

Range of Perspectives: Examples along a Line

Summary

Students examine a range of examples that fall within a continuum from 'acceptable' to 'not acceptable', noting subtleties that individual cases provide within controversial issues. They consider their own perspectives as well as observe the range of perspectives that exist in a community. This exercise helps to reveal the 'shades of gray' that are inherent in ethical dilemmas.

Teacher Instructions

Make a line on a board or wall and label one end 'acceptable' and the other 'unacceptable'.

Provide examples to place along the continuum. You may want to make large 'notes' that you can stick up along the line that are easily readable and can be reused.

Begin with cases where most students can agree on the acceptability or unacceptability of the example. Write these in the appropriate position on the line as determined by a majority of the class, acknowledging that individual differences will persist.

Proceed to more difficult and less obvious examples.

(If working with the issue of animals in biomedical research, for example, most students will probably say that it acceptable to work on *C. elegans* worms, especially for important clues to human disease. However, what if the animal at issue is a pig for heart disease studies?)

If appropriate, connect students' positions with ethical perspectives/theories. (Do potential outcomes matter? Are inalienable rights involved?)

Debrief and focus on the importance of acknowledging the subtleties that can exist in what might seem to be a 'black and white' issue.

Variations

Precede the large group activity with a small group one, asking students to place examples along a line with 2-3 other classmates.

Have *students generate examples* and have them place them along a line either individually or in small groups, before conducting a large group activity

Have students actually 'draw' a line where they believe the difference between 'acceptable' and 'not acceptable' lies.

The Lifeboat

Summary

Students discuss an ethical dilemma that is readily comprehensible – who to save in a lifeboat. The various ethical perspectives can be derived in students’ own words. Alternatively, each group can assume one perspective and analyze their choices through that lens.

Student Handouts: Ethical Group Discussion – The Lifeboat

Teacher Instructions

Discussions about the lifeboat are influenced strongly by how the question is posed. Be sure to allow room for solutions that maximize fairness (i.e. drawing straws) by asking students to focus on how they are making their decision. Students often default to solutions that are outcome-based. It is useful to be able to show that there are other approaches that can be applied.

Although the lifeboat scenario does not directly address science, it has many applications to issues that may pertain to a science classroom. Examples are organ allocation (who should get the scarce organ for transplant?) and vaccine distribution (who should receive scarce supplies of vaccine?)

Provide students with the scenario, and specify how long they have to discuss it.

Have each group identify someone to explain *how* the decision was reached, and provide justification. From the debriefing, derive elements of the ethical theories. Also discuss some of the confusion, conflicts, benefits and limitations of each ethical theory.

Variation

Assign each group an ethical perspective, and ask them to base their decisions on that perspective. Refer to the ‘Ethics as a Discipline’ section of the Primer for more information about each perspective.

Moral Rules Groups may choose a rule such as “every life counts” in which case a certain set of people get chosen according to these rules, for example, by lottery.

Virtues Based Groups may hold “achievement” or “justice” as their priority, in which case a certain set of people gets chosen according to who demonstrates the greatest possession of these virtues. In the interest of time, have the group choose one virtue as their priority.

Outcomes Based Groups may weigh how much benefit saving each person has on the person, other people, or society, in which case the most “beneficially effective” people get chosen.

Principles Based Groups may try to weigh and balance all four central principles, in which case a certain set of people gets chosen according to the group consensus on this process. This group tends to have the most difficulty in deciding on the survivors (especially due to the time limitations).

Care Based Groups may decide to serve the typically underserved or honor the most equitable relationships, in which case a certain group get chosen according to these criteria.

Some of our teachers recommend doing the lifeboat twice – once without mention of perspectives, and a second time by assigning students to an ethical perspective, or asking them to compare all perspectives in terms of which individuals should be chosen.