# Using Open Mind to Foster Intellectual Humility in Teaching Business Ethics

**Nhung T. Hendy**

*Towson University, USA*

**Abstract.** In this study, Open Mind – an interactive learning platform – was introduced as a pedagogical tool in developing students' intellectual humility using a sample of 35 upper level undergraduate business students enrolled in a business ethics course in the mid-Atlantic region of the U.S.. Students completed the 5-step Open Mind learning assignment as a measure of intellectual humility during the first four weeks of class. Class lectures were concurrently given while students completed the Open Mind exercise. Students were subsequently required to debate a controversial topic during the remaining 11 weeks of the class. Various grading rubrics as well as skill assessment matrix are provided to assist faculty in adopting this learning platform in their classrooms. Initial evidence showed that Open Mind was efficacious in fostering student intellectual humility. Implications for teaching business ethics using Open Mind to cultivate intellectual humility are discussed.

**Keywords:** business ethics education, viewpoint diversity, teaching methods.

## 1. Introduction

According to a poll conducted by the *Wall Street Journal* in October 2018, 80% of registered voters (85% Democrats and 73% Republicans) believed that the United States was divided (Murray 2018). One reason explaining the divisiveness among the American electorate is the increasing reliance on destructive disagreements, rather than constructive disagreements. Because destructive disagreements are dysfunctional, conflicts are rarely resolved when the parties involved are focused on defending their own viewpoint, rather than giving the other side a chance to present their viewpoint. Because of this, most experts in conflict resolution suggest that destructive disagreements can decrease feelings of openness between opposing parties. On the other hand, constructive disagreements can lead to feelings of mutual respect and increased feelings of closeness between conflicting parties (Porter & Schumann 2018).

Constructive disagreement can foster organizational innovation as well as organizational diversity and inclusion (DeGaff & Mueller 2015). Constructive disagreements were shown to help reduce groupthink (Janis 1982) and better

decision making. Thus, it is important for faculty to encourage constructive disagreements on college campuses. In addition, it is important to cultivate a sense of self-scrutiny and respect for other dissenting views among students because of the humility premiums associated with effective leaders who display humility by asking questions to which they do not know the answers (Cojuharenco & Karelaia 2020).

Intellectual humility, defined as "a willingness to recognize the limits of one's knowledge and appreciate others' intellectual strengths" (Porter & Schumann 2018, p. 140) is important for learning, as documented in prior research (Haggard *et al.* 2018). In this paper, I propose that cultivating intellectual humility in students is highly relevant in business ethics education because a major challenge in the field of business ethics worldwide continues to be curriculum and pedagogy (Holland & Albrecht 2013). Cultivating intellectual humility among students is important for the following reasons. First, although we must interact with people with whom we disagree during our normal course of daily transactions, nowhere is it more frequent and appropriate to expose students to opposing viewpoints to foster intellectual humility than in a business ethics course. In this course, typically students are required to debate controversial issues (e.g., gun rights, drug testing) with which they themselves have formed deeply held opinions. Having intellectual humility will help students do well in these debates because they will be better able to formulate arguments and counterarguments; a necessity in most debates. They will also be more willing to accept the legitimacy of the view presented by the other side, i.e., the opposing side. Thus, instead of being defensive about supporting their own point of view, they will be more open to alternative and/or opposing views.

Second, since the 1970s, several cross-temporal meta-analyses have reported a 30% rise in personality traits such as narcissism and self-esteem among U.S. college students than previous generations (e.g., Twenge & Foster 2010, Twenge *et al.* 2008). Whereas self-esteem was positively related to intellectual humility, narcissism was negatively related to intellectual humility (Porter & Schmann 2018). In addition, intellectual humility was positively related to modesty (Porter & Schmann 2018) among a sample of American adults. Modesty is one of the four dimensions of general honesty-humility personality trait conceptualized under the HEXACO framework (Ashton & Lee 2007) defined as the extent to which one is modest and unassuming. The other three dimensions are sincerity (the tendency to be sincere in one's interpersonal relationship), fairness (a tendency to be fair and avoid corruption), and greed avoidance (the tendency to be indifferent to possessing wealth and luxury goods). Because intellectual humility was found to be positively correlated with modesty, it is reasonable to expect that intellectual humility is also positively related to fairness, sincerity, and greed avoidance. Based on the above discussion, it is important for American college students to develop intellectual humility.

Third, according to the 2020 standards for the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) accreditation, students are now called "learners", which suggests the shift from teaching students what *they should know* to preparing learners for lifelong learning well after college graduation. In fact, one new requirement is to ensure learners are cultivated with a lifelong learning mindset (AACSB 2020) or a growth mindset that is amenable to developing intellectual humility as opposed to a fixed learning mindset, which inhibits intellectual humility (Dweck 2000).

Fourth, as the U.S. student body becomes more diverse than ever before, it is important to be sensitive to other cultures and intellectual humility has been associated to cultural humility (Meagher, Gunn, Sheff, & Tongeren 2019). In addition, being open to others' ideas has been identified as one of the main areas of contemporary education (Barak & Lavenberg 2016).

Debating as a pedagogy to improve critical thinking and communication skills has been documented in psychology (e.g., Elliott 1993), management (e.g., Mesch, Harris, & Williams 1994), marketing (e.g., D'Souza 2013), teacher education (e.g., Kennedy 2009), social work (Hafford-Letchfield 2010), public policy (Keller, Whittaker, & Burke 2001), and business ethics (Hedges 2018, Hendy, Basuray, & Williams 2017). As mentioned, debating enables students to defend their position on the debate topic while giving the opposing side an opportunity to present their case. To win the debate, each side must be able to understand and willing to accept the validity of the other side's view while persuading the audience that their criteria of judgment for the resolution are better alternatives than that of the opposing side.

Intellectual humility has received growing interest among organizational researchers given the polarized political climate in the U.S., with several studies showing that intellectual humility can be developed through interventions such as a lecture on intellectual humility (Meagher *et al.* 2019) and experimental manipulation (Porter & Schmann 2018). However, no studies have explored the linkage between debating and fostering intellectual humility. In addition, most studies utilize self-report measure of intellectual humility (Meagher *et al.* 2019, Porter & Schumann 2018). In this study, the author wanted to explore the role of Open Mind (an interactive on-line learning platform available free of charge at openmindplatform.org/app-user) in cultivating and fostering intellectual humility in a 15-week business ethics course.

## 2. Open Mind as a Learning Tool to Develop Intellectual Humility

Open Mind is a free online interactive learning tool using evidence-based psychology designed to reduce polarized viewpoints and foster mutual understanding across multiple viewpoints. The project was started by Professor Jonathan Haidt at New York University, Stern School of Business in late 2016,