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Guide for Designing Ethics Cases For Older Students

Middle and High School

Ethics case studies encourage middle and high school students to reason critically and dialogue respectfully about authentic moral dilemmas. When writing ethics cases for this age group, it is important to explore substantive ethical issues that are relevant to and age-appropriate for middle and/or high school students.

The purpose of these case studies is to help students push past obvious answers, recognize interconnections between ideas, and evaluate conflicting ethical priorities, using everyday moral reasoning. In order to accomplish this, we recommend that writers of case studies keep the following in mind.

Content & Structure: Cases may be drawn from real-world events or crafted as realistic fictional stories. Scenarios must present a plausible dilemma with genuine personal, social, or community stakes. Each case should be between 300-500 words and include a title, case narrative, and set of study questions, one of which can be chosen as the match question in an ethics bowl.

The study questions should prompt students to address the core ethical dilemma raised by the case. The questions should be phrased in a way that remains open and allows for

different possible answers, such as:

- “What ethical considerations are important for X to consider and why?”
- “Is X ethically obligated to Y?”
- “When, if ever, is it morally permissible to X?”
- “What should X do? Why?”

The questions should help students push past obvious answers by highlighting:

- Stakeholder perspectives
- Competing values and obligations
- Possible implications and consequences

Accessibility: Scenarios should be concise and written appropriately for middle and/or high school students. Use natural language and familiar contexts, so that students from all backgrounds can relate to the issue raised by the case. Students should be able to talk about the cases without using technical language from the field of philosophy and ethics. Include ethically relevant details using ordinary language, e.g. terms such as harm, benefit, freedom, respect, greater good, care, friendship, character, and intention.

Clear Dilemma: A well-crafted case provides enough context for students to understand the stakes while maintaining strict neutrality so that multiple defensible conclusions remain open. Instead leave space open for student analysis and decision formation.

- Consider the ethical issue from at least two viewpoints, and present these outlooks generously and fully so that the complexity of the case is made clear.

Avoid Partisan and “Hot-Button” Topics: Do not base scenarios on partisan political debates or sensationalized headlines that invite pre-packaged political arguments rather than open ethical reflection.

- Remember that these cases will be used by students across the country (and world).

No Footnotes or Required Research:

Avoid including footnotes or references to specific outside texts. While students are welcome to research background context if they choose, no case should require external text research to understand or discuss the moral problem.

Sample Cases

Middle School Case: *Science Unfair*

Valentina's high school biology teacher has paired up students for a project and announced that the partnerships are final. The assignment involves crafting and executing an experiment and will take each group approximately a month to complete. At the end of the term, each group will be responsible for writing and delivering a report of their findings. The project will be worth a third of each student's grade.

Valentina's partner is Gerald, one of the worst students in the class. Gerald doesn't care about biology and only signed up for the class because he was required to do so. All year long, he's put in the bare minimum effort and, as a result, has fallen behind. Valentina, on the other hand, is an unusually good biology student. She is also highly motivated, driven by a desire to attend a prestigious college. Despite her excellent scores on every test so far, however, Valentina knows that the group project will determine her final grade in the class.

When Valentina and Gerald meet to design their experiment, it quickly becomes clear that after almost a full year of slacking off, Gerald has neither the knowledge nor the skill to contribute to a successful project. He gamely offers to help, but both he and Valentina know that he would almost certainly be a hindrance if he got involved; Valentina would just have to re-do everything he did! Ultimately, Valentina decides that the assignment is too important to leave to chance, and tells Gerald not to attempt to make any significant contributions. Gerald feels guilty, but also relieved—he hadn't fully appreciated that his laziness might affect any other student negatively, and he's glad that he won't be responsible for bringing Valentina's grade down by doing substandard work. To be honest, he's also at least a little bit happy that his grade will get a boost because of Valentina's excellent work.

Question: Is it ethical for Valentina to do the group project by herself without Gerald?

High School Case: *AI in College Admissions: Algorithmic Acceptance?*

Many colleges have started leaning on Artificial Intelligence (AI) to help manage the flood of applications for admission. In some places, the first screen isn't a person at all but a machine that checks whether an applicant clears basic thresholds before passing them along for human review. At UNC-Chapel Hill, for example, the student paper *The Daily Tar Heel* reported that admissions essays are sometimes run through "Reader AI," occasionally without a human ever looking at the writing itself. Some companies, like Othot, go a step further. Their enrollment analytics software assigns real-time scores predicting whether a student is likely to enroll. These cases raise serious ethical questions about the admissions process: should AI be the gatekeeper of opportunity?

Proponents of these tools argue that the use of AI is almost unavoidable when a flagship university receives tens of thousands of applications with limited staff. They point out that AI predictive models can sort through routine data like GPAs and demographics much more quickly and consistently than can people, allowing students to be notified earlier of admissions decisions. Advocates even argue that good predictive models can surface "hidden gems," such as first-generation or low-income high performers who might otherwise be overlooked. In that sense, AI may help promote equity while keeping admission rates manageable.

Skeptics see it differently. AI tools trained on past admissions data often carry forward the very biases they are supposed to erase. As *Inside Higher Ed* has reported, platforms like Othot's predictive analytics system, which generates enrollment 'likelihood scores,' can unintentionally disadvantage multilingual, rural, or under-resourced applicants. Brookings analysts warn that tying financial aid or admission to "yield scores" treats students like commodities instead of recognizing their merit. In addition, there is the accountability gap between the AI vendors and the admission offices, and rejected students have no real path to appeal. Without transparent reviews and genuine human checks, speeding up admissions decisions through AI risks sacrificing fairness and undermining public confidence.

Discussion Questions

1. **Is it fair for an application to be accepted or rejected without any human reviewing it?**
2. **Does the use of AI by college admissions offices dehumanize students?**