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Advocacy, Neutrality, or Indifference: Should Business Ethics Instructors Share Their Personal Opinions?

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Abstract. Determining whether business ethics instructors can or should share their personal opinions in the classroom presents both pedagogical and ethical challenges. This paper argues that instructors should act as subject-matter experts in ethical reasoning by forming and then sharing their professional opinions with their students based on their intensive study and understanding of the pertinent issues under discussion. The instructor's 'moral authority' to do so, however, must be established by the cogency and consistency of the arguments presented and the demonstration of appropriate moral reasoning. Based on the analysis presented, this paper contends that personal views may be shared—but only under ethically constrained conditions—that help to minimize potential undue influence while fostering independent moral reasoning by their students. These conditions are then operationalized through the provision of a series of practical pedagogical guidelines addressing the timing, framing, and suitable context for disclosure. The paper highlights broader implications for the teaching of business ethics, including fostering critical reflection and supporting students' independent moral autonomy. It also identifies directions for future research on business ethics pedagogy related to this issue. By clarifying the appropriate and ethically acceptable role of instructors' sharing their personal opinions in classroom discussions, the paper contributes to facilitating a more ethically responsible and pedagogically effective approach to teaching business ethics.

Keywords: bias; business ethics education; ethical pedagogy; indoctrination; instructor advocacy; instructor perspectives; student learning outcomes; teaching business ethics; undue influence.

Given the inherently normative and potentially sensitive nature of the academic subject of business ethics, one key pedagogical question for every business ethics instructor—whether professor, lecturer, teacher, or tutorial leader—is: *"Under what conditions is it educationally appropriate, or even advisable, for business ethics instructors to share their personal opinions with their students?"* This question is especially salient given ongoing debates over the role of instructor disclosure in university courses including the teaching of ethics and related disciplines. These debates highlight the tension that inherently exists between the fostering of students' independent moral reasoning capability, and the risk of

unintentional undue influence being placed upon students when instructors share their personal views. Addressing this tension requires careful consideration of the ethical and pedagogical constraints that should guide instructors' self-disclosure, as well as practical strategies for promoting critical engagement without compromising student autonomy. By doing so, business ethics instructors can provide educational dividends to their students based on the instructor's investment of years of study and personal struggle attempting to resolve various ethical issues and dilemmas for themselves.

The analysis below begins by discussing the arguments both for and against business ethics instructors indicating their personal opinions in class to their students. This is followed by a series of practical recommendations for those teaching the subject of business ethics when they do choose to express their personal opinions to their students The paper then concludes with the study's implications for the future teaching of business ethics, the limitations of the study, as well as future research directions on this important yet contentious teaching issue.

1. Introduction

Imagine that a business ethics instructor has just taught the following case to their students:

> IKEA's dependence on its suppliers ultimately led to problems in the mid 1990's. At the time, IKEA was the largest furniture retailer in the world and had nearly 100 stores in 17 countries. Also, during this time, a Swedish documentary was released that highlighted the use of child labour in the rug industry in Pakistan which impacted IKEA because it had production there. The rug industry is extremely labour intensive and is one of the largest export earners for India, Pakistan, Nepal, and Morocco. In Pakistan, children are forced to work long hours for very little pay (if there is any pay at all). In some cases, their wages are only enough to pay for food and lodging. In cases where children are not paid, the wages are used by the loom owners to pay the parents and agents who brought the children to their factories. Additionally, the work the children must do is very dangerous. More specifically, children face the health risks of diminishing eyesight and damaged lungs from all the dust and fibers from the wool used in the carpets. As a result of these poor working conditions, many of these children become very sick as they get older. Despite these terrible conditions, families have few options other than sending their children to work at these factories. Many parents in these countries can't afford food, water, education, or healthcare, so they rely on their children to work for additional sources of income (taken from the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, 2023, online).

The business ethics instructor then asks his or her students the following questions: 'What should IKEA do?' 'Cease production and leave Pakistan if paying the children higher wages would significantly reduce IKEA's profits,

especially given that many of its competitors are engaged in the same practice?' 'Remain in Pakistan and continue its legal profit-making rug operations using child labour?' 'Pay higher wages to the children, or possibly only hire adult workers, despite any negative impact on the company's profits?' *Should the business ethics instructor ever express his or her personal opinion to their students on what the instructor believes IKEA should do? If so, what should their opinion be? Are there any ethical or pedagogical concerns when a business ethics instructor expresses their personal opinions on the topics and cases being discussed in their class?*

2. Background

Over two decades ago, the U.S. Ethics Education Task Force of the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) asked business schools to enhance their focus on ethics education (AACSB, 2004). Since then, the teaching of business ethics has become widespread. Surveys of AACSB-accredited schools indicate that business ethics is widely integrated across curricula in most institutions (Plumlee et al., 2014), with almost two-thirds of the *Financial Times'* top ranked U.S. MBA programs offering a business ethics course by 2013 (Jorge et al., 2017), an increase from only 28 percent in 1987 (Katz, 1990). In addition, business ethics is now widely incorporated into undergraduate business education, most commonly through integration of ethics across the curriculum (Caldwell, 2025). In a report entitled *A Collective Vision for Business Education*, the AACSB once again stressed the importance of ethics being integral to business education: "In their curricula, research, and outreach, *business schools* must be advocates for the human dimension of business, *with attention to ethics*…" (AACSB, 2016, p.12, emphasis added).

Given, however, the inherently normative character and potentially sensitive nature of the subject matter of business ethics, a key pedagogical issue that arises for every business ethics instructor to consider is: "*Under what conditions or circumstances is it acceptable, or even advisable, for business ethics instructors to share their personal views or opinions in class with their students*?"

Related to this issue, in one classic historical example, the mathematician and scientist Galileo Galilei expressed his professional opinion in his writings to colleagues and in his teachings to his students that based on his telescopic observations and mathematical evidence he supported the Copernican conception that the Earth revolves around the Sun. As a result, in 1633 he was tried by the Roman Inquisition for advocating his opinion, which was deemed heretical, and he was sentenced to house arrest for the remainder of his life (Finocchiaro, 1989). In a more recent example, a European business ethics professor expressed issues involving the challenge and concerns over expressing her professional opinion to students as follows:

> I hoped to make the point that even high performing women experience gender-based discrimination. This led male students to remark that my own gender was biasing my arguments. This left me wondering…*I was upset but could not express my sentiments for fear of being negatively perceived*…yet, I spent an uncomfortable night replaying the scene from the classroom in my mind over and over again… (Patel et al., 2024, p.28, emphasis added).

The pedagogical issue of whether instructors should ever express their personal opinions in class is especially salient amid ongoing debates over academic freedom, classroom discourse, and social media influences. These debates encompass 'expressionist pedagogy' (i.e., the professor's disclosure of a personal story; see: Ejsing, 2007, p.235), student 'self-disclosure' (i.e., students sharing their personal experiences in class; see: Borshuk, 2017, p.78), 'freedom of speech' (often conflated with academic freedom; see: Chemerinsky & Gillman, 2017), and 'safe spaces' (i.e., discursive safety and the psychological framing of student experience; see: Stengel & Weems, 2010, p.505). The debates also include movements to restrict the teaching of such sensitive topics as "critical race theory" (i.e., frameworks examining systemic racism; see: Stout & Wilburn, 2021, online) and broader 'culture war' conflicts in the U.S. and elsewhere, such as disputes over evolution instruction, sex education, school prayer, or the posting of the "Ten Commandments" in schools (see: Hunter, 1991; Whittington, 2024a; Zimmerman, 2021).

Business ethics instructors are generally concerned with their own pedagogy and its possible impact on their students. In an international survey of 211 scholars with expertise in business ethics, the top issue identified by the respondents for the coming decade was "business ethics education" (Holland and Albrecht, 2013, p.781). Business ethics education was considered as being more important than "the credibility of the business ethics field," "environmental issues," "issues relating to business ethics research," as well as "the decline of ethical behavior." The significance of the debate over business ethics pedagogy in terms of instructors expressing their personal opinions is especially emphasized given than many business ethics instructors themselves appear to prefer *not* to express their own opinions in class. For example, one interview-based study conducted with business ethics instructors from around the world: "…revealed professors' *inability* or *unwillingness* to pronounce a right or wrong kind of answer when discussing an ethical dilemma" (Patel et al., 2024, p.30, emphasis added). At the same time, social media 'influencers' attempt to equate their popularity based on the number of their "followers" or 'likes' with the truthfulness or correctness of their positions. This resembles the conflict between the Sophists (i.e., Greek teachers focusing on teaching skills such as the art of argumentation) and democratic society in ancient Greece, which ultimately undermined Socrates' quest for truth and led to him being sentenced to death. The other challenge is due to the nature of business ethics courses themselves. In teaching business ethics, instructors frequently encounter topics that are normative, complex, and potentially controversial, making classroom discussions