

Ethical understanding

Introduction

In the Australian Curriculum, students develop ethical understanding as they identify and investigate the nature of ethical concepts, values and character traits, and understand how reasoning can assist ethical judgment. Ethical understanding involves students in building a strong personal and socially oriented ethical outlook that helps them to manage context, conflict and uncertainty, and to develop an awareness of the influence that their values and behaviour have on others.

The *Melbourne Declaration on Education Goals for Young Australians* (MCEETYA 2008) recognises that ethical understanding assists students to become 'confident and creative individuals and active and informed citizens'. It does this through fostering the development of 'personal values and attributes such as honesty, resilience, empathy and respect for others', and the capacity to act with ethical integrity (MCEETYA, pp. 8–9).

As cultural, social, environmental and technological changes transform the world, the demands placed on learners and education systems are changing. Technologies bring local and distant communities into classrooms, exposing students to knowledge and global concerns as never before. Complex issues require responses that take account of ethical considerations such as human rights and responsibilities, animal rights, environmental issues and global justice.

Building ethical understanding throughout all stages of schooling will assist students to engage with the more complex issues that they are likely to encounter in the future, and to navigate a world of competing values, rights, interests and norms.

Scope of Ethical understanding

Students learn to behave ethically as they explore ethical issues and interactions with others, discuss ideas, and learn to be accountable as members of a democratic community.

In this context, students need regular opportunities to identify and make sense of the ethical dimensions in their learning. As ethics is largely concerned with what we ought to do and how we ought to live, students need to understand how people can inquire collaboratively and come to ethical decisions. They need the skills to explore areas of contention, select and justify an ethical position, and engage with and understand the experiences and positions of others. These skills promote students' confidence as decision-makers and foster their ability to act with regard for others. Skills are enhanced when students have opportunities to put them into practice in their learning; for example, understanding the importance of applying appropriate ethical practices in areas such as Australian Indigenous studies (AIATSIS 2011).

Students also need to explore values, rights and responsibilities to assist them in justifying their ethical position and in engaging with the position of others.

The processes of reflecting on and interrogating core ethical issues and concepts underlie all areas of the curriculum. These include justice, right and wrong, freedom, truth, identity, empathy, goodness and abuse.

Processes of inquiring into ethical issues include giving reasons, being consistent, finding meanings and causes, and providing proof and evidence. Interrogating such concepts through authentic cases such as global warming, sustainable living and socioeconomic disparity can involve group and independent inquiry, critical and creative thinking, and cooperative teamwork, and can contribute to personal and social learning.

As students engage with these elements in an integrated way, they learn to recognise the complexity of many ethical issues. They develop a capacity to make reasoned ethical judgments through the investigation of a range of questions drawn from varied contexts in the curriculum.

For a description of the organising elements for Ethical understanding, go to [Organising elements](#).

Ethical understanding across the curriculum

Ethical issues arise across all areas of the curriculum, with each learning area containing a range of content that demands consideration from an ethical perspective. This includes analysing and evaluating the ethics of the actions and motivations of individuals and groups, understanding the ethical dimensions of research and information, debating ethical dilemmas and applying ethics in a range of situations.

Ethical understanding is addressed through the learning areas and is identified wherever it is developed or applied in content descriptions. It is also identified where it offers opportunities to add depth and richness to student learning in content elaborations. An icon indicates where Ethical understanding has been identified in learning area content descriptions and elaborations. A filter function on the Australian Curriculum website assists users to find where Ethical understanding has been identified in F–10 curriculum content. Teachers may find further opportunities to incorporate explicit teaching of Ethical understanding depending on their choice of activities. Students can also be encouraged to develop capability through personally relevant initiatives of their own design.

- [Ethical understanding in English
\(www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/English/General-capabilities\)](http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/English/General-capabilities)
- [Ethical understanding in Mathematics
\(www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/English/General-capabilities\)](http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/English/General-capabilities)
- [Ethical understanding in Science
\(www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/English/General-capabilities\)](http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/English/General-capabilities)
- [Ethical understanding in History
\(www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/English/General-capabilities\)](http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/English/General-capabilities)

Background

This background summarises the evidence base from which the Ethical understanding capability's introduction, organising elements and learning continuum have been developed. It draws on recent international and national research, as well as initiatives and programs that focus on ethical behaviour across the curriculum.

Ethical understanding can be informed by reason, character, values and ethical principles. Each of these is addressed in the Ethical understanding learning continuum.

People call on principles, concepts, experiences, senses, emotions and reasoning to guide them when making judgments. Therefore, it is important that students are exposed to situations that develop both their awareness of meanings and their practical reasoning abilities associated with their thoughts and actions.

Ethical theories can be divided broadly into those that focus on action and those that focus on agency or character; both are concerned with the 'good life' and how concepts such as fairness and justice can inform our thinking about the world. These considerations can lead to students' developing a broad understanding of values and ethical principles as they mature.

Although they have their supporters and critics, interrogation of frameworks such as Kohlberg's stages of moral development (1964, in Crain 1985), Ruggiero's encouragement to apply ethical issues (1997), and the Values for Australian Schooling (in *National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools* 2005), guides thinking about the dimensions of learning about ethical understanding and how it might be developed or encouraged throughout schooling.

The Australian educational philosophers Burgh, Field and Freakley (2006) describe ethics as pertaining to the character of persons and the wider society. Lipman, Sharp and Oscanyan (1980) state that ethical inquiry should be 'an open-ended, sustained consideration of the values, standards and practices by which we live ... taking place in an atmosphere of mutual trust, confidence and impartiality' (p.189).

One area of study in ethics is human nature itself and how that may equip us to answer the question: 'How ought I to live?' The philosophers Plato, Aristotle and Aquinas, along with Kant during the Enlightenment, and more recently modern philosophers such as Peter Singer (1997), identified the importance of reason as a human attribute – although their justification varied. Developing a capacity to be reasonable is one of the three elements of the Ethical understanding learning continuum. Other dimensions in the exploration of human nature are perceptions of activities and character: 'What kind of person should I be?' For some philosophers, this replaces the question of 'How ought I to live?'

Although the basis of justification of what is right or good for the individual and for others is contentious, it is misleading to confuse disagreements in ethics with there being no right or wrong answer. There may be different positions, each with their strengths and weaknesses, and often there is the need to make a judgment in the face of competing claims. At the same time there is need for an open-minded, ongoing endeavour to create an ethical life.

The Ethical understanding capability has also been richly informed by understandings gained through the *National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools* (DEEWR 2005), and the resultant Values education initiatives in all areas of Australian schooling. In addition, the *Melbourne Declaration on Goals for Young Australians* (MCEETYA, p. 5) states that 'a school's legacy to young people should include national values of democracy, equity and justice, and personal values and attributes such as honesty, resilience and respect for others'. While Values education is certainly found within Ethical understanding, it is also located within other general capabilities, such as Personal and social capability.

References

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Organising elements

The Ethical understanding learning continuum is organised into three interrelated organising elements:

- Understanding ethical concepts and issues
- Reasoning in decision making and actions
- Exploring values, rights and responsibilities

The diagram below sets out these elements.



Organising elements for Ethical understanding

Understanding ethical concepts and issues

This element involves students in recognising ethical concepts and exploring ethical issues in context. Students identify, examine and give examples of ethical concepts. They discuss, analyse and explore dimensions of ethical concepts in context. In summary this element consists of:

- recognise ethical concepts
- explore ethical concepts in context.

Reasoning in decision making and actions

This element involves students in reasoning and making ethical decisions, considering the consequences and reflecting on ethical action. They analyse the reasoning behind stances when making ethical decisions and evaluate the intended and unintended consequences of actions in an increasing range of scenarios. Students articulate understandings of a range of ethical responses in social contexts. In summary this element consists of:

- reason and make ethical decisions
- consider consequences
- reflect on ethical action.

Exploring values, rights and responsibilities

This element involves students in examining values, exploring rights and responsibilities and considering points of view. They use instances of expressed values to explain social interactions and to determine rights and responsibilities in social and legal domains. Students recognise and interpret points of view in ethical contexts. In summary, this element consists of:

- examine values
- explore rights and responsibilities
- consider points of view.

Ethical Understanding Learning Continuum

Understanding ethical concepts and issues

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6
Typically by the end of Foundation Year, students:	Typically by the end of Year 2, students:	Typically by the end of Year 4, students:	Typically by the end of Year 6, students:	Typically by the end of Year 8, students:	Typically by the end of Year 10, students:
Recognise ethical concepts					
<p>identify ethical concepts arising in familiar contexts, such as good and bad behaviours</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> identifying the behaviours of characters in familiar stories 	<p>describe ethical concepts, such as right and wrong, honesty, fairness and tolerance</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> describing instances of fair and unfair treatment <p>Science ACSHE035</p>	<p>identify ethical concepts, such as equality, respect and connectedness, and describe some of their attributes</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> exploring what it means to treat people equally <p>History ACHHK077</p>	<p>examine and explain ethical concepts such as truth and justice that contribute to the achievement of a particular outcome</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> exploring the difference between an honest mistake and intentional deception 	<p>analyse behaviours that exemplify the dimensions and challenges of ethical concepts</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> examining the challenges involved in demonstrating loyalty or honour, or avoiding harm to others <p>History ACDSEH012</p>	<p>critique generalised statements about ethical concepts</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> balancing freedom of speech with the defamation of others
Explore ethical concepts in context					
<p>describe familiar situations that involve ethical concepts</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> discussing familiar situations that illustrate the concepts of kindness or caring 	<p>discuss ethical concepts within a range of familiar contexts</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> discussing story scenarios involving fair and tolerant behaviour 	<p>discuss actions taken in a range of contexts that include an ethical dimension</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> exploring the responsibilities of witnessed to instances of bullying 	<p>explain what constitutes an ethically better or worse outcome and how it might be accomplished</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> exploring the consequences for individuals of others' actions, in a range of 	<p>analyse the ethical dimensions of beliefs and the need for action in a range of settings</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> identifying sustainable practices, or ways of confronting cyber bullying 	<p>distinguish between the ethical and non-ethical dimensions of complex issues</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> considering whether animal experimentation is an ethical matter, and, if so, how

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6
Typically by the end of Foundation Year, students:	Typically by the end of Year 2, students:	Typically by the end of Year 4, students:	Typically by the end of Year 6, students:	Typically by the end of Year 8, students:	Typically by the end of Year 10, students:
	English ACELT1587	Science ACSHE051	scenarios Science ACSHE121	Mathematics ACMSP206 Science ACSHE135 History ACDSEH068	Mathematics ACMSP247 Science ACSHE194 History ACDSEH085

Reasoning in decision making and actions

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6
Typically by the end of Foundation Year, students:	Typically by the end of Year 2, students:	Typically by the end of Year 4, students:	Typically by the end of Year 6, students:	Typically by the end of Year 8, students:	Typically by the end of Year 10, students:
Reason and make ethical decisions					
<p>identify examples from stories and experiences that show ways people make decisions about their actions</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> exploring the choices that different characters make in stories 	<p>discuss how people make decisions about their actions and offer reasons why people's decisions differ</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> considering the differing interests of others in the classroom and family 	<p>explain reasons for acting in certain ways, including the conflict between self-respect and self-interest in reaching decisions</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> explaining ways to reach fair and respectful decisions 	<p>explore the reasons behind there being a variety of ethical positions on a social issue</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> examining conflicting media reports about the same event <p>History ACHHK114</p>	<p>analyse inconsistencies in personal reasoning and societal ethical decision making</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> examining decisions that lead to unequal outcomes 	<p>investigate reasons for clashes of beliefs in issues of personal, social and global importance</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> examining the treatment of people in the context of disparity or distribution of resources <p>History ACDSEH021</p>

Level 1 Typically by the end of Foundation Year, students:	Level 2 Typically by the end of Year 2, students:	Level 3 Typically by the end of Year 4, students:	Level 4 Typically by the end of Year 6, students:	Level 5 Typically by the end of Year 8, students:	Level 6 Typically by the end of Year 10, students:
Consider consequences					
<p>identify links between emotions and behaviours</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> discussing the effects of selfish or uncaring behaviour on people's feelings 	<p>describe the effects that personal feelings and dispositions have on how people behave</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> discussing the consequences of keeping or not keeping promises, or being truthful or untruthful 	<p>examine the links between emotions, dispositions and intended and unintended consequences of their actions on others</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> examining what it means to cause people to feel let down <p>History ACHHK080</p>	<p>evaluate the consequences of actions in familiar and hypothetical scenarios</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> assessing possible consequences of including or excluding a person or group 	<p>investigate scenarios that highlight ways that personal dispositions and actions can affect consequences</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> examining the effects of tolerance on relationships or of misrepresentations in social media or reporting <p>History ACDSEH054</p>	<p>analyse the objectivity or subjectivity behind decision making where there are many possible consequences</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> exploring the complexities associated with sharing or violating resources <p>History ACDSEH021</p>
Reflect on ethical action					
<p>identify and describe the influence of factors such as wants and needs on people's actions</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> identifying the difference between wants and needs at school 	<p>give examples of how understanding situations can influence the way people act</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> assessing that a person is distressed and offering assistance 	<p>consider whether having a conscience leads to ways of acting ethically in different scenarios</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> considering responses to the questions 'What would I do?' and 'What should I do?' in a range of scenarios 	<p>articulate a range of ethical responses to situations in various social contexts</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> weighing the relative merits of actions to prevent harm to animals <p>History ACHHK095</p>	<p>analyse perceptions of occurrences and possible ethical response in challenging scenarios</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> discussing whether or not witnesses should come forward in response to an event 	<p>evaluate diverse perceptions and ethical bases of action in complex contexts</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> considering times when limiting liberty or free speech may be the best option <p>English ACELA1565</p> <p>History ACDSEH109</p>

Exploring values, rights and responsibilities

Level 1 Typically by the end of Foundation Year, students:	Level 2 Typically by the end of Year 2, students:	Level 3 Typically by the end of Year 4, students:	Level 4 Typically by the end of Year 6, students:	Level 5 Typically by the end of Year 8, students:	Level 6 Typically by the end of Year 10, students:
Examine values					
<p>identify values that are important to them</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> discussing care for self and others 	<p>discuss some agreed values in familiar contexts</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> discussing the value of giving everyone a fair go 	<p>identify and describe shared values in familiar and unfamiliar contexts</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> acknowledging the need for honesty, respect and equality when working with others 	<p>examine values accepted and enacted within various communities</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> exploring instances where equality, fairness, dignity and non-discrimination are required 	<p>assess the relevance of beliefs and the role and application of values in social practices</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> exploring different beliefs and values when seeking to solve social and workplace problems and dilemmas <p>History ACDSEH039</p>	<p>analyse and explain the interplay of values in national and international forums and policy making</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> explaining the complexity of factors leading to policies such as mandatory detention <p>Science ACSHE230</p>
Explore rights and responsibilities					
<p>share examples of rights and responsibilities in given situations</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> discussing reasons for and behaviours associated with school rules 	<p>identify their rights and associated responsibilities and those of their classmates</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> exploring rights and responsibilities, such as friendship and care for others at home and school 	<p>investigate children's rights and responsibilities at school and in the local community</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> examining the relevance of rights, such as freedom and protection, in everyday situations 	<p>monitor consistency between rights and responsibilities when interacting face-to-face or through social media</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> establishing differences between freedom of speech and destructive criticism in debates or through social media 	<p>analyse rights and responsibilities in relation to the duties of a responsible citizen</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> analysing actions when seeking to solve disagreements in a range of social and work-based situations 	<p>evaluate the merits of conflicting rights and responsibilities in global contexts</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> investigating the role of law in maintaining peace in public and private domains <p>History ACDSEH023</p>

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6
Typically by the end of Foundation Year, students:	Typically by the end of Year 2, students:	Typically by the end of Year 4, students:	Typically by the end of Year 6, students:	Typically by the end of Year 8, students:	Typically by the end of Year 10, students:
			History ACHHK114		
Consider points of view					
<p>express their own point of view and listen to the views of others</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> offering opinions in discussions that involve ethical considerations 	<p>recognise that there may be many points of view when probing ethical dilemmas and identify alternative views</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> identifying a range of views on caring for the environment <p>English ACELT1589</p>	<p>describe different points of view associated with an ethical dilemma and give possible reasons for these differences</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> deciding on what basis an idea or action is trustworthy <p>English ACELT1603</p>	<p>explain a range of possible interpretations and points of view when thinking about ethical dilemmas</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> finding and unpacking biased research findings <p>English ACELT1609</p>	<p>draw conclusions from a range of points of view associated with challenging ethical dilemmas</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> recognising the consequences of the non-disclosure of relevant facts for the outcomes of societal conflicts <p>English ACELT1807</p> <p>History ACDSEH043</p>	<p>use reasoning skills to prioritise the relative merits of points of view about complex ethical dilemmas</p> <p>Examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> examining attitudes towards environments, diversity and socioeconomic disparity between groups of people <p>English ACELT1812</p> <p>History ACDSEH125</p>