

# How to be an Ethics Bowl Coach

*Based on Best Practices Shared at the Summer 2014 Ethics Bowl Workshop in Clearwater, FL organized by the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics*

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Preface: Though there are better and worse ways to coach an ethics bowl team, there isn't one right way. Plus, it's better to jump in and learn via trial and error than to wait until conditions are perfect. So use your judgment and have fun! Just remember that ethics bowl isn't debate – the goal isn't simply to win, but to help your students grow and flourish as moral reasoners and responsible citizens.

## **1. How to recruit a team**

- a. Solicit names of bright students from colleagues; send each a personal invitation
- b. Hold an interest meeting (offer food)
- c. Reassure shy students that they needn't speak – they can be “researchers” who help prepare, but don't participate in (or at least don't speak during) the competition
- d. If too many students sign up (a good problem!), no problem – have an in-house bowl to determine which team(s) advance(s) to the bowl

## **2. How to structure practice**

- a. As a class (not an option at all institutions)
- b. As part of a class (insert case discussion into an existing class)
- c. As a club (currently the most common model, but these often lead to the development of ethics bowl classes)

## **3. How to teach your team ethical theory**

- a. *\*Note that it's an open question as to whether ethical theory need be used in ethics bowl, as well as whether using ethical theory is harmful or helpful when used*
- b. Review an ethics intro text, such as the open source ebook [Ethics in a Nutshell: An Intro for Ethics Bowlers](#) or simply the “ethical theory” chapter included in most applied ethics textbooks

- c. Remind the students that ethical theory is best used to illuminate otherwise neglected moral nuances and extend otherwise underdeveloped lines of reasoning – that its role is not to simply rationalize preexisting biases
- d. During the bowl, encourage your team to “educate” judges about the theories they employ as they explain their views. This will help non-philosopher judges appreciate their reasoning and show philosopher judges they know what they’re talking about – not simply name-dropping (Kant, Mill, etc.).

#### **4. How to cover the cases**

- a. One at a time
  - i. Thoroughly covering any ethics bowl case requires more than a quick, casual discussion, so slow down and devote adequate time and attention to each
- b. Consider dividing the labor by assigning different students primary responsibility for different cases. There are several ways to do this:
  - i. Have the students rank the cases according to their interest in taking ownership (either after a first blush reading, or after several group discussions)
    1. *Eager*
    2. *Willing*
    3. *Please, no!*
  - ii. Assign cases according to your assessment of each student’s strengths
- c. Rather than assigning specific students primary responsibility for specific cases, consider assigning students consistent roles – primary initial presenter, primary commentator, primary judge interactor, primary researcher, etc.
- d. Help your team develop a sense of each case’s central moral tension – ask, “What makes this case hard?”
- e. Encourage your team to transcend their knee-jerk responses and develop a nuanced, well-developed view

#### **5. How to prepare for the bowl**

- a. Run a mock bowl
  - i. Appoint a moderator, use brand new questions, preclude notes – *have your students practice as they intend to perform*
  - ii. Have participants serve as judges to better appreciate that perspective
    1. Remember that judges are beholden to their scoring rubric (so review and study it)
- b. Have your team practice responding to different types of questions
  - i. Common question style: *What’s the central moral tension and how might you resolve it?*

1. Note that many cases are so complex that they can't be boiled down into a single, central moral tension (broad consequences versus relational obligations, for example). Judges notice oversimplification, so be sure your team appreciates and can articulate the various aspects of each case.
  - ii. Curveball questions (diverges from the above, steering analysis in an unexpected direction)
- c. Practice responding to different types of commentary
  - i. Aggressive critiques
  - ii. Obvious questions

## 6. How to be a good coach

- a. Be encouraging – with this approach your job is to support and help your team grow, not necessarily and in every case critique or judge them
- b. Tough love – once you've established a relationship with them, don't be afraid to bluntly point out flaws in your students' reasoning. (Some teams need some degree of sugar coating, but many teams perform better when strategically pushed.)
- c. Show all views due respect
  - i. *Gently* challenge weak arguments and suspect positions
    1. Help the students unpack and analyze their views, but always with due consideration for their perspective, background, etc.
- d. *Remember that you're teaching students (persons), not just principles and rules*

## 7. Bonus Tips

- a. How to gently encourage students to reevaluate biases, positions, etc.
  - i. Foster an environment of open, supportive learning and discussion
  - ii. Take all positions seriously – attempt to discuss them dispassionately, separated from identity or ego
- b. How to deliver a quality presentation
  - i. Follow the three commandments of public speaking: know your material, be yourself, and practice (to the extent that you know what you're talking about, you're being yourself, and you've practiced you'll also be less nervous)
- c. Seek out advice from veteran participants

***For more information on the National High School Ethics Bowl, visit [nhseb.unc.edu](http://nhseb.unc.edu).***

***For more information on the Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl, visit <http://appe.indiana.edu/ethics-bowl/intercollegiate-ethics-bowl-competitions/>.***