



NHSEB ACADEMY

ADVICE FROM VETERAN COACHES

COACHKIT



The following are excerpts of advice from veteran Ethics Bowl coaches who have led successful teams at NHSEB Regional Bowls, and, in many cases, brought their teams to NHSEB Nationals as finalists. Responses have been anonymized and edited for length and clarity.

HOW OFTEN DO YOU AND YOUR STUDENTS MEET?

“ It depends on how close we are to the competition. They do lots of draft work on their own when the cases come out. We meet one or two times a week regularly as a group. They often meet more outside of our “official” meeting--the local coffee shop does well as we get close to the Bowl.

“ We begin meeting early in the year and invite new students to learn about Ethics Bowl. Then we meet once a month. As soon as the first set of cases is released, we start meeting about once a week. As the competition draws nearer, we add in as many practices as we need, and usually meet most days of the week prior to the bowl. Because team members are very busy with other clubs, we usually meet before school, so our meetings are usually 45 minutes.

“ We meet once a week (currently every Thursday) at lunch. The week before Regionals, we have one or two long meetings outside of school where we review our notes and come to more definite conclusions about each case.

IS THERE A FACILITATOR? DO YOU KNOW IN ADVANCE WHAT YOU WANT TO ACCOMPLISH IN A GIVEN PRACTICE SESSION?

“ At in-school meetings that occur once/twice a week. However, as mentioned before, they need to and often get together outside of school. Most early meetings are about becoming familiar with the cases. As we revisit them we try to outline the moral concepts, contours, and tensions in the cases that allow for different perspectives. After identifying these perspectives, they deliberate on the what their position might be on a variety of questions that we’ve brainstormed are relevant to the case.

“ We have a team captain who sets out a schedule for the meetings. She assigns cases to team members and they do extensive research on the cases they are given. Then at the meetings they usually discuss one case per meeting on the first round, then revisit each of the cases as many times as possible.

“ In the past, we’ve covered one case per lunch meeting. We all read the case at the beginning, and then proceed to discuss the case for the rest of the meeting. We usually go through every study question to focus the discussion. A note taker generally records a list of pros, cons, and larger ethical issues as we talk. The meetings are basically fun, open-ended discussions about

the ethical dilemmas. As we get closer to Regionals, some meetings become scrimmages where we divide into 2 groups and simulate actual Ethics Bowl rounds. This year, we want to focus the meetings a little more on preparing for the competition. We want to spend the first half of each meeting doing our usual open-ended or study-question-driven discussions about the case. Then, we want to actually decide and write down how we would present the case in competition (i.e. what position we would take and how we would structure our argument). (There are also cookies at every single meeting.)

HOW DOES YOUR TEAM PREPARE THEIR POSITION ON A CASE?

“ The first time they talk about each case, they discover if they initially agree on their positions. I would guess that about 2/3 of the time students agree. They create a Google doc on each case and they add information and/or discuss on the document and try to come to consensus. I listen to their discussions. If I feel like they are missing important aspects of the case, I ask them questions to guide their discussion. By the time the team goes to a Bowl, they have discussed each case several times (many times for the most challenging cases) and have outlined on their Google Doc the format of their discussion. Each team member specializes in some aspect of each of the cases, based on their strengths. (For example, this last year S would introduce the team's position and provide an overview of their discussion. L would outline the stakeholders affected by each of the situations. M would provide and address counterarguments to the team's position. N & E would have special information/research/perspectives on each of the cases, if necessary. Then S would wrap up the discussion.) They used the same format for each of their discussions.

“ We mainly discuss and argue our personal thoughts for each case. We always have teammates playing devil's advocate to balance out the discussion. Our main source of preparation is discussing answers to the study questions. In the past, we have relied on team members to improvise points in competition, hopefully prepared by our weekly discussions. For better or for worse, we use our meetings to give team members practice thinking and talking about ethical cases, instead of preparing outlines for our presentations.

“ In order: Central moral questions raised by the case; Morally salient features of the case; Moral implications of those features; What each major moral theory would have to say about the case; Best points and arguments in favor of each position one could take on the central questions.

DO YOUR STUDENTS DO RESEARCH?

“ Consideration of legal approaches, similar cases and scenarios that are analogous to the case in question, focus on stakeholder groups that could be relevant to the case. position and provide an overview of their discussion.

“ For most cases, one person would research. They would read all the information in the links provided, and then do further research as needed. Then they would share their research with the group. When the group didn't immediately agree, everybody would go out and do further research on their own, then bring that back to another meeting for further discussion on the issue.

DO YOU TEACH PHILOSOPHY OR ETHICS TO YOUR TEAMS BEFORE COMPETITION? HOW, IF SO?

“ Although I teach lots of philosophy, we don't go heavy on moral theory in ethics bowl. We do use the language and understanding of different approaches (utilitarian, ethics of care, virtue ethics, deontology) to serve as conceptual placeholders for discussion and analysis.

“ When there are questions that suggest discussions that have long been addressed in philosophy, since I don't have much of a philosophy background (other than two college courses and an ongoing interest), I research online to find out what others have said about the topic. I may give a mini-lesson on what I discover, but mostly I just ask the team members questions and allow them to figure out what they want to say about the issue. Sometimes students will bring in articles or suggest videos that the team shares and discusses.

NHSEB ENCOURAGES IMPROVISATION AND FLEXIBILITY. DO YOU USE ANY PARTICULAR METHODS TO CULTIVATE THESE SKILLS?

“ In the spirit of the competition and by necessity given that we don't know the focus question, in practice we focus heavily on counterarguments offered by other students and alternative ways of viewing each case.

“ We practice actively listening to opposing arguments and incorporating new information into the team's position. When they practice, I sometimes have them divide into opposing teams and spontaneously discuss ethical questions other than the ones in the packet. They practice collaboration and civility during these discussions. I play the role of judge during practices and ask them follow up questions when they practice.

“ First, I make sure that when we're preparing each case, students are forced to identify and reckon with the best arguments for the opposing position. Second, we do mock practice rounds. The best way to learn a skill is by practicing precisely that skill in conditions as close to the real competition as possible! I try to remind them constantly that if you think a case is easy or the answer is obvious, you're probably not thinking hard enough about it.

DO STUDENTS ON YOUR TEAMS SHARE IDENTICAL RESPONSIBILITIES? OR ARE THINGS SPLIT UP IN SOME WAY?

“ The only difference in responsibilities that are formally set is set by the students at the table as to who will speak when during the presentation. I... encourage full (generally) equal participation by all members of the team sitting during a match... Our team practices to develop an equal “flow” between members. By doing this, it forces greater responsibility of each individual to further develop both their knowledge of the cases and their own presentation skills. . . This requires quite a bit of coaching confidence and encouraging the students to work together to improve each other and to have the willingness to be critiqued.

“ Each pair is assigned a certain number of case students on which to be the experts. See my answer to question (3) above. In deciding which students will compete in each round during the competition, we make sure that at least one member of each pair is included! More informally, students usually learn their own and each other's strengths and are able to structure their presentations accordingly. (For instance, some students are really good at summing up arguments clearly and concisely. Those students tend to be good "closers." Others are really good at remembering empirical facts, others draw very creative analogies, etc.).

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WHAT SKILLS MAKE A GOOD ETHICS BOWL COACH?

“ Flexibility, knowing the audience (teenagers) and how they relate to the cases, experience in having seen cases argued, basic knowledge of moral theory, a willingness to guide students to their own beliefs and arguments rather than provide the content or reasoning behind what the team argues. Understanding the culture of one's school and one's team.

“ Good ethical reasoning, strong questioning skills, ability to engender camaraderie and to address individual students' needs (e.g., if one needs to learn to speak up, or one needs to learn to step back, to address that individually with the team member)

“ Teaching experience. Genuine intellectual curiosity. Humility. Humor. Love of working with teenagers. Willingness to learn from peers and from other high school teachers (who make GREAT mentors). Passion. Devotion.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU OFFER TO A BRAND NEW ETHICS BOWL COACH?

“ Get through it once, revise. Do it a second time. The third time you will know what you are doing. And you will realize that in each instance of working with the students in preparation or in a competition, that it has dramatically benefitted them. Ethics Bowl has been the highlight of most of my students' high school career even though they do many, many other things that are very

important and rich experiences. There is just something about preparing the cases together—they get to know each other better than they know some of their closest friends. Invite students to bring friends to meetings—this ensures that many of the conversations will continue in places outside of the classroom. Find curricular connections whether it be in the classes that students take or the clubs that they are involved in. It is important to find the niches of students who may be interested (and benefited) in doing work with moral thought.

“ Give yourself and your team plenty of time to discuss each of the cases. Be sure somebody records the team's thinking (one of my students liked to record the discussions on her phone and then she would type info into their Google Doc). It should be a lot more work for the team members than it is for you -- I see the coach's job as getting the students to think more deeply about the topics by asking questions that get the team to think about things from a different perspective or through a different lens. I read through each of the cases and just jot down my thoughts. Then I listen as the team discusses each case and I just ask them questions to make sure they think about the points that came to mind for me.

“ Come up with an overall game plan for the whole season up front. Come up with a general plan for each practice session in a few days before that session. Use backwards planning--figure out your goal for each session, and then design activities around achieving that goal. Remember that Ethics Bowl is supposed to be a learning experience for the students, and they learn when they are having fun. Be flexible, and laugh with the students--don't panic if things don't go according to plan. Also, don't be too hard on yourself. You will become a better coach with each year of experience.

