**Cooperative Learning, Critical Thinking and Character: Techniques to Cultivate Ethical Deliberation**

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**Abstract**: Effective ethics teaching and training must cultivate both critical thinking skills and character traits that are needed to deliberate effectively about ethical issues in personal and professional life. After highlighting some cognitive and motivational obstacles that stand in this way of this task, this article draws on both educational research and the author's experience in order to demonstrate how formal cooperative learning techniques can be used to overcome them. Since relatively little attention has been paid to the efficacy of cooperative learning in the area of ethics specifically, this article also serves to illuminate additional areas for cooperative learning research.

Suggested Call-Outs:

1. Cooperative learning … refers to the use of highly structured, interactive exercises that have been carefully designed to hold each participant individually accountable for contributing to a larger, complex learning goal, while also making all participants jointly responsible for integrating the learning of every other member (p. 5).

2. [I]nstructors must carefully specify not only what kind of learning the group is expected to demonstrate, but also how each individual participant will contribute to that outcome (p. 9).

3. [W]hen individuals are forced to present not just a conclusion, but also its rationale to other individuals, this tends to deepen their understanding of both the position being defended and the higher order reasoning strategies that support it (p. 15).

4. [S]tudents can be put in situations where they must practice – that is, exhibit and utilize -- responsibility, multiple perspective taking and tolerance in order to achieve cooperative learning outcomes (p. 17).

One of the biggest challenges in ethics teaching and training is getting participants to avoid both *simplistic subjectivism*, on the one hand, and *anything-goes-relativism*, on the other. 'Simplistic subjectivism' refers to the view that ethics is simply a matter of personal opinion, that there is nothing anyone can say or do to change a person's mind about ethical issues, and that indeed there is something wrong with trying to change people's minds, because, after all, people have a right to their own opinion, and ethics is just about being true to your core values. 'Anything-goes-relativism,' by contrast, refers to the view that ethics is whatever a particular culture or societal group happens to dictate, that there is nothing anyone can say or do to show that one group's ethical practices are preferable to any other's, and that indeed there is something wrong with evaluating any cultural practice, because, after all, every culture is entitled to make its own rules, and ethics is just about rule-following. Neither of these positions is intellectually -- or ethically -- tenable. And although many people say they believe these positions, they rarely adhere to them in their daily choices and actions. Still, the fact that people think these positions are somehow appropriate creates significant obstacles to ethical decision-making.

After exploring these obstacles, this article demonstrates how cooperative learning techniques can be used to overcome them. Both educational research and concrete examples are provided to show how such techniques cultivate critical thinking skills and character traits that are needed to deliberate effectively about ethical issues in personal and professional life. Although the general effectiveness of cooperative learning has been validated by numerous studies in the past 30 years, relatively little attention has been paid to its specific efficacy in the area of ethics (Johnson et al. 2007). Hence, this

article also serves to illuminate additional areas for cooperative learning research.

**Obstacles to Ethical Deliberation**

One way to address simple subjectivism and anything-goes relativism is to prepare lectures or interactive discussions about how and why these positions fail various tests of critical scrutiny. It is fairly easy to get learners (whether students or professional trainees) to come up with examples of individuals whose core values are seriously flawed. And it is fairly easy to get learners to identify persons they admire as ethical role models precisely because those persons refused to obey their culture's ethical rules. In light of such examples, most learners can recognize that they must be relying on some criteria other than personal values or cultural rules to evaluate cases.

Similarly, it is fairly easy to get learners to come up with examples where a person is just plain wrong about something, even though it is impossible to change that person's mind, as well as examples where groupthink is not only unenlightened but dangerous. In light of those examples, most learners can recognize that there is clearly a difference between describing how people *do* think and act in the area of ethics, and figuring out whether people really *should* think that way and hence what they really *ought* to do. At this point, the instructor can point out that ethical deliberation is the latter of these options, and presumably the learners will then be ready to do the intellectual work of identifying the ethical norms that are operative in various situations and applying those norms to evaluate their own and others' conduct. As learners become more adept at ethical deliberation, it is tempting to assume that they will also be motivated to incorporate those norms in their daily choices and actions.

As Steven Satris (1986, 195) has pointed out, however, undergraduate students will return to positions like simplistic subjectivism and anything goes relativism time and time again, and their "most disappointing appearance occurs after the course is over, although, mercifully, most instructors are then spared an encounter with it." Much of the problem is that these are not typically held as intellectual positions at all. Rather, they are held as psychological defense mechanisms or intellectual “suits of armor” (Satris 1986). No one likes to have their choices and actions scrutinized, and students are savvy enough to recognize that if they get into the business of critically examining other people's positions, sooner or later they will have to accept critical examinations of their own. Similarly, even though undergraduates, as a group, are hardly known for their blind conformity to cultural norms, they are again savvy enough to recognize that if they don't want society "imposing its views" on them, they can hardly go around imposing their views on any other culture. Since the challenges here have more to do with motivation than understanding, it is not surprising that treating them as intellectual errors tends to have limited long term effects.

A similar pattern is at work in professional ethics training. Since participants are often required to attend such training as a condition of employment, they have a strong motivation to learn the prescribed ethical rules, and little motivation to voice any personal concerns or conflicts they may have with those prescriptions. But this does not mean that trainees give up their core values or other group affiliations; indeed, most professional associations actively encourage members to retain their personal moral identities. So long as no conflicts occur between these potentially competing sets of values, trainees may become quite adept at identifying and applying relevant professional norms. But when

conflicts occur, they may have few skills for resolving them. In that case, the temptation toward simplistic subjectivism may lead them to act on personal values in lieu of legitimate professional norms. Alternatively, the temptation toward anything goes relativism may tempt them to participate in an unethical workplace culture that can and should be challenged from other perspectives. Both temptations are psychologically attractive insofar as they enable people to avoid judgments that can often be personally uncomfortable. Here again, the obstacles are primarily motivational, and most likely to arise long after the training is over.

Still, part of the obstacle remains more cognitive in both the student and the professional case. Quite simply, ethical deliberation is *hard*. It is not just that ethical norms are quite thorny to apply. It is also that legitimate criteria for defending ethical judgments are complex and overlapping, with the result that it can be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to identify a clearly authoritative theory or point of view (Williams 1985). The instructor who teaches that there is no single preferred perspective risks confirming the sense that "anything goes," so even if they get quite adept at applying a variety of ethical principles, learners are left with the impression that this is a purely academic exercise, rather than a way of resolving concrete practical disputes. And the instructor who teaches that one perspective is clearly superior looks suspiciously like just one more authority figure telling them what they should do. This subtly confirms the learners' sense that ethics is ultimately subjective, often leading them to avoid ethical conflicts altogether rather than to search for common ground.

What is needed is a way of enabling learners to articulate and defend ethical decisions that fall somewhere between these two poles. Cooperative learning techniques

can facilitate this process.

**Best Practices in Cooperative Learning**

Cooperative learning – which may also be called 'collaborative learning,' 'small group learning,' 'team learning,' or 'peer learning' (Sweet and Svinicki, 2007) – refers to the use of highly structured, interactive exercises that have been carefully designed to hold each participant individually accountable for contributing to a larger, complex learning goal, while also making all participants jointly responsible for integrating the learning of every other member. The fact that participants are held individually accountable motivates each of them to avoid simply going along with the group, while also minimizing the problem of free riding or hitchhiking on other participants' ideas. Meanwhile, the fact that they are jointly responsible makes it impossible for any one of them to rely uncritically on their core values or purely personal perspectives.

Education research conducted over the past 30 years provides ample evidence that cooperative learning techniques produce significantly higher levels of student achievement in any discipline (Johnson et al. 2007; Kember et al. 2006; Riley & Anderson 2006; Slavin 1983, Ch. 3;). Much of the effectiveness results from the way in which cooperative learning environments require students to utilize both cognitive skills and social skills. For many students, this makes their learning "less academic" and "more fun." This does not mean that all students prefer learning cooperatively. In fact, a recent study by Gottschall & García-Bayonas (2008) found that up to one-third of undergraduate students preferred individual learning. Still, even those students achieve at higher levels as a result of being required to learn cooperatively. Another study found that graduate

(MBA) students learn more from truly cooperative learning experiences than in poorly structured or poorly functioning groups (Bacon et al. 1999).

D.W. Johnson and R. Johnson (1989) have described 5 conditions that are necessary in order for learning to be truly cooperative. The first is positive interdependence, which occurs when (a) all members of a learning group are oriented toward the same general outcome our goal ("outcome interdependence"), (b) each member has only part of the resources needed to complete the task ("resource interdependence"), and (c) every member has an essential yet complementary role to play in producing the final result ("means interdependence"). Positive interdependence is further enhanced when (d) the boundaries between learning groups are clear, that is, when participants know exactly who is part of their group and who is not ("boundary interdependence"). It is not that there needs to be competition between groups. Rather, within each group, participants must perceive that their individual success is inextricably linked with the success of all the other members. For this reason, most research suggests that cooperative learning groups should be kept fairly small; three to five members is ideal (Bacon et al. 1999; Gottschall & García-Bayonas 2008; Slavin 1983).

The second condition for cooperative learning is individual accountability, which exists when participants are assessed primarily on their individual performance, yet the results of those individual assessments have a direct impact on the rest of the group. This aspect of cooperative learning sometimes makes participants and instructors uncomfortable. However, participants must understand that the purpose of cooperative learning is not simply to complete a group project, but to increase the knowledge and skills of each and every student member. Finding some way to link the success of each

individual to the performance of all the others conveys this understanding, and can be done in ways that respect each participant's privacy and produce individual evaluations that are fair (Slavin 1983, Ch. 3).

The most obvious means of ensuring individual accountability is through the grading policy (or certification requirements in the case of a professional training seminar). One way to do this is to test and grade each learner individually, but to make all learners eligible for a "boost" if every other member of their group performs especially well. For example, if every member of their learning group scores 75% or more, then each member of the group can be given a 10% "boost" to his or her personal score (hence, a student who earns a 90 will end up with a score of 99, while a student who earns an 80 will end up with a score of 88). Another way, facilitated by new Wiki technologies, is to have students write joint essays or papers in which each has primary responsibility for contributing a specific paragraph or stage of the analysis, but they are all jointly responsible for editing and revising the final draft. Those essays can then be graded as unified wholes, with every member receiving the same "whole essay" grade as the other members of the group. However, individual members can also be given a second "personal contribution" grade that is based on the quality of whichever piece of the overall analysis for which they were individually responsible. Poor student performance on one individual piece of the assignment doesn't drag the whole group down in an unfair way, since the whole group is responsible for editing and improving each individual student's contribution as they work together on the final version of the complete essay. At the same time, the differential performance of individual students is accounted for – students receive slightly higher scores if their individual contribution

makes one step of the analysis particularly convincing, and slightly lower scores if their contribution remains confusing or vague.

Whatever methods of accountability are adopted, it is crucial to avoid competition among members of a learning group and to minimize possibilities for finger pointing or blame. In other words, it is essential that such policies be mindful of the third condition for cooperative learning, *promotive interaction.* For learning to be truly cooperative, participants must be willing and able to exchange needed resources and provide efficient and effective assistance. They must also be motivated to provide honest feedback, which includes challenging each other's conclusions and reasoning when necessary to improve their knowledge and skills. The task for instructors is to ensure that this is done in a way that promotes more and better learning, rather than embarrassment or frustration. This means that careful attention must be paid to assignment design.

When cooperative learning activities are explicitly designed to incorporate multiple points of view, participants understand the need to respect each member's contributions. This is linked to the fourth and fifth conditions for cooperative learning: *appropriate use of social skills* and attention to *group processing*. There is, of course, no guarantee that individuals who are good at working cooperatively will think in more sophisticated ways. And similarly, there is no guarantee that individuals with highly sophisticated cognitive skills will be particularly adept at sharing the results of their thinking with others. Hence, instructors must carefully specify not only what kind of learning the group is expected to demonstrate, but also how each individual participant will contribute to that outcome. This helps to develop the forms of trust, listening and communication skills that are necessary to group success. Similarly, cooperative learning

activities should include opportunities for the group to discuss how effectively they are working together, identifying gaps in each member's learning that need to be addressed, as well as strategies for working more productively. This enhances each participant's self-knowledge while also contributing to the overall learning among all members of the group.

Research suggests that social and group processing skills are increased most dramatically when participants remain in the same cooperative learning groups for substantial lengths of time – an entire semester or the duration of a workshop. This means that careful attention must be paid to how the groups are formed, with the aim of ensuring a roughly equal balance of background knowledge and ability levels within each learning group. Although at least one study suggests that graduate students prefer self-assignment to groups (Bacon et al. 1999), this is unlikely to promote as much overall learning as instructor assigned groups, and in any setting where the goal is to increase learners' ability to take seriously diverse points of view, instructor assigned groups are probably to be preferred. Meanwhile, what all students worry about most seems to be the problem of free riding and the difficulties involved in coordinating their busy schedules (Gottschall & Garcia-Bayones 2008). Giving them time to work cooperatively during the regularly scheduled class can minimize both of these problems.

Attention to social and group processing skills can seem tangential from the perspective of traditional teaching and training. Nonetheless, these skills are essential to creating genuinely *cooperative* learning environments. Since the 1960s, "[o]ver 305 studies have compared the relative efficacy of cooperative, competitive, and individualist learning in college and adult settings" and there can be little doubt that cooperative

learning works (Johnson et al. 2007, 18). Specifically, it "tends to result in greater long-term retention of what is learned, more frequent use of higher-level reasoning (critical thinking) and meta-cognitive thought, more accurate and creative problem solving, more intrinsic motivation, [and] transfer of learning from one situation to another" (Johnson et al. 2007, 19). In other words, even if social and group processing skills are not among the explicit learning outcomes of a specific course or workshop, they enhance the ability of learners to achieve more cognitive outcomes.

Of course, there are some disadvantages to cooperative learning as well. As mentioned earlier, up to 1/3 of students may prefer individualized learning. Some learners may feel intimidated by being held individually accountable to their group, while others may be too worried about their individual grades to engage in truly promotive interaction. And of course, if members do not come appropriately prepared, groups will lack important information that all of them need in order to learn cooperatively. This means that instructors and trainers must spend considerable amounts of time managing cooperative learning groups and thinking carefully about assignment design. Grading time will also be increased given the desirability of both group ad individual assessments. In addition, devoting class or workshop time to cooperative learning activities also means reducing the time available for content delivery.

In contrast to unstructured group work, participants in cooperative learning environments are not just doing something together. Rather, they are learning something together, and each one of them must be able to demonstrate that learning by the end. In an ethics classroom or workshop, what they are learning is how to deliberate ethically. This requires both critical thinking skills and character traits.

**Critical Thinking about Values**

To fulfill the five conditions mentioned above, cooperative learning activities need to embody constructive forms of controversy (Deutsch 1973; Johnson & Johnson 1989). The ability to resolve ethical controversies has often been cited as a mark of "moral maturity" (Furrow 2004). And when managed constructively,

> controversy promotes uncertainty about the correctness of one's views, an active search for more information, a reconceptualization of one's knowledge and conclusions and, consequently, greater mastery and retention of the material being discussed and a more reasoned judgment on the issue being considered (Johnson et al. 2007).

The resolution of constructive controversies facilitates the development of critical thinking skills, including critical thinking about values.

Critical thinking about values can be usefully divided into three main skills or abilities. The first is the ability to understand ethical positions 'from the inside' – that is, to identify the reasons and evidence that support those positions, and to recognize the implications of those positions in potentially new and unfamiliar contexts. Since this sort of inside understanding requires learners to do more than simply internalize what a position requires, asking learners to apply the position to specific cases is a good way to assess their development of this skill.

Of course, this skill can be developed through individual writing assignments. But this risks subtly endorsing the tendency to embrace simple subjectivism, since it treats the reasons that inform any particular ethical position as isolated or closed sets. It is at this

point that the value of constructive controversy within a cooperative learning environment becomes especially apparent. For there are at least two more skills involved in critical thinking about values: identifying independent reasons and evidence to decide whether an ethical position may indeed be appropriate, and articulating criteria for determining which ethical values are most appropriate or relevant in any given situation, especially in a situation where not every value can be perfectly realized or fully achieved.

Taken together, these latter skills enable learners to understand ethical positions 'from the outside.' This requires use of the higher order cognitive tasks that make ethical deliberation especially *hard*, tempting learners to fall back on positions like simple subjectivism and anything goes relativism that obviate the need to make concrete judgments at all. But the use of cooperative learning enables instructors to place learners in a situation where they cannot avoid making a decision about what to do. If they must resolve a controversy in order to complete the group assignment, and the controversy is structured in a way that forces them to integrate competing points of view, then they must learn to deploy these higher order thinking skills in order to succeed.

One cooperative learning technique that is particularly useful in a workshop setting is the "jigsaw" exercise (cf. Clarke 1994; McKeachie 2001, 192ff.). Jigsaws occur in two phases. In phase one, participants are divided into equally sized groups (hence, a workshop with sixteen participants would be divided into four groups of four persons each), and each group is given a specific first order task. For example, each group within a bioethics training session could be asked to apply one of Beauchamp and Childress's influential four principles to a concrete case or issue (see Exhibit 1, below). This focus on developing a detailed understanding of a single principle makes members of each phase

one group outcome interdependent, and the fact that every group is responsible for a different principle also makes all of the groups boundary interdependent. However, that alone is not sufficient to promote means interdependence. Means interdependence is achieved because all groups apply their unique principle to the same case study or issue, and culminates during phase two of the jigsaw. [EXHIBIT 1 ABOUT HERE]

During that second phase, new learning groups are formed which incorporate one member from each phase one group. Phase two groups are then asked to come up with a final resolution to the case study that incorporates and/or responds to decisions reached under *all four* of the principles discussed during phase one. Since this means that every participant provides a unique resource and has an essential role to play in phase two, it makes each participant individually accountable for the learning achieved during phase one. The phase two groups are also outcome interdependent, united not by the goal of understanding a single perspective, but by resolving the case in a way that is sensitive to a variety of ethical norms. Participants can be held individually accountable during phase two by being told that one of them will be picked at random to report on the resolution achieved by their group. And promotive interaction occurs throughout both phases, since the entire class or workshop group is working toward the jointly held goal of achieving a more detailed understanding of how all four principles can be put to practical use.

Since group processing and social skills are enhanced when cooperative learning groups work together over an extended period of time, another useful technique is to organize participants into “mock ethics boards” or “ethics advisory committees” which meet regularly over the course of a university semester. For each group meeting, individual members of each board can be assigned to represent a specific author

(Aristotle, Kant or Mill) or theoretical approach (i.e., virtue ethics, deontology or consequentialism), and the task during the group meeting is to resolve the case or issue at hand. Crucially, the goal of each member in preparation for the meeting is not to decide whether his or her assigned thinker or theory leads to the correct or best conclusion. All they must do is figure out precisely how their assigned approach applies to the case. This helps to minimize any fears about "imposing one's views," while also requiring learners to think carefully – that is, in a reasoned and step wise fashion -- about at least one set of reasons and evidence that can be brought to bear on the issue. [EXHIBIT 2 ABOUT HERE]

Many learners find this activity liberating and intriguing – their individual work in preparation for the group meetings becomes a kind of psychological detective hunt. More importantly, as they come to understand their assigned author's position from the inside, they begin to see the way in which the values embodied by their assigned position inform and color the perspective of persons who hold it, and more generally, they begin to see that endorsing a particular set of ethical values does indeed have specific and concrete implications about how one thinks and acts. This at least subtly counteracts the temptation to say that in ethics "anything goes." Given the way the activity is structured, all that "goes" are the values incorporated in the position to which they have been assigned.

During the regular board meetings, each member's individual responsibility is to accurately represent their assigned position, but they all share the responsibility of producing a joint memo or policy statement about a specific case or issue at hand. To ensure that positive interdependence and promotive interaction are achieved, it is crucial

that they be tasked with explaining *why* certain kinds of reasons and evidence were ultimately found to be especially important or compelling, while others were less convincing, irrelevant or even incorrect. Of course, the group might decide that a single member's position represents what is by far the most sensible view. But since the member's position is one that he or she has been assigned to represent, it is impossible to say that view is best simply because it represents that member's own core values. Instead, the group must articulate the criteria they all used together in order to determine that the view was indeed ethically preferable to the other alternatives. Similarly, a group might work hard to reach some sort of "middle ground" position that incorporates or at least is sensitive to reasons and evidence provide by each of the positions they brought to the board. But here again, a well-structured assignment can minimize the opportunity to say that a resolution is correct simply because all the members agree with it. The instructor can require the group to explain precisely why their resolution is indeed supported by the authors or theories that every individual member was assigned to represent.

Another approach that works well in a traditional classroom and explicitly requires group-processing skills is the use of peer reviews. Here, individual students are required to write essays or case studies and submit drafts of those essays to their learning group. The groups are given a worksheet asking them to evaluate specific elements in each member's draft (a worksheet the group completes together). Learners then rewrite their individual essays, for which they are individually assessed. To achieve more positive interdependence, the entire group can be tested on the topic of every member's essay later on. The peer review worksheet can also be graded for how carefully and thoroughly the group reviewed each individual essay. And the "boost" grading procedure

described above can also be utilized to give the whole group a greater stake in making sure that every individual essay succeeds.

Of course, these sorts of requirements can also be built in to more traditional, individualized writing assignments. But there are two reasons to think that the critical thinking skills involved in ethical deliberation might be developed more effectively through cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1992). First, when individuals are forced to present not just a conclusion but also its rationale to other individuals, this tends to deepen their understanding of both the position being defended and the higher order reasoning strategies that support it. Second, when individuals are presented with a problem or decision to resolve on their own, they tend to fall back on familiar categorizations based on their personal experience, but in a situation where they are required to make a decision with a group, they are more likely to actively seek out novel information that enables them to rank and prioritize among competing points of view. In the context of ethics teaching and training, this suggests that constructive controversy can be used to transform the temptation to avoid critical thinking about values into a quest for normative reasons and evidence that every member of the group can truly share.

The opportunity to transform learners' motivations while improving their critical thinking skills provides an additional reason to incorporate cooperative learning into ethics teaching and training. Cooperative learning techniques also cultivate the character traits that sustain effective ethical deliberation in both personal and professional life.

**Cultivating Deliberative Character Traits**

"Critical thinking is concerned with the evaluative processes that are common to virtually any kind of decision we reach" (Hendrickson et al. 2008). However, critical thinking about values depends on an ethic as well as a logic – that is, it requires the development of a particular set of character traits. Michael Minch and Christine Weigel have usefully highlighted the virtues of humility and courage in this context (2008, 10). In addition, effective ethical deliberation requires a sense of responsibility, the capacity for empathy or 'multiple perspective taking,' and the ability to tolerate ambiguity and shades of grey.

There is little evidence that any of these traits can be taught didactically. Knowing or sincerely believing that humility is a virtue – even if that knowledge is taken to include an understanding of why humility is important to the process of ethical deliberation – is not equivalent to being disposed to exhibit humility in one's own choices and actions. Hence, an additional advantage of cooperative learning is the way in which it requires students to utilize such traits as part of their day-to-day learning.

Aristotle pointed out long ago that people become more virtuous through the repeated performance of right actions (*Nichomachean Ethics* Bk II, Ch. 4). He is sometimes accused of circularity, since elsewhere in the text he seems to define right action as the output of a virtuous character. But the value of cooperative learning in an ethics classroom or workshop is not that it provides an independent reason for thinking these character traits are good. Rather, the value is that learners can be put in situations where they must practice – that is, exhibit and utilize – these traits in order to achieve the

goals of their cooperative learning. Practicing these traits repeatedly makes it more likely that they will become stable elements of the learners' characters, making it more likely that they will be disposed to rely on such traits in their personal and professional lives.

It is important to note that responsibility is not identical to individual accountability (since if it were, this trait could be cultivated just as well through more traditional or individualistic approaches to student learning). Individual accountability *holds* each member responsible for performing his or her task within the group, but it cannot, by itself, make the members *take* responsibility for their thoughts and actions. Whether they take responsibility depends on their levels of intrinsic motivation.

Part of the reason that simplistic subjectivism and anything goes relativism are attractive as psychological defense mechanisms is that they enable learners to avoid taking responsibility for resolving ethical disputes among people with competing points of view. But as has been noted, the constructive controversies that form the core content of specific cooperative learning assignments require learners to articulate and defend a concrete resolution. To be sure, the cases they are dealing with are often hypothetical or may have already been resolved in the real world outside the classroom. Nonetheless, the learners are placed in a situation in which they must explain their thinking by reference to the thinking of others. They must take responsibility for defending a point of view.

Although much of the literature on cooperative learning tends to assume that groups should be required to reach consensus positions, it is not clear that this is true in an ethics classroom or workshop. To begin with, a consensus requirement subtly endorses the anything goes relativism that encourages uncritical forms of groupthink. Moreover, since there are some ethical conflicts in which not every value can be realized, learners

must at least be allowed to reach the meta-level consensus that the case itself is irreconcilable. Hence, it seems appropriate to allow groups to defend a bifurcated position if necessary, so long as the position statement indicates precisely what they are unable to reach agreement about, and why. U.S. Supreme Court decisions that contain both majority and minority rulings serve as a useful "real world" model of this kind of bifurcated group decision-making by individuals with a deep sense of responsibility.

This process of constructing a mutually agreed upon, even if ultimately bifurcated, point of view also requires learners to practice the virtues of courage and humility. They practice courage each time they find themselves defending a point of view that conflicts with reasons and evidence provided by others. And they practice humility each time they are forced to admit gaps in their own thinking that make it impossible to explain their assigned position to everyone's satisfaction. To be sure, the view they are defending is often the view of an author they have been assigned to represent, and the gaps they are acknowledging may also be gaps in their assigned author's thinking. So cooperative learning facilitates these virtues by engaging learners in role-playing.

This role-playing element also enhances learners' ability to take on multiple perspectives, and can be built into the cooperative learning environment in two separate yet overlapping ways. The first is by holding participants individually responsible for representing a series of different perspectives over the course of several exercises. For example, the member who is assigned to represent a utilitarian point of view at the first mock ethics board meeting can be assigned to represent a deontological viewpoint at the second and a more virtue-ethical approach at the third, thereby ensuring that every member has detailed practice working within each of these perspectives seriatim. But this

more focused practice on working within one perspective at a time is complemented and reinforced in a second way by making the entire group jointly responsible for articulating a position that is responsive to multiple perspectives each and every time they meet. This flows directly from the condition of positive interdependence, which ensures that the group work is structured so that learners must not only explain their assigned point of view to all the others, but also develop a deeper understanding of each of the other points of view in themselves.

Responding to multiple and overlapping perspectives is both cognitively and emotionally challenging. But the fact that participants in a cooperative learning environment are each tasked with playing a specific role can help to alleviate some of the difficulty, by providing them with a degree of emotional distance. At the same time, the use of constructive controversies puts learners in a situation where they cannot avoid dealing with shades of grey. Crucially, the cooperative learning environment does not allow students simply to notice that there are many competing perspectives. It both requires and motivates them to find points of contact between them.

**Conclusion**

Mary Midgley (1981, 187) uses the term “moral isolationism” to describe the superficial version of tolerance that supposedly forbids individuals from taking up a critical position toward any other conception of value. In doing so, she points out that the temptation “does not flow from apathy, but from a rather acute concern about human hypocrisy and other forms of wickedness.” This deep commitment to avoiding hypocrisy is what makes a cooperative learning environment one in which learners can begin to

tolerate – rather than simply seek strategies to avoid – the inevitable degree of ambiguity that seems to exist in ethical matters. For it repeatedly puts them in situations which show that the "moral isolationist's picture of separate, unmixable [claims about value] is quite unreal" (188). That is, it puts them in situations where neither simplistic subjectivism nor anything goes relativism is an option.

Of course, cooperative learning environments succeed in cultivating both the critical thinking skills and the character traits that students need to deliberate ethically because they are highly structured to achieve this specific purpose. It is not clear that the world outside the classroom is structured in the same way, and it is certainly not structured to the same degree. To date, there has been insufficient research to determine whether the skills developed in the classroom setting are transferred effectively to other areas of human life. But cooperative learning is an approach that ethics teachers and trainers may want to consider.



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**EXHIBIT 1: Sample Jigsaw Exercise using Beauchamp and Childress's (1994) four principles of biomedical ethics**

- **Introduction**: everyone is given the details of a controversial case. The class or workshop is divided into four groups of at least four members each.
- **Phase One:** Group One applies the principle of autonomy to the case; Group Two applies the principle of beneficence, Group Three applies non-maleficence and Group Four applies justice. Everyone is reminded that they will need to report on their group's deliberations when they convene with a new group in Phase Two.
- **Transition:** Members of each group count off by fours. Four new groups are formed (all the 1s, all the 2s, all the 3s and all the 4s).
- **Phase Two:** groups are asked to determine the best course of action available, taking the insights from all four principles into account. Everyone is reminded that they may be asked to report on their group's deliberations at the end of the exercise.
- **Wrap up:** Each group is asked to report on their decision. Instructor can then lead a discussion about any significant differences between the groups, how the groups made decisions about ranking the four principles, etc.

## EXHIBIT 2: Sample Assignment Sheet for Mock Ethics Board on Cloning

**Preparatory Assignments:** Everyone must read the case study called "My Father, My Son" on p. 179 of the Boss text, and come prepared to represent the assigned author below:

- **Member 1** Matt Ridley
- **Member 2** W. French Anderson
- **Member 3** John A. Robertson
- **Member 4** Leon Kass
- **Member 5** Lori Andrews & Dorothy Nelkin

You may trade specific assignments within your group **only so long as each member agrees**. *Make sure there is no confusion--if two people "accidentally" bring the same interpretation, only the person to whom it was originally assigned will receive credit!* Remember, your group is counting on you to provide expertise on your assigned author.

### ASSESSMENT CRITERIA for Board Memos:

The ***Position Statement*** is worth 25 points

23-25: Position statement is ***crystal clear*** (unambiguous), ***comprehensive*** (incorporates all morally relevant features of the case), and ***careful*** (does not rest on any unwarranted assumptions and is sensitive to contrasting points of view). There are no gaps in reasoning, all premises are highly plausible.

20-22: Position statement is reasonably clear, comprehensive and careful, but could be improved in some ways. There may be slight gaps in reasoning, or one or more premises may be more controversial than the position suggests (with no effort to defend the controversial stance). Relatively minor aspects of the case may also be overlooked.

18-20: Position is clear, but lacking in comprehensiveness (fails to incorporate one or more morally relevant features of the case), or carefulness (contains significant gaps in reasoning or one or more premises is highly questionable). Position may also be slightly vague.

15-17: Position statement lacks clarity (is vague, ambiguous or subject to multiple interpretations).

0-14: Position statement contains a deep contradiction or is otherwise impossible to understand.

The ***Use of Each Author*** is worth 5 points, as follows:

5: Gives specific reasons and evidence to explain why the author would support or reject the group's position AND either (a) explains precisely how that author's reasoning influenced the group's thinking (if author supports group conclusion), OR (b) explains precisely how the author's reasoning goes astray (if author rejects group conclusion)

4: Gives reasons and evidence to *explain* why the author supports or rejects the group's position, but is a bit vague on how that author's reasoning influenced the group or goes astray.

3: Accurately *describes* whether the author supports or rejects the group's position, but reasons and evidence are weak, implausible, or show misunderstanding of the relevant issues in the case.

0-2: Description of whether/why the author supports or rejects the group's position is false or highly implausible.