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Lesson Plan: Ethics and Decision Making

I have created materials that allow for an assortment of approaches to teaching these ethics modules. Basically, the first module on ethics is designed as a stand-alone module where student read about and learn about the various approaches to ethics. I have incorporated many questions into the slideware presentation that can be removed or changed as needed. Using my own test slides, I covered all the material and most of the discussion questions. While I did skip over a few questions that I thought had been touched on while discussing other topics in the class, I have intentionally incorporated more questions than necessary so that you can decide which ones to keep. My goal was also to assess whether I could cover all of the material in one 75-minute class session. Which I did. Obviously, adjust the slides as you see fit, based on your own individual lecture style.

The second module is intended to describe many of the features that go into decision making. In the introductory video I stress how ethics *are* essentially decisions that are also guided by rhetorical and informational choices. I.e., doing research on a problem makes it possible to make better decisions, but how we frame a problem also influences how we look at it, etc. Most of the topics on the list are basic decision making concepts taught in courses called Decision-Making.

My ultimate goal in the two modules is for students to

- (1) Understand the various ethical frameworks, be able to apply them in various situations, and become more aware of their own ethical orientations and ethical decision-making strategies.
- (2) Understand that the ethical frameworks *are* decisions.
- (3) Understand that decision-making is a complicated process that is informed by research, and the ethical approach that we take, as well as by other situational, cultural, economic, etc. variables.
- (4) For students to understand that by learning how people make decisions, we can make better decisions ourselves. And also, for students to understand how to help others make good decisions.
- (5) For students to understand ethics and decision-making, and learn that by identifying the ethical frameworks, dominant incentives, etc. of others, we can become better group decisions makers and better organizational members.

The final part of the module is the incorporation of a simulation/role-playing activity that students do in class. I updated the topic of the simulation for this module, but in the past, I have used a similar simulation to teach how to understand ethics and how to identify the ethical positions of others. The module can be used as a stand-alone activity, or it could be incorporated into the lecture from Module II. I used the module II lecture (minus the discussion questions) and did the simulation in the same day, but typically I do two weeks on ethics and would cover codes of ethics first, ethical orientations second, decision making third, and the ethical activity on the last day. However, assuming the students have done their reading, both modules and the simulation can be done in two class periods.

Recommended Materials (not provided)

1. Prepare a one-page summary of the ethical orientations, or require each student to prepare one before the Module I Lecture.
2. Prepare a summary of the decision-making frameworks, or require each student to prepare one before the Module II Lecture.
3. Prepare a checklist for the student audience members with the things they should be looking for: ethical orientations of each participant, decision making strategies, etc. Note: each scenario includes a dominant incentive as well heuristics and biases, a base rate preference, etc.

Module I

Housekeeping issues (0–5 minutes)

Video Introduction to Lecture (2 minutes)

Remainder of class to cover the slides and incorporated questions (~65 minutes)

Alternatives

1. As above but assign the students one of the ethical questions as an essay that they must prepare as homework for the next class (to discuss or just get feedback on). Be sure to remind students to focus on public relations examples and issues in their answers.
2. As above but have the students respond to a public relations oriented essay question or ethical scenario, *before class*, that they can incorporate into the class.
3. Assign each member of the class a different ethical orientation (double or triple up as needed) and make them accountable for discussing it during lecture or after.
4. Incorporate an electronic discussion board to talk about ethical public relations situations and how they might be decided differently depending upon the approach taken.
5. Remove the questions from the slides, cover the material (about 40 minutes), and then have the students answer some of the questions at the end about the material.
6. Remove the questions from the slides, cover the material (about 40 minutes), and then, break the students up into two groups and have the students debate the merits of various ethical approaches: absolutist vs. situational, situational vs. deontology, etc.
7. As above, but have the student each take a few minutes 5–10 to work out answers and individual examples to some of the questions and then discuss them.

Module II

Housekeeping issues (0–5 minutes)

Video Introduction to Lecture (2 minutes)

Remainder of class to cover the slides and incorporated questions (~65 minutes)

Alternatives

1. As noted above, if the instructor intends to do Module II and the simulation on the same day, the slides and any questions asked must be completed in about 30 minutes max. Students might then be directed to review the various ethical orientations from the previous class, and then the nine character roles can be distributed and students given five minutes to study their role and take notes for themselves. During this time, the instructor should explain to the class that their task is to try and identify the various ethical orientations of each student participating in the simulation, as well as identifying features of how they make decisions (heuristics, biases, dominant incentive, framing, etc.).

While the simulation is taking place, the instructor may need to offer some explanations or “private notes” of advice to participants. Once the discussion starts to wane, or depending on the class time remaining, halt the simulation and see how accurate the students were at identifying the various ethical and decision-making orientations. The participants should also have the opportunity to make some comments at this time.

2. Another option is to take an entire class for the simulation, spending time at the beginning of class reviewing the ethical and decision-making orientations, and then taking more time for the simulation, giving the participants more time to review their readings, take notes, and prepare, and talking the class through their role as the audience before the simulation begins.
3. Another option for an instructor not interested in the simulation would be to cover the decision making strategies and questions, and then, drawing upon a public relations situation or issue (ethical scenario, crisis, etc.), have the students discuss how the various decision making strategies/concepts influenced or could influence the outcome. I.e., as described above, a political issue could be used to talk about framing, heuristics and biases, etc.