



Imagine a classroom where student research...

Faculty at Work

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The Public Ethics Project is a collaborative, community-based ethnographic research project. Students choose a local non-profit organization in the course and it became a laboratory for testing and evaluating ethical theories. Students examined the organization's ethical language used to explain and advance its mission, analyzed and evaluated the ethical practices in which the organization engages or promotes, and performed a documentary analysis as well as conducted informant interviews.

Students integrated the study of ethics on a cognitive, affective, and kinetic level. They also applied ethical reasoning to evaluate organizational claims for human flourishing or social justice and examined organizational language and practices from multiple normative perspectives.

*Read the **complete interview** with Edward Gray.*



**An Interview with Edward Gray, Department of Philosophy
2016 recipient of a High Impact Teaching Practices grant**

1. What is community service learning?

For me, community service learning in an ethics class is informed by Alasdair MacIntyre's dictum that "What philosophers primarily do is study the actual world in which they live – its politics, traditions, social organization, families, and so on."

This course and its assignments reflect that view that ethics is an activity; something that we do intellectually, emotionally, and kinetically. It is not simply a body of knowledge or an artifact of culture. As a recipient of the high impact teaching practices grant, I enhanced a course project by making it a more collaborative community-based experience for my students.

2. Describe the course and assignment. How did the community service activity contribute to class material?

The public ethics project is a collaborative, community-based ethnographic research project. Students choose a local non-profit organization early in the course and it becomes a laboratory for testing out and evaluating ethical theories. Students examine the organization in terms of the ethical language it uses to explain and advance its mission. They analyze and evaluate the ethical practices in which the organization engages or promotes. Finally, students perform a documentary analysis and conduct informant interviews.

About 40% of the class elected to participate. Students selected their teams, wrote an "ethics profile" of an approved community organization. They interviewed staff and volunteers and studied documentary evidence to see how the organization defined who was good, what acts were right, and what is just. They got to see an organization in action and to test their ability to "read" ethical theory into a real organization with everyday concerns. I think their work with an organization made the ethics material more and instantly relevant.

3. What did you gain from the teaching experience?

I got a chance to make some connections with some very worthwhile organizations in Colorado Springs. Having the project be such a big part of the course also made me mindful of making ethics relevant to students in everything I did.

Because of the grant support, I was able to be thoughtful as I developed the assignment. I was very certain that it needed to be a group project. As you can see, I have learned to make group projects voluntary. Voluntary means that students must make a choice and that shirkers can be removed – or withdraw -- from a team. I also designed the project in a way that prevent students from using the "divide and conquer" method. I don't like that approach at all and certainly not in an ethics class. I think team assignments need to encourage teaching and learning among the team and that means students need defined roles, not defined chunks of the project. This means I had an obligation to ensure that the project, in its design and my management of it, gets students to communicate, collaborate, and create together.

4. What do you think your students gained from the experience?

My students were able to integrate the different dimensions of the study of ethics on a cognitive, affective, and kinetic level. They applied ethical reasoning to evaluate organizational claims for human flourishing or social justice and examined organizational language and practices from multiple normative perspectives. I think they got to do this and in a way that would have made MacIntyre proud.

I also think that such skills are critical to student's professional success. They are going to have many employers over the course of their careers. As an adjunct, I know this well, so, I think the ability to reach the ethical culture of an organization is a life skill!

5. From your perspective, how did the community agency or agencies benefit?

In addition to having an opportunity to focus a bit more intentionally on organizational ethics, one of the most successful projects done by a team was to make recommendations for a code of ethics that the organization had never had. As part of their work, teams had to do a service project for the organization.

6. What was your greatest success story in this experience?

Wow! I should confess that I often fear that my course assignments end up as failures! I guess I have high aspirations but I am confident that students do have solid learning outcomes. With this project, much depends on group dynamics, internally within the team and between the team and the organization. I feel that I have done a very good job though in creating a team assignment that really requires both individual effort (for example, by having to conduct an interview and to use a unique ethicist) and the opportunity to be a teacher and a learner to one another as well.

7. What was your biggest challenge in this experience?

Balancing the need to give direction to a team while allowing the team to be self-regulating.

8. Would you recommend the incorporation of community service learning to other instructors? Why or why not?

Yes! It is great to see students make connections with real life concerns and put themselves in a position to do some good as well. I want to push all philosophical ethicists out onto the streets!