When people think of ethics in communication, it is often in the context of journalistic ethics. Such a context is important, to be sure, but there is a vast array of communication contexts outside of journalism that involve ethics. Indeed, Johannesen (2001) argued that theory and research in the communication discipline clearly demonstrate the centrality of ethics to human communication processes. For instance, communication ethics issues in interpersonal relationships (e.g., lying) and in organizations (e.g., whistle blowing) have garnered much attention (Bok, 1978; McQueeney, 2006; Serota, Levine, & Boster, 2010). However, communication curricula are typically meager in using the “e” word when addressing these important issues students likely will encounter. As an indicator of this general deficiency, only one undergraduate textbook exists that presents a survey of ethics issues across the discipline, Ethics in Human Communication by Johannesen, Valde, and Whedbee (2008).

For the past several years I have undertaken several endeavors to forefront ethics in human communication courses. These efforts included developing a stand-alone course in human communication ethics, conducting a study comparing outcomes of students in communication ethics classes to students in communication classes with ethics units (Canary, 2007), participating in the Arizona State University Lincoln Polytechnic Ethics Teaching Fellowship, and teaching courses re-designed to highlight ethics throughout course content. Because this special issue is dedicated to reporting work accomplished by ASU Lincoln Fellows, this article reflects upon my experiences incorporating Fellowship efforts into human communication courses.
BACKGROUND FOR FELLOWSHIP EFFORTS

My interest in ethics traces back to experiences in industry before I re-entered academics on a full-time basis. I was involved with a small international sales company that held much promise but which ultimately folded largely due to unethical and illegal actions of the CEO and those who acquiesced to his bullying tactics. I limped away from that experience disillusioned and confused about how “good” people could do “bad” things. Academic research seemed a good way to answer questions inspired by my disillusionment and confusion. Likewise, college teaching seemed a good way to help prevent others from engaging in the destructive behaviors I witnessed.

However, when I started pursuing these interests, grounded in the perspective that communication is central to constructing notions of what constitutes ethical and unethical behavior, I encountered two significant barriers. First, studying the communicative construction of ethical and unethical practices in organizations is practically impossible due to accessibility issues, legal roadblocks, and the ever-present social desirability bias. Second, most undergraduate communication courses and textbooks relegate ethics to the end of the semester and back of the book, tacking on ethics as an after-thought rather than as an integral foundation to all of human communication.

I attempted to get around these barriers in teaching and research. First, I developed and taught an upper-division overview course on communication ethics. This course familiarized students to ethical issues across human communication contexts, from interpersonal relationships to public communication. Second, Marianne Jennings and I compared a sample of corporate codes of ethics, as formal organizational discourse regarding ethics, from before the Enron-inspired Sarbanes Oxley legislation to codes established after the legislation had gone into effect (Canary & Jennings, 2008). This study identified changes in formal organizational discourse regarding ethics, but it was admittedly lacking in access to everyday informal constructions of what is and is not ethical in organizations.

To be sure, these experiences increased my familiarity with ethics pedagogy and research. However, they also contributed to my growing sense that teaching ethics to human communication students might better be accomplished in content-specific courses. Likewise, I realized that my organizational communication research might better examine ethics latently through manifest investigations of other communicative phenomena, such as decision-making, knowledge sharing, and the like. In
keeping with the scope of this journal, the remainder of this essay focuses on teaching efforts rather than research.

**FELLOWSHIP FOCUS**

For the ASU Lincoln Polytechnic Ethics Teaching Fellowship I identified two existing courses in the communication major that could use an “ethics injection.” I had taught both courses multiple times previously, so I was very familiar with textbook alternatives for each course as well as alternatives for structuring the courses to meet institutional descriptions. Both courses fulfill communication elective requirements for communication majors and business-related majors at ASU. Hence, course sections tend to include students from different majors.

The first course, Small Group Communication (COM 230), is a lower division course that has no course prerequisites to enroll. Basically anyone who is interested in fulfilling a lower-division communication requirement with a course about how to work in groups takes the course. Students range from freshmen to seniors. This class addresses communication processes in small groups (e.g., decision making skills, developing group creativity, managing conflict, etc.), while students also learn by doing communication in small group projects. Throughout the many years of teaching the course at multiple institutions I had not put much thought into the ethical dimensions of small group communication. As a result, class discussions had not grappled with ethical issues such as group participation, power, diversity, or other communication ethics issues.

The second course, Leadership Communication (COM 430), is an upper division course that also has no course prerequisites to enroll. As a result, the course is taught at a senior level but often includes students who have had no previous exposure to communication principles. I had taught this course previously with a leadership ethics book as one of the required texts, but the ethics units still seemed disconnected from other content. A student one semester even commented in the course evaluation that we had not “discussed ethics much” in the course! This previous experience with the course and my desire to infuse ethics throughout communication courses were motivations for re-designing the leadership communication course. I knew it could be better.
Small Group Communication Text

The first challenge in using an ethics lens for focusing on small group communication was to find a textbook that would support such an approach. Small group textbooks typically include little or no treatment of ethical issues involved in small group communication. For example, an introductory textbook by Myers and Anderson (2008) includes one section in the first chapter called “Ethics of Small Group Membership.” Other small group textbooks, such as Keyton’s (2005) introductory text, do not address ethics at all. However, the popular textbook Communicating in Small Groups by Steven Beebe and John Masterson (2009) was recently revised to highlight an ethical issue relevant to each chapter in the book. Textboxes and case studies highlighting these issues are included with each chapter rather than lumped together in an ethics chapter at the end, allowing students to see the relevance of ethics to issues of participation, conflict management, information seeking, and every other concept covered in the course. This feature of the textbook allowed me to structure the class very much like any other small group communication course, but to foster discussions of ethics throughout the course.

Leadership Communication Texts

I faced a different challenge in redesigning the leadership communication course. Both textbooks I had used in the past were very good in and of themselves. One book, Peter Northhouse’s (2004) well-known Leadership: Theory and Practice, provided excellent support for addressing general leadership communication principles. The other text, Craig Johnson’s (2009) Meeting the Ethical Challenges of Leadership, did an excellent job of illuminating ethical issues in leadership. However, these two texts did not work well together, at least as I had used them in the past. The challenge, then, was to find textual support that would help me effectively use an ethics lens to focus on leadership communication, to pan out for broad principles and to zoom in for ethical issues. I opted to keep the Johnson book and to use a case study book, Rowe’s (2007) Cases in Leadership, to provide general readings and discussion material for leadership principles in practice. This decision allowed me to restructure the course to include readings from both texts for each unit, rather than separating ethical issues from leadership principles as I had in the past.
I put the new course structures, texts, and supporting activities into action in spring 2010. The experience was very different for the two classes, partly due to course purpose and partly due to student composition of each course.

Small Group Course

The ethics lens was somewhat useful for this course, but the ultimate goal of using ethics to shape course discussions was not met. One reason the small group course proved to be challenging in this regard was the strong “how to” emphasis of the class. Although I frequently incorporated break-out discussions of ethics issues presented in the text, I also found myself pressured to allow in-class time for groups to work on their projects and coach them on effective group process. As a result, the over-arching theme of being ethical group members and engaging in ethical communication practices was diluted by the nuts-and-bolts emphasis on moving through phases of group development and task accomplishment. I had not anticipated that these two goals would be competing rather than compatible. They are not necessarily so. However, I discovered that using an ethics lens requires more than simply finding an appropriate text and using class time when possible to address ethical issues of group communication. My commitment to using the lens was perhaps weaker for this course than was my desire for students to learn as many group communication skills as possible and have opportunities to put those skills into practice in the classroom. This is likely one reason so few group textbooks contain a strong ethics emphasis.

A second challenge in using the ethics lens for this course was student readiness. Few students had been exposed to communication principles before taking the class. The class was fairly small (fewer than 20 students), with the majority of students being freshmen and sophomores. A few students were chronically absent. Accordingly, the class developed a dynamic of fairly basic-level information exchange and step-by-step guidelines for success. This was not the dynamic I had envisioned when redesigning the course to adopt an ethics lens. It could be that this dynamic is typical for the small group course but that I had never attended to that because I was not attempting to do anything different.
Interestingly, we had discussed ethics issues sufficiently such that one of the groups raised an ethics issue in their mid-term project presentation. The assignment was to propose a solution to a university problem. As is typical for this course assignment, one group chose the parking problem (what university does not have a parking problem?). What was not typical, however, was that this group chose to investigate the issue of accessible parking for people with disabilities (no group or class member had a visible physical disability). Their information gathering revealed that although the institution was following the law regarding accessible parking spaces, the allocation of those spaces across the university was ethically suspect. Not only did the group point this out, they proposed an affordable and efficient solution to meet legal guidelines that would also ethically address needs of people with physical disabilities at the university. How refreshing, indeed!

Toward the end of the semester I conducted a “decision dilemma workshop” based on the Konstanz Method of Dilemma Discussion (Lind, 2008). For this activity, I presented a case of a community group decision that involved race, prejudice, inclusion, and legal rights. After discussing the details of the case and the decision, students were asked to vote whether they thought the decision made was right or not. Then the class divided into small groups of people who voted the same way and these groups developed lists of reasons to support their vote. Classroom seats were then arranged in a “face off” arrangement such that those voting “for” the decision were on one side and those voting “against” the decision were on the other side. Each side was invited to present one argument in support of their position at a time. Following ethical discussion guidelines, students were allowed to criticize or challenge ideas but they were not allowed to criticize or challenge other people. At the end of this phase, students went back into their small groups and identified the strongest arguments presented by the other side. We reconvened as a large group and each small group presented what arguments they found to be the strongest of the opposing side. I took another vote regarding the decision.

Although no students changed their minds, students indicated in written feedback after the activity that they thought it was very useful to be “forced to” listen to people with whom they disagreed. Even more importantly, they thought the most important lesson they would take from the activity was that people have good reasons for their viewpoints even if they do not agree with them. Another refreshing insight!
Leadership Communication Course

The leadership communication course was a completely different experience than the small group course. First of all, almost all students in the course were juniors and seniors, with many students in their last semester before graduation. Hence, the level of preparation to discuss both communication principles and ethical issues was much higher than it was in the lower division course. Secondly, I had some experience in presenting ethics content to students in this course, so my efforts at re-focusing the ethics lens was also informed by my previous experience of what worked and what did not work. I knew from earlier courses that presenting ethics theories and issues as separate units was not effective. Discussions in the Lincoln Fellowship program inspired me to use a more integral approach, truly using ethics as the lens through which to view all leadership communication issues. The result was more rewarding than I had imagined.

From the first day of class I structured the class seating arrangement and discussion format to foster a sense of responsibility to participate among students. Although the classroom space was constrained by rows of long tables, at the beginning of each class we re-arranged the furniture to create a U-shaped seating arrangement so all students could face each other. In course reflections some students called this arrangement the “round table discussion format,” which they noted was both unique and helpful for promoting participation. In addition to structuring the physical environment, class discussion time included a combination of starting discussion with pointed questions about readings, highlights of key points or difficult concepts, video clips, and case studies. Participation was a significant portion of the course grade, and I reminded students early and often that I attended to their contributions to class discussions. I posted participation points weekly on the course web-based grade book so students could see how I perceived their level of participation. As a result, class discussions were informed by the assigned readings and involved widespread participation.

Early in the semester we read an overview of several prominent ethical theories, including utilitarianism, virtue ethics, Kant’s categorical imperative, communitarianism, and others. However, instead of just presenting these for consumption by students (as I had done in the past), that unit also included reading a case study of a leadership communication dilemma. In class we evaluated the case using principles from each of the theories presented, guiding students to an understanding of how different ethical perspectives lead to different (or
similar assessments of right and wrong action. Written reflections by students indicated that this exercise was foundational to developing an understanding of the centrality of ethics in leadership communication.

One graded assignment, application papers, specifically demonstrated the usefulness of an ethics lens. For this assignment, students found written reports of current news regarding a leader or leadership action and evaluated that news report using course concepts of communication and ethics. Students found both positive and negative examples of leadership communication and ethics, which they presented to their classmates in oral reports. Many students reflected that they had not tried to relate classroom content to “real world” events before, and the experience was extremely useful for them to see how they can use their education to critically evaluate events going on around them.

As with the small group course, toward the end of the semester the class included a “leadership dilemma workshop,” modeled after the Konstanz Method of Dilemma Discussion (Lind, 2008). For this course, the case involved a small business owner as leader, disclosure issues, employee safety, and the use of a dangerous chemical in a residential pesticide. The same procedure was followed as described above for the small group course. In this class, however, one student noted that people became very emotionally charged about their positions. In the phase of finding strong arguments from the opposing side, one student stated to me, “None of their arguments are good. I disagree with their position.” When encouraged to try, this student eventually admitted to me that he had never before considered that he could see merit in an opponent’s reasoning when he did not agree with the overall position. Several other students wrote in the activity evaluation that the most valuable aspect of the exercise was learning to respect other’s perspectives even in disagreement. Progress!

One class activity served as an outcomes assessment for using an ethics lens to teach leadership communication. At the beginning of the term students had submitted their written definitions of “leadership.” The last day of class they repeated the exercise without the aide of their first definition. Then I returned their first definitions and we had a discussion about how their conceptions of leadership had changed. Some definitions stayed relatively the same, such as one sophomore who initially wrote, “…the act of motivating an individual or group to accomplish specific tasks” and then submitted at the end of the term, “the act of motivating, directing, and managing others to accomplish specific tasks and goals.” Most definitions, however, had become more
nuanced and more inclusive of the ethical dimensions of leadership. For example, a senior first submitted, “…when another person views your direction or opinion to be of value or importance, you are a leader to them.” At the end of the course he wrote, “…the ability to motivate, inspire, and bring out the better side of their followers… being a person one needs to be so followers will see them as a leader.” A junior first wrote, “…a person in charge of delegating tasks to others. A person who manages a group of individuals for a purpose and in process of completing tasks assigned.” At the end of the course she wrote, “…having followers and teaching them to be productive. It’s liking people and respecting them. Leadership is building community with others. Being a leader involves following ethical societal standards and teaching others to.”

LOOKING FORWARD

Teaching both of these re-designed classes in the same semester provided several insights for teaching ethics across the communication curriculum. These lessons easily apply to integrating ethics into any disciplinary curriculum. First, class dynamics, processes, and outcomes demonstrated that I should continue to work with differences inherent in diverse course foci and levels. A class of mostly lower-division students, which focuses primarily on skill-building, will have different dynamics and outcomes than a class of mostly upper-division students that focuses on integrating concepts into an overall approach to practice. As an educator I need to meet my students where they are cognitively and experientially. Any amount of course redesign cannot make up for the intuitive adjustments that need to be made as a class unfolds with its unique combination of personalities, histories, and abilities.

Another lesson learned, transferable across disciplines, is that integrating ethics into existing courses with specific descriptions is challenging work. The Lincoln Polytechnic Fellowship was a year-long endeavor that included regular meetings with colleagues to discuss ethics theory and pedagogy. I spent months reviewing textbooks, course activities, and course syllabi to redesign these courses. But the work had only begun. When I put the redesigned courses into action, the challenges continued as I discovered the delicate balance of meeting expectations for course content and using an ethics lens to approach that content. One attempt was much more successful than the other. I am grateful for both experiences.
Finally, I discovered that benefits of using an ethics lens in communication courses far outweigh costs of challenges identified above. I observed immediate benefits in the classroom, such as students developing the ability to apply ethical concepts to class discussions. Additionally, student reflections at the end of the term indicated that they had begun to use an ethics lens in their approaches to their personal and professional lives as well. Although I observed fewer direct changes in the small group course than in the leadership course, small group students nevertheless demonstrated in group projects, journals, and activity reflections that they had begun to consider ethical implications of their interaction behavior. An added benefit of being an educator is that I am also a lifelong learner, capable of taking lessons learned from these class experiences and applying them to my future classroom experiences. Adopting an ethics lens might not always be easy, but it definitely provides insights unavailable without trying.

REFERENCES


