

# Chapter 14

## Becoming an Ethical Teacher

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As Uncle Ben told Peter Parker (Spider-Man), “With great power comes great responsibility.” Like Spider-Man, graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) and new teachers are endowed with great power over students, and that power comes with great responsibility. A teacher’s fundamental responsibilities include constructing courses and classroom environments that encourage learning, evaluating learning fairly, and treating students respectfully. Ethical teaching means engaging in behaviors that meet these responsibilities in ways expected by students, your institution, and your discipline (Keith-Spiegel, Whitley, Balogh, Perkins, & Wittig, 2002). Keith-Spiegel et al. argued that ethical teaching includes attention to avoiding actions or inactions that may cause students educational or emotional harm.

The responsibilities listed above form the foundational elements of ethical behavior in teaching and are embedded within ethical codes and principles for teachers. Unfortunately, like most ethical standards, these codes only provide general guidelines for ethical teaching. Our intent in this chapter is to provide an overview of key principles of ethical teaching, some suggestions to increase teachers’ sensitivity and awareness about ethical pitfalls, and a few strategies for avoiding ethical dilemmas.

## Challenges for Ethical Awareness for Beginning Teachers

GTAs and beginning teachers tend to focus on preparing for teaching basic content more than on ethical relationships with students (Keith-Spiegel et al., 2002). In fact, it appears that new teachers are poorly prepared to handle ethical dilemmas they might encounter (Branstetter & Handelsman, 2000; Handelsman, 1986; Keith-Spiegel, Wittig, Perkins, Balogh, & Whitley, 2001; Keith-Spiegel et al., 2002). Although GTAs and new teachers may be aware of the more obvious or illegal unethical situations (dating students, sexual harassment, confidentiality of grades), they appear to be less prepared for more subtle situations (Keith-Spiegel et al., 2002). Relatively few GTAs are aware of ethical principles or codes related to teaching, much less intentionally trained or mentored in identifying and resolving potential ethical dilemmas (Branstetter & Handelsman, 2000; Handelsman, 1986). GTAs differ from more experienced teachers in their perception of what constitutes ethical teaching behavior. Keith-Spiegel et al. (2001) found that GTAs rated potentially ethically questionable behaviors as less problematic than did more experienced teachers (e.g., accepting gifts from students, teaching class when unprepared).

Becoming and remaining an ethical teacher is not a simple task. Although there are aspirational principles and guidelines for ethical teaching, there are few absolute rules. Some ethical issues are codified legally (e.g., confidentiality, sexual harassment, discrimination) or are set by institutional policy (e.g., rules with respect to student-teacher dating, academic dishonesty). However, faculty often face many ethically ambiguous situations. Braxton and Bayer (1999) and Tabachnick, Keith-Spiegel, and Pope (1991) surveyed faculty asking them to rate whether a variety of different teaching-related behaviors were ethical. Both studies found a lack of consensus for most of the listed behaviors. For example, although most ethical codes include guidelines emphasizing subject matter competence, Tabachnick et al. reported almost 30% of respondents rated teaching material they haven't mastered as ethical. These results highlight the fact that perceptions of particular ethical (or unethical) behaviors vary widely among faculty. These results also suggest the importance of engaging GTAs and new teachers (and for that matter, experienced teachers) in discussions about ethical behavior, in both clear-cut and ambiguous situations. Whether discussions are included in courses on teaching for GTAs, mentoring, or programs offered by university teaching or ethics centers, sharing perspectives on what constitutes ethical behavior in teaching provides the opportunity to increase awareness of ethical challenges and thinking critically about them. It is a practice that should continue throughout a teacher's career.

## Basic Ethical Principles for Teaching

In order to provide a starting point for thinking about ethical teaching behavior, we list and briefly describe some basic ethical principles for teachers and examples of how GTAs and new teachers might proactively think about situations related to each. Our list is based on our analysis of disciplinary and professional teaching organization ethical principles and codes for teachers (American Association of University Professors, 2001a, 2001b; American Chemical Society, 2011; American Historical Association, 2005; American Psychological Association, 2010; American Sociological Association, 1999; Murray, Gillese, Lennon, Mercer, & Robinson, 1996; National Education Association, 2002–2011).

### Ethical Teachers Have Disciplinary Competence

When teaching any course, faculty must have the necessary content knowledge to provide their students with up-to-date information relevant to course objectives, which in some cases may be standardized by a department for core or required courses. In addition, including specific content will be an expectation when a course is a prerequisite for subsequent courses in the curriculum. Ethical concerns arise when teachers are asked to teach courses outside their area of expertise (which occurs frequently in smaller institutions with few faculty) or when they propose courses that reflect personal interests for which they have a limited background.

When teaching a course for the first time, teachers should investigate whether there are established departmental learning objectives and ensure they incorporate them into the teaching of that course. If an administrator asks a teacher to teach a course outside of her expertise because of a departmental need, she should make it a personal ethical responsibility to avail herself of educational resources to increase her content knowledge (e.g., reading journals or advanced texts, attending conference sessions on the content area, soliciting advice from others who teach the course).

### Ethical Teachers Teach Effectively Through Effective Pedagogy

Although content knowledge is foundational, many ethical codes also emphasize that teachers are cognizant of effective pedagogical strategies. Research over the last 25 years has produced a plethora of data-based information about how students learn and the effectiveness of various pedagogical techniques (e.g., Davis, 2009; Donovan, Bransford, & Pellegrino, 2000; Walvoord & Anderson, 2009). Many disciplines publish

journals devoted to pedagogical research on discipline-specific teaching in higher educational settings (see Pusateri, 2011, for an extensive listing of disciplinary pedagogical journals). Ethical teachers use these resources to implement teaching practices that enable them to enhance student learning. Ethical teachers also evaluate their effectiveness through midcourse and end-of-course student evaluations or peer review of their teaching, and based on this feedback, make adjustments necessary to improve their teaching effectiveness.

### Ethical Teachers Provide Balanced Content and Free Inquiry

Faculty must provide students with a representative balance of mainstream theoretical perspectives and current knowledge that encourages students to think critically about different points of view. Our duty as teachers is to present information and guide students in making informed and objective conclusions based on data, and not to coerce, indoctrinate, or intimidate students to adopt a particular perspective, especially one that reflects our personal biases. Ethical teachers encourage open discussion of alternative theoretical positions and focus on content explicitly related to the course objectives.

### Ethical Teachers Respect Students

Students must be treated as individuals who may bring strongly held perspectives on the course content as well as personal issues that affect their ability to meet course requirements. Thus, teachers must continually be sensitive to (a) inadvertent behaviors that might embarrass or disparage student comments and (b) course content that is potentially discomfoting to some students. Of course, teachers should never omit or avoid controversial or sensitive content that is integral to meeting course objectives. However, teachers have a responsibility to forewarn students about course content that may be potentially discomfoting (e.g., sexually explicit content, material that includes explicit language, racist or sexist readings). When content may be sensitive, teachers should also explain its relevance so that students understand why it is included as part of the course content.

Discussion of sensitive material requires teachers to establish a classroom atmosphere that is open, respectful, and encouraging of discussions of sensitive topics and that does not disparage or discriminate against individual student perspectives. Before responding to student comments that are potentially discriminatory or based on personal anecdotal beliefs, teachers should take a moment and carefully construct a response that avoids embarrassing the student or discouraging future student participation.

Despite our desire that students make our classes their primary priority, students have lives that interfere with course participation, just as our personal and professional lives sometimes interfere with meeting our teaching responsibilities. Thus, teachers should avoid make-up policies that are unfair or insensitive to unavoidable student conflicts. For example, is it fair to allow no make-up exams or establish attendance policies that fail to take into account students who must be absent because of illness, legal obligations, taking care of a sick child, or unavoidable work situations?

### Ethical Teachers Foster Academic Integrity

Teachers have a core responsibility to encourage academic integrity and honesty. Student academic dishonesty undermines student learning and its objective assessment. Ethical teachers establish, communicate, and assist students in understanding disciplinary and institutional expectations concerning academic integrity. In addition, they communicate and apply clearly stated consequences for academic dishonesty that incorporate course-specific consequences (e.g., the specific impact of a violation on a student's grade, a zero on an assignment versus a failing grade in the course) as well as institutional policies concerning academic integrity violations. Ethical teachers include a description of the consequences of academic dishonesty as part of the stated grading policy in their syllabi and consistently apply those consequences. Many teachers, whether new or experienced, find addressing potential cases of academic dishonesty time-consuming and emotionally aversive. Honestly, they are both, but a teacher's ethical responsibility requires addressing potential violations.

### Ethical Teachers Use Objective and Fair Assessments

Course assessments of student learning must be objective, valid, fair, and directly related to learning objectives as outlined in the course syllabus or other written materials distributed to students. When designing course assessments (i.e., tests, out-of-class assignments, and even extra credit), ethical teachers are cognizant of assessments that do not match course objectives. For example, ethical teachers assess content objectives, critical thinking, or writing objectives that are specifically stated or emphasized in the course objectives.

Ethical teachers are aware of factors that may affect fairness in grading. They use best practices to design valid and reliable test questions. Teachers should also avoid letting unrelated factors or personal biases affect their grading of student assessments (e.g., a student's attendance or classroom behavior, a theoretical disagreement with a student, grading the expected "best" or "worst" papers first or last).

## Ethical Teachers Protect Their Students' Confidentiality

Teachers have a responsibility to maintain confidentiality with respect to student performance, classroom behavior and comments, and personal communications. As Murray et al. (1996, p. 3) argued, “students are entitled to the same level of confidentiality in their relationships with teachers as would exist in a lawyer-client or doctor-patient relationship.” The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) specifically prohibits faculty from revealing student performance to anyone but the student unless there is a compelling reason or legal requirement (U. S. Department of Education, 2011). Ethical teachers are careful to ensure that only individual students have access to their graded assignments. For example, although it may seem convenient and helpful to place graded tests or assignments outside one’s office for pickup by students, this tactic potentially allows anyone to see an individual student’s grade. In addition, a teacher may be contacted by a student’s parents about their child’s performance and must be prepared to explain that per FERPA this information cannot be shared with anyone unless the teacher is given the student’s express permission.

Another significant challenge is informal discussions among faculty about student academic performance or behavior in the classroom. Students have a right to expect their academic performance, classroom comments, and shared difficulties with their teachers to be confidential, and teachers should respect this right. Any teacher who violates this right strongly risks losing students’ respect. Although teachers may want to warn their colleagues about a problematic student with respect to classroom behavior or academic difficulties, they should be extremely careful. Sharing information with others should only occur when it is absolutely necessary to assist a colleague in helping a student succeed or preventing a negative classroom environment from developing.

## Ethical Teachers Have Professionally Appropriate Relationships With Their Students

Faculty must be sensitive to maintaining professional and objective relationships with students. First and foremost, all ethical codes for teaching as well as policy statements at most institutions explicitly prohibit dating students. These prohibitions tend to be very specific regarding dating students currently enrolled in class, but sometimes ambiguous about dating after the class is over. Our advice is simple: Teachers should not date currently enrolled students at their institution.

Ethical teachers are also sensitive about engaging in behaviors that take advantage of their power relationship with students. For example, we consider it unethical to incorporate extra credit assignments that reflect their

personal, social, or political biases (e.g., giving blood or donating a toy during the holiday season). Although these activities may be laudable, they are often unrelated to course learning objectives and represent an instructor's personal social interests.

Ethical teachers also avoid behaviors that might be construed as discrimination or sexual harassment (e.g., lecture comments that could be interpreted as discriminatory toward a particular religion or race; sexually suggestive comments about a female's/male's appearance; suggesting males are better at mathematics than females, which is both discriminatory and harassing). Not only is it simply wrong, federal law requires institutions to act on charges of sexual harassment and discrimination against teachers who engage in such actions.

Ethical teachers also are sensitive to other situations that may imply an improper student-teacher relationship or the perception of a potential bias because of the interaction. For example, we recommend that teachers not accept gifts from students or hire students to perform personal tasks for them such as home repairs or babysitting. In addition, we suggest avoiding out-of-class personal relationships through social networking media such as Facebook, especially when it may give an appearance of bias.

## Conclusions

Although the ethical principles we summarized previously are common to most ethical codes for teachers, the application of a particular principle in a specific situation may not always be clear-cut. Because most ethical codes for teachers constitute behavioral guidelines, not explicit rules of behavior, discussions among teachers as to whether a particular behavior is or is not ethical can often generate diverse opinions and perspectives. Thus, we recommend that teachers take a proactive stance by developing a deeper understanding of ethical teaching and reflecting on these principles and their application to teaching. Some specific strategies we encourage GTAs and new teachers to consider at the outset of their teaching duties include reviewing their institution's faculty handbook for policies and expectations that address the ethics of teaching, doing additional reading on ethical principles and their application to specific situations (e.g., American Association of University Professors, 2001b; Braxton & Bayer, 1999; Keith-Spiegel et al., 2002; Murray et al., 1996; Strike & Soltis, 2009), identifying a mentor with whom to discuss ethical dilemmas as they arise, and participating in discussions on the ethics of teaching that may be scheduled at their university center for teaching or offered at a conference.

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