

Ethics Across the Curriculum
Aging and Society
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Obviously there are many biases and stereotypes in our society concerning the aged, and discussing ethics is a natural part of this course.

I welcomed the idea of increasing the emphasis on ethics in this course, which I had already taught several times, and therefore decided to continue some segments, decrease the emphasis in some areas, and incorporate some new activities to challenge the students to contemplate how they view the elderly.

On the first day of class, we did an exercise in which students called out words that came to mind when they thought of the elderly. We then went through the list and the students recognized how many of their first reactions were negative. Throughout the course we referred back to this list.

We also introduced the importance of the community giving to the elderly and the elderly giving to the community by inviting speakers from the Scotia-Glenville High School "Give" Program, who are devoted to helping in the community. The club consists of volunteer students and volunteer elders or elders who need assistance. Three students, the director of the program and an elderly participant all spoke. The information that had the most profound impact on the Union students was the fact that many of the high school students were nervous to meet their "elders" and yet developed very close and meaningful relationships with them.

To have the students tackle some of the ethical issues that involve the elderly, we had five debates:

- Should there be mandatory re-testing of drivers on a regular basis after a certain age?
- Is there an ethical obligation for grown children to care for their elderly parents rather than move them into a nursing home?

- Should grown children have input in estate planning or prenuptial agreements if their widowed parent decides to remarry?
- Should wealthy elders automatically receive entitlements such as social security and medicare as the aging population grows rapidly and there are fewer workers to support these programs?
- Discuss the ethics of right to die versus norms (and laws) against suicide.

Surprisingly the students on the last debate theme got stuck in their thinking and kept focusing on legal issues and the Hippocratic oath. Slowly they realized the scope of the issue: morals, religion, the right to be free of pain. This was by far the most successful debate in that it generated an enormous amount of class discussion.

The final component that I added addressed how we treat our frail elderly with a documentary on nursing homes, a visitor from Hospice, and the presentation of the DVD "ABC News Presents Morrie Schwartz – Lessons in Living."

Thanks to the ethics committee for providing these opportunities.