

# A focus on outcomes enhances learning

**Deni Elliott**  
**Professional freedom & responsibility chair**

**O**utcomes. Many of my colleagues think that "outcomes" is a four-letter word. "Outcomes" indicates that the powers that wanna be, from the dean to the legislature, are out to show that professors are not doing their jobs.

The reasoning behind this fear seems logical, on its face. Teachers can teach without some students managing to learn. An untold number of variables from hours in the classroom to hours on the job to hours in the bar affect student performance. However, outcomes can be predicted and evaluated with the variables of real life in mind. Focus on outcomes is a friend to ethics teaching. A focus on outcomes changes the assessment of ethics teaching from the professor's ability to state course goals, like those provided by The Hastings Center in 1980, to the professor's ability to articulate how pre-professionals should look walking out the door at the end of the semester. A focus on outcomes helps professors describe to themselves, their colleagues and their students just why the ethics course or unit is imperative in the development of young professionals.

In a series of monographs and the comprehensive book, *Ethics Teaching in Higher Education*, Daniel Callahan and Sissela Bok identified the following important goals in the teaching of ethics: The course should stimulate the students' moral imaginations, it should help students recognize ethical issues, it should elicit a sense of moral obligation, it should assist students in develop-

ing analytic skills, and it should provide them opportunities to tolerate, and reduce, disagreement and ambiguity.

Some of these goals are easy to turn into statements of student outcomes. Students can show that they recognize ethical issues by listing the ethical issues contained in a particular case study. Students can show that they have developed analytic skills by reasoning through a case in a manner that illustrates the principles of good inductive and deductive reasoning.

Unfortunately, this is where most evaluation in the ethics classroom ends. However, if our intent, as ethics professors, is to have students who walk out of the class as more aware, more committed and more creative

A focus  
on outcomes  
helps professors  
describe to themselves,  
their colleagues  
and their students  
just why the  
ethics course or unit  
is imperative  
in the development  
of young professionals.

moral agents - the intended outcome of the other Hastings Center goals - developing cognitive skills such as recognition and analytic reasoning is just the beginning.

Two connected changes from the traditional ethics class are necessary to bring about these more important student outcomes. First, along with the laundry list of ethical issues to be covered in the term, students need to focus on themselves as moral agents. If students are to focus on their own moral agency, they must have continual opportunities to observe and analyze themselves in decision-making that is in the present rather than in some hypothetical newsroom. They need opportunities to notice how their awareness and sense of responsibility has changed.

One way to begin is with a pre-test. The first week of the term, prior to any real instruction, I ask students to do a case analysis. The case always has essential concerns linked to course content, but also asks students to put themselves in a decision-

making mode that connects with their current lives. While the ethical issues may include professional concerns like conflict of interest, privacy, and deception, the situation for analysis is one students are likely to have experienced. The ethical issues arise as clearly in classroom interactions and relationships among peers as they do in the newsroom.

The pre-test asks students to identify ethical issues, to make choices and to describe, as completely as possible, the considerations that went into their decision-making. I collect the pre-tests and put them away until the end of the term.

Exercises throughout the term encourage students to identify ethical issues that they confront in their daily lives and to analyze their decisions and the reasoning behind those decisions. A light-hearted "moral mistake of the day" provides students the opportunity to talk about a decision that they might make differently in the future and highlights the fact that we all make moral mistakes. We are all in the midst of our own moral growth and development. We cover the standard set of ethical issues, but always with a request that students think about when they have encountered these issues in their own lives.

The pre-test becomes their final exam. Students are asked to review their initial analysis and to discuss how they analyze the case differently at this point. What did they miss in the initial analysis that they notice now? How do they reason through their decisions differently? How do they assess the degree of their responsibility now as compared to the beginning of the term?

Successful students illustrate a deeper understanding of the ethical issues and concepts on the final as compared to the first attempt. They notice greater sensitivity in themselves to ethical concerns and are better able to describe their responsibilities. But, most importantly, they describe their greater level of self-awareness. The most important outcome for an ethics class is that students leave with a greater level of consciousness about themselves as decision-makers. If they are not able to describe what they have achieved, it is questionable whether they have achieved anything at all.