

# Fostering Moral Reasoning through Liberal Arts Education: A Pedagogical Framework for Ethical Decision-Making in Universities

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## Abstract

This paper investigates the role of Liberal Arts Education (LAE) in fostering moral reasoning among university students. It explores the historical evolution, contemporary mechanisms, and pedagogical approaches that underline LAE's effectiveness in ethical decision-making. The study suggests a structured program comprising knowledge, skills, and values dimensions to systematically integrate moral reasoning into higher education, highlighting significant implications for educational policy and practice.

## 1. Introduction

There is a research-based consensus among scholars on the fundamental task of higher education and Liberal Arts Education (LAE) in moral reasoning development of college students (Pascarella, 1997; Wright, 2001; You & Penny, 2011). These two entities play an important part in shaping young minds, imparting a comprehensive and cumulative education, cultivating students' intellectual, social, and spiritual capabilities, and preparing them for active participation in the lives of their communities. Pascarella (1997) and Nucci (2001) assert that moral development is a core function of higher education, and this is evident in the language of most of the universities' mission statements, such as preparation for citizenship, character development, service to society, etc.

LAE is an approach to undergraduate studies that emphasizes broad knowledge and in-depth study in a specific subject area. It encourages the development of critical thinking, problem-solving and communication skills, the mechanisms which enable LAE to influence ethical decision-making. It aims to produce well-rounded individuals with a foundation for life-long learning and civic engagement.

According to the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), LAE is an "approach to learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change. It provides students with broad knowledge of the wider world... as well as in-depth study in a specific area of interest.... [It] helps students develop a sense of social responsibility, strong transferrable intellectual and practical skills such as communication,

analytical and problem-solving skills, and a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings”.

With the rapid societal change, increased acts of violence, burglary, arson, and pillage, diverse forms of business fraud, abuse of authority, and political corruption have started to spread rapidly (Thomas, 2000; Rabl & Kuhlmann, 2008). In addition, some social media platforms disseminate content that encourages the violation of rules and principles under the name of freedom, which has exacerbated this problem of moral decline. Religious extremism has also spread over the Middle East, leading to radical changes in ideas, principles, and beliefs among youth.

All these acts of misbehavior and malpractices have collectively sparked my interest in exploring ways by which LAE is utilized to enhance moral reasoning in university students so that they can make sound judgments about right and wrong and then act accordingly. Thus, understanding LAE mechanisms that best foster ethical reasoning and ethical decision-making in students is beneficial for their personal growth and crucial for society at large.

This study is highly significant for policy makers, educators, students and stakeholders because ethics- often simply termed morals- are crucial to every aspect of life. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: “Kindness is not to be found in anything but that it adds to its beauty, and it is not withdrawn from anything, but it makes it defective.”

قال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم: "ان الرفق لا يكون في شيء الا زانه ولا ينزع من شيء الا شانه"

Following the Prophet’s hadith and recognizing that life is a never-ending series of decisions, it becomes critically important to develop methods that foster ethical reasoning and ethical decision-making in our students.

Despite the recognized importance of moral reasoning within higher education, contemporary implementations of LAE often lack systematic integration of ethical decision-making frameworks. This paper addresses the critical need to identify and evaluate effective educational strategies that explicitly incorporate moral reasoning development into liberal arts curricula. In other words, it seeks to:

- identify the mechanisms through which LAE facilitates moral reasoning,
- examine contemporary approaches and theories relevant to moral reasoning development,
- and propose a structured educational program that systematically incorporates ethical decision-making into LAE curricula.

The following section reviews existing scholarly literature on moral reasoning and Liberal Arts Education, including foundational theories by Piaget, Kohlberg, Rest, Dewey, and Bandura. It synthesizes research that supports the effectiveness of LAE mechanisms such as critical thinking and problem-solving in enhancing students' ethical capabilities. Key studies and theoretical frameworks relevant to the study's objectives are discussed to establish an academic foundation.

## Chronological Development of Liberal Arts Education (LAE)

Liberal Arts Education (LAE) has evolved from its ancient Greek origins, where it was exclusive to free elites, to a broad and inclusive framework. Initially focused on the “trivium” (grammar, logic, rhetoric) and “quadrivium” (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music), it shaped early university curricula and became central to American higher education, as seen in Harvard’s founding.

Over time, societal changes—such as the democratization of education and specialization of knowledge—expanded beyond the elitist roots of LAE. By the 18th and 19th centuries, educational reformers like John Locke and Henry Newman helped make LAE accessible to diverse populations, breaking down barriers of class, gender, and socioeconomic status.

Additionally, the changes propelled the aims of LAE, which were transformed from cultivating a citizen to cultivating the intellect and disciplining the mind (Newman, 1994). The priority of LAE has become intellectual training rather than the whole person (Shen, 2016). Liberal Arts Education (LAE) has a distinguished history of fostering quality education and cultivating well-rounded, well-mannered individuals. However, over time, significant changes in its structure, course content, methodology, and goals have caused LAE to lose some of its original focus and purpose. With these changes in focus and purpose, the momentum of the affective aspects of LAE, including moral reasoning and values, tended to wane.

This study is particularly timely; it strives to tap into LAE’s potential for promoting ethical decision-making skills. This study seeks to honor and revive the rich legacy of LAE by exploring how it can be revitalized to equip university students with essential ethical decision-making skills, aligning with its core mission of nurturing informed and responsible citizens.

## Modern Liberal Arts Education

LAE’s potential for promoting ethical decision-making skills in university students lies in the mechanisms that make it a preferred approach to higher education. The first mechanism is critical thinking, a core skill emphasizing analyzing and synthesizing information thoughtfully and logically. To promote critical thinking skills, students are encouraged to question, negotiate, evaluate the effects of consequences, consider different perspectives and develop logical and rational conclusions. Training in critical thinking enables the students to distinguish strong arguments from weak ones, valid from invalid, and socially accepted behaviors from refuted ones. Eventually, they learn to construct evidence-based responses and arguments.

The second mechanism is problem-solving skills. Training in these skills encourages students to use their thinking skills to go beyond surface-level thinking to identify a problem, understand its root causes, find possible solutions, evaluate the course of action of each solution, and finally decide and implement the best solution. This mode of intellectual activity requires thinking that finds innovative solutions to real-life problems, leading to success and progress in their societies.

Dewey (1939), a visionary educationalist whose ideas were ahead of their time, concludes that teaching values and developing programs for moral reasoning development in college students is commendable but insufficient. Students may appreciate many values, but deciding which value to follow in a particular situation is a pressing need for them. For him, critical thinking, including

decision-making, problem-solving, and critical analysis, is paramount for deciding which value to follow.

Piaget (1932), Kohlberg (1981) and Rest (1986), pioneers in the field of moral development, emphasized the relation of moral judgment and moral action. They stressed the significance of logical reasoning in advancing moral reasoning and the role of moral reasoning in guiding moral conduct. Thus, critical thinking is the driving engine that encompasses moral reasoning. All of these factors and processes are combined in an interdependent framework where factors or conditions support each other to achieve a broader goal, that is, moral conduct.

### Approaches to Moral Reasoning Development

So far, I have briefly presented the mechanisms that make LAE a potential approach to instilling moral reasoning and ethics in university students. It is important to remember that every action is ethically charged and can positively or negatively impact people. Additionally, research confirms that participation in communal life is based on making judgments that affect both the individual and society (Raja & Alias, 2024). Thus, finding an approach to instill moral reasoning in students is vitally necessary.

Approaches to the development of morality have graduated from a mere focus on external factors to a complete dependence on intrinsic factors. Freud believed that moral development is conforming to cultural norms through the process of internalization. Children's moral development depends on moral imperatives that the child receives from parents or significant adults in his or her life. These imperatives, forming his/her super-ego and later called conscience, represent guidelines about social norms that the child should adhere to. When the conscience or super-ego is formed, it prevents the child from violating or transgressing social norms.

In their learning theory approaches, Bandura (1963) and Eysenck (1964), among other theorists, believe that moral behavior is a learned behavior similar to acquiring a skill or a habit. This approach to moral development relies on reinforcement, where punishment and rewards play significant roles in a child's moral development.

Social learning theorists Bandura and Walters (1963) believe that children's morality develops not only because of punishment and rewards but also through imitation. They emphasize that learning a desirable or deviant behavior is learned mostly through observation rather than instructions.

So far, all of the abovementioned approaches represent complementary explanations of moral development and seem to enhance moral training rather than moral education. They encourage conventional morality, as they entirely depend on such concepts as reinforcement, including punishment, rewards, and imitation or modeling.

Arnold Gessel (1964) one of the earliest investigators in the field, concerned himself with moral conduct only. His theory consists of three stages: (1) obedience to rules, authority, or commands; (2) rigid adherence to rules even in the absence of authority; and (3) personal morality, autonomous in character.

Piaget and Kohlberg agree that moral development is a cognitive-developmental process based on moral judgment, that is, an individual's reasoning. Based on longitudinal and cross-cultural studies, Piaget (1932) refuted the idea that punishment, rewards and imitation build moral judgment, as they negate the significance of cognitive skills. He contends that moral judgment results from a maturational process through gradual cognitive restructuring (Chaudhary et al., 2017).

Piaget heavily relies on the ideas of the German philosopher Kant in developing his theory of moral development. Based on the theory, who distinguished between heteronomy and autonomy of the will, Piaget categorized morality into conventional and rational. The former refers to external factors for moral development, such as social disapproval or refraining from doing an act disapproved by others, while the latter refers to intrinsic and spontaneous ones, such as when individuals follow rules not because of authority but because they accept these rules as their own.

Piaget chose three areas to explore children's moral judgment:

1. Children's attitudes towards rules: They abstain from violating rules, instructions, or commands prescribed by authority so as not to lose the adult's approval.
2. Children's judgment of right and wrong: They begin to formulate their own views of right and wrong.
3. Children's assessment of justice and fairness: For children, the concept of fairness means equal treatment administered to all. However, as they grow older in age, they think of fairness in addition to the needs and desires of others. Thus, fairness is equal treatment if the needs are the same. Treatment should be proportional to the needs of others.

Kohlberg (1966) believed that all suggested and prescribed programs and approaches could not achieve their purposes unless they are based on solid knowledge of an individual's moral development stages. Kohlberg postulates that the development of human morals and reasoning skills takes place in three levels: pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional, each of which consists of two stages.

At the first level, the pre-conventional, children base their moral judgments on obedience, punishments, and self-interest. At stage one, they decide whether an act is good or bad on whether they get punished or not. In most cases, they follow instructions to avoid punishment. Stage two is characterized by self-interest. For instance, although they expect punishment if they intervene to help, they do so because they expect others to help them in the future.

At the second, conventional level, morality is centered around what society regards as right. At stage three, children begin to think of their community. Their behaviors are based on "interpersonal accord and conformity" (Koblin, 2021). They start to think of socially acceptable or unacceptable behavior because they care about what others think of them. Stage four takes place when the young start to value authority and how to maintain law and order. Questioning the fairness of the rules does not happen at this level.

At the third level, post-conventional, the ability to reason, judge the fairness of rules, etc., is almost mature; not many people may reach this level. Stage five is characterized by a sense of

reasoning. Young adults start to think about rules and regard them as social contracts. At this stage of morality, individuals believe that decisions should be made to promote “the greatest good for the greatest number of people”.

Stage six is the second stage of the same level, the post-conventional level. At this stage, individuals’ morality is based on abstract reasoning and focus on ideas such as equality, dignity and respect. Individuals can think for themselves. They may deny or object to a rule or law if it is unfair or not grounded in justice. At this stage, a person feels obliged to disobey a rule if it is unfair. For them, being fair is more important than being lawful and obedient to rules and laws. Applying universal ethical principles becomes the mode of thinking and a priority, particularly if they are aligned with fairness and justice. Kohlberg asserted that stage six of moral development exists even though few individuals reach it.

Rest (1994) argued in favor of developing an ethical decision-making model. He proposed a model that involves four psychological processes, namely “moral sensitivity,” “moral judgment,” “moral motivation,” and “moral character.” The processes are in an interdependent relationship, and one process influences another. The table below delineates each process of this model:

| Psychological process       | Meaning   |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Moral sensitivity           | An individual’s ability to recognize that a situation contains a moral issue. An individual is aware that his or her action may hurt or benefit another person.   |
| Moral judgment              | Recognizing that a situation contains a moral issue, a person must decide which solution is ethically justified by evaluating its potential consequences and ethical soundness. This process is critical to the model because it involves several steps. First, once the issue is identified, a person must find different ways, including actions or decisions, to address the problem at hand. Second, the person must decide whether each solution aligns with ethical principles such as fairness, honesty and respect for others. Third, the individual must consider the merits of each solution such as benefits, rights, duties and potential harms. Finally, the individual will select the best option based on the aforementioned steps and ensure it adheres to moral principles. |
| Moral motivation/ intention | The selection of the best solution depends on the decision-makers’ intention. Some options are ethically justified but lead to a conflict of interest. The final choice depends on the decision maker’s willingness to choose the value of morality over the value of interest (Lincoln & Holmes, 2011).  |
| Moral character/action      | It refers to an individual’s behavior or action in the situation. It requires courage to bridge the gap between deciding what is right and doing what is right.   |

Piaget and Kohlberg, among other researchers such as Kay (1975) and Kerb (1964), agree that logical reasoning and moral judgment are essential but insufficient components for generating moral conduct. Other factors should be considered and added to the equation, such as motivation, courage and determination, in addition to consideration of the situation and its pressures to execute a moral behavior. Although these are not moral factors in nature, but are integral components for materializing moral reasoning

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) assert that critical thinking and well-structured programs that engage students in moral dilemmas can facilitate deeper moral reasoning. Williams (2017) and Lickona (1991) advocate for integrating ethics into the curriculum to enhance students’ ethical growth and social responsibility. Other studies (Self & Baldwin, 1994; King & Mayhew, 2002)

showed that long-term programs, including discussion of moral dilemmas, have produced modest but definite effects on moral reasoning development.

Therefore, based on the increasing demand for instilling morals and ethics in our students to resolve ethical problems rampant in society and functioning within the framework defined by the morality theories of Kant, Piaget and Kohlberg, among many others, it is essential to propose a program for instilling moral values in our students. The framework of this potential program has three dimensions: knowledge, skills and values, which appear in the table below.

| Dimensions | Components   | Examples  | Courses  |
|------------|--|---|--|
| Knowledge  | <u>Media Literacy:</u><br>- Teach students how to think critically about all forms of media they personally interact with, such as television, video games, their smart phones by responding and raising questions.<br>- Teach students to think critically about their own habits of thinking and doing.<br>- Let them discuss these virtually via Discussion Boards, pods and other pertinent platforms. | - Who created social media platforms?<br>- What are the messages of the social media platforms?<br>- What is the purpose?<br>- Who has benefitted from these platforms?<br>- they personally interact with, whether it's television, video games, their smart phones,<br>- How does any form of media influence their values, beliefs, attitudes, goals?<br>- How they spend their time, and the kind of person they are becoming?<br>- Is it making them a better person and helping them build a positive future? | Certain chapters in<br>- GMED151<br>- GARB 131<br>- GENG 131<br>- GENG 132<br>- GENG 133       |
|            | <u>Kohlberg's Stages of moral Development</u><br>Scholars of Morality<br>Principles of Morality<br>Theories of Morality<br>Approaches to Morality  | - Research-based activities<br>- Group discussion   | Agreed-upon chapters in:<br>- GISL 121<br>- GARB 131<br>- GENG 131<br>- GENG 132<br>- GENG 133 |
| Skills     | <u>Implementing moral principles in decision-making activities based on theoretical scenarios</u>  | - Group discussion<br>- Presentations   | - GISL 121<br>- GARB 131<br>- GENG 131<br>- GENG 132<br>- GENG 133<br>- GSEM 100<br>- GSEM 201 |
| values     | <u>Real-Life Scenarios</u>   | - Voting and winning solutions  | - GSEM 100<br>- GSEM 201   |

The main objectives of this program are as follows:

#### Knowledge Level:

1. **Moral Knowledge:** Students should be able to explain Kohlberg's stages of morality, notable scholars in the field, theories and approaches to morality.

2. Moral clarity: Students should be able to distinguish social-media platforms that create, share and disseminate authentic from fake information.

#### Skills Level:

1. Moral Sensitivity: Students should be able to study and discuss the moral situation and the consequences of their deeds on others objectively before they act.

2. Moral Empathy: Students should be able to implement values such as respect, honesty, empathy, cooperation, altruism, fairness, patriotism, loyalty and forgiveness among many other values in situations that involve moral issues.

3. Emotional intelligence: Students should be able to practice full responsibility to make thoughtful, informed decisions based on their knowledge of morality.

#### Values Level:

1. Students should be able to resolve moral issues in real-life situations.

#### Findings and Analysis

Analysis of historical and contemporary pedagogical practices underscores that fostering critical thinking, engaging students in ethical dilemma discussions, and promoting applied problem-solving significantly enhance moral reasoning capabilities among university students. Historical perspectives illustrate that LAE traditionally emphasized a holistic approach, integrating ethics and moral reasoning deeply within educational curricula. In contrast, contemporary practices highlight the need for structured approaches explicitly dedicated to ethical development to counteract the dilution of moral education in modern academia.

The present study's analysis identifies three core mechanisms that reinforce moral reasoning within the Liberal Arts Education framework. First, critical thinking emerges as a foundational skill that enables students to discern, analyze, and evaluate moral issues rigorously, thereby fostering informed ethical judgments. Second, structured discussions around ethical dilemmas effectively engage students in reflective and deliberative processes, significantly deepening their capacity for moral understanding. Third, applied problem-solving exercises provide students with practical contexts in which they can actively apply moral theories and ethical principles, thereby bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world practice.

The proposed educational framework systematically structured around three essential dimensions—knowledge acquisition, skill development, and value internalization—addresses critical pedagogical gaps identified in contemporary educational models. This comprehensive framework offers educators actionable guidelines to effectively embed moral reasoning within curricula, ensuring that students not only grasp theoretical ethical concepts but also develop the practical competencies necessary to navigate real-life moral challenges confidently.

This study thus highlights a critical imperative for universities and educational policymakers: to explicitly integrate moral reasoning into curricula through robust, structured pedagogical interventions. Such interventions promise significant societal benefits by equipping graduates



with enhanced ethical decision-making capacities, ultimately contributing positively to both personal integrity and communal well-being.

## 2. Methodology

The pedagogical approach of this program depends on a series of steps:

### 1. Pre-implementation stage:

GARB 131 and all GENG course syllabi should be adjusted in a way that each course strives to instill a few concepts of moral knowledge in our students. For instance, moral literacy may be added to GENG 131 and the rest of the topics listed above can be distributed among the rest of the courses.

2. Implementation Stage: Similarly, the research-based courses, GSEM 100 and GSEM 201, in addition to the previously mentioned courses should be utilized to encourage the students to conduct research to understand these concepts and apply them in real-life scenarios to resolve moral issues. During this stage, teachers can utilize a variety of teaching strategies depending on their suitability to content and objective. For instance, teachers can use group discussions in classroom, one-to-one interaction, as in tutorials, presentations, drawings, etc. to help the students understand and eventually own a system of values that helps them make ethical, informed decisions.

The values dimension is realized by sharing their experiences, expressing opinions, taking and defending stances, debating, analyzing, arguing, and evaluating positions. All these intellectual activities, triggered by critical thinking questions and problem-solving scenarios, in addition to a self-assessment activity can be geared toward moral reasoning development in college students.

Furthermore, the class environment should be encouraging. Interacting with the faculty in a safe and non-depressing environment has a far-reaching influence on the student's academic achievement and motivation to learn. Additionally, student-faculty interactions, including sharing personal experiences, contribute to fostering intellectual and character growth and a deep understanding of core values and principles. Freshmen students are usually in dire need of such an environment, especially at the beginning of their first academic year, during which they usually feel tense, anxious, and confused, and everything seems new and strange (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006).

### Post-implementation Stage:

Real-life and theoretical moral scenarios are used to assess students' ability to make ethical, informed decisions regarding moral issues.

## 3. Conclusion

This paper underscores the essential role that Liberal Arts Education (LAE) plays in cultivating moral reasoning and ethical decision-making capabilities among university students. Through

examining the historical progression and contemporary pedagogical mechanisms inherent to LAE, this study provides robust evidence that structured, deliberate integration of moral reasoning within liberal arts curricula significantly enhances students' ethical capacities.

The proposed educational framework, structured around the tri-dimensional approach—knowledge, skills, and values—not only equips students with theoretical understanding but actively prepares them to confront real-life moral dilemmas thoughtfully and responsibly. The strength of this approach lies in its holistic treatment of moral reasoning as an integral component of higher education rather than a peripheral or incidental aspect.

Nevertheless, several nuanced areas remain to be explored more comprehensively. For instance, future research might empirically assess the long-term effectiveness of the suggested pedagogical strategies on students' moral development post-graduation. Longitudinal studies could provide insight into whether students who engage intensively with structured ethical curricula exhibit sustained ethical behaviors and improved decision-making in their professional and personal lives.

Additionally, comparative research involving diverse cultural and institutional contexts would deepen our understanding of how universal or context-dependent moral reasoning frameworks are. Given the globalized and pluralistic nature of contemporary societies, it is vital to explore how LAE can effectively address varying cultural interpretations of ethics and morality.

Lastly, as digital platforms profoundly influence contemporary ethical norms and behaviors, future studies could beneficially examine how the intersection of LAE and digital literacy might enhance or challenge ethical decision-making processes among digitally native generations.

In conclusion, to genuinely foster a morally conscious and ethically responsible citizenry, higher education institutions must embrace a comprehensive, research-informed approach to moral education. The pathways proposed herein not only respond effectively to immediate societal challenges but also lay the groundwork for ongoing scholarly inquiry into the ever-evolving relationship between education, ethics, and societal well-being.

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