

Chapter 11

Deliberating across the Lifespan

Michael Vazquez

Ethics Bowls always involved adults—as coaches and judges. But why not compose adult Ethics Bowl teams? Many people who judge or coach leave an event wondering when they will have the opportunity to answer questions instead of ask them. According to Parr Center for Ethics Director of Outreach Michael Vazquez, Ethics Bowls can be adapted in a variety of settings (workplace, senior centers) and across a wide swath of professions.

* * *

As a person advances in age, doesn't he become increasingly reluctant to sing? That is, he enjoys it less and, when compelled to do it, he feels especially embarrassed—the more so the older and more moderate he has become. Isn't this so?¹

FLIP THE SCRIPT: ETHICS BOWL FOR ADULTS

The young are malleable. Educable. Their prospects for growth and achievement are vast and filled with promise. Adults, on the other hand, are hardened—worn down by experience, too busy for leisure and play, too fixed in their ways to learn new things.

So goes a familiar story about aging, at least. It is well past time for outreach practitioners to flip the script. The same optimism that motivated the pioneers of the Philosophy for Children movement to dismantle educational prejudices toward children should animate our efforts to work with folks beyond the schooling years. We must continue to think expansively about

who has a seat at the table in the “community of philosophical inquiry”²—and Ethics Bowl is one of the best tools for the job.

Ethics Bowl is an opportunity for individuals to engage in ethical reflection *for themselves* and to, thereby, have greater ownership over their habits, beliefs, values, and life projects. It is also an opportunity for individuals to cultivate democratic skills and dispositions that will in turn permeate the civic sphere, the workplace, and other domains of shared life. In this way, Ethics Bowl for Adults is both a space for humanistic self-fulfillment and for the ameliorative project of maintaining and transforming the social order by producing more ethical professionals and more public-spirited citizens.

Unlike general philosophy discussion activities, Ethics Bowl is an exercise in *deliberation*.³ Deliberation centers on the question, “What should I *do*?” construed broadly so as to include interpersonal ethical choices that arise in the context of everyday life, controversial policy questions, and other individual and collective decision points that involve trade-offs, competing values, preferences, risks, obligations, and other features of practical import. Ethics Bowl provides a space for folks to *practice* deliberating by “giving reasons, listening, considering perspectives, evaluating views, and treating each other as political equals.”⁴ This is why we should not hesitate to call Ethics Bowl a *deliberative pedagogy*.⁵

Engrained assumptions about age, plasticity, and decline have so far prevented us from exploiting the power of this pedagogical tool for the promotion of lifelong learning, a cause championed by the educational theorist Eduard Lindeman in the twentieth century:

From many quarters comes the call to a new kind of education with its initial assumption affirming that *education is life*—not a mere preparation for an unknown kind of future living . . . The whole of life is learning, therefore education can have no endings. This new venture is called *adult education*—not because it is confined to adults but because adulthood, maturity, defines its limits.⁶

Lindeman gives pride of place to “the learner’s experience” as opposed to passive forms of content acquisition.⁷ His focus on inquiry that is guided by real-world needs, interests, and puzzles is well-suited to Ethics Bowl as a discursive form of case-based reasoning.

Ethics Bowl is, in essence, a structured and curated environment for discussion of the sort Lindeman envisioned: a “co-operative venture in non-authoritarian, informal learning,” and a vehicle for egalitarian associations among adults centered on the cultivation of democratic habits of thought, talk, and action.⁸ The fate of our democratic experiment depends not only on our commitment to the education of the next generation, but also on our

commitment to creating opportunities for the present generation to adapt and to grow in the face of ever-changing circumstances.⁹

STRATEGIES FOR PROSPECTIVE ORGANIZERS

As a deliberative pedagogy, Ethics Bowl is more than any particular set of rules and procedures. Foremost, it is an exercise in humility. The activity begins from a collective recognition of the “hazards involved in the correct (and conscientious) exercise of our powers of reason and judgment”¹⁰ and an acknowledgment that reasonable and well-intentioned people can disagree about questions of value and ethics. It is most fruitfully used to discuss issues around which there is *reasonable disagreement*, or disagreement about matters of ethics and value that persists even after all parties have competently and earnestly reckoned with the same facts and considerations.

Some organizers of Ethics Bowls for adults worry that the regimentation of the activity—scoring, judging, and time constraints—might seem childish. However, whether or not a regimented activity like Ethics Bowl will be perceived as heavy-handed depends on the particular individuals with whom you are engaging. In my ongoing efforts to host Senior Ethics Bowls in North Carolina, some groups of older adults have expressed a preference for retaining traditional elements like scoring and judging. For some, rules and scoring provide structure and additional incentive to participate actively. For others, that is not the case, so it is worth approaching Ethics Bowl for adults with a particular kind of flexibility.

Remember: the aims of Ethics Bowl can be realized in *many* different ways. Extended opportunities to speak, respond, collaborate, and change one’s mind are ineliminable features of Ethics Bowl—but there is a great deal of latitude within those constraints. As an organizer you can treat the elements of an Ethics Bowl match (“initial presentation,” “commentary,” and so on) as modular pieces that can be moved around or used in isolation. It also helps to think of the essential *skills* involved in, for example, analyzing an Ethics Bowl case—offering a responsive commentary or formulating judge questions—as skills that can be promoted in isolation with activities suited to the diverse needs, interests, and constraints of participants.

Finally, it helps to think of Ethics Bowl for adults as an educational *package* that includes didactic elements, normative case studies, and opportunities for discussion. Although adults are uniquely well-situated to discuss ethical dilemmas on the basis of lived experience, an appropriate dose of ethical theory enables participants to impose structure on what is an otherwise diffuse set of moral intuitions and experiences.

A basic repertoire of ethical concepts also provides a shared foundation and vocabulary with which folks can disagree and discuss a case. In all cases it is important to avoid jargon and other needless barriers to entry. Organizers should emphasize the robust expertise participants *already* have, both in virtue of their practical and professional experience, and in virtue of the fact that they are socialized human beings.¹¹ It is also important to avoid giving the impression that case-based reasoning is nothing more than the mindless application of systematic ethical theories like consequentialism and deontology. Aside from certain forms of consequentialism, it was rarely the intention of moral philosophers to provide a simple decision procedure or algorithm for figuring out what the right thing to do is!

An ethical toolkit for participants should facilitate, rather than inhibit, careful scrutiny of the richness of concrete situations, and it should also be tailored specifically to the discussion at hand. So, for example, an Ethics Bowl for city policymakers centered on the implementation of a proposed randomized control trial for universal basic income might benefit from a crash course on competing principles of distributive justice (e.g., equality, sufficiency, utility, merit) and ethical notions like “paternalism” and “respect.”

What Ethics Bowl provides is a domain-general space within which folks can discuss the distinctive ethical issues that arise in the context of their professional practice and everyday lives, with all the nuance and specificity such discussions deserve. As the burgeoning of applied domains of ethical theory in philosophy has demonstrated, every arena of professional practice—whether that is business, policy, medicine, education, or other domains—is pervaded by ethical values and dilemmas.

ETHICS BOWL FOR EDUCATIONAL PROFESSIONALS

Education is a fruitful place to begin since the philosophical and democratic foundations of schooling are in many ways aligned with the core ideals of Ethics Bowl—an activity which began in the classroom, after all! Promising research has demonstrated the theoretical congruence and salutary effects of ethical literacy and deliberative practices like Ethics Bowl for educational practice.¹² There is also innovative work being done at, for example, the Harvard Graduate School of Education to provide teachers and educational leaders with opportunities to reflect on ethical and normative dimensions of their practice. I commend in particular the resources and publications curated by Harvard Graduate School of Education’s Justice in Schools Project (www.justiceinschools.org) and the case studies found in Levinson and Fay (2016, 2019). Ethics Bowl provides a ready-made space within which such

discussions can take place, with educators and experienced practitioners alike aspiring to enter the profession.

In the summer of 2020, I organized an Ethics Bowl for educational professionals as the capstone event for a doctoral seminar on the Social Foundations of Education. After weeks of reflecting on foundational questions around educational practice—including the aims of education, diversity and multiculturalism, and distributive justice—twenty-five educational professionals were divided into four teams. Each team had the chance to analyze and discuss two cases from Levinson and Fay (2019) and was guided on how to identify the salient normative dimensions of the case, articulate why it might be the basis of reasonable disagreement, and stake out a nuanced position on the issue.¹³ The first case focused on the difficulties of facilitating controversial conversations in the classroom, and the second focused on de facto segregation at a charter school founded to meet the needs of a Somali immigrant community. The Ethics Bowl was also followed by an individual writing assignment in which students crafted a normative case study of their own and wrote an “ethics memo” analyzing the case. Two students who were unable to attend the capstone Ethics Bowl were able to conduct a written and asynchronous analogue to Ethics Bowl, complete with presentation, commentary, and judge periods—further testimony to the malleable nature of the Ethics Bowl format.

At the end of the course, students reflected on the value of Ethics Bowl for their professional growth:

1. “As an attorney and a former competitive debater, I learned that participating in this exercise was somewhat difficult because of the less competitive nature that it presented (e.g., I really wanted to cross-examine members of the other team). It’s difficult, but I would like to do something like this again with the cohort so we can reach reasoned outcomes and I can work on ridding any vestiges of competitive behavior.”
2. “During the process of the ‘Ethics Bowl,’ I recognized that I’m still stretching to master the skill of assertion without aggression. Monitoring my internal reactions to ideas from my groupmates, I noticed that I was hyperaware about measuring my responses; I wanted to find the ‘right’ words and tone without compromising what I meant. I like that I’m trying; I think that everybody should do so.”
3. “I really learned the power of productive silence in a conversation. Just taking the time to really step back and listen to the other point of view in relation to my own . . .”
4. “I personally loved this format and the way in which it allowed for ‘safe’ discourse . . . and I don’t think [debate] lends itself to the purpose

of having healthy dialogue around complex, triggering, and sensitive issues.”

Ethics Bowl for educators has promising curricular and extracurricular use cases. Deliberative democratic practices can be incorporated into standard coursework and training for educators and educational leaders in Schools of Education, or else incorporated into continuing education programming for active professionals and school districts across the country.

One of the most heartening aspects of Ethics Bowl is its propensity to spread. That is, those who experience its transformative value, especially firsthand, tend to advocate for it, whether high school students who talk about it with friends at other schools who then go on to create teams, or midcareer educational professionals who participate in an Ethics Bowl as part of their graduate studies and go on to organize an Ethics Bowl for teachers within their school, or for principals within their school district, or as a school-wide activity intended to build community and foster public deliberation. Judges, as well, recruited as prominent community members, often become Ethics Bowl’s biggest proponents, amplifying the program’s spread and giving voice to its central tenets. In a word, Ethics Bowl is contagious.

ETHICS BOWL IN THE WORKPLACE

Another promising frontier is to introduce Ethics Bowl into professional development and training opportunities in the workplace. Calls for the cultivation of business ethics are not new, but Ethics Bowl provides a uniquely engaging format and structure for such programming. The process of case preparation and discussion can be compressed into an intensive event or series of meetings that is both didactic and interactive.

The Parr Center continues to offer three-hour credit-bearing workshops for UNC frontline employees in partnership with UNC’s Human Resources department. The workshops allowed participants to think through issues and challenges that commonly arise in workplace ethics, including the moral responsibilities of supervisors and supervisees, conflicts of interest, and personal relationships on the job.

The structure of the Ethics Bowl invites a level of nuance and complexity that is all too often lacking in discussion of ethical dilemmas in the workplace. Those who participate can move beyond a professional ethic of rule-compliance and instead discuss the intellectual and moral virtues that can sustain a collaborative, ethical, and respectful workplace *culture*. At the Parr Center, we also hope to leverage our network of private and nonprofit sector

partners to offer Ethics Bowl programming in the workplace (e.g., at annual corporate retreats or leadership training workshops).

ETHICS BOWL FOR PUBLIC SERVANTS

In recent years, more of those engaged in the public sector have come to appreciate that philosophy can guide them as they engage with the normative and ethical dimensions of public sector work. One model for Ethics Bowl for public servants, and one that speaks to the possibilities and interest of this kind of programming, took place in the city of Durham, North Carolina. “Ethical Leadership and Decision-Making at All Levels” workshops were offered in response to polling of city employees that expressed concerns about the ethical culture in the city’s workforce and low levels of trust in city leadership. The director of Durham’s Department of Audit Services, Germaine Brewington, partnered with the Philosophy department at UNC-Chapel Hill to provide case-based and discussion-oriented programming rooted in the elements of Ethics Bowl. Building on the success of this model of programming, Germaine is spearheading our efforts to integrate Ethics Bowl programming into existing educational opportunities for city employees during the workday. As she notes:

The City’s ethics training programs . . . bring awareness to employees about the ethical behavior expected at the City; and they provide City employees a framework to think through ethical dilemmas. Ethics in the workplace also underpins the relationships between the community and City staff because operating under a set of ethics policies helps City employees accurately and equitably manage tax dollars entrusted to them by City residents.

Ethics Bowl for public servants promises to lead to more reflection on ethical issues arising in a distinctive and underappreciated sphere of professional practice. It is also an opportunity to integrate ethics programming with other city-based academic partnerships that aim to keep public servants apprised of cutting-edge social scientific research, create opportunities for normative reflection that is grounded in the complexity of real-world problems, and avoid some of the vices of overly stylized or idealized ethical reasoning in philosophy.

ETHICS BOWL FOR OLDER ADULTS

Ethics Bowl for Older Adults can be fruitfully situated in the context of wider adult programming discussed at the beginning of this chapter, which includes both general philosophical inquiry and the specific kind of practical deliberation that is characteristic of Ethics Bowl.

Ethics Bowl through Informal Discussion

Lindeman was a proponent of small group discussions, and in particular neighborhood discussion groups that he deemed “the finest medium available for dealing with controversial issues.”¹⁴ Ethics Bowl can provide infrastructure for democratic community groups of this kind. Take, for example, Bartlett Reserve Retirement Community’s “Brainstorming” discussion group in Durham, North Carolina. Formerly known as Socrates Café, we collectively decided to shift our focus to ethical and normative reflection, using case studies from the National High School Ethics Bowl case archive as the anchor for each session. Each of our sessions begin with a guiding question that is the functional equivalent of a moderator question.

Although there are no teams or rounds, many of the didactic and discursive elements of Ethics Bowl are still present. Each case presents an opportunity to introduce canonical ethical notions that are germane to the topic at hand. Each team member has the chance to serve as presenter, respondent, judge, and moderator. We have found that the informal format is especially conducive to earnest, nonperformative discussion. Here’s what I mean: during a formal Ethics Bowl match, folks are more inclined to take a broader view on the issue, to consider the issue from different angles and points of view, and to reason in less self-regarding ways. That’s a feature, not a bug, of the design of Ethics Bowl as an activity. Sometimes, though, it helps to give those same people the chance to be more forthright than they might in the context of a public dialogue, where candor is mediated by social expectation. The notion that *sincerity* is vital to our collaborative pursuit of truth goes back to Socrates’s public philosophizing in Athens.¹⁵ That’s where the informal discussion group centered on Ethics Bowl can help.

Senior Ethics Bowls

We are working with retirement communities and older adult advocacy groups in the Triangle area to offer conventional Ethics Bowl programming to seniors. To lower the barrier to entry, it helps to limit scheduled matches to *two* cases chosen democratically by those involved—or slightly more if teams

want to preserve the element of surprise on match day. A tip for organizers: the case selection process is fun and rewarding for everyone, and an early opportunity for “opposing teams” to meet. It is also a useful teaching opportunity, for example, to introduce the basic elements of case-based reasoning and ethical analysis.

In our experience, senior enrichment coordinators welcome the opportunity to partner with a local university to offer programming that is accessible, engaging, and, most importantly, well-defined. It is also important to reach older adults who do not live in congregate communities, so we work closely with the Orange County Department of Aging and plan to continue to utilize public senior centers to create deliberative opportunities for folks from different communities and backgrounds.

Keep in mind: Ethics Bowl can be the occasion for forming new community partnerships with communities of older adults, but it can also be introduced to longstanding community partners—for example, as a way to shake up the traditional senior philosophy discussion group or as a capstone event for a group like Bartlett Reserve that is already reading and discussing ethics.

INTERGENERATIONAL ETHICS BOWL

Finally, this past academic year, I designed and taught a new, experiential education course in philosophy that promotes learning across generations and across the lifespan. The course was conceived as a response to the many calls by advocates for older adults to create opportunities for intergenerational encounters that promote well-being, social inclusion, and civic participation. UNC undergraduates participated in weekly hour-long discussions with older adults from the Retired Faculty Association at UNC and from the Galloway Ridge retirement community. Students worked with “intergenerational peer reviewers” to compose public-facing philosophical op-ed pieces. They also planned an intergenerational philosophy capstone event at which groups of undergraduates and older adults deliberated about a case study on forgiveness.

The aim was to grapple with a question that is of particular interest to an intergenerational audience and that implicates central dimensions of our practical and moral lives. Building off the success of this program, our plan is to continue to offer intergenerational experiential education opportunities to UNC undergraduates and to expand intergenerational Ethics Bowl programming to primary and secondary school students. There are exciting prospects for bringing older adults into the fold of existing communities of practice, such as the Middle School Ethics Bowl, the National High School Ethics Bowl, and the Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl. Intergenerational Ethics Bowl admits of several promising variations: older adults deliberating alongside

younger students, neighbors and family members deliberating across generations about issues of local concern, and young students using Ethics Bowl as a Civic Action Project for facilitating important conversations in their communities.

We have high hopes for the success of the programs already underway, and we are excited to collaboratively pursue the aspirations outlined in this chapter and elsewhere in the volume. Ethics Bowl remains one of the most impactful forms of public philosophy in our engagement toolkit. It fosters mutual respect and a spirit of cooperation in the face of ethical and political disagreement, and bridges our many divisions—age included.

[See references for this chapter in the References and Resources section.]

* * *

For me, Ethics Bowl was a great learning experience, and one that I would absolutely love to continue participating in. Discussing the overall positions our group would defend for each case developed my abilities to persuade and compromise, while being in the event itself strengthened my ability to debate. I discussed contentious, modern issues in a constructive manner and became more aware of their nuances and similarities to historical issues. I would thoroughly recommend it to anyone interested in public speaking, debate, research, or collaborative work. A word of advice to the newcomer: do not fret about what you don't know when you first receive the cases. As someone who initially panicked about my inexperience and lack of knowledge about factory farming, I am most proud of our performance in the round in which this case was discussed. I was proud to speak to it and provide specific, topical examples of environmentally friendly alternatives and lab-grown meat.

—Ryan Roth, High School Ethics Bowler