Ethical Principles in University Teaching

Authors

Preamble

The purpose of this document is to provide a set of basic ethical principles that define the professional responsibilities of university professors in their role as teacher.

Ethical principles are conceptualized here as general guidelines, ideals or expectations that need to be taken into account, along with other relevant conditions and circumstances, in the design and analysis of university teaching.

The intent of this document is not to provide a list of ironclad rules, or a systematic code of conduct, along with prescribed penalties for infractions, that will automatically apply in all situations and govern all eventualities. Similarly, the intent is not to contradict the concept of academic freedom, but rather to describe ways in which academic freedom can be exercised in a responsible manner.

Finally, this document is intended only as a first approximation, or as food for thought, not necessarily as a final product that is ready for adoption in the absence of discussion and consideration of local needs.

Ethical Principles in University Teaching was developed by the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, and is endorsed by the winners of the national 3M teaching award whose names appear on the cover page. The document was created by individuals actively involved in university teaching, and will be distributed to university professors across Canada.

The Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education believes that implementation of an ethical code similar to that described herein will be advantageous to university teachers (e.g., in removing ambiguity concerning teaching responsibilities); and will contribute significantly to improvement of teaching. For these reasons, STLHE recommends that the document be discussed thoroughly at Canadian universities, with input from professors, students, and administrators, and that universities consider adopting or implementing ethical principles of teaching similar to those described in this document.

Principle 1: Content Competence

A university teacher maintains a high level of subject matter knowledge and ensures that course content is current, accurate, representative, and appropriate to the position of the course within the student's program of studies.

This principle means that a teacher is responsible for maintaining (or acquiring) subject matter competence not only in areas of personal interest but in all areas relevant to course goals or objectives. Appropriateness of course content implies that what is actually taught in the course is consistent with stated course objectives and prepares students adequately for subsequent courses for which the present course is a prerequisite. Representativeness of course content implies that for topics involving difference of opinion or interpretation, representative points of view are acknowledged and placed in perspective.

Achievement of content competence requires that the teacher take active steps to be up-to-date in content areas relevant to his or her courses; to be informed of the content of prerequisite courses and of courses for which the teacher's course is prerequisite; and to provide adequate representation of important topic areas and points of view.

Specific examples of failure to fulfill the principle of content competence occur when an instructor teaches subjects for which he or she has an insufficient knowledge base, when an instructor misinterprets research evidence to support a theory or social policy favored by the instructor, or when an instructor responsible for a prerequisite survey course teaches only those topics in which the instructor has a personal interest.

Principle 2: Pedagogical Competence

A pedagogically competent teacher communicates the objectives of the course to students, is aware of alternative instructional methods or strategies, and selects methods of instruction that, according to research evidence (including personal or self-reflective research), are effective in helping students to achieve the course objectives.
This principle implies that, in addition to knowing the subject matter, a teacher has adequate pedagogical knowledge and skills, including communication of objectives, selection of effective instructional methods, provision of practice and feedback opportunities, and accommodation of student diversity. If mastery of a certain skill (e.g., critical analysis, design of experiments) is part of the course objectives and will be considered in evaluation and grading of students, the teacher provides students with adequate opportunity to practice and receive feedback on that skill during the course. If learning styles differ significantly for different students or groups of students, the teacher is aware of these differences and, if feasible, varies her or his style of teaching accordingly.

To maintain pedagogical competence, and instructor takes active steps to stay current regarding teaching strategies that will help students learn relevant knowledge and skills and provide equal educational opportunity for diverse groups. This might involve reading general or discipline-specific educational literature, attending workshops and conferences, or experimenting with alternative methods or teaching a given course or a specific group of students.

Specific examples of failure to fulfill the principle of pedagogical competence include using an instructional method or assessment method that is incongruent with the stated course objectives (e.g., using exams consisting solely of fact-memorization questions when the main objective of the course is to teach problem-solving skills); and failing to give students adequate opportunity to practice or learn skills that are included in the course objectives and will be tested on the final exam.

Principle 3: Dealing With Sensitive Topics

Topics that students are likely to find sensitive or discomforting are dealt with in an open, honest, and positive way.

Among other things, this principle means that the teacher acknowledges from the outset that a particular topic is sensitive, and explains why it is necessary to include it in the course syllabus. Also, the teacher identified his or her own perspective on the topic and compares it to alternative approaches or interpretations, thereby providing students with an understanding of the complexity of the issue and the difficulty of achieving a single "objective" conclusion. Finally, in order to provide a safe and open environment for class discussion, the teacher invites all students to state their position on the issue, sets ground rules for discussion, is respectful of students even when it is necessary to disagree, and encourages students to be respectful of one another.

As one example of a sensitive topic, some of the content analyzed with John Donne can cause distress among students who perceive racial slurs embedded in the professor's interpretation, particularly if the latter is presented as the authoritative reading of the poem. As a result, some students may view the class as closed and exclusive rather than open and inclusive. A reasonable option is for the professor's analysis of the poem to be followed by an open class discussion to explore other possible interpretations and the pros and cons of each.

Another example of a sensitive topic occurs when a film depicting scenes of child abuse is shown, without warning, in a developmental psychology class. Assuming that such a film has a valid pedagogical role, student distress and discomfort can be minimized by warning students in advance of the content of the film, explaining why it is included in the curriculum, and providing opportunities for students to discuss their reactions to the film.

Principle 4: Student Development

The overriding responsibility of the teacher is to contribute to the intellectual development of the student, at least in the context of the teacher's own area of expertise, and to avoid actions such as exploitation and discrimination that detract from student development.

According to this principle, the teacher's most basic responsibility is to design instruction that facilitates learning and encourages autonomy and independent thinking in students, to treat students with respect and dignity, and to avoid actions that detract unjustifiably from student development. Failure to take responsibility for student development occurs when the teacher comes to class under-prepared, fails to design effective instruction, coerces students to adopt a particular value or point of view, or fails to discuss alternative theoretical interpretations (see also Principles 1, 2, and 3).

Less obvious examples of failure to take responsibility for student development can arise when teachers ignore the power differential between themselves and students and behave in ways that exploit or denigrate students. Such behaviors include sexual or racial discrimination; derogatory comments toward students; taking primary or sole authorship of a publication reporting research conceptualized, designed, and conducted by a student collaborator; failure to acknowledge academic or intellectual debts to students; and assigning research work to students that serves the ends of the teacher but is unrelated to the educational goals of the course.

In some cases, the teacher's responsibility to contribute to student development can come into conflict with responsibilities to other agencies, such as the university, the academic discipline, or society as a whole. This can happen, for example, when a marginal student requests a letter of reference in support of advanced education, or when a student with learning disabilities requests accommodations that require modification of normal grading standards or graduation requirements. There are no hard and fast rules that govern situations such as these. The teacher must weigh all conflicting responsibilities, possibly consult with other individuals, and come to a reasoned decision.

Principle 5: Dual Relationships With Students

To avoid conflict of interest, a teacher does not enter into dual-role relationships with students that are likely to detract from student development or lead to actual or perceived favoritism on the part of the teacher.

This principle means that it is the responsibility of the teacher to keep relationships with students focused on pedagogical goals and academic requirements. The most obvious example of a dual relationship that is likely to impair teacher objectivity and/or detract from student development is any form of sexual or close personal relationship with a current student. Other potentially problematic dual relationships include: accepting a teaching (or grading) role with respect to a member of one's immediate family, a close friend, or an individual who is also a client, patient, or business partner; excessive socializing with students outside of class, either individually or as a group; lending money to or borrowing money from students; giving gifts to or accepting gifts from students; and introducing a course requirement that students participate in a political movement advocated by the instructor. Even if the teacher believes that she or he is maintaining objectivity in situations such as these, the perception of favoritism on the part of other students is as educationally disastrous as actual favoritism or unfairness. If a teacher does become involved in a dual relationship with a student, despite efforts to the contrary, it is the responsibility of the teacher to notify his or her supervisor of the situation as soon as possible, so that alternative arrangements can be made for supervision or evaluation of the student. Although there are definite pedagogical benefits to establishing good rapport with students and interacting with students both inside and outside the classroom, there are also serious risks of exploitation, compromise of academic standards, and harm to student development. It is the responsibility of the teacher to prevent these risks from materializing into real or perceived conflicts of interest.

Principle 6: Confidentiality

Student grades, attendance records, and private communications are treated as confidential materials, and are released only with student consent, or for legitimate academic purposes, or if there are reasonable grounds for believing that releasing such information will be beneficial to the student or will prevent harm to others.
Principle 9: Respect For Institution

In the interests of student development, a university teacher is aware of and respects the educational goals, policies, and standards of the institution in which he or she teaches.

This principle implies that a teacher shares a collective responsibility to work for the good of the university as a whole, to uphold the educational goals and standards of the university, and to abide by university policies and regulations pertaining to the education of students.

Specific examples of failure to uphold the principle of respect for institution include engaging in excessive work activity outside the university that conflicts with university teaching responsibilities; and being unaware of or ignoring valid university regulations on provision of course outlines, scheduling of exams, or academic misconduct.

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