

Student Moral and Ethical Development

Rob Linsenmeier
Insight XIII

Northwestern | McCORMICK SCHOOL OF
ENGINEERING

NORTHWESTERN CENTER FOR
ENGINEERING EDUCATION RESEARCH

Questions

- 1. What do students understand at different ages about ethics?**
- 2. How do we leverage student values and connect them to professional ethics?**
- 3. What are the most effective types of assignments and interventions?**

Moral development

Lawrence Kohlberg (1958), building on Piaget:

Six stages of moral development in three levels:

- Preconventional level: Self-centered thinking.
- Conventional level: Influence of peer pressure
- Principled level: Orientation toward justice and appeals to universal rights.
 - Stage 5: Social contract orientation
Individual rights determine behaviour. The individual views laws and rules as flexible tools for improving human purposes. That is, given the right situation, there are exceptions to rules. When laws are not consistent with individual rights, alternatives should be considered.
 - Stage 6: Universal ethical principle orientation
The appropriate action is determined by one's self-chosen ethical principles of conscience. These principles are abstract and universal in application. This type of reasoning involves taking the perspective of every person or group that could potentially be affected by the decision. Not everyone gets to this level.

Moral development through the lens of care

- Kohlberg worked only with boys
- Carol Gilligan (1982) challenged this, finding different behavior in girls.
- Framed it in terms of care, but also with a developmental trajectory
- Did not think the formulation applied only to girls.

- Phase 1: Individuals care more for themselves than for others.
- Phase 2: Care comes to emphasize concern for others over care for oneself.
- Phase 3: In its mature form the ethics of care seeks a balance between care for oneself and care for others. What nevertheless remains primary in each case is personal relationships: of others to oneself, of oneself to others, or mutually between oneself and others.

- <https://www.encyclopedia.com/science/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/ethics-care>

Relating to undergraduates

- **Personal ethics/morality**
 - Ethics as not cheating/academic integrity
 - Ethics as compliance with authority
 - Rule following
- Should be at a lower level of ethical development.
- Some aspects of professional development (understanding and following codes) should be at this lower level.
- **Professional ethics involving complex situations and competing outcomes for different stakeholders**, would seem to require the highest level of moral development in either the Kohlberg or Gilligan formulation.
- **How to encourage that development?**

Strategies - from IIT Ethics Center

- Staged, but **ethics throughout the curriculum**
- Increase **ethical sensitivity**: First year
 - Bring up ethics in class often
- Increase **ethical knowledge**: Second year
 - Bring in professional codes
 - Easy case studies that can be resolved with reference to codes
 - Raise (harder) ethical issues in class, allow discussion (how should you handle this?), point out pitfalls (if any) of students' proposals, describe some standard ways of handling them
- Increase **ethical judgement**: Third year and beyond:
 - Harder cases; consider ethics, develop written responses with rationale
 - Require analysis of ethical dimensions of projects
- Increase **ethical willpower**
 - Discuss supports for making tough decisions (academic, corporate, legal)
 - Discuss how other professionals would respond
- <https://ethics.iit.edu/teaching/objectives-teaching-ethics>