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# Assessment Project Write-Up: Phil 112, Ethical Question Activity

Michelle Saint  
*Western Washington University*

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Michelle Saint

## Assessment Project Write-Up: Phil 112, Ethical Question Activity

I regularly teach Phil 112: Introduction to Moral Issues. This is a 100-level, 3 credit hour course that is intended to introduce students to philosophy in general and the study of ethics in particular. One of the most significant goals I have for the course is getting students to understand how to engage in ethical inquiry. I don't want them to learn just the content of ethical theories that *other* people have previously developed; I want them to develop the skills that will permit them to engage in ethical inquiry themselves. The most significant threshold concepts covered in this class are those associated with the skill of inquiring.

Previously, I attempted to help students practice their skill for ethical inquiry by assigning group presentations. Each group was assigned a specific topic covered in our text book and then tasked with presenting the views regarding that topic provided in the text. Each group had to give a ten minute presentation where they summarized the positions presented in the text and the arguments used to support them. The idea was that, in order to prepare for their presentations, students would be required to engage philosophically with certain ethical arguments and theories on their own.

There were a number of reasons why I was dissatisfied with this assignment, but the most significant problem was something that Carmen Werder helped me put into words: it wasn't actually teaching students how to engage in ethical inquiry. For these presentations, which topic a group covered was determined by a rather irrelevant measure: whether it was one of the topics covered by our text. How these topics were presented and considered by each group was again determined in a rather irrelevant measure: which specific viewpoints had been included in our text. What was left unaddressed, unquestioned, was this: why *these* topics? Why *this* approach?

When you get down to it, the most important step to inquiry, especially ethical inquiry, is determining what to inquire after. That's the step where an undifferentiated mass of information becomes a *topic* or a *subject* or an *issue*. That's the step where one has to make decisions about what matters and what doesn't, about how to proceed. A presentation schedule built from a pre-formed list of topics gave students no opportunity to discover this most important process of locating a topic worthy of inquiry and developing it into a robust research subject. What I wanted, instead, was some assignment or activity that would do this, that would teach students the method through which ethical questions themselves are constructed.

During the 2013 "Backwards by Design" summer working retreat, Carmen Werder helped me develop a new assignment design, and I tested this assignment in the Fall quarter. Unlike the presentations, which led students to focus on how ethical theorists have answered some pre-selected ethical question, this new assignment focuses on how to develop an ethical question at all. The goal is to walk students through the process of finding a topic worthy of ethical inquiry and then developing an ethically-significant question about it. Students would also attempt to find different ways of answering the ethical question they developed, but the most important element of the activity was the discovery of the question itself.

I devoted dead week, when the class otherwise would have been suffering through group presentations, to this activity. For each day of class, students completed a low-stakes writing assignment by following a list of specific steps. On the first day, students developed an ethical question. On the second day, they used the material we had previously studied to determine different ways this question may be answered. On the third day, students evaluated these potential answers and determined where their own beliefs lie. Finally, I asked students to complete a short survey about their experience with the assignment.

The results of this short survey, along with the work students turned in, lead me to see the activity as a success. Students developed a host of profound, interesting, creative, and fun topics on Day 1. I was amazed by the scope of the topics selected, as well as the ingenuity and creativity students displayed. Students told me that they found the creativity afforded by this activity quite welcome. They also told me that the activity helped them feel connected to the material. Several remarked that it had not occurred to them previously that they could just create their own ethical question. These last remarks in particular are significant for me, as it shows that the activity did in fact meet the pedagogical goal I had for it. Day 1 of the activity opened students' eyes in an important way to what it means to partake in ethical inquiry, just as I had hoped it would.

Day 2's activity also had a valuable side effect: it allowed students to review the material we had previously studied. By having to apply the theories we had studied previously to their unique questions, they deepened their understanding of those theories. In the future, I plan to move the activity to earlier in the term, for this reason.

Day 3's activity was a successful denouement. In lower-level philosophy courses, there are few opportunities for students to express their own philosophical conclusions. So, students appreciated the opportunity to, for once during the term, focus on what *they* believed, what *they* accepted as true. I saw this as a good way to conclude a term covering ethical theory.

Not all elements of the activity were successful, but the problems I faced are easily resolved. First, while I encouraged students to casually group with others, I had each student focus on their own unique question. I wanted each student to see their ethical inquiry to its end, but this set up led to in-class discussion being stifled. In the second term that I have used this activity, I had each student develop a question and then each group select one question to pursue. This allowed for more cohesive group discussion, but at the expense of each question getting the attention it deserved. Second, some students had difficulty completing each day's activity in the time allotted. When I developed the worksheets for the activity, I was worried that they would complete them too quickly! So, I overcompensated and instead asked for too much. This, again, is easily fixed by just simplifying the worksheets involved. I intend to continue using some form of this activity in the future.

In the end, I was quite pleased with how this new activity worked as a pedagogical tool. In college, most of the questions students are asked to consider come pre-formed. And yet, one of the most important tasks for an academic, an intellectual, a *thinker*, is to figure out what questions to ask. This activity helped students understand what goes into the process of

formulating a question. It gave them the opportunity to discover what questions they have that are worthy of inquiry and what it means to develop a question, confront it, and answer it.