

# Bringing Mission to Practice: It's a Matter of Ethics

by Thomas Joseph, Aurora University

**Author Note:** I enrolled as a graduate student at Aurora University in 2008 pursuing an Ed.D. in Curriculum and Instruction. One of the most rewarding experiences of that endeavor has come through the relationship Aurora enjoys with the nearby Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy (IMSA) which has afforded me an opportunity to explore a realm that, despite 15 years of classroom experience, is completely new to me—the field of gifted education.

IMSA endeavors to “ignite and nurture creative, ethical scientific minds that advance the human condition” and both IMSA and Aurora express a commitment to the transformative power of education and collaboration among their community members. Since NCSSSMST seeks to foster such relationships, I thought its Journal readership might find an account of IMSA’s Considerations in Ethics (CinE) program a valuable contribution to ongoing conversations about best practices and to enriching opportunities among its member schools.

## Overview

Last fall, I attended an evening seminar in the IMSA auditorium that began with a presentation of the following medical scenario:

*A fourteen-year-old girl with cancer has reached the terminal stage, yet her family has instructed medical staff not to tell her the prognosis. How should caregivers respond if the girl asks about her condition?*

He cited post-graduation data that revealed NCSSSMST member school graduates consistently rated their schools’ contributions to their ethical decision making skills lower than critical thinking, creative thinking, and research skills (Thomas & Love, 2002). President McGee also referenced findings from an internal survey on academic integrity that raised concern among the IMSA faculty. The CinE initiative was developed and launched in light of these findings.

Dr. Lee Eysturlid, who is the architect of the CinE program and an IMSA history faculty member, then outlined the program’s specific objectives and described the curriculum to session participants. As Dr. Eysturlid explained, the program intends to: (1) fulfill IMSA’s mission to create ethical leaders; (2) address issues of academic dishonesty; (3) generate in students a belief that ethics and moral philosophy is a field of inquiry that is integral to human endeavor; and (4) create a program open to expansion and development.

The monthly CinE seminars follow one of two formats. Roughly half of the monthly seminars involve a thirty-minute lecture drawn from a diverse array of philosophical traditions. Students are prepped in advance with a moderate dose of primary readings from the likes of Aristotle,

Lisa Anderson-Shaw, Director of Clinical Ethics Consulting Service at the University of Illinois Medial Center, posed this question to approximately two hundred IMSA juniors that November evening. The scenario inspired a thirty-minute discussion of contemporary bioethics, during which speaker and students untangled issues of patient autonomy, utilitarianism, and the Kantian notion of a human’s right to unconditional truth. The rich discussion was part of IMSA’s Considerations in Ethics (CinE) program - a series of nine lectures and small-group discussions designed to advance the ethics component of IMSA’s mission.

IMSA President Glenn “Max” McGee explained the genesis of the CinE program at the November 2010 NCSSSMST/National Association of Gifted Children joint professional conference in Atlanta.



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Immanuel Kant, John Stewart Mill, and Confucius. In addition to the presentation and discussion of ethical traditions, on alternating months Dr. Eysturlid invites speakers from an array of professions who, from their own experiences, share the types of ethical dilemmas they encounter regularly in their respective fields, such as medical ethics, legislative ethics, and educational ethics.

Upon the conclusion of the evening's lecture, students retreat to breakout classrooms where senior student facilitators, selected by Dr. Eysturlid, moderate small-group discussions. The evening's readings and lecture orient students who then wrangle over ethically complex hypothetical scenarios, similar to the case of the terminally ill child.

the first year of the review, Dr. Thomas provided a formative report to Dr. Eysturlid and IMSA's leadership team. Significant findings from the formative evaluation suggested that:

- Nearly half of the students would be willing to enroll in a credit-bearing experience on the topic if it were made available as an elective course;
- Students appreciated both the primary readings and the discussions that were grounded in real-life issues;
- Students felt very strongly that they like to see the adult community members (faculty, residential life staff) involved, because it demonstrates that the community is invested in the topic; and



### Evaluation

From its inception, IMSA realized that CinE is both critical to realizing its institutional mission and, as well, CinE is an innovative academic experience among specialized schools. With these thoughts in mind, IMSA built in two phases for evaluating the efficacy of CinE.

First, rather than evaluate the program after several years of delivery, IMSA sought an external evaluator, Dr. Jay Thomas of Aurora University, to provide formative feedback over the course of one year of the experience. Dr. Thomas examined course materials, surveyed students, faculty, and senior facilitators, and examined the program with respect to current literature on gifted students and ethical development. At the mid-point and end of

- The majority of the students were able to identify an ethical lens through which they now looked at issues they encounter.

The second phase of the evaluation involves a research-based examination of changes in students' understanding of ethics. This research is currently underway and will involve two years of data gathering using standardized instruments such as the Defining Issues Test (DIT).

### Dissemination

The IMSA team concluded its Atlanta presentation of CinE by inviting feedback from the audience. They encouraged those interested to contact them with questions, comments, or to simply exchange

ideas about teaching ethics. Session participants left with a CD that included a CinE course outline, lecture notes, and various PowerPoint presentations – a product of IMSA’s sincere hope others will join the conversation about disseminating CinE among NCSSMST member schools.

### Concluding Thoughts

I think IMSA’s CinE program has tremendous potential for many curricular applications, whether replicated in whole or tailored to meet an individual school’s logistical context. As a former English teacher, I envision integrating CinE lectures with literary analysis. I imagine students applying Kantian Ethics to John Proctor’s moral dilemma, or examining the breakdown of social order in *Lord of the Flies* through any one of the philosophical lenses set forth in the CinE program. I imagine science and civics teachers bolstering their existing units to include the “real-world” application piece of the CinE program as their students explore ethical conundrums inherent within those fields.

In my opinion, IMSA’s CinE program invites the exploration of big questions with implications spanning multiple domains of curriculum and instruction.

- From a social foundations perspective, CinE evokes the challenge of selecting moral orientations for the curriculum while respecting all forms of diversity.
- There are also implications for developmental psychology and gifted education in exploring the relationship between cognitive and moral development and whether CinE supports previous research that finds a high correlation between advanced academic ability and moral reasoning skills (Narvaez, 1993).
- From an assessment perspective, measuring the impact of morals education has historically been problematic (Brimi, 2008);

I am excited to be assisting in the effort currently underway to measure the impact of CinE on IMSA students’ ethical development. However, the greatest impact on my learning has been witnessing one school’s process for explicitly addressing its mission statement. IMSA cast

critical eyes inwardly, enacted data-driven instructional innovation, and empowered a teacher-leader to bring about change - a synthesis of many things we graduate students learn about effective curricular reform. Having recently augmented their program to include the DIT as a quantitative measure of its impact, IMSA’s developing CinE initiative embodies best practice as they renew a mission “...to create ethical sCinEntific minds that advance the human condition.”

Yet their commitment to their mission does not end there. IMSA invited educators in Atlanta that morning to join their conversation about teaching ethics to STEM school students. Their open call for partnership is reflected within the second significant aspect of their mission—to be a *laboratory* of best practice. Since the NCSSMST’s mission is to support such collaborations, I hope readers from member schools consider similar programs and accept IMSA’s invitation to share ideas.

I have learned that relationships spanning multiple professional networks are vital to addressing the big questions in any field and that we educators should take full advantage when those relationships present themselves. The relationship between Aurora University and IMSA has taken my own professional growth in new and exciting directions, and my time at the Atlanta conference revealed NCSSMST’s unlimited potential for maximizing intellectual capital inherent in networks.

I am beginning to believe it’s just the right thing to do.

### References

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