NjP *Journal of Business Ethics Education 23.*
© 2026 NeilsonJournals Publishing.
Promo 1st Version

Reflections on Instructor Performance Styles: Coaching as an Integral Part of Teaching Business Ethics

Irina Ervits and Wulf-Peter Schmidt
CBS International Business School, Köln, Germany

Abstract. The goal of this paper is to make sense of our experiences as instructors of business ethics in a private European business school. We want to understand how to reinforce students' ability to make morally grounded decisions. This objective is especially relevant in a time when students are exposed to a wide range of competing perspectives on values, evidence, and societal issues. We applied the "dramaturgical performance" framework and, using the sensemaking process, reflected on our experiences. We develop three individualized cases that contextualize, concretize, explain, and critically assess the choice of a particular "performance" style as instructors. This paper shows how our understanding evolves from analyzing our teaching routines to identifying an important element of our performance, namely, coaching. We argue that coaching may better promote ethical ownership and self-awareness in students facing moral dilemmas. Our reflections have practical implications as we hope that other instructors of business ethics consider coaching as a useful component of their pedagogical repertoire.

Keywords: teaching, business ethics, higher education, dramaturgical performance, coaching.

1. Introduction

The goal of this paper is to reflect on our experiences as instructors of business ethics in a private European business school, where both authors work. It is part of a university of applied sciences with a particularly strong practical training component. Our school is a member of the UN Global Compact Initiative Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME). PRME's mission is to transform management education and empower the responsible decision-makers of tomorrow to advance sustainable development. In consequence, we teach classes that heavily rely on business ethics themes be it sustainability, responsible investing, environmental, social and governance (ESG) indicators or other topics at the nexus of business and society interaction. The objective of our paper is to explore how coaching may complement the dramaturgical performance framework (Patel et al., 2024) in the context of business ethics teaching. Based on three cases, the paper chronicles our evolution as instructors in search of solutions for how to help students tackle moral dilemmas.

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/JBEE/abstractjbee23ervitsschmidt.html
Any enquiries, please contact the Publishing Editor, Peter Neilson pneilson@neilsonjournals.com
© NeilsonJournals Publishing 2026.

From the perspective of business ethics educators, the fundamental difference between teaching and coaching concerns taking ownership over learning outcomes. Coaching implies that students are active participants in the learning process, not mere "vessels" where teachers place their wisdom. Coaching enhances students´ self-awareness and a sense of personal responsibility. A coach facilitates the self-directed learning of students through questioning, active listening, and challenging in an encouraging manner (Munro et al., 2020). We believe that addressing complex moral dilemmas and making ethical decisions requires individuals to take an active role. Students cannot practice ethical management principles without assuming ownership, they cannot be moral leaders by proxy.[1] Thus, we explore how the concept of coaching fits into the teaching performance framework in the context of business ethics and reflect on using this approach in our courses.

Our main research question is as follows:

How can we become more effective as educators in fostering ethical decision-making among students in a time when moral principles are increasingly challenged by political populism and authoritarianism?

We also raise the following additional questions inspired by the Patel et al. (2024) typology of "performance styles":

What "performance style" do we use as instructors of business ethics in a particular context and why do we make these choices?

Are our "performance styles" effective in encouraging ethical decision-making and respect for moral values in students?

Due to their intensity and moral implications, business ethics topics like child labor or the intergenerational questions around climate change require a conscientious approach – a strategy resulting from a sensemaking process (Patel et al., 2024). This strategy translates into a "performance," a particular way an instructor approaches a topic in the classroom. We argue that our performance depends not only on our personal preferences but also on the context, including the topic, situation and task at hand. We analyze the four types of performances in (Patel et al., 2024) and look at the alignment between our performance style and what we teach (topics), as well as the type of assignment (practical groupwork, case study, written assignment, presentation, team projects), teaching mode (lecture, discussion in class, workshop, guest lecture) and student reaction (active, passive, constructive, destructive, ethical, non-ethical). These contextual factors seem to escape current research and might help develop an analytical framework of "making sense" of instructors´ course structures, their own and students´ experiences. Most importantly, we reflect on the success and failures of our

1. We understand that there is a wealth of literature on co-creation in learning and teaching or educational partnerships that imply a higher level of personal responsibility and involvement of students in their learning journey (Bovill, 2020). For business ethics we also see the necessity of a more affirmative approach towards the desired outcome of ethical behavior in responsible management education.

approaches and strategies to strengthening the support of moral values. We use self-guided sensemaking process to reflect on our experiences and develop three individualized cases that contextualize, concretize, explain, and critically assess the choice of a particular "performance" style.

In this article, we analyze our experiences as instructors using the "dramaturgical performance" framework suggested by Patel et al. (2024). In their turn Patel et al. (2024) are inspired by Goffman (1959) and assume that teachers inevitably engage in a performance act through inventing, reiterating and upholding their narrative. "Performing" does not imply that instructors are being unauthentic, it means that through repetition and affirmation they develop behavioral schemas and verbal patterns of addressing their content in a particular way. As instructors in a teaching-oriented educational organization, we can relate to the pressures of the on-stage modus and the necessity of developing teaching schemas or performances that we use to approach business ethics topics. Upon reflection, we believe that the repertoire of performance styles in Patel et al. (2024) has – at least for lectures and seminars in the field of business ethics – a limited effect on the desired outcome to help students understand the necessity of ethical decision-making and actively apply these morally inspired principles. Patel et al. (2024) framework captures the performance schemas used in the process of teaching, which is different from the process of coaching (van Nieuwerburgh and Barr, 2016). This paper advocates the use of coaching as a distinct pedagogical strategy for fostering ethical ownership and self-awareness among students confronting moral dilemmas.

As educators, we have struggled with how to encourage students to act on fundamental moral values in their decision-making while they are increasingly exposed to rhetoric and behavior from populist politicians and authoritarian governments that undermine those very values. For example, under the Trump administration political agenda, business ethics and sustainability principles have been subjected to constant attacks. Bulgarella (2025) refers to this phenomenon as the "normalization of rule-breaking behavior." At the beginning of his second term as a president, Trump initiated a series of executive orders that attacked the pursuit of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) policies and programs in the Federal Government (Hsu, 2025). Companies followed suit by abolishing their DEIA policies, some universities were coerced into doing the same. Faculty members in top US schools admitted fearing bringing up "controversial" topics because of potential student complains and retaliation from the administration (Cornell Free Speech Alliance, 2025). In a similar vein, the rise of radical, right-wing populism in Europe like the Alternative for Germany party (AfD) undermines democracy, respect for human rights, as well as other values that form the core of (business) ethics and denies science of anthropogenic climate change.

Amid this turbulent political environment, we are challenged to critically examine our responsibilities as educators and to prioritize moral decision-making

in business ethics education. As we reflect on our experiences in the classroom, we want to understand how to teach business ethics now in the context of core values being publicly challenged and undermined. And, of course, we constantly question our approaches in pursuit of an optimal pedagogical framework in terms of teaching mode, style, course structure and assignments that sensitize future business operatives to business ethics and encourage responsible leadership. We believe that the outcomes of our self-reflection process offer useful recommendations for business ethics educators who seek practical guidance on navigating moral dilemmas in the classroom and who want their students to succeed in making morally grounded decisions.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Background: Value of Business Ethics Instruction

Universities of applied sciences in Germany are part of a broader professional training network that provides students with opportunities to learn on the job (Haxhiavdyli, 2024). Like in many other business schools, students at our university must fulfill a mandatory internship requirement as part of their Bachelor programs. They also typically work in addition to their studies. This means that students have insights into the real world of business practices, including potentially how business ethics are implemented in their company. And even though professional training might offer a few advantages, including more efficient assimilation into the labor market, it has disadvantages. Professional training arguably devotes less time and grants less importance to the exploration of philosophical concepts such as truth or justice. The lack of critical exploration of these values as part of a more classical, liberal arts form of education, might lead to reducing the process of learning to utilitarian goals and consequent devaluing of these values in society (Stanley, 2024). The results for ethical behavior in business and, as Stanley (2024) emphasizes, democratic values in general, can be disastrous. Thus, the value of business ethics instruction should not be underestimated especially now when globally democratic values, including in Germany, are under threat.

The major debates in the literature on teaching business ethics first concerned the issue of whether business ethics should be taught at all in business schools, then whether business ethics should be taught from a normative or descriptive lens (Tan et al., 2025; De Los Reyes et al., 2017). The first debate involved questions of the alignment of business school objectives with business ethics principles. The profit maximization perspective on managerial responsibilities still dominates in business schools (Burrell et al., 2022) despite the long history of business ethics instruction (De Los Reyes et al., 2017). "Corporate psychopaths," particularly selfish and manipulative managers, still run companies (Fuchs and Lingnau, 2024) And as Julie Nelson observes from a feminist perspective, many still share the assumption that shareholder value maximization