LESSON 3

BUILDING A MORAL COMMUNITY

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Prework for participants: Have participants read the handouts "Definition: A Moral Community" and "Cooperative Argumentation: The Basis of a Moral Community." Ask them to develop a viewpoint on several controversial issues in preparation for practicing moral dialogue.

OBJECTIVES

By the end of this session, participants will be able to:

- Define the term "moral, or deliberative, community"
- Determine the extent to which their college community meets this definition
- Describe the essential role of moral dialogue and cooperative argumentation in creating a moral community
- Demonstrate the basic skills of moral dialogue

OPENING

In this session, we will further extend our concept of community by describing the characteristics of a moral, or deliberative, community and then asking questions to determine if our own college or university meets those criteria. What are the benefits of living, learning, and working in a moral community and how can we achieve this end? What are the attitudes, knowledge, and skills essential for creating this model?

STRATEGIES

Begin by reminding participants of the major findings from the previous session. Next, lead a discussion to compare the local college/university community with the description of a moral community found in the Definition: A Moral Community handout. Discussion questions are included in the handout. Allow adequate time for everyone to express their viewpoints and, as much as possible, model and encourage the use of moral dialogue skills and attitudes.

Introduce the Moral Dialogue activity by reviewing the reading, Cooperative Argumentation: The Basis of a Moral Community. Divide participants into triads and begin the moral dialogue/cooperative argumentation skill practice activity. Allow as much time as

possible for practicing, providing feedback, and processing the experience. End by asking each participant to complete the Cooperative Argumentation Self-Assessment Tool, reflect on their current status, and think about how they might actually use their new skills in the coming week. If you have time, consider the Widening Circles activity at the end of this lesson.

Key Questions

- What are the characteristics of a moral, or deliberative, community?
- What is the role of moral dialogue in a deliberative community?
- What skills and attitudes are essential in moral dialogue?
- To what extent is our college/university community a moral one?

Closure & Transition

Today we have practiced the skills of moral dialogue and determined the value of using these skills to build a moral community. In our next session, we will explore individual moral development and the process of building the habit of acting in accord with our moral values.

Homework for Lesson 4:

Ask students to finish reading *Character is Destiny*, by Russell W. Gough. Using the Homework Assignment worksheet, have them take notes on each chapter

Lesson Assessment: Revisions for Next Time

Definition: A Moral Community

Introduction

A moral community comprises a group of people who take moral discussion seriously and try to achieve some understanding of what is right and wrong. Moral communities depend on a process of moral dialogue for mutual understanding and try to reach moral consensus whenever possible (adapted from *Ethics and College Student Life,* K. A. Strike and P. A. Moss, 1997).

Basis of a Moral Community

The individual is the basis of any community, and moral dialogue is the basis of a moral community. This dialogue takes place within the context of relationships between individuals and among groups within the community. Most of us are members of multiple groups within a community and also hold membership in diverse communities. Opportunities for moral dialogue and the building of moral communities are therefore available to us on a daily basis. Furthermore, one individual or a small group of individuals who are able and willing to engage in moral dialogue can influence the entire community.

Becoming a Moral Community

To move toward becoming a moral community—one that is closer to our ideal of a college community—we must try to minimize the harm of conflicts of opinion and attitudes and maximize the potential for good. Moral dialogue helps us to maintain responsible, respectful relationships with each other at all levels of the college even if we have honest and heartfelt disagreements with one another. Looking to our code of ethics, honor code, or shared commitments, we acknowledge that by joining this college community, we agree to live and work with each other under a system of shared values and expectations. We can look to these documents to guide us when we are faced with conflicts.

Ultimately, resolving ethical conflicts and problems involves regularly and openly discussing our differences and seeking to resolve disagreements in a fair and explicit manner. In other words, we must engage in moral dialogue using cooperative argumentation skills to assure mutual understanding, effective and ethical decision making, and when possible, moral consensus. If we are to become a truly moral community, we will need to learn and practice this new approach to communication.

Discussion Questions

Address the nature of your own college or university community and compare it to what characterizes a moral or deliberative community. Discuss the following questions in your small group and be prepared to share your responses with the larger group.

1. In what ways does our college/university community resemble or not resemble a moral or deliberative community as described in our readings?

2. What might be inhibiting members of our community from engaging in moral dialogue?

3. How do members of our community generally express differences of opinion?

4. How do we work out conflicts between opposing viewpoints?

5. Where on our campus do we find moral dialogue practiced?

6. Do we have a system in place to help mediate differences or negotiate conflicts? How successful is this system?

7. What are the risks and benefits for our college or university of developing into a more moral community?

8. What can I do personally to develop this moral community?

MORAL DIALOGUE

PURPOSE

To help students learn and practice the art of moral dialogue.

PREPARATION & MATERIALS

Copy, for each student, the reading Cooperative Argumentation: The Basis of a Moral Community, and the Moral Dialogue Critique Form.

PROCESS

- Assign the cooperative argumentation reading as homework the night before class. Ask students to compare mentally their own set of dialogue skills to the criteria listed in the reading.
- Divide students into groups of three and assign—or let them select—a topic. Start with simpler topics (e.g., a preference for cats versus dogs, rap versus rock 'n' roll, vegetarian versus a traditional diet). Then move on to more controversial topics (e.g., whether or not to hide bad grades from your parents, report a friend who has vandalized the dorm, live together before marriage, support the death penalty, support physician-assisted suicide, use animals as research subjects, or fund social services through religious organizations). Students should move from discussing nonmoral topics where they state and defend a clear preference for the value or superiority of their choice to more controversial and clearly moral issues where core moral values are at stake.
- Two students will engage in a dialogue while the third student observes, taking notes and giving feedback. The observer will use the questions listed on the critique form. Emphasize that the observer should pay attention not only to the words and content of the dialogue, but also to body language and the use of voice and gestures.
- After the first pair has completed their dialogue, ask the students to switch roles so the observer will have a chance to dialogue and be critiqued.
- Debrief the exercise as a group of the whole. Select some of the following key questions for the debriefing:
  - —How well did your group do at following the principles of moral dialogue?
  - —Was it harder to follow those principles when you had strong feelings about a topic?

—Was it more difficult when the issue was a moral, rather than a nonmoral, one?

—What are some strategies we might use to improve a dialogue when we are emotionally caught up in one side or the other?

—What was the most important thing you learned during this exercise?

Cooperative Argumentation: The Basis of a Moral Community

(Adapted from Cooperative Argumentation—A Model for a Deliberative Community *by J. M. Makau & D. L. Marty, 2001, and* Ethics and College Student Life *by K. A. Strike & P. A. Moss, 1997)*

Makau and Marty (2001) present a form of conversation termed "cooperative argumentation" which serves as the basis for *moral dialogue* and *moral community* described by Strike and Moss (1997). This form of communication is a constructive way of addressing ethical dilemmas, expressing opposition, and negotiating disagreement. This process is characterized by a comprehensive and open exchange of ideas in an atmosphere of mutual respect and care.

The object of this exchange is both to express one's own position and to understand others' viewpoints as all parties work toward clarifying the realities of a situation and discovering the most ethical position. The ultimate purpose of this dialogue is to reach either moral consensus, if possible, or "the most effective and responsible decision in any given set of circumstances" (Makau and Marty, p. 3). The long-term effect of this moral dialogue is the moral development of individual community members; the enhancement of critical thinking, debate, and argumentation skills; and an improved decision-making capacity. Thus a moral community is created when moral dialogue is the norm.

Contrary to *competitive argumentation*, which reflects the dominant cultural values of U.S. society—competition, individualism, and winner-take-all—participants in *cooperative argumentation* perceive each other as resources, not rivals, and realize the interdependent nature of their relationship and even of their arguments. The final outcome of this exchange is that all parties will be motivated to cooperate in actualizing the decisions made. The cooperative argumentation model emphasizes working with, not against, another for the common good of the community and a win-win outcome.

The value of cooperative argumentation is that it helps to build a *moral, or deliberative, community* by encouraging and supporting a democratic deliberative process wherein:

1. Everyone affected by the decision is included in the dialogue
2. Equal opportunity to participate and express views on controversial topics is afforded to all

3. The agenda for discussion and the methods of decision making are determined by all participants
4. Free and open exchange of information and reasoning allows understanding of the issues and of the multiple views (100)

To enter into a deliberative community, we are called to embrace and enact the following:

- The capacity to listen to and understand others' perspectives nondefensively
- A willingness to persuade others and be open to persuasion by convincing arguments of others
- An ability to present beliefs backed by credible authorities, objective and reasonable evidence, and with balanced partiality
- Empathy toward others, even if one disagrees
- Critical thinking
- Personal accountability for our words and deeds
- Care and concern for self and others
- Authenticity and honesty
- A commitment to comprehensive assessment of facts, issues, and circumstances, and to working cooperatively "to make the most reasonable, fair, and just decision possible" (105)

Cooperative argumentation is a style of decision making that requires the development of a range of skills and knowledge. It also involves the desire to reach ethical decisions while honoring the value and safeguarding the integrity of our human relationships.

When ethical issues are at stake, cooperative argumentation "used in the service of critical thinking helps us form moral communities committed to and able to engage in ethical and effective deliberation" (106). Often the best decisions are made when the reasons for and against one's respective views are fully aired and evaluated.

One aspect of becoming "ethically fit" is to develop and use the skills of cooperative argumentation and to engage actively in the moral dialogue of one's community. How willing and able are you to participate in this form of communication?

Moral Dialogue Critique Form

What is the evidence that the students in moral dialogue are doing the following? Observe not only their words and the content of the dialogue, but also their body language, use of voice, and gestures.

1. **Argues point of view based on fact, real evidence, credible authorities, and reasoned opinion.**

Student 1: _____ Student 2: _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

2. **Listens carefully and openly to the arguments of the other. Gives proper feedback to the other student.**

Student 1: _____ Student 2: _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

3. **Avoids inflammatory language and emotional attacks on character, intelligence, or competence of the other student. Voice is even and steady.**

Student 1: _____ Student 2: _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

4. Persuades other student, and appears open to the persuasion of the other student.

Student 1: _____ Student 2: _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

5. Is patient and seriously considers the opposing viewpoint. Does not interrupt.

Student 1: _____ Student 2: _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

6. Treats the other student as an equal worthy of respect.

Student 1: _____ Student 2: _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

Cooperative Argumentation Self-Assessment Tool

How well do you practice the essentials of cooperative argumentation? Take this self-assessment by circling the response that best represents how often you exhibit the skills or attitudes of cooperative argumentation.

1. I listen carefully to hear others' perspectives without getting defensive.

Always Frequently Occasionally Rarely

2. I present my deeply held beliefs with a balanced partiality.

Always Frequently Occasionally Rarely

3. I am empathic toward those with opposing views even if I disagree with them.

Always Frequently Occasionally Rarely

4. I am willing to be personally accountable for my communication and action.

Always Frequently Occasionally Rarely

5. In arguing I show care and concern for myself as well as for others.

Always Frequently Occasionally Rarely

6. I am authentic and honest in what I say and do.

Always Frequently Occasionally Rarely

7. I work with others to make the most reasonable, fair, and just decisions possible.

Always Frequently Occasionally Rarely

8. I am open-minded and willing to risk changing my mind.

Always Frequently Occasionally Rarely

9. In discussions I am inclusive and give everyone an opportunity to be heard.

Always Frequently Occasionally Rarely

10. I feel interdependent and interconnected with others in my community.

Always Frequently Occasionally Rarely

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT: *CHARACTER IS DESTINY*

Read and reflect on the short book, *Character is Destiny,* by Russell W. Gough. For each chapter, note in writing your assessment of the most significant ideas *for a college student.* Why is each idea significant? How personally do you respond to each idea?

In other words, your notes might take the following form:

Chapter: _____

Significant idea(s): _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Why significant: _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Personal response: _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Setting your note-taking pages up for each chapter ahead of time will make this process flow more easily for you. Demonstrate that you have read and engaged with the material and applied it to your own life. Be prepared to share your ideas in class.

Supplemental Activities

Widening Circles

Purpose

Widening Circles helps people to see with new eyes an issue or situation that is of great concern to them. Thus they participate in widening circles of identity. It is excellent for environmental activists, bringing wisdom, patience, flexibility, and perseverance. The name of the exercise is taken from Rainer Maria Rilke's poem in his *Book of Hours,* that begins, "I live my life in widening circles/that reach out across the world" and ends with "And I still don't know/Am I a falcon, a storm/or a great song."

Process

Participants sit in groups of four. Ask them to choose, mentally, a particular issue or situation that concerns them. After a moment of silence, invite them to take turns speaking and listening to each other. Each person will describe the issue from four perspectives in turn:

- From their own experience and point of view, including their feelings about the issue
- From the perspective of a person whose views are very different and even adversarial on the issue, introducing themselves and speaking as this person, using the pronoun "I"
- From the viewpoint of a nonhuman being that is involved in or affected by that particular situation
- And lastly, in the voice of a future human whose life will be directly affected by the choices made now on this issue

The guide announces these perspectives when the time comes for each one—instead of all at once at the outset—and repeats them in that sequential fashion for the following speakers. Give at least three minutes for each perspective. Signal the time with a verbal cue ("take another minute to finish") and then with a clacker or bell to end that part. Allow for silence between each part and at the end of each series.

To speak on behalf of another, and identify even briefly with that being's experience and perspective, is an act of moral imagination. It is not difficult to do: As children we knew how to "play-act." Use an uncharged, almost casual tone in your instructions; you are not asking people to "channel" or be omniscient, but simply to imagine another point of view.

Allow some silence as they choose for whom they will speak and imaginatively enter that other's experience, so they can respect it and not perform a caricature of it. It is a brave and generous act to make room in your mind for another's experience and to lend them your voice; let the participants appreciate that generosity in themselves and each other. Allow time at the end for people to share in their small groups what they felt and learned.

(From Chapter 8 of Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect Our Lives, Our World *by Joanna R. Macy and Molly Young Brown, New Society Publishers, Gabriola Island, British Columbia, Canada, 1998.)*

Discipline/Major Adaptation

Research and discuss the forms of critical discourse used in selected professions. Find examples from professional newsletters, journals, papers, or interviews.

- How are opposing viewpoints aired and debated in this profession?
- Who acts as a spokesperson in this profession?
- Where, or in what context, are disagreements discussed?