The Need to Personalise Business Ethics Education

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Abstract. Can business ethics textbooks and modules prepare business students to manage ethical challenges if they bypass students' personal ethics? This paper is an academic reflection by a Higher Education, business ethics tutor in the UK and Ireland. It charts a pedagogic journey of moving away from lecturing based on the contents of the standard, "impersonal", business ethics textbook, to moving towards facilitating interaction among students about their ethics in all parts of life, and especially "at work" in their part-time employment. The rationale for this pedagogic shift is supported by excerpts from *Journal of Business Ethics Education* (JBEE) articles and by current, UK, Higher Education (HE), quality frameworks. Qualitative student feedback on their experience of this more personal design of a business ethics module is included. Ten exercise suggestions and resources are offered. Business ethics textbook authors and tutors are recommended to begin their content with exercises in personal ethics.

Keywords: personal ethics, business ethics, at work, textbook, resource, UK.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the need to involve students' personal ethics in their business ethics education. Echoes from previous JBEE authors are gathered to reinforce the point. In addition, quality frameworks from the UK's HE sector on the subject of ethics education, reinforce the need to include students' personal ethics. Personal ethics, put simply, are the values used uniquely by individuals when judging what is right and what is wrong. Both personal ethics and business ethics need to be explored together since both derive from the same person and both are engaged at work.

This paper adds to the infrequent discussions in business ethics education of the link between business and personal ethics. The terminology in these papers has evolved from "personal business ethics" (Hollon and Ulrich 1979); and "personal ethical codes" (Ferris 1996); to "organisational citizenship" (Turnipseed 2002), CSR (Carroll 2016), and spirituality (Lozano 2022a). Previous to these, academic discussion focused on "corporations" and "corporate ethics", rather than individuals/employees and personal ethics (Quinn 1997).

This offering tells the evolution of my pedagogic story. I used this approach for the first time in my teaching of a business ethics module in 2022. A brief outline of the module content, and a note on the tutor's role, is followed by ten resources/exercises that contribute a personal dimension to business ethics education. Recommendations point to the addition of a section on personal ethics to business ethics textbooks, and the continued sharing of new resources and exercises among the educator community in order to stay current in our business ethics education.

2. In the Beginning…

When I was invited to teach a stand-alone module on business ethics (entitled Business and Society), it had just been added to the curricula of two degrees during their course revalidations (the "reval" exercise is compulsory every 5 years to ensure every course is fit for purpose). The module was designed for first year, undergrad students on two courses in Ulster University Business School. The module content was based on the renowned US text by Carroll, Brown and Buchholtz (2017) (8th edition was reviewed by Fraedrich in JBEE in 2011; currently Carroll and Brown, 2022). Then in its 10th edition, the textbook offered much to the tutor and student alike. It was one of the most revised textbooks on the market, and was packed with current topics. It was authored by Archie Carroll who created the CSR pyramid, a staple model on any business ethics course. It included useful exercises and many familiar cases (such as Toms Shoes, the Body Shop, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation). However, like other textbooks, it did not include a section on personal ethics.

3. Meet Them Where They're At

Teaching business ethics by using students' own ethics is not new. In the early 2000s, academics from multiple disciplines advocated the need to include personal ethics in with business ethics education. What follows is excerpts from these proponents. I have quoted them deliberately in order to keep in line with the personal thrust of this paper and to capture their individual characters.

In a seminal paper by Rossouw (2002) on three approaches to teaching business ethics (namely cognitive, behavioural and managerial), he writes: "personal moral development becomes the yardstick of success" (p. 414). "When it comes to the behavioural competence position, its agent-centred approach makes an important contribution to the field of business ethics by insisting that moral behaviour is dependent upon intra-personal transformation," he explains (p. 424). In other words, a student's (agent) ethical

behaviour in business is based on their own personal (intra-personal) ethics and Rossouw explains that this includes their will and emotions.

Four years later in a JBEE forum entitled "what I try to achieve when teaching business ethics", four university lecturers described their pedagogic journeys around teaching business ethics (DesJardins *et al.* 2006). DesJardins emphasizes both a personal and a social-justice side of ethics in his teaching. It boils down to the question "how should we live our lives?", he says. "We are asking it not only about me, the individual person, but we're asking it as citizens, members of the community. We are asking how we are all going to live together" (p. 87). In the same forum, Ryan explains to her students that they make ethical decisions regularly. "To help students clarify their own ethical systems, I remind them that they have one when they walk into class—one that they have somehow conglomerated from their experiences, their parents' teaching, church, school, or friends. They use it to make ethical decisions all of the time" (p. 89). This echoes Bowie (2004) in a previous JBEE paper: "the one thing they cannot do is avoid ethics" (p. 9). The third lecturer in the forum, Weber, shares: "I learned that you have to go in their door to come out your door" (p. 97) and, in a list of his classroom tools, he includes students' personal experiences and dilemmas. Finally from the forum, Wood writes "so, it's best to start teaching … ethics at the lowest possible level" (p. 101). Rather than asking students to imagine themselves as CEOs and make CEO-level ethical decisions, she urges educators to "meet your students where they are" (p. 106). She teaches to the level of an assistant manager at a local shop because this is likely to be where her students will work when they graduate. Similarly, Poulton (2009) in his JBEE paper acknowledges that many students have little experience of the corporate world and that "many ethical situations are of a very personal nature and require personal responsibility" (p. 93). His paper discusses the use of short stories/ narratives in teaching which can increase understanding of the personal nature of ethical decision making.

The conversation continues among the global academic community today (Boda and Zsolnai 2016; Hooker and Kim 2022; Lozano 2022b). More locally, support is provided for a personal approach to ethics education from HE professional bodies in the UK. For example, SEEC is the UK HE reference point for credit-based learning, structures and processes. In the SEEC descriptor for "ethical awareness and application" for the level of first year, a student: "applies an awareness of established ethical values and issues to personal decisions, actions and responsibilities in familiar and unfamiliar contexts" (SEEC 2021, p.13). The personal dimension is included in the descriptor in terms of "personal decisions, actions and responsibilities". Additionally, in the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for Higher Education's subject benchmark statement on business and management (2019 with revision in 2023), it stipulates that graduates should know how to behave ethically.