

Can Ethics Be Taught?

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Abstract

For many years educational programs have dealt with ethics. However, can ethics be taught? Secondly, how should it be taught? The notion that ethics is a process of communication that gives way to new understandings and commitments to our social life has been utilized herein to explore several questions. Should ethics teaching be via standalone modules or embedded in ethics discussion within curricula? Clearly both have merit yet we argue that authentic ethics discussions should pervade curriculum, be contextualized and multifaceted. This attention to implementation and the notion of a possible ethics framework to structure student experiences was explored.

Key Words : Ethics, Teaching, Curriculum, Instruction

Introduction

Ethics is often presented in classes by well meaning educators as a moral philosophy that infuses critically assumed beliefs which are used to search for a 'good' human life. To most this is a classical understanding, however if we were to suggest ethics could be inherent in the duties humans owe to each other we would be touching upon a modern understanding. Educators and students confronted with these understandings may frequently face a predicament. The educator may discover or currently know that they cannot teach ethics because of religious (spiritual) and cultural disagreements linked to what should be taught (curriculum). Many students draw upon background pre-understandings and are perplexed when confronted with ethical understandings of both peers and professors (Emerson & Conroy, 2004).

To choose to not discuss ethics may be a safer path yet avoidance sends messages that this topic is a private matter and not suitable for discussion. It is not a private matter yet avoiding discussion of ethics at all levels of education may only fuel mystification and/or ignorance. Discussing ethics should not be a private matter it should be within educational programs and rightly so, according to the many business school deans who rank ethics among the top five learning goals for their programs (Martell & Calderon, 2005). Herein, we could consider ethics as,

the general study of goodness and the general study of right action . . . [which] constitute the main business of ethics. Its principal substantive questions are what ends we ought, as fully rational human beings, to choose and pursue and what moral principles should govern our choices and pursuits. (Audi, 1995, p.3)

This study of right action could be viewed as a system of rules or principles rooted in the legal system however ethics can also be understood as a set of skills (acts) yet this understanding has limitations. Ultimately, we can view ethics as a process of communication that gives way to new understandings and commitments to our social life. Our argument is that we should discuss ethics in educational programs order to develop our understandings and enrich our lives. Our present day society is reeling from ethical wrongdoing (crime) and challenges (bad decisions) reported in the media yet these ethically challenged people behind these scandals share a common experience, school.

Perhaps, each person attended school until the law no longer required them to attend or until the person attending deemed they were ready to leave school. Many complete only secondary school and work their way into executive positions; some go further and deeper in post-secondary stepping directly into professional roles. The path we examine is of importance herein since the following words address and illuminate the teaching of ethics at the post-secondary level within the subject area of business over the past thirty years and we ask: Can ethics be taught? Secondly, if it is to be taught, than how should it be taught?

1.0 Curriculum: Can ethics be taught?

Current research and the researchers behind this research were searching to discover the root causes of well reported ethical problems, dilemmas and challenges in all areas of society (Frank, Ofobike, & Gradisher, 2010). The investigation of unethical activity may lead back to a common experience point for the people within the scandal and that often is school. Herein we launch into a cursory inspection (due to page limitations) of the construction and delivery of curricula within business at the post-secondary level over the past thirty years. We illuminate the issues and discover if there is or was a linkage between what is, or is not taught, and the causes of unethical behaviour which has inspired many researchers to take an even closer look at how texts are written and how professors teach within business courses.

Stark (1993) indicated that the unethical behaviour is not the result of an absence of business ethics curriculum since, “over 500 business-ethics courses are currently taught on American campuses; fully 90% of the nation’s business schools now provide some kind of training in the area” (p. 38). Perhaps the problem lies not in the sheer number of ethics courses offered, but possibly the ethics courses are not being taken seriously (Emerson & Conroy, 2004; Stephens & Stephens, 2008). Alternatively, it could be that professors, who hold questionable ethical philosophies, inadvertently projecting this onto their students or it could be a dearth of ‘real life’ application in textbook case studies (Wittmer, 2004). The reason for our current predicament is puzzling.

There exists an argument as to whether or not ethics should be taught in a post-secondary environment (Ritter, 2006). Oddo (1997) explains that, “. . . the primary reason for discussing ethical issues in the business classroom is for the students to develop a process which considers the ethical implications of business decisions” (p. 296). Weber (1990) reviewed four studies and found that three of the four indicated a positive shift in ethical reasoning as a result of ethics education. Boyd (1981) indicated an increase in moral reasoning and Stead & Miller (1988) saw an increase to students’ awareness and sensitivity towards social issues following ethics coursework. Burton, Johnston and Wilson (1991) also showed an increase of ethical awareness when compared to a control group within their research.

Even though published research has indicated that ethics education improves ethical attitude, there are others that have shown a negative relationship (Cohen & Bennie, 2006; Stephens & Stephens, 2008). Cragg (1997) argued that ethics cannot be taught and a study conducted by Bishop (1992) further supported this assertion. Bishop (1992) concluded, that “another interesting criticism of ethics is that as long as we have laws that dictate what is permissible; we do not need courses in ethics” (p. 294). Pamental (1991) found that “. . . there are serious flaws in the very *foundation* of the business ethics course – [and] ethical theory itself” (p. 392) because most of what is provided in business ethics texts does not involve ethical dilemmas and many instructors place too much emphasis on ethical situations dealing with policy (Pamental, 1991). Cragg (1997) and Ritter (2006) indentified other groups, such as, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB international) who have questioned this dilemma. Ritter (2006) suggested, “academics concerned about including ethical decision-making strategies or other content in their classroom are hard pressed to find simple answers in either the theoretical or empirical research” (p. 153).

Perhaps this situation arises due to the fact that within Kohlberg’s Theoretical Model on Moral Development, “character development has already occurred by the time an individual reaches college age” (Ritter, 2006, p. 154). McCabe et al. (1994) supported this perspective while researching MBA students utilizing the Rokeach Terminal Values Scale as a means to gauge the ethical predisposition of respondents; similar to what was done in the 1994 study conducted by Sikula and Costa. This longitudinal study used the same sample of respondents over a two year period, yielding no significant changes in their ethical attitude. Arlow and Ulrich (1983) also conducted a similar study where respondents were contacted years after administration of the original study, indicating a deterioration of ethical attitude.

1.1 Morals and Ethics.

Churchill (1992) believed that there was a misconception behind whether or not ethics can be trained because many who attempted to answer this question often confused the terms “ethics” and “morals” suggesting they shared a similar meaning. He defined morals as the behaviours of a human and ethics as a “. . . systematic rational reflection upon that behaviour” (p. 297). Cragg (1997) noted a similar distinction between moral standards and ethics when he stated:

I do not want to teach moral standards; I want to teach a method of moral reasoning through complex ethical issues so that the students can apply the moral standards they have in his view, the primary function is to teach ethical systems of analysis, not moral standards of behaviour. (p. 19)

Being able to teach ethics within a program requires instructors to be able to grasp the process of moral reasoning to a point where this can be taught as a necessary route to arrive at ethically sound outcomes. Instructors therefore need to have an understanding of the moral relationship with ethics, something that may take a great deal of experience with the unique curricula to fully grasp. Gundersen, Capozzoli and Rajamma (2008) supported the development and implementation of ethics curriculum suggesting “individuals should become more ethical as they increase their educational accomplishments because of increasing exposure in both receiving and administering ethics curricula” (p. 315). Hence, the ethics course advances along with the instructor’s understanding of the ethics curricula and related instructional theory.

1.2 Teaching ethics: Goal establishment.

Regardless of the method of instruction utilized to deliver business ethics; strategic goals and objectives must be first identified within the curricula. Weber (1990) believed that ethics instruction must achieve some goal or set of goals before integrating it into the curricula. For instance, Felton and Sims (2005) highlighted several goals when teaching business ethics at the undergraduate level, stating,

1. Assist student in the formation of their personal values and moral ideas,
 2. Introduce them to the broad range of moral problems facing their society and world,
 3. Provide them contact with important ethical theories and moral traditions and
 4. Give them the opportunity to wrestle with problems of applied business ethics, whether personal or professional.
- (p. 388)

Bishop (1992) also reported a set of ethical curriculum objectives created by The College of Business. Similar to the objectives outlined by the Felton and Sims (2005) study, The College of Business wanted to help guide and plan the implementation of ethics curriculum. Felton and Sims (2005) suggested that it is also vitally important to know the backgrounds of each of the students. Some cohorts of students might have a mixture of backgrounds, while in another cohort students might be composed of mature students coming directly from industry for retraining. In order to achieve goals or objectives, approaches to curriculum might be based on the backgrounds of the students in the classroom. Felton and Sims (2005) explain:

Students, especially those with little exposure to the larger world, often bring to the classroom values that they have adopted from their parents, church affiliations, peer groups, or similar persons or forces of influence. The students in their thinking and actions simply reflect the values of their reference groups without having examined or evaluated them. (p. 389)

Business ethics education is about helping the student bring to consciousness their own set of values, but also, recognize how their values may conflict with the values of the business world (Felton and Sims, 2005). Ritter (2006) agreed and concluded that ethics education must be relevant to the student in order for it to transfer once they have graduated and are out working.

1.3 Coursework: The stand-alone ethics course.

Offering business ethics as a stand-alone course or integrating it across the curriculum has sparked much debate. Hendersen (1988) believed that by offering courses solely devoted to business ethics “. . . sends a powerful message: A top priority at this school is for all students to know and follow the generally accepted rules of business” (p. 53). Weber (1990) identified, in a national survey of graduate and undergraduate students, that fifty three percent of students prefer to have a separate course in ethics. More recently, the AACSB’s Ethics Education Task Force (2004) put forward this position:

Business schools must encourage students to develop a deep understanding of the myriad challenges surrounding corporate responsibility and corporate governance; provide them with tools for recognizing and responding to ethical issues, both personally and organizationally; and engage them at an individual level through analyses of both positive and negative examples of everyday conduct in business (p. 9).

What is certain is that ethical dilemmas occur, and within a context that is not always reproducible in coursework. Understanding and applying rules is but one half of the equation within an ethical dilemma because “the typical approach to ethical dilemmas is a two-step process: we locate a rule, and then we assume or judge that it applies to our situation” (Lebacqz, 1985, p.15). It is the ability to judge or evaluate, which is a higher order thinking skill, which challenges us to do the ‘right thing’ within a situation.

1.4 Embedding ethics curriculum.

Researchers such as Ritter (2006); Kullberg (1988) and Oddo (1997) argue that stand-alone courses are disconnected from real-world application and that ethics must be integrated throughout the curriculum. Wynd and Mager (1989) conducted a study only to discover no significant changes in ethical decision making took place as a result of taking a course in ethics. Saul (1981) suggested that in order for business ethics to succeed, ethical considerations must be woven into every aspect of the “decision making repertoire as economic ones” (p. 273). Felton and Sims (2005) further supports this by stating “ethics is embedded in all business decision-making. A given decision may be described as marketing, production, or financial decision, but ethical dimensions are intertwined in the decision” (p. 381). Even if ethical decision making is integrated into business curriculum, Sims (2002) argued that the success of this approach would materialize only if the entire faculty and administration were in agreement. Alternatively, Stephens and Stephens, (2008) concluded:

Ethics courses may be resulting in better ethical decision making. Perhaps alerting students to ethical violations is making them more aware of their decisions in the workplace. The results indicate that requiring an ethics course does make an immediate (albeit perhaps short term) difference in ethical decision making or in assessing potential ethical/unethical behaviour. (p. 54)

The variety of opinion is easy to find within the last few years hence the problematic nature of our question Should we (can we) teach ethics in classes? If yes, then how must it be done to achieve desired outcomes?

1.5 Effective implementation.

Ritter makes mention in her 2006 study that “. . . most theorists suggest that given the proper implementation, an ethics curriculum can be designed for effective learning” (p. 154). A study conducted by David, Anderson and Lawrimore (1990) reported that only 24% of the respondents indicated that ethical issues were emphasized throughout their program. Surprisingly this study concluded,

Fully 92% of respondents indicated they never attended a business ethics seminar in college; 80% never had a course in business ethics; 92% never wrote a business ethics term paper; 75% never heard a faculty lecture on ethics; and 56% never participated in a case study with ethics issues. (p. 29)

The results of this study can be linked to a current study that concluded “professors are ill prepared or uncertain about how best to teach accounting ethics” (Frank, Ofofibe & Gradisher, 2010). Alternatively, perhaps, it is not that ethics cannot be taught, but rather, how ethics education is delivered which might be the reason for poor ethical attitude amongst students and recent graduates. Ritter (2006) identified a multitude of perspectives throughout the literature, and determined three common questions surfaced frequently which asked: “how [should we] teach ethics in business school, what to teach, and even if [we should] teach it at all” (p. 153).

Burton et al. (1991) indicated that students preferred discussing ethical business scenarios instead of a lecture that is philosophical in nature. Researchers Pizzolatto and Bevill (1996) discovered that only 10% of the students preferred lectures, and yet this approach had been used 68% of the time. Students did, however, express their preference for class discussions when learning about business ethics (Pizzolatto & Bevill, 1996). More recently, Pettifor, Estay and Paquet (2000) conducted two-day workshops on ethics in psychology and after the workshop, the different teaching approaches used throughout (lectures, questions and answers, group discussions, videotapes, recommended readings, problem-solving, essays and exams) were rated by the participants. Ethical discussions for the workshop were divided into several categories: philosophy and theories of ethics, codes of ethics and guidelines, ethical decision-making, ethical sensitivity, legal issues, disciplinary issues and self-awareness. Preferred teaching approaches varied depending on the topic.

For example, when discussing philosophy and theories of ethics, respondents preferred lecturing and answering questions, whereas, students preferred discussing vignettes when reviewing codes of ethics, ethical dilemma decision making and sensitivity to ethical issues. When learning about legal aspects of ethics and disciplinary matters, respondents preferred video (visual). Pettifor et al. (2000) identified a unanimous rejection of the traditional approaches to learning: writing essays and studying for exams, but it was noted that essays or exams were not used throughout the workshops. Most intriguing, Pettifor et al. (2000) explained that the most effective teaching approach, not only depends on the student's learning styles, but also depends on what is being taught (content). Preceding this research, Burton et al. (1991) also supported these findings, indicating a strong preference for in-class discussions of hypothetical scenarios versus philosophical lectures on ethics. This 1991 study also indicated that gender and teaching method did not produce any results of significance (Burton et al.). Earlier research conducted by Webber (1990) indicated that 50% percent of participant students felt as though ethics was not stressed enough and 53% felt as though a separate ethics course should be offered.

1.6 Normative theory: A framework.

Bishop (1992) defined a philosophically-oriented approach to ethics as “. . . rigorous in terms of theory, logical foundations, and abstract conceptualizations of business ethics problems” (p. 293). Later in the decade Oddo (1997) investigated students at a particular school who were required to complete an undergraduate degree with courses in philosophy and religion. It was these philosophy courses where utilitarian theories, deontological theories, theories of justice and theories of rights were explored. The ethics content was infused in the curricula and yet the courses lacked practical application depending predominately on theory. This imperfection within curriculum is commonplace and can be traced back to academic valuing of theory within course content over authentic societal issues, problems and dilemmas. Bringing the daily news and events into the classroom is a start but threading this authentic content into curricula is a goal however; is this proper way to teach ethics? It may be a popular more with students but professors may not value this approach.

Doing what is right and acting within a context calls upon each person's understanding and perception, it is “not simply a matter of following rules or calculating consequences. It is a matter of discerning which rule are called into play in a situation “ (Lebacqz, 1985, p. 29). Your values, morals and philosophical orientation among other variables come into play as your very perception filters the events. This fact can change the manner in which we teach a course in ethics as we need to discuss how one can make a distinction from what is important to that which is less so.

1.7 Issues: Students and Curricula

Pamental (1991) contended, “what may be clear to the trained philosopher is not at all clear to the student. Philosophers have had extensive training in logical analysis and argumentation” (Pamental, 1991, p. 387). In many instances, students who register for an ethics class, are usually at the very introductory stages of learning philosophy and are not able to apply these abstract and sometimes contradicting philosophies to business scenarios (Pamental, 1991; Tenbrunsel, 2008). Pamental (1991) goes on to say “. . . the texts' lack of specificity of method for applying theory, and the lack of resolution in dealing with competing theories, is compounded by the professor teaching the course” (p.387). For instance, even the Normative values framework is quite expansive and based upon several theoretical frameworks, for example:

Egoism (hedonistic or otherwise), consequentialisms utilitarian and non-, act or rule utilitarianisms, moral sense theories, a veritable menagerie of deontological theories of varying stringencies, contractualisms, natural law theories, etc., are all in hot contention for the exclusive franchise on the Good and the Right. (Miller, 1991, p. 397)

To expect a student entering an ethics course to have a grasp of these theoretical frameworks seems somewhat unfair to the student. It now becomes a challenge to identify a starting point in any ethics course. We need to know from the onset of the course, the level of preparedness of each student. Failing this, the course could literally miss its mark as the content could be too advanced.

Historically researchers such as Furman (1990) explained that using a principle-based approach to learning ethics, assumes students are functioning at Kohlberg's autonomous stage, but it was through Furman's experience she concluded that most students have difficulties breaking free from ethical relativism. Interestingly, Pamental (1991) analyzed two hundred syllabi and was able to identify an examination question that created confusion and influenced students to think in a relativistic or subjective way.

Pamental (1991) stated, “this typical question asks the student to analyze and discuss a particular business situation using “either” utilitarian or deontological theory . . . the professor thinks that the use of either one is OK” (p. 388). Furman (1990) added that poor ethical attitude “cannot be remedied in the course of a ten-week ethics class; a reflection of my failure as a teacher; or, more significantly, a measure of the impracticality of teaching ethics in this way?” (p. 32).

Oddo (1997) explained that philosophy courses are usually offered in a department separate from the business department. These courses offer very little practical application that usually results in a weak transfer of ethical reasoning in a business context (Oddo, 1997). Offering a course from within the business department provides students with an opportunity to consider ethical decision making as it relates to everyday business activities. Business ethics provides a link from what is learnt in a philosophy course to what students are faced with once they get out into the work world. Oddo (1997) explains that there must be cooperation between the philosophy department and the business department to ensure students receive a balance between theoretical reasoning and their application into today’s world.

Robertson (1993) defined normative research as “. . . the values, norms, or rules of conduct which govern ethical behavior and which are presented as an ideal” and argued that much of the research in business ethics lacked validity because researchers did not incorporate these theories into their studies” (p. 586). Some studies in the area of business ethics are grounded in normative theory while others are not. For example, Werhane (1988) conducted a study on the rights of individuals and responsibilities of shareholders during a merger and acquisition. The rights of individuals and the rights of shareholders are rigorously considered from normative principles throughout the study. For example “. . . rights have two other characteristics: they are universal, that is, if X is a human right, X applies to everyone, and they are equal, that is, X applies to everyone equally” (p. 586). Fritzsche and Becker (1984); Reidenbach and Robin (1990); Hunt and Vitell (1986); Tenbrunsel (2008); Ferrell and Gresham (1985) have similarly applied ethical theory to management behaviours in their studies.

1.8 Character-based ethics.

There are critics, like religious ethicists, who do not agree with Kohlberg’s moral development theory. Furman (1990) explains that ethical-decision making does not have to be understood similar in a linear, rigid and scientific manner. Furman (1990) defines character-based ethics as “rather than relying on abstract principles to decide on correct moral action, this approach is interested in developing the agent’s moral character or virtues by reference to narratives or stories, metaphors, parables, images and so forth” (p. 33). As opposed to interpreting ethical situations from an objective lens, ethical decisions could also be based on subjectivity (Furman, 1990). Furman (1990) does indicate that virtue ethics can have just as many issues as principle-based ethics. For example, virtue-based ethics could empower individuals to think that ethical decision making is done on an individual basis and without a connection to society as a whole. Coinciding with character-based ethics, Robertson (1993) believed that future research conducted in this area must focus on behaviours as opposed to questionnaires designed to identify attitudes.

Oddo (1997) explained that in addition to teaching ethical decision making skills, business faculties must also encourage students to integrate their own personal values into the decision process. Cragg (1997) described a situation where three different people (a naturalist, a forester, an outdoor educator) will take the same walk down a trail and see completely different aspects. To get passed this limitation, Cragg (1997) suggested; “to weaken the grip of prejudice in a society, people, particularly children have to be brought into contact with images, stories, experiences that challenge stereotypes and change perceptions” (p. 236). Business ethics education must incorporate situations where ethics will run up against students’ personal values (Tenbrunsel, 2008).

1.9 Relevancy to the ‘real world’.

Ritter (2006) mentioned that ethics education must also be relevant to the business context and that ethics has been rendered legitimate when it is seen in real life business applications (p. 156). Bishop (1992) believed that in order to make business ethics education relevant “speakers from industry, government, and other sectors of society may be invited to speak before students on ethical issues” (p. 298). As well, “. . . colleges might affirm their commitment to business ethics through printed materials” (Bishop, 1992, p. 298). One of the associations cited in Oddo’s (1997) study, The Institute of Management Accountants (IMA) is a governing body responsible for ensuring ethical conduct of management accountants across the United States. The IMA published a video series on proper ethical conduct in the accounting world.

Oddo (1997) believed these videos were “effective in the classroom by raising awareness of ethical issues and by stimulating vigorous discussion” (p. 295). Not only are business students developing analytic skills and decision-making skills, they are developing implementation skills (Felton & Sims, 2005).

2.0 Professional Codes: Corporate ethics

Oddo (1997) believed that including professional association codes into the business curriculum helped students to see the importance of ethics at work in the business environment. Oddo (1997) explained that Niagara University incorporated professional association codes and corporate codes into the curriculum. Oddo (1997) believed that getting students to evaluate business decisions using professional codes or corporate codes teaches students a skill they must learn when they are out working. Oddo (1997) stated, “business textbooks today include more coverage of ethics, and often refer to real-world examples of corporate codes of ethics” (p. 295). Cragg (1997) defined this type of ethics as, “the ethics of doing” and points out that an individual can comply to any professional code without any loyalty to such a code (p. 234). In his study, Cragg (1997) explained how aboriginal views, Kantian ethic and Buddhist philosophy represent something different for each of their respective followers. Cragg (1997) explained that it is important “. . . to recognize that values, including moral values have an impact not simply on what we do, but also, on what and how we see and finally, on who we are” (p. 235). Cragg (1997) contended that too much attention in teaching business ethics cannot exist from sole adherence to professional/corporate ethical codes because personal values may interpret and follow the code differently from each other.

There exists an argument as to whether or not ethics should be taught in a post-secondary environment (Ritter, 2006; Tenbrunsel, 2008). Oddo (1997) explained that, “. . . the primary reason for discussing ethical issues in the business classroom is for the students to develop a process which considers the ethical implications of business decisions” (p. 296). Weber (1990) reviewed four studies and found that three of the four indicated a positive shift in ethical reasoning as a result of ethics education. Boyd (1981) indicated an increase in moral reasoning and Stead & Miller (1988) saw an increase to students’ awareness and sensitivity towards social issues. Burton et al. (1991) also showed an increase of ethical awareness when compared against a control group.

3.0 Summary

To this point we have attempted to answer the questions: Can ethics be taught and if so, how should ethics be taught? As we stated from the onset, we view ethics as a process of communication that gives way to new understandings and commitments to our social life. From here we presented a series of important considerations such as moral standards and moral reasoning, making a distinction between the two and pointing out how one infuses the other. Also, within the teaching of ethics there must be a sense of goal establishment via authentic contextualized ethics curricula and astute instruction. The issue of implementation within a standalone (modules) versus embedded ethics discussion within curriculum was noted. Clearly both have merit yet we believe ethics discussions should pervade curricula and be contextualized. This attention to implementation concerns and the notion of a possible framework to structure the student experiences from within a normative theory stance was suggested as favourable.

The authenticity of ethics instruction was deemed fundamentally important for both the student and the instructor. Important in order to heighten the realism and potentially impact student character growth which in turn may eventually influence the future development of professional codes (corporate ethics) as students become employees, leaders and executives charged with the responsibility of upholding and revising existing codes. While we hoped to answer our opening questions we eventually provided assertions and claims that were supported via literature that spanned 30 years of business education in order to present both depth and breadth. In sum, we now conclude that it is prudent to discuss ethics in educational programs in order to develop our understandings and enrich our lives. Ethics instruction is something best done from within all courses yet if necessary a stand-alone course may achieve the same results if the instruction is at the necessary level.

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