

## **Ethical decision-making for communications professionals**

### **IDEA**

This assignment was developed to encourage students to work through the Potter Box (Potter, 1965, 1972), a tool used in ethical judgment making across media and business industries, to students in an introductory public relations course. The assignment could easily be tailored for other introductory communication courses that include a lesson on ethical principles and/or professional ethics.

By engaging in this two-part assignment, students are better able to understand how professional ethics and personal ethics might interplay in work dilemmas, as well as determine how various ethical principles may result in different choices. In my experience in teaching ethics, undergraduate students are often intimidated by the necessary philosophical discussions. In order to help them see how philosophers from hundreds (or thousands) of years ago, such as Immanuel Kant or Aristotle, relate to the work they will be doing in their future careers, I developed this assignment to provide them with an opportunity to apply these ethical principles to possible dilemmas that contemporary communications professionals might face.

The successful use of the Potter Box to teach ethics has been documented across business and communication courses (Backus & Ferraris, 2004; Watley, 2014). Moreover, the value of writing assignments and group discussion for student learning have been recognized for decades (Allwright, 1984; Herrington, 1981). This assignment utilizes this combination of pedagogical approaches to encourage both independent thought and interactivity.

### **GOALS**

The learning outcomes connected to this assignment are (1) identify the key components of the Potter Box (Facts, Values, Principles, and Loyalties) and of the ethical principles discussed in class material (Aristotle's Golden Mean, Kant's Categorical Imperative, Utilitarianism, Ross's prima facie duties, The Golden Rule, and Ethical altruism), (2) apply the key components of the ethical principles to an ethical dilemma situation (in which they are provided context and assigned a role) through careful deliberation of the dilemma, guided by the Potter Box model, and (3) demonstrate how one's personal ethics and professional ethics interplay in ethical decision-making at work through written and oral communication.

This assignment supports these learning outcomes by providing students the materials (readings, worksheets, and lecture materials on ethics) to highlight the key components of the ethical judgment tool and ethical principles, while also giving them the opportunity to develop their own understanding of the concepts through (1) applying the Potter Box model and an assigned ethical principle to navigate their response to an assigned professional ethical and (2) present the application of this tool lead them to their judgement of how to handle the dilemma in a short paper and subsequent peer-to-peer discussions.

### **STEP-BY-STEP RUNDOWN**

In order to be prepared for class on the day this assignment is introduced, students are expected to have completed the assigned reading on ethics from the course text book, as well as a brief handout explaining the Potter Box. The class lecture and discussion focus on concepts related to professional ethics, the six ethical principles mentioned above in the learning objectives discussion, and how to work through an ethical dilemma using the Potter Box.

During the portion of class dedicated to the ethical principles, students are asked to form six small groups. Each small group is assigned one of the ethical principles to discuss amongst themselves and prepare a short, impromptu presentation about their principle for their peers in the other groups. After each group presents their ethical principle, I provide additional clarification or insight to help aid in the class's understanding of the principle when necessary.

Once all groups have presented, the two-part assignment (individual paper and follow-up discussion) is introduced. Students are assigned a situation in which they are given a public relations practitioner role in an organization facing an ethical dilemma and one of the six ethical principles to help them decide how to move forward in the dilemma. In a class of 24 students, I have used four different scenarios [developed from Stacks & Wright (1989); see Appendix for assignment materials), which are randomly assigned to the students in each of the small groups. Ultimately, the goal is to end up with a situation where no two students are assigned the same scenario and ethical principle combination. Then, students are asked to review their individual scenarios and begin brainstorming with the other members of their ethical principle group how their assigned principle may apply to their scenarios.

Depending on the semester, students are then given five-seven days to consider the dilemma and write individual reports on how they utilized the Potter Box and assigned ethical principle to help guide them toward an ethical resolution. On the day the reports are due, students are then grouped by scenario (instead of by ethical principle like before) to discuss the various resolutions to the dilemma that they came up with through the exercise. At the conclusion of the small group discussion, the class comes together as a group once again, to debrief about the assignment and review how differences in personal and professional ethics can lead to different resolution decisions.

As an aside, the scenarios also vary in the type of organization (public vs. private). This difference can be tapped into in the final full-class discussion to consider how our expectations for organizations' behavior (and acceptance of 'less than ideal' behavior) may vary based on general organizational characteristics.

## **STUDENT TAKE-AWAYS**

When reflecting on the assignment, students have reported that it highlights:

-the value of the Potter Box in ethical decision-making:

- “The Potter Box allowed me to break down this decision into its parts, and when analyzed in the sections of ‘facts,’ values,’ ‘principles,’ and ‘loyalty,’ the initially complex ethical choice was made clear.”

-how to thoughtfully consider your ethical principles when addressing an ethical dilemma:

- “... helped me come to the conclusion that telling the truth would be in my best interest in order to follow ethical altruism.”