

# ETHICS OLYMPIAD

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The mention of Olympic rivalry probably conjures up images of battles in the swimming pool or on the athletics track. But an Ethics Olympiad is a very different experience. It requires excellence in communication skills and ethical understanding rather than physical strength or co-ordination. It is a different sort of strength, a strength of character and a different sort of co-ordination involving collaboration and the forming of a well-reasoned arguments. An 'Ethics Olympiad' places an emphasis on reasoning and explaining how the team arrived at their ethical conclusion. It's a unique opportunity for schools to engage their students in interesting ethical discussions with other students who come from different parts of the country and the world.

In a time of seemingly growing polarization in society, the process of analysing, thinking, and talking through tough issues (instead of simply reacting and defending) leads to less harsh opinions and more considered positions .....and open minds. The Ethics Olympiad encourages critical thinking, civil discourse, teamwork and a competition of ideas. The event fits well within the general capabilities in the National Australian Curriculum requiring students to develop an ethical understanding. Furthermore prospective employers will look positively on students who have participated in this sort of event. Not to mention teachers that promote ethical understanding through the process of preparing students for an Ethics Olympiad.

This initiative is not to be confused with the Philosothon which was conceived in 2007 and which now involves many hundreds of schools nationally and overseas. A Philosothon



*Figure 1-Austin East High School Tennessee*

utilises a specific pedagogical approach called Community of Inquiry and involves students sitting in a circle. An Ethics Olympiad involves students in a panel format and the judges are involved in the discourse. The Ethics Olympiad uses real time cases where a difficult ethical decision needs to be made...whereas a Philosothon deals with a range of philosophical issues including ethical issues but also metaphysical and epistemological issues. Whereas the Philosothon happens in one location, usually

once in the year, an Ethics Olympiad can occur at any time in the year depending on the organising teachers from each school. The skills identified in the marking keys are similar but the format and content is different.

The Ethics Olympiad is based on a structure used in the US called an Ethics Bowl. Ethics Bowls have been run since 1993 and have previously only involved the US university sector. It was the brain child of Dr Rod Ladenson from the University of Illinois. In 2013 I went to the US to observe the first National US High School Ethics Bowl which was held at the Sheridan Hotel in Chapel Hill and hosted by the University of North Carolina. This trip



*Figure 2 Judging panel 2013 National US High School Ethics Bowl*

was made possible by an Endeavour scholarship awarded by the Australian federal government which allowed me to visit the US and the UK during the school holidays. Thirteen schools participated in the event from throughout the US. Each team had won their regional Ethics Bowl and thereby became eligible for the nationals. While in the US I had been asked to be a judge for one of the "Bowls". The quality of the discussion was excellent and the intensity was palpable. During the Ethics Bowl people

were curious about this Australian who had come all that way for this event and discussions led to the possibility of US and Australian schools participating in a video conferencing version of the same event which I proposed should be called an 'Ethics Olympiad'. The reason for the name change was because the term 'Bowl' does not resonate with people from countries outside the US. One of the ethical cases under discussion was to do with climate change and this involved resources from the Australian philosopher Peter Singer. Another case involved Julien Assange and Wiki leaks and so there were many links with Australia in the issues being discussed. At the end of the event St Petersburg College from Florida won the first US National High School Ethics Bowl and they were outstanding.

I returned to Australia determined to introduce the concept to my own school and allow other schools the opportunity to participate. So in May 2013 we conducted a trial linking up with schools in the US. Students from Hale School in Perth Western Australia competed against Austin HS in Tennessee and later on the same day competed against Bentley College in California. We used video conferencing technology in the first round and then Google + in the second round. Judges for this event included professionals in Australia and in the US. The Aussie judges included Dr Laura D'Olimpio, Philosophy lecturer at Notre Dame University and Chairperson of the Association for Philosophy in Schools and Dr Alan Tapper, Philosophy Lecturer at Curtin University and co-author of the Senior Secondary text in WA, Philosophy and Ethics. In the US the judges included Dr. Don Olive, the Chair of Philosophy and Dean of Humanities at Carson-Newman College and John McClellan who teaches philosophy at Carson-Newman College.

The topics under discussion were;

- Is Peter Singers proposed cap-and-trade system a moral way to address climate change?
- Is it moral to kill Mary so Jodie can live?
- Should the Red Cross/Red Crescent offer assistance to the Taliban?
- In what circumstances is it moral for a person to use secretive phone apps to keep track of another's whereabouts?

The Ethics Bowl executive supported the trial. Dr Matt Deaton from the University of Tennessee did a wonderful job moderating the discussions from the US. Simon Kidd from Australia helped moderate at this end. The students in Australia found the cases very stimulating and the comment made to me at the end was that they loved the opportunity to work as a team. "This was the best thing I have ever done at school" was a quote from one of the students involved.....These boys will remember this experience for the rest of their lives. For the record the Australian school won the first round convincingly and this gave them confidence for the second round. We found ourselves facing a formidable team from Bentley in California and we managed a draw. We reflected on issues for improvement after the event and thereby refined the process for future events.

The Ethics Olympiad trial was followed up with the production of resources and systems to allow other schools to participate. A few schools accepted an invitation sent out to participate in the initiative, including Methodist Ladies College in Melbourne. The following reflection was written by the Gifted and Talented co-ordinator Alison Crawford at MLC.

"On 29th April 2014, an Ethics Olympiad was held between students of MLC, Melbourne, Australia and Austin-East High School, Knoxville, Tennessee. Students from MLC formed a team in Term 1 (March) and began preparing their positions in the cases with a mentor. I liaised with David Goff from Austin-East High School to determine which cases we would be looking at, and then chose a suitable day and time (considering the time difference) to hold the competition. Due to the differences in school years it was not possible to hold more than one 'heat', so we determined that this would be a friendly competition. Nevertheless our students took it seriously. They enjoyed doing their own research for their positions and

arguing about their cases. The discussion questions provided provoked thoughtful discussion. Some of the students involved had participated in the Philosothon which they also loved. This was “better than debating” and they “loved the amazing opportunity”. The chance to compete against students on the other side of the world was a key selling point, and worked in well with our school’s desire to become a more internationally-minded school. David and I had skyped twice before the competition to ensure that the technology would work. We used an external camera/microphone to pick up our students but on the day the microphone wasn’t strong enough and this caused us some technical difficulties until we solved it (by moving the students closer to the camera). The use of projectors meant both teams could see each other and talk directly to each other. Dr Janette Poulton, lecturer at the School of Education at Melbourne Institute of Technology and Education Officer for the Victorian Association for Philosophy in Schools, was our judge in Melbourne. The moderator for the event was in Tennessee, Jonathan Goff, a local pastor who is a graduate of Earlham School of Religion in Richmond, Indiana. The judges in Tennessee were Aaron McClain, a philosophy grad from the University of Tennessee who teaches math at Austin-East High School, and Don Dillard, a Graduate Teaching Associate and PhD student at the University of Tennessee who was one of the coordinators for the East Tennessee Regional High School Ethics Bowl. Also present was Ryan Windeknecht, also a Graduate Teaching Associate and PhD student at the University of Tennessee, who was one of the coordinators for the East Tennessee Regional High School Ethics Bowl. Dr Poulton was most impressed by the event and enjoyed the judging experience.

For all of us at MLC, this was a positive event we would be keen to participate in again. Our students thoroughly appreciated the experience, particularly the international nature of it. They rose to the challenge of competing without notes and working as a team. The structure of the Olympiad most impressed me, and having to respond to the judges’ questions added an element of intellectual rigour absent in other fields. In the end, I think the qualities the Ethics Olympiad were more about reason, logic and coherency of ideas, which are far more difficult and more necessary perhaps than the qualities of persuasion and debating for debate’s sake. We were very pleased when the event was awarded to MLC.”

Other successful Ethics Olympiads have occurred in 2014 involving schools in different Australian states. In August Queensland students participated in an Ethics Olympiad against students from WA. The topics under discussion are determined on the day from a pool of five possible cases which the students have worked on over the preceding months and the decision about which team goes first (Team A) is determined by a coin toss. Students are presented with a specific question which they address. The WA students put forward a position on the topic of forced fatherhood, specifically the conditions where a government could be allowed to limit the number of children parents can have or interfere with one’s liberty to reproduce? They had to collectively present their position and then defend or clarify the position for the judges. Students from Queensland then had the opportunity to critique their position -to which the WA students responded. One of the strengths of this event is that students have to think on their feet and respond to questions and comments made on the day.

Students describe Ethics Olympiads as fun, engaging and profound. Much of the growth occurs during preparation – the hours engaged in rational discussion with their teammates and coaches. Then the event itself, with its emphasis on civility, clear reasoning, and cooperation, reinforces dispositions cultivated behind the scenes, ultimately moulding the students' character for the better.



Students participating in an Ethics Olympiad develop a broader and more nuanced understanding of ethical issues. By honing their ideas in the preparation for the Ethics Olympiad they consider points of view beyond their own local understanding and while participating in the event they gain a unique perspective on those same issues.

*Figure 3-Students from Bentley School California*

The benefits for the school and the students involved are worth contemplating.

- Improving ethical and civil discourse in your school
- Promoting constructive philosophical thinking
- improving critical and creative thinking skills
- developing communication skills

In November 2014 we trialed this event successfully with Middle School Year 8 students. Holy Spirit College Corrimal in NSW competed against Hale Middle school students in WA. Topics used included;

- Copying Homework
- Immunization Programs as a cover for Spying Operations
- Lying to Parents
- World Cup Controversy
- Violence against Bullies

Again the students enjoyed the experience overall and found it really worthwhile.

Schools like mine have always put a great deal of time and energy into sport. We want our students to be healthy and furthermore learn skills such as being part of a team and working towards success and even perhaps success at an elite level within their chosen sport. Aristotle thought that virtue was also an area that requires hard work, training like the sort of training one might see in sporting endeavours. An ethical life or what is



*Figure 4 Hale Year 11 students competing against St Patricks College students Townsville*

sometimes referred to as the Good Life involves elite reasoning skills and a determination to be the best person one can be.

An Ethics Olympiad is an event where students train as a team and then work collaboratively towards establishing an ethical response to an interesting and challenging ethical problem. The cases we look at are real life issues such as whether it is ethical to copy homework, lie to parents or be violent towards bullies. The answers to these questions might seem straight forward (no, no and no way) but would it be wrong to lie to an abusive parent if in telling the truth there would be a risk of real harm to yourself or a loved one? Surely copying homework could be justified in certain situations and is a policeman able to use force where a frail or elderly person is being physically bullied? A case can effectively be made to justify each of these actions. The ethical framework most students use is a form of utilitarianism which allows for any action or inaction if it maximises health and happiness for the most people. This might mean that in the horrific situation where a husband or father is physically abusing a member of the family it might be the right thing to do to lie to a parent in order to ensure the health and happiness of the person that is being abused. Utilitarianism would say that under these circumstances it would be immoral not to lie to a parent.

The problem with utilitarianism has been highlighted by the philosopher Immanuel Kant. Good results can come from bad actions and how can we foresee accurately the consequence of any action or inaction? Kant says if we apply the maxim (i.e. lying to parents) as a universal principle then it would destroy trust and relationships....therefore it is always immoral to lie to parents even in such a situation as described above. In this approach principles such as treating people as an end in themselves rather than a means to an end and making moral decisions that can be universally applied are vital ingredients to the Good Life. Here an ethical response to a situation where one could lie to a parent would be to always tell the truth and in doing so act on principle. Herein the Good life is a matter of acting on principles rather than on consequences. Our school motto is not some fancy Latin phrase rather it is simply the word "Duty". Duty is at the heart of Kantian Ethics where doing the right thing is based on logic and ethical principles.

As I had hoped the Ethics Olympiads we have run to date have had the same excitement and gravitas as I had witnessed at the Ethics Bowl in the US. So we have continued to grow the event in 2015.

### **2014/15 Medal winners**

**Gold Medal** winning schools - In order to win a gold medal a school must win a regional/local Ethics Olympiad (or Bowl) and an international Ethics Olympiad event.

- Bentley School California United States
- Hale School - WA Australia
- Methodist Ladies College - Vic Australia

**Silver Medal** winning schools - In order to win a silver medal a school must win a regional/local ethics Olympiad event.

- Holy Spirit College Corromal NSW Australia
- St Patrick's College- Townsville- Qld Australia

**Bronze Medal** winning schools -In order to win a bronze medal a school must participate in an international Ethics Olympiad event.

- Austin East High School Tennessee United States

I commend this opportunity to you as a wonderful way forward for your school. Below is a case from the 2014 Ethics Olympiad.

## **SAMPLE CASE**

### **Copying Homework**

Gabriella and Vivian have been friends for a long time and are now in high school with aspirations to attend top-notch universities. They have four classes together this year, three of which are AP (for gifted students) classes. As such, they are extremely busy with their schoolwork. Unluckily, two of their AP courses happen to have tests scheduled for the same day. To make matters worse, homework is assigned in their fourth common course the day before they must take the tests. It is just a simple worksheet, but it must be submitted for a grade. Gabriella is annoyed that she has to take time away from studying for the tests, but it only takes her thirty minutes to complete the assignment. Vivian, however, studies diligently all evening and forgets to do the worksheet. It just slips her mind.

The next day, Vivian realizes that she has forgotten to complete the homework. She knows that getting a zero on an assignment will be detrimental to her overall average and the teacher does not accept late homework. She decides to ask Gabriella if she can copy her answers to the worksheet. Gabriella is sympathetic to Vivian's situation but has a few concerns. First and foremost, she could get in a great deal of trouble for letting Vivian copy her work—after all, it's considered cheating. In the eyes of many people, including the school administrators, cheating is always wrong, no matter how small of an assignment it is. Gabriella is also frustrated because she took the time to complete the worksheet while Vivian did not. It seems unfair that Vivian had the extra time to study but will still receive full credit as Gabriella. It is not only unfair to Gabriella, but to all of the students in the class who did the homework on their own.

At the same time, it just a menial worksheet—what some students might call “busy work.” It doesn’t seem the same as plagiarizing an essay, and the benefits Vivian will receive if Gabriella lets her copy the worksheet seem to far outweigh the triviality of the rule being broken. Perhaps more importantly, Gabriella wants to help her friend. She certainly doesn’t want to see Vivian’s grade damaged over a silly worksheet. If Gabriella says no, she knows that it will really hurt her friendship with Vivian.

Copying Homework was originally published by the National High School Ethics Bowl Case Writing Committee under a CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license. For more information about the National High School Ethics Bowl visit <http://nhseb.unc.edu>

### **Study Questions**

- (1) Would it be morally permissible for Gabriella to allow Vivian to copy the worksheet? Why or why not?
- (2) Does the fact that Gabriella and Vivian are good friend’s influence the ethical analysis of whether or not copying would be morally permissible? Explain.
- (3) Is it ever morally permissible to break rules in order to help a friend? If so, what must the conditions be?

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Interested teachers can register their school at the Ethics Olympiad Website;  
[www.ethicsolympiad.org](http://www.ethicsolympiad.org)