

Producer Mindset First, Then Teach Business Ethics

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Abstract. Developing best practices for the business ethics classroom is an ongoing endeavor. One area of interest is the influence of mindsets on teaching and learning business ethics. Various mindsets are proposed to increase student awareness of the body of business ethics knowledge and motivate them to incorporate ethical knowledge in the real world. This paper reviews the current dominant consumer mindset that is argued to have unproductive effects on pedagogical practices in business ethics. Because human beings are biological production systems and live in a world of dynamic natural and human-made production processes, this paper proposes replacing the consumer mindset with Producer Mindset, a world view that is a far more natural way for humans to think, talk, and make decisions. A Producer Mindset framework is constructed for the business ethics classroom and details are provided as to how it can grow the cognitive and emotional capacity of students to independently produce ethical decisions in business and in their personal lives.

Keywords: producer, consumer, mindset, language, framework, input-output systems, instinctive, cognitive, metacognition, critical thinking.

1. Introduction

It is 2021 and the exploration into best practices for teaching business ethics is ongoing. Jonson, *et al.* (2016) reviewed researchers, theorists, and practitioners proposing best practices for the business ethics classroom. As we currently speculate about the internet of everything, AI, robotics, distribution of goods, advanced surveillance systems, social media platforms, neuropsychology, and bio-nanotechnology, one can only imagine the challenges future business ethics classrooms will face. One certainty, the future will undoubtedly bring new ethical dilemmas requiring changes in the way we think about and develop practices that best help students navigate those dilemmas (Baron 2018).

One recent practice getting attention is mindsets. For this paper mindset is defined as a mental attitude or inclination, a person's way of thinking, a world view. French (2016) reviews various meanings attached to mindset. A proper mindset can help students understand ethical theories, motivate independent critical thinking about ethical situations, and provide a framework needed to approach the multivariate ethical issues they will encounter professionally and

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personally (Snipes, *et al.* 2012; Dweck 2006; Mills and Mills 2018; Inada 2020; Li and Bates 2020; Barbouta, *et al.* 2020). Gunn and Gullickson (2005) explain that mindsets shape words, actions, directions, and deeds and conclude that mindsets are constantly changing, reflecting shifts in ways of thinking, thus allowing for a state of mind that enables individuals to act and lead in a dynamic world. Snipes, *et al.* (2012) argue for an academic mindset, Benson and Dresdow (2003) argue for a discovery mindset, and Begley and Boyd (2003) see the need for a corporate global mindset. Gosling and Mintzberg (2003) propose five different mindsets that apply in a business context: managing self (the reflective mindset); managing organization (the analytic mindset); managing context (the worldly mindset); managing relationships (the collaborative mindset); and managing change (the action mindset). Issa and Pick (2010) look at eight components of ethical mindsets that should serve as the foundation for business ethics decision making: aesthetic judgment, spirituality, optimism, harmony and balance, contentment, truth telling, individual responsibility, and professionalism.

The currently dominant consumer mindset influences all academic classrooms but especially interferes with business ethics pedagogy and should be replaced by Producer Mindset. Improper framing impedes moral awareness and judgment (Dedeke 2015; Schwartz 2017). After detailing the Producer Mindset framework, we illustrate how students in a business ethics class at a public university in northeastern Ohio apply it to learn and understand business ethics theories and issues. The paper ends by showing how Producer Mindset relates to other business ethics pedagogy, highlighting the lead author's experiences teaching business ethics before and after Producer Mindset, and providing student testimonials. [**We've embedded student assignments so that the reader can see how students operationalize the details of Producer Mindset.]

2. Consumer Mindset in Education in America

America is synonymous with consumer culture (i.e., mindset). The consumer mindset adds to freedom and liberty the unfettered ability to choose from a variety of goods in the marketplace. The word consumer has morphed the pursuit of happiness into emotional pleasures from material possessions. Gibson (2011) provides that the phenomenon of consumerism cuts across so many different aspects of contemporary life that it is little wonder it generates so much commentary. Gibson goes on to say that the drive to purchase an excess of private consumer goods plays a key role in a wide variety of social ills. Wang and Murnighan (2014) correlate money, emotions, and ethics across individuals and countries and found a direct relationship between higher incomes and the acceptance of unethical behaviors. Barber (2007) indicates that we are consumed to the point of adults acting like children, a claim often shared by college teachers.

Piaget's (1932) "egocentric", a term used to identify young children conceiving of a world organized according to their own interest, can be applied to many adults functioning in the marketplace.

American higher education is framed by a consumer mindset. Guilbault (2018) says that there's no more debate, education is a business and students are consumers. Schwartzman (2013) says that education is modelled after the values of the free market, prioritizing efficiency and customer satisfaction while treating education itself as a commercial transaction and students as consumers to be pleased rather than characters to build. Grineski (2000) posits that the commercialization and commodification of teaching and learning in higher education makes him feel like "we're not in Kansas anymore." Jacob (2003) concludes that the commodification of knowledge and education is part of a global process of commodifying everything. Finney and Finney (2010) and Tomlinson (2014, 2017) found that students who view themselves as consumers are less likely to be involved in their education and more likely to view themselves as entitled to receive positive academic outcomes. Woodall, et al., (2014) look at the real value of the university experience when students are perceived as consumers. Bunce, *et al.* (2016) give evidence that the more students express a consumer orientation, the poorer their academic performance. Williams (2013) sees a shift away from intellectual engagement with content matter towards doing what is necessary to pass or obtain the desired degree classification. Naidoo and Jamieson (2005) show that the consumerist frameworks may unintentionally deter innovation, promote passive learning, and threaten academic standards.

Looking specifically at the business ethics classroom, Giacalone and Promislo (2013) argue that students seeing themselves as consumers is a disruptive element in teaching business ethics. Students bring to the ethics classroom the "baggage" containing two sets of languages of a materialistic worldview that undermines how they see the world and compromises their ethical judgments. One language set is econophonics, the other is potensiphonics. Econophonic language is money-centric (i.e., money dictates and justifies all actions; the commodification of everything). With econophonic language, students see doing good or making moral decisions as a function of profit seeking and financial bottom lines. The language of potensiphonics is about power and supremacy. Habermas (1975) sees potensiphonic language as reinforcing rules, norms, beliefs, attitudes, and values embedded in the status quo to protect and defend personal, community, or national self-interest. Both econophonic and potensiphonic languages contain ideas that disparage virtuous actions as threats to personal and organizational wealth, that see those in need of help as being lazy, irresponsible, or lacking intelligence, and that "keeping up with the Jones" is normal behavior. Along the same lines, Velasquez (2011) says our students come from an environment where those who are virtuous—having the acquired dispositions that morally good human beings exhibit in their behavior—are often

ridiculed and mockingly dubbed “bleeding hearts”. Haidt (2014) adds that business schools should strive to create a culture of ethics, professionalism, and trust that leads to collaboration, rather than a materialistic culture of competition for scarce resources.

3. Humans Are Producers, Not Consumers

The language of consumer mindset is ubiquitous. Psycholinguistics is resurrecting the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and studying how the causal connection runs not from language to cognitive processes, but from activity of a culture (e.g., consumerism) to language to cognitive processes (Tulviste 2019). Count Alfred Korzybski (1949) long ago recognized that language is a powerful influencer of thought, and behavior. Confucius’ “rectification of names” points to the importance of language and argues that words must correspond with reality (Hinton 2014). Senn (2019) studies how F. Scott Fitzgerald weaves the language of commodification into the novel “The Popular Girl”, while Friedman (1985) similarly looks at the language of consumers in novels of the post-WWII era.

Literature critiquing the consumer and consumerism, however, stops short of disavowing the consumer all together. In lieu of totally eliminating the word *consumer*, this paper proposes that humans should never be identified as consumers, especially in higher education and specifically in business ethics classrooms. Indeed, humans are not consumers and the cultural activity of consumerism is wrongheaded. The very word *consumer* means to waste, destroy, and dispose of. Humans are not consumers, humans are autonomous agents “producing” a wealth of feelings, actions, reactions, and thoughts. Indeed, our cultural activities should be shaped by human “producerism”. Even the notion of consuming food is wrongheaded. Eating is a production activity. Chewing food is the human producer’s phenomenal digestive system’s first production operation to turn raw materials (food inputs) into energy needed to produce feelings, actions, reactions, and thoughts.

In ecology the precise and restricted definition of a producer is an organism that is able to make its own food through photosynthesis; hence, ecology views humans as consumers. This paper, however, will treat the human producer as a metanarrative for sociology, psychology, anthropology, and economics and argue that humans are naturally producers whose world view (mindset) and therefore, cultural activities should be that of a producer.

The notion that humans are producers has a priori conditions. For one, every aspect of human biology, physiology, and neurology (down to the cellular level) can be described as production operations. Lovelock’s (1979) Gaia hypothesis involves living organisms (like humans) and inorganic materials being part of a dynamical production system that maintains the Earth as a fit environment for life. Physics and the laws of energy that humans live by are universal production processes. Even spirituality is predicated on perceived forms of universal