



The Concept of Moral Imagination – an Inspiration for Writing and Using Case Histories in Business Ethics?

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Abstract: The paper presents a discussion of how the concept of moral imagination can enrich the process of moral deliberation in case discussions when teaching business ethics. The author links the discussion to experiences of having written a case where the goal was to generate a wider and more comprehensive learning process. The process then may yield – depending on the case and the use of moral imagination – the creation of entirely new solutions in ways that are novel, economically viable and morally justifiable.

Key words: moral imagination, case studies, business ethics, sympathy, learning process, writing of cases, Shell.

1. Introduction

Cases are a good teaching medium to further moral imagination which is “an enabling mechanism for the ongoing process of moral deliberation and moral judgment that is not merely reactive, sentimental, or absolutism”. (Werhane, 1999, 108) If this statement is true, and I believe it is, what are some of the main aspects to consider when writing and teaching with the case method in a course on business ethics? Are the methodologies the same? Is the case method in business ethics really effective? If so, how? And finally, can we prove that there is scholarship in writing case studies and teaching with cases in an ethics course? The following paper sets out to address some of these questions by trying to establish a link between the concept of moral imagination and the development of a case study for a course on business ethics.

Moral deliberation and moral judgment as skills belong to the field of moral philosophy and thus are different from what we normally find in management education. A known definition of a case study reads as follows: “A case typically is a record of a business issue which actually has been faced by business executives, together with surrounding facts,

opinions, and prejudices upon which executive decisions have to depend. These real and particularized cases are presented to students for considered analysis, open discussion, and final discussion as to the type of action which should be taken". (Gragg, 1930, 6)

This then would imply, that students are facing a real-live business situation with real problems at a particular point in time. Students are given data, substantive and process – which are necessary to analyze the problem in order to frame alternative solutions, keeping in mind the need to implement the decision in form of actions.

Students learn to see the ambiguity of the business world, the lack of enough information and the speed necessary to reach a conclusion. A major part of learning consists of “boiling down” case facts to their essence – well known in legal studies – in order to present a variety of options.

2. Teaching with the case method

In a nutshell, there are a set of five fundamental principles underlying case method teaching according to Barnes, Christensen and Hansen (1994, 47):

1. *The primacy of situational analysis.* Students are forced to deal with the “as is”, not the “might be”. This also includes the absence of needed information, the ever-present conflict of objectives, and the imbalance between needs and resources. The overall goal is to help the students to deal with the situation – as if in real life.
2. *The imperative of relating analysis and action.* The overall intent here is to combine knowing and acting, and doing this in a classroom setting, which normally stresses conveying knowledge in the form of theories.
3. *The necessity of student involvement.* Cases require the active intellectual and emotional involvement of the student. In group-discussions students also learn other real-life administrative skills: observing, listening, diagnosing, deciding and intervening in order to achieve the desired objectives.
4. *A non-traditional instructor role.* Rather than teaching, the instructor encourages learning. As a discussion leader, he or she is less an authority figure, but more a member of the learning group, facilitating a process of joint inquiry. Finally, the instructor must be both a teacher and practitioner.