



Ethics and Assessment: When the Test is Life Itself

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As the national tragedy that was Watergate progressively unfolded, it became known that John Dean, one of the men at the center of the scandal, had taken, while at Yale, an ethics course from William Sloane Coffin. As one might imagine the fact that one of President Richard Nixon's scandal-ridden inner circle had been an ethics student of one of the president's most outspoken critics provided a field day for the press. When, as the story goes, a reporter asked the Reverend Coffin how John Dean had done in his class, Coffin responded, "Evidently, he failed."

This story highlights the fundamental challenge of assessing students' ethical reasoning. Ultimately the fundamental test or assessment of one's ethical reasoning or practice is life, as it may well be for all of one's education.

I write this to make clear what everyone knows but perhaps we fail to say often or convincingly enough. Our assessments or measurements are contingent upon what we define as success. Someone convinced that the goal of education is the formation of an individual into a particular way of being in the world undoubtedly would focus on notably different "measures" than would one who saw that goal as a mastery of a particular body of knowledge.

Assessing ethical formation is possible, though I think it always will be imperfect. My purpose with this essay is to identify the limitations of such assessment and to stimulate a conversation about how we identify what we can assess and, perhaps more importantly, what we cannot assess.

As a rule we cannot assess how students might actually respond in real-life situations. With the rare exceptions of certain experiments we cannot "stress test" our students and, even if we could, most formulations of such stressors would (and should) fail to meet IRB approval or give rise to much more complex analyses than perhaps they have received.

Even having students analyze the most detailed and textually rich ethics case cannot give them the feeling of being a junior employee, with two young children and a recently laid-off spouse who is placed in a situation where she or he feels as though she or he must comply with unethical behavior or risk being fired. Limitations such as this are serious and must be acknowledged.

That said any meaningful attempt to assess students' ethical reasoning must be able to determine the extent to which students can accomplish the following:

Viewpoint

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- Identify and articulate the ethical issues or challenges within a particular situation or set of facts;
- Identify the values at risk in various courses of action;
- Identify the value or values that most ought to be served in a particular situation and why those values take precedence;
- Choose a course of action designed to serve those values;and
- Describe how one might bring about that course of action.

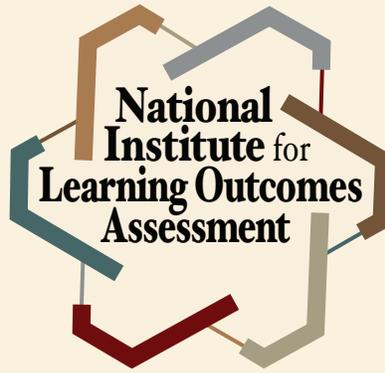
Ultimately the fundamental test or assessment of one's ethical reasoning or practice is life, as it may well be for all of one's education.

While assessments focusing only on some subset of the above may provide us with important information, we must be clear on what they tell us. A student may be completely competent or even superlative in doing 1 and 2 above and still act totally unethically in that situation. She or he may be willing to say in practice, “Yes, receiving the answers on this test via text messages is wrong and it constitutes cheating but I am going to do it anyway because I want a perfect score.” It is not impossible to have ethically informed sociopaths and psychopaths.

That said, students’ abilities to identify ethical issues are much weaker than one might imagine. Not only are there students who, even when they are told that there are ethical issues in a case, cannot identify them. More fascinating is the large group who identify non-existent ethical issues. The latter results from a tendency to manufacture facts, the inability to think conditionally, as well as a tendency to fixate on a case’s most disturbing elements (its “yuck” factor), even when it is ethically irrelevant. What makes this tendency most disturbing is that it reflects notable weaknesses in students’ overall reasoning and analytical capacities. Here is an instance where simply assessing students’ ethical reasoning may teach us much about their reasoning capacity in general.

Even among those students who are capable of identifying ethical challenges and ordering their values, research suggests that their biggest challenge is determining what to do. Recent graduates entering the work force often are paralyzed when confronted with such challenges because they immediately assume that their only choices are to do nothing or “go nuclear.” This reflects significant weaknesses in our teaching. Hence my insistence on finding some way to assess what students would or could do in a particular situation to ensure that the appropriate values or goods are served.

Ethics inherently are embedded in actions; one is not honest if one lies all the time. If we fail to teach students how to craft ethical actions then, as time will show, it is we who have failed.



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