

# WHY TEACHING WORKPLACE ETHICS IS NOT AS HARD AS YOU THOUGHT

Mini-Seminar  
Illinois Cooperative Vocational Education Coordinators Association  
Naperville Central High School  
Naperville, Illinois  
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The seminar today has three parts. Part I will try to make it easier for you to teach workplace ethics by freeing you from what I call "The Four Fears". Part I will be about forty-five minutes long, including fifteen minutes for questions.

Part II presents a classroom situation in which you could discuss workplace ethics. I will suggest some ways you might do that. No doubt you will only have to hear my suggestions to think of better ones. My purpose in Part II is not to tell you what you must do but to get you thinking about what you might do. Part II will be forty minutes long, including about fifteen minutes for questions.

After a short break, we will reconvene for Part III, your turn to identify opportunities to teach workplace ethics and ways to take advantage of them. We shall adjourn at about 5:00.

## PART ONE

The common wisdom seems to be that one should begin a presentation like this with a joke. I prefer to begin with a puzzle. Here's the puzzle: My training is in philosophy, not vocational education. I teach at a university, not at a high school. I have almost no experience of the ordinary workplace while most of you have a great deal. So, by rights, I should have nothing useful to tell you about teaching workplace ethics. Yet, here I am, and the chances are that I do have something useful to tell you. How can that be?

That's the puzzle. I hope you find it worth solving. I hope that because solving it provides the key to teaching

workplace ethics. To explain that claim, I must tell you something about how this seminar came about.

#### How This Seminar Came About

About three years ago, the Fel-Pro Foundation and IIT's Center for the Study of Ethics in the Professions agreed that something needed to be done about teaching ethics in the workplace. Though IIT does not have a school of education, the Fel-Pro Foundation did not err in thinking we knew something about the subject. We have been teaching professional ethics since 1976. The profession we know most about is engineering. Since most engineers work for companies like Fel-Pro rather than for themselves or other engineers, teaching engineering ethics seemed a good start on teaching workplace ethics generally. That, as it turned out, was not nearly as true as it seemed. But it was true enough to keep us going.

Once our center agreed to do something about workplace ethics, we did a literature search. The search turned up a lot on "value clarification" and "values education", a little on teaching ethics or morality (mostly quite abstract), but virtually nothing on teaching workplace ethics. Given the number and variety of education journals, we wondered how our topic could have been overlooked.

Because we found almost nothing published on teaching workplace ethics, we decided to approach the subject as we had other areas in which we knew little and could find little in the literature. We decided to ask those who must know more about the subject than we did, the practitioners. We decided to talk to vocational educators.

My colleague, Fay Sawyer, and I then went about Chicago schools interviewing vocational teachers, co-op coordinators, and vocational education administrators. Our original purpose was to collect problems of workplace ethics students brought up in class. Such problems are the natural

raw material for teaching applied ethics. Once we had a substantial collection of such problems, we could, we felt sure, figure out what the central problems were and how they might be handled. We would be well on our way to writing a text or preparing other useful teaching materials.

But, in the course of a mostly unsuccessful attempt to collect such problems, we made two discoveries. One discovery was that vocational teachers seemed both interested in workplace ethics and well equipped to teach the subject. This seemed odd given our other discovery: Almost none of those we interviewed felt comfortable teaching ethics. Some said so frankly. Some said teaching ethics was unnecessary or hopeless. Some thought themselves unfit to teach the subject. ("I know a little about philosophy of education, but nothing about ethics.") Some lectured us on the importance of teaching ethics, sprinkling the lecture with references to Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and Kant, to utilitarianism and deontologism, to pragmatism and existentialism. One showed us the two brief paragraphs in the text he used in which ethics was mentioned. But only a few could remember an ethics problem coming up in class. Of these, very few were happy with what they did with it.

I must admit that at first I didn't know what to make of these discoveries. In time, I began to notice certain patterns in what my interviewees said. Eventually, I identified four concepts, attitudes, beliefs, or blocks--what I now call "The Four Fears"--that seemed to disable otherwise qualified teachers from teaching a subject about which they knew a great deal. The Four Fears are: (1) the fear of not being value neutral, (2) the fear of subjectivism, (3) the fear of relativism, and (4) the fear of impotence.

These fears are ultimately philosophical, that is, their power to disable comes from beliefs ordinary evidence alone cannot refute, from beliefs that can be refuted only by understanding better the concepts involved. The Four

Fears can only disable those lacking an adequate concept of workplace ethics. Once you have that, you will be free to use the knowledge of teaching, of the workplace, and of ethics you have had all along to teach workplace ethics.

Here then is the solution to the puzzle I put to you earlier. Because the Four Fears are ultimately philosophical, a philosopher is an altogether reasonable candidate to help you dispose of them. And if the Four Fears are really all that stands in the way of your teaching workplace ethics, what could be more useful than a seminar the primary purpose of which is to free you from those fears so that you can do what you are otherwise well equipped to do?

Can things really be that simple? Perhaps not. But you are the ones to answer that question. My approach will be to describe each fear, explain why it might disable a teacher in the classroom, and then explain why it should not interfere with teaching workplace ethics. If you don't think I have yet made you fear free, be sure to tell me that in the question period--and give details. That's part of what the question period is for. Now, the first fear.

#### Value Neutrality

One thing that can stop a teacher from trying to teach workplace ethics is the fear of not being "value neutral". This is a fear every well-trained teacher brings into the classroom. "I am," he says, "not supposed to impose my values on my students." Because people often--but mistakenly--equate teaching ethics with teaching values generally, this first fear naturally seems to stand in the way of teaching ethics. Why should it not?

The answer is that teachers cannot, as teachers, be value neutral; nor should anyone want them to be. Every time you grade an exam, correct a student's mistake, or send a student down to the principal's office for discipline, you

are not value neutral. You are showing that you value the right over the wrong, the good over the bad. Indeed, though schools are often criticized for not teaching the difference between right and wrong anymore, I have yet to find a school that fits that description. Teaching the difference between right and wrong is what schools spend most of their time doing.

So, the value neutrality teachers are supposed to exhibit in the classroom cannot be neutrality with respect to all values. If some sort of value neutrality is a good thing in teachers (and I think it is), the neutrality must be with respect to certain values, for example, with respect to various religious or political values, not neutrality with respect to values as such. What then is the difference between those values with respect to which teachers (in the classroom) should be neutral and those with respect to which they should not be neutral?

Let us define right and wrong in this way. The right consists of those acts, words, or practices that, all things considered, satisfy the appropriate standard. The wrong consists of those that do not. So, for example, "4" is the right answer to the question, "How much is  $2 + 2$ ?" because  $2+2$  is 4 according to the appropriate standard, the principles of arithmetic. So, too, the right answer to the question, "Can an employer legally discriminate against someone because of race?" is, "No". Why? Because the appropriate standard of legality is the law and the law says she cannot.

These two examples have one thing in common that most religious or political standards would not share. In both these examples, the standard of right and wrong is not itself in dispute. Whether I am Muslim or Jewish, Republican or Socialist, I will accept the principles of arithmetic as the standard for doing sums and the law as the standard for what is legal. The neutrality we expect of teachers thus seems to be a neutrality with respect to

values competing in their community, not with respect to values about which there is no dispute. If ethical standards are as uncontroversial a guide to conduct as arithmetic is to correct addition, then a teacher can teach ethics and still be value neutral in the appropriate sense, that is, neutral with respect to competing values.

### Subjectivism

Here the second fear enters the classroom, the fear of subjectivism. "How," it asks, "can ethics be as uncontroversial as arithmetic or law? Isn't ethics just a matter how you feel about things?" What makes this second fear so chilling is that it rests on an obvious truth. Ethics is in part a matter of feeling. How, for example, could we believe stealing is unethical without having negative feelings about stealing? Luckily, we need not deny this obvious truth to teach ethics. We need only deny that ethics is "just a matter of feeling". This, I think, is the place to define ethics. I have found the following definition useful. I think you will too.

Ethics consists of those standards of conduct that, all things considered, every member of a particular group wants every other to follow even if their following them would mean he too has to follow them. Acting ethically is acting according to the appropriate ethical standard.

This definition makes ethics (in part) a matter of feeling. What our ethics are will depend in part on what we want. But that is not all our ethics will depend on. The definition also makes our ethics depend on what everyone else in the group also wants. The question I am to consider when deciding what it would be ethical to do is not what I happen to feel toward a certain act but whether the act is right according to a standard everyone, myself included, wants everyone else to follow.

If all this sounds familiar, that is not surprising. New inventions or discoveries are rare in a field as old as ethics. The definition I am suggesting is little more than a restatement of the Golden Rule. The fundamental idea is certainly the same: we are to figure out what we should do by treating what other people want as equal to what we want. The difference between this definition and the Golden Rule, though small, may nonetheless make a big difference in teaching. The Golden Rule focuses attention on two-person relations. You are told to put yourself in the other person's place. My definition focuses attention on the social practice, on what we want everyone else to do even if it means doing the same ourselves. The definition reminds us not to forget third parties, the big picture, how our acts might appear to others, and similar matters the Golden Rule allows us to forget all too easily. We are led to think of ethics as an inherently social enterprise.

#### Relativism

This said, it may seem that I have quieted the second fear only to arouse a third, the fear of relativism. "People are so different in a society like ours," this new fear says, "how could we agree on anything like a standard of conduct?" Have I explained what ethics is at the cost of making it impractical? I think not.

Consider some facts so obvious they generally go unnoticed. While we are different and disagree about much, we do not disagree about everything. For example, we seem to agree that arithmetic provides the standard for doing sums--even if we sometimes do not do our sums that way, whether by mistake or design. More relevant here is that we also seem to agree about certain rules of conduct. For example, the rule against murder seems to be the common property of everyone--or at least of those not plainly too

young, too feeble-minded, or too ill mentally to count as rational.

We might call these universal ethical standards "morality", saving "ethics" for those (morally-permitted) standards that apply only to particular groups. Morality applies to "everyone"; but Catholic ethics applies only to Catholics, business ethics only to those engaged in business, legal ethics only to lawyers, and so on.

Why is there so much agreement about moral rules? Consider the moral rule, "Don't kill." Why does everyone want everyone else to follow it? One important argument for the rule is this: Each of us would be safer if everyone else abstained from killing. That safety has its costs, of course. If I follow the rule, "Don't kill", I can't kill you when I would benefit from so doing. We are, however, generally willing to give up the opportunity to kill others if others will do the same. We are willing to give up that opportunity because we are generally more worried about being killed than we are about carrying out plans that involve killing others.

I said "generally". This suggests that moral rules have exceptions. We must admit that much. We need not panic--so long as the exceptions are as open to the same analysis as the general rules themselves. I think they are. For example, one exception to "Don't kill" is certainly "self-defense". Why? Well, if we did not allow people to defend themselves against attackers who sought to violate the rule against killing, the moral among us would be in more danger with a rule against killing than without it. Morality would not be a rational practice. On the other hand, with the exception, we are even safer than without the rule. Potential attackers have a reason to abstain from attacking that they would not have if self-defense were not an exception to "Don't kill". They must take into account the possibility that even a perfectly moral victim will defend herself.



You have probably noticed that this argument appeals only to reasons of self-interest. No doubt self-interest has much to do with the universal appeal of "Don't kill" and certain of its exceptions. But there are less-universal reasons for the rule as well. For example, some people might want the rule in part at least because their religion or culture has such a rule. Such differences in reasons are consistent with agreement on the same standard of conduct. Moral standards are neutral between such competing values.

I have, I hope, now convinced you that morality, a universal ethics, is at least possible. If so, you should be convinced that ethics in the narrow sense is possible too. But you may still wonder whether workplace ethics--in any interesting sense--are more than a mere possibility here. How much agreement could there be on ethics in a place as diverse as Illinois? Though this question is all that's left of the fear of relativism, it is probably enough to disable most teachers. Here, I think, social scientists have something useful to tell us. I will give two examples.

The first concerns ideas about justice. Tim Tyler, a social psychologist at Northwestern University, has been conducting surveys in Chicago trying to compare the attitudes toward justice of various groups. While he has found significant differences between groups on such questions as whether the police are generally honest, he has not found significant differences on such questions as whether taking a bribe is dishonest. Adult Chicagoans of all classes, races, and ages seem to have a common conception of justice, one much more specific than Tyler himself expected.

My other example of what social scientists have to tell us comes from a field in which I have a special interest, punishment. Over the last twenty years, researchers have conducted major surveys in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe asking people to rank crimes according to seriousness. They report some differences between social

groups. For example, the poor tend to rank property crimes somewhat lower than the middle-classes do. But such differences are small. For example, no economic, racial, or age group considers bank robbery a minor offense or pilfering a major one.

The conclusion I draw from such empirical evidence is that, as matter of fact, the differences among your students on basic ethical questions is probably minimal. So, forget relativism. The problems lie elsewhere.

### Can Ethics Be Taught in High School?

We have now reached the fourth fear, the last, and perhaps the most incapacitating, the fear of impotence. "How," it asks, "can a high school teacher hope to teach near adults what they should have learned on their mother's or father's knee? If they don't know right from wrong already, what can I do?"

What makes this fear so incapacitating is that you cannot hope to teach near adults what they had ample opportunity to learn long ago. If teaching workplace ethics really were teaching students what parents have already tried to teach for many years, teaching workplace ethics would be either unnecessary (since the students would already know what was being taught) or hopeless (since students so stupid as not to learn the basics after years of being taught them at home are probably not going to pick them up in one class).

How can we dispose of this last fear? Consider: If teaching workplace ethics is doing something different from what parents generally do, there is no reason to fear that teaching workplace ethics is unnecessary or hopeless. But is it something different? Let's think about right and wrong again.

I have already pointed out that schools spend most of their time teaching the difference between right and wrong.

Yet, teaching the difference between right and wrong is also something that parents do. Are the schools wasting their time? Of course not. Though most children entering kindergarten know the difference between right and wrong in a general way, they certainly do not know all about right or wrong. Indeed, none of us does. So, for example, a child entering kindergarten would normally know the difference between putting his shoes on wrong and putting them on right. But he would have to wait a few years to learn the right answer to  $22+97$ . What is true of right and wrong in arithmetic may be true of right and wrong in workplace ethics too.

What do parents teach their children about ethics? They teach them the basics, of course, what we have called morality: Don't kill; keep your promises; don't steal; don't cheat; and do on. They have also taught them more local rules, for example, the ethics of their family such as: don't take money out of the cookie jar without leaving a note or be home for dinner by six. Even those who break such rules will generally know of them and not treat them with indifference. Let's then suppose (what I think is true) that students enter your class reasonably well informed about morality and about the ethics of their family, neighborhood, religion, and school. And let's suppose as well (what I also think is true) that most of your students mean well. They don't want to kill, break promises, steal, cheat or otherwise do anything they regard as wrong. What's left for you to teach them? The answer is: plenty.

A business is not a family, neighborhood, church, or school. Though businesses differ much among themselves, they are generally less personal than a family, neighborhood, church, or school, less interested in the individual, and more committed to an outcome to which the individual has only an instrumental connection. Businesses are, in short, organized around "the bottom line" in a way

few other institutions are. Anyone not raised in a business environment is likely to underestimate the difference between business and the institutions they are familiar with. Certainly, they are unlikely to know in advance the particular standards governing conduct in a workplace. For example, how can a student guess that promptness would be more important in the workplace than in his family, neighborhood, church, or school? The workplace is a new environment with new standards of conduct.

So, teaching vocational education, especially a course in how to get and keep a job, is necessarily teaching right and wrong of a sort most students will find useful. Is teaching such a course also necessarily teaching workplace ethics? The answer, I think, is no. This answer may seem odd given what I have already said. But, in fact, it is not at all odd--and understanding why not is important for understanding how to teach workplace ethics. There are at least three ways to teach right and wrong in the workplace: the way of prudence, the way of morality, and the way of ethics. Let me explain these one at a time.

The first way to teach right and wrong in the workplace is the way of prudence (or self-interest). You explain right and wrong in terms of what the boss wants and what he will do if you do not do what he wants. You might, for example, explain why an employee should be prompt in this way: "If you don't want to get fired, arrive on time."

The second way to teach right and wrong in the workplace is the way of morality. You explain right and wrong in terms of a moral rule. For example, you might say, "You should arrive on time because taking the job is an implicit promise to be prompt and you don't want break a promise, do you?"

The third way to teach right and wrong in the workplace is the way of ethics (in the narrow sense of ethics). You explain right and wrong as determined by standards everyone involved wants everyone else to follow even if that means

having to follow them too. You might, for example, tell your students, "You should arrive on time. Other employees depend on you to do so and you depend on them to do the same. You will all be better off if you all arrive on time than if each arrives at his own convenience. Do your share since the others are doing theirs."

You can, I think, easily see that the three ways are different. Each gives a distinct interpretation of right and wrong in the workplace, though only the second and third are ways of teaching ethics in the broad sense. You can also see from this example that the three ways can be consistent. Sometimes prudence, morality, and ethics all favor the same act.

You may, however, find the first two, the ways of prudence and morality, more familiar. You may also have realized that the way of ethics is likely to be the hardest to follow. So, for example, the way of prudence required only that you know what the boss wants. The way of morality required something more, that you know what is implicit in the employment contract. But the way of ethics required as well that you know a lot about the workplace. Who depends on whom? Why? How much? What would happen if someone did or didn't do this or that?

Once you see how much you must do to teach workplace ethics, even if you rely only on the way of morality, you can see as well how you can teach right and wrong in the workplace without teaching workplace ethics. More important now, you can see why teaching workplace ethics can add something important to your students' understanding of the workplace. You need not fear impotence.

## PART TWO

I must begin this part of the seminar with an apology. Though my purpose now is to get you started thinking about how to apply the theory of Part I to your classroom, the

problem I shall discuss does not come from an actual classroom. It is more or less made up. I shall use a made-up problem because my collection of real-life problems is too small to offer a real-life alternative simple enough to make the points I want to make briefly. Since there is no reason to make this part of the seminar longer, I hope I will be forgiven for doing what is necessary to keep it short.

### Penny's Case

The apology over, we can turn to the sample problem, Penny's case:

The reading you assigned for today includes a discussion of pilfering. You summed up the text in this way, "Some employees think nothing is wrong with taking little, inexpensive things. But that's pilfering and pilfering is a kind of theft. So, don't do it." As you finish, Penny raises her hand. She is plainly unhappy. Her question makes clear why. "I work at Fat Boy Pizza," she says, "There are always too many Fat Boy pencils around. Even the manager wonders why we get so many. Everybody takes a few home now and then. That's not wrong, is it?"

How should you respond? The simplest way is to appeal to prudence, for example, by pointing out that Penny is technically pilfering and that the manager could use that fact as an excuse for firing her any time he wanted to. "Pilfering," you might say, "is a tactical blunder in the game of keeping your job."

Though that is the simplest way to respond to Penny's question, it may not be the best. You are asking Penny to think of her manager as an opponent, as someone who might any day decide to fire her and then go looking for an

excuse. She might find this characterization of her manager unrealistic. Even if she accepts the characterization, she still might conclude not that pilfering is wrong but that pilfering doesn't matter. Once a manager wants to get rid of someone (she might reason), he can find an excuse; so, why worry about giving him one?

An appeal to ethics (in the narrow sense) may also seem unlikely to succeed. If everybody really does take home a few pencils now and then and no one at Fat Boy is inconvenienced, what ethical standard could Penny be violating? If Penny has her facts right, her pilfering should be consistent with all the special standards of conduct her co-workers accept. I will come back to Penny's facts later. But, for now, let's take them at face value.

#### The Way of Morality

If Penny has her facts right, the way of morality is the only alternative left to you--apart from silence. But you have already pointed out that pilfering is theft, and Penny's question suggests that she knows theft is morally wrong. What more can you say? What about some question like this?

"Penny, you agree, don't you, that theft is wrong?"

Seeing her nod, you might continue, "And you agree too that taking what does not belong to you is theft?"

Suppose she answers, "Yes, generally." Now you have a problem. The "yes" shows she understands what theft is; the "generally" that she thinks taking Fat Boy pencils belongs to some category of exception. What now?

One approach is to try to bring the implied exception out into the open. "Penny," you might say, "are you suggesting that what you're doing isn't really theft, that it's more like taking something given to you, or like picking up something someone else has thrown away?"

Let's suppose Penny answers, "Yes, like picking up something someone else has thrown away." Now all you need to determine is whether what she is doing comes under that exception.

So, you might continue, "Okay, that's plain enough. Now, what makes you think Fat Boy meant to throw away the pencils? Did you check with the manager?" If Penny did check with him and he said she could take a few pencils now and then, she is morally all right (though the manager may have a problem).

But, if (as seems more likely) Penny must admit that she did not check with the manager, you can ask, "Penny, tell me this: would you want a guest in your home taking something of yours without permission just because you left it out where he could get it and he thought you had so much you wouldn't mind?"

Let's suppose Penny agrees she would not want that. Then you might bring the discussion to a close with a question like this, "Well, if that's so, Penny, don't you think it would be a good idea to ask the manager's permission before taking any more pencils?"

That might end the discussion. We can easily imagine Penny nodding her head in agreement. But what if, as students sometimes do, Penny resists the argument? What if she answers your question, "No, I don't see why. What does what I would want guests to do in my home have to do with what I should do in a business?" What do you say now?

You might try getting Penny to explain how her moral status in a business differs from that of a guest in her home. You might, for example, say something like this, "Look, Penny, you must admit that there are some similarities. You must admit that your home is no more your guest's home Fat Boy's is yours. You must also admit that you could have too much of something just as Fat Boy's does. So, don't you owe us an explanation of the difference between your home and Fat Boy's that could make what is



theft in your home merely taking what Fat Boy's has thrown away?"

Perhaps Penny would think this last question answers itself. But let's suppose she is still not convinced. Let's suppose she responds, "Well, isn't the difference obvious? A business is a business; a home is not." What should you do now?

You should not panic. Penny is simply trying to distinguish between exceptions that apply to businesses and exceptions that apply to homes. There might be such a distinction. But just because there might be, Penny is not entitled to conclude that there is. To show that she is not really pilfering, Penny must show that everyone would want everyone else to treat taking from a business like Fat Boy's as one thing and taking from a home like Penny's as another.

One heavy-handed way to get Penny to see that she probably cannot show that is the familiar technique of asking her to put herself in the other person's place. "Penny," you might say, "I can see why you would want to have your things at home treated differently from the way things in a business are treated. You don't own a business. But what if you did, would you feel that way then? Would you still be willing to let business property be up for grabs?"

Let's suppose Penny agrees that if she owned a business she would want her business property respected in much the way she now wants her property at home respected. You could then conclude, "So, don't you agree that the right thing to do is to treat Fat Boy's property with the same respect you would want a guest to treat yours?"

#### Why Morality Can Be Taught This Way

We can, I think, still imagine Penny rejecting this conclusion for various reasons. We must nonetheless end the

discussion here. The reasons Penny could now offer would be much like those we have already imagined her to offer. You could respond to them much as we have imagined you responding to the others. Penny's case has already illustrated all it can. I would stress three points:

The first is that the way of ethics and the way of morality are not equivalent. You may well be able to use the way of morality when you can't use the way of ethics. In Penny's case, for example, we had no trouble using the way of morality even though (assuming Penny had her facts right) we could not see any obvious way to use the way of ethics.

A second point I want to stress is that you should not just assume you know why a student has gone wrong. Penny might have pilfered because she wanted to steal ("an evil will"); because she gave into temptation ("weakness of will"); because she fooled herself into thinking she wasn't theft ("self-deception"); because she didn't put together what she knew already ("mistake"); because she didn't know certain crucial facts ("ignorance"); or because of some combination of these. You could not know which without investigation.

Penny's question itself tells us something. She probably would not ask it if she were not concerned to do the right thing. So, she probably has a good will. Her question also suggests that neither weakness of will nor self-deception played much of a part in her pilfering. A weak-willed person knows that what she is doing is wrong and so would not need to ask Penny's question. A self-deceiver probably would not want to ask Penny's question for fear of being told what she is trying to forget. So, a question like Penny's is a good indication that mistake, missing fact, or some combination of these is the wrongdoing's cause.

Penny's question did not, however, give you much help in identifying the relevant mistake or missing fact. To

make the identification, you had to ask questions of your own. The first questions we imagined you to ask revealed that Penny's wrongdoing rested on a mistake. She supposed that taking the pencils fit under an exception to the rule against theft. Your questions then identified the relevant exception. We could imagine the discussion going on indefinitely because we could imagine any number of possible exceptions she had in mind. While in theory the number of possible exceptions is infinite, in practice there are few and a few questions will allow you to identify the one the student has implicitly assumed.

Once you have identified the exception, there are at least three possibilities. I have illustrated two of them. One possibility is that the exception does not excuse the act. For example, the exception might actually require Penny to check with the manager first. The second possibility is that the identified exception might not be defensible. It might not actually be an exception. For example, once Penny put herself in the place of a business owner, even she could see why such a person would reject her distinction between property in the home and property in a business. She could understand why her exception could not be a standard everyone wants everyone else to follow.

Though I have not illustrated the third possibility, it deserves mention. The same questions that we imagined to help Penny put together the information she had in a way that changed what she thought about pilfering might instead have changed what we thought. Penny might have been able to identify a defensible exception excusing what she did. We must always be ready to learn from our students. Moral argument is no exception.

The last point I want to stress is related to this second and concerns what you can hope to accomplish by a discussion like the one we imagined. You are, I think, justified in hoping to change for the better how someone like Penny will act in the workplace. Penny's question

showed that she wanted to do the right thing. If your questions lead her to see some act as caused by a mistake, she will not want to repeat it. You can actually change the conduct (and the moral views) of a student like Penny. There's no magic about it. You need only understand her thinking well enough to identify the mistake that caused her to go wrong. Identifying the mistake is easy once you have made her thinking explicit. But you may have to use all your skill as a teacher to make it explicit.

### The Way of Ethics

So far we have been assuming that Penny has her facts right. She may not have. And you, an experienced vocational teacher and co-op coordinator, are likely to know enough about Penny's working environment to know whether she does have her facts right. So, let's change the problem a bit. Let's assume that Penny is not the first student to tell you about Fat Boy pencils, that you first heard Penny's question some years ago, and that you then made suitable inquiries of the manager and others. Here is what you found out:

There is a problem with shrinkage in the inventory of pencils. The primary cause seems to be forgetting to return pencils at the end of a shift rather than employees actually taking them intentionally. A few employees even accumulate them at home until they remember to bring them back and then bring back a handful all at once. Whatever the cause, shrinkage is a small problem. According to the manager, so few pencils disappear that, even at the rate of one per employee, no more than a quarter of the staff could be guilty of taking one pencil a year. The manager doubts very much that "everyone does it". He admits that Fat Boy's does have a lot of pencils around, but he denies ever wondering why. Company policy is to have enough pencils out that no employee will ever have to take time to hunt one up. The

company limits the number of pencils a manager can order or have in stock. If employees pilfered too many pencils, the manager would have to check each employee before letting him or her out the door or risk a drop in productivity by making his employees work with too few pencils. Company policy does not allow using pencils without the Fat Boy logo.

With this additional information, you would be in position to handle Penny's question in a very different way. If ignorance caused Penny's pilfering, just reciting these facts should change her mind or at least convince her to check the facts before taking any more pencils. But, let's suppose these facts do not change her mind. However unlikely, let's suppose that Penny simply shrugs her shoulders and says, "Well, I still don't see what's wrong with taking a few cheap pencils now and then."

You would have two options. One is the way of morality we already discussed. But the other is the way of ethics. By a series of questions much like those we already imagined, you would try to get Penny to see that her having a pencil at work when she needs it depends in part on other employees not pilfering as she does. If the other employees did what she does, there would be a shortage of pencils. Unless the manager then cracked down, all employees would be inconvenienced. So, everyone, including Penny, has an interest in a practice in which employees abstain from taking pencils in the way Penny did. Penny's pilfering is ethically wrong. You can, I think, easily imagine a series of questions that would lead Penny to that conclusion.

#### Helping to Get Students Thinking about Ethics

The approach I have just sketched depends on students asking something like Penny's original question. If you are like many of the vocational teachers I interviewed, you may be saying to yourself, "But my students never ask questions like that in class. How I wish they would." So, you might

also be wondering whether I have any suggestions for getting your students to ask questions like Penny's.

The answer is that I do have one. Students of engineering, law, and other professions generally seem to believe that ethics, like sex, is a personal matter irrelevant to the workplace. Your students may come into your classes with much the same attitude. If so, you will have to do what most teachers in professional schools have to do if they want their students to raise ethics questions in an ordinary course. You will have to let them know that such questions are legitimate. The simplest way to do that is to raise such questions yourself early in the semester, discuss them with some care, and encourage the class to participate. Once you break the ice with a few good discussions, you may be surprised at what happens next.

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