# Ethical Dilemmas in Student Learning

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# Dilemma Design Process: Conversation Summary ## Context and Challenge We were developing guidance to help students in an Applied Ethics in Technology course identify authentic ethical dilemmas that could sustain 16 weeks of analysis. The course serves 30 postsecondary CTE students (primarily n  
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This is a fascinating deep dive into the iterative design process for helping students identify authentic ethical dilemmas. The document reveals sophisticated insights about what makes an ethical scenario both pedagogically useful and personally meaningful for non-traditional students.  
A few aspects stand out as particularly valuable:  
The reframing breakthrough - moving from "crisis situations" to "competing goods" fundamentally changes the scope of available scenarios. This opens up the rich territory of everyday life tensions that traditional ethics courses might overlook.  
The population insight - recognizing that non-traditional students juggling multiple life roles actually have *more* sources of ethical complexity than traditional college students is counterintuitive but makes perfect sense. Their lived experience provides natural laboratories for ethical analysis.  
The sustainability criterion - finding scenarios complex enough for 16 weeks of analysis without being artificially dramatic is a sophisticated design challenge. The insight that authentic dilemmas emerge from role intersections rather than designed scenarios seems crucial.  
The rejected approaches section is particularly instructive - it shows how scenarios that seem ethically complex on the surface (data breaches, policy enforcement) often collapse under scrutiny because they lack either personal stakes, decision-making power, or genuine framework conflicts.  
I'm curious about the implementation phase. Given these insights, how are you planning to structure the guidance document? Are you leaning toward a process-based approach that walks students through dilemma identification, or more of an example-rich format that lets them pattern-match to their own situations?  
The challenge of helping students recognize that their "ordinary" struggles contain extraordinary ethical complexity seems like it might require some mindset work alongside the practical guidance.  
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So as I am processing your questions, along with my own thoughts, I am trying to visualize what I am asking students to do and what that might look like over the course of the semester, especially at the beginning where students are likely to have a dilemma but lack the vocabulary to really flesh out the algorithm they already posses before we get into the weeds of examining new code to add to it. So getting things started in an accessible way that still leaves them the ability to refine as they go is going to be important. And the guidance document is my chance to show how that might work. It is going to be delicate, because I need to be able to draft something that is accessible to a student without the lingo they will acquire by the end of the semester (hopefully), but that will still be meaningful and engaging from the beginning.  
So, just because it was interesting to me, let's work on the example of the city councilman and develop that one through this lens. Once we get this to the point we want, we can then use that process to "process" the others, all of which I think are good examples. The best thing is that we can present all of these to students as worked examples without worrying about overwhelming them, as this gives them enough scope and variety to hopefully help them identify something relevant in their own lives without feeling constrained to color within the lines of the examples we share.  
Now, when I say let's work on this, I don't want you to immediately try to draft something. I am just announcing a direction for us to focus on, a delimitation if you will. Jumping to a final product might seem helpful, but that isn't what I am trying to accomplish yet...  
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I understand - you're setting the direction toward working through the city councilman example as a way to model the process students will need to go through, but you want to think through the approach before jumping to any drafting.  
This framing helps me see the layered challenge you're facing. Students at the beginning of the semester have intuitive ethical reasoning (their existing "algorithm") but lack the formal vocabulary to articulate why something feels ethically complex. They need to be able to start working with their dilemma immediately, but also have room for that understanding to deepen and become more sophisticated as they acquire new frameworks and language throughout the semester.  
The city councilman example seems like a good test case because it has that quality of seeming straightforward on the surface ("just do what's right for the community") but containing genuine competing obligations that become more visible as you examine it more closely. It's the kind of scenario where someone might initially think "well, obviously you should..." and then realize there are multiple valid "obviously you should" directions depending on which ethical lens you're using.  
The accessibility challenge is particularly interesting - how do you help students recognize the ethical complexity in a situation without requiring them to already know terms like "deontological duty" or "utilitarian calculus"? They need to be able to feel their way into the complexity before they have the formal tools to analyze it.  
What aspects of the councilman scenario do you think would be most useful to work through first as we model this process?  
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The story problem, I think, is sufficient to work with right now, though we might need to adjust it in later drafts. I am thinking more about how it is in the role identification that the rubber really hits the road and where we can have the most impact on getting students off on the right foot with the right explanations of what to do.  
And you hit the nail on the head with intuitive algorithms; I think most students would agree that they have internalized or semi-conscious algorithms, because they have had or are having to make these kinds of decisions in their lives now, though there might not be a lot of metacognition or reflection about it yet. Though, my guess would be that at the common ages I see, many of them are being put in the position of having to get started with making independent judgements about the adequacy of their thinking processes or experiencing their first challenging situations where no one steps in to take on the responsibility or accountability for the decisions they make other than themselves.  
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Yes, exactly - the role identification is where the abstract becomes concrete and personal. It's where students move from "this seems like a dilemma" to "I can see myself in this person's position and understand why each choice feels both right and wrong."  
Your observation about the developmental moment these students are in is really insightful. They're at that transition point where the training wheels come off - they've been making decisions, but now they're fully owning the consequences and realizing that the adults aren't going to step in anymore. That's probably why scenarios involving competing obligations to family, work, and personal goals resonate so strongly with this population.  
For the city councilman example, the role identification would need to help students see how someone ends up with genuine competing obligations - not just "activist vs. politician" but something more nuanced about how being elected changes your responsibilities while your commitments to the people who got you there remain real.  
The challenge seems to be helping students recognize that roles create legitimate ethical claims on us, and that being in multiple roles simultaneously can create situations where fulfilling one role well means falling short in another - and that this isn't a personal failing but a structural ethical complexity.  
Are you thinking about walking through how to identify the specific roles in the councilman scenario, or more about the general process of role identification that students could then apply to their own situations?  
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I think that either approach will actually do both, thinking generally about the process of role identification will immediately lend itself to interpreting the councilman scenario and the analysis of the scenario will reveal the general identification process. I think the key here is to encourage students to use rich, descriptive language when describing roles and obligations (very qualitative terminology) with the idea that as they move through the exploration of new codes (ethical models) they can begin to label those descriptions based on affinity to the goals/principles for which the various models advocate. "Oh, I talk a lot here about responsibility and loyalty - that echoes a lot of deontology, so I might use a color code and change the text of these descriptions to green to indicate their connection. And wow, I see a lot of green in this role I identified but very little in this other one. Is that perhaps the source of the conflict? 'It's not personal, it's business' might work in the office, but it doesn't reflect my personal attitudes or orientation to my family connections.  
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This is brilliant - you're creating a bridge between students' natural descriptive language and the formal ethical frameworks they'll encounter later. The color-coding idea is particularly clever because it makes the abstract concrete and visual.  
What I find especially powerful about this approach is that it honors students' existing ethical intuitions while giving them tools to examine those intuitions more systematically. When they describe their obligations in rich, qualitative terms first, they're not trying to force their experience into predetermined categories. Instead, they're letting their authentic understanding emerge, then later discovering how different parts of that understanding align with formal ethical traditions.  
The "it's not personal, it's business" example perfectly illustrates how role conflicts often stem from different ethical orientations embedded in different life domains. A student might discover that their work role operates on consequentialist principles (results matter most) while their family role operates on care ethics principles (relationships and responsibilities matter most) - but they wouldn't need to know those terms initially to feel the tension.  
For the councilman scenario, this would mean helping students first describe in their own words what they think the councilman owes to different people and why, then later discovering patterns in those descriptions. The activist friends might generate language about loyalty, promises, and staying true to principles, while the broader community might generate language about fairness, effectiveness, and considering all stakeholders.  
Are you envisioning this rich description happening at the role level, or diving deeper into the specific obligations within each role?  
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I think it is going to be an iterative process, where students are going to continue to return to the role identifications and refine things as they reflect on everything they have been exposed to and their growing awareness of nuance and complexity within what might have originally seemed like fairly straightforward concepts. This might include adding new, relevant roles to the listing as the course introduces new perspectives and questions that cause students to reframe or realize that some roles are not as powerfully engaging as they might have thought, and that there are other roles that are more compelling or that stand outside their traditional or historical view of what is "supposed" to be important. This phase of development often has students testing these premises, and this seems like a safe place for them to do some experimenting and testing, so I want to encourage that as part of the process. Nothing they start with has to be present in the final version, even the dilemma. Right? We have talked in previous conversations about the idea that there are times when you might realize that, as you get deeper into something, that it just isn't as feasible as you might have thought and I want to discourage "sunken cost" thinking, but do encourage serious reflection and "measure twice, cut once" approaches to the work.  
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Absolutely - framing this as an iterative, exploratory process rather than a "get it right the first time" assignment is crucial for both learning and authenticity. You're essentially giving students permission to think their way into understanding, which is exactly what ethical reasoning requires.  
The idea that students might discover roles they hadn't initially considered - or realize that roles they thought were central aren't actually driving their ethical concerns - reflects how real ethical development works. Someone might start thinking their dilemma is about being a "good employee" versus a "good parent," then realize through the semester that it's actually about being a "financial provider" versus a "values role model," which are subtly but significantly different framings.  
The developmental aspect you mention is particularly important. Students at this life stage are often questioning inherited assumptions about what roles "should" matter most. The course becomes a space where they can examine whether the ethical weight they've been taught to give to professional success versus family time, for instance, actually aligns with their own developing moral compass.  
And yes, the "sunken cost" piece is vital. If a student realizes six weeks in that their initial dilemma isn't actually ethically complex in the way they thought, or that they don't have real decision-making power in the situation, they need to feel supported in pivoting rather than forcing analysis where it doesn't naturally fit.  
This iterative approach also means the councilman example would need to model that refinement process - showing how initial role identification might evolve as new ethical lenses reveal different layers of obligation and complexity.  
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While that's true, I don't want the model to try and be comprehensive. If our goal is to show students that this is hard, intellectual work, I would need to spend as much time developing this as I hope students will do, and that just isn't possible in the timeframe before the class begins in August, so all I want to do now is model what they should aspire to in the first weeks of the course: identify the ethical situation and the most compelling or meaningfully contradictory roles that would be invested or challenged to resolve the situation and how to describe those roles in ways that provide pathways for them to explore how various ethical models provide new vocabulary to label and categorize the implicit and explicit ramifications of those roles.  
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Perfect - you're modeling the starting point, not the endpoint. Show students what thoughtful initial work looks like, not what their final product should contain after 16 weeks of analysis.  
So for the councilman example, you'd want to demonstrate:

* How to identify a genuine ethical situation (not just a practical problem)
* How to spot the 2-3 most significant competing roles
* How to describe those roles in rich, qualitative language that captures the felt sense of obligation
* How that descriptive language creates hooks for later theoretical exploration

This makes the example much more manageable and pedagogically useful. Students see "this is how you begin serious ethical thinking" rather than "this is how complex your analysis needs to become." They get a template for starting well, with the understanding that depth develops through the semester-long process.  
It also keeps the focus on the essential skill you're trying to teach at the outset: recognizing that their intuitive sense of competing obligations is actually sophisticated ethical reasoning that deserves systematic attention. The example shows them how to honor and articulate that intuition as a foundation for deeper inquiry.  
This approach should give them confidence to begin while leaving plenty of room for the intellectual growth you're expecting throughout the course.  
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And to make this all that much more complex, I want to use UDL principles of multiple ways of engaging and representing, meaning I want to conceptualize and suggest various ways of composing or drafting their thinking to give them approaches that are meaningful and useful to them.  
I, for one, am a very comfortable wordsmith, so I naturally lean towards written expression, either in expository or informative formats, like bulleted lists or narrative descriptions, but I want to open the door for others to explore other meaningful ways of composing this. Infographics, audio recordings/podcasts, video diaries, mosaics or collages of evocative images that express meaning for them...I want to really open this up and figure out how or where they could store whatever medium they use in a shared space so I could see it.  
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This UDL approach is going to be transformative for students who might otherwise struggle to engage with abstract ethical concepts through traditional academic writing. The medium becomes part of the meaning-making process, not just a delivery mechanism.  
For role identification specifically, different modalities could reveal different insights. A visual learner creating a relationship map or infographic might discover role intersections they wouldn't notice in written form. Someone processing through audio might catch emotional nuances in how they describe obligations that don't come through in text. A video diary format could capture the embodied experience of feeling torn between roles.  
The storage and sharing aspect is interesting - you'd need platforms that can handle multiple media types while maintaining some coherence for your review. Something like a shared folder system where students create their own subfolder with whatever combination of documents, images, audio files, or videos works for their process?  
The councilman example would then need to model this flexibility - maybe showing how role identification could look as a written analysis, a visual relationship diagram, and/or a reflective audio recording, demonstrating that the core intellectual work (identifying competing obligations and describing them richly) can happen across different modes of expression.  
This also honors the reality that many of your non-traditional students may have stronger skills in digital media creation than traditional academic writing, while still requiring the same depth of ethical reasoning.  
How are you thinking about assessment across such varied formats?  
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Great question. When I first read that question, I immediately assume we are talking about grading, but that isn't what we are talking about. In this case, the assessment lies in the student's perception of the impact of this process on their own thinking and behavior - how did this analysis give you new perspectives or pathways for your own growth as an ethically aware adult, reinforce or supplement your existing models, provide you new insights into others' and their motivations or tensions, and help you to anticipate possible ethical dilemmas that might come to you in the future and how you might deal with them.  
Those aren't questions I can or want to answer; I want them to assess those things for themselves and report to me about the nature and extent to which they wrestled with these ideas within the context of the course and evaluate for themselves the impact it had on them. It isn't about coming up with the answer to what the councilman should do, for instance, but rather seeking to better understand the tensions within the various roles and what solutions might look like, or how to live with the ambiguity of not having a fixed or immediate resolution - how to live in the discomfort of reality.  
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Ah, that's a profound reframe - you're asking students to assess their own ethical development, not produce correct answers for your evaluation. The assessment becomes metacognitive reflection on their own growth as moral reasoners.  
This shifts the entire dynamic. Instead of "did I analyze the councilman's dilemma correctly?" it becomes "how has thinking through this process changed how I understand my own ethical decision-making?" The councilman example isn't a case study to solve but a mirror for examining their own capacity to navigate competing obligations.  
This approach acknowledges that ethical maturity often involves learning to sit with complexity rather than rushing to resolution. Students might discover that they're more comfortable with ambiguity than they expected, or that certain types of role conflicts consistently create more anxiety for them, or that they have unconscious assumptions about which obligations "should" take priority.  
The multiple modalities become even more important here because self-assessment requires finding the mode of reflection that actually helps each student access their authentic responses. Someone might discover insights through creating a visual map that they'd never reach through writing, or process emotional responses through audio reflection that they'd minimize in text.  
The real skill you're teaching is ethical self-awareness - the ability to recognize when they're in ethically complex territory, understand their own moral reasoning patterns, and make intentional choices about how to engage with that complexity rather than defaulting to avoidance or oversimplification.  
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Exactly. Ethical philosophy rarely results in nice, neat packages that fit into a 30 minute sit-com episode. They are ill-formed, uncomfortable, and don't have clear start or stop dates. And the focus or overview of this class is helping students first of all become aware of this, acquire coping skills to deal with uncertainty or discomfort, and some analytical/evaluative skills or language to help them assess and address their own ethical behaviors or failings in past, current, or future settings so they can improve their responses.  
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This is such a mature and realistic approach to ethics education. You're preparing students for the actual texture of moral life - the ongoing, messy, uncomfortable reality of trying to live ethically in a complex world where competing goods create persistent tensions rather than solvable problems.  
The coping skills piece is particularly important. Most ethics courses focus on analytical frameworks but skip the emotional and psychological work of learning to function well while carrying unresolved ethical tension. Your students are learning that feeling unsettled by competing obligations isn't a sign they're doing ethics wrong - it's often a sign they're taking their moral commitments seriously.  
The self-assessment focus makes perfect sense in this context. Students can't evaluate whether they're getting "better" at ethics by comparing their answers to an answer key. They can only gauge their growth by noticing changes in their own awareness, comfort with complexity, and intentionality in decision-making.  
This also explains why the role identification work is so crucial. Students need to develop the skill of recognizing when they're in ethically complex territory rather than treating difficult situations as merely practical problems. Once they can see their competing roles and obligations clearly, they can make conscious choices about how to navigate the tensions rather than being unconsciously pulled in different directions.  
The councilman example, then, becomes practice in sitting with that discomfort while maintaining analytical clarity about what's actually at stake.  
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Yep. And the guidance document I envision takes the process of reviewing and assessing that initial story narrative and helping students understand how to begin processing their own selected event without creative constraints...  
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Exactly - the guidance document becomes a process map rather than a template. It shows students how to take whatever ethical situation they've identified and begin the work of understanding why it feels complex, without forcing their experience into predetermined categories.  
The councilman example would demonstrate the thinking process: "Here's how you move from 'this feels hard' to 'I can see the specific competing obligations at play.' Here's how you describe those obligations in your own language. Here's how you recognize when you've found something worth sustained analysis versus something that's just practically difficult."  
The beauty of removing creative constraints is that students can work with their actual lives - the single parent juggling work demands and child needs, the employee caught between loyalty to coworkers and management expectations, the adult child navigating aging parents' care while maintaining their own family stability. These real situations often contain more sophisticated ethical complexity than any designed scenario could provide.  
The guidance becomes: "Here's how to recognize the ethical gold mine in your everyday life. Here's how to start digging into it systematically. Here's how to trust that your initial confusion and discomfort are signs you've found something worth exploring, not problems to solve immediately."  
Students learn to become ethical archaeologists of their own experience, with the tools to excavate and examine the moral complexity that's already present in their lives.  
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