



The best way to teach ethics may not be about the content of ethics at all but the process by which students learn.

Not teaching ethics

Let students learn ethics by experiencing ethical behavior through Socratic seminar.

By Alexis Wiggins

WHEN I STARTED TEACHING, I naively thought that the best way to teach ethics was to instill in my students a strong set of moral values. I posted artwork and political posters on my classroom walls. I forbade the use of derogatory terms related to race, gender, or sexual orientation in my classroom. I happily schooled my Women's Literature class, especially the wary males, in feminist theory. In short, straight out of college and teaching high school seniors who weren't much younger than me, I thought it was my duty to inculcate these students with my moral beliefs.

That didn't work out so well. I wound up isolating more students than I ever impressed with my frequent admonitions.

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Further on in my career, I thought I was doing better by leading students through complex discussions of ethics via the literature we read. I no longer moralized to them on the plight of female authors, but instead asked them to think about the challenges to women writers throughout history in comparison to their male counterparts.

Eventually, I realized that the best way to teach ethics may not be about the content of ethics at all but the process by which students learn. My self-perception shifted. I was no longer a teacher who led

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students through the study of ethics; I was a coach who drew upon the innate ethical talent in her athletes. Ethical conduct derives from more than just analysis; the goal is to affect behavior and ultimately produce thoughtful, ethical people. Teachers should encourage students not only to examine ethical issues in English class, but also to experience ethical and unethical conduct directly. For me, the most effective way to do this has been through Socratic seminar.

A Socratic seminar in my classroom looks like this: Students sit in a U-shape or circle so that every student can see every other one. Students have a hand-out that details expectations for the discussion:

- Every discussion should have balanced participation (shy people are encouraged to speak and loquacious ones don't dominate);
- Students should cite the text often to support ideas or clarify questions;
- Students don't talk over one another, interrupt, or put down other ideas; and
- The discussion should build, "get somewhere," and raise everyone's understanding.

The catch is that nearly all of this gets done without the teacher speaking. Usually, I sit off to the side, or even in the back, listening carefully and taking notes.

More than ground rules

How do I make this happen? The months-long process begins with an explanation of the seminar, practice seminars, and feedback to students after each seminar. When students really begin to get it and discussions take flight without my leading them, I begin grading the seminars, which is the keystone to the entire process, because students earn a collective grade. If a given seminar is excellent, every student gets an A on it; if it stinks, they all get a

D. This means students can't get a good grade on seminar if one person is spouting brilliance, but no one else can get a word in edgewise. Or if everyone speaks eloquently and equally, but only two people refer to the text. Or if they collectively explore the most meaningful aspects of the text in great depth, but keep interrupting each other. Essentially, they all sink or swim.

A class debate on whether this assessment method is fair or not might make for a lively ethical debate in and of itself. And I've taught in schools where the assessment structure didn't allow me to actually include these grades in final student grades, so I just left them as symbolic grades. I still "graded" student seminars and announced the grade at the end of each seminar, but the grade wasn't calculated into their course grade.

The real point here, however, is not the assessment — that's just a means for achieving quality seminars — but rather the ethical culture that naturally develops out of a Socratic seminar with these criteria. When the entire group is rewarded for encouraging everyone to be engaged, students become more aware of their peers and more empathetic. A student who might usually dominate a discussion with her ideas soon learns to ask another student her thoughts. A student who interrupts another quickly discovers that such behavior works against him and others, excuses himself, and asks the interrupted student to continue. A student who would never speak if not called upon learns how to speak up during seminar, often surprising the rest of the class with his insights (many of us erroneously assume that quiet students have little to say). After several years of running Socratic seminars this way, I've learned that the class dynamic changes radically when students shift their view of themselves as stars — the brightest thinkers or the most prolific contributors — to players on a team with a common goal. Students relax. They bounce ideas off each other. They help each other out. They speak up more or less and they tend to be kinder and more inclusive to one another in class. Discussions become very, very good because the group, not the individual, is rewarded for it, and nobody wants to bring down the rest of the group. I have at times been blown away by the questions raised, insights made, and conclusions drawn, all without my interference.

Stepping aside

I have learned that students also can explore profound ethical questions in literature on their own, and can do so while modeling ethical behavior.

This doesn't mean the teacher has no role. Just as a coach guides her team to a win without getting on the field herself, so the teacher helps students create the

best possible discussion without leading it herself.

I do often like to join the discussion once it's gotten going — but never when it stalls. I learned early that if I rescue them, the whole process is doomed. But I like to join in by throwing out a provocative question, often an ethical one. When I was teaching at an affluent international school in the Persian Gulf, I joined a discussion about *The Great Gatsby* by asking, "Can money buy happiness?" The class immediately erupted, responding heatedly on both sides, and talking over one another. But, when they reminded each other to quiet down and speak one at a time, they gave many reasons for and against the argument that money can buy happiness. One student spoke earnestly, saying, "Those of you who say money can buy happiness only say that because you don't have money. I can honestly say that I often wish I didn't have money because people without money can look at a bird and find meaning and beauty in it. I can't. It all seems empty to me."

That poignant moment reflected the ethical message of *The Great Gatsby* better than I could have. But it was really born of an hour-long, student-led discussion before my question. Students often share more openly and more profoundly when they're managing the discussion themselves.

When students get pretty good at Socratic seminar, I encourage *them* to ask good questions more often and remind them that one well-worded and well-timed question can be worth 50 comments. By the middle of the school year, my classes are often asking and answering deep and complicated ethical questions drawn from their texts without any prodding from me. In that same school, I found that Ibsen's *Ghosts* came alive and provided hours of riveting discussion on social mores, gossip, and religious hypocrisy — as seen not only through the lens of Ibsen's 20th-century Norway, but also through that of students' modern-day Islamic culture. Through seminars, students could ask the most difficult ethical questions about themselves, their religion, and their culture — a fairly taboo topic that I would never have broached if leading the discussion myself — and to do so in a thoughtful, productive way.

The questions that arise from these discussions, whether from students or the teacher, can make good paper topics or be developed into thesis statements. In addition to questions, anticipation guides can make wonderful companions for Socratic seminar when it comes to examining eth-

ics. A teacher reading *Oedipus Rex* with his class might hand out a brief anticipation guide, asking students to agree or disagree with statements such as: "It is wrong to question society's beliefs," and "The end justifies the means." My students often refer back to these statements after they're engaged in the Socratic seminar, and I find they help them understand the texts' themes, as well as anchor the class in ethical issues raised by the book.

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Inspiring ethical inquiry and growth in students could happen in many different ways. But I've found that the best strategy for instruction of ethics has been, paradoxically, not to instruct very much at all. Instead, I help students learn to ask each other and themselves what they think. Socratic seminar has allowed my classes to examine ethics while negotiating the ethics of group work. I reach far more students this way than when I was more directive in how I worked with students. And, ultimately, if the goal is to produce thoughtful, ethical adults, there is no better way than by asking them to be thoughtful, ethical teenagers. **K**



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