

Background on Ethical Reasoning Protocol

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“Why do you believe what you believe and not something else?” When we encounter situations in which reasonable people disagree, we need to be able to sort out what we believe and why. With a process, an ethical reasoning protocol, we can look at these situations through the lenses of veracity, transparency and responsibility. This paper describes a process that supports critical thinking, promotes civil discourse, engages students in using their minds well, and gives them confidence in ethical decision-making.

This protocol grew out of the need to have students discuss complex environmental health issues where reasonable people can disagree. Two difficulties arose: 1) students were quick to state their opinions and cling to them tenaciously even in the face of evidence to the contrary; 2) students chose sides and began attacking each other instead of developing stronger arguments for their positions. Hence, this protocol is designed to scaffold civil discourse with a tone of decency while requiring students to use their minds well to arrive at an answer to the question, “Why do you believe what you believe and not something else?” Students are able to ask and answer this question in their academic, public and personal lives have developed the core intellectual power to live ethically and contribute to a democratic society.

The use of this protocol is core to knowledge-building as defined in philosophy and cognitive psychology, so it speaks strongly to the goal of having teachers as models and purveyors of scholarship in thought and action. Ethical reasoning is central to participation in a democracy. All students need to have access to these intellectual tools to participate equitably. This protocol was developed with students from high poverty areas, as well as students in private and parochial schools.

Step-by-Step Protocol for Ethical Reasoning

In Plato’s *Meno*, Socrates guides a slave boy to develop and use the Pythagorean theorem, leaving us to wonder whether mathematics is so intuitive that we all truly know what we need to know about it and only need to have someone remind us of when and how to use it; or that perhaps we need someone of Socrates’ stature to bring it out in us. The dilemma in today’s classroom is not only about the skill it might take to have students discover what they need to know, but the time and skill of that it takes to do it. Hence our goal was to develop a protocol to guide student thinking that any teacher could use in any subject within a standard class period.

In this process the teacher facilitates a process in which students consider four questions:

Veracity	<i>What do you know about this situation? What do you believe to be true? Why do you believe it and not something else?</i>
Transparency	<i>What don't you know? What hasn't been asked? Is this the whole truth? What questions have not been answered?</i>
Responsibility	<i>Who is responsible? For what? What could be done? What are the possible (not necessarily desirable) alternatives?</i>
Justice	<i>What should be done? By whom? Why is this the best ethical decision?</i>

The discussion takes 45 minutes. 85-90% of the time, students are talking to each other or reporting out to the group. The teacher facilitates the process of timed rounds of discussions – one 7-10 minute round for each of the four questions. In a round, the students read, or reread the question and the scenario, answer the question in the protocol, and then report out to the whole group. The students work in groups of three to come up with answers to each question. Each student in the small group has a role. One student, usually the most talkative, is asked to be the facilitator who makes sure everyone talks. A second student (the one with the best handwriting) acts as recorder. The third student is destined to be the reporter when each small group shares its ideas with the larger group. After 3-4 minutes of discussion on the question in the protocol, each group reports out, one after another without the teacher or other students commenting. They listen for ideas that are the same across all groups, and what unique to only one group. Reporting out and listing common and unique ideas takes 4-5 minutes.

Even if erroneous or incomplete information is presented, the teacher does not correct or comment, since the students will hear from each other, and revisit the scenario four times through the questions in the protocol. Students evolve their understanding through this process, building knowledge of what is true (veracity), what they don't know (transparency), who is involved and what they each could do (responsibility) and what should be done (justice).

Through using the process, the students read and reread the scenario, listen intently to each other, and form their arguments so in the end, they are able to express a well-reasoned argument for what should be done, by whom, and why, based on what they know and don't know. For homework, and evaluation, they can be asked to write their personal response using this same format used in class.

Round 1: Veracity

*What do you know about this situation? What do you believe to be true?
Why do you believe it and not something else?*

First, we ask students to consider carefully what IS happening in the situation; not what might be, should be or could be, but only what is. A small group of students, usually three, reads and rereads the description of the situation, discussing what is happening.

They come up with statements they can make as a result of this careful reading and discussion. This first read, done as a group, ensures comprehension of the text, identification of the key and relevant pieces of information, and helps each person clarify his or her understanding in light of the other member's comments.

Having established what they know, we ask students to consider why they believe what they believe to be true. Is everyone telling the truth? What is the evidence for what they believe? Is it sufficient to instill confidence? If there is insufficient evidence, what would be acceptable evidence? What degree of confidence does the evidence inspire? What are our requirements for knowing that something is true? In the ethical reasoning process, we want students to consider the veracity, the truth of the claims that are made.

In this round, students are considering the evidence behind the claims and planning investigations that will verify the claims being made. Students begin to consider the competing claims of stakeholders. By considering the veracity of the claims being made by different stakeholders, students are gaining experience in what is sufficient evidence to make a claim, and how a lack of evidence changes what you can claim. This takes them still deeper into the situation, perhaps even causing them to qualify what they said in response to the first question about what they think they know. They modify their responses to be something like, "If thus and so is true, then we can say..." Students will come up with different sources of evidence: appeal to authority; reasoning about what is fair; using analogous situations.

They report out using this beginning: We know We believe this to be true and not something else because...

Round 2: Transparency

***What don't you know? What hasn't been asked? Is this the whole truth?
What questions have not been answered? How would you find out?***

In this round students are ready to consider what they don't know, but need to know to make an ethical decision. Again we have slowed down the process so students are thinking about what they know and what they need to know. Students reread the description of the situation, this time looking for what is not there. This reading between the lines is one more way to have them consider what it really takes to make an ethical decision. You need to know the full circumstances, the kinds of evidence, the history and context to make an ethical decision.

Students report out using this beginning: We don't know ... We could find out by...

Round 3: Responsibility

*Who is responsible? For what? What could be done?
What are the possible (not necessarily desirable) alternatives?*

Keeping the is/ought distinction in mind, we are asking the students to consider what could be done, **NOT** what should be done. To do this, they consider what each stakeholder would recommend, would try to avoid, what would be best for each group, what would be feasible, if not desirable. This divergent thinking sets the stage for considering what ought to be done because all the options are out there to consider. In response to this question students can play the extremes, and consider the consequences. By considering who is responsible, they develop many alternatives from very different perspectives.

Students report out using this beginning: We believe (A) , (B) , and (C) are responsible. (A) could (course of action) , (B) could (course of action) , (C) could (course of action) .

Round 4: Justice

What should be done? By whom? Why?

Finally we arrive at the “ought” question. But now the students have a lot to consider in making that ethical decision. They know what they know and how they know it. They know what they don’t know and they have considered the possible. Now we ask them to decide what should be done and by whom. With the in-depth thinking they have been doing, the “why” is now rich and deep. In environmental health ethics, we find students support their beliefs with: what is equally fair to all groups (environmental justice), what is best over the long term for the most people (sustainable development), what does the least harm, what informs people of their choices and so preserves their freedom (risk communication), if the benefits outweigh the costs (cost/benefit analysis), and what is acceptable to all the stakeholders (acceptable compromise). Like the Greek slave boy, they intuitively use all the powerful concepts in ethics to make an ethical decision.

Students report out using this framework: We believe _____ should be done by _____ because we know _____ and because we don't know _____.

Conclusion

In 42 minutes, students go from apathy or unsupported opinions to examining the situation closely for claims and evidence, missing information, responsible parties and potential courses of action. They are able to state what they believe ought to be done and why.