

Using controversial news stories to teach ethical decision making: A more engaging approach

Goal: To teach the application of ethics to real-world decision making in public relations

With this activity, students are introduced to a multimedia news topic involving an ethical dilemma in which multiple perspectives have been reported. Students are then asked to recommend a course of action from a PR practitioner's perspective. This activity takes at least 60-90 minutes and works best if completed over the course of two class periods. The class discussion is usually more robust if students have had a chance to think about the dilemma for a few days. However, if you are trying to replicate a fast-paced newsroom or a public relations crisis situation, it may be better to restrict the activity to one class period. I have used the activity in an introduction to public relations class to demonstrate the resources practitioners may use when deciding an ethical course of action. It is best placed in the calendar after covering how to identify and prioritize publics and after discussing the main ideas of philosophers such as Aristotle, Kant, Mill, Rawls, etc.

Instructions for the activity:

Prior to class:

1. Select three to five multimedia news stories from the month/semester/year that contain an ethical dilemma.
2. Download a PDF or print the article from the news organization's website.
3. Add the URL for each article to your favorites list to access in class.
4. Create a handout containing a description of the Potter Box decision-making guide for class discussion if your textbook doesn't include this content.
5. Create a summary page describing the general theories of moral philosophers such as Aristotle's Golden Mean, Kant's Categorical Imperative, Mill's Utilitarianism, etc. if your textbook doesn't include this content.
6. Write questions asking students to work through the steps of the Potter Box while considering their topic and 1. Recommend a course of action to address the dilemma inherent in the news story and 2. Explain which of the philosophers would support this decision.
7. Type the headlines of the news stories on a page and cut them into small strips with each strip containing one story topic.
8. Fold the strips of paper and put them in an envelope.

During class:

1. Introduce the class activity by describing what the Potter Box is and how it can be used as a guide for making ethical decisions (10 minutes).
2. Review the main ideas of each philosopher's moral theory (5 minutes).
3. Lead the class through an example of the process using a sample news topic (10-15 minutes).
4. Introduce the class to each topic for that day's activity by playing audio or video clips from the news organization's website (about 5 minutes for each topic).

5. Divide the class into groups of three to five students by having students number off according to the number of news topics and then get into groups that share a number. The smaller the group, the more each member will engage in the discussion and decision-making process.
6. Have one member of the group choose a topic from the envelope (#8 above).
7. Give the groups about 30-45 minutes to work through the Potter Box decision-making process and to decide an ethical course of action.
8. Reconvene the students and discuss each group's decision-making process. Have the students tell the class what their group decided and which philosophy their approach best fits (about 15-20 minutes per group).

Suggestions:

If you are pressed for time, you can have students work through the Potter Box decision guide handout outside of class then have the groups present their deliberations and decision to the class the next class period.

The articles don't have to be about breaking news. If the story has been developing for a period of a year or more, it can add more depth to the decision-making process and class discussion. It is important to choose stories that have been reported in multimedia formats. Using NPR stories, for example, gives you access to the audio story, video clips and a transcript on their website. The multimedia aspect of the stories aids in the execution of this assignment because you are able to play audio and video of the story prior to the activity. This gives the whole class a quick synopsis of each topic so students in one group will know the gist of the topic the other groups are considering. A PDF or printed copy of the story allows the discussion groups to reference the full story while answering questions from the Potter Box handout.

This GIFT activity works well if you need to make a disability accommodation. I first used this approach when I needed to introduce the activity to a sight-impaired student as well as the rest of the class in a timely manner. Playing a sound bite of each topic gave all the students quick background on all the discussion topics as well as the one their group would address. This reduced the amount of class time it took to introduce the activity and gave the groups more time to work. It also corrected a previous problem of students not reading the assignment before the class activity. This way all members of the group have the same information to work with, so I have continued this approach even when not making an accessibility accommodation.

Possible Adaptations:

This can be adapted for lessons in ethics across the journalism curriculum. It can also be used to demonstrate how public opinion evolves if students are given a pre/post discussion survey of their opinions on the controversial news topic.

Student response:

Student enthusiasm and engagement were very high when using this approach to teaching ethical decision making, much higher than for a traditional lecture, because they see the practical relevance of the ethics and philosophy lessons. The more complex or strange the news item, the better the student engagement.