

Teaching Notes

LA CARPIO, COSTA RICA

Friendship

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A student working in a Costa Rican slum community must decide how to respond to a request for financial assistance from a local woman she has befriended. The dilemma sets in when it is revealed that even though the woman has already received aid to pay for her son's surgical procedure, she is still approaching the student for money, apparently hoping to exploit the personal relationship that has been established.

This case reflects the classic Right-Right Dilemma of justice versus mercy, and draws out the larger question surrounding relationships between foreign aid-providers and locals looking to improve their lives: can true friendships ever develop in contexts of deep power and economic disparities?

Please refer to the “Ethics of Engagement” overview at the end of this document to familiarize yourself with the general ethical framework this case was created 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 working in a Costa Rican slum community must decide how to respond to a request for financial assistance from a local woman she has befriended. The dilemma sets in when it is revealed that even though the woman has already received aid to pay for her son's surgical procedure, she is still approaching Michelle for money, seemingly hoping to exploit the personal relationship that has been established. The questions below are designed to facilitate class discussion.

1. *What are the challenges to acting ethically in this case? Think through the personal, organizational, and systemic challenges.*

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Personal, organizational, and systemic challenges:

- Personal: Michelle wants to help Jorge but does not want to be taken advantage of by Soledad.
 - Organizational: Michelle acts as a volunteer with the Costa Rican Foundation (CRF) while in La Carpio. Her individual act of kindness may undermine the organization's long-term goal of making locals more self-reliant and less dependent on direct foreign aid.
 - Systemic: Urban poverty; gun violence in slums. Students should recognize the importance of systemic factors that lead to Soledad's behavior. Political, economic, and social uncertainties dictate life in La Carpio; Soledad's actions can be interpreted as simply making the most of her current 'good fortune' to have made friends with much more privileged American aid workers. This case can point students towards the importance of preparation. What do students preparing for civic engagement work need to do beforehand to avoid the disappointment that Michelle faces? For example, could Michelle have read about the attitudes locals hold towards foreign aid workers? Could this knowledge have changed anything about this particular case?
2. *What dilemmas does Michelle face? What steps would you take to resolve these? What principles can you draw from? What are the consequences?*
 - Justice versus Mercy:
Soledad is not being entirely truthful when she seeks Michelle for monetary support. How does this affect Michelle's response? What is merciful in this situation? What does justice look like? Is there a way for one to be both merciful and just, to still pay for the surgical procedure Jorge needs and at the same time disapprove of Soledad's methods? How might this play out on a systemic level, with regards to the attitude many locals hold towards foreign aid workers like Michelle?
 - Short-term versus Long-term:
Acceding to Soledad's request can improve Soledad's familial situation in the short-term, but it may breed a culture of dependence that will prove to be unsustainable in the long-term, for both Soledad's family and other families in the La Carpio community.
A larger problem may involve issues of systemic urban poverty and the need to provide Soledad's family with the opportunity to earn a decent living.
 - Individual versus Community:
A utilitarian approach would ignore Soledad's pleas and focus aid efforts on the entire community. How might this, practically, be done within the confines of the CRF, and within Michelle's summer internship with the CRF?

When reviewing possible resolutions to the dilemmas Michelle faces, it is important to consider the systemic dimension of ethics. Students may focus on the individual-level issue of one individual “betraying” another’s trust, but Soledad herself can be seen as a victim of systemic injustice. This is an important aspect of work in civic engagement that students will doubtlessly encounter, that they should recognize and understand, and that they may have problems addressing.

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.