I use this exercise for our last or next-to-last meeting of the semester. I like doing it at that point, when students have gained some knowledge and sophistication about the field. It also dovetails nicely with the unit on legal issues (civil commitment, NGRI verdict, duty to warn, etc.). The associated chapter of the textbooks I’ve considered, if they cover ethics at all, dealt only with confidentiality and informed consent. The exercise generally takes most of a two-hour class period (allowing for a break, announcements, etc.), but it can easily be edited to fit a shorter span.

I’m afraid I can’t provide a generally accepted outcome measure (e.g., pre/post) of this exercise’s effectiveness. However, at the risk of relying on qualitative anecdotal evidence, I can say it always gets students interested and very actively involved in classroom discussion, even at a time when spring fever has hit and they would like nothing better at the moment than getting out of class early. Students often commented that they gained a new perspective about the field and a new appreciation for what clinical psychologists do.

To start, I put the General Principles of the APA’s Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct up on the screen, and we briefly discuss it. (I also distribute it as a handout.) I then designate one side of the room for “ethical” and the other for “unethical.” For each scenario, I give the class an appropriate amount of time to silently read and think about it (usually about a minute for the first one; others may need longer), then each student heads to the side of the room that matches his or her opinion. (Hanging out in the middle is not allowed.) We take perhaps five to ten minutes discussing the issue. At an appropriate point, I stop the discussion and scroll to the next page (I use the .rtf document), which shows the relevant section(s) from the Code. We then discuss the issues raised by the Code for an additional five to ten minutes.

These are the main issues and questions that have tended to arise for each scenario:

1) Marketing my practice at upscale bars and lounges/Section 5.06: What’s the definition of “agent?” Is upscale-only marketing ethical? Are their customers “vulnerable to undue influence?” What if they simply kept a referral book?

2) Barter as payment for my therapy fee/Section 6.05: What if this person had a friend who also wanted to barter, but you didn’t like her artwork? (This starts getting into the issue of “It might be ethical, but is it wise?”) How do you determine “exploitative?” If you decide to not see her for therapy, are your obliged to refer her elsewhere?

3) Acting as an “expert” in the mass media/Sections 5.02 and 9.01: Is Dr. Phil (Dr. Drew, etc.) unethical? Can you say that a behavior is characteristic of a disorder without implying that the person in question has that disorder? Is it OK if the person has publically said they have bipolar disorder? (Osbourne has, Tyson hasn’t; his first wife said it.)

4) Relationship with a relative/Section 10.06: What is the nature of a therapeutic relationship? Wouldn’t family events be rather awkward? Why would it be harmful if you transferred him to someone with better skills than yours? Why should a therapeutic relationship always take precedence over a personal relationship?

5) Intimate relationship with an ex-client/Section 10.08: This scenario again raises the issue of “ethical vs. wise.” Of special interest is the inherently unbalanced nature of most therapeutic relationships and how that might affect any subsequent relationship. We sometimes even digress into the issue of teacher-student relationships.

6) I realize that a client is dating my daughter/Sections 3.05 and 4.05: Did I make a rash decision about changing therapists? How is this decision different from the one in #4? Did I disclose confidential information to my daughter? Can someone violate confidentiality without actually mentioning someone’s name? What should you do if you run into a client while out in public? Does our state have a law defining “harm,” and if so, what it is?