

Facilitating a Good Ethical Discussion of Carl’s Case: Sample Student-Teacher Dialogue

The sample dialogue below shows how a teacher might push a student to develop a more reasoned stance about Carl and steroid use. Notice that the teacher does not provide reasons for the student; instead, the teacher asks open-ended and probing questions and periodically summarizes the student’s reasoning. Thus, the teacher facilitates and guides the student’s thought process but does not provide ideas or reasons. Also, although this sample dialogue focuses on an exchange between the teacher and one particular student, this could instead be a class-wide discussion, with multiple students participating.

In the sample dialogue below, major statements and key turning points are in bold font.

The italics represent thoughts about the student-teacher interaction.

TEACHER: **So, do you think Carl should use steroids?**

STUDENT: **Athletes have the right to do whatever they want to improve their performance.**

TEACHER: Why do you think so?

STUDENT: Your body is your body. No one can tell you what you can or can’t do with your body.

This student is implicitly invoking the ethical consideration of respect for persons (respect for personal autonomy) and likely believes it would be disrespectful for another person to get in the way of the athlete’s decision. The teacher asks an open-ended question to help the student articulate the ethical consideration behind the student’s statement.

TEACHER: Tell me more about that. You seem to be saying that it would be disrespectful not to let athletes do what they want with their own bodies.

STUDENT: Right. In fact, everyone should have that right.

The teacher becomes concerned by the student’s rigid extension of the student’s original thought.

TEACHER: **Everyone? All the time?**

STUDENT: Yes.

The teacher is worried that the student is stuck thinking in very rigid terms and sees no exceptions to the belief about respect for persons. So, the teacher asks a probing question.

TEACHER: **Can you think of any exceptions?**

STUDENT: Not really.

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The teacher decides to follow up with an open-ended question.

TEACHER: Can you give me some other examples of actions that athletes take to better their performance?

STUDENT: I don't know ... maybe weightlifting and working out. Or eating energy bars.

TEACHER: Good, can you think of a few more?

STUDENT: No.

The teacher sees that the student is again stuck. The teacher resists the temptation to provide more examples for the student. Instead, the teacher frames the question slightly differently, and in a more accessible way, in hopes that the student can continue.

TEACHER: Well, then, what do everyday people do to maximize their own personal health?

STUDENT: Well, taking vitamins, getting doctor check-ups, eating healthy foods, getting enough sleep.

The teacher records the examples as the student speaks. The list can then serve as a visual reference for the student.

TEACHER: Good. I've made a list of these as you've been talking. **Is there any difference between taking steroids and doing any of these other actions?**

STUDENT: Well, the others are pretty common, and most of them don't require much money, assuming you have health insurance.

TEACHER: Yes, I agree. Are there any other differences?

STUDENT: Well, steroids can be harmful to your body, while the others don't have many risks associated with them.

TEACHER: **Okay, so should safety risks, cost, or accessibility be determining factors for whether athletes should take steroids?**

STUDENT: In terms of risk, I think that it's still the person's choice. The athlete needs to be informed of the risks, and maybe be at least a certain age. But we allow other risky behaviors: smoking, drinking, driving motorcycles.

The teacher decides to verbally summarize what the student has said so far.

TEACHER: So you're saying that we allow other risky behaviors and that it would be disrespectful of one adult to tell another adult how much risk he or she should take?

STUDENT: Yes, as long as the person is an adult who is aware of the risks.

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By asking a probing question, the teacher then encourages the student to think about exceptions.

TEACHER: Do you think any limits should be put on that?

STUDENT: Well, like I said—maybe age. Little kids shouldn’t decide stuff like that themselves.

TEACHER: Any other exceptions?

STUDENT: Well, maybe if the risks are extreme. Like people who drive motorcycles need licenses and may need to wear a helmet to keep the risk from being extreme. And certain drugs are illegal. Maybe I should learn more about the health effects of steroids...but they probably aren’t riskier than alcohol.

TEACHER: Okay, so you’re saying that the level of risk—how safe or dangerous something is—might count?

STUDENT: Right.

TEACHER: So we need to make sure that we know more about the science of steroids, and their medical risks, in order to weigh them against other types of risks that our society permits?

The teacher wants to affirm the value the student places on respect for personal choices, but the teacher also wants to help the student see that there may be other ethical considerations to take into account. In the sequence below, first, the teacher affirms the student’s emphasis on the importance of respecting personal decisions when confronted with risks, but then immediately introduces another ethical consideration: fairness.

TEACHER: **Okay, you’ve said that in general we should allow adults to make decisions for themselves, even if there’s risk involved, but you might want to place limits on their choices if the risks are extreme. So we’ll do more research on the science, and come back to this question.** But I want to go back to another point that you mentioned when you were brainstorming this list of actions that people take to improve their personal health or performance.

The teacher again points to the list the student generated.

TEACHER: You mentioned that using steroids differs from these other actions (sleeping, taking vitamins, exercising, etc.) in terms of their accessibility. **What do you think about this issue of accessibility?** Vitamins and sleep are relatively accessible, but steroids aren’t. **Is it fair for some athletes to take steroids, since steroids aren’t available to all athletes?**

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STUDENT: That’s where I’m getting confused. If steroids aren’t easy to get, some people will have access and some won’t. **Maybe the need for fairness matters, too, meaning that people can no longer do whatever they want, even though they are doing it to their own bodies.** If a few students gain access to steroids and then break a school record, that wouldn’t be fair. I’ll have to keep thinking about that one.

The teacher notices that this student began thinking about Carl’s Case in a rather rigid way—thinking only about one of several important ethical considerations—for example, only about respect for persons or autonomy. Through carefully structured questions and positive give and take, the teacher helped introduce concerns about safety (minimizing harms when risks are high) and about fairness, another ethical consideration relevant to the case. The teacher wraps up this part of the conversation to help make sure the student is aware of what has happened.

TEACHER: You’ve done a nice job thinking about multiple ethical considerations: showing respect for persons by allowing them great latitude in making choices about their own behaviors, minimizing harms if risks are high, and fairness. **You began with the blanket statement that “athletes have the right to do whatever they want to improve their performance” and moved to a more complex thought, that there could be instances when a loss of freedom is necessary to reducing potential harms or ensuring fairness.** Tomorrow, when we have more scientific facts about the safety issues and we’ve had a chance to think a little more about the fairness issues, we will talk about this case again.