Helping students to see for themselves that ethics matters

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Abstract

Business ethics education is experiencing a renaissance as recurring corporate scandals and malpractice over the last decade have ensured that most universities now see the subject as an important and necessary component of any business degree course. As well as integrating professional ethics into their curriculum, Business Schools are also developing standalone ethics courses, showing that they take seriously their responsibility to help prepare the next generation of managers to improve business' track record of transparency, accountability and sustainable development. However what are the learning approaches that will help to bring about real improvements in business ethics learning at university? This paper argues that a holistic approach to ethics teaching is needed, in which students are encouraged to develop ethical knowledge and skills within their personal value systems. In this way ethics does not become something apart but integrated into one's terms of reference. The paper discusses a particular pedagogic approach designed to develop a student's critical consciousness using a student-led learning method in which students actively engage with important concepts and discuss the issues amongst themselves within an environment where they can speak freely. Qualitative interviews with a selection of undergraduates on the compulsory first year professional ethics module provide insight into the impact of the method on attitudes and behaviours.

1. Introduction

The consequence of the recent spate of corporate scandals has been a crisis of confidence in the ethical performance of ‘business’ broadly defined (Wankel & Stachowicz-Stanusch, 2011) and now, as never before, universities are being called upon to ‘prepare a cohort of students who will raise the ethical standards of the business world’ (Kurpis, Béqiri, & Helgeson, 2008: 447). As a result of the economic downturn, business scholars and academics have supported the need for greater attention to be paid to the education of business students in professional ethics and a greater ‘sense of responsibility toward the common good’ (Blasco, 2012: 365). A 2009 report commissioned by the Association of MBAs confirmed that in response to this changing economic and technological environment, business schools have increased the number of standalone business ethics courses available at HE level but concluded that the challenge is how to deliver in ‘an effective and engaging way’ (Institute for Global Ethics UK Trust, 2011: 8). This begs the question as to how can educators ensure that ethics courses are ‘effective and engaging’.

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Sims (2002) provides a list from a variety of Business Ethics educators of considered learning outcomes for ethics courses. These include a range of desirable outcomes, which can be categorised under six broad headings. First, they seek to increase student awareness of the ethical, legal and social dimensions of business decision-making; second, the mainstreaming of ethical issues as a necessary aspect of business decision-making; third, courses seek to develop students’ analytical skills for resolving ethical issues; fourth, and relatedly, the courses attempt to expose students to the complexity of ethical decision-making in business organizations; fifth, courses are intended to cultivate an attitude of moral obligation and personal responsibility in pursuing a career. Finally, and perhaps most aspirational, they seek to stimulate the moral imagination (p. 19–20). Taken together, these constitute a weighty set of objectives in comparison to other, typical sets of objectives for many business courses where the emphasis is often much more on the knowledge content. Business schools now widely acknowledge that greater emphasis is needed on ethics education (Evans & Weiss, 2008: 51). With a maturing of expectations and a new perspective on business ethics teaching fuelled by the economic crisis and global technological trends, learning objectives are emerging as more personally centred, grounded in the concept of human flourishing – with integrity as a key focus (Wankel & Stachowicz-Stanusch, 2011).

Blasco (2012) refers to the importance of the ‘hidden curriculum’ in the development of personal responsibility, integrity and values. This hidden curriculum is defined by Sambell and McDowell as, ‘what is implicit and embedded in educational experiences in contrast with the formal statements about curricula and the surface features of educational interaction’ (1998: 391). They suggest that the role of the institution, via its sets of structures, processes, routines and traditions, is to support ethics teaching by validating and giving credence to the importance of being ethical. An example is the issue of cheating, which has become more prevalent amongst business students in recent years: ‘cheating in higher education is rampant ... and students of business are among the most dishonest,’ (Levy & Rakovski, 2006: 736). Caldwell (2010: 9) avers that when academics turn a blind eye to dishonest practices, they are ‘implicitly contributing to the cheating culture’, such that students see a dissonance between what is taught as ethical and what is permitted in practice. In other words, we need to ‘walk the talk’ in terms of our institutional processes and cultures.

There is also increased emphasis on a ‘multi-dimensional’ learning environment as critical to ethics development. Espoused initially by Hafferty (1998), Blasco (2012) expands on this concept as consisting of: the formal curriculum, which signals what really matters to Business Schools, i.e. a compulsory ethics course and a course organisation that supports ethical content sends a particular signal to students; interpersonal interactions involving stories, anecdotes, and traditions that contribute to socialisation and challenge students’ existing views and interactions and; that the institution is seen to be run democratically in which persons are respected as equals, with powerful role models who demonstrate alignment with perceived ethical goals. This multi-dimensional environment supports the view that teaching ethics should achieve more than just satisfying initial articulated outcomes.

This paper advances the concept that we need to look beyond teaching a set of rules and codes of conduct, to a capacity building model for moral development, which is transformative in the way that people think about ethics. It begins by placing the teaching of ethics within the context of Aristotelian principles, examining current use of moral decision making approaches and how these methods engage with a number of psychological paradigms such as the social intuitionist viewpoint, Rest’s four component model (focussing specifically on the component of moral sensitivity) (Rest, 1984), and the relevance of empathy and affective engagement in the development of personal value systems and integrity. We then describe the teaching methods used on a first year undergraduate module, which utilizes a particular pedagogic approach to test the theory by praxis and finally evaluate the experiences of a group of nine respondents to determine the effect of this pedagogic approach in the development of moral sensitivity.

1.1. Teaching business ethics

With increasing pressure on universities to provide courses that are marketable, meet students’ demands for satisfaction and ensure that graduates are employable it is easy to lose track of the intrinsic values that should be embedded within education, and our role as educators within it. Aristotelian principles imply that an educator’s primary goal is to facilitate transformative education, changing lives, inspiring and enabling the good citizen. Or, as Aristotle instructs, to aid in the acquisition of virtues of the mind (intellectual virtues) and virtues in action (practical virtues) (Aristotle, 1998 [circa 350 BCE]). Virtues of the mind focus on thinking rationally with autonomy and understanding. Virtues in action mean living our lives in accordance with the pursuit of our and others well-being. Plato saw education as grounded in the concepts of coherence between what is truthful and what is good (Plato, 1992 [circa 380 BCE]) – that education should embody the intrinsic values of truth and knowledge. We argue that our teaching practice should reflect these values by encouraging students to learn and develop not just knowledge within a chosen discipline, but also virtues in action – to achieve their full potential both intellectually and personally. When teaching ethics, such objectives transcend the teaching of codes of conduct or how to analyse a problem effectively to a broader remit, the ideal being to achieve transformational learning through deep critical development and reflection with virtuous aspiration. One of the great challenges in devising and executing a pedagogy in ethics is the fact of reasonable pluralism. Not only are our students diverse in their cultural, ethnic, religious, and educational circumstances, but there is an equally manifest diversity among scholars, whose differences are found across disciplines and also across schools within particular disciplines. An ethics curriculum that proposes to educate with an eye to transformational learning instead of merely indoctrinating students into some or another parochial list of right and wrong will have to discover and leverage those elements of our ethical experience that can command the widest possible assent.

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We believe that an Aristotelian conception of the virtues, and especially the role of moral sensitivity in the diverse family of ethical approaches broadly described as Aristotelian ethics, is such a lever, whereby the ethics curriculum can encourage moral progress without our having to know or agree in advance what exactly will count as progress. That is, we do not need to take any particular stand on controversial and obscure matters with respect to meta-ethics (e.g., realism vs. anti-realism, cognitivism vs. non-cognitivism) or value theory (e.g., a complete catalogue of human goods) or specific issues (e.g., the legitimacy of Intellectual Property) in order to have an ethics curriculum that will improve our students’ characters and prepare them to offer meaningful contributions to our ongoing debates on these more controversial matters. While the value and meaning of moral sensitivity will be unpacked differently by the realist or the subjectivist, that meta-ethical dispute does not prevent both schools from embracing the practical advantages of a curriculum that encourages the cultivation of character and moral sensitivity. Emotivists may not agree with more traditional Aristotelian realists about what it means to affirm the value of moral sensitivity or even why it is so worthy of our affirmation, but each school can and does affirm moral sensitivity.

It is sometimes supposed that exercises in procedural rationality are sufficient for improving moral sensitivity. A common method used in teaching business ethics is to develop skills in moral reasoning whereby students identify ethical issues associated with specific professional scenarios, weigh the options based on the perspectives of different stakeholders, and then choose a suitable ‘moral’ path – the idea being that the development of reasoning skills will ultimately have an impact on the chosen behaviour (Liffick, 2004; Wolcott & Lenk, 2003).

The use of moral decision-making exercises is a rationalist approach in which students evaluate the ethical implications of actions within professional contexts. These exercises are designed to assist students in identifying relevant ethical issues – an important element of moral sensitivity. Blum asserts that ‘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’ (1991: 701). However the development of moral sensitivity is a complex process. Narvaez divided the component into two parts – moral perception and moral interpretation. Perception denotes the semi-conscious or unconscious process prior to realisation. Interpretation involves the conscious realisation that a moral situation exists and a judgement is required. ‘Initial conditions’ at perception will incorporate elements of attention as well as affective responses such as attraction, empathetic response and mood (1996: 3). Affective response will aid perception, which results in the realisation that a moral problem exists. Without attentiveness and perception, interpretation is unlikely to occur. Therefore attentiveness, attraction, empathetic response and mood are all key aspects to enabling interpretation, leading to the development of moral sensitivity.

There are a number of ways ethics education can have an impact on moral sensitivity. Vetlessen (1994) asserts that attentiveness can be facilitated by ethics teaching. Bosco, Melchar, Beauvais, and Desplaces (2010) affirmed that ethical discussions that took place either as a separate course topic or throughout the course resulted in higher levels of moral reasoning and moral competence scores. Plaisance (2007) experienced an improvement in the ethical awareness of students as a result of instruction, which cultivated ethical analysis and critical thinking about stakeholders, to enable them to deliberate through ethical problems. Jagger (2011a) found that students who exhibited higher levels of moral sensitivity experienced increased levels of moral judgement as measured by the Defining Issues Test.

However, teaching students how to reason does not necessarily translate into actions outside the classroom. Research into illegal downloading demonstrates the gap between cognition and the motivation to ethical conduct (as measured by adherence to law). Robertson, McNeill, Green, and Roberts (2011) demonstrated that the perpetrators of illegal software download believed they were doing the wrong thing (possibly because it was illegal) and yet chose to do it anyway for their own gain, narrowly conceived. This indicates either a weakness of will in not being true to their belief systems or a failure to develop the moral sensitivity to refuse the temptation. Legal-awareness courses alone are unable to prevent illegal downloading (Lifick, 2004; Wolcott & Lenk, 2003).

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This suggests that pedagogies, which engage a student’s emotional response could be a valuable approach to aid in the development of empathy and overall moral sensitivity. Moreover, when students see for themselves that ethics matters, there is reason to think ethical conduct will follow and their experience of ethical concerns will be integrated with their sense of their own values and concerns. That is, there is reason to think such an education encourages integrity, such that students will be more likely to do ‘the right thing’ even when no one is looking.

Vetlesen describes empathy as ‘indispensable in providing us with an access to the domain of the moral’ (1994: 6) and comments that empathy is at work in moral perception and that perception always requires attentiveness, which ‘needs to be learnt, cultivated, maintained’ (p. 9). The link to empathy in moral sensitivity is clear – it is not just a question of teaching students moral decision-making skills; there is also a need to acknowledge the perceptive aspects of moral sensitivity – to utilise methods that appeal to affective characteristics to foster empathy.

In his early work Carl Rogers described empathy as a skill that could be taught, and later referred to it as a ‘way of being’ (Davis, 1990) implying that empathy can be defined as an intention to live or an essential part of someone’s nature, which can develop with guidance and training. Stein defines empathy as a ‘happening’ (rather than a skill) via three overlapping stages. The first stage, self-transposal takes place when we listen and attempt to put ourselves in the place of the other person; a crossing over can then occur whereby an emotional shift takes place from thinking to feeling which results in a deep connection and lastly; a return to self such that we do not share the experience but have sympathy for that person (Davis, 1990: 708). Davis asserts that by encouraging self-transposal and sympathy, educators can facilitate the second stage of crossing over. Similarity with others allows empathy to occur and Davis contends that, ‘the more mature a person is, the more the imagination can see even the smallest of similarities’ (1990: 710).

As ethics teachers we cannot ‘make’ our students behave ethically. We can assume expectations within a business context, in terms of how we should treat ourselves and each other or levels of professionalism which are often engendered in codes of conduct and law, to bring about awareness of the consequences of unethical actions and yet, the notion that being ethical means sacrificing one’s own interests in the name of prejudged abstractions may well prevent students from embracing ethical concepts. Rather than focussing on a set of codes or prescribed ‘morals’ in which a judgement is determined right or wrong by some arbitrary fiat of the teacher, the boss, the Dean of the school, etc., a more appropriate teaching objective could be to encourage the development of an individual’s personal value system through aspiring to virtues. By focussing on the virtues educators can avoid the trap of falling into a willy-nilly relativism and yet move away from the notion of a set of morals and judgements. The virtues are just traits of character that will tend to improve one’s chances of doing well on one’s own terms.

The classical virtues will be roughly the same across humans, with little more than changes of emphasis or priority across different cultural or social contexts. Courage, which means having the right amount of concern for one’s own safety, matters whether one is a banker in Manhattan or a hoplite in ancient Sparta, since safety matters even across these very different circumstances; what courage will specifically entail and the weight it will have relative to other virtues may very well be different, but there is little doubt that one is likely to do better on one’s own terms if one is courageous. In light of such considerations, courage will be good no matter what ends one pursues, such that anyone of sufficient moral sensitivity and judgement will come to regard courage as a virtue. We do not need to declare once and for all an exhaustive accounting of all human goods and their exact nature to affirm the value of courage. Instead, we can rely on whatever values already move our students and show that a commitment to the classical virtues flows naturally from these.

Since this is also true for the other classical virtues, one will have to temper courage with an appropriate concern for pleasure, truth, fellowship, and whatever other goods there are and thus their associated virtues. In this way, one need not insist on any particular conception of the good life in order to have a meaningful ethics, and this avoids the finger wagging associated with absolutist accounts. Within the context of those virtues, we seek to encourage students to internalise ethical concerns as their own, especially through the empathetic identification of others’ concerns as one’s own. By developing their own ethical values it is hoped they will have a higher propensity to be law-abiding but from an internalised learning which includes critical analysis and not simply because they have been told this is the correct way to act. While this approach carries with it the possibility that students may hold views that are against the law or particular codes of conduct, it is felt that ultimately, if they have had the opportunity to internalise what their values are at university, they may less likely be swayed when tempted to ignore the law or codes of conduct in future years.

Evaluating this approach within the context of psychological theory requires us to consider Rest’s Four Component Model which describes four major kinds of psychological processes which ‘must have occurred for moral behaviour to occur’ (Rest, Bebeau, & Volker, 1986: 3): component 1 – moral sensitivity (discussed earlier), is described as the ability to identify the salient aspects of a moral dilemma. The component requires moral imagination and the ability to ‘trace the consequences of action in terms of how each action would affect the welfare of each party involved’ and Rest et al. comment on the striking difference between individuals in their ability to see the needs of others with some exhibiting extreme sensitivity and others needing to ‘see the blood flowing’ (Rest et al., 1986: 6). Rest et al. also comment that affective arousal can have both a positive and negative impact on this component. Moral judgement (component 2) is defined as the ability to determine whether a course of action is morally correct; moral motivation (component 3) involves ‘distinguishing between moral and non-moral values and committing to the moral value’ and; moral character (component 4) gives priority to moral values above personal values and takes action as a result of this commitment (1986: 3).

This description, with its emphasis on putting moral values ‘above’ personal values and ‘distinguishing between moral and non-moral values,’ provides an indication as to how ways of thinking about ethics can tend to undermine integrity. We cannot be expected to regard ethics as an expression of our own rich understanding of what is ultimately worthwhile if we conceive of it as an expression of ethical correctness or an expression of a code of conduct.

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it from the start as something opposed to what we otherwise really care about, as if ethics were something to be added as a constraint on behaviour after we have catalogued what is valuable to us. In that case, ethics will not be an expression of one’s self but an enemy of one’s own pursuits, and we will be tempted to ignore it when we have no fear of being caught. In contrast, if we regard ethics as being alongside or as a function of our other values – as an immediately experienced expression of our real concern for what we believe to be truly valuable in the world, including as it does the concerns of others and integrating these concerns into our own immediately perceived interests, then we can expect ethics to flow as a resulting expression of our character. Moral conduct thus takes care of itself if we have the appropriate sensitivity to all the relevant information about what is good for us and for those around us. Instead of putting morality ‘above’ one’s own concerns, to the person of integrity being ethical is the sum of one’s concerns.

1.2. Designing a critical pedagogy

Freire referred to traditional forms of teaching as ‘banking’ in which students ‘deposit’ knowledge given to them by their teachers (Freire, 1970). In the teaching of ethics, this rules-based approach supports the use of methods whereby students learn codes of conduct and are instructed in what is regarded as ‘correct protocol’. Whilst there are decidedly occasions in which it is apt (and indeed necessary) to instruct students with regard to particular codes of conduct and acceptable modes of behaviour within particular professions, we decided to approach the teaching of this course differently. Our argument is that ethics courses should seek to foster moral sensitivity and integrity which requires a critical awareness and sensitivity to the impact of different ethical decisions on the relevant stakeholders in a given context and in the light of the virtues, and involves being in touch and true to one’s personal values within those contexts. Such an outcome from an ethics course requires a student to develop a ‘critical consciousness’ to moral dilemmas. This pedagogic approach promotes ‘co-intentionality’ between the teacher and the student whereby students are presented with a problem, which is related to a student’s subjective experience (Freire, 1970: 58).

Our context was a cohort of fifty-four first year Business Computing students taking a compulsory professional ethics module. Typically these students had achieved entry requirements of at least three Cs at Advanced level and a B in maths from the recognised General Certificate level for entry to the course, as well as a number of mature students who gained entry through non-traditional methods. Being a London university, the programmes traditionally have a rich cultural diversity and this cohort was no exception with 20–30% of students being of Middle Eastern, African or Asian heritage, 10% from other European backgrounds, and the remainder a mixture of English ethnic mixes. English was the first language for roughly 60% of the cohort.

To facilitate this pedagogic approach we used a student-centred model to promote awareness of ethical issues from other perspectives by having students develop their own arguments in groups, within the context of topics in which they had personal interest. We designed one of the course assessments as a form of structured debate led by the student groups.

A list of possible debate motions was presented to the students and they voted on the topics they wished to discuss. They were also encouraged to provide their own topics, which were put in the pool for voting. All the motions related to controversial ethical issues, but these were quite ‘lightweight’ as opposed to those what would elicit a serious emotional reaction (such as abortion or euthanasia) and were topics which students were likely to have had some personal experience and awareness, such as intellectual property violation (illegal music download), personal data infringement (abuse on Facebook), violence in computer games, internet bullying and internet censorship. This was to encourage response and interaction amongst students without being overtly intense. The debates were student-led with individual teams leading the discussions by developing arguments for and against and delivering speeches to their peers, which were then collectively discussed and questioned. Voting took place at the beginning and end of each debate to identify shifts in audience opinions. Audience participation was encouraged and was often very lively as experiences and viewpoints were shared to provide another dimension to the arguments. Sometimes discussions became heated as students debated different viewpoints through the sharing of experiences. Individual debates were videoed and detailed descriptions of the proceedings are discussed in a separate paper (Jagger, 2013).

From the cohort nine students were selected to take part in this qualitative study designed to evaluate character changes from group respondents through in depth study of responses to interview questions. Selection of the nine participants was based on results from an earlier experimental study carried out on the entire cohort which measured levels of improvement in moral judgment using a well validated psychometric test, (Bebeau & Brabecck, 1987, p. 193) to provide a cross-section of types with three students chosen who had shown improved levels, three who had shown no change, and three who had shown a decrease (Jagger, 2011b).

Interviews took place six months after course completion and were designed to determine the impact of this pedagogic approach by evaluating which teaching interventions used were the most memorable, establish evidence of ethical sensitivity in the form of empathetic response or attentiveness to ethical issues that may have occurred as a result of the approach, and to note any resulting change in ethical attitudes or behaviour which they attributed to being on the course.

The interviews gathered information on each student’s cultural and religious background, attitudes to ethics, their own reflections of the course content and associated attitudinal and/or behavioural changes. Interviews were face-to-face, roughly half an hour in length and were recorded. Names of respondents have been changed and all research was approved before commencing by the university’s Ethics Committee.

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2. Results and discussion

The interviews highlighted two particular themes in relation to the effect of the course on students’ ethical awareness and sensitivity: the impact of the structured debates on the ability to see from others’ perspectives and perceived changes to attitudes and behaviours. These themes were seen within the context of individuals from widely differing cultural and economic backgrounds.

2.1. Structured debates

Although students showed appreciation for the blend of learning methods used, the structured debates were overwhelmingly popular with these nine students. The innovation appeared to provide a point of reference for the students and was often the focus in answer to open-ended questions surrounding which methods they wished to comment on. In answer to the question, ‘Was there anything in the course that made you change your mind or your attitude towards ethics?’ all bar one student cited the debates as having made an impression on them, helping them to see things from other perspectives, to ‘go outside the box’ to ‘think beyond their own beliefs’ and suggest that the variety of background and cultural differences enriched their learning experience in understanding ethics.

Amos, a 24 year old African man and the son of a professor and surgeon, travelled abroad with his parents for most of his early childhood and came to England because his parents valued the need for him to receive a good education. Although not particularly religious, he considers himself to be a spiritual ‘warrior’ and believes in approaching life philosophically. He commented on the power of the debates to make him look outside himself as he evaluated the contribution from another perspective. His comments demonstrate how he came to re-evaluate and respect others on the course having been initially sceptical of them and their views;

It’s not a lack of principles that’s the problem, it is just perspective. So I think the course gave me – I realised that – I realised that you can’t be overly rigid cos if you’re overly rigid you’re saying that this person doesn’t have any principles but it’s not the lack of principals that’s the problem it’s just different perspectives.

Matthew a 20 year old man, born in England of West Indian parents, explained that religion was the most powerful impact on his approach to ethics and that he has read the Bible extensively. This was a motivation he had rather than as a pressure from family. He also commented that the debates helped him develop better listening skills and a greater respect for other viewpoints;

…made me get to know other people’s points of view and where they’re coming from instead of just dismissing what they were saying. … if I’m having a conversation with someone you have to listen to where they’re coming from and put yourself in that position.

Hamid, a 21 year old man from the Middle East, was born of Middle Eastern professional parents and lived there until he was eight years old at which time he came to England. He learnt about ethics through his parents who are both Muslims and went to university. He said Islam was his main influence with regard to ethics and that he is deeply religious. He also felt that the debates really helped his ability to listen and respect other’s viewpoints;

…everyone expressed their opinion in a way that they chose was right and to listen to other people’s opinions and all of that makes you see things differently – definitely.

Graham, 21 year old man of Chinese descent, comes from a liberal, non-religious family. Although he was born in China, he has lived in England all his life. He never received any formal instruction in ethics and felt that his main influences came from his own thinking and reading. He felt the course had not had a great impact on his ethical behaviour but that it made him more aware of other viewpoints;

I think it depends on what area you’re talking about. I’m not saying I’m selfish in anyway but there’s some areas that may not really concern me all the time. I wouldn’t say my views changed too much it only made me realise more what other people say and what they are really about.

Josie a 20 year old Caucasian woman, is from a close family who are not particularly religious and who she describes as having had an average impact on her approach to ethics. She stated in her interview that ethics was not something discussed at home and she received no instruction at school. She felt the debates had been instrumental in helping her see the other side of things;

Well, now I look at things in two different ways. I think because before I used to think one thing and that was it but since doing like when we did those debates, we looked at one way and the other and we answered the questions before and after it makes me think now of all the sides instead of just one.

Jeremiah, a 22 year old African man, has lived in the UK since his primary school years. He speaks three languages at home and English is not his first language. His parents are both religious and both went to university in Africa. When asked about the major ethical influences in his life he hesitates but then says that communication with his parents with regard to ethics is not strong and that his relationship with his parents is very strained. He commented that the course opened his mind,
It takes you outside of the box when most of the time you’re concentrating on what’s going on in – like just in our own mind – like when you were asking some of the questions and the way the questions were built up it was like come outside the box and see what’s around you and this is the difference between this, this and that.

When asked to clarify what he found most helpful he commented on a newly found respect for one particular opposing team member;

I knew certain things about it but I never really studied the other perspective. I didn’t really go into detail. …when the other girl came up, she had some real good points and in my mind I was actually thinking you are… you are actually right.

Only one student interviewed did not feel the course had benefited him in the area of ethics. David, a 22 year old Caucasian man, was born in the UK in a non-religious household. Neither of his parents went to university. He considers his parents and grandparents to have been his chief and sole influencers with regard to understanding ethical issues. Although he commented that he enjoyed the debates, he did not feel the course had any impact on the way he thought about ethics although he enjoyed learning about security aspects,

I didn’t know all the ethics security stuff and that sort of stuff I found useful.

2.2. Behavioural change

When participants were asked if they were aware of any behaviour changes they would attribute to their experiences on the course, all but two responded that they could not think of any cases they could clearly attribute to the course. Of the two students who did comment on changes that they felt had occurred, one involved a change in ability to interact with customers at work and the other involved a change in practice with regard to illegal downloading of music.

Sam, a 20 year old Caucasian born in the UK, comes from a working class family and was the first in his family to attend university. His school did not provide any introduction in ethics that he remembers and he attributes his parents, friends and himself as being those who have had the most impact on his approach to ethics.

He commented that as a result of the course he now felt he was better able to cope with customers at work as he made a point of listening to other’s points of view:

The course actually helped with customer service quite a bit since I’ve done it cos you get an angry customer, they shout at and you could react this way but you don’t – you take their views into account and react how they want you to react.

Celia a 19 year old African woman, comes from a professional family in which both parents went to university. She came from Nigeria specifically to go to an English university. She believes her religious upbringing had a strong impact on her approach to ethics although she received no specific instruction in ethics at school or at home and therefore was not aware of the formalised concepts to do with ethics until joining the course. She confirmed that, as a result of the debate on music downloading, she now considers the practice to be wrong and no longer downloads music illegally. As a result of the debate on violent computer games, she now makes a point of preventing her young nephew from playing violent computer games because the arguments presented for and against have led her to believe there is a danger there and she has a responsibility towards her nephew to protect him.

Two other male students, Hamid and Graham confirmed that, although they felt they’d benefitted from learning about ethics, this did not result in any obvious behavioural change. Hamid acknowledged that he was challenged by the debate on music download.

Yeah, whenever I wanna download music from the internet. Or think of downloading anything from the Internet I just think of that debate.

However, unlike Celia, Hamid went on to admit that he still downloaded music despite his concern about it and his personal belief that it was ‘wrong’. He acknowledged that the experience on the course was not enough to get him to change his behaviour, commenting,

It’s something yeah, it’s something I do so….

Graham commented that he would be unlikely to change his behaviour because the consequences would not affect him directly;

It’s basically because like you know something’s there that’s not quite right, then you go to learn about it – then you realise “yeah it’s really not right” but you wouldn’t come back and actually do something about it. It’s one of those situations because it doesn’t really affect you in direct ways.

This dissonance between believing and behaving corresponds with research on downloaders discussed previously that many downloaders actually do consider the practice to be ‘wrong’ (Altschuller & Benbunan-Fich, 2009). How this is to be resolved remains an open question, since perhaps the notion of “wrong” is being conflated with “illegal” here, such that integrity is restored upon further reflection that conceives the practice as not wrong after all even though it is illegal. Whether that is a satisfactory resolution will depend on whether we ultimately think a full moral sensitivity is consistent with discounting or overruling the interests of artists and publishers in this case, and that remains a controversial matter.

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The point here is not whether the practice of downloading is wrong — this is controversial and many ethical discussions are — but the impact of the class debate on people’s attitudes and behaviours by creating dissonance, to internalise ethical concerns as their own as the issues began to matter to them as a ‘personal value.’ If we hope to influence people to be better people — as defined by the virtues — ethical concern has to be an expression of and not in opposition to one’s total interests, understood honestly and broadly to include the interests of others who are, quite literally, a part of one’s life. Of course, as this case shows, moral sensitivity alone does not simply resolve every moral controversy, since it is not obvious in every case how we are to balance all the elements of our veridical moral perception. Indeed, it is probable that in certain cases an increase in moral sensitivity is liable to issue in greater dissonance and even challenge one’s personal values in the short term. However, as long as this greater sensitivity is itself a spur to resolving the dissonance one experiences, this outcome is a development. At least the problem can be experienced as a problem, which is an occasion to discover the best solution and become a better person on one’s own terms. That is to be on the path to integrity, and it may be that all we can do in moral education is point students in the right direction, based on a virtuous perspective.

3. Conclusion

The world economic crisis has highlighted the need for universities to rise to the challenge to motivate students to think and act ethically — to consider actions that go beyond shareholder value and personal monetary gain, and develop integrity to be better people, to foster leadership values that promote and embrace transparency, accountability and sustainability. Research has demonstrated that a chief requirement in ethical development is the development of moral sensitivity — you can’t make ethical decisions unless you know precisely that there are ethical issues and what they are — and this is an issue for many students who do not see ethical issues easily. This paper has explored the impact of a particular pedagogic approach, designed to help develop the capacity to be morally sensitive, on students from widely differing backgrounds and cultures. This study has three key findings:

Firstly it suggests that the use of student-centred teaching methods can contribute to the development of moral sensitivity. The qualitative approach allowed for an in-depth analysis of the attitudes and perceptions of students when engaging together in a student-centred pedagogic approach. It provides an insight into how this approach to teaching ethics appeared to help students to see from another’s perspective, to take oneself out of one’s own ‘blinder thinking’ to identify ethical issues. Responses suggest the disparity of the group added to the learning as students found unity in working through issues together. Respondent comments suggest the development of a mutual respect that appeared to transcend the different religious and cultural inheritances, personalities, value systems and personal circumstances represented. A primary feature of the sessions was that the students took charge of their debates, exploring each other’s perspectives, and to be able to identify ethical issues — finding a way to resolve their disputes.

Secondly student comments demonstrated that for some the experience resulted in attitudinal change — that as a result of the teaching intervention, some changed their beliefs with respect to the ethics of some actions — demonstrating an impact on their personal value systems. The learning didn’t achieve this for all students without exception, but it showed that there was an impact on the attitudes of the group in varying degrees.

Thirdly, for two students there was evidence of behavioural change as a result of the intervention. For one the experience of learning to listen to others’ points of view provided a skill, which was subsequently utilised in the workplace. Sam’s comment during his debate when he was arguing against illegal music download in which he adjured his peers to ‘put themselves in the position of the artiste’ suggests a level of moral sensitivity that was subsequently applied effectively at his workplace. Celia decided after the debate that she no longer wished to download music illegally and confirmed that she no longer does so. In so doing she showed a development in sensitivity towards an issue that led to a level of commitment to act based on her belief. And yet, two students, whilst acknowledging a change in attitude (that, as a result of the debate they now consider the practice to be wrong) confirmed that their behaviour was not altered because ‘it is what they do.’ As Graham pointed out — the issues of harm did not affect him directly.

The six-month gap between the end of the course and the beginning of interviews suggest that this type of pedagogic approach can have an impact that is sustained beyond the immediate short term. Further research through longitudinal study will be needed to conclude whether the development is long lasting. However the results suggest potential for this method to contribute to pedagogy. If we can provide spaces and opportunities for students to develop skills to see from others’ perspectives, and to be able to identify ethical issues — to develop moral sensitivity, applying them within the context of the virtues, such an experience should help them to see that ethics matters.

4. Limitations of the study

The research was practitioner-based with one of the authors being the tutor on the course and therefore subject to inadvertent bias. At the same time, the relationship held by the student with the lecturer could be seen as a way of gaining greater depth of response as students felt free to discuss issues in an atmosphere of trust and respect.

References


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