Can Business Ethics Be Taught?

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ABSTRACT

The scandals in recent years reminded business schools have to take responsibility for instilling ethical concepts to the students who will become the future managers. Business schools have a role to play in increasing the likelihood that students are less likely to end up committing unethical acts. This paper aims to review literature published in the field of business ethics education in order to answer the question: Can business ethics be taught? The main purpose of this paper is to analyze different perspectives on business ethics education in higher education to study whether business ethics can be learned as a result of the educational process, and subsequently to identify the goals of business ethics education that can facilitate educator designing and teaching business ethics courses. This paper supposes that we should identify the goals of business ethics education before answering that question.

INTRODUCTION

For historical reasons, the American society promotes ambition, individualism, and personal gain (Mann, 2005). Higher education and the American society have been inextricably intertwined (Boyer, 1994). One important commitment for American colleges is to provide curricula to serve the public needs (Levine & Nidiffer, 1997). However, American higher education traditionally focus mostly on intellectual and academic development and less emphasize on ethical training and personal growth (Levine & Nidiffer, 1997).

Today, it is the time to rethink the ethical training in higher education. After several scandals, various bodies have made calls for a greater emphasis on rethinking business ethics education. These scandals clearly show the need to instill in students the importance of ethics for managers, accountants or auditors, and increased attention has also been directed toward the teaching of business ethics. Business schools have a responsibility to acquaint their students with the ethical challenges they will face in their business careers. A wave of discussion involving ethics education has taken place. Issues of business ethics are widely discussed in the professional and academic literature (Gaa & Thorne, 2004; Felton & Sims, 2005).

With a growing interest in the subject of business ethics in many business schools, there appears to be a variety of attitudes ranging from the view that while ethics courses may not be effective, there is no harm in trying, through open resistance to the introduction of ethics program. Some people doubt the necessity of ethics courses because they do not believe that ethics can be taught or learned in classrooms and suspect the timing of teaching ethics in postsecondary level and assert that ethics should be learned earlier. A lot of people ask a recurring question: Can business ethics be taught?

If yes, why did these business scandals happen while most of the managers and accountants involved in these
scandals took business ethics training when they studied in business schools? If no, why did more and more business schools pay attention to business ethics education?

Therefore, this paper will aim to consider literature published in the field of business ethics education in order to answer the question: Can business ethics be taught? The main purpose of this paper is to analyze different perspectives on business ethics education in higher education to study whether business ethics can be learned as a result of the educational process, and subsequently to identify the goals of business ethics education that can facilitate educator designing and teaching business ethics courses.

**CAN BUSINESS ETHICS BE TAUGHT?**

Ethics is important for businesses because public entrusts them with the responsibility of ensuring that corporate entities are held accountable for their actions. Business ethics can be defined as the study of those decisions of managers which involve moral values (Gandz & Hayes, 1988). Business schools, which act as the role of fostering manpower in business specialties, also take the responsibility of infusing ethics into students. Increased attention has been directed toward the ethics curriculum in business schools. Many colleges realize the importance of ethics and set up related courses to help construct ethical concepts of students before they join the businesses (Mann, 2005). However, can business ethics be taught?

As to the question, few would challenge the contention that ethics is learned, but many people doubt that ethics can be taught (Geary & Sims, 1994). Ethics courses have stimulated much discussion in society. There are conflicting views on whether ethics can be taught and conflicting expectations about how the teaching of ethics will lead to more ethical behavior.

A majority of research supports that ethics can be taught. A business course focusing on ethics can facilitate growth in principled moral reasoning (St. Pierre, Nelson, & Gabbin, 1990; Armstrong, 1993; Ponemon, 1993; Shaub, 1994; Bonawitz, 2002). Penn and Collier (1985) claim that there is a need to implement an education program which results in the advancement of students to higher stages of moral development. Wright (1995) noted that education is the best means of developing good ethical behavior in the modern business environment. Wimalasiri (2001) suggests that there is at least a partial role of ethics in educational intervention.

Hosmer (1988) indicates that educators can reinforce students’ ethical attitudes by teaching ethical principles rather than moral standards of behavior and by introducing them to the ethical arguments. Loeb (1988) found that many accountants themselves believed that classroom exposure to accounting ethics would enable individuals to better handle ethical dilemmas encountered in business practices. Kavathatzopoulos (1991) concludes that ethics training can improve students’ abilities to deal with business dilemmas though the business ethics courses offered by many business schools. Kerr and Smith (1995) found that ethics education can increase skills in identifying and analyzing problems, and therefore help to handle conflicts of values which arise between the practitioners, clients and society. Carlson and Burke (1998) found that students taking ethics courses are more perceptive, more willing to read between the lines, more sensitive to the ambiguities and more curious to the effects of their decisions. Bonawitz (2002) suggests that business students exposed to courses having a purposeful focus on professional ethics and ethical issues show significantly greater growth in the use of principled moral reasoning than similar students not exposed to such courses.

However, some studies have provided indications that ethics courses may have little to no statistically significant impact on student attitudes (Budner, 1987; Lane, Schaupp & Parsons, 1988; Wynd & Mager, 1989). Luoma (1989)
indicates that requiring students to learn professional regulations and guidelines in order to pass an ethics examination does not ensure that they will retain a concept of ethical behavior. A one semester ethics curriculum would have minimal impact on ethical values and attitudes. St. Pierre, Nelson, and Gabbin (1990) and Ponemon (1993) both found that the inclusion of ethical content in courses, or exposure to a specific course in ethics during college, had a trivial impact on growth in the use of principled moral reasoning. Enyon, Hill, Thorley, Stevens and Clarke (1996) propose that non-classroom effects, which include politics, attitude and gender factors, are commonly associated with learning or applying ethics. Smith and Oakley (1996) found that completion of a course in business ethics had no significant effect on students’ attitudes toward ethical business behavior.

We suppose that the mixed and equivocal findings for this body of evidence reflect to some extent the fact that the ethics courses in the various studies differed substantially in their content, emphasis, and implementation. It appears to me that, if we want to answer the question of whether business ethics can be taught, we must consider what we really mean by that question. We should identify what the goal of business ethics education is.

Hosmer (1985) has admitted that it is hard to change habits, beliefs and values and thus such change should not be the primary goal of a business ethics course. In his view the primary goal is to teach ethical systems of analysis, not moral standards of behavior. A longitudinal study conducted by Murphy and Boatwright (1994) to investigate the effectiveness of a business ethics course found that the business ethics course could influence a student’s ability to identify ethical scenarios; however, the course did not lead to a change in the ethical values of the students. They suggested that the goal of ethics education should not be to change the ethical values of students, but to help them identify situations of an ethical nature.

Therefore, as to the question “Can business ethics be taught?” based on the literature favoring business ethics education, our answer will be “Yes” if the goals of business ethics education are to provide theories, models, approaches, examples or case studies which might be useful in handling business ethical dilemmas, to make students more sensitive to the ethical implications of some business activities, and to provide students with a set of tools that could help them analyze difficult ethical situations later in their business careers. An amount of evidence reveals that such goals can be achieved through teaching business ethics in the classroom. Business ethics education can broaden students’ understanding of ethics and its complexity (Wright, 1995; Fleton & Sims, 2005).

On the other hand, our answer will be “No” if the goals are to create value systems that will enable students to act ethically, and to make students having the moral will to choose the ethically correct action even when it conflicts with self-interest. One reason given for the view that ethics cannot be taught is that one’s ethics is fully formed and immutable by the time one enters college. Shenkir (1990) indicates that the development of moral character continues through an individual’s entire education experience. By the time people reach college age their moral formation is, by and large, complete. Ethics are learned early in life and that by the time students reach college they are either honest or not (Carruth & Carruth, 1991). Armstrong, Ketz and Owsen (2003) indicate that the courage and commitment to take up ethical issues may be particularly resistant to change. Ethical attitudes rest on values that are generally developed over time and as a result of cultural, family, and religious affiliations. Moral values are inherent and thus cannot be taught categorically in the classroom. The influence of college on principled moral reasoning is the result not so much of any single college experience but rather of the cumulative impact of a set of mutually reinforcing experiences (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Therefore, some literature concludes that formal courses in business ethics will have little effect in the sense that students will learn to behave more ethically.
THE GOAL OF BUSINESS ETHICS EDUCATION

According to above discussions, it is necessary to determine what the true goal of business ethics education should be. The goals of ethics courses need to be more closely examined as it is important to make clear whether business ethics can be taught. However, agreement about business ethics teaching goals is not an easy task. For some, teaching ethics means instructing students not to break the law or to abide by some professional or legal codes; for others, it means an attempt to improve students’ moral characters or to instill certain virtues; for still others, it means imparting student special skills in the handling of ethical argumentation (Callahan, 1980).

Gandz and Hayes (1988) suggest that the goals of business ethics education include the fostering of awareness of the ethical components of managerial decision making, the legitimization of ethical components as an integral part of managerial decision making, the provision of conceptual frameworks for analyzing the ethical components and to help individuals become confident in their use, and the helping of students to apply ethical analysis to everyday business activities. Wynd and Mager (1989) suggest that the goal of business ethics education is to make students aware of the ethical and social dimensions of business decision making, such that these dimensions may become components in their decision making process in the future. Felton and Sims (2005) suggest that the goals of teaching business ethics can be divided into three categories: focus on developing students’ theoretical knowledge base, focus on analyzing issues facing managers in business situations, and an equal focus on theory and practice. Haugen (2005) indicates that the goal of business ethics courses is to teach students how to apply personal morality to real life business scenarios.

The development of moral judgment continues throughout a person’s whole life in a complex process of social interaction with parents, peers, faculty and other significant persons in various situations. The values of a person are influenced over time (Luoma, 1989; Bishop, 1992). Moreover, the influence of college on student ethical behavior is the result of the cumulative impact of a set of mutually reinforcing experiences (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Therefore, it would be impractical to set changing students’ moral behavior as the goal of teaching business ethics. Moral behavior is the result of character building which happens before attending college and throughout life for a student. We think families, religious organizations and peers would have a better chance to influence moral behavior.

However, in the complexity of today’s business environment, students still need additional guidance for making ethical decisions, which can help them to recognize the ethical dilemmas that are likely to arise in their jobs, as well as the rules, laws, and norms that apply in the business context. They can learn reasoning strategies that can be used to arrive at a better ethical decision, and can grasp an understanding of the complexities of organizational life that may conflict with one’s desire to do the right thing. Business schools have a moral obligation to contribute to the ethical development of students.

A body of evidence has revealed the positive impact of business ethics education on students’ ethical awareness and ethical reasoning. Therefore, in our viewpoint, the goals of business ethics education should include introducing students to ethical codes and reasoning theories, demonstrating to students how to bring ethical principles and reasoning to bear on ethical problems, helping students to recognize ethical issues in business situations, and fostering students the ability to develop plans or strategies for implementing solutions to business ethical problems.

CONCLUSION

The scandals in recent years reminded business schools have to take partial responsibility for instilling ethical concepts to the students who will become the future managers of businesses. Business schools have a role to play in
increasing the likelihood that students are less likely to end up committing unethical acts. This means that business schools must make sure that teaching business ethics is an integral part of the business school curricula. However, the doubtful effectiveness of business ethics education leads to people to argue whether business ethics can be taught.

According to the literature published in the field of business ethics education, this paper supposes that we should identify the goals of business ethics education before answering that question. Based on above discussion, it might be impractical to expect business ethics courses can significantly change students’ moral will and ethical behavior. To make business ethics education more effective, ethics courses had better act as a role of guiding students and fostering students’ ability to deal with ethical issues which they will face somehow in their business careers.

REFERENCES


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