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Using Ethical Dilemmas in the Classroom

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In my twenty plus years as a National Schools of Character site evaluator for Character.org, I have rarely observed where schools have a systematic approach to teach students how to address ethical dilemmas. This is a critical gap for modern character education. Students will certainly encounter ethical dilemmas throughout their lives. This article describes a strategy that provides students with four steps to analyze ethical dilemmas and identify the action option that demonstrates positive character.

Defining key words and phrases

At The School for Ethical Education, we define ethics as the field of study where principles or standards are identified that guide behavior. And while there are multiple ethical theories that suggest principles should guide behavior, we narrow our focus to an adaptation of the ancient virtue-based model as originally described by Aristotle. Using the terms virtues or core values, teachers can help students learn to analyze ethical dilemmas in literature, history, or science. This process also supports students' ability to analyze and guide their own behavioral choices. We define an ethical dilemma as any situation where an individual is faced with a range of choices that always will include some cost. Cost is not meant to refer only to an economic expense. A cost may be

social/political, environmental, health related, life related, faith, or any other relevant cost to the individual and/or others. In a true dilemma, there are no options that do not have a cost. So, the individual must have a method to weigh or compare the costs in as objective a method as possible.

Our next definition to consider relates to the term core values.

Character.org has historically recognized the work of Dr. Rushworth Kidder and his qualitative surveys of populations around the world where terms such as respect, responsibility, justice, caring, integrity, and truthfulness were identified as core values held by multiple cultures. These core values would support the behaviors Aristotle sought his students to demonstrate as virtues. Lists of core values like this have been created by many authors historically and in the modern era, including those described by Peterson & Seligman in their 2004 text *Character Strengths and Virtues*.¹ The point of emphasis here is to acknowledge there are core values that are recognized globally regardless of culture, religion, or ethnicity. Any list of core values, when properly defined, offers a powerful tool for students to use when faced with an ethical dilemma. Our last definition to consider is the principle of the Golden Rule, which ethicists refer to as the “law of reciprocity.” This principle challenges us to focus on the welfare of others, which is a basic element of creating a personal moral compass. It is also a principle that helps individuals and communities to flourish. The classic western version of the Golden Rule states, “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you” but the law of reciprocity is found in almost all cultures and religions. There are also [examples of this ethical principle across time and cultures](#).

Case Study

Keeping the definitions of ethics, ethical dilemma, core values, and the Golden Rule in mind, let us introduce the steps of a value-based decision-making strategy with a simple case example regarding a middle school student named Michael.

Michael is a nice kid with above average potential who enjoys basketball more than academics. His parents have recently increased their attention to his grades and have threatened the loss of some privileges, including loss of participating on the basketball team, if Michael's next test scores do not

improve. On an errand to the school copy room for a teacher, Michael happens to notice copies of his next history test on the copy machine. No one is in the room. He could take one copy and not be noticed.

Clearly, Michael is facing an ethical dilemma. While Michael's situation may trigger some obligation to honor his parents by practicing trustworthiness and not get caught stealing the test, he may also feel a more immediate pressure to improve his grades and believe that stealing the test would be a good choice to help him improve his next test score and remain on his basketball team.

Here are the four steps that Michael would need to take to make a decision that is based on his core values.

Step 1

Stop! Michael first needs to calm his emotions that might be compromising his reasoning ability. Michael needs to control an emotional impulse to steal the exam, so he has time to consider his action options.

Step 2

Think! Michael has been taught to consider his action options and identify the core value each choice demonstrates. If Michael steals the test, he will have the potential short-term gain to have the test as a study guide and he can argue he will be responsible to himself to improve his grade and remain on the basketball team. But when applying the principle of the Golden Rule, he recognizes he will be cheating the teacher and his classmates by having an unfair advantage on the test. His choice will also be demonstrating dishonesty and untrustworthiness to others. In addition, he will risk the cost of getting caught and the consequences associated with stealing the test and having his reputation tarnished as being untrustworthy and irresponsible.

Step 3

Act! If Michael rejects the temptation to steal the test, he will be demonstrating trustworthiness and responsibility to avoid being caught with the test. This will also pass the analysis with the Golden Rule in regard to demonstrating fairness to his classmates and teacher. Finally, Michael will need to recognize that if doesn't steal the exam he will need to find more time to study to improve his grade. This step often requires courage and self-control. That is why it is important for schools to give students the opportunity to develop a personal integrity statement. Michael could use the moment to recall that he once wrote, "I pledge to demonstrate

integrity and respect for fairness in all that I do.” Recalling that he has made [this pledge to himself](#) will help Michael to commit to a position of integrity and made a decision not to steal the test.

Step 4

Reflect! This step would be practiced after the outcomes of Michael’s decision are evident. Michael may or may not improve his history grade, but by reflecting on his decision he will not compromise his integrity, violate the Golden Rule, or risk being caught taking the test. Taking the time to reflect will help Michael understand the benefits of practicing value-based decision-making.

Teaching the 4-step process

Value-based decision-making provides a teachable four-step process to help guide students to make ethical decisions. How can this be taught? First, students need to learn and practice the steps. Teachers can introduce this life skill in their classrooms by using age-appropriate scenarios in history, literature, science, current events, or with real-life situations and circumstances students may face at school. Value-based decision-making is a great life skill that helps students develop their own ethical compass.

[Examples found in history and literature](#) are particularly relevant to demonstrate the importance of positive character or the consequences when a person’s core values are compromised. Class visual aids such as room posters and values linked to class procedures can also be useful reminders.

For those interested in strengthening the reasoning ability of their students, Character.org has links to resources supporting the [Tri-Factor Model for Ethical Functioning](#). These resources include sections on exposing rationalizations, considering hierarchy of personal, social, or moral outcomes, and teaching strategies to strengthen a student’s commitment to integrity and other core values. I also talk about this model in a recent [Character.org webinar](#).

Conclusion

Teaching students the steps to analyze ethical dilemmas is not only good character education but it’s also good pedagogy. Providing opportunities for students to learn how to analyze and evaluate ethical dilemmas by using core values will help develop their higher order reasoning skills that

every state requires in their academic standards. While the strategy does not assure everyone will agree on what an ethical solution will look like, every school should teach students the steps they need to take to analyze and evaluate outcomes that are based on their core values rather than letting their emotions or short-term gains guide their choices. The four-step model presented here is offered as a teachable option to help students put ethics in action.

Character.org can also provide a workbook titled *The Golden Compass* that describes these steps and provides cases for over 50 student dilemmas for class discussion. [Contact Character.org](#) for more information about ordering *The Golden Compass*.