



Perspectives on Teaching Research and Professional Ethics

C. K. Gunsalus
Professor Emerita of Business
Research Professor at the Coordinated Sciences Laboratory
University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign

November 20, 2011

Standing in the back of the elevator on the way to give a department’s annual, mandatory ethics presentation, it was hard to miss the conversation two graduate students in the front were having. They were discussing which of them was going to lie about attending that afternoon’s required ethics presentation: “If you sign me in this time, I’ll cover you next time.” My departmental host, standing with me in the elevator, confronted with information that that might suggest something amiss reacted as many do: he looked at the ground until the students got off and then he apologized to me, assuring me that the students in the department were a really good group of kids.

Those short moments in the elevator capture much that has shaped my approach to teaching about research and professional ethics.

First, there’s a baseline expectation that required professional ethics presentations and courses will be boring, so my first goal is always to meet people where they are by telling stories and presenting problems that are relevant to their daily lives, like opening this essay with the story of being in the elevator.

Second is the awareness that whether my presentation is the “ethical event of the semester,” one more speech by a guest lecturer, or my own semester-long course, a key dynamic in the room is the acute

awareness among the audience--always--that only students are required to attend. This is seen as hypocritical when they know that there are those around them getting away with shortcuts or shady practices, notwithstanding all the messages they are getting about needing to be ethical.

To counter the current of cynicism, I work both to acknowledge that injustices exist, that power differentials affect how many situations play out, and at the same time to focus upon the choices that each of us makes every day in shaping who we are and who we want to be. A related, important point is that there are many studies showing that emerging professionals often believe that being ethical is a luxury they cannot have while they are getting started. My goal is to talk openly and honestly about the fact that there are always pressures and the choices we make daily define who we are and our reputations.

Third, few of us know how to react well when confronted with a problem, just as my departmental host in the elevator was at a loss for words in the moment. Anticipating some of the predictable situations that arise in working life, having guidance for how to respond to them, and practicing those responses, can be invaluable. My colleague Gretchen Winter and I have developed exercises that revolve around working out words for problem situations, designed to help students develop their own [personal scripts](#) for problem moments.

Let me add another story here: some time ago, I was contacted by a staff member affiliated with a science department, who was “tasked,” as he said, with assembling an ethics curriculum. He asked for the FIVE MOST important ethical issues the curriculum should cover. My response (which in the end had six elements, not five) included what seems to me to be a list of the truly essential skills for a successful, ethical career:

1. [How to have a dispute professionally](#)
2. Understanding the rules of authorship and how to maneuver in the trenches for getting



credit and giving it

3. How to choose a mentor and colleagues for character: thinking about your own values, matching what you do with what you say you believe and finding ways to deal with the pressures that professional life inevitably involves
4. The line between making your data look “pretty” and manipulating/altering data and images
5. Finding the line between inappropriate self-promotion and sensibly advancing your career
6. How to get useful advice, and to recognize it, when you encounter a problem

His response to my list was that it was “not quite” in the form he envisioned, which would be “something out of a philosophy syllabus.” And yet, teaching ethical theory or a set of compliance obligations will not help students become thoughtful professionals capable of working through real-life difficulties in research or at work.

What will help them is knowing the unwritten rules of how to have a dispute at work, how to prevent problems from arising and how very much our daily interactions and colleagues shape our careers can contribute to that goal. My talks almost always end with three lessons: Choose your colleagues and bosses for character; know how to have a dispute professionally; and have good luck. Having good luck does not mean standing by idly while waiting for karma to rain good luck upon you; it means making your own good luck by learning the first two lessons and living by them.

As a result, in teaching about professional and research ethics, my approach is:

- Tell a lot of stories, always about problems real people in real situations have faced, usually from my own experience. One of the most successful assignments I use in my semester-long course is adapted from one first described to me by Harris Sondak of the University of Utah: have the students submit 150-word ethical dilemmas they have encountered at the first class. Thereafter, devote a third of each class to discussing real dilemmas of real people in the room

that I have anonymized. Students may, but are not required, to identify the dilemma when it is discussed. These discussions are powerful and effective in reaching students. The [Illinois two-minute challenge \(2MC\) methodology](#) arose from this exercise and these discussions.

- Provide guidance and perspective on how to have a dispute professionally, from the bottom of the power curve, and still have a career afterwards, using this article as the foundation for discussion. (Note that there are two versions: [one for science/research settings](#), and [one for business settings](#)).
- Work to establish a connection between the small choices we make every single day and the larger arc of our working lives. The point I emphasize here is that temptation and pressures are present at every point in working life: there's not a magic moment, ever, when one is able to say "Ah, NOW I'm successful enough, I can start being ethical."

A circular graphic composed of several overlapping, semi-transparent blue and light blue segments, creating a layered, globe-like effect.

ncpre

National Center for
Professional and
Research Ethics