What Are They Thinking? Teaching Ethics Using Games

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What is philosophy all about? It is about trying to understand what you already know, but you know it so well that you have become unaware of it.[1]

Ethics is a form of punishment that we have designed to inflict upon those who themselves have done nothing wrong.[2]

Moral dilemmas are that we don't know and disagree over what is the right thing to do when we are trying to do the right thing. In a test of character, by contrast, what is right and wrong seems pretty clear.[3]

Students discovering their moral philosophy

The study of ethics is complicated by the perception that many see this subset of philosophy as an overly scholarly pursuit with little application in daily life. However, the above quotes describe certain notions regarding ethics that military professionals should contemplate. For example, it has been argued in earlier articles that everyone has a moral philosophy, but not everyone is aware of it without reflection.[4] [5] [6] As the first quote above suggests, many may be only subliminally aware of their own philosophy. Additionally, the second and third quotes show that often ethics instruction is reactive after a scandal, and there is confusion between what is a moral dilemma versus a test of character. These common misunderstandings served as inspiration for a study conducted at the US Army command and General Staff College (CGSC).

In the 2019 academic year, a mixed-methods study was conducted at CGSC to investigate alternative ways to teach ethics using a gaming approach. One of the lessons during the initial few months of CGSC

discussed ethical decision-making using a case study approach. It was proposed that a gaming approach might be appropriate for teaching ethics. Games promote interactive play, which could simulate the context where moral dilemmas occur. Such games reinforce what ethics is all about—decision-making given ambiguous situations where actors might compete or cooperate with each other.[7] Therefore, a control group used the case study approach for instruction and was compared to the test group that learned ethics using games. What follows is a description of what we learned from this experiment and how those lessons might be applied to other kinds of instruction. First, it is important to understand some of the literature that served as the foundation for the study before we discuss the study itself.

A brief literature review

Honor Defined

One of the reasons why ethics instruction, especially in the military context, can be complicated is because some terms might be poorly defined. For example, most of the army values are clearly defined, while honor is simply defined as "live up to the Army values," which seems like a circular definition.[8] Army leaders might find a re-examining of this central value as a useful pursuit given the importance we place on honor. One could argue that honor is a unifying value that holds all the other values together. Figure 1 depicts how honor could be viewed in its central role.
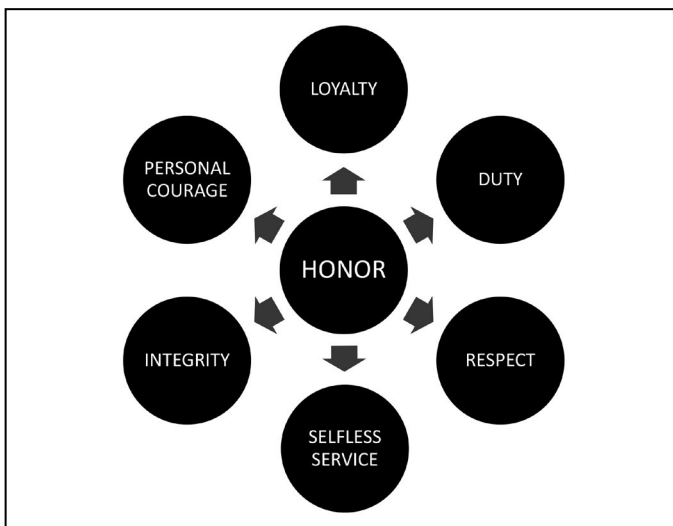

Figure 1. The unifying army value: honor

An example on how this model could be applied practically could be described as a protocol for leaders struggling with moral dilemmas. For example, leaders who find themselves in situations where they might be encouraged to compromise their integrity might see that as a dishonorable thing to do. Inversely, if leaders are feeling uneasy about a decision they are about to make, they might find that they are being tempted to compromise their integrity. As indicated by the opening quotes above, sometimes leaders must discover right from wrong through reflection. One way to encourage reflection is by starting with the central role of honor and framing it with specific actions in the other army values. This protocol might be useful in general, whereas other scholars have created more specific models worthy of our consideration.

The Ethical Triangle

At the foundation of ethical decision-making are three main areas of accepted thought regarding how ethical/moral behavior is played out in individuals. In his book *Combating Corruption, Encouraging Ethics*[9]; James Svara described these three main areas as the ethical triangle, which is depicted in figure 2.

The ethical triangle depicts virtue, principles, and consequences as three points of the triangle that people use either exclusively or in combination to make moral choices. If I make choices based on what I believe an honorable person might do, perhaps I am operating in the virtue domain. If I spend time considering what laws and regulations apply to the situation, then perhaps I am in the principles domain. If I am concerned about what does the most good for the most amount of people, perhaps I am operating in the consequences domain.

A key aspect of this model is explained in the text above the triangle. If a person prefers one point of the triangle such as virtue to make moral choices, they should avoid using that one portion of the triangle exclusively. The closer to the center of the triangle people are when they make decisions, the better they are. In other words, if someone uses one point of the ethical triangle to initially assess the situation, they could then use the other two points of the triangle as a step for checking their work, that might yield better choices that are more ethically justifiable. The ethical triangle is relevant to this discussion because it was a key concept taught to both the test and control groups in the ethics class. Therefore, determining how effectively students employed the ethical triangle after either a game or case study approach was an important thing to measure to determine the effectiveness of instruction.
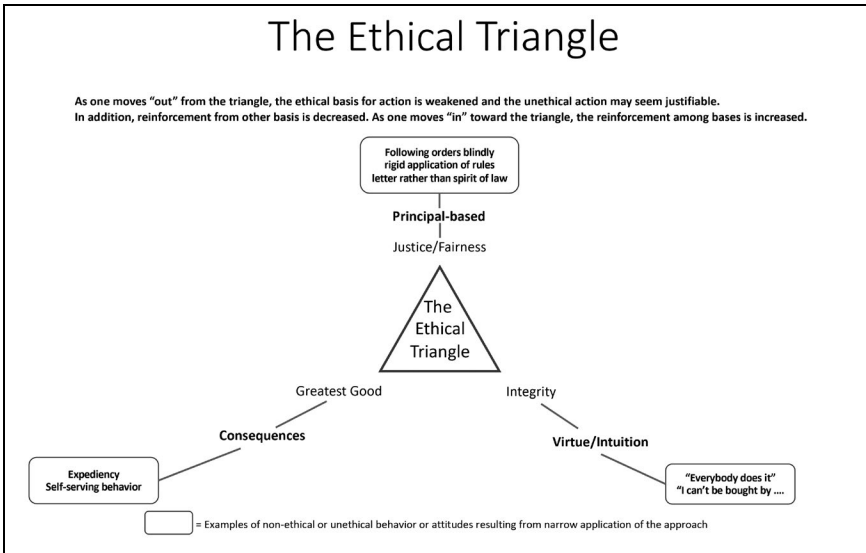
The Ethical Triangle

As one moves "out" from the triangle, the ethical basis for action is weakened and the unethical action may seem justifiable.
In addition, reinforcement from other basis is decreased. As one moves "in" toward the triangle, the reinforcement among bases is increased.

Following orders blindly
rigid application of rules
letter rather than spirit of law

Principal-based

Justice/Fairness

The
Ethical
Triangle

Greatest Good   Integrity

Consequences   **Virtue/Intuition**

Expediency
Self-serving behavior

"Everybody does it"
"I can't be bought by …."

☐ = Examples of non-ethical or unethical behavior or attitudes resulting from narrow application of the approach

Figure 2. The Ethical Triangle

How we designed the experiment

Before we go into the findings of this study, we first need to explain how the study was set up in greater detail. At CGSC, students are divided into staff groups for their learning based on the adult educational model. The average staff group size is sixteen students. Four staff groups make up one teaching team or student section. All four staff groups share one instructor for their leadership lessons. The study was split between two different student sections. The control group was one section (63 participants) the test group (62 participants) was another section. With a total of 125 participants.

Students in both test and control groups were given a pre-test and post-test. This enabled us to understand where the students were prior to the instruction and examine any differences between the test and the control group post instruction. A mix of quantitative Likert scale questions and qualitative short-answer questions were employed in this mixed-methods study.

Students in the control group received instruction in the normal case study manner. In the test group, students were divided into small teams of four in each staff group. They were given a simple set of instructions to develop solutions to a moral dilemma. Each small team would use their solution to the dilemma as a template to evaluate and assign a score to how their fellow students contended with the dilemma. This approach would essentially enable students to teach themselves the ethical triangle by using

it to solve problems and evaluate the moral rigor of other solutions. Student pre-readings for the class remained the same. What is unknown is the level of student's familiarity and experience in studying the ethical triangle prior to CGSC. If you exclusively use army leadership material, it suggests that students had minimal ethical instruction and training prior to the block of instruction given by their CGSC leadership instructors.

What we learned from the experiment

Since this was a mixed-method study, students were given the opportunity to answer questions using a Likert scale for the quantitative data collection and answered open-ended questions for the qualitative data collection. Some statistically significant results were discovered in the quantitative portion of the study (see figure 3) but the most definitive findings came from the qualitative themes collected from both students and from faculty observers (see figures 4 and 5).
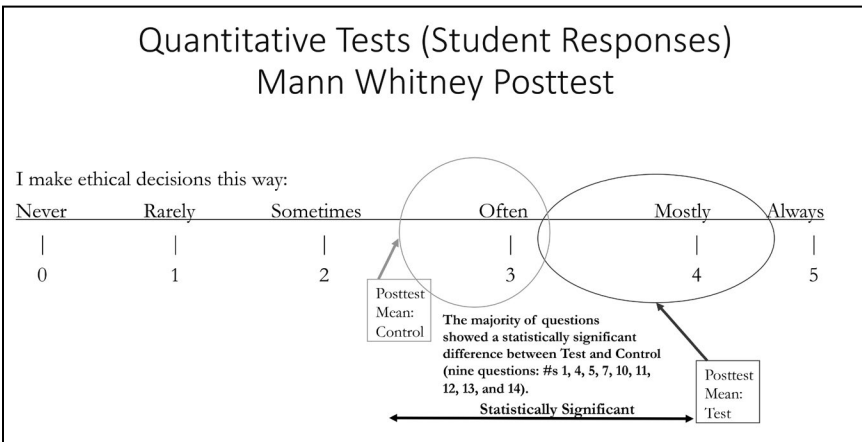

Figure 3. Findings 1

One of the most compelling findings was from a simple question posed to the students, "What aspects of the class should be changed?" We collected an unsolicited response from students responding to this prompt. Three control group students said that they understood the concepts better because of taking the class, compared to ten in the test group. In other words, test group students were over three times more likely to feel that they understood the concepts better having taken the class using a gaming approach.

The above finding generally supported the qualitative results collected from faculty silent observers as well as a four-person faculty focus group
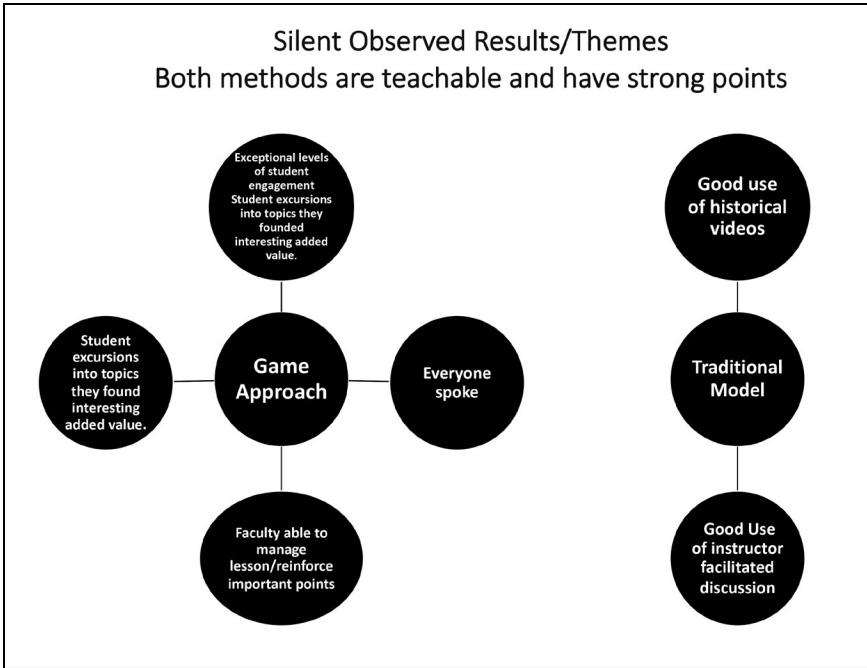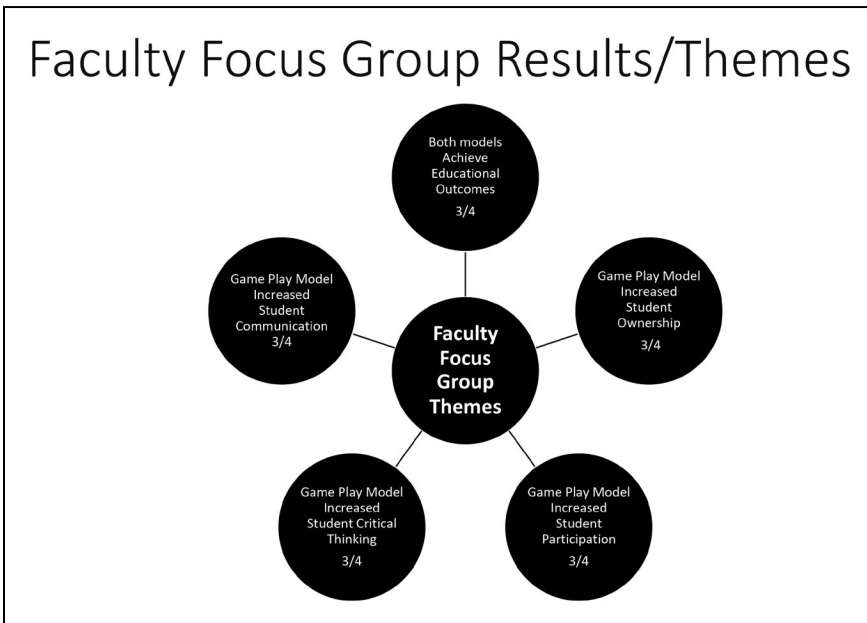
Figure 4. Findings 2

Figure 5. Findings 3

conducted at the end of instruction. In general, faculty observers and focus group members agreed that both methods of instruction were effective but that the gaming approach was by far more engaging. In the ethics game class, students were more likely to be actively involved and learn experientially. Because students had to interact with the ethical concepts and apply them not only to solving a moral dilemma but evaluating somebody else's solution, the concepts were more likely to stick.

Recommendations

The focus of this research has been based on improving ethics instruction using simple gaming. This is built on previous work using gaming to improve visualization within the educational setting. Army leaders may be able to take gaming theory concepts and apply them to ethics training at the unit level and in formal professional military education. Even with the stand up of several institutions for leadership and ethics within the army, most training is still reliant on traditional methods. The use of game theory by army leaders could provide an alternate approach that provides leaders at all levels a chance to discover and reflect.

For example, unit leaders could use the game that this study was based upon (See end notes for link to study research report for detailed game instructions). The ethics game could help leaders at the unit level understand how they make decisions by using the pre-and post-test feedback to understand their ethical preferences. In addition to informing unit leaders to understand their ethical decision-making process, this game could also be used by leaders to help understand where their subordinate element leaders are on the ethical triangle and help them to make sound ethical decisions. This could potentially enable leaders to understand their subordinate's decision-making processes, thereby allowing senior leaders to make better decisions or at least consider how their subordinates make critical decisions. Understanding subordinate moral reasoning allows commanders to understand how they need to communicate their decisions down to their subordinates. Such ethics instruction could enable subordinate leaders to better understand their commander's intent and purpose and why their higher echelon leader made some of the decisions that they did.

This simple game can be run in a matter of minutes without much preparation and does not take up valuable training time. Unit leaders often face challenges in allocating time to training especially in response to ethical and leadership training.

Conclusion

Perhaps it is no great revelation that the experiential approach employed using a game to teach ethical concepts would be more effective. Instruction at CGSC has long emphasized experiential learning at the graduate level. Practical exercises and simulations which encourage higher levels of engagement among students is a time-honored practice in our institution. Employing a simple game clearly raised the level of student engagement. As stated in the introduction, the field of ethics can sometimes be confusing and present challenges in engaging the learning audience. Making the ethics class a game encouraged students to go beyond simple comprehension to successfully manipulate and apply the concepts in real time. Instruction using games is clearly a best practice that should be considered to a greater extent in our professional military education system.

Notes

1. Einar Øverenget, "Why Good People Do Bad Things" (TEDEX, Oslo, Norway, May 17, 2017), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AndXsPdvHCM.
2. George Lucas, "Ethical Pluralism in Military Conflicts: Which Side Defends a Just Cause for War?" (Ethics symposium guest speaker, Ethics Symposium, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, April 30, 2018), 8:40, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UX3Vzh4mLxQ.
3. Lucas, 13:00.
4. Richard McConnell and Evan Westgate, "What We Are Thinking: Discovering Your Moral Philosophy Using the Forensic Approach," in *The Impact of Diverse Worldviews on Military Conflict* (2018 annual ethics symposium, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: CGSC Foundation Press, 2018), 82.
5. Richard McConnell and Evan Westgate, "What Were You Thinking: Discovering Your Moral Philosophy Using the Forensic Approach," *The International Journal of Ethical Leadership* 6, Fall 2019 (October 2019): 70–71.
6. Richard McConnell et al., "The Ethics Game: A Mixed Methods Examination of Learning Outcomes Using Games," in Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning (Association for Business Simulations and Experiential Learning (ABSEL), University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh Pennsylvania: ABSEL, 2020), 281.https://absel.org/?page_id=22.
7. Steven Tadelis, *Game Theory: An Introduction*, 1st Edition (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013).
8. Department of the Army, ADP 6–22: Army Leadership (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 2012), 1–12.
9. James Svara, *Combating Corruption, Encouraging Ethics: A Practical Guide to Management Ethics* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2011).