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What Students Need to Learn Pages 34-39

Ethics: From Thought to Action

Robert J. Sternberg

Teaching students the steps of ethical reasoning and action is just as important as teaching them how to pass tests.

Many of the problems facing us in schools and in the world at large are not caused by lack of knowledge. As I write, there are ongoing investigations into the activities of a number of banks and rating agencies that led up to the mortgage crisis. These institutions are run by smart and knowledgeable people. The question is not whether the people had sufficient knowledge; it's whether they used that knowledge ethically. Similarly, in some of the major corporate scandals in the United States—Enron, WorldCom, Arthur Andersen, Tyco, and more—the problem in every case was not ignorance, but ethics.

Can we as educators justify producing smart and knowledgeable students who have not learned to think and act ethically? Is the teaching of ethics someone else's job? I believe it's our responsibility. But because translating ethics knowledge into ethical behavior is much harder than it appears, it's not enough to teach students a simple set of rules. Rather, we need to teach them how to reason about ethical situations and then follow their reasoning with action.

The Gap Between Theory and Action: An Example

"I am very proud of myself," I told the 17 undergraduate students in a seminar I was teaching on leadership. I had just returned from a consulting trip on ethical leadership, I told them, and felt that I had been paid less than I deserved. I felt bad that I had agreed to so little compensation. But when filling out the reimbursement forms, I discovered that I could actually get reimbursed twice. The first reimbursement would come from the organization that had invited me, which required me merely to fill out a form listing my expenses. The second reimbursement would come from my university, which required me to submit the receipts from the trip. I explained to the class that I had worked really hard on the trip, so I was pleased that by getting reimbursed twice I could justify to myself the amount of work I had done.

I waited for the firestorm. Would the class, which had already studied leadership for several months, rise up in a mass protest against what I had supposedly done? Or would only a few brave souls raise their hands and roundly criticize me for this patently unethical behavior?

I waited, and waited, and waited. Nothing happened. I then decided to move on to the main topic of the day's lesson. All the time I was speaking, I expected some of the students to raise their hands and demand to return to the topic of my double reimbursement. It didn't happen.

Finally, I flat-out asked the class whether any of them thought there was something off-the-mark with my strategy to obtain double reimbursement. If so, I asked, why had no one challenged me? I figured that, to a person, they would be embarrassed. Quite a few of them were. Others said they had assumed I was kidding. Still others thought that because I was the teacher, I must have had a good reason for whatever I did. What shocked me, though, was that some of the students maintained that I was entitled to receive the money—if I could get away with it, more power to me!

The students in my course had been studying leadership for several months. They had read about and discussed ethics in leadership, heard about ethics in leadership from a variety of real-world leaders—and then, in at least some cases, totally failed to recognize unethical behavior when it stared them in the face.

Why is it so hard to translate theories of ethics into practice, even after one has studied ethical leadership extensively?

A Model for Ethical Behavior

The behavior of bystanders in situations demanding ethical action sheds light on this question. Bibb Latané and John Darley (1970) opened up a new field of research on bystander intervention. They showed that, contrary to expectations, bystanders intervene when someone is in trouble only in limited circumstances. For example, if they think that someone else might intervene, the bystanders tend to stay out of the situation. Drawing on their theory of bystander intervention, I propose here a model for ethical behavior that applies to a variety of ethical problems.

The basic premise of the model is that the ethical behavior we learn from our parents, from school, and from our religious training is much harder to enact than one would expect. To act ethically, individuals must go through a series of steps. Unless all these steps are completed, people are not likely to behave in an ethical way, regardless of their intelligence or the amount of ethics training they have received (Sternberg, 2009). Here we'll look at how these steps apply to my leadership students' reaction to the double reimbursement story, as well as how the steps would apply to a situation elementary and secondary students are more likely to encounter—observing a fellow student being bullied.

Step 1. Recognize that there is an event to which to react.

For some of my students, the story of my double reimbursement may have been a nonevent. The students were sitting in a class on leadership; I was an authority figure simply telling them about something I had done. They had no reason to expect that my story would require any particular reaction, except, perhaps, taking notes.

Similarly, suppose a student sees what appears to be a bully accosting another student. Can the observer be sure that the student is really being bullied? Often, it's not clear what's going on, making it easy to simply ignore the situation.

Step 2. Define the event as having an ethical dimension.

In discussion, it became clear that some students in my leadership class saw the problem not as ethical but as utilitarian: I had worked hard, had been underpaid, and had come up with a clever way to attain adequate compensation for my hard work.

In the bullying situation, suppose the student decides that the kid he sees is really being bullied. The student may still be unsure whether this is an ethical situation. Isn't that just the way the bully is? It's annoying; it may even be frightening. But life is full of such situations; how can we decide whether they are "ethical" problems?

Sometimes it's hard to spot the ethical aspect of a situation because powerful forces are trying to hide it. In 2008, for example, the Chinese government apparently attempted to manipulate media to downplay the ethical dimension of a disaster. In May of that year, an earthquake in Sichuan province killed an estimated 10,000 schoolchildren. Schools for children of well-connected party leaders, as well as government buildings, withstood the earthquake with no problem. In contrast, schools housing poor children crumbled to dust because these schools had been built in ways that could only poorly withstand an earthquake. Presumably, the money that was supposed to have supported better construction went to line the pockets of party functionaries. The Chinese government did what it could to suppress these basic facts (Atlas, 2008).

Step 3. Decide that the ethical dimension is significant.

Some of my leadership students may have felt that my supposed double reimbursement was sketchy or dubious, but not significant enough to create a fuss over. Perhaps they themselves had sometimes taken what was not theirs—something small like a newspaper or even money they found on the ground—and they viewed what I was doing as no more serious.

Similarly, it is not always clear whether a bullying scenario is significant. How bad does bullying have to be before one decides to report it? At what point does behavior go over the line past which one should do something? Surely the many students who witnessed and ignored the bullying of Phoebe Prince, a student

in South Hadley, Massachusetts, who committed suicide, did not foresee the serious consequences.

Step 4. Take personal responsibility for generating an ethical solution.

My students may have felt that they had no responsibility, or even right, to tell a teacher how to act. From their point of view, it was my responsibility to determine the ethical dimensions of the situation.

If a student sees another student being bullied, is it his or her responsibility to do anything about it? Or might he or she assume that other students should intervene, or that intervention is an adult's role?

In the 1970 Latané and Darley work, the more bystanders there were, the less likely anyone was to take action to intervene. Why? Because everyone figured that if something were really wrong, someone else witnessing the event would take responsibility. Thus, you are better off having a breakdown on a lonely country road than on a busy highway, because a driver passing by on the country road may feel that he or she is your only hope.

Step 5. Figure out what abstract ethical rule(s) might apply to the problem.

Perhaps some of my leadership students recognized the problem I created for them as an ethical one, but were unsure what constituted unethical behavior in this unfamiliar situation. Perhaps they had never had to figure out reimbursements. Even if they had, they might wonder whether there are some circumstances in which it is ethical to be dually reimbursed. Maybe the school supplements outside reimbursements, as it sometimes does fellowships. Or maybe I had meant to say that I had some expenses paid by the university and others by the sponsoring organization, and I had simply misspoken.

In the case of the bully, students may have trouble figuring out what ethical rule applies. We have a responsibility not to harm others; do we also have a responsibility to prevent harm to others? What is the rule that says we should intervene?

Step 6. Decide how these abstract ethical rules apply to the problem so that they suggest a concrete solution.

Perhaps my leadership students knew ethical rules that were relevant to the double reimbursement scenario but did not see how to apply them. For example, suppose they knew the rule that one should not expect something for nothing. Well, I did something, so I was only trying to get something back that adequately reflected my work. In the end, they may have had trouble translating abstract principles into concrete behavior.

In the case of the bully, a student may believe it's wrong to allow one person to bully another. But what should he or she do in the actual situation? Confront the bully? Ask the victim to walk away? Step between the bully and the victim? Run to get a teacher? There are many ways to try to stop a bullying situation, and it's often unclear at a given moment which strategy is best.

Step 7. Prepare for possible repercussions of having acted in what one considers an ethical manner.

Perhaps students in my leadership class saw me as grossly unethical but did not want to risk challenging me openly and thereby potentially lowering their grade.

Someone witnessing bullying also needs to prepare: A student who tells on a bully places him- or herself at risk. The teller may be exposed to bullying, harassment, or shunning—or he or she may simply fear looking foolish.

Step 8. Enact the ethical solution.

Carrying out a solution is a key part of behaving ethically—and yet often the hardest to do. You sit in a classroom and hear your teacher brag about what you perhaps consider to be unethical behavior. You look around you. No one else is saying anything. As far as you can tell, no one else is even fazed. Perhaps you are simply out of line.

In the bullying situation, a student may realize what he or she should do but then fail to do it. Maybe he or she is rushing to a class or is afraid or decides, as in Step 7, that the possible reprisals are not worth it. So

nothing happens.

Lost in Translation

What is the difference between those who behave ethically and those do not? Howard Gardner (1999) has wrestled with the question of whether there is some kind of existential, or even spiritual, intelligence that guides people through challenging life dilemmas. Robert Coles (1998) is one of many who have argued that a moral intelligence, which differs from individual to individual, exists in children as well as adults. Lawrence Kohlberg (1984) believed there are stages of moral reasoning, and that as children grow older, they advance through these stages— some faster and further than others.

My perspective is different. Ethical prowess is not an inherent characteristic, but something we can develop in virtually all children (assuming they are not psychopathic). Although people may differ in their moral reasoning and development, we can teach children as well as adults to enhance their ethical reasoning and behavior by teaching them about the challenges of thinking and acting ethically. They may not consciously go through all the steps leading to ethical behavior in real-life decision making, but understanding the process will enable them to translate ethical knowledge into ethical action.

This kind of translation is not automatic. In our work on practical intelligence, my colleagues and I found only a modest correlation between the academic, abstract aspects of intelligence and its more practical, concrete aspects (Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2000). People may have skills that shine brightly in a classroom but that they are unable to translate into real-world, consequential behavior. For example, someone may pass a written drivers' test with flying colors, but not be able to drive. Or someone may get an *A* in a French class, but be unable to speak French to passersby in Paris. Translation of abstract skills into concrete ones is difficult, and people may know a lot of ethical rules that they are unable to translate into their everyday lives.

Teaching for Ethical Reasoning and Action

Five fundamental principles can guide educators in teaching ethical reasoning in the context of the school curriculum.

Infused instruction. The answer to teaching for ethical reasoning is not a separate ethics course. Such a course risks students isolating their knowledge about ethics from their knowledge about subject matter and their everyday lives, thus ending up with inert knowledge that they never use.

Active instruction. Students learn more from being actively involved in ethical decision making than from reading about others making ethical decisions. The students need to go through the steps rather than merely read or hear about these steps.

Concrete case examples. Students need to see the principles embodied in concrete case examples, not merely learn the principles by rote.

Self-application. Students need to see how to apply the principles to problems in their own lives and not just the lives of others.

Critical conversations. The best way to teach ethical reasoning is in the context of critical classroom conversations, not merely by asking students to think things through individually. Such conversations can be followed up by assigning students to write papers or give oral reports that show how they have internalized what they learned.

Here are a few examples of critical conversations about situations that might come up in various curriculum areas. (For more, see "Questions for Critical Conversations on Ethics," p. 37) Teachers guide the conversations by helping students through the steps of the model of ethical reasoning: Is there a situation here that needs to be addressed? Is it an ethical situation? Is it important enough to matter? Should one take personal responsibility for it? And so on. The goal is to have students formulate both the problem and their solutions. If students come up with questionable solutions, it is better if other students, rather than the teacher, identify the solutions as unethical.

English

In *King Lear*, Regan and Goneril falsely flatter their father, but Cordelia tells Lear the truth. As a result, Cordelia is disinherited whereas Regan and Goneril inherit and divide his realm. Is it ever ethical to flatter someone falsely? If so, when? If not, why not? In an example closer to home, suppose that a good friend of yours has spent a great deal of time and effort improving her appearance (for example, by changing her hairstyle or dressing differently) but, in your opinion, has utterly failed to accomplish her goal. If she asks your opinion, what should you say?

Social Studies/Government

Politicians who are running for office frequently find themselves in ethically sensitive situations. For example, to keep the support of major backers, they may be under pressure to vote in a way that does not seem right. Suppose you are running for student office. A popular and influential classmate offers to support you publicly in exchange for your support in an election for an office for which he is running. You need the classmate's support, but you don't think he would do a good job in the office if elected. What should you do? Why?

Science

You're doing an experiment with a friend in which you are comparing the effects of two different soil samples on plant growth. You have to compare the heights of plants grown from identical seeds in the two different soil samples, one dark and one light. Your job was to do the plantings; your friend's job was to measure the heights of the plants. Your friend reported that the dark soil resulted in taller plants, but after you write up the results and hand in your paper, you notice that the data don't appear to be right. You check your friend's work and find that his measurements were wrong—in fact, there is no evidence that the dark soil produced taller plants. Further, you realize that his errors were not likely to have been merely careless because they were so large. What should you do? Why?

Mathematics

You are taking a math quiz. You studied hard for it, but you are finding it to be particularly difficult. Fortunately, there are only three problems. You're sitting next to the best student in the class, so you hope that her skill will rub off on you. You've just finished answering the last problem, which has taken a full page of calculations. You're not confident that you got the right answer. As you get ready to get up and hand in the quiz, you feel a tap on your shoulder. You look up and see the student sitting next to you slightly shaking her head. She is looking in your direction with a small frown. It is pretty clear that she's signaling to you that your answer to the third problem is wrong. What should you do? Why?

Lessons for Life

We spend a great deal of time teaching our students the knowledge they need to succeed on tests. But how much time do we spend teaching them the steps of ethical reasoning that they need to succeed in life? How many of the scandals of our generation might have been averted had students learned the steps of ethical reasoning and how to engage in them?

Ethical reasoning does not appear on statewide mastery tests. Perhaps it should: Students will find it as important in their lives as content knowledge. Those who have lost their savings or their homes to unethical businesspeople might decide that it is *more* important. Those who read of Phoebe Prince's being bullied and then committing suicide might realize that this was not a lone case, but the tip of an iceberg that we have the ability to melt—if only we have the will.

Questions for Critical Conversations on Ethics

The following questions provide opportunities for students to discuss the steps of ethical action. The teacher's goal is not to answer these questions, but to ask students to ponder them and generate their own answers.

When does an event have an ethical dimension?

- Is it unethical for physicists to develop weapons of mass destruction?
- Is it unethical for biologists to create new pathogens?
- Is it unethical for governments to execute people?
- Was Tom Sawyer unethical to persuade his friends to whitewash his fence?

When is the ethical dimension of a situation significant?

- When is cheating by another student serious enough to report?
- In general, how catastrophic do the events in a country have to be before other countries have a responsibility to intervene? For example, should the world have noted and counteracted Hitler's behavior sooner?
- If a child is treated by one or more of his or her parents the way Huckleberry Finn was treated by his father, should the town or state authorities take the child away from the parents?

When does an individual have an ethical responsibility to generate a solution to a problem?

- Under what circumstances should a soldier refuse to obey an order?
- Is there ever a case in which a child should disobey his or her parents?
- If a student knows that another student of his or her acquaintance takes illegal drugs, does he or she have a personal responsibility to do something about it?

How do you decide whether acting in an ethical manner is worth it even though you may suffer repercussions?

Behaving ethically may have negative and even serious consequences. Consider the difficulty of acting ethically in the following cases:

- In the Enron corporate scandal, when Sherron Watkins blew the whistle on unethical behavior, she was punished and made to feel like an outcast.
- In the Rwandan genocides, Hutus were encouraged to hate Tutsis and to kill them. Those who were not willing to participate in the massacres risked becoming victims themselves.
- In Hitler's Germany, those who tried to save Jews from concentration camps risked being killed themselves.

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Robert J. Sternberg is provost, senior vice president, and professor of psychology at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater; **robert.sternberg@okstate.edu**.

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