

# Developing Core Competencies with the Ethics Bowl: Perspectives from British Columbia

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## Abstract

How can we best promote our students' intellectual development in the current environment? The ongoing curricular reform in BC proposes an answer, albeit incomplete, to this question. After reviewing the guiding principles of the new curriculum, I will describe an activity that has recently been implemented in BC—the High School Ethics Bowl—and I will explain how it fosters an integrative development of each core competency emphasized in the new curriculum.

Keywords: Ethics Bowl, curricular reform, integrative development

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## 1. Introduction

The education system of British Columbia is undergoing an extensive transformation.<sup>1</sup> Although BC has one of the best education systems in the world (based on the OECD's PISA ranking), "it's a world that is changing rapidly and we owe it to our students to keep pace" (BC Ministry of Education, 2015). Accordingly, the new curriculum seeks to harmonize the realities of twenty-first century education with BC's Mandate for the School System (BC Ministry of Education, 1989). The mandate states that

[t]he purpose of the British Columbia school system is to enable learners to develop their individual potential and to acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy society and a prosperous and sustainable economy. (p. 4)

It emphasizes that socioeconomic development "depends upon well-educated people who have the ability to think clearly and critically, and to adapt to change" (p. 4). Specifically, the Mandate identifies the following as the *prime goal of public schools* in BC:

*Intellectual Development* — to develop the ability of students to analyze critically, reason and think independently, and acquire basic learning skills and bodies of knowledge; to develop in students a lifelong appreciation of learning, a curiosity about the world around them and a capacity for creative thought and expression. (p. 5)

Given this mandate, the question is: how can we best promote our students' intellectual development in the current environment?

The ongoing reform proposes an answer, albeit incomplete, to this question. After reviewing the guiding principles of the new curriculum, I will describe an activity that has recently been implemented in BC—the High School Ethics Bowl—and I will explain how it fosters an integrative development of each core competency emphasized in the new curriculum.

## 2. Focusing education on core competencies

The guiding principles underlying the reform were articulated by the Curriculum and Assessment Framework Advisory Group, which was formed in 2011. In addition to the general objectives contained in the mandate, the group emphasized that "the Province needs a more flexible curriculum that prescribes less and enables more, for both teachers and students" (BC Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 2). As such, the idea was to have a new curriculum architecture that prescribes fewer but more important outcomes, while providing teachers with flexibility to personalize learning in their classroom. Moreover, it seeks to emphasize higher-order cognition that leads to deeper learning and understanding. Over the course of the curriculum's development, many attempts were made to identify such cognitive practices that would "lead to the development of the whole child—intellectually, personally, and socially," so as to form a "holistic and integrated vision of learning" (BC Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 3). In the early phases of the process, they were called "crosscurricular competencies" to emphasize their transferability, but eventually the name "core competency" was adopted.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For more details concerning the process that has led to the core competencies as they are currently articulated, see Fillion and Martelli (2017). For a discussion of teachers' perspective on the process, see Gacoin (2018).

The core competencies emphasized in the new curriculum are organized in three categories: 1) thinking (T) 2) personal and social (PS) 3) communication (C). Each of the three categories of core competencies includes sub-domains (see figure 1). In academic discussions concerning core competencies, the Thinking competency (and in particular the Critical Thinking sub-competency) has received the most attention. The current version of the curriculum defines ‘critical thinking’ as follows:

Critical thinking involves making judgments based on reasoning: students consider options; analyze these using specific criteria; and draw conclusions and make judgments. Critical thinking competency encompasses a set of abilities that students use to examine their own thinking, and that of others, about information that they receive through observation, experience, and various forms of communication.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 1. The core competencies in the new BC curriculum (image from curriculum.gov.bc.ca)

This definition does not exactly map onto the structure proposed in figure 1. Following this structure, critical thinking has three interacting facets: (a) analyze and critique, (b) question and investigate, and (c) develop and design. On the other hand, creative thinking has three interacting facets: (a) novelty and value, (b) developing ideas, and (c) generating ideas. As we see from their different three-point descriptions, critical thinking is understood as complementary to but

<sup>3</sup> See the description at <https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/competencies/thinking/critical-andreflective-thinking>.

different from creative thinking (as opposed to other popular accounts that include both under the heading ‘critical thinking’). It is also understood as complementary to but different from the communication and the personal and social core competencies, despite their partial overlap in the definition cited above.

To enable teachers to make pedagogical decisions concerning their classroom activities, the conception of critical thinking at work in the new curriculum is minimally specified. As a result, no exact details are given about the nature of critical thinking and the other core competencies, and about how they should be taught and assessed. Beside the formulaic language cited earlier, there is no fleshed-out description of what critical thinking *is* and what critical thinkers *do*. Considering critical thinking as its own discipline—whose objects of study are the principles of good reasoning, judgement and decision-making that are integral to other disciplines—there is no summative and cumulative critical thinking content specified. Based on conversations with teachers and learning coordinators, it is clear that most teachers appreciate the flexibility, but that some also find somewhat daunting the prospect of a transition away from a content-oriented pedagogy to one that primarily focuses on critical thinking.

There is a clearly expressed need for more substantive guidance, in the form of paradigmatic examples, of this teaching mode, sample lesson and unit plans, uniform and coherent assessment guidelines, and professional development workshops. Not only about specific competencies, but also about how they integrate to form a cohesive learning experience. As a result, stakeholders have been looking for resources and activities that support a learning environment corresponding to the intent of the new curriculum. This is where the Ethics Bowl comes in.

### 3. The Canadian High School Ethics Bowl

An Ethics Bowl is both a collaborative and competitive team event, in which grade 9-12 students study, imagine, criticize, and compare stances and argumentative strategies, within an educationally-enhanced debate structure. The aim of the activity is that participating students develop and demonstrate their ability to critically engage with each other about current ethical issues—social, political, economic, scientific, cultural, and beyond. As opposed to traditional debate structures, in which reactionary opposition to each other and rhetorical flurries are often rewarded, the Ethics Bowl rewards critical listening and the ability to envision other points of views. Instead of being rewarded for digging their heels as the argumentation progresses, debaters may amend their original positions when faced with convincing arguments. Students have opportunities to pose and respond to probing questions from judges with expertise in critical and ethical reasoning, resulting in a deepening awareness of the stakes and principles that animate the discussion.

The Ethics Bowl began in the United States in the early 1990s at the college level. Since then, multiple variations of the event have been developed, including events that have focused on bioethics, engineering ethics, and business ethics. A high school version of the Ethics Bowl was later developed, and it has been supported by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill since 2013. In its first year, it involved around 1,000 students from 89 schools. As of 2019, it involved over 4,000 students from over 500 teams representing 327 schools from 28 states.

A Canadian High School Ethics Bowl (see <https://www.ethicsbowl.ca/>) was first organized in Manitoba with the support of the Manitoba Association for Rights and Liberties and local universities. One of the Canadian Ethics Bowl’s innovations is that it provides resources to serve students and educators in both the English and the French school systems. In Manitoba, English-language Regionals are held at the University of Manitoba, and French-language Regionals are held at the Université de Saint-Boniface. The Manitoban community has organized Ethics Bowls in English every year since 2015 and in French since 2019. The last edition involved 22 teams (16 for the English event, and 6 for the French event).

With the support of the Manitoban Ethics Bowl community, a first Canadian Regional was organized outside Manitoba in 2019 by the Department of Philosophy at Simon Fraser University in partnership with the BCSSTA. It was held at the SFU Burnaby campus on April 13, 2019.

Teams from five high schools took part in a round-robin style tournament, followed by semi-finals and finals. The first five schools to participate in the BC Ethics Bowl were:

- Ideal Mini School, Vancouver
- Prince of Wales Secondary, Vancouver
- Princess Margaret Secondary, Surrey
- Sands Secondary, Delta
- Vancouver Technical Secondary, Vancouver

Each team was led by energetic teachers who organized the teams, helped them to prepare, and accompanied them to the event. In addition, a team of dedicated volunteers helped to organize, moderate, and judge the event, most of whom were graduate students, instructors, and professors of philosophy at a college or university of the lower mainland. After a day of competition with many surprises and turnarounds, Sands Secondary earned first place, with Ideal Mini School ending second.

As we had Regional competitions in at least two provinces, the first National Final took place this year. The Manitoban community has coordinated the efforts to organize the Final in Winnipeg on April 24-25, 2019, at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights. Our two finalist teams joined six other qualifying teams for a two-day event. Over the next few years, it is expected that many more Regionals will be organized, so that the event will become a geographically representative national competition, as well as an opportunity for qualifying team members to meet peers from all over the country.

#### **4. How an Ethics Bowl match works**

There are multiple ways to use Ethics Bowl as a pedagogical device. Teachers often use the Ethics Bowl to structure classroom activities that start with students researching topics in a more or less autonomous way, and that result in an amicable debate. In this section, I will discuss how the Ethics Bowl works when it is used as part of a tournament.

The first step involves recruiting a team, consisting of five to seven students in grades nine to twelve. Many teachers recruit students from one or many classes, or from a club (e.g., the philosophy club or the debate club). Other teachers involve many more students, and determine who will be on the team later on in the semester.

Students and their coaches will receive a list of ten cases months before the competition. This gives participating members an opportunity to study each case in detail, and to familiarize themselves with the relevant ethical concepts, broadly construed. For a complete sample case, see figure 2.

Sample  
Case 1

Freedom of Speech or Protection against Hate Speech?

In the past few years, many radical speakers on both the far left and the far right have been prevented from speaking on university campuses due to protests from opposing viewpoints. For example, Ann Coulter (author of *In Trump We Trust*) was initially banned from speaking at University of California, Berkeley, which was ironically the stronghold of the Free Speech Movement that took place in the 1960s. The reason for the ban was stated as “active security threats,” although many far-right supporters of Ms. Coulter suggest it was an infringement of her right to free speech (BBC News). Protesters often cite hate speech as their rationale for preventing people who speak hateful rhetoric from entering their campus. This was the case for students at Middlebury College who peacefully protested social scientist Charles Murray by standing up during his speech with signs reading: “Your message is hatred, we cannot tolerate it” (CBC). Should campuses be a haven for free speech regardless of what is said? Or are campuses meant to be a haven for students who feel threatened by speakers’ hateful speech? What are we losing if we do not allow dissenting voices to meet?

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Figure 2. A sample Ethics Bowl case (borrowed from the *Guide for educators* freely available on ethicsbowl.ca)

For each case, a short question will be asked, but participants do not know the question ahead of time, so they need to anticipate what might be asked and prepare accordingly. The following ethical cases were discussed by the teams for both the BC Regional and the Final of the 2019 Ethics Bowl:

- (1) Post human ethics: Should performance-enhancing implantable devices be banned, partly or fully, in the same way that performance-enhancing drugs are banned from athletic competition?
- (2) Victim impact statements: To what extent should our legal system seek to incorporate victim impact statements into sentencing for criminal offences?
- (3) Robot labour: Will robot labour increase or decrease human welfare over the next decades and, if possible, what policies should be put in place to ensure that the social benefits of robot labour outweigh the disadvantages?

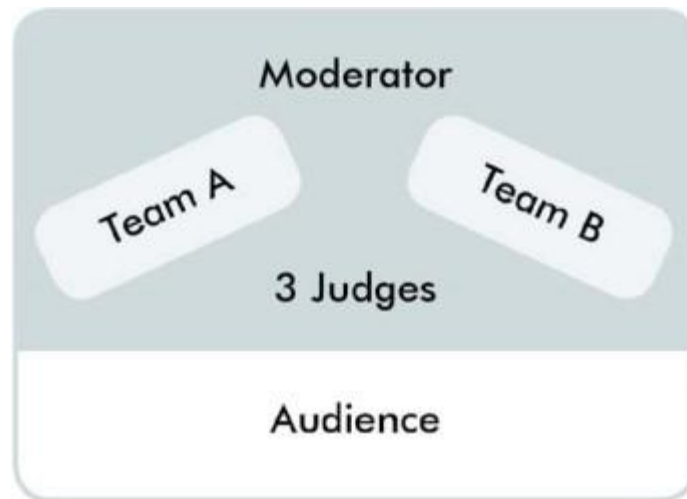


Figure 3. Room setup for an Ethics Bowl match (borrowed from the *Guide for educators* freely available on [ethicsbowl.ca](http://ethicsbowl.ca))

- (4) Superheroes: Does the superhero culture enable or undermine the development of a well-calibrated moral compass?
- (5) Fake news: Can fake news be regulated without unduly restraining freedom of the press? And if so, how should it be regulated?
- (6) Carbon culture: Should the big lifestyle changes required to tackle climate change be primarily grassroots, individuals or communities volunteering to make different choices about how to live, or should it be mandated by government policies?
- (7) Nuclear weapons ban: Should the international community adopt a complete ban on nuclear weapons, including disarming those that already exist? If so, how can such a ban be enforced?
- (8) Refugee crisis: Do wealthier, more stable nations have a duty to take in as many refugees as they can? If so, how can we determine how many we "can" take in?
- (9) Child welfare crisis: Is the best approach to improving child welfare in Indigenous communities to (1) provide support to specific communities (and if so, who should do it, and how), or (2) to focus on alleviating poverty more generally?
- (10) Gun ban: In Canada, is the balance of the risks and benefits associated with the possession of firearms warranting a federal gun ban and, if so, what kind of ban?

On the day of the event, each team will participate in five rounds, each round consisting in a debate about two cases. The room will be set up as in figure 3. Each round will follow this procedure:

- (1) The moderator flips a coin. The winning team is asked whether they want to lead or pass on the first case (if they pass, they will lead on the second case in that round). Following this decision, the moderator asks the question for the case.
- (2) The leading team has 2 minutes to confer, and 5 minutes to present their position.
- (3) The responding team has 1 minute to confer, and 3 minutes to respond and ask questions to the leading team.
- (4) The leading team has one minute to confer, and 3 minutes to respond.
- (5) Judges have 2 minutes to confer, and 10 minutes to ask questions (this includes the time for answers).
- (6) Judges score both teams, and write feedback for both teams.

- (7) The leading team and responding team change roles, and the same procedure is followed for the second case of the round.
- (8) In the BC Ethics Bowl, the winning team is announced (here, different organizers have different practices).

The criteria used to judge team performances in an Ethics Bowl significantly differ from more traditional debates. Judges assess whether participants were well-informed, relevant, and whether they addressed the question in its full complexity. To score well, students must display their understanding of alternative perspectives, as well as flexibility and adaptability in their thinking. They must also have an attitude befitting a constructive debate, which includes respect for all participants, a capacity to actively listen, and a willingness to improve their position in a way that brings more clarity and a more nuanced understanding to the discussion. The criteria do give some weight to factual knowledge, but more weight is put on skills that are typically associated with critical and creative thinking, as well as on personal and social skills. As such, in perfect alignment with the BC Mandate for the School System cited above, the Ethics Bowl emphasizes not only knowledge and cognitive skills, but also the *attitudes* conducive to intellectual development.

## 5. Educational benefits of the Ethics Bowl

There is extensive research literature on the educational benefits of participating in an Ethics Bowl. In this article, I have not focused on this literature in order to emphasize the relevance of the Ethics Bowl to the context of British Columbia, specifically as it relates to the new curriculum. If we return to the Ministry's official description of the core competencies presented in figure 1, it becomes evident that each core competency is developed by participating in an Ethics Bowl.

The Communication competency includes sharing and developing ideas, as well as obtaining, interpreting, and presenting information. The joint research that students engage in while studying the cases aligns with both. Moreover, the debate format encourages sharing ideas effectively. At the same time, by eschewing the reactionary opposition typical of standard debate structures and by allowing participants to amend their position, the Ethics Bowl also encourages the development of ideas and arguments in a way that is collaboratively planned and carried out.

The Thinking competencies are unquestionably central to a successful Ethics Bowl. Students are encouraged to study cases autonomously, at least in part, so that articulating their position on an issue is a creative endeavour. The views that students arrive at will perhaps not be novel in the grand scheme of things, but will often be an original contribution to an Ethics Bowl community, to the benefit of all participants. Moreover, arguing critically is the very essence of participating in an Ethics Bowl. Thus critical thinking competencies associated with argumentation, judgement, and decision-making will necessarily be developed in any active participant.

The Ethics Bowl also fosters the development of Personal and Social competencies. This is partially thanks to its enhanced structure, which encourages collaborative learning, the ability to envision things from diverse points of view, and having the correct attitudes, and partially thanks to its focus on ethical issues. As a result, it is hard to imagine that an active participant to an Ethics Bowl would not develop competencies that relate to positive personal and cultural identity, social responsibility, as well as personal awareness and responsibility, as they are described in the new curriculum.

This short survey makes clear the suitability of the Ethics Bowl for the development of core competencies as they are articulated in new BC curriculum. However, the Ethics Bowl does more than merely tick the boxes corresponding to each of the six competencies in figure 1. Indeed, as we have seen, the new curriculum does not provide much substantive guidance concerning how to design activities that provide cohesive learning experiences that lead to the holistic development of the child—intellectually, personally, and socially. Typical activities often focus on a subset of the factors contributing to this sort of development—often a fairly small subset. On the other hand, by its very structure, the Ethics Bowl emphasizes the necessary interconnections between the different aspects of our development. By its collaborative nature, the Ethics Bowl embodies an inclusive perspective on critical thinking that naturally includes communicative, personal, and social components.



Peter Ellerton, Curriculum Director of the University of Queensland Critical Thinking Project, has advocated a perspective on critical thinking that aligns well with the view of critical thinking (as it relates to other core competencies) embodied in an Ethics Bowl (Ellerton, 2015, 2017a,b). In contrast to other approaches, this framework places less emphasis on critical thinking as a discipline with its own content—isolated lists of fallacies, imperative rules, and argument structures. Instead, it encourages its users to focus on refining their metacognitive vocabulary—a vocabulary used to verbalize thought processes and their assessment. At its core, this vocabulary includes three kinds of concepts that structure inquiry in a cohesive manner: cognitive skills (e.g. analyzing, interpreting, explaining), epistemic values (e.g. clarity, precision, relevance), and virtues of inquirers (e.g. resilience, curiosity, integrity). This vocabulary is central to shaping learning activities and is a basis to provide intelligible feedback, allowing students and teachers alike to recognize critical thinking as a continual process of creative inquiry. Students and teachers then find themselves in a favourable position to answer their own questions—or questions raised in their community of inquiry—about what makes a reasoning more or less valuable within critical thinking practice.

## 6. Conclusion

The Ethics Bowl is an activity that has a number of pedagogical and educational virtues. Among them, it prioritizes the development of core competencies in a way that naturally aligns with the guiding principles underlying the recent reform of the British Columbia curriculum. At the same time, the Ministry says little about the different core competencies— what they are, what individuals with such competencies do, how to teach them, and how to assess the extent to which one holds them. As such, participation in an activity structured like the Ethics Bowl is an opportunity that helps teachers align their practice with the objectives stated in the new curriculum, to the greater benefit of participating students.

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