

2024-2025 Middle School Ethics Bowl Case Set

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Case 1: To Persevere or To Pass

Luca, Joseph and Max are 6th graders at Big Horn High School in Arizona. They have been best friends for years. As they've grown, these three students have developed different interests and perspectives on life and politics. By and large, though, they have found ways to continue their friendship and make it work. They have stuck with each other through hard times, including the year when Max's father lost his job forcing Max's family to lose their house and move. This experience proved unsettling for Max. He began to struggle academically and seemed to draw away from some classmates - but not Luca or Joseph. In fact, Max's troubles brought them closer.

Recently Max has been spending more and more time online playing Fortnite. He enjoys the escape from real life that it offers, and he feels a sense of belonging in the community of gamers who have bonded through shared campaigns and online "trash talking." Max's online activities, however, are spilling over into his interactions at school: he has become more aggressive in his interactions with peers and regularly talks over classmates when they are speaking. Worst of all, his conversation has come to include a constant stream of profanity. His unfiltered remarks are not targeted at any person or identity in particular; on the contrary, he slides between so many offensive terms that he has managed to alienate people from several different groups. As a result, Max, who was never popular, is now actively looked down on by most of those in his grade. Even Joseph has started avoiding Max since he does not want to be associated with his offensive behavior and is, frankly, tired of dealing with it himself. At this point, Luca is the only one left who voluntarily associates with Max at school.

Luca can't decide what to do. If he abandons Max, he fears that Max will increasingly turn to this online community for support: the more isolated Max feels at school, the more he will seek acceptance online. But if Luca stays close to Max, Luca risks alienating other friends, especially Joseph. Should Luca stick by Max as always and hope that Max will eventually grow out of his profanity problem? Or should Luca pull away from Max too, both to preserve his other friendships?

Match Question

1. At what point should Luca end his friendship with Max? Why?
2. Are we free to end a friendship whenever we want to? Is Luca?
3. Who in Max's life has an obligation to help him correct his problematic behavior?

Discussion Questions

1. Should we treat children who engage in offensive behavior differently than we treat adults?
2. What obligations do friends have to each other when relationships change?
3. Are there ever situations when ending a friendship is the most caring thing to do?
4. How can our definition of friendship help us make choices about our relationships?

Case 2: Number on the Scale

Blue Ridge Middle School has a new wrestling program. Coach Wilson, who wrestled in high school and college and loves the sport, runs the team with high expectations. Even though he has a family, he spends extra time at school every day helping those on the wrestling team refine their skills. He expects team members to take their training very seriously, working every day to improve. During practice, wrestlers work out with partners who are roughly the same size to see that matches are fair.

Although the Blue Ridge wrestling program began as a way for interested students to get into good physical condition and learn the sport, Coach Wilson feels that the team has learned so much that they are ready to participate in tournaments. He believes that competing is the best way for his young wrestlers to further improve. In accordance with tournament guidelines, he begins sorting wrestlers into predetermined weight classes.

The decision to enter a tournament creates an uproar among parents and the wrestlers themselves. Some parents feel that it is preposterous for Blue Ridge wrestlers to enter tournaments in which they will be put into weight classes. These parents have read about student wrestlers who try to gain or lose weight by either force feeding or starving themselves to meet their desired weight. Parents worry that their children will become obsessed with the number on the scale, desperately trying to “make the weight” in order to compete. This obsession has led competitive wrestlers around the country to develop eating disorders which can impair their mental health. Aware of this, some members of the Blue Ridge team who are already insecure about their weight worry that competing may prove degrading and frightening.

Others in the school community support the decision to enter the tournament. Some parents share Coach Wilson’s belief that by participating in the tournament, students become more disciplined, serious wrestlers who will be better prepared to wrestle in high school. He argues that matching wrestlers by weight class is the only way to ensure fairness. Some parents are also eager for the tournament. They support their children who are excited by the prospect of competition. These wrestlers feel that they have been working hard and have earned a right to compete.

Match Questions

1. How should the coach respond to the concerns raised by parents about weight classes?
2. How much risk should parents permit for middle school students engaged in wrestling?

Study Questions

1. How should we balance concerns for student development and concerns for safety?
2. What responsibility do coaches have for members of their team?
3. Do weight classes actually make wrestling matches fair?

Case 3: Prayers for Peers

Luisa is president of the student body at Sigmund Hills, a California private school, grades 6-12. Her friend Muhammad, a strict follower of Islam, is required to pray five times every day which means he must find a quiet spot to pray by himself during lunch or recess. This makes him feel isolated. Muhammad has told Luisa that he wishes there were a designated time for prayer during the school day so that he didn't have to pray by himself and feel so alone. Muhammad isn't the only student who prays during school. Many Buddhist students pray with their prayer beads as they walk through the halls between classes. Sometimes, they don't pay attention to their surroundings and trip or fall, a safety hazard for them and others. Other students can be seen meditating during the school day at various times.

Luisa wants to accommodate the religious students in her school. She thinks about creating a new daily period, "General Spirituality," a 12-minute interlude before lunch during which all students sit silently at their desks. Some could pray; others could read or simply rest. To carve out time for this period, two minutes would be subtracted from each of the six class periods throughout the day. Luisa wants to bring this idea to the school's Headmaster. Advocating for her plan, Luisa would argue that the General Spirituality period would encourage religious diversity as well as inclusiveness by making students aware of various religious denominations. This aligns with the school's Initiatives for Inclusion and Diversity.

Before approaching the Headmaster, Luisa asks members of the school community if they would support a General Spirituality period. Many students are enthusiastic, saying that it would allow students to connect with their religions and grow as individuals while at the same time allowing students to learn about religious traditions other than their own. Students who aren't religious or spiritual could use the time to decompress and relax.

However, some students feel that the proposed period is a waste of time: students who need to pray can do so during lunch or recess as they do now. Other students believe that religion has no place in school. Some students worry that the General Spirituality period would cut into time in class; for example, the 12 minutes lost from class each day would add up to 36 minutes per week. Teachers are also concerned about lost class time. They worry that some students would use the prayer period to goof off. Student Life officers think the plan could factionalize rather than unite the study body. Stressing religious differences could encourage bullying and other objectionable behavior.

After polling students, teachers, and administrators, Luisa is faced with a difficult decision. She isn't sure whether he should propose the General Spirituality period after all.

Match Questions

1. Should Luisa propose the "General Spirituality" period to his Headmaster? Why or why not?
2. If Luisa proposes the "General Spirituality" period, should her Headmaster approve it? Why or why not?

Discussion Questions

1. What place does religion have in schools?
2. Are religious commitments more important than learning time?
3. How may interfaith initiatives bring together or divide students?

Case 4: Concert Conflict

John, a high school sophomore, is passionate about music, especially the songs of his favorite pop singer, Skyler Miller.¹ John and Atul, his best friend, have been fans of Miller since they were much younger, and many of the songs have emotional meaning to them. Miller's music reminds John and Atul of playdates, sleepovers, and carefree times when they were unaware of his problematic views. Miller's music has also helped John through a lot of tough times, including his parent's divorce. John and Atul have long dreamed of attending one of his concerts, and recently, after a year of saving up money, they finally bought tickets to see Miller perform live.

However, Skyler Miller has a history of making offensive comments toward the LGBTQIA+ community that he attributes to deeply held personal beliefs. Miller's opinions are widely known, yet many fans, including John and Atul, believe that artists should be judged by their talent, not their personal beliefs, controversial though these may be. The friends focus on the songs, which they find positive, inspiring, and uplifting.

Their friend Charles, who is openly gay, experiences Skyler Miller's homophobic views as deeply hurtful. Charles came out in 8th grade and has faced challenges since then. Some classmates make fun of him, which makes him feel isolated. However, becoming friends with John and Atul this year has had a positive impact on Charles' mental health and overall happiness at school. Although Charles recognizes Miller's musical talent, he chooses not to support an artist whose views he finds offensive.

A week before the concert, Skyler Miller posts a homophobic message on social media that Charles sees and shares with John, asking how John can still enjoy Miller's music. This conversation causes John to reflect on his support for an artist with hurtful beliefs. John hasn't told Charles that he and Atul will be attending the concert. Now John worries how Charles will react if he finds out that his friends were at the concert. John isn't sure what he should do.

Match Questions

1. Should John go to the concert despite Charles' feelings about Skyler Miller? Why or why not?
2. When is it okay to separate an artist's controversial views from their artistic work?
3. If Charles found out about the concert, would it be fair for him to ask his friends not to attend?

Study Questions

1. How should John decide between his friendship with Charles and his desire to attend Skyler Miller's concert? What should he think about?
2. Should John tell Charles about the concert? Why or why not?
3. Do we have the right to challenge our friends for the interests they pursue?

¹ This is a fictional character.

Case 5: The Invasive Species Plan

Cara, a 14-year-old entrepreneur, wants to launch new, innovative startups. She is mainly interested in environmental issues. Her philosophy is that to make money, you must do so responsibly; this means that you have to think about the community and the environment, not just your wallet.

During a recent trip to Maine, Cara learns that an invasive species, European green crabs, is causing colossal damage to the native flora and fauna of the northeast's coastline. These crabs aren't tasty, and they are dirty. In addition, they are decimating species important to the region's economy: filter-feeding oysters, native clams, mussels, and baby lobsters. The crabs also destroy eelgrass beds that not only filter water but also prevent erosion.

Cara has an idea: use the crabs to create an organic, all-natural fertilizer product. This would solve two problems: it would stop the invasion of the crabs, and it would create a natural alternative to synthetic, chemical-based fertilizers. Win-win, right? Unfortunately, the process of turning crabs into fertilizer requires blending them whole in an industrial liquidizer-shredder. To do this humanely, Cara would need to stun the crabs first. Her first thought is to freeze the crabs before shredding, but there is little evidence that this method spares them any suffering (according to the ASPCA, RSPCA and other sources). The only sure option she finds is the CrustaStun, a device that costs \$3500. Cara's budget is \$50. She searches for investors to purchase the CrustaStun, but turns up empty-handed. There are no other options, so Cara is at a stalemate.

Cara doesn't know what to do, and knows that the longer she waits, the worse the crisis will become. According to some sources, each female European green crab breeds about 4.7 million offspring in her lifetime.

Match Questions

1. Should Cara go ahead with her fertilizer business even if she cannot humanely kill the crabs?
2. Is it wrong for Cara to walk away from this problem now that she has found a solution to it?
3. What is more important, the method in which Cara kills crabs, or the integrity of the ecosystem which they are destroying?

Study Questions

1. If a certain amount of suffering cannot be avoided to bring about a worthy end, does that justify it?
2. How should we balance the welfare of individual animals and the health of an ecosystem?
3. How far do animal rights extend to invasive species?

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Case 6: "Dear Grandma"

Haley has been meaning to write a letter to her grandmother who will turn 80 in a few weeks, but finds herself struggling to find the right words. Her grandmother's health has been declining recently, and Haley feels it is important to express just how much her grandmother's unwavering support has meant to her over the years. Despite her best efforts, the words simply won't come.

As she sits at her desk, frustrated by her inability to translate her feelings onto paper, Haley remembers a commercial she saw on television recently. In it, a father uses Google's Gemini AI tool to help his daughter write a fan letter to her favorite athlete. AI takes the daughter's scattered thoughts and turns them into a polished, heartfelt message. Intrigued, Haley decides to give the tool a try.

She opens Gemini on her laptop and with a mix of hesitation and curiosity, types a few sentences about the memories she shared with her grandmother, and how grateful she is for her grandmother's unconditional love and support. Within moments, AI generates a beautifully written letter, thoughtful and eloquent, capturing everything Haley wanted to say. It's perfect - but Haley can't shake the feeling that the letter isn't entirely hers.

This raises an uncomfortable question: Is using AI to write such a personal letter akin to cheating on homework? Does it violate personal integrity in the same or similar way that using AI to write an essay for school violates the principles of academic integrity? In her classes, Haley has been taught that relying on AI assistance to generate content crosses ethical boundaries because essays are meant to reflect the student's own understanding and abilities. Does the same concern apply to a letter to her grandmother? Is it wrong to let AI articulate personal emotions, or is AI simply a tool to help her express what she couldn't put into words herself?

Haley hesitates, torn between sending the polished, perfect letter generated by Gemini and writing something in her own words—even if it isn't as eloquent. She knows that her grandmother will appreciate anything she sends, but she can't shake the feeling that her own words fall short. Is the letter written by Gemini a true expression of her love and gratitude? Or has Haley, in her desire to express her emotions perfectly, allowed AI to speak for her, thereby stripping the letter of its true meaning?

Match Questions

1. Should Haley send the letter written with Gemini? Why or why not?
2. Is there an ethical difference between the circumstances in the ad and Haley's situation?

Study Questions

1. How might using AI change people's relationships?
2. How important is authenticity in personal communications?
3. How might using AI for everyday tasks change the way we think?