

What Makes Ethics Education Effective? An Umbrella Review and Evidence-Led Best Practices

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Abstract. Ethics education remains in high demand in business schools. Meta-analyses published in the last two decades show that ethics instruction with certain characteristics produce more desirable moral outcomes than other characteristics do. Acknowledging the vast accumulated knowledge on this topic, we believe that the existing evidence base could be overwhelming for ethics educators designing and delivering their courses. Thus, we review the research evidence on the effectiveness of ethics instruction and translate the findings into evidence-led best practices. Adopting the meta-science approach and using a model of training evaluation, we synthesized 8 meta-analyses and 3 quantitative reviews that examine the extent to which ethics instruction types, course duration, instructional techniques and activities, and instructor and student characteristics affect the effectiveness of ethics education. We conclude by making specific recommendations to ethics educators who are interested in designing and delivering evidence-based ethics courses.

Keywords: ethics, ethics instruction, evidence-based management, review.

1. Introduction

High profile corporate scandals such as Enron, Microsoft, and Volkswagen have become veritable tropes for motivating organizations to pay special attention to ethics in business (Armstrong *et al.* 2003; Clemente & Gabbioneta 2017; Hail *et al.* 2018). At the same time, the dismal public perception of corporate executives' integrity has sown seeds of distrust in business and business leaders (Stevens 2013). In response to these issues, there have been numerous calls to change business education. For example, Ghoshal (2005) castigated business schools and "bad" management theories for contributing to corporate misconduct, imploring business schools to completely rethink how they theorize, research, and teach. Other organizational scholars in the last several decades have proclaimed teaching business ethics in universities as both a moral and reputational imperative (Adler

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2002; Gioia 2002; Evans *et al.* 2006). In addition, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools in Business (AACSB)—a worldwide accreditation body for business schools—has asked business schools to re-design their ethics courses to better prepare students for ‘real world’ dilemmas (Wang & Calvano 2015).

As a response to these decrees, many business schools design and deliver curricular and extra-curricular instructional programs to teach ethics. For example, Litzky and MacLean (2011) estimated that about 70% of the world’s top business schools offer ethics courses. These calls are in line with other disciplines such as medicine (Beigy *et al.* 2016), nursing (Zhang *et al.* 2019), psychology (Self *et al.* 2018), and engineering (Han 2015), which explicitly integrated ethics education into university curricula, and often decades before business schools did.

Although there has been considerable attention, resources, and effort toward developing and deploying business ethics education, there are not clear guidelines about best practices for how to teach ethics in an effective way. Moreover, due to its volume, the vast amount of research on ethics education evaluation is neither easy to access nor to absorb for many instructors. Our goal in this paper was to conduct an umbrella review—reviewing existing reviews with the goal of producing a digestible summary of the complex literature on ethics education (Aguinis *et al.* 2020). Using a meta-science approach (Gurevitch *et al.* 2018; Siddaway *et al.* 2019), we synthesized meta-analyses and large program evaluations of ethics courses in general (e.g., Steele *et al.* 2016; Turner *et al.* 2018) and business ethics in particular (e.g., Hauser 2020) to produce evidence-based guidelines for optimal design and delivery of ethics courses.

Conducting an umbrella review (Aguinis *et al.* 2020) was the most suitable approach for this paper for two reasons. First, there have already been many studies on the evaluation of ethics courses in various disciplines. Second, meta-analyses enable comparison of different studies on the same topic and the detection of average effects (Borenstein *et al.* 2011), compared to cherry-picking individual studies or using partisan research to reinforce a particular point. Based on this review, we developed prescriptive recommendations for ethics educators who are interested in designing and optimizing their evidence-led ethics courses. Adoption of these recommendations will lead to not only more effective ethics education, but also enable more cost-effective ethics instruction as universities are availed a range of possibilities for ethics education from which to choose. Scholars and educators of ethics can use this paper as a “one-stop-shop” for designing and delivering their ethics education programs.

2. Umbrella Review

Ethics courses vary in content and design. Some university degree programs integrate ethics education into the formal curriculum (e.g., McDonald 2004), whereas others offer stand-alone, non-credit courses (e.g., Ajuwon & Kass 2008).

Many disciplines outside business such as dentistry offer mandatory ethics training on “codes of ethics” pertinent to the profession (Malathi 2015). There are also other formal courses on ethical decision-making and ethical standards and practices (Medeiros *et al.* 2015). In addition to these formal courses, universities often also offer elective ethics training programs. Such programs are generally shorter in duration and vary in their instructional approach ranging from an emphasis on case studies (Bull *et al.* 2011), role-play (Noone *et al.* 2013) or traditional lecture format (Zhang *et al.* 2019), with an overall intention to improve ethical consideration in everyday work situations (Morris & Faulk 2012). This review primarily focuses on mandatory and optional ethics courses and training programs offered to students in university settings. While ethics courses refer to formal classes, ethics training refers to extra-curricular ethics development activities offered by various centres and groups at universities.

Antes and colleagues (2009) assert that the majority of the ethics courses are based on Kohlberg’s (1984) and Rest’s (1986) models of moral development—two of the most commonly used moral theories in the field of ethics education (Malti & Keller 2010). According to Kohlberg (1984), ethical development occurs in stages of justice. Building on Kohlberg’s work, Rest (1986) argues that there are four components of moral development: (1) moral sensitivity, (2) moral judgment, (3) moral motivation, and (4) moral character. Moral sensitivity refers to paying attention to ethical issues (Kalshoven *et al.* 2013), and is usually perceived as the first step in moral development. Moral judgment concerns making ethical decisions; a person with high levels of moral judgment emphasizes ethical consideration when making decisions. Moral motivation is about willingness to act in morally right way (Schroeder *et al.* 2010). People with high levels of moral motivation are committed to being morally responsible individuals. Last, moral character refers to thinking, feeling, and behaving in a consistently ethical way (Cohen & Morse 2014). Moral character is considered the most stable form of ethical development and requires time to develop.

Ethics teaching aims to develop individuals’ sense of morality using one or more of routes presented above (see Table 1 for a summary). Building on Rest’s (1986) theory, Thorne (1998) suggested that the first two components—moral sensitivity and moral judgment—can be developed on a cognitive level and are therefore easier to cultivate. For example, ethics courses that aim to enhance moral sensitivity teach students to identify a moral issue (Armstrong *et al.* 2003). The expected outcome of moral sensitivity interventions is the ability to recognize the presence of an ethical dilemma via augmented understanding (Thorne 1998); it is assumed that students will act ethically when they recognize the ethical issues. Programs that aim to embellish moral judgment encourage students to think about an ethical issue, analyze the problem, and suggest ethical ways to solve it (Antes *et al.* 2009). The expected outcome in this type of intervention is a higher number of ethical judgments via heightened ethical reasoning (Armstrong *et al.* 2003). Thorne (1998) suggests further that cognitive

interventions are limited in their efficacy because they only scratch the proverbial surface without changing students’ values or sense of self.

Courses that seek to enhance moral motivation and moral character are classified as “virtue interventions” (Thorne 1998). Compared to cognitive interventions, the development of moral motivation and moral character require more effort and time. These interventions also promise longer-term outcomes than cognitive interventions do (Armstrong *et al.* 2003). Students go beyond the cognitive level by encouraging appreciation of moral philosophy (Penn 1990) and integration of ethics into values and sense of self (Antes *et al.* 2009). Virtue interventions are less common often because of implementation difficulties such as the sustained commitment by both educators and students to changing moral outcomes over a long time period.

Table 1: Summary of the Ethics Intervention Types

Intervention Type	Mediator	Performance Indicator	Advantage	Disadvantage
Moral sensitivity	Increased sensitivity to moral issues	Identification of ethical dilemmas	Can be taught in short sessions	Does not necessarily lead to change in moral behavior
Moral judgment	Analytical skills specific to ethical problems	Ethical judgment	Can be taught in short sessions	Teaches the ideal behavior, but knowledge may not translate into behaviour
Moral motivation	Increased motivation to act ethically	Higher levels of ethical intentions	Can result in more stable outcomes	Requires time and effort
Moral character	Enhanced ethical character	Ethical behavior	Results in behavioural outcomes	Highly dependent on the student’s personal values and motivation

Note. The table is based on Thorne’s (1998) integrated model of ethical decision-making.

Training is an effective method for personal and organizational development (Arthur *et al.* 2003). One of the most well-established frameworks for assessing the effectiveness of training is Kirkpatrick’s (1959) four-levels: (1) reactions, (2) learning, (3) behavior, and (4) results. Acknowledging the shortcomings of Kirkpatrick’s model, Sitzmann and Weinhardt (2019) developed a multilevel framework of training evaluation that examines training effectiveness using multiple metrics at different levels of analysis. Evaluating business ethics courses using this enriched framework provides scholars and educators with a more nuanced way to evaluate effectiveness.

Sitzmann and Weinhardt’s (2019) multilevel training evaluation framework has several taxons of evaluation outcomes. The first taxon is *training utilization*, which broadly refers to enrollment and attrition rates of participants (Sitzmann & Weinhardt 2019). A focus on training utilization is important for business ethics education to answer the numerous calls for an overhaul of business education discussed in the opening of this paper. Therefore, attention needs to be paid to how many students are actually receiving the ethics education.

One important issue pertaining to training utilization is the decision about whether educational programs should be voluntary or mandatory. Although it might seem that business schools would want to mandate ethics education, two