

[W5] Stand in another's shoes. A 'Values and Rights' exercise to develop and assess students' ethical awareness

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Biomedical ethics has been taught in various guises in the School of Applied Sciences at Wolverhampton, from its inception in the early 1980s as part of an Honours Special Study Module to its current format of a full final year module entitled 'Biomedical Ethics'. The focus of study is enshrined in the stated learning outcomes of the module whereby students are expected to be able to:

1. Present and maintain a coherent moral position on the experience of human subjects in biomedicine, and sympathise with divergent and opposing ethical standpoints
2. Articulate that research with human subjects cannot be wholly isolated from its social, philosophical, ethnic and gender context.

In general, methods used to assess ethics learning are seen to be contentious, particularly in view of the potential diversity of aims. Whilst some proponents suggest a skills and knowledge based, decision making approach others prefer to use measures of moral development and value preference (Goldie, 2000). To allow students to demonstrate that they have achieved these learning outcomes, a 'Values and Rights' exercise has been developed that permits students to learn through the process of assessment. Students are presented with three descriptions of ethical 'dilemmas' for resolution. These dilemmas cover issues such as voluntary euthanasia, rights to treatment or animal experimentation.

An example might read as follows:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has suffered a severe stroke. Although conscious, he is unable to communicate either by word or gesture and acknowledges nothing. Neither does it appear that he is able to comprehend any information passed to him orally or visually. He has to be fed parenterally and is incapable of attending to any of his personal functions. It is possible by a combination of extremely costly, high risk surgery and extensive rehabilitation that the Chancellor may be restored to his previous condition. True to his socialist principles, the Chancellor has always refused private health care and is dependent on the National Health Service. He is acknowledged as a man of formidable intellect and an economic genius on the verge of resolving some of the country's greatest financial problems. However, observers comment that with a family history of cardiovascular problems, he should have taken more care with his diet and stopped his 60 cigarettes a day smoking habit. Is there any ethical obligation to provide funds or procedures to try to cure him?

Needless to say there is no limit to the range of topics and descriptions that might be used. However, in accordance with the first learning outcome stated, students are not expected to provide their own views but approach each dilemma from a selection of ethical 'stances'. Examples of these stances include a utilitarian position, a contractual view, and a perspective of self interest. Students receive a full description of each of these stances and are expected to 'resolve' each dilemma in terms of each of the stances. An example of a contractual view would run as follows:

Moral choice is based on the idea of contracts between people (social contract). People matter as ends in themselves and deserve equal and fair treatment and justice(?). In order to make contracts fair the strong should have no greater bargaining power than the weak, and in practice should exercise any discrimination in favour of the weak. To do this people must agree on the principles of justice under a 'veil of ignorance' without knowing the position they will hold in society and ignorant of their own strengths and weaknesses. As in any bargaining for a contract each party will try to do the best for themselves but, since they are veiled in ignorance, asking what is best for themselves is the same as asking them to decide impartially what is best for everyone. This is actually a generalisation of the Golden Rule, or putting oneself in other people's shoes. Such impartial contractors will distribute benefits equally, unless it is to the benefit of the least well off.

Currently the exercise is used for a summative assessment at the mid-point of the module. Students receive the exercise one week before the assessment takes place and are encouraged to discuss this with as wide an audience as they choose. One week later they complete a dedicated answer sheet under examination, time constrained conditions. Staff mark the exercise using a comprehensive mark scheme and depending on the size of the module, the students receive a grade and rapid feedback on their arguments. In this way, the exercise serves a highly formative function and in the final summative assessment of the module we find that there is a more 'open minded' way of thinking by the students. Students perform well on this assessment in that it is possible for them to achieve high grades and it is unusual for them to experience failure. External examiners, past and present have commented favourably on both the design of the exercise and its completion by candidates. Interestingly the assessment receives favourable comment on student module evaluation forms.

This exercise is used, at present, for summative assessment; however it has considerable utility and can be used in a number of different ways to encourage ethical thinking in students:

- As a tutorial exercise without the formality of any mark scheme – simply a stimulus for discussion and argument
- As a formative exercise
- As a formative exercise with the mark scheme issued for self-assessment
- As a formative exercise with the mark scheme for peer-assessment
- As a summative exercise with the mark scheme issued for self-assessment
- As a summative exercise with the mark scheme for peer-assessment

As a device to encourage students to engage with the dilemmas posed by ethical conundrums this exercise of making them 'stand in another's shoes' provides a useful learning experience.

Reference

Goldie, J. (2000) Review of ethics curricula in undergraduate medical education. *Medical Education* **34** 108-119.