Using *Hard Times* to Teach Business Ethics

Michael Stodnick
University of Dallas, USA

Nancy Schreiber
Salve Regina University, USA

Abstract. In this research we employ an inter-disciplinary project that uses active learning theory to help bridge the gap between a university's extensive liberal arts core and its business program. We believe this project will improve and enrich classroom discussions of the more complex and nuanced issues found in the application of business principles. To redress the fact that many undergraduate students do not have extensive work experience to draw on when discussing the application of business ethics principles, we present a project that uses a classic novel, *Hard Times*, to improve students' abilities to contextualize and apply common business ethics frameworks. The project focuses on active learning and non-linear thinking, and aims to immerse the student in a fictional environment that models the complexity of, without being identical to, a real world business setting.

Keywords: active learning, ethics, role of business, literature, interdisciplinary, catholic social teaching.

1. Introduction

The motivation of our study comes from wanting to improve classroom discussion on complex business topics such as ethics. We have found that students often struggle when presented with complex ethical problems that are not well structured within rigid bounds. In researching this phenomenon, we found our experiences were not unique. In their work on contemporary teaching dichotomies, Heames and Service (2003) find that business education suffers greatly from an increased emphasis on providing one-size-fits-all scientific answers for everything. They argue that there seems to be a desire to search for singular methodologies, easily quantifiable measures and non-recursive "to do" lists at the expense of nuanced discussion. Ghoshal (2005) argues that this "scientific" approach results in an overemphasis on technical knowledge at the cost of contextual and theoretical knowledge. This type of instructional model may help to explain the anti-intellectualism found among business students and

their overall reluctance to explore complex problems from competing perspectives (Elias *et al.* 2008, Willits 2010).

One topic that can suffer most from this instructional paradigm is business ethics. Surveys by Tanyel *et al.* (1999) and Abraham and Karns (2009) show that business ethics is a topic that is very important to prospective employers, yet research by Abraham and Karns (2009) and Nicholson and DeMoss (2009) demonstrates that business programs are failing to produce students who meet employers' expectations in this knowledge area. Ethics is a topic that does not allow for extremely structured scientific investigation that searches for a single, correct solution and as such, the associated instructional methodologies must reflect that. For example, Krawczk (1997) concludes that student ethical development cannot be stimulated by traditional lectures alone. Citing studies that have shown that students lack the ability to apply ethical judgment and other business principles to real life contexts, Crane (2004), Cagle *et al.* (2008), McCourt-Larres and Mulgrew (2009), Berdrow and Evers (2011), Carrascoso (2014) and Charam and Carter (2018) suggest assignments that require reflective analysis. For example, Cagle *et al.* (2008) writes, "[a]sking students to discuss their opinions of ethical dilemmas is an active pedagogical style requiring students to connect themselves and is therefore more likely to be an effective means of ethics instruction {than traditional lectures}" (p. 77).

The goal of this research is to provide an interdisciplinary example of a project that allows students to draw upon their university's rigorous liberal arts core to provide the context for enhanced, reflective discussion of how principles of business ethics and ethical leadership can actually be applied. Like the researchers cited earlier, we have found that many of our undergraduate students do not have rich work experiences to draw upon to provide that context, particularly when they first enter university. As such, we must find creative ways to alleviate this shortcoming. Interdisciplinary projects like this are particularly important to our university because our liberal arts core is a competency that is mission critical and based on the needs and values of our students.

In trying to bridge the gap between the liberal arts and business programs we needed a pedagogical theory and framework to help us understand the project's potential positive outcomes, to design its structure and to justify its inclusion in the curriculum. The pedagogical vehicle used as the basis of this project is active learning. With the aim of improving deeper classroom discussions, our project requires students to get out of their comfort zones of looking for the ubiquitous singular solution and instead attack the assignment from multiple, often competing, perspectives. In the next section of this paper we add detail to the pedagogical problem as we see it. Included in this section will be a review of our medium of choice—active learning. We then give a description of the university and class settings where these projects were implemented. We then detail the project over its four class periods. We briefly discuss student responses to the