

Teaching Brief

**PR Ethics Literacy:
Identifying Moral and Ethical Values Through
Purposeful Ethical Education**

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The topic of ethics should become a required element that is routinely explored in the communication classroom (Kolić Stanić, 2020). It is reported that “in the field of public relations, unethical practices have been regarded as a serious problem with numerous deleterious effects” (Ki et al., 2011, p. 267). This is not a desire that practitioners, educators, or scholars want to perpetuate (Taylor & Yang, 2015). Long has the profession suffered from labels including “PR hacks” and “spin doctors” and from professionals that merely push propaganda for the benefit of their organization to the detriment of the public. Using a case study as the model, this ethics assignment allows students to better understand the impact that sound ethical decisions can have on both the profession as well as the associated publics.

Keywords: ethics, literacy, moral code, public relations, case studies

Educators are encouraged to integrate ethics into the education of future public relations practitioners; however, before that can be achieved, a system of ethical PR literacy must be established. PR literacy is defined as identifying ethical viewpoints and understanding the ethical orientations of personal and situational experiences and allows for students to critically analyze, apply, and evaluate frameworks and principles for decision-making capacity. The exercise of teaching ethics and introducing ethical codes of conduct within the classroom has proven to discourage unethical behavior (Neill, 2019).

This ethics assignment utilizes the PURE model of ethical decision making, which includes a decision-making guide (Appendix) based on research by Kathy Fitzpatrick (2016). Per the Bivins and Kohlberg models of identifying moral obligations for PR practitioners, the highest stage of ethical development evolves from basic individual concern to a recognition of how the student's behavior impacts others (Luttrell & Ward, 2018). As students become more ethically literate, they have an increased understanding of the overlapping and underlying influence of their ethical behavior on others.

By leveraging case study methodologies, which promote a deeper understanding of an issue, students become increasingly invested in learning and take away a clearer appreciation of the ethical decision-making process (Gomm et al., 2000; Kolić Stanić, 2020). Krebs et al. (1997) studied performance factors for university students to test Kohlberg's model. In this study, the authors began work toward a new model of moral decision-making present in students as to uncover the implications for education. The authors discovered:

a common thread runs through many of these implications: moral decisions and the cognitive structures that support them may serve many functions, which may vary with the types of dilemma people consider (e.g., hypothetical, real-life), their level of personal

involvement and the contexts in which they occur. (Krebs et al., 1997, p. 142)

The use of case studies in a variety of fields can be applied to PR programs to prepare students for the multitude of ethical dilemmas that may need to be addressed over one's career. Krebs et al. (1997) further support the use of role-play to discuss the consequences or moral dilemmas that arise from self-interest and public interest conflicts. This can sensitize students to the possibility that they will be better equipped to acknowledge the type of self-interest and justification that may evolve within a corporate or client structure and prepare the students to diffuse such issues.

The core competencies at the center of this exercise extend to a multitude of courses and the interchangeability of the cases for discussion can be customized to an instructor's individual classroom needs. The authors of this teaching brief have used a plethora of ethical dilemmas and case studies including The Flint Water Crisis, television anchor Leslie Roberts scandal, Alabama Human Life Protection Act, Sea World's Blackfish scandal, and the Founders Brewing Co. lawsuit. Any ethical problem could be substituted into this assignment and paired with the instructor's ethical model of choice. Depending on the instructor's preference, other ethical models could be applied in the same manner, including the ETHICS model developed by Thomson J. Ling and Jessica M. Hauck (2017), Kathy Fitzpatrick's Ethical Decision Making Guide (Fitzpatrick, 2016; Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001), Baker and Martinson's TARES Test (2001), or Kant's Decision-Making Model (Bowen 2004). One of the many benefits of this assignment is the ability to customize both the case study as well as the ethical model.

The Ethics Assignment

Instructors should allow for two weeks to complete this assignment. Week one consists of in-class lectures, analysis, and

discussion of the ethical dilemma being analyzed; a brief background on the Public Relations Society of America's (PRSA) Code of Ethics; and how traditional ethical theories affect modern day practice including an examination of the ethics of consequences, ethics of duty, and ethics of character, and an overview of the PURE model of ethical decision making. In week two, students will complete the written application assignment. In this example, the authors have chosen to explore the topic of ethical implications within artificial intelligence (AI).

Objective

This assignment enables students to develop an understanding of principles of moral reasoning and ethical problem solving and decision-making. Learners will recognize the ethical responsibilities of practitioners and the social responsibilities of corporations and other organizations after completing this unit.

Procedures

Part 1/Week 1: Analysis and Discussion Surrounding the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence in PR

Class 1. During this initial class session, the instructor—leveraging lecture, journal articles, blog posts, and video clips—discusses some of the more challenging ethical principles within this scenario. This situation represents how PR practitioners must advocate for the ethical use of AI within the practice as well as with the organizations we work for or represent.

Class 2. Students are introduced to the PRSA Code of Ethics (Public Relations Society of America, n.d.) and the PURE model of ethical decision making along with the decision guide. It is imperative that students leave this session with a solid understanding of the selected code of ethics and how to apply ethics theory to present day ethical practices.

Background Materials. The PRSA Code of Ethics is a set of ethical guidelines that apply to members of PRSA, the world's largest and

foremost organization for PR professionals.

The PURE Model of Ethical Decision Making and Decision

Guide. This model affords entry-level practitioners the opportunity to see how ethical decisions are grounded not just in the idea of public interest, which is too elusive to guide practice, but rather in theory, which provides them with a way of articulating how they arrived at their decisions.

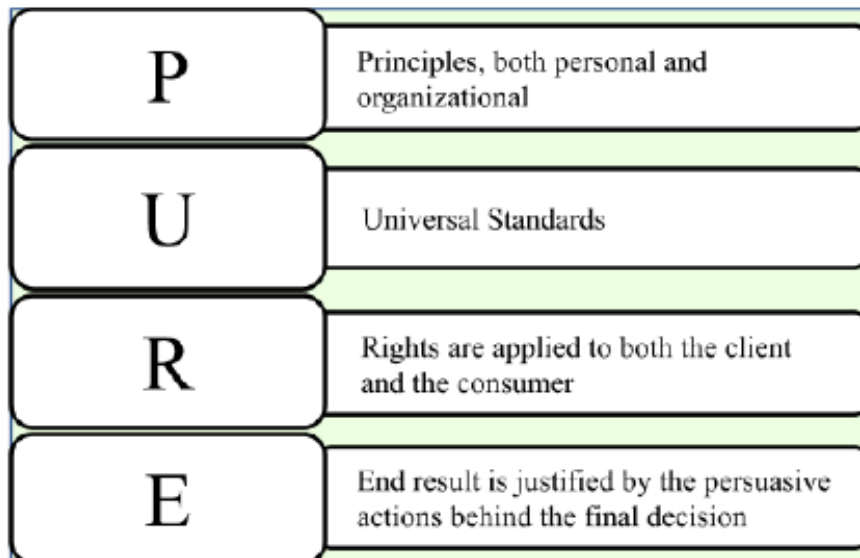


Figure 1. Diagram of the PURE Model of Ethical Decision Making (Luttrell & Ward, 2018)

Step One: Introducing the Ethical Dilemma

The use of AI has become more pervasive as brands have begun using technology to better identify, target, and connect with audiences. To that end, data and privacy issues are of great concern. Some areas explored include the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), chatbots that communicate with consumers and also collect and save their data unknowingly, and the 2019 Facebook announcement regarding the collection of millions of users' email addresses obtained without

permission.

This ethical scenario provides strong points of discussion based on privacy and legal implications as well as race. Researchers Nick Bostrom and Eliezer Yudkowsky (2014) developed this ethical dilemma, which is the foundation for this assignment:

Imagine, in the near future, a bank using a machine learning algorithm to recommend mortgage applications for approval. A rejected applicant brings a lawsuit against the bank, alleging that the algorithm is discriminating racially against mortgage applicants. The bank replies that this is impossible, since the algorithm is deliberately blinded to the race of the applicants. Indeed, that was part of the bank's rationale for implementing the system. Even so, statistics show that the bank's approval rate for black applicants has been steadily dropping. Submitting ten apparently equally qualified genuine applicants (as determined by a separate panel of human judges) shows that the algorithm accepts white applicants and rejects black applicants. What could possibly be happening? (p. 316)

The first step of the PURE Model of ethical decision making is to follow your personal, organizational, and industry-specific principles. Individuals carry a personal moral code that guides their day-to-day decision-making abilities. To more robustly understand real-life moral judgments made by practitioners, we must attend to the functions that involve juggling multiple angles of perception for a PR professional.

Knowing that new PR professionals often rely on their personal morals to make decisions as their experience dealing with ethical dilemmas in the workplace is limited, we must fashion resolving hypothetical moral dilemmas in the classroom to improve future decision-making. Morals may include treating others the way you want to be treated, saying please and thank you, having respect for others, or

simply showing compassion. Personal principles tend to be derived from surrounding influences (individuals and environments), including family, friends, and co-workers as well as educational and religious institutions. While it is not always recognized, there is a distinction between morals and ethics. Morality focuses on internal values and beliefs. An individual's moral compass is generally a combination of learned and modeled behavior, while ethics involve a set of standards or codes that can develop and change over time depending on the situation or location.

Organizational principles that guide behavior should also be explored. This includes expectations regarding the treatment of clients, or the way information is communicated to the public. The final component of this step focuses on industry-specific principles serving as the collective conscience of the profession.

When determining if the response to a dilemma is ethical, students should consider whether any personal, organizational, or industry-specific principles have been compromised. Each decision will largely depend on an individual's personal principles as well as organizational and industry standards of operation. In the example provided in this assignment, one might ask students the moral responsibility of the PR practitioner that works at the bank or the ethical obligations of the app developer that created the automated loan application.

Given that human bias is inherent in AI algorithms (Silberg & Manyika, 2019), AI systems are only as good as the data that is fed to them and from which they learn. Left unchecked, the potential of undetected bias could uncontrollably increase as the AI accelerates. This is particularly true in cases where AI is devoid of or inconsistent in audits and remains largely unregulated. If this had been tested on the marginalized population's mortgage applications, the erroneous algorithm could have been avoided by better training the system with data that is fair and unbiased.

Practitioners must decide how to craft an ethical response for the public. Drawing on organizational and industry principles such as transparency and honesty, as found in the PRSA Code of Ethics, it is important to divulge racial disparities in an algorithm's response. Once completed, it will likely make the public skeptical of any rejected applications, and relationships with the public will likely be tarnished. Each of these points alludes to a much larger discussion on how personal beliefs often lay the groundwork for ethical decision making. In this step, students must begin to determine whether personal and organizational principles support the action.

Step Two: Ensuring the Ethical Principles are Applied without Exception

The second step is to ensure that the selected ethical principles are universal and are applied without exception. This step aligns closely with the beliefs of Immanuel Kant and his views on duty-based ethics (Kant & Gregor, 1998). According to Kant's Formula of Universal Law, an individual should "act only on that maxim which you can at the same time will to become a universal law of nature" (Kant & Gregor, 1998, p. 39). In other words, principles must be applied to all individuals equally without exception.

According to step two, if one bank justifies the use of this type of algorithm, it must be justified across the board. Can a PR practitioner working in the banking industry justify the use of any type of artificial intelligence knowing that the bot mirrors human bias? Can the criteria of loan applications ever truly be applied across the board without exception? Students should think about the key messaging they would utilize in press releases, media interviews, social posts, etc., as well as how to provide reasonable reassurance in both the process and the monitoring of the AI to squash future issues before they impact people, through regular auditing and adjusting.

Step Three: Review the Practitioner's Values

The third step reviews whether the practitioner values the rights of the public as well as their client. When examining this ethical dilemma, students are asked to examine how AI may be violating human rights. One might question personal versus professional priorities.

Here, PR practitioners need to reconcile the rights of the public with the rights of the organization. The company has a responsibility to improve the AI algorithm. That responsibility must be thoroughly articulated to the public, and practices need to be implemented so that the use of such systems are fair and equitable to all parties involved. PR's role is to communicate a solution that addresses the public's concerns over discrimination. This also highlights the bank's desire to make the application review process equitable.

Students will begin to investigate the importance of making ethical decisions that prioritize the public's interest. Doing so can help eliminate siloed decisions that have negative repercussions on those without a voice.

Step Four: Weigh the Desired Results Against Morally Questionable Decisions

In the final step, students will weigh the desired result against any morally questionable decisions or behavior required to attain it. As a tenant of consequentialism, the primary concern is the result. "When examining consequences in ethical advocacy, practitioners need to determine if the ends justify the means" (Luttrell & Ward, 2018, p. 61).

When discussing this ethical dilemma, the ends justify the means if the bank's response to finding out about the algorithm was to correct the problem and rereview all previous applications. As a result, the bank earned the trust of the public, saved time, and doubled mortgage applications. However, if none of this happened, the ends did not justify the means. Instructors should have students justify their beliefs and the impact of those beliefs from both sides of this issue. Students should have

a thorough understanding of both the PRSA Code of Ethics and the PURE model of ethical decision making to appropriately apply ethical theory to modern-day practices.

Part 2/Week 2: Applying the Decision-Making Guide

Once students have thoroughly discussed the case and applied appropriate codes of ethics using the PURE model of ethical decision making, they then fill out the decision guide and write an in-depth analysis which includes:

- Personal, organizational, and industry-specific principles;
- Universal principles of the case;
- Discussion on how the rights of the public and the client were handled; and
- Discussion on the justification of the end result.

Students present their findings to the class and discuss justification for their selection of specific material/content.

Assessment

Learning objectives for this assignment include assessing the student's ability to identify and apply theories related to navigating ethical dilemmas, to offer experiential and reflective opportunities for students so they can explore their personal values and ethical perspectives, and to provide students with the ability to make ethical recommendations based on issues faced in the profession. Grounded in cognitive theory, learning in this assignment incorporates the use of memory, repetition, motivation, critical thinking, and reflection (Griffin et al., 1994). This theory is dependent upon the instructor/student relationship. The instructor provides and leads the content to be learned (e.g., the case study, introduction of ethical models, the code of ethics), while the student decodes, interprets, and makes sense of the material (Almasseri & AlHojailan, 2019). The introduction of a framework, model, or theory paired with a current ethical dilemma or case study, is performed repeatedly throughout the semester to

further connect theory to professional practice by presenting a multitude of moral theories and cases used to navigate ethical dilemmas. Therefore, this assignment is repeated throughout the semester to reinforce concepts. Additionally, this assignment can be used effectively in courses where ethics is taught as a stand-alone module.

The 260 students that completed this assignment since it began being administered in 2015 were asked whether they were able to identify and apply theories related to the practice. A total of 251 students either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement (146 strongly agreed, 105 agreed). The remaining nine students selected either neutral or strongly disagree.

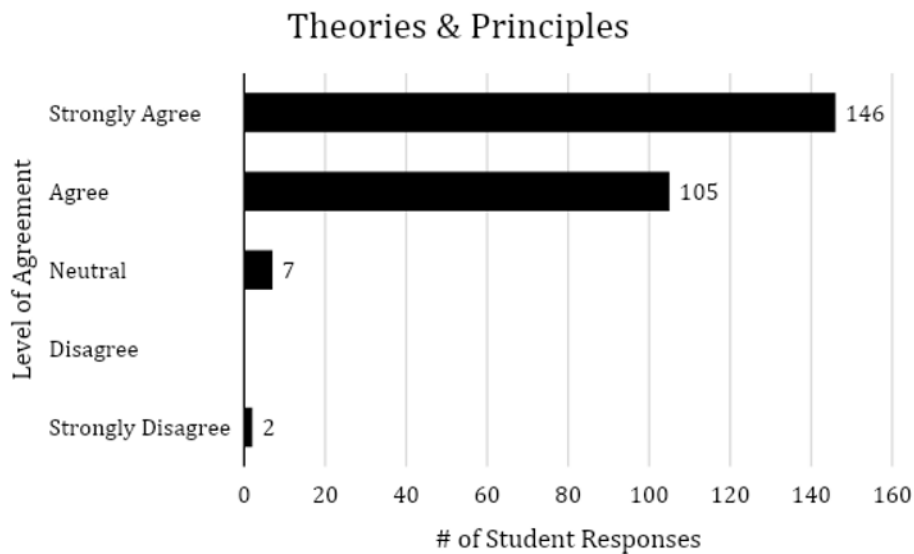


Figure 2. Student responses to whether the course and assignments “helped me to identify and apply theories to the practice.”

Students were invited to discuss their rationale and overall observations. Many students commented that making ethical decisions was much more difficult than initially anticipated. “This assignment made

me think about the different types of decisions I will have to make as a practitioner and how I will often have to guide others in ethical decision making,” noted one student. Another student commented that “before this class I would just make decisions based on what I thought was right. I never thought about why I was making them.” Others said they appreciated being introduced to the models and theories in supporting their final decision, especially with a complicated topic. Some students expressed that they felt not all situations would need such a model to make an ethical decision.

As evidenced by the evaluation data, the majority of students felt that the lesson was impactful and welcomed the idea of talking through a decision-making process with the confidence of a team or group in the classroom. This assignment supports the research that the basis of transformative training of future PR specialists should include purposeful ethical education through varying media for the development of ethical and moral competence in a practitioner as an emerging young professional.

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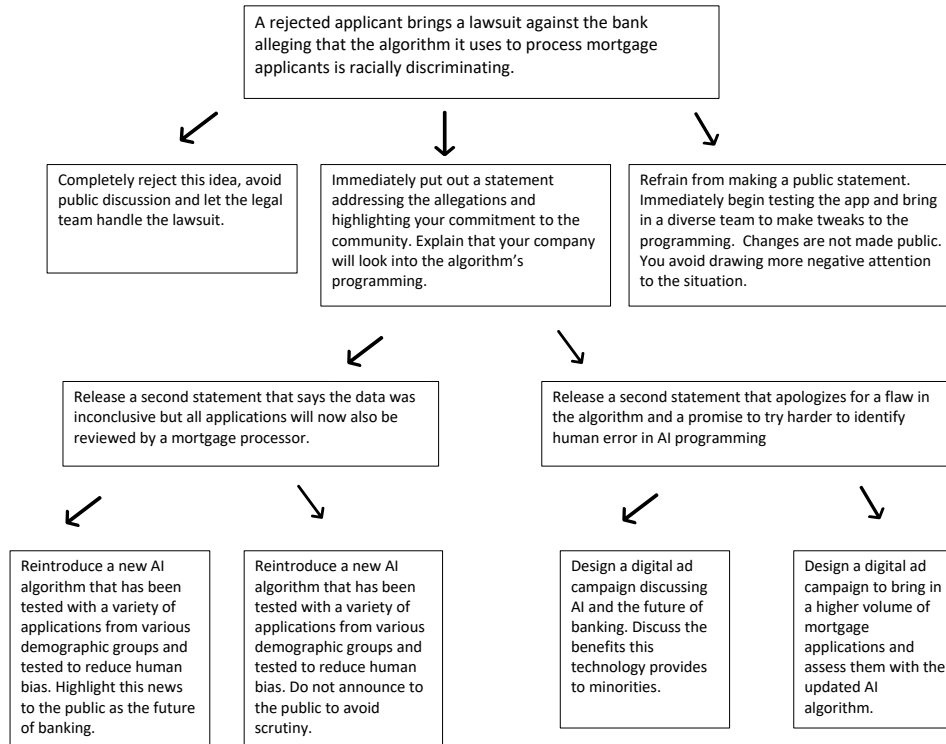
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Appendix



Following Kathy Fitzpatrick's six steps, use the decision guide and answer the following questions:

1. Define the specific ethical issue/conflict.
2. Identify internal/external factors (e.g., legal, political, social economic) that may influence the decision.
3. Identify key values.
4. Identify the parties who will be affected by the decision and define the public relations practitioner's obligation to each.
5. Select the ethical principles to guide the decision-making process.
6. Make a decision and justify it."

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