



The Ethics of Teaching Business Ethics: a Reflective Dialogue

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Abstract. This paper takes the form of a reflective dialogue between three teachers of business ethics working in different continents. Originating as a conference debate, it takes as its theme the notion of ideological 'neutrality' and the role of the business ethics teacher. A position statement outlines an argument for 'restraint' as a modern day Aristotelean mean to protect student academic freedom. Two responses follow. The first of these provides a moderate advocacy position based on Socratic principles. The second response outlines the notion of teaching as a relational process necessitating delayed disclosure and moral courage on the part of the teacher. The paper concludes with a brief reflection by the author of the position statement.

Keywords: ethics of teaching, reflective dialogue.

1. Introduction (Bruce Macfarlane)

This collaborative piece takes the form of a position paper followed by two responses; a conversation between three teachers of business ethics working in different institutional, national and cultural contexts. The paper has its origins as a debate at the *Teaching Business Ethics2: Innovation and Technology* conference, held at Brunel University in December, 2002 in conjunction with the European Business Ethics Network (UK). The theme of the conference debate was whether the business ethics teacher should 'sit on or come off the fence'. In other words, is it right for the teacher to explicitly advocate particular ethical, social and economic theories or should they seek to 'sit on the fence', an approach based on what is sometimes referred to as a position of 'neutrality' or being 'balanced'? (Hanson, 1996).

The theme of this debate raises important and enduring moral questions for all teachers. Many normative doctrines are associated with the teaching of ethics including socialism, communitarianism and altruism. However, while teachers of ethics may hold strong ideological and religious commitments, tolerance for the values of others can act as a powerful metaethic curbing the expression of the educator's personal beliefs. Accordingly 'the teaching of ethics neither rules in, in principle, nor rules out, in principle, espousal of a particular moral viewpoint' (Macklin, 1980, p 82).

This moral question is particularly relevant for teachers of business ethics many of whom are passionate advocates of the importance of the need for a university education to incorporate explicit attention to the ethical attitudes of students (Bampton and Cowton, 2002). Convincing, often sceptical, academic colleagues that business ethics deserves intellectual space in the curriculum also demands commitment and passion. One of the classic responses to the argument in favour of 'neutrality' is whether deliberately concealing one's ideological beliefs is compatible with intellectual integrity. Moreover, more practically, is it even possible to keep commitments hidden from view or will they always 'seep out' in the end?

The design of the curriculum entails a process of editorial selectivity although some courses in business ethics tend to wear their ideological commitments more openly on their sleeve. Normative doctrines strongly represented within the business ethics field include economic sustainable development and Rawls' theory of social justice. While some courses give roughly equal space to the presentation, discussion and application of a series of ethical theories, such as Kantianism, utilitarianism and virtue ethics, others explicitly follow a more committed agenda. Furthermore, regardless of the nature of the business ethics curriculum, teachers may adopt widely contrasting positions on the question of concealing or revealing their moral standpoint.

In this reflective dialogue the stance of two teachers of business ethics will be presented in response to an initial position statement set out by Bruce Macfarlane. The exchanges are inevitably somewhat static in nature rather than a fluid dialogue but they represent an attempt to open up a wider debate on this issue within the business ethics teaching community.

2. A Position Statement: Protecting Student Academic Freedom (Bruce Macfarlane)

In *The History Man*, Malcolm Bradbury's satirical campus novel set in early 1970s Britain, the central character, Dr Howard Kirk, is a radical sociologist who victimises a politically conservative student by giving him low grades and humiliating him in class. As the student states plaintively: