

Testing ethical acuity

Description

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Ethical sensitivity is best cultivated through examples. To test this proposition I ran a class in which ethical matters were addressed through a series of contemporary case studies. There were 50 masters students in the class. Before the students broke into their groups to discuss the case studies I asked them all some simple binary questions, each with a third choice, â??I prefer not to say.â?•

These responses were recorded and transmitted anonymously via the studentsâ?? own smartphones and laptops using the educational software *Top Hat* (tophat.com) that records and collates the results of class quizzes, surveys â?? that kind of thing.

After the groups discussed and reported on the case studies, I asked them the same binary ethical questions with which I began to see if there was any change. If there was a reduction in the indecisive response (â??I prefer not to sayâ?•) to the original question, and/or a significant difference in the binary responses, then we might assume that the case studies and their discussion had an effect, or at least an effect that could be picked up over a short time frame. (Of course, as every educator knows, the value of any pedagogical experience doesnâ??t depend on such instant measurement.)

This was a very informal study, and at best is on the way to developing a method for detecting short term transformations in ethical awareness, and testing the software and this particular use of it.



The case studies were designed to encourage the students to put themselves in challenging ethical circumstance, rather than consider ethical questions from a distance. Eleven cases included simple narratives on several themes, and included variants and questions that probed the narratives. There were eleven groups, with one case study per group, but the case discussions were extended as the groups presented their findings to larger groups.

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Case study list

1. How some companies use cold calling to induce people to purchase a product or service, and how to respond
2. Running an experiment, or a â??stingâ?• operation, without prior consent from the participants
3. Tapping into someone elseâ??s unprotected network
4. Accepting a film from someone who downloaded it from an illegal site
5. Setting up an amateur surveillance system to gather evidence against an unruly neighbour
6. Responding to a commercial web site for a product that you donâ??t approve of, and that includes your picture as part of a group scene taken without your knowledge
7. Responding to a challenge that your online consumption practices disadvantage local suppliers and are unethical
8. Freelancing on company time
9. Your response to a friend who is shamed by their ex-partner on a social media site after an acrimonious break up
10. How you counsel a friend nervous about travelling to a rendezvous with someone they met on a dating site
11. Nepotism in the office and the impact of adultery dating sites

Survey questions

The opening questions included a warm up to test everyone was logged on to the *Top Hat* survey app, to practice using the system, and as a control question.

1. Someone offers you a choice of chocolate or strawberry ice-cream

- I would take the chocolate flavoured ice cream

- I would take the strawberry flavoured ice cream
- I prefer not to say

Then followed two more serious questions

2. Someone offers you a copy of a movie youâ??ve always wanted to see. They tell you they downloaded it from a pirate (illegal) web site

- I would politely turn down the offer
- I would accept it
- I prefer not to say

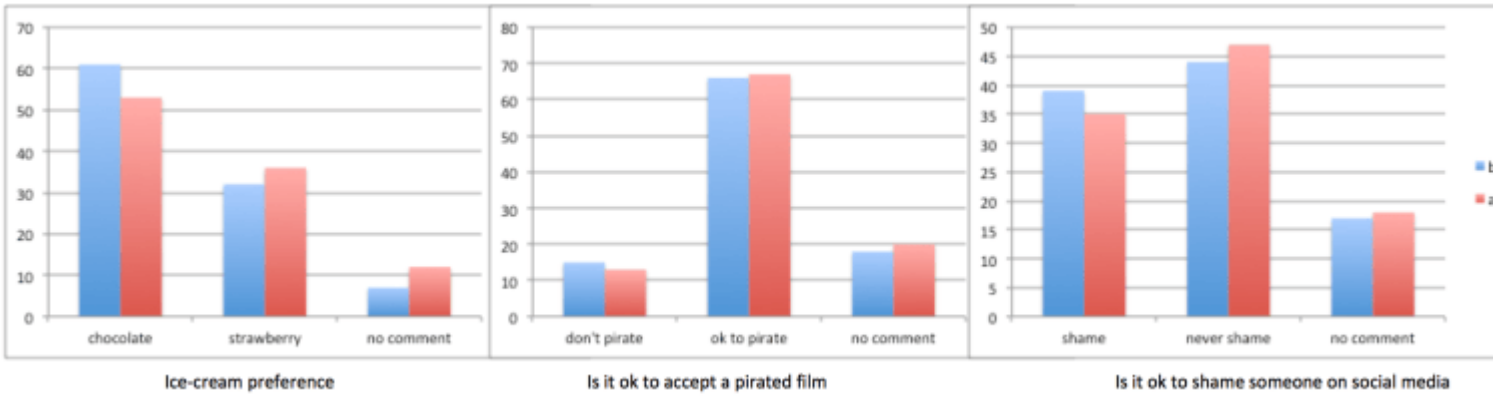
3. You know that someone has done something really horrible to your neighbourâ??s pet dog

- I would be prepared to shame and embarrass the person on social media (e.g. Twitter)
- I would never shame or embarrass anyone on social media, whatever they did
- I prefer not to say

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Were I to pursue this method then I would have to think about repeating the experiment with different groups, comparisons with a control group who spent the same time doing something other than discussing ethical case studies â?? and many other refinements.

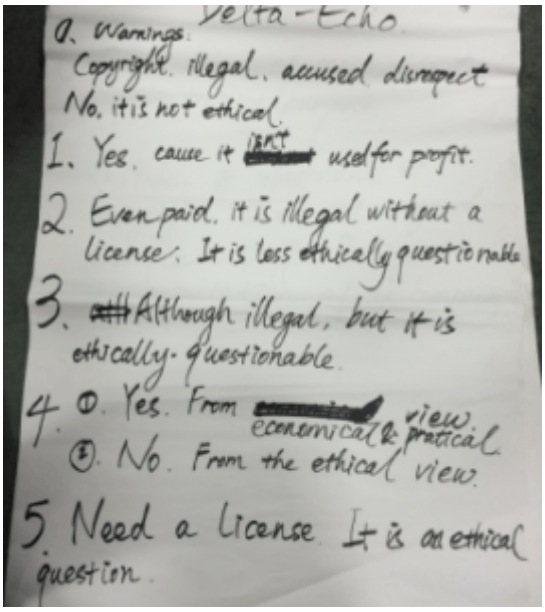
Information is free



So an in depth discussion of ethical case studies in a class context resulted in a marginal increase in preferences for strawberry ice-cream! Thereâ??s as much support for that proposition as for any shift in moral compass. Students didnâ??t really budge on the question of whether itâ??s ok to accept pirated movies. I thought they might.

Responses to the ice-cream question indicate that variations to the ethical questions are just noise in the data. The study may also demonstrate that in a survey context people tend to stay with their initial predisposition, whatever happens. Only time, extended discussion, and a slow fusion of horizons budges people from their â??prejudicesâ?• â?? if indeed there needs to be any movement in the case of intractable ethical conundrums.

In the case of pirated files, whatever laws are invoked to protect producers and consumers, many people harbour the view that if itâ??s online it should be free.



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Note

- 50 out of the 80 students registered for the class were present on the day, with some studying at a distance. The number of students responding to the online survey maxed at 71, which implies that some were only present intermittently and virtually. So thereâ??s data there from people who werenâ??t attending to the case studies. Perhaps the study makes explicit the leaky boundaries of the contemporary classroom â?? and its ethics.

Category

1. Ethics

Tags

1. ethics
2. interpretation
3. prejudice

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