International Collaborative Across Bloomington Course Portfolio

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PHIL 102 Introduction to Ethics

Enrollment per semester: 60-50 students  
Semesters taught: Fall 2012, Spring 2013

International Learning Outcomes

- Identify issues of global concern and the ethical challenges that arise from cultural, political, religious and economic differences.
- Describe the cultural, economic, environmental, and factors that shape values, practices, and behaviors in specific regions and societies.
- Apply ethical reasoning skills to an assessment of the actions taken by individuals, political leaders, and societies in response to real-world problems of poverty, human trafficking, gender inequity, environmental degradation, and war.
- Make choices and decisions informed by multiple frames of reference that include diverse cultural contexts.
- Demonstrate humility and willingness to scrutinize and adapt one's own values, practices, and behaviors.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- Reflections on My ICAB Experience
- Course Syllabus
- Course Schedule
- Appendices
  - A. Blog: Assignment, Grading Rubric, and Student Work Samples
  - B. Case Study Paper: Assignment, Grading Rubric, and Student Work Samples
Reflections on My ICAB Experience

The purpose of an introductory course in Ethics is not to teach students how to be a “good person but to help them recognize that we are all connected to individuals, communities, and societies that think and act differently from us. To this end, I automatically incorporated review of non-western ethical systems and discussion of ethical and contextual differences across cultures. But my method of integrating an international and intercultural dimension into the teaching and learning was inconsistent and unfocused. It could best be described as a “shock therapy” approach to multicultural ethics. I gave students both too much (issues and behaviors) and too little (context and time) to ensure the development of reasonable perspective and understanding of complex ethical problems.

Participation in the Internationalization Collaborative Across Bloomington (ICAB) encouraged me to reflect critically on course objectives and to develop a plan for teaching internationalized ethics in the fall and spring semesters. Using the course design framework for global learning integration, I was able to target specific areas for improvement of the course: my approach; the assignments; and the assessment. At the same time, the taxonomic framework enabled me to articulate the following international learning goals.

- Foster understanding of the different systems of morality (major ethical theories) and core beliefs that shape core values and actions at the individual, societal, and transnational level.
- Enable students to perceive the connections between urgent global challenges and the physical, cultural, economic, and political factors that influence moral judgment and action.
- Provide students with the foundational skills needed to analyze and critically evaluate ethical dilemmas from multiple perspectives and to scrutinize options for resolution.
- Provide students with a chance to think about the relationship of their own values and beliefs to broader ethical issues, including issues related to the dynamics of globalization.
- Encourage tolerance for moral ambiguity at the local, national and transnational level, or the recognition that there may be no single ideal solution to ethically problematic issues.

In my eagerness to meet some of these goals without having to add too much additional course material, I selected a new “globalized “textbook (see Syllabus) for the course. This was a mistake, albeit an instructive one. Although the new textbook covered issues of global concern, students were somewhat overwhelmed by the assortment of empirical, cultural, political, and economic facts. Many students were uncertain which aspect of the course to concentrate on during the chapter readings, the “ethics” or the “global studies” material. At risk of developing a “course within a course” I had to
determine how much and what kind of contextual information would enhance student learning objectives.

Fortunately, the problems that I encountered while trying to fully integrate an international dimension into the course were addressed at the ICAB work sessions. One of the first corrective measures I took in the fall semester was to select a few countries in the regions of Central Asia and Latin Americas for particular consideration. At the same time, I chose a few global ethical dilemmas (issues) of interest to the students for deeper contextual study. This led me to modify many of the student activities and course assignments, especially the first short reflective paper, the blogs, and the case study paper.

In previous semesters I introduced issues such as prostitution, child labor and human organ trafficking in discrete fashion, to be examined on a one time basis and at a general level. Students were required to respond to a video or article in either short essay format or blog. Although the assignments were designed with some of the international goals in mind, there was little thematic or contextual cohesion. Depending on the chapter topic, students might discuss child labor in India one week and gay marriage in Indiana the next week. This meant that learning goals and outcomes tended to vary with each course activity and assignment.

Specific Internationalized Learning Assessments

Internationalization not only helped students understand the nature of assignments but also made it easier for me to assess performance. For example, throughout the fall and spring semester students examined sexual trafficking, prostitution, forced marriages (Child Brides Blog, Appendix A), and poverty. In keeping with the academic course objectives, students were required to apply ethical principles, identify contextual factors, and reflect on their initial “gut” reaction to a disturbing behavior or practice. The thematic and regional consistency of the cases enabled students to draw on and synthesize the material in the chapters on sexual morality, gender discrimination, abortion, reproductive rights, human rights, and economic justice. This in itself was an invaluable outcome of the modifications. At the same time, the inclusion of additional material on specific countries helped students to connect the practice of “child brides” in Afghanistan to political (perpetual war) and economic (increased poverty) conditions for which western nations, including the United States, are accountable. Instead of viewing child marriage through one broad lens or as “something that is done in some cultures because of tradition, religion, and poverty” many students discussed the different regional circumstances, including war in Afghanistan and fear of AIDS in Africa, that contributed to the continuation and the resurgence of child to adult marriages. Although some students did not waver from their initial position on the “horror” and “immorality” of the practice, most students understood the importance of reserving moral judgment of the parents until one has sufficient and credible background information. Many students also recognized there is no simple or single solution to a problem closely tied to systemic poverty, violence, and cultural beliefs about gender roles.
I have always assigned a case study paper to serve as the final, most comprehensive applied ethics project. The paper topic in the fall semester was *Bolivia Water Crisis: Human Right or Private Commodity?* (Appendix B) The purpose of the paper was an ethical analysis and critical assessment of the plight of the indigenous people of Bolivia, especially the communities still residing in the Andes Mountains. Although not all students did so, they were required to read the assigned material on Bolivia and to do independent research on the multicultural nature of Bolivian society. A major task for the students was to identify and explain the systems of morality held by indigenous people, the non-indigenous economic elite, and the global banks and corporations invested in the privatization of water. Students also had to distinguish among the views of “human rights” held by indigenous people, international organizations such as the UN and international economic organizations/businesses. Most students were able to do so, although there were considerable differences in clarity, precision, and supportive arguments. However, not as many students adequately described or clarified the underlying philosophical, cultural, economic systems or values that precipitated and aggravated the crisis. This, however, is not unusual for a class where there are pronounced differences in writing and critical thinking skills. What students did demonstrate was a sensitivity to the plight of non-western societies whose members hold radically different values from ours. It was also clear from many of the concluding comments that students recognized the negative consequences of their own culture and values. Some even concluded that water should be privatized in the United States, so that high prices would force Americans to reduce consumption and treat it with reverence. Coupled with the realization that the shortage of water is a global humanitarian crisis that resists easy and just solution, this self-critique indicated that the outcomes of an internationalized curriculum were met.

**CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS**

Internationalization of the ethics course did not fix some of the problems that I and other instructors encounter every semester, but it definitely expanded student awareness of critical issues and problems that are global in nature rather than just local. By reflecting on their own initial “gut” responses to an issue or behavior, students understood the importance of selecting and using appropriate sources of information before passing judgment. Moreover, all students recognized that “my morality” is not shared by billions of other people in the world. Many students also realized that acceptance of a policy or solution to a shared problem is not the same as approval of a behavior. This was particularly evident in the short papers on the UN proposal encouraging the legalization of prostitution in some developing countries. Overall success in meeting the internationalized curriculum objectives varied with student academic skill level, critical thinking ability, and level of maturity. Older adult students proved (as in the past) to be the exception; regardless of academic skill level, they were the most engaged and flexible in their perspective. In the future I plan to partner mature students with the younger students on assignments and projects. But the first change I will make is to revert to the original textbook.