Strategic initiatives to advance business ethics education: Reflecting on a seventeen-year journey

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ABSTRACT

The College of St. Scholastica has learned many lessons in its seventeen-year journey of teaching ethics including how to more effectively apply ethics theory, integrate ethics curricula across disciplines, develop faculty competencies in teaching ethics, and distribute ethical decision-making instruction across the various business and technology disciplines. Throughout this journey, the goal was not only to embed ethics into our curriculum, but to make ethical decision making an integral part of students' lives. The authors reflect on the major challenges that needed to be addressed during this journey. One challenge was encouraging faculty to try new creative teaching methods associated with business ethics education. The second challenge was determining how to assess the effectiveness of teaching ethics. The purpose of this paper is to share our experiences with colleagues at other higher learning institutions in order to enhance their efforts in preparing students for ethical leadership.

Keywords: Business ethics education, ethical decision-making, ethical dilemmas, ethics integration, ethical leadership, and ethics simulations.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to capture the lessons learned in teaching ethics over a seventeen-year period at the College of St. Scholastica (CSS) and share the effectiveness of our efforts with other educators. If we read popular press, after the Enron crisis faded some universities reduced their ethics related programs (Middleton, 2010). Baer (2009) even posits that there may be widespread belief among some business faculty that ethics should not be taught because it is not quantitative enough. As a Benedictine college with strong ties to ethical values, faculty members see a natural obligation to continually teach and refine their ability to help students achieve greater skills in ethical decision-making as they leave the institution and assume leadership positions in society.

HISTORY

For many years, the endowed chair of ethics at CSS was housed in the Philosophy Department and taught a required Management Ethics course that included a framework for ethical decision making, as well as applied examples that linked to real-life cases.   Earlier research in effectively teaching business ethics supported the need to migrate the teaching of business ethics from Philosophy Departments to Management Departments with business schools (Gilbert, 1992). In 2007, CSS restructured to move the endowed chair position from the Philosophy Department to the School of Business & Technology (SB&T). When that position became vacant again, the SB&T leadership team realized the school needed to come together and embed ethics across the disciplines. Instead of continuing with the current model of each discipline operating as a silo, the team promoted the idea that ethical dilemmas should be integrated throughout the discipline-specific courses using problem-based learning.   Business ethics is the common thread that weaves the disciplines together forming the SB&T. This goal is supported by Grant (2008) when he states, "by exposing students to ethical issues along many of the arrows connecting traditional academic disciplines, instructors can be confident their students will be prepared to analyze ethical quandaries in their professional lives" (p. 83). In 2008, the primary focus for SB&T turned to integrating ethical decision-making methods across the various majors and degrees. These degree programs included undergraduate majors in Accounting, Economics, Computer Science, Finance, Management, Marketing and Organizational Behavior.   It also included graduate majors in Master of Business Administration, Masters in Management, and Masters in Information Technology Leadership.

In order to identify the practices in teaching business ethics, Modin (2008) researched other institutions of higher learning to determine methods of embedding ethics across the curriculum. The goal was to find new approaches that would eliminate the compartmentalization of ethics education and incorporate it into the full educational experience (Boylan & Donahue, 2003). The faculty leaders also produced a series of videoconferences involving some of the best practitioners and scholars in the nation. The four dialogs feature notable business leaders and ethicists, prominent women in the healthcare profession, and several local business leaders in the college area. The transcripts and videos of these discussions were saved and are accessible on the school's virtual Sandbulte Center for Ethical Leadership website.

CHALLENGE ONE: FACULTY SUPPORT

The first major challenge was persuading instructors to consciously make an effort to incorporate ethics into their courses.   The goal was to move seamlessly from theory to practice by engaging students in solving everyday ethical dilemmas in every class. Some professors believed they did not have time for extra activities that should be covered in the Management Ethics course. However, research supports the need to not only have an ethics course, but also to integrate ethics throughout a variety of core management courses (Brinkmann, Sims, & Nelson, 2011; Cagle, Glasgo, & Holmes, 2008; Crane, 2004).

Meeting the Faculty Support Challenge

Over the course of several months, the faculty leaders conducted one-on-one interviews with each member of the faculty and hosted a series of workshops on how to embed ethics into the curriculum. Examples of topics presented at the faculty workshops included: revising the syllabus to reflect an ethical decision-making outcome in each course, how to use ethical dilemma case studies, sample frameworks for critical thinking skills, using role playing to act out ethical dilemmas, student-written case studies, faculty exchange guest speakers for presenting cross-discipline ethics topics, and using library resources to find discipline-specific case studies.

Another popular activity developed by the faculty leaders involved the use of CSS alumni. A faculty member from each discipline submitted the name of an alumnus in that particular degree program to be invited as a guest speaker at the monthly Character Building Luncheon. The graduate would present a moral dilemma he/she encountered in the real world and students attending the luncheon would try to solve the issue using a critical-thinking framework. After hearing all of the suggestions, the speaker would reveal how the problem was actually resolved. Here are comments received from students attending the last Character Builder Lunch:

- "This was an interesting and informative lunch. It's nice to hear about issues, other people's opinions and solutions. Definitely a nice switch from classroom work."
- "I thought the real life simulation was useful because it gives you an actual situation of what we may experience in the workforce when we graduate."
- "It was awesome to hear how alumni have used their education and values learned here at CSS to deal with ethical issues."

In addition to the Character Builder Lunches, one SB&T instructor also created a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) course that used cross-discipline topics to connect students with community organizations. Teams of students worked with business leaders regarding real world issues in corporate life and became more aware of the relationship between social responsibility and ethical implications in decision making.

At the end of the academic year, the SB&T faculty met to share their experiences on what worked and what was challenging. Informal mentors began working with instructors still struggling to find creative methods to use in the classroom. Some faculty members invited their colleagues into their classrooms as guest speakers which resulted in experiences such as a Computer Science instructor speaking to a Marketing class on technology ethics and privacy, and an Economics instructor talking to Management students about social responsibility in today's

global economy. The SB&T faculty members have now moved into a more mature phase where all instructors are responsible for integrating ethics instruction in their discipline.

The following year, it was decided to migrate the Endowed Chair of Ethics to a Director of a Center for Ethical Leadership. The Dean of SB&T was asked to coordinate the new center. In addition, an Ethics Committee, composed of faculty, students, business leaders, and alumni, was formed to assist in providing oversight of the endowment funds.   During the past few years, the SB&T faculty leaders have used those funds to invite executives and educators to present topics related to ethics. The presentations were videotaped so that they can be accessed on the school website and incorporated in future courses. Recently, an SB&T faculty member coordinated efforts with the local prison to transport four blue-collar convicts to the campus to share their experiences with ethical dilemmas. Students from all disciplines within SB&T were invited to the presentation. It was a powerful lesson in the consequences of making wrong choices. The students found that the presentation was one of the most useful and insightful presentations that the college has hosted and provided positive feedback, including:

- "All four of them described how easy and simple it was to make such a horrible decision and it just seemed to get easier as they kept at it."
- "Their greed for making money caused them to live a life full of lies and always had this dark cloud hanging over their head. Being smart and making ethical decisions in the workplace will help you earn success and achieve personal goals the right way. I think this was a strong message that every business student at our college should have the opportunity to hear in the year to come."
- "The prisoners' experiences have taught me what to expect when upper management gives me a task that may be unethical. I know what the consequences could be, and I would rather lose my job than several years of my life."
- "One statement that stood out to me was when the first speaker said 'It's not IF you are faced with an ethical decision, but WHEN you are faced with the decision.'
- "I am grateful for having the opportunity to hear them speak about their troubles and how they have all changed for the better after being caught for the crime they committed. This was a truly eye-opening presentation."

This past year, SB&T moved to fully online degree programs. Faculty members have partnered with adjunct instructors teaching at extended sites and online to share ideas on integrating ethics in their courses. An idea exchange emerged as faculty members collaborated and a "Best Practices" booklet was produced to share with adjunct instructors. Faculty members continue to explore innovative ways of teaching ethics across traditional, online, and blended learning environments, including ethics games and simulations using open source simulation engines (Linberg & Rosato, 2011). Revoir (2011) also explored learning through the use of a business ethics simulation that incorporated students using YouTube. Teams of students filmed their critical-thinking process for solving an ethical dilemma in the workplace. The videos were shown in class and critiqued through peer-review.

CHALLENGE TWO: ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING

The second major challenge was determining how to assess this learning.   The focus on integrating ethical theory and application into the outcomes of the academic programs and also

assessing this learning is supported by leading accreditation bodies (AACSB, 2004) and ethics researchers (Bartlett, 2003; Hartman & Werhane, 2009; Park, 1998). Heller and Heller (2011) found that the leading business schools are doing an effective job at incorporating ethics into their curriculum and meeting the expectations of the AACSB criteria. However, these researchers suggest that more comprehensive research be performed to determine how well the students' general ethics knowledge is being transferred across disciplines.

Meeting the Assessment of Learning Challenge

Faculty members within SB&T have focused on assessment, including assessing ethics outcomes. They have enhanced learning outcomes in the school and ensured that each major/degree program had an outcome related to ethics. These learning outcomes were then presented to two business executive focus groups. These executives confirmed that incorporating an ethics-related learning outcome in each major was important and should be continued in the future.

In addition to the focus group to validate the learning outcomes, an intensive hand-on Ethics Assessment Workshop was presented by two distinguished faculty from the University of St. Thomas Ethics Department. This session provided relevant examples on how to assess ethics-related learning outcomes within both undergraduate and graduate management programs and confirmed that our faculty members were on the right track. For example, the Management Major includes a learning outcome of "apply ethical behaviors in addressing challenges encountered as managers" that is assessed in the MGT 4170 Policy and Strategy Course (Capstone). The assessment was based on an essay question where students needed to answer the following question: "Based on what you have learned in this class and throughout your management education, describe at least three ethical dilemmas you may face in your management career and how will you address each dilemma?" Using the rubric in Table 1, 90% of the Spring 2012 students (26/29) scored in the proficient and distinguished area (this exceeded our established assessment goal of at least 80% proficient or better).

Table 1
Ethics Rubric for MGT4170 Policy and Strategy Course

Outcome	Non-Performance	Basic	Proficient	Distinguished
Is able to apply ethical behaviors in addressing challenges encountered as managers.	Not clearly written, or, does not identify ethical dilemmas applicable to a future manager, or missing any decision making information.	Clearly written, identifies 3 ethical dilemmas and provides a short summary of what they would do as managers.	Professionally written, identifies 3 ethical dilemmas that will likely be faced as a manager, provides an adequate discussion on how the future manager will make the ethical decisions.	Professionally written, identifies 3 ethical dilemmas that will likely be faced as a manager, masterfully explains a framework or process that would be followed to decide on a fair and socially responsible decision.

Note. Rubric is used to assess a student's essay.

The SB&T faculty members continue to explore effective methods of assessing the application of ethical and moral decision making in the lives of CSS graduates and would welcome any discussion forum on this topic.

SUMMARY

Activities undertaken over the past seventeen years have significantly enhanced our efforts to prepare our graduates for ethical and effective leadership in their organizations. The goal of this paper was to share our journey in teaching ethics and identify the initiatives, structures, and successes so that other teaching institutions of higher learning could benefit from our experiences and advance their outcomes in ethical decision-making among their students.

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