Measuring student success skills
A review of the literature on ethical thinking

As educators, economists and business leaders advocate for preparing students for a globally interconnected and technologically complex world, ethical thinking has emerged as a crucial competency for the future. Ethical thinking is indispensable for engaging thoroughly with pressing global issues, such as climate change, sustainable development, artificial intelligence, data privacy and inequality. Ethical thinking also plays a key role in fostering cohesive, pluralistic societies, and is vital in creating a more peaceful world through promoting understanding and respect.

What is ethical thinking?
Ethical thinking is the process of identifying and describing ethical issues in a variety of contexts, articulating the ethical considerations involved in different responses to those issues, and providing a rationale for a position that addresses those considerations.

Is ethical thinking domain general or domain specific?

Ethical thinking encompasses both domain-general and domain-specific aspects. It involves cognitive processes, such as identifying, analysing and resolving ethical issues, which are domain general. However, ethical thinking also possesses domain-specific elements. For example, different disciplines and professions often have unique ethical principles and considerations, such as the principle of attorney–client privilege in the legal profession.

How do students develop ethical thinking over time?

While there is substantial research and many theories on the development of ethical thinking in students, for example, Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development and Domain Theory, the exact process remains a subject of debate and ongoing research. It is a multifaceted developmental process influenced by, among other things, cognitive stages, moral and social norms, and cultural factors.

What is malleable with respect to ethical thinking as a result of instruction?

Ethical thinking is malleable and can be developed through instruction, as evidenced by empirical research. This is supported by various studies that demonstrate the effectiveness of instructional methods, particularly discussion-based interventions focused on moral dilemmas. These discussions have been shown to result in notable improvements in moral reasoning.

How is ethical thinking influenced by culture?

Ethical thinking is deeply influenced by cultural factors, such as religious traditions and values. One difference lies in the emphasis on individual versus collective focus. Western societies often focus on the individual in ethical reasoning, whereas many cultures in Africa, Asia and the Americas emphasize collective considerations. A second difference arises in moral foundations (for example, fairness/cheating, liberty/oppression), where some are salient in certain cultures but not in other cultures.

What does the research say about effective ethical thinking instructional strategies?

Studies suggest a range of instructional methods can be successful in improving ethical reasoning. Engaging students in discussions about moral dilemmas has been shown to notably enhance their ability to reason about moral issues. Methods which emphasize the clear differentiation between moral questions and social norms also appear to be effective in deepening students' understanding of ethical principles. Additionally, constructivist approaches, which encourage active learning through group collaboration and debate, significantly advance students' ethical thinking. Furthermore, social-emotional learning techniques, which develop skills such as self-awareness and sound judgement, can also promote ethical reasoning.

How should ethical thinking be measured and assessed?

While there are a variety of both psychometrically developed and rubric-based assessments, care must be taken when considering why ethical thinking is being assessed, how this will be done and what student feedback will be provided.