ETHICS—CAN’T BE TAUGHT, CAN BE LEARNED

As an English professor by training and by preference, I was less than thrilled 15 years ago when, upon the retirement of a colleague, I was asked to teach Introduction to Philosophy and Introduction to Ethics, in addition to my literature courses. I grudgingly accepted. Little did I know that some of my most intellectually stimulating interactions with students would come in these philosophy and ethics classrooms.

The first hurdle I had to overcome was my own suspicion that philosophy, and ethics, especially, cannot be taught. I’ll return to that theme in a bit; but for now, suffice it to say that my Jesuit background had instilled in me the notion captured in a Latin dictum: “Quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur”—“Whatever is received is received according to the mode of the one receiving it.” How could I expect to teach philosophy, and especially ethics, when the socialization of my students had already given each a lens which had solidified his or her world view and precluded any new information that might come from my own decidedly personalized ideology?

Furthermore, there was the material. Most philosophy texts are comprised almost entirely of theories and ideas first articulated by dead male European thinkers. Any group of vital American college students of varying ethnicities, sexes, sexual orientations, and economic backgrounds would either drown in the words of these thinkers or laugh heartily and return to their fleeting obsessions with whatever rock band, celebrity television show, or burning social issue I had distracted them from momentarily.

Well, I finally decided to put on the hair shirt of philosophical examination—responding to Socrates’ admonition: “The unexamined life is not worth living.” So, I looked for and found some texts that were at least relatively pluralistic and periodically challenging, even to contemporary students.

I began to design group projects for my introductory philosophy course, not unlike the old Steve Allen program, “Meeting of the Minds.” After students had read 10 or 12 philosophers’ works and watched videos on Pythagoras, Plato, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Joseph Campbell, they created vehicles for conversations the rest of the class might enjoy. I usually let one student play the role of a non-philosopher, and this innovation provided some interesting frisson. Aristotle, Gandhi, Simone Weil, Frederick Douglas, and Henry David Thoreau might gather in a prison cell and discuss the human right to freedom. Perhaps Bart Simpson or Madonna would be the guard listening in or providing commentary. Or Lao-Tzu and Machiavelli and Mary Wollstonecraft and Karl Marx might be exploring integrity during a poker game with Jimmy Carter or Oprah Winfrey. You get the idea!

The research, relationships, and learning were far more exciting than I had dared to hope for initially. I still cherish the moment one of my students, a 72-year-old woman, played a mysterious and wise Lao-Tzu and a feisty 18-year-old donned doublet and sword (and mustache) to become a subtle, albeit snarling, Machiavelli.

The ethics class was a different challenge. Yes, the texts were as male-dominated and dry as those I initially reviewed before finding a more suitable one for the philosophy classes, but eventually I found a text whose author agreed with me—that ethics can’t be taught and that moral health is like good nutrition. One can come to understand that there are better choices, but no teacher can make one choose to eat well or live a moral life. Rather, perhaps Kierkegaard was right when he discerned, “More knowledge is not what is needed”; rather, the moral challenge is to respond to the knowledge we already possess.

So, initially, we plunge into lots of theories, some of which make sense, some of which once made sense, and some of which have gotten humankind into quite a lot of trouble: utilitarianism, divine command, egoism, paternalism, psychological egoism, categorical imperatives, the ethics of care, and many more. While doing this, we view The Mission, Brave New World, “Visible Target” (an account of Japanese internment), and Weapons of the Spirit (an account of Jewish children
Then we are ready for group projects. Working with an ancillary textbook, approximately seven groups of five students each decide among themselves which topic they will study, what additional research they will conduct, and how to present an organized, 12-minute presentation. I judge the groups on content, evidence of collaboration, creativity, and communication (the same criteria I use for evaluating the Intro to Philosophy dramatizations).

This term, topics will include the pro and con issues in the professional analyses that students researched, debated, and digested: human cloning, legalization of drugs, physician-assisted suicide, the morality of eating meat, the concept of reparations for slavery, sex and commitment, and payment for body parts (as a way to increase organ donation). Each group may bring in research that goes beyond chapter content, and each is encouraged to be creative in explaining the issues—e.g., we should all be able to understand the complexity of the problem and its possible resolution. Each group must script its presentation carefully since exactly 12 minutes is allotted for each. Role-playing is a small part of most presentations, but students use other formats (Jeopardy format, formal debate, etc.), as well; and significant learning takes place. These presentations hardly comprise all the important issues students might explore. But that isn’t the point. I want to provide the experience of exploration and the opportunity to think about ethics from diverse perspectives, sometimes applying the concepts and vocabulary traditional ethicists use.

So, I persist in my surprisingly rewarding work, sometimes a bit wistful about those days when Melville’s *Billy Budd* and Flannery O’Connor’s complex and wonderful stories were my principal intellectual fare. But I am convinced that something very important is happening in my philosophy classes, something I see missing in many academic and social venues in our modern world: learners are focusing, collaboratively, on issues we could all know more about in order to shape the future more wisely. Even if ethics can’t be taught, there is much about ethical living that, arguably, can be learned.

**Don Foran, Professor, English and Philosophy**

For further information, contact the author at Centralia College, 600 West Locust, Centralia, WA 98502.
e-mail: dforan@centralia.ctc.edu