**Student-Authored Ethics Vignettes: Giving Voice to Values All Semester**

Like many undergraduate organizational behavior (OB) courses taught to undergraduate business students, ours includes a unit on ethics meant to complement a stand-alone course within the degree program. The approach taken in the OB course is to focus on helping students identify the possible actions that can be taken when faced with an ethical dilemma, understand the opposition they may face, and consider strategies for articulating and defending their choice. This follows the tactics promoted by Mary C. Gentile (2010) in her seminal book, “Giving Voice to Values”.

Below is a description of how the OB unit on ethics can be taught using student-authored ethics vignettes (mini-cases) embedded throughout the semester. This gives students multiple opportunities to discuss ethical issues in conjunction with course content and a chance to practice the GVV tactics. Benefits of this approach include having numerous very short cases that are accessible to traditionally-aged college students and heightening their curiosity about how their peers may or may not make the same decisions as themselves. Students also learn what really happened to the anonymous classmate who experienced the situation and wrote about it. With repetition of this activity during the semester, students improve in their ability to identify options and plan arguments to back their positions.

**Pedagogical theory:**

Much has been written about how best to teach ethics in business schools and to what end. That is, there is debate over whether the purpose is to instill a set of values that will guide future behavior or to create a broader awareness of the ethical challenges to be faced and the various frameworks to make sense of them. More recently it’s been pointed out that business education has focused ineffectively on having students review ethical decisions rather than focusing on process, such as teaching them how people experience and can react to ethical dilemmas (Gentile, 2010; Rest, 1986).

There have been calls to help students develop “moral courage” and the ability to argue and defend their decisions (Jones, 1989). Rest (1986) suggested that students must first recognize when they are faced with an ethical issue, after which they can consider their own role and how to react, form an intent to do so, and then act on the situation. The Giving Voice to Values” (GVV) framework developed by Gentile (2010). It focuses on how a values-based decision in the face of an ethical dilemma can translate effectively into action only after one has taken the time to understand the potential opposition and formulate a strategy that incorporates plans for whom to speak with, about what, with what data and in what manner, and ideally has been practiced (Gentile, 2010). The strengths of this approach includes a focus on first-person, practical skill development, and an emphasis on action and expressing values within an organizational context (Edwards & Kirkham, 2014).

Classroom techniques to increase the effectiveness of business ethics education include making it relevant and experiential, and having a classroom climate that fosters discussion (Sims, 2002). The traditional printed business case relegates students to a passive analyst role reading information that has been filtered by a "distant outside party" (Bailey, Sass, Swiercz, Seal & Kayes, 2005). Decision cases also build critical thinking skills (Meisel & Fearon, 2006) and as applied experiential ethics exercises, they can help students link their values with the organizational context and possible actions (Sims and Sims, 1991). And, discussing the pros and cons of various decision options can lead students to change their responses to an ethical situation (Peek, Peek, & Horras, 1994). While students do not necessarily emotionally resonate with traditional cases, when students share their personal experiences in class, it generates enthusiasm, and an interest in listening. Discussing ethical situations in class helps them to understanding different views held by their peers (Robinson & Kakela, 2006). Stories told by peers engage students’ attention and teach from the firsthand experiences (Steslow & Gardner, 2011) resulting in focused and highly engaged student interaction (Laditka & Houck, 2006).

Students report that the advantages of writing a case about an ethical dilemma they experienced ranges from reflection to self-evaluation to catharsis to justifying to themselves a previous ethical decision; it also prepares them for future decisions by increasing awareness of possible ethical decisions, potential bias, and how others handled such situations (Laditka & Houck, 2006). My own experience with assigning student-authored ethical vignettes has been that students are less likely to dismiss the ethical situations presented by peers as irrelevant or too distant to matter to themselves, which they occasionally do when given cases about senior executive misdeeds at large corporations. Additionally, students report that they enjoy hearing how peers would or would not make the same decision that they did, and why.

Below a process for embedding student-authored cases in an organizational behavior course is described and a lesson plan is provided for a single class session utilizing these cases and a stripped down version of the GVV model. In addition, a few teaching tips are provided as well as four sample student-authored (and faculty edited) vignettes and epilogues. Also included is an outline for an ELA session that would be based on this paper.

**Embedding student-authored ethics cases in an Organizational Behavior course**

This section outlines an overall plan for soliciting and then embedding student authored ethical vignettes throughout the semester in a course such as Organizational Behavior. It is possible to modify this as a stand-alone activity for one class session.

**Explain to the class how the student-authored vignettes/cases will be used**

It is helpful to set student expectations around this assignment when reviewing the syllabus at the start of the semester. Students are informed that not only will they read and discuss ethical situations, they will also write about an ethical situation they experienced. At this stage it is helpful to indicate that the some, but not all, of the students’ cases will be used anonymously for class discussions. And if used, the instructor will change the company name and possibly other names in the stories to disguise them. While close friends may recognize an unusual or unique setting (e.g., a snowboarding manufacturing facility) or situation that the student has previously talked about, typically most classmates won’t know who wrote the case unless the student authors choose to reveal that at the end of the class discussions.

**Assign writing of ethical situations as homework:**

Within the first few weeks of the semester, assign homework in which students write about an ethical situation they experienced (or witnessed) in the workplace. If students have little or no work experience, they could instead write about an ethical situation faced in a team project, while volunteering, etc. Encourage them to write concisely, but to fully describe the situation in a few paragraphs. The ‘epilogue’ to the dilemma should be written up in a separate paragraph. It is necessary for students to turn this homework in electronically (see editing section below).

The following directions elicited well-formulated vignettes from students:

*You will describe a situation that involved an ethical situation in an organization, non-profit, business, school, etc. that you personally experienced (first-hand or second-hand) as a paid employee, athlete, intern, customer volunteer, etc. Your write-up needs to come from real life!*

*Your* ***half-page ethical dilemma*** *should cover the following: clearly describe what the unethical decision/situation was (and if happened once or more frequently), who was involved including your role, where this happened (company, type of business, etc.). Add in the details about the people and company that will help your classmates truly picture themselves in this situation. In your write-up, use the company’s real name. The company and any names in your paper will be disguised if it is selected to be used in class (and your name will not be shown either).*

*Your* ***1 paragraph epilogue*** *should tell us three things: (a) what was the final decision and the actions taken by you or others who were facing this ethical dilemma? (b) what happened as a result? i.e., what were the outcomes? And, (c) now that you are thinking back about it, what else could have been done and why?*

**Identify the vignettes to be used**

While grading the homework, identify which of the student-authored situations could be paired with topics to be covered later in the semester. Not all cases will be useful for ethics discussions as some may be better suited as examples to be tied to other class discussions. The reason for this is that some students do not actually describe ethical situations in their homework, but rather describe a situation when they perceived unfairness or abusive behavior by bosses or peers. In some cases, they may not have taken the course ethics course prior to OB and are unable to differentiate correctly ethical situations from those that are not. Of the homework papers that do present ethical dilemmas, instructors may decide that some should be culled if inappropriate for the course or too unique for students to perceive relevance of their future career experiences with that situation.

*Example*: students in my Organizational Behavior course wrote about a wide variety of situations. Some described power abuses by people in positions of authority or by those who had informal power bases, some described instances of group dynamics that were unfair (though not unethical). Some wrote about managers behaving ethically or unethically, which factored into a later decision the student employee had to make. Others described peers who stole, cheated or lied, in contexts ranging from sports teams, to the workplace to class project groups. An older veteran who had worked in a mine wrote about a laborer disobeying safety rules and who ultimately had a horrific accident and loss of limbs. In reading these, I chose 2-3 scenarios each to be used in future class sessions when we covered power, group dynamics, leadership, motivation, etc. See Appendix 1 for redacted samples of what to expect from average students.

**Edit the vignettes to be used**

The students’ cases will vary in the extent to which they need to be edited for use in class. All of them should be redacted to allow students the choice to remain anonymous authors. While this means removing names, it is too awkward and not effective to remove all contextual information such as the type of business, sport team, or even a reference to a military setting. Cases can distract the class if certain points are belabored, or if they include rants, tangents or excessive minutia. For these, a judicial shortening turns the ethical situation into an effective vignette for this activity. It is best to maintain the students’ own words and writing style as much as possible. Ideally though, the edited vignette should end at the point of the decision to be made. If the student’s homework bled the epilogue with the case or artificially narrowed the choices available, this should be adjusted so that the vignette elicits maximum discussion.

Create a separate instructor document with both the vignettes and the epilogues, as the latter will be referenced at the end of the class discussion. For each vignette jot down possible actions available to the protagonist (e.g., tell the boss about observed theft, not tell the boss, confront thief directly).

It is also helpful to keep a master list of cases and authors, in the event that you wish to get student permission to share redacted cases/epilogues with adjuncts or others teaching the same course. Students have been very agreeable when asked if other instructors can use their redacted cases, particularly after they experience the class session where their authorship was not revealed. [Suggestion: do not distribute the cases to instructors teaching different courses, as that creates the possibility that students will be exposed to the same case across multiple courses.]

**Plan the class session and distribution of vignettes**

Depending on your course design, students can be given the vignettes in advance of the class session in order to prepare written answers to discussion questions. Alternatively, they could be given a handout in class to read and discuss. For the latter option, giving students *all* vignettes to read and prepare while in class would require too much time, so it would be more efficient to divide them into separate groups whereby each group is assigned only one of the vignettes to focus on. If each group is provided a hard copy of only one case, each group would need to summarize the vignette for the class prior to debriefing it with the class. If the printed handout includes all cases, students have something in front of them to refer to during the larger class discussion.

The design of the in class activity can vary in the time allocated to it. The class activity described here can be adjusted as needed by limiting time spent in small group or larger class discussion and/or by limiting the number of vignettes that are assigned as homework.

**Individual class session plan (may be repeated throughout the semester):**

**Learning goals**:

* Students will examine ethical dilemmas from multiple perspectives.
* Students will deconstruct possible opposition to what they deem to be an appropriate response to an ethical dilemma.
* Students will identify tactics and strategies to bolster actions in response to ethical dilemmas.

**Timing**:

Approximately 30 minutes for two cases. Expect about 3 minutes for coordination and instructions, 7-8 minutes for discussion within subgroups, and 4-5 minutes per subgroup to make their case. Each case will have at least two subgroups.

**Class session:**

1. Homework should be due at the start of class. Students should read all of the assigned vignettes and answer the following questions for each:
2. What is at stake for the author? What is at stake for others in this situation?
3. What should the author do regarding this situation?
4. What are the arguments for and against the action you suggest?
5. In class, break students into groups. The number of groups should equal the number of vignettes. It’s okay if there are 10-15 students in a group, they will be subdivided in Step III.
6. Assign each group one vignette. Instruct students that the first step is not to discuss the case, but to subdivide their group. This should be done by making a quick list of the decision options from homework question (b) and with a quick show of hands determine who is in favor of each option (without discussing the reasoning or case). The voting determines how to divide into smaller groups based on actions proposed. It is okay if subgroups are uneven in size.
7. Each subgroup is aware of the range of decision options for their vignette by virtue of the previous step. In regard to the action their subgroup proposed, have each discuss the following:
   1. What is at stake for the people who disagree with your subgroup’s proposed action?
   2. What pushback or arguments might be expected from them?
   3. How should the protagonist rebut those arguments?
8. When they are ready, bring their attention back for a larger class discussion.
   1. Ask one of the students who focused on the first vignette to give a one minute summary of the case situation and the list of possible actions that could be taken.
   2. Ask one subgroup to identify what action they supported, and:
      1. What do they believe is at stake for the people who will disagree with them?
      2. What pushback or arguments do they expect to face?
      3. What strategy would they use to follow the action they proposed?
   3. Have the other subgroups for that vignette answer the same three questions. Throughout the brief presentations, encourage the class to respond to the depth and breadth of the arguments and strategies, to make recommendations or suggestions and perhaps to play devil’s advocate. This will simulate in a controlled manner some of the pushback that the subgroup had discussed, but didn’t actually experience while considering a response to the ethical dilemma. The intent is to get them to role model persistence with their planned response as they maintain commitment to their values.
   4. If there is time, ask the class how the recent course content might offer insights into how to make any of these strategies more effective (e.g., motivation theories, influence tactics, power bases, organizational culture).
   5. Lastly, read or paraphrase the vignette’s epilogue, without revealing who wrote it (students should know that they can self-identify as authors or remain anonymous).
   6. Repeat steps 1-5 for each assigned vignette.
   7. Have the class reflect on the activity:
      1. *When facing ethical dilemmas at work, what makes it difficult to act in ways that are consistent with your values?* (Note: answers might include fear of conflict, pushback, being in the minority, not realizing that there are several actions that could be taken, not being prepared for disagreement.)
      2. *How can you become better able to act on your values?*
      3. *What did you learn from today’s activity?*

**Additional teaching tips:**

**Breaking into subgroups can result in unevenly-sized groups**. This is not necessarily a problem. However, if you judge that it will interfere with the discussion, further ad-hoc subdivision may be necessary. For example, a group of 15 who will focus on the same vignette could subdivide into a group of 2 students voting to tell the boss, and a group of 13 voting to stay silent. The instructor can step in and either divide the 13 into two groups who have the same task, or assign half of them to discuss the case questions from the point of view of a protagonist whose action plan is to take a different tact (e.g., anonymous note in a suggestion box, confront the co-worker, etc.).

Class discussion can be greatly impacted by **unprepared students** who have not read the vignettes or prepared written responses in advance of class. A quick visual check of the homework at the start of class identified who had not completed it. On a day when several students had not prepared the three assigned vignettes, the following tactic allowed for greater participation and less frustration by prepared students. I put all students into one of four discussion groups. The first three were randomly assigned by dividing up the students who had completed the assignment. The fourth group comprised only those who had not prepared the homework. Most students were unaware of how I decided who was in what group since I used my roster to call out names, but the fourth group was told the reason behind the choice of its members when they were given a printed copy of the shortest case, told to read it and that I’d be back to break them into subgroups. Even though they received a zero for the homework, this process allowed these students to participate fully during class as well as in the larger debrief. Had they not been segregated, every discussion group would have had multiple members who sat silently reading while other students were already discussing the vignette. When the separate groups were brought back for a larger class discussion, it was possible to integrate somewhat seamlessly the responses of the students who prepared the cases in advance with those of the unprepared students who prepped it in class.

At some point during the semester, a **follow-up assignment** can ask students to consider their values and how these affect them in the workplace. The assignment could include a reflection on the vignettes discussed in class and what they have learned in regard to standing up for their beliefs when encountering what they perceive to be unethical situations.

**ELA Conference Activity:**

A modified version of the class activity above will be run for ELA, as follows:

1. **An overview will be provided**:

The Giving Voice to Values premise to teaching ethics is that in order to be true to one’s own values, one must also understand the pushback that might be encountered and develop strategies to meet it head on and persist. That is a skill to be practiced.

To apply this model, homework is assigned to write a short “case” about an ethical dilemma they personally experienced at work. Cases that turn out not to be about ethical dilemmas can still be used as examples during the semester. Those that outline ethical dilemmas are redacted and used for class discussions at several points in the semester in ways that reinforce course concepts. This allows for repeated practice using the GVV model and shows the relevance of ethics to many areas of organizational behavior.

Today’s activity simulates one class session, except it uses only 1 vignette rather than 2-3 vignettes, which results in groups discussing and presenting different cases in the debrief.

1. **A short case will be distributed** (approx. 2 paragraphs in length)
2. **Participants read the case and individually jot down responses to the following questions**:
   1. *What is at stake in the case for the protagonist? For others?*
   2. *What action should the protagonist take?*
   3. *What pushback or arguments are expected from people who disagree with this action?*
   4. *How should the protagonist rebut those arguments?*
3. **Participants will be broken into three groups** based on their responses to question (b) in section 3 above. If one group is too large, some participants may be moved to a smaller group.
4. **Subgroups will discuss these questions**:

* *What pushback or arguments are likely against the action you think should happen?*
* *What is at stake for the people who will disagree with the proposed action?*
* *What strategy might make the proposed action more likely to be successful? (How should it be approached, what information is needed, who needs to be involved?)*

1. **Each subgroup will briefly state the action they proposed, the opposition expected, what’s at stake for those who oppose the action, and the strategy they propose**. Listeners will be encouraged to push back on the arguments and strategies and/or play devil’s advocate in a way that replicates the resistance they may face. Challenge them to defend and argue back.
2. **Reveal the epilogue**.
3. **If time allows,** the following additional discussion questions will be posed. If time is short, it will be noted that these types of questions would be posed to students:

* *When facing ethical dilemmas at work, what makes it difficult to act in ways that are consistent with your values?*
* *How can you become better able to act on your values?*
* *What did you learn from today’s activity?*

1. **Questions for ELA participants**:

* *What needs to be tweaked or what would you suggest strengthening?*
* *How might you adapt or change this?*

**Appendix 1: four sample redacted and edited student vignettes (and epilogues)**

**Case #1 Outdated Product:** I worked at a bubble tea store and the experience overall was great. Bubble tea is basically an Asian dessert drink that is mixed between tea and different ingredients to achieve the flavors you want. I was in the kitchen preparing a pineapple jam mixture for the drinks when I realized it had already expired by a few days. One of our drinks is mainly made with it so I was worried about our customers’ health. I discussed with my co-workers and we agreed to stop serving that drink at that moment. Afterward, I talked to my manager about it and he insisted that we keep using it since it was refrigerated.

**Case #2 Truthful Feedback:** A very good friend of mine was in a class with me and I thought it would be great knowing someone else in the class. This was our first time in class together and everything was going well until she started distracting me in class. She started conversations at the most inconvenient times. When it was time to pick groups for the final project, she asked if we could work together and I agreed because she was a friend and I have a hard time saying no to people. Our group of four met twice every week and towards the end of the semester we had to meet on the weekends too. However, my friend missed many group meetings and expected me to get her up to speed on what she missed even though I was busy with other things. My other team members and I caught her up on each time and helped her complete whatever she needed to finish for the presentation. The actual presentation went well, everyone knew his or her part and we got a good grade. Then it came time to fill out feedback on our team members. I didn’t know what to write down when it came to my friend. I didn’t know if I should be truthful and tell it as it was or if I should put in positive comments and not say anything negative.

**Case #3 Construction Drunk:** I spent a summer working in the concrete sector of my dad’s construction company. On one specific jobsite I worked on there were only three of us, the job super, myself and one other employee - Frank. The project was going well until we realized that Frank was showing up to the jobsite drunk nearly every day. At first it was not a problem, but it soon became a major one because Frank was unable to work and would spend half of the day sleeping in his truck. We then started to fall behind on work. Frank was contributing nothing to the work we were doing, but he was still getting paid for it. This was extremely frustrating, but at the same time Frank had a family to support and I didn’t know how to handle it. What added to this tough position was the fact I was the boss’s kid. I had worked REALLY hard all summer to have all the employees treat me just like any other guy onsite. If I ran to my dad and told him about what was going on, my coworkers certainly would never look at me the same again. I knew it was probably unethical of me not tell on him because it was not fair to the rest of us, but then again I felt wrong telling because this guy had a family who counted on him to support them.

**Case #4: Prepared Foods:** I’ve worked at the local supermarket for 5 years as a part-time associate in the produce department. I work around a lot food that can easily be eaten. If you go into the cooler there aren’t any cameras, so it’s unlikely you’ll get caught unless the store manager or store assistant walks in on you. When we cut fruit to put into mixed fruit bowls, even our manager snacked on it. Everyone in our department does it, but what is one piece of watermelon or pineapple every now and again? Sometimes when I stock shelves, if I see a bruised fruit or veggie I take a bite before throwing it into the compost bin. Those compost bins save money for the company because food doesn’t go into the trash that we pay to haul away. The produce department looks out on the hot food bar outside of the deli, which offers wings, onion rings, mozzarella sticks, etc. Customers and associates fill to-go containers to bring to the register and pay per pound of food. I see customers and associates eat food on the way to the register. One employee got food from the hot food bar during his breaks and lunchtime, filling the container partway. He paid but didn’t go right up to the break room that is behind the registers, as most employees do after purchasing food. He would go back to the hot food bar and continue to fill the container, then head upstairs. The produce associates all witnessed this employee take food he hadn’t paid for.

***For instructor only:***

***Case #1 Outdated Product***

***Actions:*** *serve the mixture, discourage patrons from buying drinks that used that mixture, refuse to serve the mixture, lobby the manager to throw it out, ask other employees to stay unified in asking the manager to throw it out.*

***Epilogue:*** *My dilemma was to follow my orders and serve what might be spoiled or to not serve the drink at all and risk my job. I ended up not serving the drink anyways since I felt morally responsible if one of the customers got sick. It was not a right thing to do and I would not care even if I got fired. In the end, after me and my co-workers constant nagging about throwing the pineapple mixtures away, my manager finally disposed them. I think that was the best solution that we could have approached.*

***Case #2 Truthful Feedback***

***Actions:*** *falsify the evaluation/feedback to be only positive, put accurate feedback and scores in the feedback, ask the professor to meet with the group after accurate feedback is provided*

***Epilogue:*** *I felt like I had to be loyal to my friend but at the same time be truthful to my professor and my other team members. By the end of it, I didn’t put it down exactly as it was, I didn’t say she was a “freeloader” but I did mention that she missed a couple of meetings and could have put in more effort. As the feedback was anonymous but everyone in the group got a chance to see what the other members wrote about them, my friend realized that everyone in the group had made similar comments about her effort and absence. I thought she would be upset with me at first but I think she realized that she needs to put in just as much effort as everyone else and contribute just as much as everyone else and she actually apologized and thanked me as well as our group members for being honest and she will change and improve.*

***Case #3 Construction Drunk***

***Actions:*** *do nothing, speak to the dad (company owner) directly, push the job super to take action, speak to Frank, speak to an employee who seems close to Frank and ask that person to intervene*

***Epilogue:*** *My final decision was to not say anything to my dad about what was happening. I couldn’t bring myself to have a family lose everything just because it wasn’t exactly fair that I had to do some extra work. The summer ended and I didn’t think much about it until one day my dad came home from work infuriated because Frank had just gotten into a car accident in a company vehicle while drunk. I decided to tell him at that time that Frank had been drinking and sleeping on the job all summer. He told me he knew just hadn’t realized how bad it really was. I explained to him my rational of why I didn’t tell him at the time. He understood and told me if he was in my position he would have done the same thing.*

***Case #4 Prepared Foods***

***Actions:***  *do nothing, tell the store manager/asst. manager, tell the manager who oversees the hot food bar, put a note in the suggestion box, confront the associate, ask a trusted peer to speak to handle it.*

***Epilogue:*** *We didn’t do anything, and instead waited to see if someone noticed. Someone did, and it wasn’t just another associate from the bakery or deli. What the thief seemed to forget, even though it is pretty clear to see, is that there is a camera right over the hot food bar. So the employee whose job it is to watch the security camera, saw what the employee was doing. His act of “outsmarting the system” blew up in his face. He was fired for stealing soon after. We didn’t have to rat him out or throw him under the bus. His unethical act got sniffed out real quick and he got fired over trying to save 3 or 4 bucks on some wings.*

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