

Assessing Ethics: Evaluating Coursework whilst Respecting Value Diversity in Bioethics

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Introduction

- A model for assessing learning on an applied ethics module in the Human Sciences Dept. at Londonmet – BM2008N Bioethics .
- Evaluating student learning whilst respecting plural & diverse personal ethical standpoints & value sets within cohorts.
- An example of successfully engaging students with a course.
- Very good student attendance & achievement.

A Diverse Student Body

- The student body at Londonmet is diverse in terms of background, situation & experience but also re: epistemological standpoints.
- Students hold a variety of different views about ethics & morality, often stemming from different social, cultural, religious or secular, perspectives, approaches, experiences, habits.

The Module: BM2008N Bioethics

- Intermediate level undergraduate core module for BSc (Hons) Biological Sciences, Biochemistry; optional for Biomedical Science, etc.
- Fairly large student numbers – approx. 90 students take it in the autumn, and 40 in spring. Smaller discussion classes where possible.

The Module Aims

- To introduce the underlying concepts of ethics and processes of ethical decision-making;
- To offer an opportunity for in-depth examination of specific ethical issues in modern biology and medicine;
- To develop moral reasoning skills, and to provide a supportive environment for the development of competence in written and oral presentation.

Module Structure

- Briefly, the module is taught in 3 phases:
- Phase 1 - lectures introducing philosophical ethics and normative ethical theories applied in bioscience, with follow-up discussion classes;
- Phase 2 – lectures/seminars studying bioethical case-studies & critically exploring the application of theory to practice;
- Phase 3 – preparation for group presentations.

Assessment Strategy

- The module is summatively assessed on 3 items of coursework:
- 1. an essay describing & critically analysing ethical theory (e.g. deontology, utilitarianism);
- 2. a set of questions dealing with the application of ethics to a given bioethical case-study(e.g. euthanasia; genetic testing; organ transplants; stem cell research,etc.)
- 3. a group presentation describing and discussing possible ethical solutions to a bioethical dilemma.

How to Assess Ethics Learning?

- On BM2008N my aim was to develop a means to assess student learning of the plural ethical approaches forming the curriculum, whilst at the same time facilitating and assessing their development of their own personal preferred means of ethical deliberation and value judgment.
- An emphasis on students developing their *own* ethical ideas & becoming *independent critical & reflective learners* in ethics – less focus on coming up with the ‘right’ answers!

How to Assess Ethics Learning?

- Critical thinking in groups. Building a 'community of enquiry'. Responsive to the specific situation of each particular group of students & foster a sense of community, of shared purpose re: studying bioethics. Engaged pedagogy.
- Be aware of & aim to diffuse hierarchies & power struggles that may emerge in diverse groups.

How to Assess Ethics Learning?

- Learning from each other, not just from the teacher/books/web.
- Facilitating debate and discussion across difference. Deepening critical & analytic skills through studying with diverse others.
- Socratic dialoguing – systematic questioning; requiring reasons; open but purposive enquiry; working out one's own values & beliefs through communicating with others.

The Group Presentation

- Students are required to prepare and present on a bioethical dilemma, in groups of 4.
- They are given a selection of dilemmas from which they can choose, but alternatively are allowed to focus on a situation they have personally experienced, or have heard about from people they know, or from the media.
- They are each given an individual assessment mark for their participation in the presentation.

The Group Presentation

- What happened when students were asked to present in groups on bioethical dilemmas?
- They often chose case-studies from personal experience, though they appreciated the guidance of the given examples.
- They usually worked well in their groups – the result of building a learning community. Shared purpose.
- They chose different ways to deliver their presentations, e.g. OHP; posters; whiteboard; re-enacting a scenario exemplifying a bioethical dilemma.

The Group Presentation

- Some students chose to use drama techniques/role play to re-enact bioethical case-studies, and to think through to ethical solutions and justifications.
- Examples: a scenario where a pregnant woman is trying to decide whether or not to have an abortion; parents of a teenager on a ventilator after an accident trying to decide whether to switch off the machine; a medic trying to decide whether or not to disclose the full prognosis to a patient; a genetic researcher deciding what level of risk is acceptable, etc.

Group Presentation – Role Play

- Interestingly, students seemed to use this form as a means to enter into & reflect on the standpoint & experience of the individuals involved in dilemmas, & to take this into consideration when deliberating about which ethical approach they would personally endorse.
- Uncovering hidden assumptions through role-play – especially when playing the role of someone with a different view to student's own.

Group Presentation – Role Play

- Students level of engagement with abstract ethical theory grew markedly when they applied it in their dramatisations, making it ‘come to life’. Narrative ethics.
- Not just learning about ethics, but actively developing ethical skills. Reasoning – but what else? Attitudes? Dispositions? Much discussion about this in classes.

The Group Presentation

- Students were able to develop deepening critical thinking skills about what the ethical issues precisely were, what the points of disagreement between different ethical approaches might be, and where there might be points of interconnection or potential for arriving at consensus.

Student Feedback

- Student feedback on this module has been consistently favourable.
- Students often comment on their enjoyment of the lively discussion classes where they are asked to debate & discuss in depth a selection of bioethical dilemmas. The open, participatory nature of these classes seems to appeal to and work well for the wide range of types of learner on the module.
- Students comment on how valuable the assessed group presentation was for them in terms of developing & exercising their presentation skills, & consolidating their critical thinking in bioethics.

Student Feedback - examples

- “At the end of each session I always go home with thoughts running around my mind based on what’s been taught, or a debate that took place in class, & it makes me think instead of just memorising.”
- “The lectures were interesting & engaging & I appreciate the fact that everyone could participate in the discussions. I would recommend anyone who can to choose this module!”
- “ We don’t always agree in class discussions – but this didn’t matter & we were all able to join in with our different views. It really helped me get my own view straight.”

Final Thoughts

- A successful model for engaging and assessing diverse students.
- Very good student attendance/feedback/achievement
- I'll continue exploring ways to facilitate the development of inclusive communities of learners/enquirers across diversity.
- Suggestions?