ABSTRACT

The authors developed an ethics game that uses specially designed ethical situations for students to consider. Two students argue a course of action based on the scenario and defend that action using content discussed in class. Substantive issues include decision-making models, values as they pertain to the situation, professional responsibilities, ethical principles, social expectations, and legal requirements. Points are awarded based on how compelling each argument is. All students have an opportunity to participate. The benefits of using the game are that students gain confidence in their ability to defend an ethical decision, are able to see ethical situations from more than one perspective, and have an opportunity to clarify values. In addition, ethical principles and decision-making models are brought to life in a fun way. Difficulties involved in using the game include class size and limited time between the students learning course content and using it in the game.

Nurses frequently encounter ethical dilemmas and make decisions that have ethical implications. However, many nurses do not label them as such. Nurses are faced daily with ethical issues such as using restraints, handling patients who refuse medication or treatment, providing information, and allocating resources (Bandman & Bandman, 1995). Nurses generally do not consciously use an ethical decision-making model to solve these dilemmas. According to Bandman and Bandman (1995), "the function of nursing ethics is to guide the activity of nursing on behalf of the presumed good" (p. 5). Therefore, the essential question of nursing ethics is, "What are [morally] justifiable reasons for my nursing actions?" (Bandman & Bandman, 1995, p. 17).

Relationship Between Games and Ethics

According to White and Davis (1987), a game is composed of "players, rules, terminating situations, payoffs, and uncertainty" (p. 622). Players must be uncertain about who will be the winner and about the outcome of the game itself, such as whether there will even be a winner (White & Davis, 1987). Similarly, ethical situations in health care often have no correct answers and no clear winners. In this way, ethics and gaming are well suited to each other. Traditionally, ethics in nursing classes have been taught through lectures and case studies. Playing an ethical game would allow students to practice making ethical decisions and examine their personal values and biases within a safe environment, where there is no expectation for students to act on a decision. Considering these issues, the authors developed a game to help nursing students understand ethics.

Literature Review

According to the literature, some primary benefits of games are that they may stimulate learning, present new information, review course content (Sisson & Becker, 1988), facilitate learning, and reinforce and apply theory. Sisson and Becker (1988) noted that adults learn best when they apply theory immediately, such as by playing a game. In addition, Schmitz, MacLean, and Shidler (1991) observed that adults found the active problem solving necessary in games more appealing than lectures. They concluded that experiences provided by games may be more similar to real events than those experiences afforded by other teaching methods. Benefits of experiential learning from games are enhanced as resolutions or decisions are made in tandem with evaluation, reflection, and application (Thatcher, 1990).

To support the idea that students taught by gaming learn as much as those taught by lecture and/or discussion, Bays and Hermann (1997) studied 69 nursing students. The control group was taught content about the endocrine system by traditional lectures, whereas the experimental group was taught the same content by a non-simulation game. No significant difference in test scores on course content was found between the two groups. Although the study was limited by the absence of a pretest prior to delivery of the content, gaming was considered a valuable teaching strategy.

The Ethics Game

The nursing school that used the ethics game has a caring, educative curriculum, as outlined by Bevis and Watson (1989). One component of this curriculum is active learning, which "involves students in doing things and thinking about the
that his only disappointment in life occurred when his youngest son began to
take drugs, dropped out of school, and
went on welfare. His disappointment
was so great that he has not spoken to
his son in 3 years. He expresses hope
that his son may straighten himself out
some day, even if he is not alive to see it.
One week later, Jack's oldest son tells
you that his family has a surprise for
Jack when he gets home. His youngest
son has been attending college and will
graduate in 2 months. He will surprise
his father by coming to see him, with his
diploma, for Jack's 66th birthday. You do
not think Jack will survive that long. Do
you tell Jack's son he may not have that
much time?

While playing the game, students must
consider that although there may be clear
legal obligations related to the dilemma,
they must be mindful of ethical considera-
tions, such as beneficence and their duty
or obligation to themselves and others.

The Set Up

For students to benefit from the game,
they must understand the role values play
in the ethical decision-making process,
and what constitutes an ethical dilemma.
Students also must have sound knowledge
of the ethical theories of utilitarianism
and deontology, and of related principles,
such as beneficence, autonomy, and jus-
tice. In addition, students should under-
stand the people to whom nurses have a
professional responsibility or obligation
of duty, such as clients, employers, profes-
sional and governing bodies, and them-
selves. Students also must recognize that
other health care providers are equally
committed to ethical practice. Nurses are
not the only health care professionals
involved in decisions with ethical implica-
tions. Students must be aware of ethical
decision-making resources, such as
in-house ethicists or ethics rounds/commit-
tees. Finally, students should examine
some ethical decision-making models and
codes of ethics or guidelines for ethical
behavior.

Playing the Game

Students are divided into pairs. The
dilemma is read aloud, a coin is tossed,
and the winner of the toss chooses which
side of the dilemma he or she will argue.
The partner must argue the other posi-
tion, regardless of personal feelings. The
winner of the coin toss must formulate an
argument for his or her position and ver-
ba1y present it to the class. When formu-
labing arguments, the two students are
required to use an ethical decision-making
model. Using a decision-making model
helps students:

- Define the problem as they see it.
- Consider some of their values as
  they pertain to the situation.
- Outline their professional responsi-
  bilities to the various stakeholders in the
  scenario.
- Consider principles such as justice
  and autonomy.
- Examine the social expectations
  and legal requirements.
- Outline the alternatives and their
  consequences.

These six points constitute an ethical
decision-making model, a framework derived
by the authors after consulting a number
of sources (Bunting & Webb, 1988; Burkhardt
& Nathaniel, 1998; College of Nurses of Ontario,
1999; Keatings & Smith, 2000).

The students in each pair must present
equally compelling arguments, considering
the same points and issues from oppo-
site perspectives. The class then votes for
the student they feel made the strongest
argument, not the student they agree with
from a moral, emotional, or philosophical
standpoint.

The game is not a debate. One student
presents his or her argument, followed by
the other student in the pair. No rebuttal
is necessary. Time allotments have been
found to be unnecessary because the argu-
ments themselves are usually self-limiting,
with the students exhausting their points relatively quickly.

Scoring

The students who argue the sides of
the dilemmas receive one point for each
student who votes for them. Therefore, the
student who makes the more persuasive
argument receives more points. In addi-
tion, all students who vote for the winning
argument receive one point for being on
the winning side. For example, in a class
of 20 students, 2 students present their
positions, and 18 students vote. The stu-
dent with the most persuasive argument
would receive 10 points for the 10 stu-
dents who voted for him or her. The other
student would receive 8 points for the 8 students who voted for him or her. Each of the 10 students who voted for the winner also would receive one point. In case of a tie, only the two students who argued their sides would receive 9 points each. Voting students do not receive points in a tie. At the conclusion of the game, the student with the most overall points wins. To raise the stakes, prizes, (e.g., useful but no longer used nursing textbooks, pens, bookmarks) may be promised to the winner.

Difficulties of the Game
This game first was used with a class of nursing students who met for 2 hours, 2 nights per week. This schedule allowed students to complete their reading assignments and discuss the theoretical material during the first class. In the next class, they would integrate ideas and use them in the game. When the course was taught for a 4-hour period, one night per week, the game was not as successful. Because students were required to understand much theory during the first part of the class, they became fatigued and had difficulty selecting relevant components to formulate their arguments. The time interval between the theory and the game provided by the class held 2 nights per week was more effective for using both theory and the game. Regardless of the timing of classes, the students benefited from having the ethical theories, principles, and a decision-making model available to help them formulate their arguments.

Class size also was related to the game’s success. Having fewer students in a class facilitated game organization. The summer class for which the game was developed had 28 students. During the regular school year, a class of 70 students had to be divided into groups of 20 to 28 students. Each group played a separate game in separate rooms using the same scenarios. Alternately, one group of 20 to 28 students could have played the game, while the rest of the students watched and voted. If this alternative were used, scoring would have been altered. Participants would score on a scenario-by-scenario basis, and voters would not receive points.

Scoring may be time consuming. With a smaller class, scoring could be completed by the instructor. With a larger class or with many games occurring at once, a student or colleague could be enlisted to keep score, or students who had just finished their arguments could score for the next pair of students. While scores are being tallied, group discussion about the scenario and the relative ease or difficulty of arguing a position with which one did not necessarily agree should be encouraged. These discussions, which usually arose spontaneously as voting closed, have proved to be thought provoking for students. They were able to examine their own values, assumptions, and ability to think critically under pressure. Alternatively, when running several games simultaneously, discussion could be reserved for a designated time.

Another difficulty with the game was that some students found the pressure of thinking and formulating a verbal argument in front of the class stressful. They stated that they were unable to think with people looking at them, particularly because some of the preceding arguments were compelling. However, few students experienced performance anxiety. Most students stated that the non-threatening atmosphere of the game outweighed their anxiety about speaking in front of the class. Formulating an argument also was difficult for students who were tired, stressed, or who had difficulty thinking critically. Again, these students were in the minority.

Finally, some students stated that choosing a winning argument based entirely on the strength of the argument and excluding personal opinion or belief was difficult. One student said:

“I found it very difficult to put my personal feelings aside when it was voting time. When the case was presented, I immediately knew how I would respond to the situation, but when I heard the arguments I had to be very careful to set my feelings aside in order to make a sound decision.”

Benefits of an Ethics Game
According to the students, particular benefits of the ethics game included a newfound confidence in using an ethical decision-making model, an ability to understand why they made certain judgments, and confidence in their final decisions. Students became aware of the ethical principles they used on a daily basis and that there are no easy, right, or wrong answers in many clinical situations. They began to appreciate that they had to make the best decisions they could based on the information available. This awareness helped remove some of the uncertainty from the decision-making process.

Most students in the summer course were working RNs returning to school for their BScN degree. They reported they were more confident in ethical decision making in the clinical setting after playing the game. One student stated:

“The lecture outlining the professional responsibilities, the [theory], and the ethical decision-making model were clearly and logically presented. None of its “real” importance for ethical issues became clear apparent until nurses were asked to justify ethically a decision which they were to support but which they did not believe in. I was forced... to alter my viewpoint and look at an issue logically from an entirely different perspective. The power and politics involved in the decision-making process have, up until now, left me with an emotional knee jerk response to what I perceive to be “right.” When you are forced to go through steps in a decision-making process, a greater comfort level is achieved once the decision is made.

Another student said:

“What a marvelous learning tool! Not only was I able to learn, but I had fun. I was able to participate and was interested and alert the whole time. This class provided me with an opportunity to evaluate whether I had absorbed the information presented. Much to my surprise, I had learned a tremendous amount. As I reflected on decisions related to ethical dilemmas, I realized in the past I “just made” decisions. To justify the question “why I made this decision” and on what principles was very difficult to answer. The information I took away from this class was, regardless of the nature of the ethical dilemmas I will be facing in my nursing career, justification of my position will increase my personal comfort with this subject... The arguments for both sides fascinated me! I discovered that sometimes I agreed to something that, in reality, I would not have agreed to. This stimulated me to wonder if subconsciously did this in my practice and upon reflection, I discovered that I did do.
this. This not only taught me to be more accepting of how others view situations, but also to be nonjudgmental in my thinking.

After the students recognized their relative lack of familiarity with practical ethics, they then had to become aware of their own ethical positions. This awareness was facilitated by helping students select an ethical decision-making model and practice using that model to make ethical decisions in hypothetical, yet realistic, situations. They also came to realize that being knowledgeable about and comfortable with their ethical position on a specific situation without pressure to make a decision, can make ethics enjoyable.

Conclusion
Games are a fundamental part of our culture and have some popularity in teaching. They can reinforce critical thinking, while making learning environments fun for both students and instructors. Weighty topics such as ethics may be more accessible through games. Games provide an excellent tool for instructors who wish to help students have a non-threatening, learning experience about making ethical decisions and understanding the value of ethics in daily practice. In this way, students learn to live their ethics.

References

Toronto: Delmar.

CLASSIFIED MARKETPLACE

DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Outstanding opportunity for a Director of Education and Professional Development in a Miami hospital.

Contact: Rose Wagner, 800-467-9117 or rwagner@besmith.com.