The ethics co-laboratory as a space for cultivating character in professional life

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Abstract

This paper presents and discusses the ethics co-laboratory (e-co-lab) model of working on ethics cases, designed to cultivate the moral sensitivity and broader practical wisdom of those who participate. Developed in the context of working with participatory researchers, the e-co-lab is equally applicable to professional education and development more generally - with health and social care professionals, teachers or engineers, for example. The e-co-lab involves a collaborative process of exploring real-life ethics cases in depth, using different methods including: participatory theatre; creative writing and poetry; drawing and diagramming; and movement and dance. The paper critically discusses the nature of moral sensitivity (particularly moral perception) and illustrates how the e-co-labs contribute to honing the capacities of participants to identify ethically salient features of situations through working with emotions, bodily movements and creative imagination. The paper concludes by considering the ways in which the e-co-lab model enables moral character to be 'caught, taught and sought', with a particular focus on how moral sensitivity is 'sought', based on the voluntary commitment and ethics work of the lab participants.

Introduction: the idea of the ethics co-laboratory (e-co-lab)

The ethics co-laboratory (e-co-lab) is a space (virtual and real) and a collaborative methodology, which aims to cultivate the moral sensitivity and broader practical wisdom of the people and groups who participate. In this paper I will present the concept and practice of the e-co-lab as developed and used by the ethics working group of the International Collaboration for Participatory Health Research (ICPHR) (for details of the ICPHR, see www.icphr.org). In this context, the aim is to cultivate practical wisdom in relation to identifying and working on ethical issues in the field of participatory research.

Participatory research involves academics or other professional researchers working with community-based partners to conduct research together on topics of interest and concern to the community researchers (such as domestic violence, household debt or rural transport), usually with the aim of influencing policy or practice (Abma e al., 2019). There are specific ethical challenges in participatory research linked to issues of equity in partnership working, use of academic power and valuing of diverse experiences and community knowledge (Banks et al. 2013; Banks and Brydon-Miller, 2019). The e-co-lab model of collaborative experimentation, which mirrors the process of participatory

research, is especially fruitful for exploring the layers of ethical complexity in this approach to research. Furthermore, it is equally applicable to other settings. It can be used in professional education and continuing professional development for teachers, doctors, social workers or engineers, for example, or groups of community activists or volunteers who see value in sharing and studying ethical challenges in their work and everyday lives. While the work of the e-co-lab described here is set in the context of participatory research, the focus in this paper is on the methodology used rather than the insights gained in relation to participatory research *per se*.

The idea of the e-co-lab developed from the practices of the ICPHR ethics working group. The group was established in 2012, with the purpose of refining ethical guidance for the ICPHR, deepening thinking on the nature of ethics and ethical issues in participatory research, sharing ethical challenges and developing skills and confidence in ethical analysis and reflection. The group has developed a guide to ethical principles and practice, shared methods for ethical reflection, and collected and published ethics cases and commentaries (see ICPHR, 2022; Banks and Brydon-Miller, 2019; von Köppen et al., 2025). A key activity of the group has been the presentation and discussion of examples of ethically challenging situations experienced by members in the practice of participatory research ('ethics cases'). It is from this process of case discussion that the more experimental and expansive methodology (going beyond discussion) of the e-co-lab has developed.

The 'ethics case' and case discussion

It is a well-established practice in professional and practical education and training to use 'ethics cases' as a focus for discussion and analysis, with the aim of developing the capacities of students and practitioners to identify ethically salient aspects of situations and undertake ethical reasoning, judgement and decision-making. In neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, these capacities would be regarded as components of the overarching intellectual virtue of *phronesis* or practical wisdom (Kristjánsson et. al., 2020).

In professional education, an 'ethics case' is often a short narrative account, which features recognisable ethical issues relating to rights, responsibilities, harms, benefits and so on (Chambers, 1997). In the ethics working group, we invite case presenters to offer longer narrative accounts of ethical challenges faced during their participatory research practice. They are encouraged to present a written version in the first person, including not only a description of details of the specific situation, but also the social, economic and political context of the case and details of the feelings and emotions of the case presenter and others in the story, and any reflections on the issues raised (see Banks and Brydon-Miller, 2019, ps 15, 23, for instructions on how to write a case).

This approach is premised on the view that ethical practice involves emotions as well as reason (Roberts, 2013; Shaw and Baghramian, 2022); that ethical, practical and political issues are deeply intertwined (Banks, 2016); and that some indication of the 'moral ecology' or context of a case (the cultural and social norms and practices surrounding it) is important (Brinkmann, 2004). These longer, narrative cases contrast with shorter 'textbook' cases or vignettes that are often de-contextualised and specifically designed to highlight a dilemma or difficult decision.

Case discussion, dilemmas cafes or more structured moral case deliberation are very useful ways of developing ethical awareness and competence (Centre for Social Justice and Community Action, 2015; Molewijk et al., 2008; Weidema, et al., 2012). Hearing the views of others and working together to identify ethical issues, consider what courses of action could and should be taken, or how a virtuous person might respond, broadens horizons and develops capacities in moral understanding and reasoning. Often emotions arise in the discussion, and accounts are given of emotions by the case presenter. However, the work of case discussion inevitably tends to draw more on cognitive resources (taking 'cognitive' to refer to processes of thinking and reasoning).

The idea of the e-co-lab developed from my experience of starting to work with different methods of exploring ethics cases – particularly through participatory theatre and associated movement practices that include use of the body and engaging with emotions and creative imagination (Banks, Rifkin et al., 2014).

The theory and practice of the e-co-lab

The e-co-lab methodology is grounded in a particular conception of ethics (situated or contextual ethics); a participatory paradigm or world view (valuing collaboration and cooperation); and an experimental approach (laboratory). I will briefly describe these three features.

- *Situated ethics* - In situated approaches to ethics, a primary focus of ethical evaluation (judgments and decisions) is on placing people, events and decisions in the contexts in which they are located (entangled in existing responsibilities, relationships, moral/political/cultural norms, geographical places and historical antecedents). This contrasts with principle-based approaches to making moral judgements, involving the application of abstract, universal principles from the top down to particular situations. Virtue or character-based ethics (Aristotle, 350 BCE/1954; Annas et al., 2016), the ethics of care (Tronto, 1993; Collins, 2015) and contextual ethics (Walker, 2003; Christensen and Eriksen, 2020) can all be characterised as situated approaches to ethics.
- *Participatory paradigm* - A participatory paradigm is a holistic worldview that values inter-relationships between people, and between people and other elements of the biosphere. In the context of participatory research, this entails a 'radical' or 'extended epistemology' - going beyond propositional, academic knowledge, and

particularly valuing knowledge gained through experience (Reason, 1998; Heron and Reason, 2008). It also involves a commitment to equality (valuing and respecting all contributions) and participation (active engagement of all members in a group) (ICPHR, 2022; Ledwith and Springett, 2022).

- *Laboratory -* The term 'laboratory' captures the idea of a work-space, where experimentation can take place. The prefix 'co' suggests cooperation amongst a group of people, while 'co-laboratory' is indicative of the collaboratory work involved. It echoes the idea of the scientific 'collaboratory' (Finholt, 2003), which mirrors the process of participatory research, with diverse groups of people 'co-labouring' to find a way of working together to design and conduct research. According to Sumara and Luce-Kapler (1993, p. 393), 'co-labouring' means 'to toil together, often under conditions of distress or trouble; to exert body and mind in ways which are sometimes painful. Collaboration is labour; it is work.' This use of the term 'labour' highlights the complexity and effortful nature of the everyday ethics work that people put into ethical being and acting (Banks et al., 2013; Banks 2016).

Contributors to the e-co-lab work together to bring and use different experiences, knowledges and worldviews and take different perspectives on the case being explored. In the ethics working group we have used the metaphor of changing lenses (von Köppen, et al., 2025) to encapsulate some features of this process, which encourages us to be reflexively aware of our own perspectives and positionalities and those of others. This process is enhanced by moving beyond group discussion to more physically active and emotionally engaging exercises or experiments, including acting out scenarios (episodes from cases) through participatory theatre, dance, writing short poems or stories and engaging in participatory drawing/diagramming.

The e-co-lab usually proceeds as follows:

- *Introductions* to each other and the e-co-lab, with optional warm-up exercise.
- *Presentation* of the case verbally, with written version distributed.
- *Work in small groups* to explore the case through different methods (e.g. choice of theatre, creative writing, etc) or through one method from the perspective of different stakeholders (e.g. drawing in the persona of a key actor in the case).
- *Sharing experiences* in the whole group; reflections on the process; drawing out learning.

The e-co-lab as a space for developing moral sensitivity

Although working in the e-co-lab contributes to the development of participants' overall practical wisdom (an over-arching virtue or quality of character entailing the capacity to engage in ethical evaluation and action), it is particularly useful in cultivating their moral/ethical sensitivity (the ability to identify ethically salient features of situations). It is this aspect that is the main focus of this paper. It is important to note that in the literature on this topic the terms 'moral sensitivity' and 'ethical sensitivity' are both

used. While some philosophers and social scientists make a distinction between 'ethics' (relating to personally held commitments) and 'morals' (relating to social norms) and hence endow 'ethical' and 'moral' with distinct meanings, many others use the terms inter-changeably. Although in some of the literature it may be significant whether the authors use the descriptor 'ethical' or 'moral', I regard the terms as interchangeable and when quoting or referring to the work of particular authors, I will use the term they deploy. Since 'moral sensitivity' is more commonly used, I will use that term in this paper (although I use 'ethical sensitivity' elsewhere).

While some accounts of moral sensitivity are quite wide-ranging, including the capacity to make judgments and decisions and the commitment and courage to take action (Kraaijeveld, et al., 2021; ten Have, 2025), I am using the concept in its more limited sense as the ability to identify ethically salient features of situations. In virtue ethical terms, moral sensitivity is just one component of *phronesis* or practical wisdom – with phronesis being the over-arching virtue that, according to Kristjánsson (2024), is the key to professional ethics education for teachers and other professionals. If we take the four-component model of *phronesis* developed by Kristjánsson et al (2020; 2021), moral sensitivity sits alongside the integration of a blueprint of a flourishing life, emotional regulation and moral adjudication. Kristjánsson (2024, p.1036) characterises moral sensitivity as the constitutive function of phronesis, involving 'the cognitive ability to perceive the ethically salient aspects of a situation and appreciate these as calling for specific kinds of responses'. In this formulation there is a focus on the cognitive processes and there are two elements identified: the *perception* of the ethically salient features of a situation; and the *appreciation* that these call for specific types of response. While in practice these two features will generally be inseparable, analytically they can be seen as two components of moral sensitivity, identified by Narvaez (1996, p. 2) as moral perception and moral interpretation:

> Moral interpretation will be viewed as a mostly conscious and controlled processing of events which takes place once a person has established that a moral decision must be made or that a moral situation is at hand. Moral perception concerns the largely preconscious and unconscious processing of events prior to moral interpretation or 'moral realization', i.e., the conscious realization that a moral situation has arisen which requires a moral judgment. It entails the perceptual processing critical to the processes of moral interpretation and to eventual moral behavior. It represents the 'intitial conditions' (as in chaos theory) in the perceiver that can determine the ultimate reaction to an event.

In this paper I am particularly interested in the role of the e-co-lab in honing the moral perception component of moral sensitivity. I take moral perception to comprise affective as well as cognitive processes (whether conscious or unconscious) and

acknowledge the inseparability of perception and interpretation, and the incorporation of both in some accounts of moral perception.

Moral perception

'One of the most important moral differences between people is between those who miss and those who see various moral features of situations confronting them' (Blum, 1994, p. 30). Blum's frequently quoted observation is worth repeating as it encapsulates the importance of moral perception in everyday life. Blum illustrates his point by means of an example, also often quoted, featuring two people, Joan and John, sitting on a subway train with no empty seats (Blum, 1994, p. 32). A woman is standing holding two relatively full shopping bags. John is not particularly paying attention to the woman. Joan is distinctly aware the woman is uncomfortable. For Blum, Joan's moral perception consists in her awareness of the woman's discomfort as affecting the woman's good (moral salience). This then serves as a reason to offer her a seat (moral judgement and action).

A commonly held account of moral perception is that we, human moral agents, have the ability to sense the moral properties of situations (such as wrongdoing) through vision, hearing, touch, taste and bodily sensation (Audi, 2013, pp. 30-50). We do this by sensing non-moral properties that are the ground of the moral properties, such as seeing one person stabbing another. The moral import (wrongdoing, in this case) comes through to us experientially. Vision is the most commonly used sense in discussions of moral perception, but perception includes the use of other senses and may involve proprioception (awareness of the body in space).

There is much debate in recent literature in moral philosophy and psychology about the concept and processes of moral perception, including the question of whether or not moral perception includes representation of moral properties (like wrongdoing or fairness) as part of the content of perceptual experience, alongside other features we directly perceive, like shape and colour, for example. Vance and Werner (2022, p. 2) call this 'contentful moral perception', in contrast to 'attentional moral perception'. As they outline, the direct perception of moral properties assumed by 'contentful moral perception' is a somewhat controversial claim. Whereas 'attentional moral perception' involves a more modest claim about perceptual attunement to patterns of salience, involving:

> The perceptual system's selection of certain features in an environment as relevant in such a way that the features are subject to attentional focus in perceptual experience. And furthermore, this attentional effect, in order to count as a plausible instance of moral perception, should have some kind of non-trivial influence on downstream moral cognition (Vance and Werner, 2022, p. 3).

Applying this version of moral perception to the case of Joan and the woman on the subway, Joan demonstrated the capacity to recognise what Vance and Werner (2022) call a 'morally relevant difference-maker' (a woman carrying heavy bags). This is a non-moral property of the situation that is morally relevant, as Joan realises that the woman's discomfort from holding the bags affects her well-being, leading to Joan offering her a seat.

For my purposes in this paper, Vance and Werner's (2022) concept of 'attentional moral perception' is sufficient, as I am interested in methods for honing people's capacities to recognise non-moral properties of situations that constitute 'morally relevant difference-makers'. This does not assume the direct perception of moral properties of the situation. The characterisation of moral perception by DesAutels as 'the apprehension and mental organisation of situations that call for a moral response' (DesAutels, 2012, p. 2) is a similar construal, which usefully introduces the idea of 'mental organisation'. DesAutels (2012, p. 2) distinguishes moral perception, as 'the mental means for taking in, organising (and sometimes describing) a situation', from 'the means for responding to (or planning a response to) a situation once it has been perceived'. She discusses the process of mentally organising situations as mostly immediate and unreflective, while sometimes involving the formation of a word- or image-based description.

The concepts of saliency, moral difference-makers, mental organisation, attention and attunement that are deployed in the literature on moral perception are useful in analysing the process of the e-co-lab.

Seeing, feeling and organising the case: 'What is it that is going on here?'

In a typical case discussion, the first question asked is often: 'What are the ethical issues in this case?' This question immediately calls for the exercise of moral sensitivity (as the ability to identify the ethically salient features of a situation). In answering it, participants will draw on some prior understanding of what might count as an ethical issue. The exercise also encourages them to work out what they consider to be an ethical issue, individually or as a group. This is primarily a cognitive exercise, although participants may engage with the case emotionally, reporting resonances with their own experiences and the engendering of anger, sadness or hopelessness, for example, in response to the case. The case is usually regarded as belonging to the case presenter (if it is a real-life case) and there is a tendency to work within the confines of the case as presented, although often the opportunity is offered to ask further questions of the case presenter, if the presenter is available, before discussion.

By contrast, one of the aims of the experimental stage of the e-co-lab is to open-up the case: in effect, to break its boundaries, expanding the range of possibilities for

participants to engage with it. The idea is to free the senses to explore aspects of the case through use of creative imagination, bodily movements and emotional engagement, for example. On the one hand, of course, the case is fixed: it is a story about a situation at a point in time, told from a particular perspective and it may be written down. On the other hand, participants can play with the case by moving the boundaries and the 'pieces' of the case. Participants can isolate a particular feature and examine it through a microscope, or switch to a wide-angle lens to situate the case in a bigger context - using the imagination to fill in details or widen the horizons. This exploratory phase involves participants in a process of 'freeing up' and 'letting go'. Instead of considering 'what are the ethical issues in this case?', in effect they are being invited to engage in a more open inquiry into: 'What is it that is going on here?'

The question 'What is it that is going on here?' is central to Goffman's (1974) notion of 'frame analysis'. The concept of the 'frame' has been developed and used in a variety of different and related ways. Schön and Rein (1994, p. 23) in their work on policy positions characterise frames as 'underlying structures of belief, perception, and appreciation'. Frames tend to be tacit and not subject to conscious attention and reasoning. They influence what counts as a fact and what arguments are regarded as relevant. I have developed the idea of 'ethical framing work', referring to the ways in which people make sense of events and experiences, as a useful means of elaborating upon moral perception and moral sensitivity as one of the components of 'ethics work' (Banks, 2016). The use of the term 'frame' is particularly helpful:

> The term 'frame' brings to mind a picture frame enclosing the work of an artist or photographer. Certain features of the landscape and figures are foregrounded, others are in the background, while others are not in the picture at all. The work of 'ethical framing' (framing work in the sphere of ethics) involves us making sense of what is going on specifically in relation to matters of harm, benefit, rights and responsibilities. This entails seeing situations in particular ways - being alert to what may be important but is not in the picture we first see or are given by others, and being aware of the background contexts that give the picture its shape and meaning (Banks, 2016, pp. 39-40).

While acknowledging that a lot of the work of framing is unconscious and is influenced by our prior experience, habitual and cultural factors (including cognitive and moral bias) and the framings of others, the premise of the e-co-lab is that we can practise re-framings, stimulated by invitations to go beyond case discussions into the realms of feeling, movement and creative imagination in collaboration with others.

Approaches and methods of the e-co-lab

The e-co-lab works online and in-person. The online work inevitably focuses more on case analysis and discussion, although we have experimented with exploring a case

through participatory theatre using Zoom (see von Köppen et al., 2025). Online meetings are also used for sharing reflections on in-person events and working together on writing. As an international group, currently with members from Europe, southern Africa, India, Australia and North America, the majority of meetings are online. In-person workshops happen at conferences, annual meetings of the ICPHR and specially organised events.

In this paper, I focus on the in-person workshops, drawing on examples from three workshops in 2024-25. These involved several members of the ethics working group as facilitators, working with outside participants using different creative methods to explore cases. These one-off workshops were designed to experiment with our approach to exploring ethics cases, offering the opportunity to try out and finesse the methodology and methods. We gained participants' consent to use records of these events in developing and writing about the methodology, and we collected brief evaluative comments from participants at the end of each workshop. It is important to note that the aim of the workshops was to help us refine the methods, as opposed to evaluating learning and insights in depth.

A brief account of the methods used in the three workshops is now offered.

- **Participatory theatre**: enables participants to become aware of their bodies in space, using the body to feel and generate ethical dimensions of a scenario and exploring the emotions and habitual responses triggered by the case (see Banks, Rifkin et al, 2014; Boal, 1985, 1992). A specific episode in the case is chosen to be acted out, under the direction of the case author/presenter. The scenario may be repeated several times, involving audience members ('spect-actors') changing places with the people playing the roles of key protagonists. The actors de-brief and everyone present discusses aspects of the emotions, bodily positioning, dialogue and tactics deployed in each version of the scenario (see the account by Banks and Cardol in Groot-Sluijsmans et al., 2026, forthcoming).
- **Dance inquiry**: allows exploration of the ethical dimensions of a case through the expressive and relational capacity of the body. As the case is read out, participants are invited to move through the space, connecting with their own bodily sensations and movements, while responding to the presence and movement of others. The participants then give feedback about what they felt and observed and share and develop insights in relation to the case (see the account by Shahinian and Groot-Sluijsmans in Groot-Sluijsmans et al., 2026, forthcoming).
- **Creating a short poem (elfje)**: calls on the ability to distil the essence of a story in a few words and work collaboratively. Having read or heard the case, participants are invited to contribute key words on post-it notes – thoughts, impressions and insights about the content of the case. They then create their own short poem in the form of an elfje – a Dutch poem using 11 words in five lines. The five lines use the following

number of words: one, two, three, four, one.
(https://yesyoucanwrite.weebly.com/elfje.html). Participants then work together to create a collaborative elfje, which is read out and people are invited to reflect, offering comments and insights. (This method was adapted for the e-co-lab by Barbara Groot-Sluijsmans and has not been written up).

- *Creative writing*: calls on the ability to translate emotions into verbal expression. Through several structured rounds of writing, participants are invited to write journal entries in the persona of one of the key protagonists in the case at key points in the situation described in the case. Using the insights gained they all then work together on highlighting key features of the case (see the account by von Köppen in Groot-Sluijsmans et al, 2026, forthcoming).

- *Magical story-telling*: based on a Wonderlab approach (Hansen, 2015) magical storytelling uses metaphors to surface what may be hidden in everyday dialogue and allows people to articulate issues that might be difficult to say in literal terms. Participants are invited to work in small groups to identify the 'heat of the moment' in the case and then transform the real-world course of events that led up to this into a magical story – drawing on a fairy tale format. These are shared at the end and insights discussed (see the account by Breed and Schrevel in Groot-Sluijsmans et al, 2026, forthcoming).

- *Participatory drawing/diagramming*: entails using creative imagination to represent aspects of the case visually through drawing or diagrams. Participants are divided into groups and in each group all the members of that group are invited to put themselves into the persona of one of the key stakeholders in the situation and then draw a visual representation of the case based on the imagined position, thoughts, feelings of that person. They then share these individual drawings and create a collaborative drawing in their group. All groups (each of which has worked on a different persona) share their drawings and discuss the different perspectives and insights gained. (I developed this method for the e-co-lab and it has not been written up).

Shortened versions of two ethics cases

I will now present condensed versions of two ethics cases, to enable the readers to get a sense of the situations on which the e-co-labs have worked. Inevitably some detail is lost in summarising the cases, including the first-person narration. The full version of Case 1 can be found in Groot-Sluijsmans et al (2026, forthcoming).

Case 1: Minestrone soup - presenting together at a conference

An academic researcher, Mieke (Professor in Disability Studies at a Dutch University), worked with a community-based researcher, Maria (a woman with lived experience of acquired brain injury), to prepare a presentation for a workshop at a conference. The conference was presenting findings of a larger

participatory research project in which they had both been involved, focusing on how to make collaborative work between theatre practitioners and people with disabilities more inclusive.

The night before the conference, Maria changed the content of her part of the previously agreed presentation, only telling Mieke during the train journey to the event in the morning. Mieke expressed misgivings, but Maria wanted to go ahead. At the conference Mieke felt that Maria's presentation was over-lengthy, confusing and that the audience was lost. She reported feeling uncomfortable and hot. She wondered about whether and how she might interrupt respectfully. After a while she decided to intervene, suggesting they move on to show an extract of a film made during the research.

Afterwards, during a debriefing together about the conference, Maria said she felt the presentation went well and it was OK 'because I can be a beginner'. Mieke expressed her vulnerability, replying: 'I don't want to come across as a beginner; I am a senior researcher and responsible for the project'. They both realised they regarded the presentation differently, as Mieke reflected: 'I wanted to see results, Maria wanted to learn together'. Mieke asks herself: 'Did our minestrone soup fail? Did I, as a researcher, lean too much on familiar structures that are repeated in research presentations, and was Maria a valuable new ingredient because of her desire to learn together, with the audience?'

Case 2: Researching public health - which stories to tell?

A Dutch doctoral researcher in the field of public health was working on a participatory research project with people of first- and second-generation migrant backgrounds living in an under-served urban neighbourhood. The focus was on the experiences of parents and carers of young children during the COVID-19 pandemic. The project worked particularly with women of Moroccan origin, and communication between the academic research team and the women was through an interpreter. The project used the method of digital storytelling, enabling the women to co-create personal, audio-visual narratives using photos, drawings, videos and voice recordings. The aim was to collect and curate an archive of lived experiences from a group that is often under-represented in academic research.

According to the doctoral researcher, the stories revealed fear, regret, resistance and scepticism about vaccination and distrust in government public health messaging. This raised ethical dilemmas for the PhD researcher and her supervisor, who were concerned to promote the 'narrative sovereignty' of the women, while also being aware of their own positions as public health academics. They did not want to amplify negative views about vaccination or

spread misinformation. The doctoral researcher felt concerned about institutional accountability: 'As public health researchers affiliated with an academic institution, the team must reconcile their dual identity as facilitators of community expression and as representatives of evidence-based science. Internal debates with colleagues revealed discomfort around hosting narratives that diverge from scientific consensus.' The academic researchers were also concerned that sharing unfiltered stories outside this small group of women might reinforce existing stereotypes or lead to further stigmatisation and targeting of those communities. At the time of first presenting this case the academic researchers had not discussed these concerns with the women.

Both these cases were contributed by academic researchers, although in the first case Mieke discussed the account with Maria (the community researcher) in the process of writing it. The academics report situations when they felt uncomfortable in their relationships with the community-based researchers with whom they were working in partnership. They were not sure how much influence or control they should deploy over the presentation of research findings, while respecting the autonomy and voice of the community researchers. This encompasses a set of very common dilemmas for academics engaging in participatory research: what rights do they have to put their own views across, if they conflict with those of the community researchers, and how can they do this respectfully and carefully?

In the in-person e-co-labs, having heard and read the case, participants are invited to break into groups to explore the case using different methods, or using one method from different perspectives. The e-co-lab workshops comprised core members of the ICPHR ethics working group and other participants with an interest in the topic as follows:

- *Workshop 1* used participatory theatre and the composition of short poems (elfjes) to explore Case 1. There were 18 international participants, who were attendees at the Collaborative Action Research Network (CARN) conference in Malmö in October 2024, including two e-co-lab facilitators.
- *Workshop 2* used dance, participatory theatre, creative writing and magical storytelling to explore Case 1. This was a specially convened workshop on ethics in participatory research held in Amsterdam in March 2025. There were 26 participants, including seven e-co-lab facilitators, alongside researchers from Amsterdam, other parts of the Netherlands and three members of the ethics working group from southern Africa and India (see Groot-Sluijsmans et al, 2026, forthcoming).
- *Workshop 3* used participatory drawing/diagramming to explore Case 2 from the perspectives of four different stakeholders: the doctoral researcher; Moroccan women; public health colleagues of the doctoral researcher; a University Research

Ethics Committee member (who did not feature in the case as told). The 17 participants, including five e-co-lab facilitators, were attendees at the CARN conference in Klagenfurt in November 2025.

What processes/abilities are deployed by participants in the e-co-labs?

I have made a preliminary identification of some of the activities of the e-co-labs that are relevant to the deployment and cultivation of participants' moral sensitivity. This loose typology is based on my experience of: facilitating the three in-person e-co-lab workshops; reflections in the ethics working group afterwards; the written records and reflections of small group facilitators; and some feedback from outside participants. I illustrate each point with examples from the workshops.

- **Attending** - *paying attention to the content of the case and the process of working on it with others; listening, looking, feeling, noticing carefully.* For example, in Workshop 1, composing a short poem (elfje) required paying considerable attention to the content of the case, the response the case provoked in the listeners/readers and how to capture and represent this concisely and accurately in a short poetic format.
- **Empathising** - *imagining and attuning to the feelings, thoughts, projects and purposes of different people in the case and participants in the e-co-lab.* For example, in Workshop 2, the participants in the dance inquiry moved around the room while listening to Mieke's account of Case 1, attuning their movements to the feelings of the people in the case and the movements of others in the room.
- **Focusing** – *paying particular attention to features of the situation relevant to one's own concerns, values and purposes.* For example, in Workshop 1, when composing an elfje, participants first recorded their own responses to Case 1, trying to distil its essence, before working with others to create a joint elfje.
- **Emotionally engaging** - *connecting with one's own emotions about the situation; being open to emotions; listening to emotions.* For example, in Workshop 2, the creative writing encouraged emotional engagement with the characters in the case and the expression of this in writing.
- **Bodily engaging** – *interoception (being aware of internal bodily signals); proprioception (sensing bodily movement and positions); movement with and alongside others.* For example, in Workshop 2, the dance inquiry facilitated bodily engagement, as did performing the case through participatory theatre.
- **Imagining** – *elaborating on details of the situation or story; adding in contextual details not in the original story; filling in the background.* For example, in Workshop 2, magical story telling invited participants to use their imaginations to develop a kind of fairy story loosely based on features of the case, but very much going beyond it.
- **Perspective-taking** - *zooming in and out; looking from different angles (as if using a microscope, telescope, periscope or wide-angle lens), and also through the eyes of*

different people (building on attending, focusing and empathising). For example, in Workshop 3, participants created drawings in four groups, each imagining themselves in a different persona.

- **Comparing** – *examining the situation from different angles/perspectives; examining views of others (what they see as salient compared with oneself)*. For example, in Workshop 3, the drawings from the four groups gave very different messages. The group in the persona of the Moroccan women drew a net around the women, originating from the window of a university building. While the group in the persona of the doctoral student depicted her in an uphill struggle, and being pulled in many directions.
- **Organising and sense-making** - *assembling the parts and views into a frame or picture; working out what to put in, where to locate elements of the scene, what to leave out*. For example, in Workshop 1, the participatory theatre group chose an episode from the case, and with the case presenter had to decide which characters to include, where to locate them and how to lay out the furniture to replicate a crowded train.
- **Being reflexive** - *putting oneself in the picture as a stakeholder (if it is one's own case), or as an observer; being as aware as one can be of one's biases and how to counter them or take account of them*. For example, in all three workshops the case authors were present. They reported finding the depictions of themselves by others in drawings, poems, journals, stories, dances and acted-out scenes as both resonating with them and also challenging, causing them to rethink their views of their roles and responsibilities.
- **Collaborating** – *working with others in organising and sense making; building on perspective-taking, comparing and reflexivity to create shared descriptions, understandings and interpretations of the situation*. For example, in Workshops 1 and 3, building on individuals' contributions to creating a group elfje and a group drawing required collaborative sense-making and negotiation.
- **Experimenting** - *rehearsing responses from different perspectives and positions; trying new persona, responses, tactics*. For example, in Workshops 1 and 2 the group undertaking participatory theatre acted out a scene from Case 1 when Mieke and Maria were on the train going to the conference. They rehearsed different conversations between the two women, and different participants acted out the roles and reflected on what occurred and how the conversations felt.

Concluding comments

All the methods used in the e-co-labs invite playful engagement and experimentation with the ingredients of an ethics case. While this engagement inevitably goes beyond moral perception (as a less conscious process), moving into interpretation and evaluation/judgement, what the methodology does is slow down the process of

exploring a case. It encourages an unconstrained lingering in the preliminaries of looking, feeling and imagining - taking time to savour and examine the whole picture and its component parts. It involves a commitment on the part of participants both to make an effort and to 'go with the flow'.

As one of the facilitators of the magical storytelling in Workshop 2 commented in reflections afterwards: 'What stood out in the workshop was how powerful it worked to move from concrete experiences ('facts') to metaphors, and then back again to insights useful for practice. That movement – from experience to imagination and back again – deepened the concept of equivalence [equality, a theme of Case 1] that we probably would not have achieved in any other way'. This was echoed in a comment from a participant in the written evaluations collected at the end of the day: 'I am always impressed how metaphors enable a group of strangers to dive in and reach great depth'. While another participant, referring to Case 1, remarked: 'Often we struggle from lack of lived experience of inequality or discrimination. This style of learning would help us learn about "privileges" as well as "discrimination"'. In Workshop 3, which worked with drawing, the facilitator of the group of participants who put themselves in the persona of the doctoral student remarked that the most interesting new insight she gained was how very little power the doctoral student had to react in this case: 'there was this idea of a steep mountain and [name of student] climbing up'. As facilitator of the participatory theatre in Workshop 1, in my reflections afterwards I noted how the acting out of the episode on the crowded train really highlighted the near-impossibility of Mieke (the academic) negotiating with Maria (community researcher) to revert to their original presentation plan.

Further work is ongoing to refine the methods used in the e-co-lab and evaluate their effectiveness more systematically. Nevertheless, the preliminary evaluations and reflections of participants and members of the ethics working group on the three workshops suggest that the methods are powerful and engaging, and that the e-co-lab model is a valuable approach for cultivating participants' sensitivities to the ethical nuances of professional practice and everyday life and developing moral character. In terms of the framework for character education developed by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (third edition, 2022), the e-co-lab can be regarded as embracing all three modes of cultivating character: 'character taught, caught and sought'.

The e-co-lab requires active participation and a commitment to experiment, challenge one's presuppositions and perceptions, and collaborate constructively yet critically. In this context, character is 'caught' through seeing and listening to others' accounts of how they might approach ethically challenging situations and watching the performance of others (in participatory theatre, for example). The 'taught' element is less about teaching and more about experiential learning (through participating in

dance or drawing, for example). The 'sought' element is based on a commitment to seek practical wisdom in collaboration with others (though joining the lab and participating).

Arguably character 'sought' is particularly pertinent in the e-co-lab, as participants have to make an effort actively to engage in the exercises both seriously and playfully. They also have to awaken different senses and be prepared to immerse themselves physically and emotionally in the riskiness of collaborative exercises. It is interesting that according to Arthur and Kristjánsson (2022), character 'sought' is less easily understood as part of *The Jubilee Centre Framework for Character Education in Schools* (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022) than character 'caught' and 'taught'. In their paper clarifying the concept, they link it not just to commitments, but commitments to something worthwhile:

> Character sought involves the desire to discern and freely pursue one's own character development. It involves reflection and ultimately planning and setting your own character commitments – that is commitments to something worthwhile.

Arguably many participants in the e-co-labs became very aware that the experience of seeing, hearing and sensing the breadth and depth of multiple perspectives on an ethics case has the potential to contribute to their development as ethically good researchers - a valuable goal in their professional lives.

Acknowledgements

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