



## Teaching Advanced Undergraduate Media Ethics

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Instructors can teach introductory ethics courses in several ways, each dependent on what prerequisites departments require. I took "Introduction to Ethics" in the philosophy department before enrolling in "Ethical Problems in Mass Communication." The requirement of an introductory ethics class allowed my instructor to focus on practical applications rather than theoretical constructs. The requirement was still in place when I taught that same course three years after taking it. The university later changed its core curriculum, and the College of Communication dropped the required ethics prerequisite. That change meant students were no longer required to have a foundational knowledge of ethical theory before entering my class, and I needed to shift how I taught the course and the texts used.

In surveying syllabi of journalism schools around the country, ethics courses can be found in all layers and levels of the curriculum. For example, one has a 1000-level course focusing on films, while another has a specialized upper-division, senior-level course on ethical branding. Introductions to philosophy are the most consistent, and few courses are taught without explicit normative theoretical grounding. Western theories are the most present in courses, with Eastern or feminist theories lacking inclusion. Course titles aren't consistent, focusing on communication studies, media, strategic communication, or journalism. Several include the term "diversity" in their title. Some instructors merged the ethics course with a media law course. Identifying that specialization in a course is one way to create an advanced ethics class.

Advanced media ethics can also be a rumination on metaethics, usually absent from introductory courses that favor questions of normative ethics.

Introductory ethics courses focus on practical ethics and provide spaces for students to address questions of right and wrong relative to media practices and behaviors. Positioning students in a place to move beyond the routine and contemplate how moral language or moral thought helps frame the field shifts the level of thinking from introductory to advanced. Utilizing metaethical questioning as a course focus provides a space to think about the interconnectedness of values and behaviors while also considering social and cultural implications that lead to what motivates us and our decision-making. I offer this approach with caution.

Ethics courses often rely on the moral reasoning of established, privileged voices. These voices are traditionally male and Western, despite Eastern and Global South representatives, females, and LGBTQ+ persons offering thoughtful critiques and questions. With such diversity in scope and sequence in course design, it is hard to pinpoint what approach would define an advanced media ethics course that wouldn't represent components of an introductory course or blend into a graduate-level seminar while considering diversity, equity, and inclusivity. Because of that, I suggest focusing advanced courses to give students experiences that build rigorous content knowledge while also developing personal resilience and an ethics toolbox.

### PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

Bridging theory and practice isn't the most straightforward task for students. Given the difficulty of the ideas we often explore, learn, and discuss, it could be even more difficult in our media ethics courses. In an advanced media ethics course, a way to create that bridge is by utilizing project-based learning (PBL). According to author and educator Michael McDowell, PBL "is an inquiry-based methodology that follows a distinct pathway of learning that organizes levels of rigor into a particular sequence."<sup>1</sup> In PBL, the teaching focus is on inquiry and is developed by providing students with real-world problems to solve or examples to deconstruct. Utilizing project-based learning in an advanced media ethics classroom is easy by following these steps:

- *Step 1:* Students are given a context to a problem or idea that stimulates thinking. Inquiry becomes the driving force of learning. This stimulant could be something introductory, like a video, or more contextual, like an argumentative podcast episode.
- *Step 2:* Students then design a plan to solve that problem by considering the course content and additional research (primary and secondary). This plan should acknowledge the role of the audience and how

it may be connected to the problem. A solution is a response to the audience's need.

- *Step 3:* Students work through the problem and take note of the critical thinking moves they need to make, problem-solving strategies they utilize, and different avenues to address the question.
- *Step 4:* Students present findings.
- *Step 5:* Students reflect on the process and share how they could solve the problem differently if they addressed it again. Students would also reflect on their strengths and weaknesses.

Reflecting on the process is essential, not just something students should do after the activity. The more attempts students make at project-based learning, the better the class and actions will become. After each effort, take notes on how you can refine the context or problem, provide more scaffolding for student success, or revise the assessment outcome to encourage more diverse student responses or outputs. The practice of PBL does not need to be unique to the topic of an advanced media ethics course. It provides an opportunity to elevate the content from an introductory course to an advanced level. Additionally, if the course is broader (meaning media ethics and not a specific topic), there are ample opportunities to diversify the project-based tasks to span media and disciplines.

*The Barbie Project.* One example is a project I used called The Barbie Project, in which I presented students with this problem: Barbie lacks diversity, and we must be responsive to evolving diversity, ethics, and inclusion (DEI) needs. I first did this project before Mattel attempted to diversify Barbie. Mattel's 2020 change led to modifying the activity to ensure students didn't recreate one of the executed changes. We began by reading Shirley Steinberg's essay "Barbie: The Bitch Still Has Everything." Through a close analysis of the piece, we dissected why Barbie had a diversity problem. In 2018, I could assign Hulu's *Tiny Shoulders: Rethinking Barbie* documentary. After students contextualized the problem, they began to plan out what this Barbie would be like—how they would respond to the problem. Students then developed production and marketing plans. They also wrote a report using research and philosophical theories about how their new Barbie responded to the problem. At the same time, students demonstrated how their Barbie reflected the audience they served. Students pitched the product to their class. We concluded with the group and individual reflections on solving the problem. Students would think about their inquiry process and discuss how and why ethical approaches to solving issues need to be responsive to the needs of communities. The reflections also helped students to identify what moral judgments help guide their behaviors and how differences in moral language or judgment can impact how we attempt to solve problems.



In addition to The Barbie Project, other options include using film to identify and address ethical values, examining nonfiction texts to process loyalties and theoretical problems, or creating podcasts to discuss ethics.

*Film Assignment.* For the film assignment, you can have students write a short analysis on a film appropriate or popular with young adults selected from a list (e.g., *Rebel Without a Cause*; *Clueless*; *Easy A*; *Love, Simon*; *Booksmart*). This would allow students to talk about representation in film. Students would need to look up and read the entry on the film on IMDb as well as film reviews from reputable news and entertainment sites. The film analysis should focus on how the film represents teenagers and their concerns and preoccupations by having students identify reasons the film appeals to an adolescent audience, as well as the messages the film conveys to young adult viewers. More specifically, students would focus on how adolescents are represented and what ethical concerns or values emerge in that representation. A film analysis could also be about the industry rather than representation. Students would choose a partner to evaluate a movie about journalism (e.g., *Absence of Malice*, *Spotlight*, *Capote*, *Almost Famous*, *Page One*). Each partnership will give a five- to seven-minute class presentation based on an ethical dilemma identified in the film. Students should provide key information related to the ethical dilemma and discuss how the dilemma was addressed in the film. In addition, they should draw on class lectures and discussions to help them evaluate how they would resolve the ethical dilemma, specifically focusing on values and loyalties. This same framework could also be accomplished using narrative nonfiction texts like *In Cold Blood*, *Missoula*, *The Voyeur's Motel*, or other examples. Podcasts are another contemporary example to which this form of analysis can be applied. When we think about these at an advanced level, here are several points you may want to address:

- An identification of the ethical dilemma;
- A thoughtful and thorough analysis of a possible role player who may face this dilemma;
- An identification of the key facts related to the dilemma;
- Use of outside research to understand the impact of the problems facing the role player;
- An analysis of the loyalties and values;
- An analysis of the most relevant ethical principle that will support making an ethical decision associated with the dilemma;
- An analysis of loyalties, counter values, and an ethical principle that will counter your ethical decision; and
- A thoughtful and concise ethical decision based on relevant loyalties, values, and principles you've identified.

Regardless of the assessment, PBL will guide the design to lead students through an inquiry-based approach to learning. Students move from traditional forms of knowledge, such as discussion or exams, to engaged educational practices.

## EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Experiential learning is like PBL, but students can see the inquiry in action instead of as insulated forms of inquiry. One of the most common examples of experiential learning includes student media, student-led agencies, and strategic communication campaign courses. Advanced ethics courses can borrow from those learning experiences by partnering with clients or newsrooms to solve ethics issues in their organization. It can also be an opportunity for students to engage with communities to address more significant questions of ethics and how media decisions and practices impact their daily lives.

According to the Experiential Learning Institute,<sup>2</sup> there are four steps in the "Experiential Learning Cycle":

- *Step 1: Experience.* This is the activity students participate in that allows them to think about what they are learning and how they are learning it.
- *Step 2: Reflect.* This step focuses on process and perspective. How do the systems lead to learning? Who is included in the experience?
- *Step 3: Think.* This leads students to conclusions about the experience and inquires about what they learned. It conceptualizes the experiences and helps contextualize the outcomes of the experience.
- *Step 4: Act.* This step is about implementation and, as the ELI states, "active experimentation or trying out what you learned." Students will return what they learned to the current experience or use it in future ventures, such as a job.

Experiential learning (EL) is a hands-on form that can cater to individual success. Participating in an EL activity also allows students to fail in a place where they can learn without extreme repercussions, such as being fired or sued. Experiential learning is similar to how Aristotle believed we know character and virtues: habits. Aristotle wrote, "We are by nature able to acquire them, and we are completed through habit . . . we acquire just as we acquire crafts, by having first activated them. For we learn a craft by producing the same product that we must produce when we have learned it."<sup>3</sup> The act of habitual practice is rooted in experiential learning. As a result, students who participate in it build up a toolbox of

sharpened skills. In our role as instructor, we move from “sage on the stage” to knowledge facilitator. This transition means we can focus on helping students to engage critically in their individual learning experiences, cultivate life skills that can be transformed and translated to other experiences, and highlight opportunities for growth.

*Community Conversation.* A way to do this in an advanced ethics course could be by elevating research experiences to focus on community conversation and complicated dialogues. This activity requires students to work with communities they live in and those that may differ from their own. For example, they could gather a group of students like themselves or bring a more diverse group into the conversation. The students come to the table in search of an answer to a question of ethics and media, similar to a focus group. The students get to practice fundamental applied research skills while exploring topical issues in the media ethics course. Beyond this, ask students to write a code of ethics for a company. Students would interview employees and read company materials to understand the values and loyalties of the organization. When this happens, students can apply theoretical frameworks to create a functional code of ethics for the organization. Students can also do this for themselves. They can do self-interviews and think about who helped them learn the values they live by, how they came to understand them, and then which will help them live out an ethical future. Experiential learning can enhance our curriculum from an introductory survey to a rigorous skill-building class by allowing students to practice with hands-on learning.

### IS THERE A RIGHT OR WRONG WAY?

What will be evident throughout this collection is that there are numerous ways to approach the ethics curriculum and build more than just an introductory, advanced, or graduate course. This book provides the roadmap to bolster education across your curriculum. I bring this chapter to a close with an opportunity: The advanced media ethics classroom is a suitable place to provide a space to develop students’ resilience.

When we think of educational resilience, we can draw from what Ye et al. (2021)<sup>4</sup> described as “Academic Resilience.” The authors define academic resilience as a student’s capacity to perform highly despite disadvantages. A disadvantage is the educational environment our students are working through, including the social-emotional and socioeconomic concerns. A disadvantage is also the professional environment our students are working toward in the future. I explore the former later in this book; thus, I intend to address the latter here. Our students will enter professions with ample opportunities to encounter trauma, inequity, and

power imbalance issues. Because of this, we need to work toward skills that build resilience. For example, the advanced media ethics course is where we can introduce the concept of trauma and trauma-informed practices and explore the potential places this may occur.

I still remember participating in a ride-along for my reporting class and seeing someone placed in a body bag. I was never trained by my instructor—a newspaper professional—how to encounter something like that, and years later, I can still recreate that image in my head. Beyond my own experience, we can reflect on the images of police brutality: George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, and Daunte Wright, to name a few. We can think about the erasure of LGBTQIA+ voices, especially those in the transgender community. For many of our students, these are traumatic events and stories that we need to begin to prepare them for, and they must leave our classes with the skills to not only take care of these stories but also themselves.

An introductory-level media ethics course focuses on theoretical concepts and core values of media practice. Still, an advanced-level media ethics course offers the chance for us to bring students into direct conversation with the moment and prepare them to respond to it. This course also gives us a place to encourage student reflection and teach students how to care for themselves. In essence, an advanced-level media ethics course could be designed from an ethic of care and teach students that care is not simply a relationship with others but also a relationship with themselves. Let’s build a more resilient media profession and a more sustainable institution that cares about those they serve and themselves.

### NOTES

1. Michael McDowell, “A Framework for Fostering Rigor in PBL: A strategy called hexagonal thinking provides students with an effective way to launch project-based learning,” *EduTopia*, George Lucas Educational Foundation, November 28, 2022, <https://www.edutopia.org/article/a-framework-for-fostering-rigor-in-pbl>; see also, *Rigorous PBL by Design* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin/SAGE, 2017).
2. “What is Experiential Learning?,” Institute for Experiential Learning website, 2021, <https://experientiallearninginstitute.org/resources/what-is-experiential-learning/>.
3. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Terence Irwin (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1999), 18–19.
4. Wangqiong Ye, Rolf Strietholt, and Sigrid Blömeke, “Academic Resilience: Underlying Norms and Validity of Definitions,” *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability* 33, no. 1 (2021): 169–202, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11092-020-09351-7>.