A focus on outcomes enhances learning

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Outcomes. 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 number of variables from hours in the classroom to hours on the job to hours in the bar to hours on the job to hours in the bar. Outcomes. However, out-comes 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.

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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 developing 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 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, 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.