



THE KENAN
INSTITUTE FOR ETHICS
at Duke University

Teaching Caselette

Teaching Notes

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

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A student interning at a domestic non-profit over the summer is frustrated with having to assume the tasks of a receptionist. This case examines the ethical dilemmas created by the situation and realistically presents the difficulties students face when their internships do not work out as planned.

Please refer to the “Ethics of Engagement” overview at the end of these teaching notes to familiarize yourself with the general ethical framework that this case is used to illustrate.

The case and teaching notes for this teaching caselette were completed under the direction of Dr. Rebecca Dunning, the Kenan Institute for Ethics.

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Issue: A student interning at a domestic non-profit over the summer is frustrated with having to assume the tasks of a receptionist. This case potentially highlights all four guiding right-right dilemmas: individual versus community, short-term versus long-term, honesty versus loyalty, and justice versus mercy. It also realistically relates the difficulties students face in objecting to the arrangements made by the local community partners on their behalf.

The following questions are designed to facilitate class discussion.

1. *What ethical dilemmas does Lisa face?*

Individual versus Community

- Lisa's desire to spend as much time as possible on her internship projects with ABT, and the non-profit's need for a temporary receptionist to help smooth the workplace transitions.

Short-term versus Long-term

- While the role Lisa plays as a temporary receptionist can help the ABT in the short-term, her contribution to ABT as an intern working on substantive projects could contribute much more to the organization in the long-term.

Justice versus Mercy

- What do we mean by justice and mercy, and how are they represented in this case? Are the work arrangements made for Lisa by the ABT a form of injustice, and is Lisa's compliance an act of mercy?
- Can Lisa's compliance also be framed as a just act, considering her temporary status as a member of the ABT team? What would mercy look like then? Would negotiating her work, and hence addressing the discomfort she feels, be an act of mercy toward Lisa?

2. *How would you respond to this situation? Use the Resolution Principles (utilitarianism, deontology/principle-based, care-based) to justify your response. Possible responses include:*

- A utilitarian approach suggests that Lisa renders the greatest good by complying with the arrangements made by her co-workers at the ABT. It seems more important that the needs of the larger organization are served, especially if it contributes to the long-term operation of the non-profit. On the other hand, if Lisa could utilize all of her internship hours devoted to the projects for which she had planned, this might contribute even more to the long-term success of ABT.
- A deontological approach may encourage Lisa to stick with her current position, as this respects the duty and obligations Lisa holds to her host organization.
- A care-based approach would emphasize the relationship Lisa has built with the ABT. If it is a particularly strong one, Lisa might feel compelled to care for the organization's immediate needs.

3. *Consider the responsibilities and obligations of Lisa and the entities involved in this case. Reflect on how each of the following might guide Lisa's decision as to what to do.:*

- What does Lisa owe to the community that the non-profit serves?
- What does she owe to the internship program that placed her with the non-profit?

- What responsibilities toward Lisa does the non-profit have?
 - What does the internship program owe Lisa?
4. *The case leaves ambiguous Lisa's reasons for not wanting to serve as the organization's receptionist, but clearly she sees the role as unattractive. Consider some ways in which Lisa can use the role of receptionist to substantively aid and strengthen the organization. How might she productively spend her internship, even if she is the designated receptionist? What might she personally gain from working in this position?*

Overview of Ethics of Engagement Case Studies

These case studies were developed as part of a workshop series the Kenan Institute for Ethics provided for students preparing for intensive civic engagement experiences. The goals for the summer experience were three-fold: to gain self-knowledge, to deepen students' commitment to life-long civic engagement, and to help the communities in which they lived and worked for the summer. Student projects took place in local and global locations, ranging from working with African immigrants in Ireland, to documenting social change movements in South Africa, to managing environmental organizations in Portland, Oregon.

The cases are based on actual student experiences in the field. They set forward the ethical dilemmas the students faced on personal, organizational, and systemic levels. They also present scenarios in which there is no clear right answer. Rather, the students in each case study are challenged by seemingly intractable problems for which there seem to be only wrong and perhaps less wrong solutions.

In constructing the teaching notes, we referred to the "Right-Right Dilemmas" paradigm drawn from Rush Kidder's book, *How Good People Make Tough Choices*. We modified this concept, suggesting that the students will likely face "Wrong-Wrong Dilemmas" in their summer placements, in which both the community and individual goods are compromised; neither loyalty nor truth can be fully achieved; long-term and short-term prospects are equally pessimistic; and neither justice nor mercy can be experienced by all those affected by the dilemma.

In the workshop, we also introduced the students to three "Resolution Principles," which we offered as frameworks to enable clear thinking about ethical dilemmas. These principles are the classical ethical principles of

Utilitarianism - providing the greatest good for the greatest number

Deontology / Principle-Based (Kantianism) - following the highest principle as absolutely as possible

Care-Based - emphasizing the importance of relationships and paying attention to the particular context and individuals involved

After reading the cases, students in the workshop were divided into small groups to discuss the questions listed in the teaching notes and then returned to the large group for a facilitator-led discussion. Given the significance and difficulty of the tensions faced by the characters in the cases, a good session often ended with significant debate, rather than consensus about a right course of action.

Our aim with these cases is to provide students preparing for civic engagement experiences with tools they will find helpful as they face morally serious dilemmas in real-world contexts radically different than those in a university setting.