

Putting (practical) wisdom into the business curriculum (0061)

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While business knowledge has expanded over the past two decades, it seems that there has not been a similar growth in business (practical) wisdom. Koehn (2005) argues there is a 'human tendency to game the system' in order to further self-interest. It may be that the game itself needs to be transformed through shifting perceptions about the telos of business and the way business people should behave. As one of the main locations for educating managers, business schools have an important role to play (Ghoshal, 2005). However, Cowton and Cummings (2003) point out that while there has been encouraging progress and optimism about the future, there is some way to go before managers and executives have adequate exposure to business ethics.

Achieving this is not easy in the contemporary academic environment in which not only is it important to justify the place of business ethics in a crowded curriculum but also to teach it with the required integrity. MacFarlane (2004) argues that with significant changes to higher education, academic staff are facing a complex array of challenges (eg. high student staff ratios and the modularised curriculum) that have significant ethical dimensions. As he points out, in such an environment, the temptation for academic staff and students is to opt for the comfort of habit rather than reflection, existing on a diet of PowerPoint slides and lecture notes. It should come as no surprise then to find that students are often less able (or inclined) to engage at the deeper levels required to develop wisdom.

To engage students more effectively, shifts in the way undergraduate business ethics is taught were implemented at Curtin University in 2010. Instead of content (ie knowledge), values such as being critical (for example looking beyond what is there, testing out one's own assumptions, looking back – reflective practice) are placed at the centre of the course with conceptual tools and techniques providing the means for developing practical wisdom. For example, students are introduced to testing their own assumptions through examining heuristics, tacit knowing and bias. Through case studies, students challenge first the perceptions and decision of characters in the case, then each other's, then their own. The results of this approach are transformative for both academic staff and students. For academic staff it poses the challenge of how to transform the curriculum and what we do in order to bring about improved student engagement. For students it is the challenge of being asked to approach issues and problems conceptually and think critically – to become more deeply engaged.

To examine student engagement, a sequential mixed methods research design is adopted. The core component is qualitative with a supplemental quantitative component. The core component is a two-part survey taken in the first and last classes. Of the 100 students enrolled in the unit, 78 responded. Students were asked to write answers to two questions:

1. What use is business ethics?
2. What do you want to get out of this unit?

The supplemental component is a survey of student perceptions about the unit which had a 38% response rate.

Results

The results suggest that there has been shifts in the way students think about business. Responses to the first survey point to a largely instrumental/utilitarian view of business in which costs and benefits measured in terms of profitability appeared central. It was an extrinsic focus in that business ethics is somehow an ‘out there’ phenomenon. This led many students to adopt a perspective reflecting a ‘good ethics means good business’ view in which an ethical stance is adopted simply as a means to improve the business bottom line. As this student states, business ethics is useful to,

Make certain decisions that will maximise profits whilst also maintaining reputation.

The second survey revealed a shift in perception to one that reflects duty and virtue. This is particularly evident in that students did not just focus on making ethical decisions they also thought it important to make decisions in an ethical way. It seems that after doing the course, students see business ethics as being something ‘out there’ (external and impersonal) *and* ‘in here’ (internal and personal). Their comments reveal an attitude that profit is important but not an end in itself. Indeed, students seem to have developed a multi-layered perspective that considers society/business/self in terms of developing business ideals, the relationship between business and society, and how they as individuals can influence situations. As this student states,

Ensure that businesses do not exist predominantly for profit-making but that they contribute to making the world a better place.

The qualitative results point to shifts in the way students approach the subject. The supplemental survey results provide further detail, suggesting that when compared to previous semesters improvements are apparent, particularly in student attitudes towards learning experiences, assessment tasks, feedback and workload (Table 1).

	2007-2009 average agreement (%)	2010- Semester 1 agreement (%)
Learning experiences were relevant	86.83	95
The assessments evaluate my achievement.	87.83	97
Feedback on my work in this unit helped me improve	84.83	97
The workload in this unit is appropriate.	88.00	95

Table 1: Summary of survey results (enrolments around 100 per semester).

Comments added to the survey support the conclusions that the unit engaged students more in their learning.

[The lecturer] was able to engage me with the unit and have come with a lot of benefits in my personal development.

These results are similar to Awasthi’s (2008) finding that students who have studied business ethics demonstrate sensitivity to moral dimensions of managerial decisions.

Conclusion

The results of this research suggest that the design of the business ethics course has engaged students at a deeper level. This goes some way towards meeting the challenge of adequately exposing an increasingly diverse student population who are future business people to ethics in ways that are effective and engaging. More development is required. In particular there is a need for more case study materials and role play exercises so that students are given more opportunities for engagement in their learning.

References

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