The Future of Higher Education is in Our Intention and Actions Today

Part I (an opening)

by Daniel P. Barbezat

Go, go, go, said the bird; human kind
Cannot bear very much reality.

Time past and time future
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.

— T.S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton,” Four Quartets

In systems that exhibit little to no
change, prognostication is rather
straightforward: a living-out of Newton’s
first law of motion. Unless poked
somehow, stuff does as it does. However, in
systems moving very quickly with larger and
more chaotic changes, what comes along
next is increasingly difficult to predict. As
environments and questions become so
complex, all we have is our own current
stance: the guidance of our intention.

No one, not even Ray Kurzweil himself,
knows what the platforms available to higher
education will be, what job markets will
look like or what the implications of global
change will be to learning, teaching and
living. No one. Whatever claim is made
about the “future of higher education,”
we must face this realization.

However, we do not need to know the future.
Attending to and challenging our current
intention guides our response to change and,
moreover, provides the means to foster what
arises next. Our actions have planet-wide
consequences. If we only develop and teach
techniques and do not cultivate an active
inquiry into their implications, how can we
ever expect to produce outcomes that foster
systemic flourishing? As we think about the
future of education, we must keep our
focus on questions of “why” rather than
simply “how.”

Our intention is the anchor we develop, the
ground from which we respond, no matter
what comes along. It is not merely reactive:
since we are cultivating an ongoing inquiry
into what is meaningful, challenging and
depthening, our intention is a living process
which develops as we see what is created and
fostered in this world. This process requires
the support of a contemplative practice that
sustains our courageous willingness to act
in accordance with our beliefs.

Our intention is vibrant and alive, yet
grounding and guiding. It is from this stance,
here and now in the present, informed by our
actions, that we must confront and create
the future of higher education. This is what
we must be cultivating in ourselves and
in our institutions if we want to transform
education and society.

...Continued on page 2
Our educational institutions should be environments which foster the realization that our actions shape the world into a reflection of what is most deeply meaningful to us. Information, theory and innovation then become grounded in a process of living out meaning – no longer simply unleashed for any purpose. In this regard, higher education can lead the process of societal change and transformation.

It is only through a process of cultivating awareness and discernment that we can develop this sense of engaged meaning and action. This process must form the core of education, affecting political and social policies, technological development and global awareness. It is essential for a vibrant society. Let's all work together to create these environments and forge the future of higher education together – without succumbing to calls for narrow training and social control.

The future of higher education is in our intentions and actions today.

In Part II, I will suggest ways to implement this inquiry and develop our intentions and actions.

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Reflective Ethical Inquiry: Preparing Students for Life

By Donna M. Qualters, Tufts University • Melissa McDaniels, Michigan State University • Perrin Cohen, Northeastern University

Abstract
Although universities often teach ethics courses, they do not always teach students how to apply ethical course content to ethical challenges they encounter on a day-to-day basis. The Awareness-Investigation-Responding (AIR) model of ethical inquiry bridges this gap by scaffolding the reflective process and empowering students to make more caring, compassionate, ethical choices in their disciplines and in life. AIR can be adapted to any discipline and any learning environment.

During a class assignment to interview a former teacher, Jerry observes his friend making up the dialogue the night before the assignment is due. When Jerry inquires why his friend is doing this, his friend replies that life is too busy and the assignment is only worth 10 points, so no harm is done. While Jerry is uncomfortable with knowing this, he doesn’t say anything as he doesn’t want to confront his friend. In another instance, Amanda is student teaching and notices teachers and staff routinely taking school supplies home. She is uneasy knowing this but is afraid to talk to her supervisor for fear that it might affect her placement and any future references. These hypothetical situations are based on real occurrences that the authors have encountered as educators. A quick reaction for our students is often to ignore, disengage or avoid dealing with these situations, leading to increased stress and sometimes costly mistakes.

Higher education institutions typically depend on specific disciplines to provide students with ethical grounding. There are courses in moral philosophy, religion, professional ethics, character education and values clarification—all of which provide students with important content and critical thinking skills in a classroom environment. But, as in the examples above, this approach is often inadequate to help students face real-life ethical dilemmas that arise in their day-to-day lives. In fact, a study by Peppas and Diskin (2001) found no difference in ethical values between students who had taken an ethics course and those who had not. Although this finding is not surprising, it should be troubling. We all experience similar cases where our students encounter complex and ambiguous ethical challenges and often react uncritically. Their responses emerge from interactions with strong external influences in their lives such as peers, the media, family or religious traditions.

Concurrently, there is also a misguided reluctance by discipline faculty to discuss ethical challenges in class. Siola (2005) provides evidence of faculty feeling unqualified to respond to issues or not feeling that the issues are important. We have found in our own work that our colleagues are uncomfortable having these discussions for similar reasons (Cohen, McDaniels, & Qualters, 2005). Faculty members are often torn because they struggle with advocacy and feel that their personal views should be kept out of the course (Hanson, 1996). Other reasons given include: (1) the belief that values are formed in childhood, and changing behavior or beliefs is impossible; (2) the assertion that faculty cannot themselves agree on what is “ethical,” and (3) the belief that no one has the “right” to tell anyone else what is ethical or not ethical (Mathieson & Tyler, 2008). Hanson warns that the methodologically neutral teacher can often create the opposite effect by making the material so boring as to not engage students, leaving them with no new tools and forcing them to solve issues through their current uncritical lens.

As educators, we struggle with how to address this delicate area with students. Do we leave our students adrift in dealing with ethical issues? Do we hope they will “do the right thing” when faced with ethical quandaries in our fields and in life? How do we prevent students from becoming desensitized to ethical issues and thus avoid them? If we do take action, how do we address students’ perceptions that they have the responsibility to address ethical concerns but not the knowledge, resources and support to do so? We suggest faculty incorporate reflective ethical thinking into their course, using the Awareness, Investigation and Responding (AIR) model of ethical inquiry. This approach encourages students to address authentic ethical issues that exist in the discipline or are encountered in real-world situations within and outside the university context.
three types of reflective ethical activities – Awareness, Investigation and Responding – that they can learn to incorporate into their everyday lives. When these AIR reflections are put into practice, they keep students’ ethical curiosity, empathic and ethically engaged in an ongoing way. This reflective process empowers an ethical “mindfulness” that sustains trust and goodwill that maintains students’ ethical bearings in the face of daily pressures.

Implementing AIR

The first step in implementing AIR is to prepare students for the type of conversation that will occur. According to Perry (1970), college-age students are often in the duality mode, looking for either a right or wrong answer. The goal of AIR is not to determine the “right” answers but to provide a framework for considering resources and options for making the “right” decisions. AIR prepares students for the richness and diversity of the discussion that often leads to multiple solutions.

In order to effectively implement the AIR model, faculty need to create a learning environment where students are able to access their own visceral and emotional experiences. Students need to resist the urge to immediately “respond” or “fix” ethical situations they encounter. They must embrace ethical inquiry PRIOR to ethical action and respond to ethical situations in compassionate and sensitive ways. Prior to developing AIR, we repeatedly heard students describe moments in their cooperative education placements and lives where they had a “gut” feeling that something was not quite right. Students often discounted these visceral reactions because they did not yet intellectually understand the situation that prompted this feeling of unease.

Implementation of the AIR model requires faculty to support students in engaging in “embodied or somatic learning” (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). This approach embraces the idea of the body as a place for learning or source of knowledge in its own right. While this is counter to western approaches to learning that favor the mind as the primary place for learning and source of knowledge, acknowledging the emotional components of learning allows for subject matter content to become more meaningful for students (Dirkx, 2001).

Because this type of learning may be threatening to both students and faculty members, it is important for the instructor to create a safe space in the classroom, characterized by four general principles:

1. Establish clear ground rules regarding confidentiality and group interactions: Instructors should engage students in defining what makes a safe environment for discussing complex and uncomfortable topics. Faculty can help students to discern what and how to share experiences they find confusing or troubling.

2. Provide an overview of the characteristics and aims of reflective discussion: Some students have never been given the tools to engage in active listening and reflective response. Instructors can ask students how they hope others would listen and respond. In keeping with the embodied approach, we introduced students to the concepts of active and generative listening. Active listening requires you to reflect back what was heard, while generative listening requires reflecting what you have felt as well as heard as the conversation advances.

3. Model and heighten awareness of the ground rules: As soon as students observe an instructor interrupting or breaking confidentiality, they will be less inclined to uphold these principles themselves. We have found that posting the guidelines during discussions reminds and reinforces them for everyone.

4. Serve a facilitative teaching role: Instructors must empower students to think about ethical issues in creative and empowered ways. By acting as a facilitator rather than an authority, the teacher validates student feelings and concerns, challenges them to think more systematically about the issue they are examining and guides them to critically assess all aspects of possible solutions. The AIR model was specifically designed to guide teachers in this type of practice.

Employing the Pedagogical Tool Kit

A faculty member can draw upon a variety of pedagogical tools designed to cultivate questioning and inquiry and to prevent students from reacting to an ethical situation. We have guided students through the following prompts to help them gain clarity (building upon their “gut” responses) about the dilemma they are facing.

In general, these tools involve asking students to describe an ethical dilemma/concern in-depth. We do this by probing students for a description of the full context of the dilemma, their affective reaction and feeling at the time (and later) and the reactions/feelings of others present. Next, we ask students to create a stakeholder map — identifying who is impacted by this dilemma and which stakeholders are involved. Similar to a concept map, this type of mapping puts those who are directly involved in the situation in the middle, but then continues to explore students’ thinking about who else not directly involved in the situation might be affected by how the student proceeds. For example, in the hypothetical school case mentioned in the opening, families of those who have been taking supplies are added to the map, as is the school principal, as both may be affected if this issue comes to a public forum like the school committee. We follow by asking students what they perceive are the specific underlying ethical issues. Then — and this is the most challenging component — we ask students to reflect on the assumptions/beliefs that trigger their reactions to and feelings about the situation. Raising tacit beliefs is never easy, but we have found through practicing this model that students become more facile at identifying their own belief systems. This progression naturally leads to asking what steps can be taken to investigate these assumptions and beliefs.

The instructor can support the students in continuing to be in a reflective space, moving on to investigate other perspectives, ...Continued on page 8
We call this identifying the “third” option, including self-care, sharing and conversing with a trusted family member or peers, learning more about an issue, reevaluating career plans, removing oneself from a situation or reporting an incident.

Reflective Awareness
Teaching Example: The instructor introduces reflective ethical awareness by telling the class: “For the next class, identify one or two ethical concerns/issues related to research, teaching or another professional activity. It should be something that is of particular interest to you and that you are uncertain or unclear how to address. The issue(s) should be something that is fair specific and has personal meaning. As part of this written exercise, include a brief description of a possible scenario of the conditions under which you are likely to experience such a concern; bodily sensations, assumptions, thoughts and feelings that are likely to arise in that moment; and the possible short- and long-term impact of the experience on you and others. During our next class, everyone will have a chance to reflectively discuss their issue(s) so we can use them as a starting point for reflectively understanding and responding to ethical concerns that you experience on and off campus.”

Teaching Guideposts: Instructors help students to agree on ground rules that support reflective ethical awareness by telling the class: “For the next class, identify one or two ethical concerns/issues related to research, teaching or another professional activity. It should be something that is fair specific and has personal meaning. As part of this written exercise, include a brief description of a possible scenario of the conditions under which you are likely to experience such a concern; bodily sensations, assumptions, thoughts and feelings that are likely to arise in that moment; and the possible short- and long-term impact of the experience on you and others. During our next class, everyone will have a chance to reflectively discuss their issue(s) so we can use them as a starting point for reflectively understanding and responding to ethical concerns that you experience on and off campus.”

Reflective Thinking
Teaching Example: Habermas’s (1984) three “domains of knowledge” are used as a framework for helping students empathically explore what is knowable about a particular issue in technical (e.g., scientific and analytic approaches/information), social (e.g., social/cultural values, spiritual/religious teachings) and emancipatory ways (self-understanding, including personal biases and aspirations). Consider, for example, the hypothetical situation of witnessing cheating which was presented at the beginning of the paper. A student exploring what to do would be encouraged to: (a) look at the university or class codes of conduct, student handbooks and research on the consequences of cheating; (b) have discussions with trustworthy sources such as family or clergy, or consult academic pieces on society values around cheating; and (c) examine their own assumptions and beliefs about the role of cheating in education. Students culminate their investigations with a scholarly research paper that concludes with their “best” ethical thinking at that time.

Reflective Responding
Teaching Example: Students are asked to use their “best ethical thinking at this time” to develop a detailed, skillful response to their ethical concern (e.g., social networking, social action plan, a practical alternative, artistic communication, self-care). They are also asked to describe how that response evolved from their reflective investigation, why they think it is a good first step in addressing the issue, and how the response might be used in a practical way.

Teaching Guideposts: Students consider how their “best ethical thinking at the time” might be converted into a skillful action that is as harmless, honest, fair and respectful as possible. Given the context, they reflect on possible responses and how they draw upon personal strengths and interests (e.g., creative, social, analytical, spiritual). Students are reminded that self-care (e.g., stress reduction, yoga, meditation and talking with friends) is also a legitimate response.

Faculty can apply AIR to provide students experience in analyzing authentic ethical issues and dilemmas within a discipline. For example, in teacher education we created cases that ranged in seriousness from teacher gossip to potential child abuse. In engineering, faculty created situations that had students grapple with the ethics of creating products that could potentially cause hearing damage or might not meet code specifications. Using the AIR tool kit, faculty walked students through the case, asking the reflective questions listed above and creating a stakeholder map. For the investigation or “1” component, students were asked to find as many sources as possible to assist the potential teacher or engineer in making the decision. The next day the class discussed what they found and then worked together to generate as many possible ways to handle the situation that reflected their beliefs, respected those involved and provided a caring, compassionate response. Additionally, AIR...
prevent them from ethical disengagement to their “gut” feelings of unease and to concrete method for students to respond about ethics but is about ethical inquiry, that provides students with a lifelong practical and simple three-step process necessary to guide students in translating knowledge from course work, family and classroom while still in the field (Cohen, 2010).


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