics as:

• The evolution and classification of ethics theories
• Normative versus positive ethics
• Ethical and cultural relativism

The goal of moral development is not to modify an individual’s perspective on several predetermined topics, but to encourage a broader moral outlook which takes into consideration new criteria for decision-making which had been previously overlooked (Duska & Whelan, 1975).
Summary Findings of a Meta-analytic Investigation of Business Ethics Instruction

The over-arching conclusion of the meta-analysis is that current ethics instruction is at most nominally effective in improving the ethical awareness, understanding judgment or conduct of college students.

However, the authors do affirm that coursework focusing on the moral reasoning of participants exhibits the greatest gains in ethical capabilities.

The issue, then is not that ethics instruction cannot work, but rather, that the means of instruction must be refined and enhanced.
Theoretical Construct – Cognitive Moral Development and the Defining Issues Test

- Lawrence Kohlberg: Individuals form ethical judgments dependent upon rational and deliberate thought processes. Through time and experience, each progresses through a series of six sequential steps.

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Rest’s Defining Issues Test Two (DIT2) measures this level of development by means of objective survey responses to five moral dilemmas.
Research Design

• A cross-sectional study was initiated
• A multi-method approach encompassing an objective survey as well as focus group interviews was applied
  • Quantitative survey responses provide the ‘what’ of the students’ level of moral reasoning
  • Qualitative group interviews provide insight into the ‘why’ of the student’s reasoning and behavior
  • Triangulation of the two methods serves to corroborate or call into question each result set.
Qualitative Research Methodology

- 8 focus groups of 8 to 12 participants
- Participants selected from students at Cuyahoga Community College enrolled in an introductory business course and at least 18 years old
- Wide scope of demographic traits
- Discussion guide crafted to address Rest’s moral dilemmas
- Proceedings videotaped and transcribed to facilitate theme and content analysis
- Content analysis primarily addresses Rest’s Stage 23, N4 and P-score references as they relate to Kohlberg levels and stages
Quantitative Research Methodology

• Causal-comparative research was applied to identify the impact of independent variables such as age, gender and prior coursework to the dependent variable of moral development.

• The convenience sample consisted of 550 community college students enrolled in an introductory business class and culled from a national base.

• Initial data tabulation was conducted by the Center for the Study of Ethical Development at the University of Alabama (the Center). Remaining calculations in the form of distribution normality tests, standard deviations, t-tests and ANOVA were calculated by the researcher.
The Instrument: Introducing the DIT2

• The updated DIT2 Defining Issues Test developed by James Rest is a quantitative alternative to Kohlberg’s moral judgment interview.

• The instrument presents twelve considerations for each of five moral dilemmas, which students rank in terms of their impact on their decision-making.

• Rest’s architecture includes eight measurement indices, four of which are derived from Kohlberg’s design:
  • Stage 23 - the proportion of items selected that represent Kohlberg’s Stage 2 (personal interest) and Stage 3 (maintenance of relationships and approval).
  • Stage 4P - the proportion of items selected reflecting Kohlberg’s Stage 4 (maintenance of the legal system, prescribed roles, and formal organizational structures).
  • P-score - the proportion of items selected that represent Kohlberg’s Stage 5 (appealing to majority while maintaining minority rights) and Stage 6 (appealing to intuitive moral principles or ideals). These stages form Kohlberg’s Level 3, postconventional level.
  • N2 Score - represents the degree to which postconventional items are prioritized plus the degree to which personal interest items receive lower ratings than the postconventional items

• The instrument has been shown to be highly reliable and valid both by virtue of repeated use in academic settings and via measurements such as Chronbach’s alpha and a six-prong reliability test.
Where do Our Students Stand?

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Closely following: Rest’s “Personal Interest” Schema

Predominant: Rest’s “Maintaining Norms” Schema
Community College Students and the Maintaining Norms Schema

In interpretation, the scores indicate that a large share of the sample, exhibiting characteristics consistent with the Maintaining Norms schema, approaches ethical issues with a view to the following considerations:

- the need to rely upon pre-established norms for ethical decision-making, thus limiting the need to consider and interpret each ethical issue that presents itself
- the propensity to obey authority with little questioning, largely out of respect for the existing social system
- the tendency to consider first and foremost the rules and regulations of institutions and societal groupings when determining the morality of modes of behavior
- the expectation that others will obey the law whether or not doing so has an equivalent benefit to them.
Community College Students and the Personal Interest Schema

These students approach ethical judgment with the following elements in mind:

• the willingness to obey rules if doing so is in one’s best interests
• the assumption that what is right will also be reflective of a mutual, beneficial exchange
• the desire to be considered a good person within one’s immediate circle
• the retention and safeguarding of mutually beneficial relationships
• an interest in the maintenance of law and authority inasmuch as they contribute to the good behavior of all

Because these schemas reflect two different stages of Kohlberg’s continuum, they do illustrate a progression from pure self-interest and avoidance of punishment to a modicum of consideration for others.
### How Do We Assist Students in Moving Forward on the Continuum?

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- Avoid lecture, encourage interactive discussion of moral dilemmas
- Alignment of teaching methods and course content to this cadre's stages of moral development (Kohlberg Stages 2-4; Rest Schemas Stage 23 and P4).
- Development of customized dilemmas and exercises for students at different stages of moral development.
- Encouragement of social interaction with peers of different moral development stages; “leveraging individual and group identity.”
- Linkage of ethical decision-making to the enhancement of critical thinking skills.
- Creation of course outcomes that consolidate these requirements.
Ethical Issues Abound in Every Discipline

English
Jean Valjean was in violation of the law. Was Inspector Javert wrong in attempting to bring him to justice?

Healthcare
If you are able to treat only one of two patients in critical need of care, how do you determine which patient to assist?

Religion
The Ten Commandments specifically forbid killing. How can war be justified by Christians and Jews?

Physics
If Albert Einstein was aware of the potential destructive capabilities associated with his theory, “Energy = Mass * the Velocity of Light^2,” should he have revealed his research to the world?

Math
In situations in which there is no clear answer or solution based on an ethical code, how can mathematics be applied to determine the greatest good?

Education
One of your students has begun your class without the requisite background or skillset to succeed. Nevertheless, the student, through hard work and considerable effort, has come within 2 points of passing your class. Do you ignore the two points and pass the student, although doing so may put them in a position to do poorly in the next level course?
Colleague Activity: Discipline-Specific Ethics Topics

• Please gather together in groups of three.
• Do seek out colleagues who work in your same or a similar discipline
• Together, develop discussion topics regarding ethics and your particular teaching discipline that can be used in class discussions to further students’ moral development.
• Share with all.
• Engage and Enjoy!!
Colleague Activity: Moral Dilemma Discussion and Assessment

• Please gather together in groups of four.
• Do seek out colleagues who are new to you and/or who work in different disciplines
• Read the moral dilemma presented and discuss the considerations provided with regard to how you would resolve the dilemma.
• Complete the assessment sheet for the dilemma.
• Engage and Enjoy!!