Learning from the experts: How ethics and moral philosophy are taught at leading English-speaking institutions

Media ethics expert Tom Cooper has just completed a detailed survey on the teaching of ethics and moral philosophy in higher education institutions. Here are some of his main findings – and they make for fascinating reading.

From April until December 2008, I conducted field research to determine how ethics and moral philosophy (EMP) were being taught in six leading English-speaking universities and in five additional leading departments or programmes elsewhere. Supported by a Page Legacy grant, by sabbatical support from Emerson College, and by guest scholar-in-residence status at the University of Edinburgh and Union University, I visited and/or corresponded with scholars at eleven British and US campuses.

Forty participants were selected and interviewed to understand not only their pedagogical philosophy and methods, but also to determine how they have evolved or enhanced classroom effectiveness over time. The interview also asked about the extent to which ethics may be taught, about why these professors teach ethics and moral philosophy (EMP), about creative teaching tools they have invented, about what problems they and students faced, about how they taught, about what constitutes outstanding ethics and moral philosophy (EMP) teaching, about the relative effectiveness of differing approaches to improving teaching, and about what draws forth the greatest learning, interest, and growth from students.

Summary of primary findings

While participants almost unanimously agree that ethics and moral philosophy (EMP) should be taught as a form of critical thinking and internalised moral reasoning, they are evenly divided about whether such instruction should aspire toward or may effect moral improvement or character development.

While the EMP (ethics and moral philosophy) instructor may initially focus primarily upon subject matter as determined by others, she typically later develops a twin focus upon:
1) subject matter increasingly informed also by personal research and
2) students – their comprehension, capacity, satisfaction, learning speed/threshold, application, needs, feedback, assessment, improvement, etc.

Participants are equally divided about whether EMP professors should (appear to) be neutral referees to avoid ‘bias’ or should reveal their own positions and views to model conviction, courage, transparency, ‘taking a stand’, and other pro-social values.

Although some participants have used several tools to enhance their pedagogical effectiveness and a few have used no tools, the majority utilised one tool – student feedback, whether formal, informal, solicited or/and unsolicited, as their primary learning gauge, rather than enrolling in teacher development courses, introducing new technologies (some oppose ‘bells and whistles’), or working with a mentor.

Participants have primarily learned to teach through trial and error, academic acculturation, student feedback, and observation. Only in a few cases have they also learned by peer observation, formal training, recording their classes, and workshops.

Almost four fifths of all instructors have used a lecture format; almost two thirds have also employed seminar or/and tutorial formats featuring discussion, while one third have emphasised student-driven formats such as debates, presentations, and student-led discussion. Of those who commented about class size, all thought reduced class size enhances the effectiveness of all venues.
Importance of teaching intellectual processes

Although 10 per cent of those interviewed emphasised the importance of students knowing class content, more than 70 per cent stressed the greater importance of teaching intellectual processes and critical skills such as analytic precision, (counter-) argument, identification and assessment of moral issues and questions, historical methods, questioning presuppositions, or internalising moral reasoning.

In the aggregate, interviewed faculty felt that the greatest keys to outstanding teaching and student inspiration/growth pertain to:
1) instructor’s support, love, or respect for students (40 per cent);
2) teacher’s engagement with, passion for, or enthusiasm about the subject, issues, philosophical thinking, or ideas (35 per cent);
3) classroom communication skills such as listening, eye contact, clarity, preparation, or pacing (35 per cent);
4) character traits such as honesty, generosity of spirit, humility, authenticity, compassion, and fairness (30 per cent); or
5) ability to evoke sustained and genuine student interest and participation (28 per cent).

Although 28 per cent have used university teaching websites, 25 per cent have employed PowerPoint type technologies, and yet another 23 per cent have sometimes used a form of visual (DVD/film, computer, or video clips) media, the majority emphasised the central importance of an undiluted, unmediated student/teacher relationship, and the opening and refinement (not the filling and entertaining) of the human mind.

Indeed, more than half of those interviewed have implemented a combined inventory of 34 creative individual teaching inventions and resources for classroom use rather than importing the technologies and programming of others. Several suspected that bowing to trends (e.g. PowerPoint, constant DVD immersion, etc.) contributed to student laziness and cloned thinking and thus they prefer to model individual innovative thinking or/and unique pedagogical systems. While over half emphasised academic skills such as logic-driven writing, systematic reflection, penetrating questioning and answering, hermeneutics, deconstruction, and critical reading as important classroom activity, one third also emphasised that such skills should be applied to moral decision-making in life itself.

Summarily, despite exceptions, a few technology advocates, and multiple perspectives participants saw teacher development, technologies, techniques, and trends as secondary to the primacy of intellectual rigour, moral reasoning, the legacy of apex thinking, and the direct student-teacher relationship.

The participants and their selection

Fifty-eight potential participants were initially identified from among those teaching ethics and moral philosophy (EMP) within philosophy departments and professional colleges at six leading English-speaking universities. Thirty-three of these at Cambridge (6), Harvard (5), Oxford (7), Princeton (4), the University of Edinburgh (6), and Yale (5) responded that they were available to participate. In addition, seven ethicists proved available from New York University (2), the University of Chicago (1), the University of Illinois (1), the University of Michigan (2) and Vanderbilt University (1).

Teaching ethics

When asked what they had to say to those who felt that ethics cannot be taught, 73 per cent felt that ethics and moral philosophy (EMP), when defined as moral reasoning, could definitely be taught. However, 40 per cent did not believe that ethics, if defined as moral improvement or character development, could be taught, while 40 per cent felt that classroom moral philosophy could or does make at least some students better persons. In other words most thought that ethics instruction can effect changes in moral thinking, but participants were divided about whether it is also the role and nature of ethics instruction to motivate changes in moral action. Some of the views expressed were ‘you may not change their behaviour but you do give them corrective lenses’; ‘you can’t make someone a good person but increasing their moral insight is helpful’; ‘classroom ethics may not make you more virtuous, but it can make you more reflective.’ Those voicing support for normative and corrective ethics included appeals to Kant (‘since ethics is not inbred, it must be taught’); or to modeling (‘showing is better than telling so ethics is taught by who you are in students’ presence’); or to social necessity (‘given the state of the world, moral improvement must be taught’).

Towards what end?

When asked why they teach, over one third (35 per cent) mentioned the enjoyment, ‘stimulation’, ‘fun’, and ‘theatre’ which make teaching
engaging. Others (25 per cent) noted that teaching ethics and moral philosophy has unique societal rewards since high quality moral decision-making is a ‘service to society’ and ‘moral life fundamentally matters to human life’. Ten (25 per cent) who noted practicality said they felt it was important to teach about ‘issues of value’, or ‘of daily significance’.

Other top reasons for teaching included:
1) ‘love for’ or ‘assistance to’ students (25 per cent);
2) ‘it pays the bills’ (23 per cent);
3) teaching ‘accompanies’ or ‘supports’ research (18 per cent); ‘one learns’ from teaching and students (18 per cent); university life is ‘important’ or ‘fulfilling’ (18 per cent); it is a social network (10 per cent), and ‘teaching ethics is valuable for its own sake’ (10 per cent).

Many teachers also teach (ethics) for the gratification of completing an effective or rewarding job. When asked, ‘How do you know when you've done a good job teaching?’ over one third (35 per cent) talked about formal student positive feedback, three tenths (30 per cent) noted informal student feedback (such as spontaneous excitement, pleasure, emails and office visits), while 25 per cent commented about more measurable changes such as improved examination scores, grades, and other means of assessment. Closely connected with this outcome was the satisfaction reported by ten (25 per cent) regarding student ‘evolution’ – better writing skills, deeper questions, substantiated answers, engaging discussion, independent thinking, greater abstraction, persuasive argumentation, more penetrating textual exegesis, and mastery of more difficult material.

Almost all answers revolved around some level of increased dynamism: both the professor and the student become ‘energised’ or ‘animated’ in new ways. For several (35 per cent) this dynamism has implications not only for the individual mind but also for the off-campus collective moral compass.

How to teach ethics?

On the surface these EMP professors seemed to use standard teaching tools. For example, although 13 per cent opposed the use of final exams, over half (53 per cent) gave finals, and almost all (93 per cent) assigned and graded long (40 per cent) or short (30 per cent) papers or both (23 per cent). Other common forms of grading included mid-term exams (33 per cent), discussion/participation (20 per cent), group projects (13 per cent), and class presentations (13 per cent). Many used tools less typical of other disciplines such as 1) case studies (40 per cent) – half of which were historically based (20 per cent), and half of which were imaginary conundrums (20 per cent); 2) innovative, individually created tools (30 per cent) and 3) debates (20 per cent).

There was also an infusion of two types of new material into EMP classrooms:
1) all participants frequently (50 per cent), sometimes (25 per cent), or rarely (25 per cent) used publications they have (co-) authored themselves and
2) most (86 per cent) use other new ideas and literature in the field, whether frequently (35 per cent), occasionally ‘when relevant’ (18 per cent), primarily in graduate courses (13 per cent), occasionally ‘in subtle ways’ (10 per cent) or rarely (10 per cent).

This new material was usually (80 per cent) balanced with an emphasis upon traditional ‘canon’ texts by seminal moral philosophers such as Aristotle, Kant and Mill, and sometimes included more modern thinkers (e.g. Rawls, Parfit, and Korsgaard) or/and multi-cultural (e.g. Confucius, Chief Seattle) and feminist (e.g. Gilligan, Noddings) voices. Since over one third (37 per cent) opposed the use of textbooks, anthologies and commentaries as primary texts, they have found creative ways to insure the reading of original (cf. traditional) philosopher texts. Such texts are emphasised by:
1) requiring reading them for major exams (60 per cent);
2) finding penetrable yet potent excerpts (15 per cent);
3) explaining canonical texts in relation to issues or cases (15 per cent);
4) matching excerpts to specific (graduate, upper level, entry level) classes according to difficulty (13 per cent); and
5) providing substantial historical, sociological or intellectual context for each text (10 per cent).

Attitudes toward incorporating newer technologies in the classroom were mixed. Not quite half (45 per cent) have used university teaching websites such as WebCT, Blackboard, and Whiteboard and many found them helpful. Fewer (25 per cent) also employed a PowerPoint-type technology, although one third of these later terminated such use due to ‘technical difficulties’, ‘increased student laziness and passivity’, ‘formulic classroom predictability and monotony’, ‘redundancy of word and image’, ‘overly structured presentation’, and ‘reduction of complex philosophical arguments into shopping lists’. Indeed, one
third (33 per cent) spoke out against using PowerPoint-type technologies despite the current trend.

Although a few have experimented with blogs, podcasts, and other new formats (10 per cent), and almost one quarter (23 per cent) have successfully incorporated visual (DVD, video, films, computer clips, etc.), EMP faculties seem more likely to safeguard mental discipline against electronic shortcuts, entertainment, and ‘bells and whistles’. Indeed, 25 per cent have never used any medium other than print (i.e. publications and hand-outs). On the other hand, another quarter (25 per cent) have successfully imported website materials into the classroom or onto reading lists. Some of these also recommended such teaching tools as the online Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy and online academic journals.

Participants employed a variety of strategies when preparing to teach EMP, the most frequent of which were:
1) rereading class reading assignments (35 per cent);
2) reviewing notes (33 per cent);
3) thinking about and searching for new examples, questions, and topics (23 per cent);
4) writing a fresh outline or ‘map of topics’ (23 per cent);
5) reading widely from related texts and journals (23 per cent), writing the entire lecture afresh (15 per cent), editing and adapting previous notes (13 per cent), preparing student hand-outs (13 per cent), ‘working hard in several preparatory modes’ simultaneously (13 per cent), and ‘rehearsing bits’ of thinking, examples, or arguments (10 per cent).

Other forms of preparation were unique to individuals such as ‘prepare three truly engaging questions’, ‘review the last class carefully and where that will lead’, ‘prepare complete notes and outline and then discard both just prior to the lecture to think on my feet’, ‘send out questions via e-mail to students the night before class’, ‘formulate my own position on each question’, ‘strive for living thinking in class’, and ‘create an alternative outline for other possibilities’.

**Why teach ethics?**

Those who felt that ethics instruction may enhance character development or moral improvement stated that their courses are contributing not only to the usual goals of education and philosophy, but also to making the world more civil, to reversing or opposing a downward spiral of human (and in some cases animal and environmental) abuse, and to correcting unfairness, injustice, inequality, and other ‘unethical’ practices. However, those who see ethics as primarily cerebral / reflective voiced other intentions for teaching ethics. When asked about what students should be able to do after taking their EMP classes which they could not do before, participants responded: look at social issues and moral problems differently or more seriously (25 per cent); think more rigorously, make sharper distinctions, morally reason, or engage beyond opinion (25 per cent); develop more philosophical, theoretical, abstract, or transcendent perspective (20 per cent); analyse and pose increasingly important questions (15 per cent), advance, deconstruct, counter, and articulate logical arguments (15 per cent), learn important historical figures, contexts, and influence (15 per cent), write more philosophically and accurately (10 per cent), read difficult thinking with greater understanding (10 per cent), change one’s mind in light of compelling arguments (10 per cent) and, in general, experience intellectual growth (10 per cent).

One of the most important goals expressed by most (80 per cent) of those interviewed was to teach students to question suppositions, opinions, and hidden contexts. Such questioning extended to just about everything from ‘anything unproven or presupposed’ (30 per cent), ‘pat answers and ordinary beliefs’ (20 per cent), ‘predictability and the status quo’ (15 per cent) to more specific mindsets such as dogmatism (20 per cent), relativism (10 per cent), political correctness or any ‘ism’ (10 per cent), and ‘any form of authority including the professor’ (10 per cent).

However, such thorough skepticism did not mean that participants wished to deflate all student beliefs and goals. When asked what they wished to teach their students to believe, half stated one or more of these objectives: ‘believe what is true, real, or factual’ (15 per cent), ‘believe on the basis of good evidence and rational thought’ (15 per cent), believe that ethics is ‘important’, has ‘moral authority’, and is ‘essential’ to the examined life (15 per cent), believe that ‘life is serious and must include awareness of the impact we have upon others’ (10 per cent), and believe that ‘truth is non-negotiable’ (8 per cent). One third said they did not intend to impart any beliefs, or did not answer.

A few (10 per cent) stated that they had ‘no specific goals’ for student learning. However,
the vast majority used ethics and moral philosophy as a premiere intellectual fitness centre, if not to a lesser degree as a civic improvement lab or humanitarian training ground.

**Recommendations: What professors can do**

While some EMF faculty seem to be ‘natural born’ teachers and others have worked hard at increasing effectiveness, almost all feel that there is room for improvement. Many already have either a systematic or intuitive process in place to upgrade their teaching skills and courses. For those who do not and who may be seeking improvement, there are a range of methods to consistently inspect and refine teaching. These include:

1) using a dedicated portion of each sabbatical, summer break, or course preparation period to evaluate and upgrade teaching;
2) reading articles or texts by those who have won national teaching awards and received consistently (near) perfect student evaluations (for excellence, not for popularity);
3) taking ‘master classes’;
4) spending more time seriously evaluating or soliciting student, if not peer, feedback;
5) reviewing selected literature from schools of education about pedagogical effectiveness;
6) examining student assignments and exams with an eye for determining depth, improvement, validity, comprehension, independent thought and thus teacher effectiveness.

Most importantly, faculty may realise that, whatever the approach, enhancing effectiveness takes deliberate work and serves the interests of students, faculty, institutions, and ethics. One might even argue that it is *ethically* important to deliberately strive for improvement to fulfil the written and unwritten contracts that teachers make with employers, students, their profession and society.

**Note on Contributor**

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