

Incorporating the Creative Arts into the Study of Business Ethics

Hershey H. Friedman

Koppelman School of Business, Brooklyn College, USA

Deborah S. Kleiner

Tobin College of Business, St. John's University, USA

James A. Lynch

Koppelman School of Business, Brooklyn College, USA

Abstract. Many scholars believe that traditional courses in ethics (especially business ethics) have not been successful in making students ethical. The best that educators can hope is that these courses will help build ethical awareness. It is thus apparent that the apparatus used to teach ethics does not inspire the intellectual leap needed between the abstract awareness of ethical issues to the functional changes in behavior and decision-making. This paper posits that the creative arts, including literature, poetry, music, pictorial art, and film, may provide the tools to help bridge that gap. The creative arts can profoundly impact individuals and cause social change by gradually implanting values and changing beliefs. They can instill morals by using stories, sounds, and images and arouse the passion needed to change behaviors.

Keywords: business ethics, ethics, creative arts, literature, poetry, music, pictorial arts.

1. Introduction

We live in a post-factual age where some people are more impressed with claims and opinions based on emotions and prior beliefs than those built on facts and truth. It is the one who yells the loudest, who rants with bombastic certainty, who spouts the most outrageous falsehoods, that is the one who is heard – and who is believed. In this new age of post-truth, “deception has become commonplace at all levels of contemporary life... It is now as acceptable to lie as it is to exceed the speed limit when driving” (Keyes 2004, p. 5). Yet, this very culture of lying leads to that very slippery slope of unethical behavior. This is why it is crucial to teach students the importance of discerning “the truth” to inspire ethical decision-making.

In 1947, Martin Luther King, Jr. asserted that “We must remember that intelligence is not enough. Intelligence plus character – that is the goal of true *This shortened version of the article is for promotional purposes on publicly accessible databases.*

Readers who wish to obtain the full text version of the article can order it via the url

<https://www.neilsonjournals.com/IBEE/abstractjbee20kleineretal.html>

Any enquiries, please contact the Publishing Editor, Peter Neilson pneilson@neilsonjournals.com

© NeilsonJournals Publishing 2023.

education.” He recognized that “If we are not careful, our colleges will produce a group of close-minded, unscientific, illogical propagandists, consumed with immoral acts” (King Institute n.d., paras. 6-7). Ethics may be an essential skill we teach in institutions of higher learning, but it is not clear that we are successful.

In the Information Age, we should use various tools to teach values and ethics and not limit ourselves to one particular methodology. A multi-modal approach may be the best way to get the message across to students that ethics and values matter and that greed is not good (Carnes 2011; Ryan & Bisson 2011). A significant number of scholars are urging educators to make use of Internet-based tools as a way of making education relevant and exciting to the students of today, who spend a great deal of time with social media and the Internet (Battalio 2007; Brown 2000; Carnes 2011; Friedman & Friedman 2011; Friedman Lynch & Herskovitz 2013; Gee 2003; Okougbo & Okike 2021; Sholihin, Sar, & Yuniarti 2020; Swartz & Brennana-Tonetta, Jain, Johnson, Mamanov, & Hale Y. Javaraman 2022)

But even using the new tools that are now at our disposal, the question of whether ethics can be taught continues to be an ongoing debate. Scholars such as Milton Friedman and Peter Drucker feel that ethics cannot be learned in a classroom, but there is no consensus either way (Altmeyer, Yang, Schallenkamp, & DeBeaumont 2011; Bowden & Smythe 2008; Friedman, Fogel, & Friedman 2005; Etzioni 2002; Holland 2009; Hühn 2014; MacDonald 2007; Parks-Leduc, Mulligan, & Rutherford 2021, Stape 2002; Wang & Calvano 2015). Haidt (2012, p. 90) posits that “Nobody is ever going to invent an ethics class that makes people behave ethically after they step out of the classroom.” What will make people more ethical is making small changes to the institutional environment so that behaving ethically is expected and one’s reputation will be severely damaged by acting in an unethical manner. Haidt also provides evidence from the vast scientific literature that the ability to reason well about ethical issues does not result in people more likely to act virtuously; the aptitude and skill to reason well does not correlate with finding the moral truth (p. 89).

Bazerman and Gino (2012) posit that the correct way to teach ethics is by using a behavioral ethics approach. Behavioral ethics takes a descriptive rather than a normative approach and attempts to assist professionals and students in understanding their behavior when facing an ethical dilemma. By making people aware of the contradictions between how they act and contrasting it with how they should ideally behave, they can develop their moral sensitivity. It may be challenging to teach individuals to be ethical, but it does appear possible to instill ethical awareness into students (Altmeyer *et al.* 2011; Bowden & Smythe 2008; Koehn 2005; Williams & Dewett 2005). Yet one can imagine a person who recognizes that his conduct is unethical may nevertheless decide to behave dishonestly. Thus, the question remains: how does one transform ethical awareness into those changes in behavior that align with moral precepts?

The time-honored, “typical” approach to teaching ethics in business schools has been primarily two-pronged: studying the canon of great philosophers and utilizing case studies that highlight ethical dilemmas.

2. Current Approaches

Cases

One popular approach to teaching courses in business ethics relies on case studies. First pioneered in 1870 in Harvard Law School to teach law, this methodology has been expanded to other disciplines, including ethics (Williams 1992). Many professors feel that case studies enhance students’ critical thinking skills because they can expose them to all kinds of issues that may arise in various organizational settings (Corey 1998; Pomykalski 2010). The problem with case histories is that they remain an abstract compilation of facts and rarely have the potential to arouse passion the way that the creative arts can.

Philosophers

Another popular and traditional approach to teaching ethics relies on studying great philosophers such as Aristotle, Kant, and Mill. These courses focus on normative applied ethics employing the significant theories of philosophical ethics, such as Kantian deontology (duty-based), Millian utilitarianism (consequences-based), and virtue ethics (character-based). These abstract philosophical discourses rarely invoke the fervor or commitment needed for students to make ethical choices, especially when faced with the specters of profit and gain, avarice and fear, ambition and success.

It appears that the current approaches to teaching ethics are not doing the job, and other techniques to teach ethics may be needed. Interestingly, one philosopher that is not usually studied is Adam Smith. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* he asserted that economic growth depended on morality. Adam Smith, a believer in the “invisible hand” of free markets, did not believe in predatory, ruinous capitalism that only enriches the few at the top (Friedman & Adler 2011).

Additionally, it might be appropriate to not only focus on Western philosophers, but also to study philosophers such as Confucius, Lao Tzu, and Avicenna. For example, a major idea of Confucianism is the importance of humaneness, good moral character, and kindness to others; thus it would be proper to study this. Moreover, it has had a huge impact on cultures in East Asia and can be applied to business (Rudnicki 1988).

3. Expanding the Tool-Kit

Case studies and philosophical theories may appeal to the intellect but may not necessarily capture the hearts and imaginations of students. There are those who are convinced by abstract principles and submit all their decision-making to its mandates. But, as has been demonstrated, that number is low. Thus, the challenge that must be met is how to inspire students to not only recognize moral quagmires but also to make ethical decisions. By expanding the tools one uses to teach ethics one – perhaps – creates the opportunity to effectuate change. In this paper we offer suggestions for using other sources, culled from the creative arts, as additional ways to teach ethics.

Creative Arts

The creative arts (including literature, music, painting, and dance) can profoundly impact individuals, and they can affect society and cause social change by gradually implanting values and changing beliefs. Creative arts can instill morals by using stories, sounds, and images and inspire passion. This paper examines how these several creative arts can work to help teachers teach ethics.

Although falling under the category of non-fiction, think about how the writings of Karl Marx galvanized people across the globe and led to revolutions in many parts of the world. Or how the hate-filled writings of Hitler continue to capture the imagination of individuals to this very day. And from a fictional perspective, anyone who has read Dante's *Inferno* has an embedded awareness of the consequences of sin. George Orwell's predictive *1984* not only provided sinister additions to our vocabulary but also raised a red flag about the consequences of continuing on our current path. Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delight* created a visually unforgettable image of eternal damnation, and Picasso's *Guernica* painted a visceral depiction of the depredations of war. And Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind", a condemnation of passivity in the face of cannonballs flying and mountains washing out to sea, continues to be a paean to change.

Literature

Literature can use fiction, parables, fables, and poetry to teach values. Indeed, numerous websites and books describe "books that changed the world" (e.g., *Books that Changed the World* by Downs 1963; *100 Books that Changed the World*, by Christianson & Salter 2018). Fiction such as Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* has made the world aware of the horrors of mass poverty. *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens also provides meaningful lessons on the effects of the corruption of the elite on ordinary people. It also explores the horrors of vengeance. In what was perhaps the first actual use of the case method to teach ethics, except substituting animals for humans, Aesop's fables date back to the sixth century BCE and teach ethics and values; they continue to be used to this day.