

Collaborating with Administrators and Students to Restructure Your Bioethics Course to Meet Best Practices in UDL and Trauma-informed Pedagogy

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The Challenge

Bioethics courses typically cover a number of **sensitive topics**, including the ethics of abortion, elective surgery, hookup culture, sexual perversion, euthanasia, physician-assisted suicide, human enhancement, IVF, and international adoption, among many other topics.

The Challenge

Students have **always** entered our classrooms with their own personal experiences of these issues. But, due to recent cultural shifts:

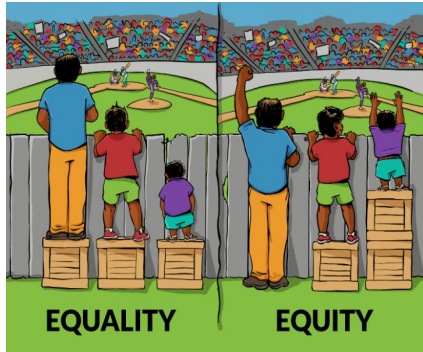
- Students are **sharing more** with their institutions about their experiences;
- Institutions are **offering broader** accommodations to students;
- Faculty are **learning more**, from our culture's increasingly public conversations, about experiences they have never had themselves.

The Challenge

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a pedagogical approach that aims to give all students an equal opportunity to succeed.

UDL draws from the **Ethics of Care**, an approach to normative ethics in which equity is secured not by treating everyone equally, but by fulfilling the particular needs of the people (non-human animals, et al) close to you.

The Challenge



The Challenge

In the case of **physical** challenges, this might involve providing notetakers or pdf readers.

In the case of **emotional** challenges, this might involve adopting trauma-informed pedagogies, such as advance warnings and assessment options.

The Challenge

UDL requires some **moral imagination** on the part of faculty members, as no faculty member has personal experience or professional training with every possible population and learning challenge.

The Challenge

One of the standing objections to the Ethics of Care is that caregivers must **determine the needs** of those cared for, in order to provide good care.

But there are barriers in any caregiver's **epistemic access** to the needs of those for whom they care.

The Challenge

Faculty hope to offer a **maximally inclusive** classroom experience.

So faculty hope to accurately **anticipate** every student's needs.

Faculty then hope to **accommodate** those needs.

Faculty also hope to accommodate those needs while continuing to convey the **canonical texts, topics, and practices** of their discipline.

Bioethics

The four desiderata above are **difficult to fulfill** in a bioethics class.

Philosophy, as traditionally practiced, asks students to **question** their beliefs, in the spirit of unearthing the reasons for them.

Questioning one's beliefs can be **uncomfortable**, especially when those beliefs have been shaped by a personal experience. An attack on the reasonableness of the belief can be received as a personal attack on one's understanding of or reaction to the difficult experience.

Bioethics

There are two kinds of readings in bioethics that are controversial right now:

- 1) **Dated one-off articles**, like Peter Singer's 1974 "All Animals Are Equal," which, in the spirit of opposing the killing of non-human animals for experimentation and food, asks readers to compare the capacities of some people with disabilities, whom we would *not* kill for experimentation and food, to non-human animals, which we would kill for experimentation and food, in order to highlight that inconsistency.

People with disabilities have argued this work is dehumanizing, because it temporarily entertains the eating of people with disabilities.

We can **eliminate these articles from the canon**, just as we might remove racist writings by Kant, for example.

Bioethics

Harder cases include:

- 2) Papers on **up-to-the-minute topics** such as physician-assisted death in Belgium and the Netherlands for children with depression; abortion; hookup culture on college campuses; and the ethics of elective surgery.

These topics can be distressing or triggering for students with related experiences. But these topics are **valuable, educational, and engaging** for students who have not had such experiences. Several of these topics—such as abortion and physician-assisted death—are also **foundational to the discipline** of bioethics.

Bioethics

Is there a way to offer bioethics, as *typically* taught, **without negatively impacting students** who have had personal experiences with, for instance, suicide, rape, abortion, or disability?

I don't think so.

Suggestions follow for how one might teach a **rigorous** bioethics course that remains inclusive by making it possible for students, who have experienced trauma or abuse, to **avoid topics** that are unhealthy for them.

A. Pre-registration

Before registering, students should have access to a **complete description** of the current faculty member's version of the course on the books—not just the catalog description.

A. Pre-registration

Typical **catalog** description:

“Bioethics considers the ethical principles and values relevant to life, and their application to the use of technology (particularly medical technology) to maintain, extend, and even produce human life.”

A. Pre-registration

Typical **instructor** description:

“In this discussion-based philosophy course, we will study contemporary ethical debates in medicine and biotechnology as they arise in four of our shared human life experiences: birth, illness, sex, and death. We will discuss readings about international and embryonic adoption, prenatal screening, abortion, public oversight of CRISPR-Cas9 and human enhancement, vaccine hesitancy and distribution, human and non-human animal experimentation, informed consent and patients' rights, caregiving, elective surgery, recreational drug use, hookup culture, sexual perversion, the concept of sex and atypical sexual characteristics, prostitution, sex trafficking, euthanasia, killing in war, immortality, and the meaning of life.

“Throughout the course, we will consider the background role played by the distinction between the natural and the unnatural, and whether the distinction is an artificial one, wielded by social powers in the name of science as a weapon against populations that are new, marginalized, or perceived as foreign or threatening.

“To succeed in this course, students should have strong reading comprehension, argumentative writing, and oral discussion skills. The final course grade will be based upon several 2-3-page argumentative response papers, in-class engagement, and the presentation of a final paper in an in-class conference.”

A. Pre-registration

Typical instructor description:

"In this discussion-based philosophy course, we will explore contemporary ethical debates in medicine that they arise in four of our shared human life: illness, sex, and death. We will discuss readings about international and embryonic adoption, prenatal screening, abortion, public oversight of CRISPR-Cas9 and human enhancement, vaccine hesitancy and distribution, human and non-human animal experimentation, informed consent and patients' rights, caregiving, elective surgery, recreational drug use, hookup culture, sexual perversion, the concept of sex and atypical sexual characteristics, prostitution, sex trafficking, euthanasia, killing in war, immortality, and the meaning of life.

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Instructor's take on the material, the lens

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Instructor's take on the material, the lens

Details of the assessment plan

B. Syllabus statement

"This course is a course in bioethics and, as such, covers material that is socially and politically controversial and that may cause **varying levels of discomfort** for individuals who are managing these issues in their personal lives.

B. Syllabus statement

Attendance

“In recognition of this, every student **can miss four class sessions** of this twice-weekly class without penalty and without telling me why. There is no attendance requirement for this class, but there is an engagement grade. Students will want to attend class to process the material, contribute to class discussion, and find community. But students can earn an ‘A’ engagement grade by making the most of their presence when they are in attendance, even if they miss four class sessions.”

“Students can request the **recording** of a class on occasion in the case of any kind of absence.”

B. Syllabus statement

In-class discussion

“Students who might be negatively impacted by our course materials can skip the class sessions on those materials, thus protecting themselves, to some extent. But philosophical discussions are, by their nature, **open, probative, and uncomfortable**. In every philosophy class, we aim to raise objections against both our personal beliefs and socially accepted ways of thinking, in order to unearth reasons for those beliefs and develop better alternatives”.

B. Syllabus statement

“Professors can correct students, once they say something inappropriate, and shut down discursive avenues that seem to be veering into dangerous territory. (Other students can take on this role as well.) But **faculty do not have complete control** over the topics that arise in a class discussion. The philosophy classroom, with its emphasis on open discourse, can be an **unpredictable place**. This is something students should know before taking this course.”

B. Syllabus statement

Assessment structure

“Students will be assessed in four, short critical responses—one for each of our four units: birth, illness, sex, and death. These responses will serve as scaffolding for the end-of-term group conference and final paper. **Students may choose** on which readings to write their responses. Please keep in mind that you will select one of your four responses to revise, submit to peer review, and present to the class.

Resources for support

“Last, I have tried to provide resource links and phone numbers, when relevant, to support students who might be looking **for personal assistance** with our subject matter.”

B. Syllabus statement

Faculty and student responsibilities

"In general, I consider it **my responsibility** to **inform students** ahead of time about the issues we will cover and when we will cover them, and to attentively **guide class discussions**.

"I consider it each **student's responsibility** to determine **which class sessions** they might have to miss and whether the course is a **good fit** for them at this time."

B. Syllabus statement

"After reviewing the syllabus, if you feel that you would have to miss more than four class sessions or that an open discussion about challenging topics would have a lasting negative impact on you, then this course is **not a good fit** for you right now.

"In the same spirit that an athlete might avoid taking organic chemistry when they are in season, a student who has experienced trauma or abuse might postpone bioethics to a time at which they could attend the suggested critical mass of class sessions without threatening their health."

B. Syllabus statement

"These attendance, assessment, and syllabus policies have been designed with the **intention** of maximizing privacy, fairness, and inclusivity. Efforts have been made to follow the principles of both Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and trauma-informed pedagogy."

C. Schedule of readings

On the schedule of readings, under each topic and homework assignment, brief, one-sentence descriptions (a) alert students to the reading content and (b) list resources, where appropriate.

"The following readings address physical and mental health and the ethics of suicide. Calling 988 will connect you directly to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (<https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org>), which is staffed by trained crisis counselors 24/7, 365 days a year."

Virtues

In response to the demands of UDL and trauma-informed pedagogy, faculty have raised the concern that (1) it is unreasonable to expect faculty to be responsible for **student comfort**, especially when faculty cannot know—and should not know—their students' psychological histories.

Faculty also feel strongly that (2) they should have the **final say** in determining what materials end up on their syllabi. This is the very point of the Ph.D., of expertise.

Virtues

This course design, through its syllabus statement, aims to accommodate those two faculty concerns by **making explicit** faculty and student responsibilities.

The responsibility for student comfort must be **shared**, as faculty do not—and should not—have epistemic access to the details of students' backgrounds and psychological histories.

Objections

1. **Coverage** is sacrificed when students can opt out of certain readings.
2. Changes like this are part of the broader, consumerist approach to higher ed, in which education involves only the transaction of tuition for credentials. On this model, **structural power flows to students** (the consumers), as faculty are abandoned by their institutions.

Objections

1. **Coverage** is sacrificed when students can opt out of certain readings.

Material is lost. As we think more about what each student needs, we inch higher ed toward a plural, tutorial model, in which faculty conceptualize their task as the instruction of 25 individuals, instead of the instruction of a "class."

Objections

2. ... **structural power flows to students** (the consumers), as faculty are abandoned by their institutions.

This course design preserves the faculty member as the final adjudicator of course content, while responding to the need for inclusivity.

Unresolved issues

High-impact pedagogies, such as peer-reviewed capstone conferences, in which students respond to one another's work in public, are difficult to organize, when the instructor knows that students are trying to avoid certain topics, but does not know which topics and why.

Unresolved issues

Philosophical discussions must be open discussions, which means they can be unpredictable. Students can struggle with the ways in which their **peers respond** to particular topics in class discussion.

Unresolved issues

Institutions should clarify and update their **academic freedom policies** to align with new DEI and Title IX policies.

Because private institutions are permitted by law to honor both First Amendment freedoms of speech and academic freedom *at their discretion*, private institutions, especially, must announce explicitly whether faculty have final say in determining the form and content of their syllabi.

References

AAUP FAQ on academic freedom:

<https://www.aaup.org/programs/academic-freedom/faqs-academic-freedom>

AAUP report on trigger warnings:

<https://www.aaup.org/report/trigger-warnings>

AAUP from 1940:

<https://www.aaup.org/report/1940-statement-principles-academic-freedom-and-tenure>

University of Chicago site on free expression and report from their committee on free expression:

<https://freeexpression.uchicago.edu/>

<https://provost.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/documents/reports/FOECommitteeReport.pdf>

References

The American Philosophical Association appears not to have its own statement on academic freedom. Instead, the APA Code of Conduct endorses the AAUP Statement on Professional Ethics:

<https://www.aaup.org/report/statement-professional-ethics>

<https://www.apaonline.org/page/codeofconduct#>

Cornell statement:

<https://theuniversityfaculty.cornell.edu/the-new-faculty-handbook/statement-on-academic-freedom-and-freedom-of-speech-and-expression/>

Pitt statement:

<https://www.provost.pitt.edu/statement-academic-freedom>

References

Kenyon College's Counseling Center resource page:

<https://www.kenyon.edu/campus-life/health-safety/cox-health-and-counseling-center/counseling-services/resources/>

Kenyon College's Civil Rights page with on- and off-campus resources:

<https://www.kenyon.edu/offices-and-services/office-for-civil-rights/discrimination-harassment-and-sexual-misconduct/>

Thank you

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