

Lesson: Reflection on ethical practice

Evidence for 7.1.1 Graduate Achieved

Scenario

During term two you notice that one of year 11 students is performing extremely well on take home assessments. You are happy that this student has seemingly turned a corner in their understanding of the key concepts but you have a nagging doubt in your head that is exacerbated by the lack of understanding they display when you discuss concepts with them in class. The nagging doubt forces you to act on this issue.

A. You schedule a meeting with the student, their parents and year advisor and give them an official warning about plagiarism

B. You make a mental note to modify the assessment tasks for next year so that there are more in-class assessments than take-home ones

C. You schedule a meeting with the student where you remind them of the contract they signed as part of the All My Own Work program at the beginning of Year 11 and set goals for their future practice in preparation of take home assessments

D. You ask the student’s other teachers in a whole school staff meeting if they have the same doubt

E. You call the student’s parents and warn them about the penalties for plagiarism

	Most appropriate ← ————— → Least Appropriate				
	1	2	3	4	5
A			x		
B		x			
C	x				
D				x	
E					x

Justification

This scenario of a professional and ethical dilemma faced by a teacher demonstrates that teaching is an inherently moral exercise (Bullough, 2011; Campbell 2008; Sanger & Osguthorpe,) and forces the student teacher “to think critically about their purposes and how to justify them from a moral point of view” (Hansen, 1998, p. 644). My response was derived not only from the provisions of the Department of Education (DET)’s code of conduct, (2016) - particularly its emphases on fairness, respect, integrity and responsibility - but also from a deeper and broader commitment to the ethical foundations of all teaching, including the values of justice, compassion and practical wisdom (Aurin & Maurer, 1993; Campbell 2008; Shortt, Hallett, Spendlove, Hardy & Barton, 2012). My response

takes into account both the ethics of the actions themselves and their probable consequences (Campbell, 2008).

In this scenario, there is no actual evidence for the students' plagiarism, just a "nagging" suspicion. Any immediate punitive reaction to the situation would therefore be irresponsible and incompatible with procedural fairness, justice or respect for the dignity and rights of the student (Aurin & Maurer, 1993; DET, 2016). Procedural fairness, amongst other things, requires decision makers to inform the accused of the allegations against them and to give them an opportunity to respond (DET, 2016). This especially applies in the scenario because the alleged behaviour does not involve potential harm to others (DET, 2016).

Option C is ideal, therefore, because it does not precipitously escalate the problem but instead directly addresses the party concerned (the student) and gives them an opportunity to respond and take responsibility for their own actions. In so doing, it conforms with Self-Determination Theory and other scholarly literature on democratic behavioural management strategies because it contributes to the establishment of the students' sense of autonomy and relatedness and their own inner motivation and moral compass (Bullough, 2001; Hansen, 1998; Reeve, 2009; Reeve & Halusic, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2017; Sanger & Osguthorpe, 2011). It thereby fulfils both the imperatives of justice and those of the teacher's responsibility for character and moral education. It also aligns with the increasing focus of higher education institutions towards an educational, rather than a punitive, response to cases of alleged plagiarism (Baird & Dooley, 2014).

Option B, in second rank, tries to change the environmental conditions of the behaviour, while avoiding an unjust escalation of the situation, but it does not address the ethical decisions underlying the student's behaviour and so misses a critical opportunity for character formation (Hansen, 1998).

The remaining options, conversely, all present differing levels of inappropriateness because they involve unfounded accusations and do not give the student a chance to respond, or take responsibility, before escalating the situation. Option A, at least has the advantage of incorporating the student in the process, as well as engaging the parents, and would be appropriate if prior steps had not resolved the situation. Option D, however, unnecessarily and unjustly undermines the reputation of the student to the entire school staff, whereas Option E of going immediately to the parents is even more forceful and unjust.

The determined order of the appropriateness of the various options therefore best fulfils the dictates of educational ethics and morality and preserves the dignity and autonomy of the student.

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