

Can universities teach students to be good?

University marks a time when students take more responsibility for their educational journey. Is that the best time to impart values? Or the worst?



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Recent debates in Singapore about cheating by aspiring lawyers during the bar exam could be the tip of the iceberg. Around the world, the swift move to online education and assessment led to hand-wringing about a “pandemic of cheating” on the one hand, or an “Orwellian surveillance state” on the other.

As education adjusts to its new normal, and as we prepare to welcome students into a new academic year (and, in my case, the new NUS College), there is an opportunity to rethink many aspects of education. That includes the place of technology, the mix of active and passive activities, as well as helping our students to see across disciplinary and geographical boundaries.

But in addition to knowledge, skills and perspectives, can we also teach values? Can we teach our students to be good?

TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE?

Some might argue that students come to university with their character already formed.

“Give me a child until he is seven,” goes the line attributed to Aristotle, “and I will show you the man.” Family, friends, teachers, spiritual leaders and national service all play a part in that development.

Yet there is a reason why legal responsibility for one’s actions shifts with the transition to adulthood. University students are, obviously, not blank slates or empty vessels; they arrive on our campuses with principles and



University may be both the best and the worst place to teach values: the best, because students are empowered to take real decisions with real consequences; the worst, because if they take a wrong turn it can derail their degree, their career or their life, says the writer. ST FILE PHOTO

ideals, as well as goals and aspirations.

They also enjoy more independence and freedom, with all the opportunities and risks that this entails. For many students staying on campus, it may be the first time that they are living more or less on their own.

Universities invest in residential living partly because it facilitates a richer educational environment. For many of us, though, the transformative role of tertiary studies comes from the communities that we join. Lifelong relationships are formed; choices about careers are made.

We hope those relationships will be healthy; that the careers will be beneficial and rewarding.

Ethics informs all these decisions. In some professions, this is explicitly recognised by requiring it on the path to practice – as it is in medicine and law. In other cases, it may be a subject of theoretical research, as in philosophy.

But an interesting finding from the literature is that, even if we are not explicitly teaching ethics in the classroom, we are still teaching it. Students at university are taking moral cues – even if those cues are that morality is not a topic for polite conversation.

All this is why university may be

both the best and the worst place to teach values: the best, because students are empowered to take real decisions with real consequences; the worst, because if they take a wrong turn it can derail their degree, their career or their life.

DO AS I DO, NOT AS I SAY

How one grapples with this is a dilemma for institutions whose primary function is educational. That challenge becomes most acute when it arises after a violation of community norms.

In the past, in Singapore and elsewhere, there was a tendency to emphasise the educational aspect, erring on the side of giving second chances. That is one way to teach ethics, but it is hardly ideal – coming only after a transgression and too often prioritising the “bright future” of an alleged perpetrator over the interests of victims.

In cases of sexual misconduct, the balance has, appropriately, shifted so that such “teaching moments” do not come at the expense of protecting other students.

Ideally, of course, students would internalise and act in accordance with basic values from the outset. In addition to the laws that apply to everyone,

universities typically have codes of conduct that students agree to abide by. At the National University of Singapore (NUS), all students and staff also complete a module on “A Culture of Respect and Consent”.

Ethics, of course, goes far beyond compliance with rules and codes. Educationally, explicit discussions about ethics help to cultivate more general critical thinking skills: identifying conflicting viewpoints, and revealing faulty rationalisations. Developmentally, such discussions can help students prepare for issues that they will undoubtedly confront in their careers and in their lives.

So, how should ethics be taught?

For professions like law and medicine, the development of ethics starts with learning the rules. Clear standards, with disciplinary action for violations and rewards for good behaviour, are a useful baseline.

The aim, however, is to move from the grasp and recall of standards towards integrating them with personal values.

This offers an insight that applies more generally, which is that ethics in theory is different from ethics in practice.

Authority figures should model the values in question, with faculty

and staff being held to higher standards than our students. But operationalising ethics is the key objective.

For ethics is not just something to be known; it is something to be lived.

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

Philosophers from Plato to Confucius have grappled with the question of why we should be moral. Plato debated whether someone bearing a ring of invisibility would behave badly if they knew they could do whatever they wanted with impunity. Confucius argued that those who comply with laws simply due to the fear of being punished lack virtue.

This speaks to a more general concern: that if we teach ethics as a standalone subject, in isolation, it will be seen that way – as separate from other topics rather than infused throughout them.

Many medical schools have embraced this, moving ethics from a single subject to stressing it across the curriculum, linked with the practice component of dealing with actual patients.

Law schools have followed suit. In Singapore, we now require all students to perform a minimum number of hours of pro bono service. This real-world

experience operationalises ethical principles and, hopefully, plants the seed that the value of a lawyer is more than the contents of a pay cheque.

Experiential learning offers opportunities to encourage ethical reflection outside those professions where it is required. Across all of the disciplines, our graduates will confront ethical dilemmas in the future, from longstanding ones like economic injustices to newer ones, like the role of artificial intelligence and who should bear the costs of climate change.

An innovative component of NUS College, which takes in its first students next month, is the Impact Experience. We will be linking interdisciplinary teams of students with non-profit partners to develop projects that will benefit the community in Singapore and abroad.

Such “service learning”, we hope, will encourage our students to see themselves as change makers, as well as moving questions of ethics from the classroom to the void deck, the community centre and beyond.

FAIL BETTER

So, ethics is on the curriculum whether we like it or not. And the best way to teach it is through doing rather than just thinking.

Our students will, of course, continue to make mistakes. A colleague I used to teach with learnt a saying in the army: “No one’s completely useless,” he would tell a student after they did something foolish. “You can always be a bad example.” Egregious cases will need to be punished, protecting our community and reinforcing its standards.

Yet ethics means more than teaching people not to be bad. Nor do we expect our students to be perfect. The dilemma for universities will remain as we struggle for them to be safe spaces, as well as educational ones.

Part of our job, then, is to pass on that struggle to our students, giving them the knowledge and experience to resolve their own dilemmas and to see the impact – positive as well as negative – that they can have in the world.

It’s an endless task.

Even as we admit new students in the coming weeks, we are celebrating the graduations of their seniors. As I tell those leaving university, they should celebrate the fact that they no longer have to worry about me and my colleagues grading their work.

From now on, they set their own exams.

When it comes to ethics, they will sometimes fail those tests.

That is no reason to give up. As Samuel Beckett wrote in one of his last pieces of prose, *Worstward Ho*, “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”

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