

Moving beyond the HS Ethics Bowl: Philosophy in High School

Presented at Association for Practical and Professional Ethics

February 28, 2014

Mark Doorley, Ph.D.

Director, Ethics Program, College of Liberal Arts & Sciences, Villanova University

I want to thank Roberta Israeloff for the invitation to join this panel. For the last two years I've had the privilege of organizing the Philadelphia Regional High School Ethics Bowl. In each year we've had 9 high schools participate, and the events have gone very well. We are gearing up now for planning this year's competition. My remarks today will be based on that experience to some degree; I hope they are helpful.

Ethics in High School

If there is an area of philosophy that would make it into the high school curriculum, it is ethics. Questions about the good life, the morality of this or that action or public policy, the challenges of multiculturalism and of relativism: these are the kinds of issues that can come up in literature classes, history classes, chemistry, biology, you name it. It seems to me that one could introduce ethics into the curriculum of any of the course that are taught on the high school level. To do that doesn't demand that each teacher become an ethicist; it demands thoughtful, open minded, responsible adults who are able to allow a discussion to arise, to follow its own path, and to steer it back to the demands of the lesson plan. However, this is no easy task.

My own experience with working on a team of faculty members to introduce ethics across the curriculum in the College of Engineering at Villanova might be illustrative of the challenges of this approach. Engineering is a discipline in which ethics is deeply embedded. Engineers make or design things that have the potential to harm people. So the principle "do no harm" is a bedrock of engineering culture. Given this I thought it would be possible to simply re-frame ethics in engineering in such a way

that all the faculty members in the college would realize that every course, even those hard science courses like hydrology, are opportunities to reinforce the values that drive the professional engineer. The engineers responded to my overtures with some variation of the following: "I am not an ethicist; I'm not competent to talk about that in my classroom." While I respect their reticence to speak outside their expertise, I also reminded them that they are human beings, that they are professional engineers, that they are citizens. As such, they are in the position to raise ethical questions and to wrestle with them, in dialogue with their students. Their role is not to convince their students that the professor's position is the right one, but to demonstrate that professional engineers ought to wrestle with the ethical questions that surround their work. They need to model it for the students. We have had some success, but more work on that effort is warranted.

I share that only to suggest that introducing ethics into the high school curriculum, as standard, is not an easy sell. However, I think there is an argument to be made for the inclusion of ethics in public education curricula. In the great tradition of Horace Mann and John Dewey, public education is a school for citizenship. All citizens in this representative democracy are called on to be informed participants in the great challenges that face us. What does that mean? They need to think carefully about the values that are at stake in our public and private lives. They need to be able to critically assess the positions of those in authority, and the positions of their neighbors. They need to be able to articulate their own positions on things, respectfully and with an attention to their listener's right to disagree. All of these skills accumulate throughout the high school curriculum. (In fact, they begin much earlier, but I'll limit my remarks to high school.)

What this suggests to me, clearly, is that ethics has a place in the high school curriculum. So why isn't it there already? In one of the schools that participate in my regional high school ethics bowl, they do have a philosophy program, centered around ethics. However, this high school is in a school district that is maximally resourced. My lone urban school, from Philadelphia, could not participate in

this year's competition because budget cuts left the teacher's ethics initiative on life-support. In this age of STEM goals, ethics, formally speaking, does not have a chance to make it to the table, given the budget shortfalls, in any but the most resource-rich schools.

In addition to the resource issue, there are curricular issues and day-to-day living issues in schools that militate against something like an ethics across the curriculum. There are things that have to be taught, and there simply isn't enough time to introduce something else. The challenge of teaching in the public schools of this country is not understood by many people. It is not the fantasy of several periods a day of uninterrupted teaching. There are constant interruptions for a variety of state or federally mandated matters. There is paper work that has to be attended to, mounds of it, and computer software programs to master in order to make reports that the paper work doesn't cover. It is amazing!

So, all of this is my way of suggesting that the high school ethics bowl is an ideal way to introduce ethics/philosophy into high schools. While it is not ideal, given the vision of an ethics across the curriculum sketched earlier, a school club dedicated to ethics is a very effective way to introduce philosophy into the high school. This is what most of the schools that participate in my regional do. The students meet quite often, after school, to prepare the cases. The teacher who moderates these clubs needs some preparation, but it is minimal. We held a workshop for our coaches, a two hour workshop, in which we went over the ins and outs of the ethics bowl. We talked about ethical theory, but emphasized that practical reasoning was the primary goal of ethics bowl. Rarely on the high school level have I heard students reference Kant or Mill. They talk about respecting people's freedom or identifying the harms that a course of action might cause.

Inviting other teacher colleagues into the process of preparing the students might spark ideas for those teachers in their own classrooms. Some of my schools, the private, religious-based schools, have morality classes in their curricula. These, of course, are the natural places for ethics to find a

curricular home and that is what happens. It is the public schools that are my concern, as that is where “everyone” is educated, and that is where the ability to engage in respectful and informed dialogue about critical issues facing our nation and communities needs to be nurtured. Ethics Bowl is one way to do that.