

Rapaport Everyday Ethics Grant Report
Ethics Unit in Existing Course
(SRS “Opium, East and West)

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Description of Ethics Unit:

The unit comes around the middle of the term, after students have done substantial reading and discussion, and feel more comfortable with the issues. The entire course is about continual attempts by governments and individuals to reconcile the benefits and dangers of opium. We first look at how opium, once the most popular and common medicine in the world (particularly in Great Britain, India, the US, and China), became a strictly controlled substance that was and is blamed for a number of social and economic ills. Then, the students read a series of very recent articles in the *NY Times* that discussed the agony of desperately ill people in Africa and India who are unable to obtain palliative morphine even in the final stages of cancer because of draconian drug laws. The students are asked to consider how much pain is acceptable in order to prevent the harm that can come from opium addiction. They also discuss if it is ethical that the developed world consumes the lion’s share of morphine, despite the desperate need for it in the developing world. And finally, the unit ends with the transcript of a US Senate hearing that discusses the fact that since the US invasion, the percentage of the world’s opium crop produced in Afghanistan has soared, which stimulated a great deal of discussion.

Student Reactions: Students responded very well to the unit. They were horrified to read about the shortage of morphine and the flourishing poppy crop in Afghanistan. Almost everyone had something to say about these issues, and most came to the conclusion that the drug problem had largely been manufactured (or at least exaggerated) so that it benefited various vested interests.

Faculty Assessment: I thought the unit worked extremely well, by bringing ethical questions and issues to the fore and by forcing the students to think about the relevance of historical issues. In a way, the unit brought the whole course together, and a number of students mentioned the discussions in this unit as being among the most thought-provoking of the entire course. I am constantly on the lookout for articles that will allow me to expand the unit, and given the hypocrisy that has always characterized the ‘war on drugs’, it is not difficult. I found an article just the other day that talked about the heartache experienced by Afghan poppy farmers who are forced to sell young daughters into marriage or service when the government cracks down on opium production (as it is urged to do by US authorities). Since the goal of the course is to get them to think beyond stereotypes about the evil of drugs and to begin to consider that some “problems” are socially constructed, I thought this unit was essential.