



3518 FREMONT AVE N #353 SEATTLE, WA 98103

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In-Class Ethics Bowls

Ethics Bowls are designed to promote thoughtful, civil dialogue about difficult questions. Students learn ethical reasoning and cultivate strong speaking and listening skills. They are evaluated on the extent to which they engage thoughtfully, collaboratively, and open-mindedly with the ethical issues raised.

Lesson Plan (6-8 sessions)

Session 1

Introduce an ethics case and work with the students to identify the ethical issues involved and discuss as a whole group. You can begin by breaking up the students into small groups and asking them to list the ethical questions they identify in the case.

Explain to them that ethics involves determining the right thing to do in particular circumstances and involves the way that we treat other living beings and our environment. You can let students know that although our first instinct is often to focus on what we think is the right answer in a particular ethics case, the best way to start your analysis is to think about what questions you might ask. Use the study questions for each case to help you.

Collections of Ethics Cases:

[PLATO Ethics Case Library](#)

[Middle School Ethics Bowl](#)

[National High School Ethics Bowl](#)

Session 2

Introduce the case that will be used for the in-class ethics bowl. Again, work with the students to identify the ethical issues and discuss.

At this session, describe the structure of the Ethics Bowl and the various roles students might play.

Ethics Bowl Structure (see Rules and Information for more detail)

1. Presentations. At the beginning of the round, both teams will have 2 minutes to confer with each other about how they want to present the case. Then each team will give presentations about the case for up to 3 minutes. In the presentations, teams should describe what they see as the important ethical issues in the case and explain how they think about them, including how they would respond to someone who disagreed with their view.

2. Open dialogue. After both teams have given their presentations, the two teams engage in a self-moderated open dialogue for up to 10 minutes, thinking together about the issues that emerged in the presentations.

3. Judges' Questions. After the open dialogue, the questioning judges have 20 minutes to ask both teams questions, first 10 minutes for Team A and then 10 minutes for Team B. It can be helpful to have the classroom teacher or other adult be one of the questioning judges.

4. Final Question. After the judges' questions section, both teams will respond to the following question:

What point or points did the other team make that really made you think?

Student Roles

After session 2, students give their first and second choices for the role they would like to play in the bowl.

1. Team member (two teams, each with up to 5 students)
2. Questioning Judge (3-5 students, who will ask questions of the teams)
3. Scoring Judge (3 or 5 students; must be an odd number; these judges will score both teams in the round; see scoring criteria and sample scoresheet)
4. Reporter (students who do not want to play any of the other roles; this can involve art and/or writing that can be submitted to *Wondering Aloud*, the PLATO Blog, or to *Questions*, PLATO's online journal)

The classroom teacher, visiting philosophy instructor, or another adult should be the moderator of the bowl (see moderator script).

Note: Depending on the number of students, you can opt to have the questioning and scoring judges be the same students. You can also elect to have adults or older students serve as the judges.

Sessions 3 and 4

At these sessions, work with the two teams (seated in separate parts of the room) to help them prepare their presentations for the bowl. They can each bring one 3x5 index card with them to the bowl, but no other outside notes. Let them know that they will have scratch paper to take notes during the event.

The teams can decide if they want to take turns presenting various parts of the presentation, if they want one team member to lead, or some other approach. You should also provide an orientation to the questioning and scoring judges, focusing in particular on the importance of neutrality in their roles. Let the

questioning judges know that it is helpful to take notes during the presentations and open dialogue, which usually raise many questions.

Session 5

This is the in-class bowl, which generally takes less than an hour. See the [Event Rules](#) for a complete description. Please note that you are free to adapt these rules as you wish (for example, some teachers allow for ties).

The event involves two teams, judges, a moderator, and spectators. Usually, you should serve as the moderator (see the [Moderator Script](#)). Each team and the questioning judges should be seated at separate tables, ideally in a triangle, with the moderator at the end of the questioning judges' table. The scoring judges (the students at the long table in this photo) can be seated next to or behind the questioning judges.

This is a wonderful event to which to invite family members.



Session 6 (optional)

If you are doing this in more than one classroom in a school, you can hold a final round between the winners of the initial rounds. It is helpful to use a new case for this round. If you do so, you will need the preparation sessions (sessions 3 and 4 above) to work through the case with the participating teams.

You can also use the Ethics Bowl format for multiple rounds, using different cases and/or different kinds of prompts, working with the students to develop their skills over time. Ethics Bowl has proven to be a successful approach to heightening classroom engagement, with ample opportunities for student reflection and deepening ethical awareness.

Optional Additions to Lesson Plan

The following activities can help to provide more scaffolding for students participating in an in-class Ethics Bowl.

- **Scrimmages** – Students may feel more prepared and better understand their roles if they participate in a scrimmage before ethics bowl. This is essentially a mock ethics bowl prior to the main event, giving students a feel for their roles and an opportunity to ask questions and develop their skills. You can use a different case for the scrimmage(s) than for the actual ethics bowl.
- **Practice for Teams** – Teams may benefit from practicing giving their presentations before a scrimmage or the ethics bowl itself if there will not be a scrimmage. Provide teams with spaces where they can be alone to practice and hear their own presentation aloud. Encourage them to ask these questions:
 - Is our position clear?
 - Are we considering alternative points of view?
 - Are our thoughts connecting to one another’s as we move through speakers on the team.
 - What might a judge ask us and how might we include that information in our presentation.
 - Is everyone speaking loudly enough for the whole room to hear them?
- **Practice for questioning judges** – It can be challenging for some students to develop questions on the spot as they must do in the ethics bowl. Providing questioning judges with a chance to practice this skill can be helpful. Some ways to practice:
 - Provide questioning judges with a video of someone presenting a viewpoint on any topic. Have them write questions they would ask that person about their view.
 - Have the students develop some prepared “back-up,” more general questions that they can use at the ethics bowl if desired. Many of these questions will end up being relevant at the event.
 - Practicing with other ethics bowl cases:
 - Provide questioning judges with an ethics bowl case that is not the one being used for your bowl.
 - Have one or two of the judges think about what they would say about that case if they were on a team doing a presentation.
 - Have the other questioning judges ask them questions about their position.

- Rotate roles so that each questioning judge has a turn putting together a “presentation” and a turn asking questions.
- **Practice for scoring judges** – Practicing scoring outside of an actual ethics bowl is quite challenging because there are not videos available of other in-class ethics bowls students can watch and score themselves. Here are some ideas for how to help scoring judges prepare:
 - Have scoring judges write a list of values a good scoring judge will bring to their role
 - Ask scoring judges to listen to or watch a video of someone presenting a viewpoint on any topic and practice writing notes as if they would have to assign scores to that presenter’s work.
 - What kinds of notes would they need?
 - What would help them pay attention to what is being said?