Making Ethics an Issue in Every Classroom

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Abstract

This process, which involves individual homework assignments, small group discussions, and presentations before class, insures that every student has thought about ethical issues. When an entire class knows that they are expected to be on their honor not to cheat and to report cheating if they are aware of it, the percentage of cheating can drop dramatically.

Introduction

Many professional societies and government agencies are focusing attention on the subject of ethics, but if a recent survey cited in *People* magazine and in *USA Today* is correct, too many students in America have not made the commitment to behave ethically. Sixty-seven percent of 6,000 college students responding to the survey say they have cheated at least once. "I was shocked by the results," said Donald McCabe, an associate professor of business ethics at Rutgers University's Newark, N.J. campus, who conducted this broad-scale study of college cheating. He observed that the survey is particularly discouraging because it involved 31 of America's most prestigious colleges. "The thing that scares me," he says, "is that these kids are the academic elite—the future leaders of America—and their attitude is: 'Society owes me. Why should I have to do the work?'" (Garred 1991).

McCabe's study found that dishonesty is less common at schools with explicit honor codes, where students must sign a pledge not to cheat. Thirty percent of students at the 17 schools without honor codes cheated three or more times while taking tests. Only five percent did at honor-code schools. McCabe says that the good news is that the well-designed honor codes, ones developed and run with student involvement, do work (Kelly 1991).

It is our responsibility as professors to renew our efforts to instill a stronger ethic in our students. This is difficult to do without feeling that one is appearing untrusting and suspicious. Communication Across the Curriculum workshops

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provide the perfect mechanism for effectively incorporating ethics using the student developed and student run approach that McCabe found most successful. Those of us teaching at institutions that do not have effective honor codes can create our own class codes using a student participatory process.

The Process of Developing a Student Code of Ethics

The process begins with the teacher, who spends about five minutes defining ethics and describing what a code of ethics is. Each student is given several days to draft an ethics statement that encourages high standards of behavior and concern for the greater society and world. Students are asked to address matters involving the relationships of each individual to peers, to professors, to employers (if they work), to employees (if they supervise), to the public, to the creatures and materials of the environment, and to the person within. Since a code of ethics is a personal statement of belief, they are asked to write in the first person singular, which makes it a personal code. This makes it voluntary, rather than a set of rules imposed by the teacher or the institution.

On the assignment due date, students are grouped into small teams of approximately five people and are asked to introduce themselves and to select a recorder and a speaker. They are given twenty minutes to come up with a group code of ethics that the whole group endorses. The recorder uses overhead transparencies provided by the teacher to note their code, and the speaker representing the group shares their code with the entire class using an overhead projector. Following are two examples of group codes taken from a twenty minute in-class assignment in a 200 level Landscape Appreciation class consisting of students from various majors including agriculture and landscape architecture.

Student Group 1—Code of Ethics

1. I will have a good attitude towards my job and assignments.
2. I will be honest with my peers.
3. I will be courteous.
4. I will show concern for the environment in all that I do.
5. I will be open minded to new ideas.
6. I will not mislead my peers or my customers.
7. I will show respect for all my clients and peers.

8. I will contribute to the community.
9. I will be generous in my doings.
10. I will stand behind my actions.
11. I will give credit to those who deserve it.
12. I will not cut down others to promote myself.

Student Group 2—Code of Ethics

1. I will treat others with respect.
2. I will be friendly, even to strangers.
3. I will be fair, honest, truthful, and won't cheat.
4. I will be supportive.
6. I will try to establish good communications.
7. I will keep commitments.
8. I will not sexually harass anyone no matter what sex they are.
9. I will admit mistakes and try my best to correct them.
10. I will always listen to both sides of the story.
11. I will be a good sport.
12. I will be responsible for my actions.
13. I will strive to do my best.

As can be seen, there is usually considerable overlap yet some diversity from group to group. A class of thirty students would present six codes covering a wide range of actions. Though unsophisticated, the codes create a sense of responsibility and establish common moral conceptions. The concept of: "I owe society" begins to replace the mistaken assumption that: "Society owes me." observed by McCabe (1991). Because a whole group accepts the same set of values, pressures can be put on individuals to conform to the code. As Aldo Leopold has noted, "the mechanism of operation is the same for any ethic: social approval for right actions; social disapproval for wrong actions (Leopold, 1949). Once the ethical principles are widely accepted, approval and disapproval follow as a matter of course, but because students are voluntarily striving for cooperative, altruistic behavior, this is less likely to be needed.

Some of the most difficult resolves that students have discussed are those that relate to the theme "I will point out error and expose fraud and dishonesty." While some groups include such statements, others point out that we have been raised from childhood not to "tattle" on others. Such discussions provide the teacher with opportunities to invite and encourage group enforcement of the class code and to explain that most parents are trying to get children to take action on their own rather than always expecting an outsider to enforce the rules. When an entire class knows that they are expected to be on their honor not to cheat and to report cheating if they are aware of it, the percentage of cheating can drop dramatically.

Developing Consensus

To get a consensus, everyone has to participate. Only then does the goal become internalized. Goal setting expands the human capacity for restraint and for self-control, which is far more desirable than coercive enforcement of rules and regu-
lations. By having our students work individually, in small groups, and as a class, we allow them to become more dynamic, self-actualizing, goal directed, organized and integrated.

Lively discussion combined with the individual homework assignment insures that every student has thought about ethical issues and is aware of other student's feelings as they begin the semester. After they have taken the initial steps to formulate, discuss, and agree upon a personal and a group code, I give them a copy of two professional societies' codes. The American Society of Horticultural Science's code of ethics, approved by the Board of Directors and members in 1990, provides a concise but comprehensive example for students to study. It is interesting to note that a class of thirty will usually cover most of the topics found in the professional codes, albeit phrased in a simpler manner.

Several weeks after establishing a *Code of Professional Ethics*, I use the same process, requiring each student as an individual and then as part of a group, to establish a *Code of Environmental Ethics*. The line between environmental ethics and social ethics is vague, since every environmental problem is in some sense a social problem. Separating the two, however, enables one to focus more closely on the natural physical environment as distinguished from the social environment.

There is an interesting parallel between Also Leopold's ethical thesis and the methodology inherent in the Communication Across the Curriculum process. Both begin with the individual and extend to the community. Leopold's thesis (1949) was that "all ethical systems so far evolved are based on a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. Ethics first dealt with the relationships between individuals and then with the relationship between the individual and the social community. Leopold's belief was that ethics should be extended once more to include one's relationship to the natural world. This 'land ethic,' as he called it, simply enlarged the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and all species of animals, each member of which is dependent on each of the other members for its own healthy existence. As a 'plain member and citizen of this community', to use Leopold's designation, each person owes respect and a duty to each of his or her fellow members and to the community as a whole." (Shrader-Frechette 1981).

My student's environmental codes often include both general and specific actions. Following are two examples taken from the 200 level Landscape Appreciation Class mentioned above. Students were given twenty minutes of class time to agree on these group codes after completing individual codes at home.

Group 1—Environmental Code of Ethics

1. I will always recycle.
2. I will be aware of the effects which my actions have upon the environment.
3. I will be involved in environmental groups.
4. I will avoid unnecessary pesticide use.

5. I will promote the replanting of trees.
6. I will work with the EPA.
7. I will protect endangered species.
8. I will report unethical environmental practices that I discover to others.
9. I will consider where my wastes go when I dispose of them.
10. I will make efforts in water conservation.
11. I will boycott companies which endanger the environment.
12. I will use my automobile only when it is necessary.
13. I will avoid aerosol can use.
14. I will service my car at businesses which recycle oil.

Group 2—Environmental Code of Ethics

1. I will recycle and reuse.
2. I will preserve natural resources.
3. I will protect endangered species.
4. I will always be aware of my actions and how they affect the earth.
5. I will report any business/industry who contributes to the destruction of the earth.
6. I will enforce licensing of pesticide applicators.
7. I will use only biodegradable products.
8. I will properly use pesticides, fertilizers, etc.
9. I will be aware of possible ground water contamination.
10. I will compost.
11. I will promote further research to use organic and non hazardous products.
12. I will implement more xeriscape practices.
13. Finally—"If you're not part of the SOLUTION, you're part of the PROBLEM!!"

In an effort to determine whether or not students actually took action on their goals, I conducted an informal questionnaire at the end of the semester. The questionnaire was given to a 200 level Landscape Appreciation class consisting of twenty eight students of different majors including agriculture and landscape architecture. It consisted of six questions which are listed below with selected student responses representing a range of opinion.

Questionnaire

I recently read an article by Bob Scarfo (1992), who described ethics as "the difference between what we say and what we do." Is this true for you? (Think about what you said in your two ethics codes and what you have done since writing those codes.) Forty seven percent of students said that this was true for them. Thirty two percent said that it was not true, and twenty one percent indicated that it was "both true and false" or were unclear in their response.

"Of course it's true. Anyone can say that they will do something, but this is worthless until they actually do it. Ask any politician. Good intentions are fine, but action is what counts."

"Yes, to some extent, I don't live by everything I say I believe in all of the time . . . I think a code of ethics is something possibly unattainable, but always reached for."

"I do not believe this is true for me. If I can't be true to what I say, how can other people trust and depend on me?"

"I try to follow anything I say. Otherwise it just makes you a hypocrite. I enjoy setting goals to challenge myself to see if I can live up to them. If I can't, any improvement is better than before I started or not even trying."

"I have tried to follow my code of ethics. I am getting better but I'm still not perfect."

"This is still somewhat true, but the difference between what I say and what I do is definitely decreasing rapidly as a result of the two ethics codes."

Has the time you spent thinking about and formulating your own personal and professional code of ethics actually changed your actions in any way? Seventy nine percent of students responded "yes"; fourteen percent responded "No", and seven percent responded "yes and no" or did not answer the question.

If so, how have your actions changed?

"I have actually seen how cheating and lying do not help you in anyway succeed through your school career, job, or through life. I have tried to be a better person, even before I knew I was going to take this class. You can be one of two people when you wake up in the morning. You can be an average "get by with the least work" self or you can be your BEST self. I try to be my best self when I get up in the morning."

"I have always believed that I could improve my own personal ethics. However, until I wrote down my ideas for improvement, I never really realized how incredibly unethical I was. As far as my environmental ethic goes, I now find myself feeling guilty whenever I do even the smallest of injustices against my environment. I used to think that it was 'no big deal.' As far as my professional ethic goes, I now find myself more aware of what my duties will be as a professional, both to my profession and to my co-workers."

"It was very worthwhile. People always have their own ethics in their head, but if you work with others, comparing and contrasting, you can improve upon and expand your morals. Actually formulating ethics makes you think about yourself and your surroundings. It makes you think about the harm you are doing and what you can do to solve it."

"Having to think about my personal ethics has helped me better answer the question, "Who am I?" I have a better understanding of what I think is RIGHT and what

I think is WRONG. I can now take actions like recycling or writing a letter that I would not have done in the past. One behavior I have acquired through better understanding my ethics is a strong urge to educate others about my beliefs and hopefully encourage those others to change or mend their ways."

"Primarily, what I've gotten from this process of ethical examination is the *awareness* of the ethical implications of different choices. . . . I believe the best thing achieved here is to become conscious and thoughtful of the important land-use decisions I make as a professional, and the environmental decisions I make as one member of the human race."

If not, why not?

"Most of my code of ethics are things I already do, or try to get others to at least think about. I set goals that are high, but realistic, or at least I think so sometimes. . ."

"I guess I'm just stubborn and set in my ways. I've been brought up to tend your own ground and let others lay fallow."

Although you may not have taken action in all of the areas you identified yet, do you think that it is helpful to have self made goals to aspire to? Why? One hundred percent of the respondents responded "yes" to this question.

"Yes, because if you don't you might get caught up with personal desires. Your purposes, whether in employment or pleasure, will not be clearly defined. You need something on which to base your actions."

"Yes. I have done a great deal of studying about goals with my fraternity. I learned that goals should be *attainable, wanted*, and in a logical number. When I set goals, I tend to adhere to them in a sense that they become a challenge. The satisfaction and good feeling I get from reaching the goals helps me to strive for them. Without goals, I have no direction or need to do things."

"Yes . . . I now have set in my mind that I will recycle 30 cans a week no matter if I have to pick them up on the road side. So far I have done that."

"None of my actions or goals would have occurred if I did not have to consider a code of ethics. By doing so, these codes have been helpful in making me think of the consequences of my actions. This responsibility is one facet that I have gained from this class. When it comes to people, it is hard for them to do what whey say. It is a long, hard process that grows over time. The only way to cross this border is to practice what we preach, think about the consequences of our actions, and achieve our personal goals and ethics. By doing this, we may be examples to our peers and have something left of this earth to give to future generations."

I suspect that Bob Scarfo's statement (1992) is true for many people. Think about what we can do to lessen the discrepancy between what we say and what we do regarding both environmental and social ethics. Discuss ways that will make it easier for us to make the leap form words to actions.

"Don't allow other people to set your goals or your limits. If you have an ethic for your profession or your environment, don't be afraid to improve it in your mind. If the law says that you shouldn't kill endangered species, does that mean that it's okay to kill unendangered ones? If your professional creed has eight important points to follow, can't you find eight or eighty more? If people begin to charge themselves up, they will find that when they improve their surroundings, they are also improving their self-appreciation."

"If people are taught early in their lives, it could be reinforced throughout schooling too. Positive reinforcement at the work place to gain self respect. If self respect is gained, then the person is able to say that he or she can do most of anything."

"First you need to educate; it's hard to have ethics if you are uneducated. Second, let other people know what your ethics are. If you do, you will be expected to live by them. If nobody knows, then you have no one to answer to. If you are expected to live by what you stand for by people who influence you, then you will be more likely to live by them. If they don't remind you, pulling out your list of them periodically helps us to live by them. If people know what your values are, then they will expect you to live by them. That is the important thing."

Conclusion

The procedure outlined in this paper provides an excellent starting point for developing an environmental ethic which inspires action in students. As we enter the decade of the environment, the question is no longer: "Do we need environmental ethics?" but rather, "How can we implement a process that inspires people to action?" McMahon (1973) observed that to persuade people that whatever we do affecting ecology is morally either right or wrong and to educate them to the point where they are willing to make personal sacrifices is a formidable task. Educators at every teaching level will have to participate. To see it as an impossible task, however, is surely to lack another kind of vision (Shrader-Frechette 1981).

It becomes obvious that if educators at every level participate, variations in the exercise will have to occur. While the methodology discussed in this paper is appropriate for students beginning to develop an environmental ethic, more sophisticated discussions and case studies will have to be devised for subsequent classes. To keep up the momentum, we need to make social and environmental ethics an issue in *every*

classroom. If every teacher would devote one assignment and one class period to ethical issues, students would be presented with a unified front and a powerful message that ethics are important for everyone. Teachers that do not have the time or the inclination to devote this much could incorporate simple reminders such as: "You are on your honor not to cheat and to report cheating if you are aware of it." when they give tests.

Incorporating such codes into classes would be a logical response to McCabe's study (1991) revealing that dishonesty is less prevalent at schools with explicit honor codes. Through a widespread effort at education, we can provide incentives for voluntary participation and perhaps avoid being forced to move toward more coercive forms of social and environmental protection. As evidenced by student reactions to student developed ethics codes, it is possible to change both our hearts and our environmental habits.

In a world plagued with dishonesty, fraud, and environmental abuse, it is important to consider our own conduct and how it affects other people and the environment. Encouraging students to write ethics statements that address high standards of behavior and concern for a greater society and world is a first step toward developing concerned professionals who will serve the public with integrity and understanding.

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