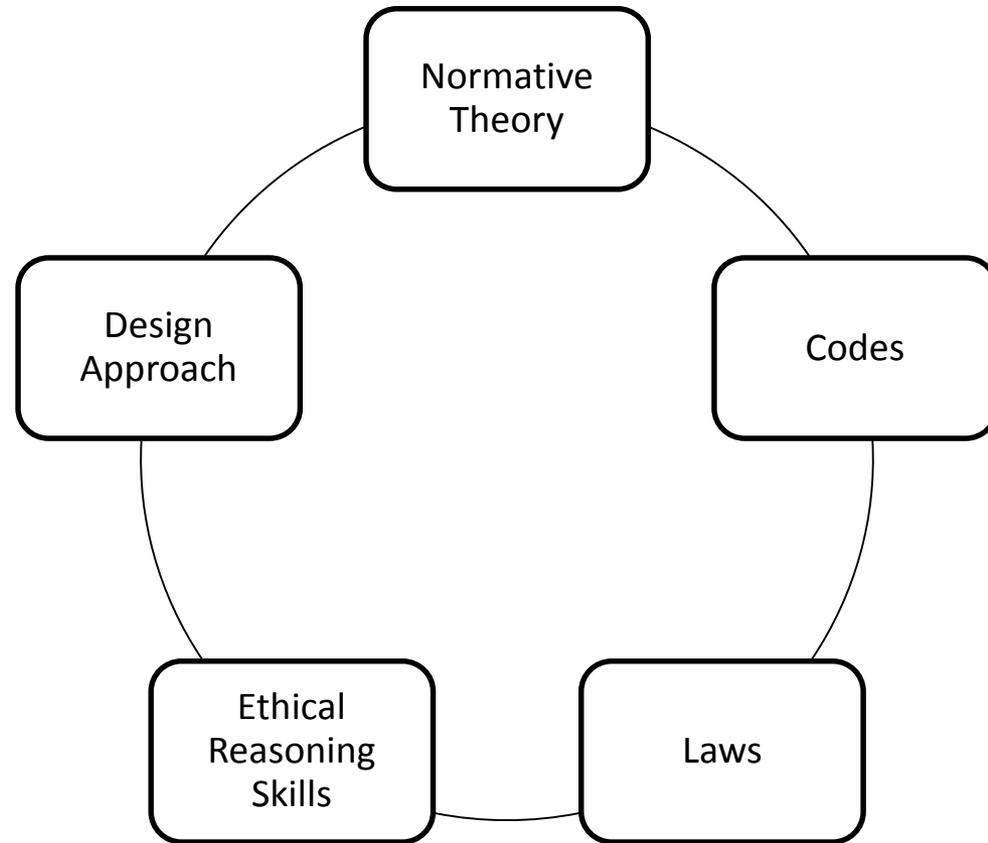


Developing Ethical Competence throughout the MPA Curriculum: Lessons from MPA Students in a Standalone Ethics Course

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Teaching Ethics



Cooper, 2012; Cooper & Menzel, 2013; Jacobs, 2013; Menzel, 2010

Case Studies and the Design Approach

- Identify competing values in ethical dilemmas;
- deliberate by considering the strengths and deficiencies of potential resolutions;
- act according to principle(s); and,
- take full personal responsibility for all implications of their conduct (Cooper, 2012).

The Study

- Qualitative interviews of 18 MPA students (n=18) who took my Leadership Ethics course
- Transcribed, coded, and the theme Ethical Reasoning identified

Research questions:

- What were students' learning experiences in the course?
- How did those learning experiences contribute (or not) to the development of students' ethical competency?

Findings

- All 18 students described scrutinizing their ethical reasoning until a principle upon which the logic stood was uncovered
 - thinking deeply about what one stood for
 - developing an appreciation for the principles of others, even if they disagreed

Scrutinizing ethical reasoning...

To articulate what that principle is... that was like very fruitful for me. [In the discussion] you're trying to figure out “ok, but why are you saying this”? “Well, this is the right thing to do,” and it's like, “but why”?! Why, why, why, is the question of the course.... That, that's what made it productive, because at the end we had to come to a conclusion [about what we stood for].

Positions abandoned...

Oh my, I'm throwing my approach out the window because this [the principled reasoning of my group members] makes so much sense.

Positions strengthened...

[During the deliberation] I was so confident that I actually didn't agree with the other two... I spent a lot of time making the case about why my theory choice was the right one.. So it provided some feedback on my very firm position.... When you have one or two or three different opinions, it certainly does force you to reevaluate and think a little deeper. You have to consider the alternative in that case. The small groups challenges you to consider their standpoint or position and what evidence they have to support that position.... But ultimately, I concluded that my theory was the most correct.

Appreciation for the principled reasoning of others...

I think it is definitely very helpful to know the theoretical basis people have for making their decisions. It was definitely very helpful to learn how different people think and there are many different ways of approaching one problem in the public world. I think I appreciated them even more once we started doing the case studies.

Implications

- Students are likely to uncover their principles rather than adopt new ones;
- ethical competence is developed with...
 - normative theories and/or public service values,
 - opportunities to scrutinize logic by “testing” the strengths and deficiencies in “practice,” and
 - requiring students to provide principled defenses