Introduction

It is absolutely critical that students are educated in how to make ethical decisions. In fact, this goal is properly regarded as central to a university education. We believe that teaching ethics across the curriculum is the best means of reaching this goal. There are several reasons for believing this: first, in places such as Clemson University, it would be impossible under current conditions for the Department of Philosophy and Religion to staff an ethics course that would be required of all students at the university. Indeed, that would be the case even if the department were prepared to completely sacrifice the rest of its course offerings to accommodate the demand. Second, and more important, ethics in practice is not compartmentalized and this point is more effectively conveyed by ethics instruction across the curriculum than by freestanding courses in ethics. Third, if ethics is truly integrated across the curriculum, the impact would be dramatic. Members of the university community would see faculty in all disciplines modeling a responsible approach to serious and often controversial ethical problems. They would both appreciate that there is an ethical dimension to every aspect of their lives and develop the critical skills necessary to make informed ethical decisions.

On the basis of these convictions, we sought support from various sources for an Ethics Across the Curriculum Pilot Project at Clemson University. We were successful in our search for funding and our EAC Pilot Project, a weeklong seminar/workshop for faculty, took place June 12-16, 2000. From the very beginning, we were very encouraged by the fact that an initial survey of potential interest in bioethics generated an enthusiastic response from over forty-five faculty and staff representing nineteen departments as well as extension and related programs in four of Clemson’s five colleges. Because of this prior interest in bioethics education at Clemson, we decided to focus our Pilot Project on such issues (including animal rights, environmental issues, genetics, biotechnology, and integrity in scientific research. One major source of funding for the seminar, Public Services Activities, South Carolina Agriculture & Forestry Research and Cooperative Extension Service, is closely connected to the College of Agriculture, Forestry and Life Sciences. Another source of financial support, the South Carolina Sustainable Universities Initiative, was particularly interested in such issues and supportive of using them to launch an ethics across the curriculum program at Clemson University.

Seminar Goals

Although faculty in areas outside of philosophy regularly encounter ethical issues in their teaching and professional work, they are often unsure of exactly how to introduce ethical discussions into their classes systematically and with real content. Presenting ethical problems in a way that forces students to think carefully about the positions they hold and why they hold them, as opposed to merely defending prior opinions without much thought, is a challenge. The purpose of the seminar was to provide participating faculty with an opportunity to acquire the wherewithal to meet this challenge. More particularly, we sought to equip participants to integrate ethics into their regular classes by either or both of two means: (a) by incorporating an ethics unit in the course or (b)—our preference—by dealing with ethical issues as they arise in connection with the material being covered in class. Obviously, then, we did not set out to do an in depth seminar in bioethics.

Overview of Seminar

Seminar participants received a copy of James Rachels’s book, The Elements of Moral Philosophy, cases studies that we prepared for the seminar, and copies of overheads—“overhead masters”—prepared for and used in the seminar. They were expected to take an active part in the
proceedings—participating in discussion of case studies and adding observations from their own experience, for example. We are pleased to report that the level and quality of the participation far exceeded our expectations, indeed, our fondest hopes. The discussion was in fact exhilarating and very rewarding for us as well as the participants.

The seminar began with basic ethical concepts and discussion of some common problems and misconceptions about ethics and ethics discussions among students. Techniques for handling these problems and dispelling the misconceptions were discussed and illustrated. Then we turned to case studies where we made use of breakout sessions of differing sizes to provide an opportunity to experience the difference in the dynamics of large and small group discussion. These breakout sessions provided opportunities for the refinement of techniques participants had learned as well as the introduction, in the context of ethical discussion (as opposed to lecture), of the discipline-specific expertise they had respecting particular issues. The idea was to model as closely as possible the kinds of teaching situations seminar participants will actually encounter. We ended with a general review and a discussion of how participants can make use of what they had learned in their own classes.

**Getting Down to Particulars**

We began with a question: what is ethics? In answering this, we noted the difficulty, especially pronounced in bioethics, of deciding what sorts of things can have moral status. We also spent some time discussing how ethics differs from other normative enterprises, in particular, etiquette, religion, and law because students are notorious for conflating religion and ethics as well as ethics and law. We wanted the participants prepared to address this source of difficulty in ethical discussions. So, among other things, we identified the distinguishing marks of moral standards. Finally, we discussed some unique aspects of philosophical reasoning (e.g., the worry about objectivity and the use of hypothetical cases).

We strove to make the material accessible to our non-philosophical audience. For example, we suggested that the advantages of hypothetical cases are similar to the advantages of controlled scientific experiments (the common motivation being to isolate a particular intuition or variable without getting distracted by confounding details). We decided that some of the more common bad moves in ethical reasoning should be discussed. In addition to identifying and explaining them, we indicated how the seminar participants ought to respond to them when they encounter them, as they surely will. The five we focused on were jumping on the bandwagon, appeal to emotion, strawman, appeal to ignorance, and appeal to authority.

We turned next to a discussion of ethical relativism using a newspaper account of a Japanese woman who had attempted oyako shinju—parent-child suicide—in Santa Monica, California. Her two children died—they were drowned. The mother survived. Although oyako shinju is legal in Japan, it occurs there roughly once a day; a mother who survives is treated very leniently, being regarded as a pitiful creature rather than a wrongdoer. In the Japanese way of thinking such a mother would be seen as one who tried but failed in her attempt to do something honorable; a mother ought not commit suicide and leave her children behind. Having made it clear that we were not interested in the legal question of guilt, but in answering the question whether what she did was morally right or wrong, discussion of this case served our purposes well.

After a break, during which the discussion of the case continued, we discussed what the arguments for relativism are, how well these arguments stand up to critical scrutiny, what a card-carrying relativist is committed to, and most important, why, in the end, on the merits, one ought to say no to ethical relativism. We believe that dealing with these topics is especially important, given our purposes, because if there is anything that we can say with certainty about discussions of ethical issues with students it is that relativism will rear its ugly head. Faculty who are going to integrate ethics into their regular classes absolutely must be equipped to deal with ethical relativism when—not if—they confront it in class.
In the afternoon of the first day (1:00-4:00 p.m.), we talked about two basic approaches in ethics, namely, consequentialism and deontology. In both cases, we began with hypothetical cases designed to elicit the basic intuitions associated with the approaches and, so far as possible, steered clear of historical details and intricacies that are primarily, if not exclusively, of interest to philosophers or those who are teaching free-standing ethics courses. We also made use of hypotheticals to reveal the “pinch points” with each approach. The thought here is that what is needed if one is going to integrate ethics into biology or forestry courses, for example, is a working knowledge of these time-honored approaches. We did not claim superiority for either approach, instead suggesting that it is probably best to take seriously the possibility that in working through an ethical problem these approaches might complement each other in the manner of mutual checks. Moreover, we are convinced that with a balanced appreciation for and facility with both approaches (along with being prepared to squelch the relativist proclivities of students) one is in a good position to show students that ethical issues can be handled in a systematic and thoughtful way. This is, of course, one of the primary goals of teaching ethics across the curriculum.

On the second day we took some time for review and to address questions that had been posed at the end of the previous day, e.g., “What have philosophers had to say, pro and contra, about the claim that animals can have rights?” We began with time for questions and comments on the three other mornings. What happened was quite in line with expectations: additional questions came up as we presented responses to queries such as the one respecting animal rights. We believe that the time for questions and comments at the start of the day was crucial. We covered so much material so quickly that it was vital for the participants to be able to ask additional questions about areas where they still had conceptual difficulties. One feature of the situation was particularly significant, namely, the constraint of time. In some cases, the questions that arose were such that we had to admit frankly that while they could be addressed briefly, it was not possible to answer them in an entirely satisfactory way, given the time available to us. That, of course, is precisely what is likely to happen in biology, forestry, or bioengineering classes as faculty in these disciplines integrate ethics into their teaching. What we emphasized was that student questions of this variety should be handled honestly in a way that promotes rather than stifles interest. Appropriate handling of such questions might amount to saying that the question is a large one that has been and is properly taken up by philosophers. And, of course, students can be encouraged to pursue such philosophical questions in philosophy courses.

While the first portion of the morning session on days two through four was devoted to questions and comments, the remainder of each morning session and the afternoon sessions on the other days, were devoted to discussion of case studies. In the mornings the participants broke into two groups. In the afternoon, they broke up into three smaller groups. Two cases were covered each morning Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, while three cases were covered in the afternoon sessions. The facilitators, who served as resource persons and worked at remaining on the sidelines rather than being discussion leaders per se, came to the sessions with a set of tasks and questions that were applicable regardless of the particular case being considered. (The list of tasks and questions was included in the packet of materials provided to each participant in the seminar.) The first task was to lead the group in the selection of a person who would serve as reporter for the group. This person had a challenging job, for in addition to participating in the group discussion, in the plenary session that followed the breakout sessions, he or she had the responsibility of reporting the group’s findings, in particular, the answers to the questions specific to their case. Here, the group fielded questions and comments from the others who had not been part of their group discussion, though everyone always had the opportunity to read each case beforehand. Thus, in the plenary session, group members engaged in discussion with persons who were rather like students in that they were asking questions and making comments though they may or may not have actually read the case.
The cases that we dealt with were of two types. Some were specific or focused, involving, for example, an individual in a situation struggling with issues specific to that situation. Some were general and not finely focused consisting of a factual setting respecting an activity, for example, the production of genetically altered foods—so-called Frankenfood—that occasions ethical questions. The latter are the sort of cases likely to come up in a course, not because one has planned on talking about ethics, but because ethical issues pervade human life and action. The former, on the other hand, most likely do not simply come up; rather, they are selected and brought to class for the purpose of talking about ethics. We believe that there is value in working with both sorts of cases. However, in our view, if one’s goal is as thorough an integration of ethics into the curriculum as possible, facility in dealing with cases that present themselves because ethics pervades human life and action is especially important.

On the final day, we worked as one large group with three short cases depicted in vignettes on videotape. The afternoon was devoted to a wrap-up discussion of what the participants had learned and how they might apply it in their own classes. That night we had a banquet at which the participants were given very spiffy certificates signed by the President of Clemson University.

**Conclusion**

The seminar was a resounding success and participant evaluations were uniformly positive. Moreover, interactions with participants subsequent to the seminar lead us to believe that the level of excitement about ethics across the curriculum remains high. In order to reward participation in the seminar, we provided a modest stipend. We will work to develop a cadre of EAC resource people who will meet annually to exchange ideas and build enthusiasm. The success of our pilot seminar gives us reason to be optimistic about the prospects of establishing a permanent EAC program at Clemson University.