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The Ethics Olympiad Experience

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Adolescents of 2022 live in a climate of information saturation, fake news and hate speech on social media, existential threats caused by climate change, a world still grappling with a pandemic, and growing political polarisation. More than ever, young people need tools to explore and understand issues affecting their world and the skills to articulate their ideas so that their voices are heard within the democratic process (Laughland-Booy & Ghazarian, 2020). One organisation that attempts to build students' critical thinking and communication skills whilst engaging them in dialogue on contemporary ethical issues is the Ethics Olympiad.

"The world has achieved brilliance without wisdom, power without conscience. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants" Bradley Omar



The Ethics Olympiad Story

The Ethics Olympiad was founded in Australia by former teacher Matthew Wills in 2013. At the time, Matthew worked as Head of Philosophy, Values and Religious Education at Hale School in Perth, Western Australia. After participating in the Ethics Bowls in the USA, Matthew was keen to launch a similar competition in Australia for secondary school students. The first trials of an Australian Ethics Olympiad involved an online competition between a small number of schools in Australia and the USA. By 2017, the competition had expanded to several Australian states and was run as a full-day, face-to-face event at host schools. By 2019, organisers of the Ethics Olympiad were running competitions for middle years' students (aged 12-15) and senior high school students (aged 16-18) in 10 cities across Australasia. In 2020, with the impact of COVID-19, the competition

returned to its original online format, with schools participating in full-day online events via Zoom. In addition, events have expanded further with students in upper primary school (Grades 5 and up) now able to participate in the Junior Division of the Ethics Olympiad.

How does the Competition Work?

Based on the Ethics Bowl format in the USA, the Ethics Olympiad invites schools to enter teams of 3-5 students to engage in philosophical and ethical dialogue. Groups are given a series of eight case studies to explore, containing topical issues of an ethical nature. For example, in one of the cases from the 2021 Middle School Division of the Ethics Olympiad, students were asked to consider whether or not the media have the right to publish the names of convicted criminals after they have served their prison sentences. Another case encouraged students to

think about how they give money to charity and whether supporters carry any moral obligations to investigate how charities spend their donations. Public nudity, lying, deciding when jokes are offensive, and how to weigh up environmental action against economic prosperity are further examples of topics explored in last year's competition.

Once familiar with the cases and study questions, students construct a response to each issue. Students meet with teams from other schools on competition day to engage in a full-day online competition. Teams are paired together and take turns delivering and critiquing responses to the case studies. A judge assesses the dialogue between the two teams and can pose further questions to widen students' thinking. The judges employed in the Ethics Olympiad are experts in philosophy, including postgraduate and doctoral students of philosophy and academic staff from various universities.

Following a coin toss to determine which team is Team A and which will be Team B, the case is revealed, and a question is readout. Team A then has 2 minutes to construct a response.

- TEAM A** Gives a 5-minute response to the question.
- TEAM B** After a 1-minute conference Team B gives a 3-minute critique of Team A's response
- TEAM A** After a 1-minute team conference Team A gives a 3-minute reply to Team B's critique
- JUDGES** Pose impromptu questions to Team A
- TEAM A** Responds to the Judges' questions in a 5-7-minute exchange
- TEAM B** Team B then take on Team A's role, and the process is continued



Each team completes four, totaling eight case studies. Judges score both teams per round, and then total points across the four rounds are tallied to find the medal-placing teams. Medals are awarded to the top three teams, and all participants in the competition receive a

certificate for representing their school.

How are Teams Judged in the Competition?

Unlike debating, teams in the Ethics Olympiad do not have to adopt a

definitively affirmative or negative position when responding to the cases. It is perfectly acceptable for both teams to share the same position or for teams to change their minds when new ideas or new thinking comes to light. Emphasis is placed on the respectful dialogue



between the two teams and students' abilities to engage with other people's ideas civilly. Students are also judged on their critical thinking skills, particularly their ability to construct arguments, assess validity within arguments, defend or modify a position, consider issues from multiple perspectives and test

arguments when faced with new questions or new information.

How Does the Ethics Olympiad Support Students' Learning?

The Ethics Olympiad provides an engaging experience for students

to develop techniques in critical thinking, communication skills, and awareness of ethical issues. Critical thinking skills and ethical understandings are vital components of holistic education for adolescence. "Critical and creative thinking" as well as "ethical understandings" appear as general capabilities

within the Australian Curriculum (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2021, p. 1). General capabilities represent key skills, knowledge and/or behaviours to be developed across the curriculum to prepare students for life and work in the 21st century (ACARA, 2021). Regarding ethical understandings, it is expected that students will learn to "...value difference in their interactions with others and to develop respect for diverse ways of perceiving and acting in the world" (ACARA, 2021, p.2). Adolescent Success' (2019) position paper shares similar views, stating "ethical understandings are a significant part of the holistic development of young people as they relate to issues that impact their world" (p.2). They advocate for opportunities for students to explore and provide local and global service regarding issues affecting

The clear structure of the Ethics Olympiad and the stimuli provided (in the form of case studies for students to examine) creates an ideal opportunity for teachers and students to explore ethical issues. Students' skills in participating in the Ethics Olympiad (i.e., critical thinking, respectful communication, valuing different opinions, exploring differing points of view) are transferable to a wide range of other curriculum areas. For example, ethical considerations are presented in Science when students design and assess experiments or collect data. Ethical thinking is also encouraged in History, when students are asked to analyse events of the past critically to assess how they may have affected people of the time. Likewise, in their personal lives, students can draw on the ethical thinking skills they develop within the Ethics Olympiad to help make decisions regarding friendships, consumer choices, political choices, beliefs and values.

How Can Schools get Involved?

Teachers who would like to learn more about the Ethics Olympiad are encouraged to visit: <https://ethicsolympiad.yahoosites.com/> or email admin@ethicsolympiad.org.

Ethics Olympiads are held across every state of Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong and Singapore. There are four divisions within the competition: the Junior School division for students aged 9-12 years; the Middle School division for students aged 12-15 years; the Senior High division for students aged 16-18 years; and the Tertiary division for university students. The Ethics Olympiad also runs training workshops for teachers and students who want to learn more about ethics and thinking processes within moral philosophical inquiry.

References

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