Best Practices in Teaching

Media Ethics

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Sponsored by
The Teaching Committee
of the Association for Education
in Journalism and Mass Communication

Thursday, August 9, 2007
11:45 a.m. to 1:15 p.m.

AEJMC Annual Convention
Washington, D.C.

Best Practices in Teaching Media Ethics

Panelists for the Session:

First Place: **Kim Walsh-Childers**, University of Florida
Second Place: **Tamara Gillis,** Elizabethtown College
Third Place: David Boeyink, Indiana University
Honorable Mention: **Holly Stocking,** Indiana University
Honorable Mention: **Glen Feighery,** University of Utah
Discussant: **Louis Day,** Louisiana State University
Moderator: **Frederick R. Blevens,** Florida International University

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Best Practices in Teaching Media Ethics

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Ethics Case Study Project

First Place Winner
Kim Walsh-Childers, University of Florida

Rationale: This course is designed to introduce students to the most common ethical issues and dilemmas the modern working journalist is likely to encounter and to help them develop the skills they need to develop ethically justifiable responses to those dilemmas. To foster students' skills in ethical reasoning, they are introduced to a variety of models and guidelines for ethical decision-making and the ethical philosophies that underlie such decision-making.

Students practice applying the decision-making models and ethical philosophies to real-world journalism ethics cases through class discussion and individual entries in ethics "journals." In addition, each student is assigned to a team of four or five students who work together to investigate the circumstances surrounding a recent journalism ethics case. The case must involve journalists who agree to be interviewed regarding the facts of the case and the decision-making process, if any, they went through in deciding how to handle the ethical dilemma(s) of the case. Students are required to identify non-journalists (i.e. story or photo subjects and/or their family members, sources, etc.) involved in and/or affected by the ethics case and to interview as many of these individuals as possible.

In addition to giving students an additional opportunity to practice using the philosophies and decision-making models, the project:

- Brings students into contact with working journalists, giving them an opportunity to see how these journalists identify and make decisions about ethical dilemmas,
- Requires students to examine the ethical dilemma from multiple perspectives so that they learn how non-journalists view the dilemma and the choices journalists made,
- Gives students the opportunity to hear first-hand how individuals (and sometimes organizations) have been affected by journalists' decisions and actions in ethics cases, and
- Requires students to work in a team to acquire both background information and interviews with those involved in the case study *and* to develop an ethical analysis of the case. Given that many, if not most, ethical decisions in journalism should involve group discussion

and decision-making, I believe this group analysis requirement helps to teach students best practices for resolving ethical dilemmas they may face in the future.

Outcomes: Students who complete the project successfully have a better, more comprehensive understanding of the process (or sometimes the lack of process) journalists go through in resolving ethical dilemmas. They learn (one hopes) to appreciate how non-journalists may view such dilemmas and the journalists' responses to them. They learn to work with peers to analyze an ethics case, to decide whether the journalists' actions were ethically justifiable and to consider how journalists' responses to the dilemma might have been improved. In some cases, the interviews students conduct with journalists might even prompt the journalists themselves to reassess their ethical decision-making procedures.

Methodology: The first day of class, I introduce the project and give students a 2-page document explaining the case study project (including the description shown below). They are asked to identify classmates they would prefer to work with (or not to work with). Teams are assigned by the end of the second week of class, and within a month, the team must turn in a one-paragraph description of the case they intend to investigate. I require a mid-semester progress report and outline, and students also complete mid-semester and final evaluations of their teammates' contributions to the project.

In addition to a step-by-step description of the process they should follow, the students receive the following explanation of the case study project assignment:

The major project for this class involves preparation of a case study, like those used throughout the class, about an ethical issue in journalism. Grading for the project will be based on satisfactory completion of the stated requirements, quality of research and analysis, and quality of your writing.

The case must be related to an ethical dilemma, mistake, controversy or decision made by a journalist or journalism outlet within the past 5 years. This is to increase the chances that you will be able to interview those involved in the decision – **the most important part of your research** – and that they will remember reasonably well the sequence of events, how they made their decisions and what the consequences were. The case need not have happened in this state, but **you must be able to interview**

the journalists involved in the decision or case. You also must demonstrate that you have made concerted efforts to talk to those affected by or involved in the decision. These interviews can take place in person, via telephone or on email. YOU CANNOT BASE YOUR PAPER PRIMARILY ON LIBRARY RESEARCH. YOU MUST TALK TO ACTUAL HUMAN BEINGS!

The case study paper will include:

Case description: A four- to six-page case description, accompanied by any appropriate exhibits (i.e. copies of photographs or articles involved in the controversy). The description should be modeled after those included in the text and examples you can see in my office, although it will be significantly longer than those in the text. The case must be REAL and must be developed from research on articles, videos, photographs and interviews with journalism professionals and others involved in the case.

Case analysis: A three- to five-page analysis of the case using one or more of the analytical frameworks studied during the course. State clearly your position, your rationale and the steps you would take to implement your recommendations for dealing with the case.

Epilogue: A one-page epilogue detailing the actual resolution of the issue studied in your case. The epilogue should include discussion of the consequences of the decision.

Annotated bibliography: In addition to MLA- or APA-style bibliography entries, each source should be accompanied by two or three sentences indicating the primary points this source makes in relation to your case. Include a bibliography entry for each interview conducted, including the time, place and method via which the interview was done (i.e. in person, telephone, email, etc.) In addition, include a telephone number and/or email address for all interviewees.

Ethics Lesson Plan: Let's Play Ball

Second Place Winner
Tamara Gillis, Elizabethtown College

Methodology: Using simulations serves as a means to engage students in the learning process while engaging creative and critical thinking skills inherent to professional communications. Simulation is one method for overcoming the challenges of lack of shared vision, lack of real experience, and the time constraint of covering a large amount of interrelated material in an economical amount of class time. Simulations address specific topics by having students engage in activities that approximate the realities of professional communications challenges. Simulations provide a tool for creating common ground, explaining complex issues, examining the connection between concepts, and creating group cohesion that will be necessary for successful completion of other course objectives and professional projects.

Rationale: This simulation, "Let's Play Ball," introduces a challenge for public relations professionals and media professionals (reporters and freelance writers). The students are challenged as PR professionals to make an ethical business judgment as to whether they should participate in a familiarity tour. Familiarity tour (fam tour), also known as a familiarization trip or a press junket, is a trip or tour for journalists or in this case PR professionals at the invitation of an organization to become acquainted with a situation, product or service. For this simulation, the students play the roles of entry-level PR professionals who work for nonprofit organizations. Part of their job responsibilities is planning meetings and conferences for their organizations. In this scenario, meeting planners receive an invitation to tour the City of Pittsburgh for a long weekend from the Pittsburgh tourism bureau. Each student works for a different organization; for some taking this invitation will not pose an ethical challenge, for others it will. The simulation scenario unfolds in a series of class meetings as concepts are addressed in class. Thus, the students are building a foundation of theoretical knowledge that will be tested in the simulation. The simulation is a role-play activity. The instructor plays a number of roles along the way to keep the challenge in motion.

Materials of Instruction: The list of materials represents the most extrav-

agant version of this simulation. When time is of the essence, some elements are narrated in class so the students get to the work activity more quickly.

- Role-play description cards
- Individually boxed baseballs … one for each student in the class
- Individually packaged boxes of Cracker Jacks
- Envelopes large enough to hold the box of Cracker Jacks and some mock promotional literature
- Mock promotional literature … business reply postcard, letter of invitation.
- Mock airline ticket promotional package
- Mock event agenda
- PowerPoint presentation that simulates the trip

Implementation: The simulation unfolds over the course of a few class meetings. During the implementation period, students learn about nonprofit organizations, public relations strategies and tactics, event planning, ethical codes of conduct (such as PRSA and IABC), conflicts of interest in PR practice, to name a few of the concepts at play in this scenario. The distribution of materials and implementation of the simulation occurs near the close of each class period. While the classes are numbered sequentially below, the activities do not fall one day after the next in the course. Many days may pass between the days of the simulation activities.

Day 1: On the first day of the scenario, I describe the scene to the students and distribute (randomly) their individual role-play description cards. They are to respond to the scenario based solely on this information regarding role and organization. As I prepare to "deliver the afternoon mail in their organization" I share with them the following details: "You are the person described on that card. You are an entry-level public relations specialist with that organization. One of your main duties is meeting planning for your organization. (Since we have already discussed the purpose and particulars about meeting planning and nonprofit organizations by this point, I do not need to describe too much more about the job.) You are busy at work one day when the mail arrives. Oh, by the way, your boss – the director of public relations – is out of the office on an extended health related leave of absence. Here is the afternoon mail." In the "afternoon mail" each student receives the Cracker Jack package, which is the invitation to the fam tour. I tell them, as the narrator in the scenario, that by the next class meeting they will

need to respond to their mail. Class ends.

Day 2: Usually the topic of discussion around this time in the semester is ethical conduct in PR practice. We talk about codes of conduct and the impact of ethical conduct on reputation – both of the individual and client. When we resume the simulation scenario, I tell them it is time to "send back your business reply card" for the scenario. But before you do, the morning mail is on your desk. In the morning mail, each meeting planner has received another promotional mailing from the tourism promotion agency. This package includes a baseball and a second business reply postcard encouraging them to participate in the fam tour. Then I collect the postcards with their responses.

Day 3: On the third day of the scenario, the class period is devoted to the scenario. Students who responded positively to the invitation receive another mailing that includes mock airline tickets and the agenda for the fam tour. The students who responded negatively receive an information package about Pittsburgh and a thank you note from the PR person at the tourism promotion agency. The second group is dismissed from class for the day to prepare their final outcome for the simulation: the essay defending their decision. The first group of students gathers for the remainder of the class period. Using a storytelling method mediated with a PowerPoint presentation, the students take the all expenses paid tour of Pittsburgh and its meeting and tourism attractions replete with air travel, luxury accommodations and meeting locations, topped with luxury box seats for a Pirates game. Fireworks conclude the game night. At the conclusion of the presentation, they too are dismissed to prepare their essay defending their decision.

Day 4: On the fourth day of the scenario, students submit their essays and we discuss the scenario and their understanding of ethical decision-making, usually with a review of the Potter Box.

Outcomes: A number of student outcomes or work responses are requested as the scenario unfolds. First, the students must evaluate the invitation and their unique role to decide how they will respond to the business reply postcard (yes, sign me up or no thank you, please send me an information packet). Then the students must defend their decision in an essay based on their understanding of ethical codes, PR practices, and the Potter Box. After the essays are submitted, we discuss in class the decision-making processes that the students used to make their decisions. Some stu-

dents cannot ethically defend their decision to attend the event. Others can and share their thinking. We pull the theory and practice together to develop an applied research model for ethical decision-making. Students learn from one another's commentary and develop a better sense of professionalism. In class discussion, students address the role of the PR practitioners and the role of the event organizer at the tourism agency, who is also a PR practitioner. The discussion centers around the ethical use of this type of event and its applications, which are many, i.e., film studios invite reporters to the opening of a new film, auto manufacturers use it in the form of test drives for industry reporter.

Media Economics and Diversity: An Ethics Exercise

Third Place Winner
David Boeyink, Indiana University

Methodology: The following exercise, set in a senior-level journalism ethics class, draws students into an ethical debate about economic constraints and staffing.

- Students are assigned a contemporary reading citing recent research about the economic pressures facing the media. A news article about cutbacks at a national news organization is also easy to add.
- Two memos are circulated to the students at the beginning of class, announcing that their media company has been sold. A new publisher will arrive shortly.
- The professor plays the role of the new publisher, giving an upbeat speech about the hopes of the media chain for their company — and the need to work together for these goals, especially profitability.

Each person is assigned to a committee to begin the process of making the company more profitable. The number of committees can be varied, depending on the size of the class. For example, the editorial page staff can also be included as a separate committee. The committees are designed to take into account the range of interests in the classroom: students in print, broadcast, photography, advertising, and public relations.

— Public relations (an outside team hired by the new owners)
— Newsroom (includes separate sub-committees for photo and sports)
— Sunday magazine
— Radio station
— Advertising
— Business/personnel

- Each committee is given a sheet outlining goals for cutting staff and/or increasing revenue. The path to accomplishing the changes is left open to the committee. Each committee is asked to consult with other committees when the changes they recommend affect the other committee. Finally, several committees are asked to consider the implications of their personnel cuts on diversity (racial and gender) that could cause the "last-hired" employees (often representing minorities) to be laid off or demoted from editor positions (the only female editor).
- Each committee is allowed to work for most of the class period. The

publisher circulates, keeping them on task, pushing for deep cuts, and encouraging committees to talk to each other.

- Near the end of class (or the next class period), the plans of each group are tallied on the board. The publisher continues to push for cuts in personnel and increased revenues (ie. shifted news/ad ratios).
- Finally, the instructor pulls back from the publisher role and summarizes what has been learned.

Rationale: The initial goal is to help students see that decisions about the allocation of resources are ethical, particularly when they threaten the quality of the journalism they are able to produce. A secondary goal is to dramatize the differing ways in which one can respond to an ethical challenge on the job:

- Give in.
- Fight for your standards.
- Compromise and negotiate.

Complicating the economic picture are concerns over diversity in the newsroom. Cuts in staff threaten recent minority hires and the highest-ranking woman editor. This illustrates one way diversity can be built into a course (or a specific exercise) without adding new modules. More critically, it places decisions about diversity in a more realistic context.

Outcomes: Three key outcomes, summarized in a debriefing, are common:

- Most committees will comply (wholly or in part) with your goals, allowing you to show how demands for higher profits have ethical implications, affecting the quality of news.
- Students will take a variety of approaches, some fighting the cuts, others playing along, others bargaining. Each approach has ethical implications for a journalist's character and behavior.
- Students generally recognize the value of diversity for the newsroom and find creative ways to protect that diversity in the face of personnel cuts. A common strategy: staff reduction based on performance, not seniority.

Several years ago, a former student called and asked if I was still using the economics exercise in the ethics class. I said I was. "Good," he responded, "because it's happening to me right now." Too often, cases in journalism ethics are overly simplistic, offering one-page summaries of the facts. Acting ethically in the real-world media is more complex. This 14-page exercise helps to narrow that gap for my ethics class.

"Good Work" Course

Honorable Mention

Holly Stocking, Indiana University

Methodology: In 2001, psychologists Howard Gardner, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and William Damon co-authored the book *Good Work: When Excellence and Ethics Meet*. The book is about the challenges of doing work that is both technically excellent and socially responsible in an era where the market reigns supreme. Since then, I have made *good work* a theme of my senior-level ethics. Because of the interconnectedness of technical and ethical aspects of work, it can be argued that students who aspire to excellence in their professions will benefit from considering in an ethics course both dimensions, along the factors that can help (or hinder) the achievement of excellence on both.

My own course provides many opportunities for students to think about good work. Students read an academic article by John Gardner that summarizes the *Good Work* findings. They also read a chapter from a subsequent book called *Making Good* in which Gardner and his co-authors examine journalists just starting out in their careers, as they move "from cocoon to chaos" and struggle with ethical temptations in a market-driven economy. But the most important opportunities for learning about good work are the Good Work Paper and the Good Work Presentation. In the required paper, students research and critically examine the technical and ethical dimensions of a media professional's work. This is followed by the presentation assignment, which requires students to critically compare and contrast their professionals and to work with one another to develop a creative team presentation that broadens and deepens the learning about "good work." In the rest of this summary, I will outline these projects, along with other ways I reinforce the good work theme.

The Good Work Paper. The Good Work paper consists of two parts. In the first section of the paper, students identify the technical aspects of a self-selected media professional's work. More precisely, they identify the kind of work their professional has produced over his or her career, attending to both the product (characteristic subjects and treatments, for example) and the process (characteristic methods for bringing the products into being – such as perusing documents or using particular darkroom techniques). This paper also examines factors that appear to have influenced the characteristics of the work, including (but not limited to)

qualities of the individual (raw talent and work ethic, for example) and outside influences (role models, education, aesthetic inspirations, etc.)

In the second section of the paper, students identify their professional's career-related motivations and/or goals and evaluate them in light of the higher goals and aspirations of his or her profession, as spelled out codes, textbooks, and other documents. They also identify the ethical values and principles that animate (or don't, as the case may be) the professional's work and show how the person has (or has not) demonstrated these values and principles across his or her career and in particular situations. And again, the students address factors that appear to have influenced the moral quality of the work.

The Good Work Presentation. In teams designated by shared professional interests (PR, advertising, magazines, newspapers, literary journalism, photojournalism, broadcast, graphic design, etc.), the students compare and contrast their media professionals in an effort to arrive at conclusions about the factors that help or hinder good work. They then develop a creative presentation to broaden and deepen our learning about these factors.

Good work about good work. In developing their papers and the presentations, students are expected themselves to do good work themselves. To reinforce the theme in relation to the students' own work for the class, I take several steps: With respect to the technical dimension of the students' work, the students write drafts of their papers, which they share with me and with members of their team, for feedback. With respect to the ethical dimension, I bring in someone from the campus writing center to discuss ways to avoid inadvertent plagiarism; the in-class exercises that are related to this class are invariably eye-openers to some of the students. I also give the students access to *turnitin.com*, a plagiarism-detection software program, so they can check their own work for inadvertent plagiarism. Finally, I ask the students to sign an honors statement saying they have followed the university's code of student ethics on academic integrity and the guidelines laid out in my syllabus.

Grading for good work. My grading also responds to these two dimensions of good work. Half of the grade on each of the papers is for the ethics of the students' work, judged on the basis of the accuracy and completeness of citations, the turnitin report (which the students hand in), and the honors statement. The other half of the grade is on the technical aspects of the report – the depth and breath of the research, the soundness of the analysis of the material, the organization of the paper, and the writing and editing – qualities that our students have worked to perfect, in skills courses, from the day they arrived in our program. I grade in this

way so students can see that both dimensions are valued in this class, as I hope – but in these times, can't guarantee – that they will be in their future careers.

Rationales: I had several reasons for developing this good work paper and presentation. One, I wanted to bring home the message that good work requires attention to both the technical and moral dimensions of one's efforts. I wanted the students to explore the missions and ethical values of their professions, not just through particular ethical dilemmas (which we do, through much of the course), but also by exploring the missions and ethical values of real people who have done what the students themselves aspire to do; my thinking was this would make ethics (and their relation to technical expertise) more "real" for the students, which indeed it has. I wanted students to use their growing understandings of ethically questionable practices to evaluate their professionals' actions, and to think about the conditions for good work — individual talents, skills, and values, but also external factors, including the work environment and economic pressures. Finally, I wanted the students to see that their own work for this course is in fact an opportunity to practice the technical skills they've learned through their journalism education and also an opportunity to pay explicit attention to the ethical aspects of work and consider the factors that do and do not allow them to do good *academic* work; I wanted students to see that something as small as showing up to help others on their team create a team presentation can be viewed as an ethical matter, as can doing strong technical work, as both will have a bearing on how the entire team fares on the collaborative project and on how much we all learn.

Outcomes: I have evaluated the good work papers for this course in a course portfolio, which was one of 16 (and only four from professional schools) selected for presentation at the first national conference on the scholarship of teaching and learning sponsored by the American Association for Higher Education, The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, The Pew Charitable Trusts, and the Universities of Nebraska and Kansas. This effort forced me to improve aspects of the paper project that were not working so well, and I have continued to improve this particular part of the course based on such reflections. My informal reading of the team presentations suggest that students leave the course with a heightened awareness of what it takes to produce good work and also of the conditions they will need to find or create to enable them to do good work; these presentations have also

improved as I've provided additional supports for students to compare and contrast their professionals on the factors that help or hinder good work, and to think creatively and hard-headedly about such matters.

There have been a few *unexpected* outcomes of the course: The fact that some of the media professionals come from other eras has driven home the message that ethical standards evolve. At the same time, it has also grown clear that some issues are not simply a function of new market forces, as is sometimes claimed, but have been around for decades. For students, the fact that professionals in the same era have found some kinds of actions deplorable (accepting competing clients or clients that do harm, for example), while others from the same era found those same actions acceptable has illuminated the matter of individual choice; in some cases, such differences also have illuminated the contributions of organizational culture, which is typically forged from on high and can last for generations. Probably the most telling evaluation of students' involvement in the good work project was the student who wrote on the course evaluation that it was like a seminar organized by one professor but taught by 30 different media professionals.

There has been one other unexpected outcome: I met John Gardner, the senior author of *Good Work*, when he spoke at a national meeting for applied ethicists. To his credit, he appeared interested in what my students have been finding – extensions of (and in some cases, departures from) the findings of the *Good Work* book, which was based on a snowball sampling of contemporary journalists and lacking the historical depth that my students' work has offered. At the end of our brief conversation, Garner indicated I should consider presenting my students' efforts in a seminar at Harvard sometime. So far I have not taken Gardner up on his offer. But it is tempting, if only so my students' good work *about* good work can make its own contributions to the intellectual and professional discussions on this most important topic.

Snowboards and Slippery Slopes: Practicing Ethical Problem-Solving Under Pressure

Honorable Mention
Glen Feighery, University of Utah

Introduction: In this exercise, students role-play through a multi-layered ethical problem to practice making and defending hard choices in a limited time and amid changing circumstances.

Rationale: Can mass communicators act ethically and keep their jobs – especially when they're new? Ethics students don't get many chances to apply what they learn. This exercise helps them practice making decisions, articulating their values, and thinking on their feet.

Implementation:

- You (the instructor) are the moderator.
- List six ethical agents: a PR account representative, a PR manager, the owner of a PR firm, a TV reporter, a news director, and a station manager.
- Ask the class to divide into six roughly equal groups, one for each ethical agent. (Students can self-select by interest or by counting off 1-2-3-4-5-6.)
- Give the groups about 20 minutes to discuss the scenario (below) and questions. Each group will decide how its ethical agent will respond. Each group will choose a spokesperson, but everybody should contribute. You circulate among all groups. Do they have spokespeople? Are they systematically analyzing the scenario and separating the red herrings from the central moral issues? Can they articulate responses based on formal ethical principles?
- With students still in their groups, they begin role-playing through the scenario in "real time." Each group in turn answers the questions (below) and interacts with other groups.
- You prompt, hector, cajole, and add complications. Declare, for example, "Your boss says she's going to fire you. Why shouldn't she?" Challenge players to explain their principles. Get others to comment. Do the players stand their ground? Can they address new fac-

tors that you introduce?
• At the end, ask students to summarize what they learned. What principles did they apply? Did students connect specific situations with broader ideas? Did they show moral courage?

Scenario: The Sissela Snowboard Company has an explicit, legally binding non-disclosure policy. Rand Public Relations just won the Sissela account, and all personnel have signed Sissela's non-disclosure form. The Rand team is briefed about Sissela's new snowboard, which is half the price of conventional boards and goes twice as fast. After months working on a campaign to help Sissela dominate the market, Rand staffers attend a reception where food and wine flow freely. A junior Rand account rep lets the wine flow too freely and discloses everything about the Sissela snowboard to a reporter from KANT-TV, the top-rated local station.

Scenario Questions:

1. Account representative. You immediately feel sober. *What specifically do you do? Talk to someone? Take some action? Describe exactly what you'll do, when, and why.*

2. PR manager. You hear your account representative divulge the final piece of secret information to a TV reporter known to be aggressive. *Describe exactly what you'll do regarding your staffer, the reporter, and your client.*

3. Owner of the PR firm. You notice activity around one of your young account reps. You typically let managers handle personnel situations, and you see that the rep's boss is nearby. But something tells you to ask what's going on. *What do you do?*

4. KANT-TV reporter. What a scoop! This story fits your outdoor-oriented audience. You know snowboards, and this represents a real breakthrough. Also, your contract is up for renewal, and this could help you negotiate a raise. *What do you do? Why?*

5. News director. Winter recreation stories are the hottest feature of your newscasts and contribute substantially to your ratings. You notice that your reporter appears to have a good story and might want to speak with you. *What do you do?*

6. Station manager. You got the latest ratings report today, and they're slipping. Your audience loves recreation stories. Your news director just returned from a reception for Sissela Snowboards. Sissela also advertises with you. *What do you do? When? Why?*

Outcomes: Thinking systematically about duty, loyalties, and principles is central to ethics education. Students in this exercise apply those concepts to a professional situation they might encounter in journalism or public relations. This works in large and small classes and adapts to subjects such as communication history, where students can role-play through scenarios and compare their decisions to those of figures like Ben Day, Edward Bernays, or Edward R. Murrow.

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