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DEVELOPING A LEARNING COMMUNITY APPROACH TO BUSINESS ETHICS EDUCATION

(Accepted 27 October 2000)

ABSTRACT. In this paper we discuss a project, still in progress, that moves away from a traditional lecture based educational pedagogy. We present a team taught approach to ethics teaching that embraces a progressive philosophy of education and is focused on the development of a discussion based learning community. We describe our primary pedagogical tools of case discussion and the development of student expert role assignments as a locus, and how they relate to the learning community, course content and course objectives. Finally, we provide our preliminary review of outcomes and emerging issues.

KEY WORDS: learning community, pedagogy, philosophy of education, student expert resource, team teaching

INTRODUCTION

This is the tale of two professors steeped in the tradition of education by lecture and their efforts to effect a fundamental change in their delivery of a course that integrates ethics, public policy, and legal education. In this paper we provide an account of our endeavor, still in progress, to move away from a traditional lecture based educational pedagogy and describe an approach to education that focuses on the development of a discussion based learning community. This philosophy of education is marked by several allied concepts. First, the primary aim of education is the development of the individual. Second, fundamental to growth is a learning community approach. Last, discussion based classes are an appropriate and effective way of achieving these educational goals. As our educational thrust moves away from a traditional educational format and embraces a progressive philosophy of education housed in the work of Dewey (1916, 1938), as continued in the field of reflective thinking (King and Kitchener, 1994), we describe our primary pedagogical tools of case discussion and expert role assignments and how they relate to a learning community, course content and further course objectives. Finally, we provide our preliminary review of outcomes and emerging issues.

Teaching Business Ethics **5:** 267–281, 2001.

A TRADITIONAL MODE OF EDUCATION AND ITS CRITICS

Traditional modes of education are generally instructor focused with reliance on lecture as the backbone of the educational philosophy. That is, the instructor is seen as the knowledge possessor and disseminator of knowledge. Besides course content, pedagogical choices and actual classroom delivery mechanisms are, of course, instructor derived. The role of student is one of passive receiver of the wisdom being imparted by the professor. Quite visible is the instructor's retention of a high degree of control over the method, timing and delivery of the course content during the lecture period. The clear emphasis is on a professor centered and controlled environment. This has long been the main staple of the educational delivery system. However, such instructor-focused approaches have not been immune to negative commentary.

Education in general and business education in particular has long been subjected to a series of substantial and sustained critiques. Nearly forty years ago two reports were separately commissioned by the Ford Foundation (Gordon and Howell, 1959) and Carnegie Foundation (Pierson, 1959), to assess the then current state of business education. Notable in Gordon and Howell's influential report was a general criticism of what they term the "descriptive" approach to teaching, the unremitting reliance placed on lecture as the primary driver in the classroom. Nearly thirty years later in a report sponsored by the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (Porter and McKibben, 1988), another extensive review of business education was again critical of teaching in the academy. The report, however, noted progress away from continued emphasis on lecture and the strengthened use of strategies that more directly involved the student.

Ernest Boyer (1987), former president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and undoubtedly one of the most influential writers on educational reform of the past two decades, notes that a particular failing of this mode of instruction is the lack of student involvement. Further, he criticizes this method for the resulting inability of students to engage in a dialog where ideas may be exchanged, challenged and held up to the scrutiny of debate and examination. As another commentator has noted, "If the dominant role for teachers has been that of a conveyor of information, the conveyor belt has been the lecture" (O'Banion, 1997, p. 15).

Why this finds favor in the educational milieu is fairly clear. Graduate degree programs are devoted to discipline mastery and acquisition of research methodologies to further expand paradigmatic knowledge. Additionally, graduate students are not exposed, let alone immersed, in any formal preparation for a career in teaching. The one educational paradigm that all are acquainted with is lecture. Little wonder that we choose to model that which we have been shown as the way of teaching. Against this backdrop we began to reformulate basic classroom conceptions.

A LEARNING COMMUNITY APPROACH TO EDUCATION

One of our central claims is that the lecture method is lacking in one of the most essential attributes of any program that hopes to foster development; the active involvement of the student in the learning process. As opposed to traditional approaches, a learning community approach de-emphasizes the instructor and shifts the emphasis to student centered learning. This is discussion based education (Christensen, 1991) taken further. There is a joint recognition and acceptance by all, students and professors alike, that they have a shared responsibility for the development of each individual and the learning community as a whole.

The concept of the college, or classroom, as a learning community is not new, having existed for more than the past fifty years. During that time it has been expressed in a number of ways. However, common has been the attempt to reformulate the roles of the student and teacher into those of collaborators in the learning process. In our view, a learning community contains a number of essential components and assumptions. First, there is recognition that while professors and teachers have significant knowledge and experience, students can be knowledgeable experts with valuable insights and understanding. Another component, then, is the active and direct participatory decision making by students as to the shape and direction of the daily classroom discussion. The learning community approach further involves increased student responsibility for the substantive content of the course, including basic concepts, current trends, and problem solutions. The desired outcome is classroom activity reformulated as a cooperative endeavor with the instructor and student as active co-contributors. Bellah et al. (1991, p. 172) make a similar point when they conclude that:

> In contrast to the standard classroom as a locus for individualistic competition of students pitted against each other for high places on the grade curve, learning communities emphasize the cooperative and interactional nature of learning and make the development of individual skills the responsibility of the community as a whole.

The question then becomes one of how to construct a pedagogical system that meets these educational objectives.

THE VALUES COURSE: A CONTEXT FOR CHANGE

Prior to our described changes the entire MBA curriculum had undergone substantial and fundamental change integrating disciplines and courses and moving to a team based approach to teaching (Wittmer et al., 1998). The Values course is part of a series of integrated core courses in the graduate business curriculum at the Daniels College at the University of Denver. These core courses combine the traditional functional based courses in ways that are more aligned with the actual practice of management. For example, Foundations for Business Decisions is a course that integrates quantitative courses such as accounting, finance, and statistics. The Values course combines previously freestanding courses in ethics, public policy and law into a two-term sequence. The resulting curriculum and substantive course content is fully integrated within and across the program.

The Values course addresses current business areas such as sexual harassment, employee privacy, product liability, insider trading and international human rights, among others. Each issue is examined from ethical, public policy and legal perspectives. The course is taught by teams of two faculty members, who are generally in the classroom together ninety-percent of the time. The teams are formed with faculty whose expertise crosses over two of the three areas of ethics, public policy and law. These are true teams delivering knowledge from different disciplines simultaneously rather than sequentially (Davis, 1995).

For several years, there were variations in pedagogy and emphasis. But generally mid-term and final exams were essay exams, with students having to apply concepts and theories to business problems. Case studies were assigned for each topic, and groups of students made presentations (usually Power Point based) of the basic concepts and current legal, ethical and public policy environment. Students generally felt the group projects were worthwhile, since one of the goals was to develop skills in accessing current information and trends, including legal, managerial, and international perspectives. Students benefited from improving their presentation skills, and students generally believed the topics were relevant and current.

These changes had been quite successful. Indeed, the Values courses had the highest overall student evaluations of the core MBA courses. Why then consider more change? In part, because of an environment encouraging change, we were amenable to revisions and in fact seeking continuous improvement. While in stream we began to take note of and discuss pedagogical issues and implications. Although the student group presentations were quite good, we became aware that they created a passive environment for the rest of the class. Student groups invariably wanted to begin class sessions with their presentations. The presentations often consumed forty or more minutes (with Q&A), and the teaching team often found it necessary to "backfill," clarify, or correct student groups. All of this resulted in more lectures without significant class involvement and interaction. Indeed, lecture seemed to be increased, with student groups making their presentations, followed by clarifying professorial lectures.

Although business cases were assigned for each class session, they were typically last on the day's agenda. More often than not, they were given short shrift because of time constraints, resulting in inadequate discussion. Yet, as we observed and discussed, some of the best discussions and learning seemed to occur during the case discussions. Students saw connections with previous material, applications of legal concepts were made, and groups doing the presentations had important perspectives from their research. In fact, they viewed themselves as experts, and the class responded by drawing on their expertise in dealing with the case. At the same time we began to see important threads that ran through the cases and topics. These included leadership, professionalism, and a virtue based approach to ethical decision making. We further reflected on fundamental objectives of the MBA curriculum and how our Values course could best articulate with those goals. It was again time to rethink pedagogical objectives, course content, and delivery mechanisms.

Another catalyst for change was a perceived need for increased leadership or values based leadership topics in our course, which could dovetail with leadership themes of the course preceding the Values course. The prior course is High Performance Management, a course that integrates basic principles of management, organizational behavior, and negotiations. Many business students, graduate students in particular, can be quite instrumental in their approach to education. They are looking for course work and course content relevant to their existing or emerging roles in business as managers and leaders. The ideas of professionalism and achieving excellence in managerial roles are clearly viewed as fundamental elements of success by students. And development of leadership attributes and skills are further seen as essential to becoming a more skilled manager and leader. Making the concept of leadership a central theme made many of the other concepts have explicit meaning and importance to the student.

THE VALUES COURSE REVISED: A LEARNING COMMUNITY APPROACH

We began the revisions with an understanding that our purpose was to create a more active learning environment for all. We sought to empower students as experts in dealing with issues and problems. We wanted to create projects and a classroom environment more similar to work and managerial settings. We also desired to use classroom time for discussion and debate, encouraging students to practice analytical and communication abilities. With these purposes in mind, we decided that our first iteration would include the following changes in terms of our pedagogy:

- elimination of formal group presentations
- addition of students as managerial staff experts on each of the topics and cases
- change of oral and written reports as more managerially focused
- class sessions focused on business cases
- reduction or elimination of class time for lectures
- elimination of exams
- substantial increase of "participation" as major element of graded student evaluation
- articulate and reinforce course threads of leadership, professionalism, and virtue

Our new approach stresses leadership, professionalism, virtue ethics, moral development and law. Woven through these threads are issue based topics ranging from employment at will, sexual harassment, discrimination and affirmative action, privacy, and whistleblowing to product liability, sales responsibility, insider trading, intellectual property and distributive justice. The course is brought together with the tools of case discussion, and more importantly students serving in a variety of expert roles as integral to the analysis area and case discussion.

The course is marked by a general absence of lecture. We begin the course with a series of sessions to provide foundations in law, ethics and public policy frameworks. Included are moral development (Gilligan, 1982; Graham, 1995; Kohlberg, 1984) and professionalism (Flores, 1988; Donaldson, 2000). Afterwards, the student places reliance on mastery of written course background material through independent reading and informal group collaboration. The result is a focus on integration of the course material by the students into a classroom that serves as a community centered on discussion based learning.

Because of the changes and revised goals, our own roles as teachers changed. We came to view our place in the class differently. We were no longer "the experts" who simply convey knowledge that students have to master. It is, of course, critical for teachers to have knowledge and expertise, and students expect as much. However, our role was expanded. We, in general, serve as learning managers, playing a variety of roles: experts, coordinators, facilitators, evaluators, mentors and coaches. This approach de-emphasizes lecture based knowledge transmission; rather emphasis is placed on development of shared responsibility for the growth and progress of the individual and the community as a whole. We will discuss briefly some of the central features of our learning community approach.

Expert Resource Roles

One of the key elements of our learning community approach is to give students more responsibility in terms of research and analysis. The "expert teams" provide a mechanism to promote such student involvement. Students form self-selected teams of two for the term. With the same partner for the quarter these teams serve as experts three times during the quarter, once in each of three areas (current legal environment, managerial practices, and international perspectives). We generally frame our class discussions as the entire class being a management team addressing the case for the day. As though asked by senior management to research an aspect of the topic (e.g. legal aspects of sexual harassment), expert teams summarize their findings, applying their findings to the case. Expert teams generally do not use formal presentations, but rather share their findings informally to the management team (entire class). Students use a variety of available technologies to research the topic and expert area. These include Lexis/Nexis, ABI Inform, Westlaw, and Academic Universe. The professors have developed a Web site to assist expert teams begin their research. This site includes various links to general sources of relevant information, as well as issue specific links. Expert teams, especially management practices, are also encouraged to interview relevant firms' personnel for current management practices. Students are required to submit a written report that is a summary of the findings for the special area researched and an analysis of the case assigned for the day. The paper (5 pages single-spaced) is conceived as a report to management, summarizing their particular research and any implications for managing the issue and the case or problem of the day.

The research dictated by the expert role assignments asks that students perform the kind and types of research that they may be faced with in their managerial and professional careers. For example, students analyzing managerial practices are engaged in research and examination of the best managerial practices and strategies associated with the case and subject area. Derek Bok, former president of Harvard University, made a similar point in arguing for the professorate to engage in research that examines actual problems and current solutions. He reasons that "... professors can extend their research beyond the more theoretical forms of inquiry to investigate the actual strategies and practices of successful corporations in America and other nations around the world" (Bok, 1990, p. 32). Here the argument is related to the ways in which students should conduct research on the ethics of managerial practice.

The style and focus of the written expert report is likened to reporting on a subject to an executive committee, including recommended courses of action. This approach is captured by a recent report by the Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University (Boyer, 1998) when they conclude:

> At present most writing in universities is addressed to professors who know more about the subject matter than the writers, but all students should be taught to write for audiences less informed on the topic than the writer. After college there will be little need to write 'up' to a professor; it will be more important to write 'down' to an audience that needs information and/or opinions, even if that audience happens to be the employer or higher authority.

Leadership and New Themes

In recasting our fundamental purpose we came to view the course goal as consistent with the Daniels College of Business goal of developing students both professionally and personally. Thus, we saw our purpose as creating an environment where students could become better managers, better leaders and perhaps more importantly better persons. We implemented this goal, in part, by expanding an existing component on virtue ethics and leadership. Students already read Aristotle (1962). Now we added material on values based management (Anderson, 1997) and leadership (Kouzes and Posner, 1993, 1995, 1999).

Early in the term we ask students to submit a list of critical attributes for what they personally consider a "good" person, manager and leader to be. From their responses we compile a class profile of the top five attributes for person, manager, and leader. We engage a discussion related to differences between leadership and management. Invariably this discussion addresses the issue of whether Hitler was a good leader and manager. We are led to distinguish an "effective" leader from a "moral" leader and what individuals require of their leader in order to follow. Honesty typically emerges as one of the top five attributes for person, manager, and leader. We discuss why honesty seems to cut across roles. This discussion is then related to

Aristotle's approach to ethics housed in a managerial context (e.g. Morris, 1997; Hartman, 1996). We compare Aristotle's list of virtues with the class profile and discuss Aristotle's view that virtue and vice are acquired through practice and habit.

These issues of virtue, leadership, and professionalism are explored in cases throughout the term. For example, one of the early cases (Wittmer and Wittmer, 1997) focuses on a decision made by the president of a Denver based beer distributor. The issue involves whether to satisfy an important customer's order for 3.2% beer by mis-stamping beer with a higher alcoholic content as 3.2% beer. Elements of the case include a precarious financial position for the company, the pressure of an impending holiday weekend, the president of the company's position as an influential member of the community and whistleblowing by a disgruntled employee. This culminates in a revocation of the distributorship's liquor license by an administrative law judge and ultimately the tragic suicide of the company president. Students are asked to assess the case in terms of managerial and leadership issues. Personal and professional character traits and their acquisition become a focus of the discussion. In particular, students generally make connections with Aristotle's theory of the acquisition of moral virtue through habit. The issue focuses on whether the decision to mis-stamp beer was a unique and tragic exception or whether it reflects a flawed character trait that had become habituated. The case is also related to a leadership profile of the class in which honesty is almost always identified as a central virtue of a good person, good manager, and good leader.

Case Discussion

One of the fundamental objectives of the course is for students to become more equipped to recognize and respond to the legal, ethical, and public policy aspects of management practice. This necessitates that students take the lead in presenting background material, analyzing cases and generating discussion. To further this goal the students, individually and collectively, are expected to integrate and apply law and ethical analysis. On the individual level, students are expected: (1) to be prepared to summarize the basic facts of the case; (2) identify the legal, ethical, and public policy issues involved in the case; (3) explore alternatives for action; (4) apply the assigned readings, concepts, and applicable law to the business case or problem; (5) provide recommendations for action; and (6) recommend relevant plans of implementation for the individual and organization.

In the midst of case discussion, there are opportunities for mini-lectures from faculty or experts assigned to that topic. For example, while dealing with a racial discrimination case, the distinction between disparate treatment and disparate impact becomes important. Or the central features of the Civil Rights Act of 1991 become important in understanding the extra-territoriality of U.S. discrimination laws. Thus legal, ethical, and public policy material is reviewed and applied in the context of problems.

Since active involvement and participation are indispensable to the course achieving stated goals, class participation is a significant graded component of the course. This is especially key since examinations have been eliminated. Quality is primarily considered in evaluating individual class participation. In general quality class discussion includes contributions that (1) make useful distinctions; (2) provide creative and insightful analysis or case recommendations; (3) apply concepts and principles from the assigned readings; (4) augment the discussion with material and examples from outside research; and (5) advance the analysis and discussion by integrating and synthesizing previous comments. This finds support in a body of work in educational philosophy and in particular in the well-known classification scheme of Bloom who proposed a "taxonomy of educational objectives." The progression of cognitive skills is portrayed in a stage model of knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and finally evaluation (Bloom, 1956). The goal is to develop the ability to progress from a beginning base of understanding some terms and concepts to the higher level cognitive skills of synthesis and integration.

Individual participation is scored in the following way. A scale of 0–3 is presented and discussed with the students on the first day of class. At the end of each class, the professors discuss and rate the performance of each student. The scores are posted on a weekly basis on the home page of the professors so students receive regular and ongoing feedback on performance. These cumulative scores for participation are added to a base, giving the students a participation score ranging from about 65 to 100. The weight for participation has ranged from 25 to 40% of total course grade.

Daily Sessions

The class sessions begin with a discussion of the case assigned for the day. After the foundation sessions, each day is devoted to a new topic, e.g. employee privacy. Instead of applying material from lecture to a case at the end of class, as had been the practice, we begin from an assumption that students have read not only the case but also the related readings on law, ethics and public policy. Convening the entire class as a management team, students identify the central issues and problems, clarify the critical and relevant facts, apply the related readings (e.g. doctrine of strict scrutiny in affirmative action), and assess managerial strategies and alternatives. The student expert teams (legal, managerial, international) provide information and knowledge as relevant to understanding the issue and the case. The instructors and the class draw on the experts to advance the discussion, reinforcing again the idea of shared responsibility and cooperative problem solving. For example, experts in affirmative action may draw on a case, not included in the readings, addressing affirmative action in university admissions (Hopwood v. Texas, 1995). Their analysis will address extensive academic (e.g. Bowen and Bok, 1998; Carter, 1991; Heilman, 1997) and managerial perspectives to advance the case discussion.

Another example is the issue of employee privacy assessed in terms of genetic testing of employees. In evaluating the stance and policies that a firm should adopt, class discussion will draw from legal experts for summaries of federal and state statutes and case law, look to managerial practice experts to provide examples of current policies and practices and draw on international experts to suggest how other countries regard the issues.

The instructors generally introduce the cases; however, students are encouraged to direct comments to other students, as well as the instructors, in order to simulate a managerial team approach to the case or problem. In the spirit of a learning community we strive to increase the role of students in terms of leading and advancing discussion. Toward that end we have experimented with other modes of case discussion. With approximately 40 students per class section, we found that it was difficult to provide sufficient “air time” for all. In fact, work teams would be much smaller in the workplace. To increase the opportunity to participate, we have divided the class into two groups (about 20 students each) to deal with the case. We have assigned team leaders or allowed the group to function as self-directed work groups. The two faculty then split-up to lead or observe case discussion. One example where this approach has been effective involves the issue of downsizing and managing layoffs. The Alexo downsizing case (McCarthy, 1996) involves a manager who has six employees in his work-group. His supervisor informs him that he must layoff two employees. Profiles of each employee are provided in the case. So, the task in the case is to recommend two employees for layoff. Our experts for the day report to the entire class their research in terms of legal, managerial, and international perspectives. For example, legal experts typically discuss protections related to the Age Discrimination Employment Act (ADEA), protected classes of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, and other possible areas of litigation. Managerial experts generally discuss strategies for confronting downsizing, such as exploring alternatives to layoffs or voluntary separation strategies such as offering early retirement packages. The class is then divided into two groups and instructed to recommend employees to be laid off and an implementation strategy. Groups typically struggle with the criteria to be used in assessing employees, how to evaluate potential litigation from members of protected classes, and the potential ethical conflicts between norms such as fairness and efficiency. After about 30–40 minutes the two groups present their recommendation to the entire class.

AN INTERIM ASSESSMENT (WHAT WORKS AND WHAT NEEDS IMPROVEMENT)

After a year and a half of experimenting with this learning community approach to our MBA Values in Action course, we can make some preliminary judgments in terms of evaluating the approach. We have taught about 10 MBA sections of the Values in Action to full-time students, evening students, executive students, and a new Emerging Leaders class. Thus, we have taught a variety of populations. Some of our reflections include:

- **Focusing class discussion on cases is well received and contributes to learning.** Student evaluations typically include very favorable comments about the use of cases. They benefit from the exchange of ideas and perspectives, they see the relevance of the issues, and they are able to apply concepts and theories to concrete situations. Clearly this element contributes to a more active and involved community of learners.
- **Using students as experts has been highly successful.** This concept of shared responsibility in terms of finding, sharing, and applying information and strategies has been meaningful for the students and is clearly consonant with the overall philosophy of developing the individuals in the learning community. Students are very receptive and responsible about assuming this role. Students generally come to class "champing at the bit" to share their information and knowledge. They invariably are creative and energetic about their responsibilities. One student called researchers in Great Britain to clarify information found on the Internet, another called the author of a case study to find out the epilogue, and another student developed a matrix of legal statutes that had not been developed previously. The point here is that students really take their role seriously. We have developed a growing list of Internet sites that include new sites from the various expert teams over the 10 quarters. Students feel they are contributing to an ongoing data base that will be useful to future students. The written report is also more meaningful when viewed as a document

that would be useful to an executive or senior manager. In fact, we inform them that our test in terms of excellence is whether the report would be impressive to senior management, as measured by organization, effective communication of important content, and implications for management practice.

One note on the size of teams. We originally had students work individually in the three expert role areas (law, management, international), but this created more reports than even two faculty could reasonably handle. We moved to permanent teams of two, and this seems to work well. Students also seem appreciative of having smaller teams, since many other projects in the other courses of the MBA curriculum involve larger teams (3–5). They found it much easier to manage the group process in teams of two members.

- **Heavily graded participation has been a nightmare in practice.** While the concept of grading student contribution to the learning community on a daily basis makes sense to the instructors, and even the students, the implementation has produced much frustration on the part of students. Assigning scores daily and posting these weekly (using random number assignments for student identification) may follow the legitimate idea of immediate feedback. However, students believe the scoring is too subjective, feel that it leads to counterproductive competition among students (i.e. counter to the idea of a learning community), and is too difficult to provide adequate “air time” in sections of 40 students. While we refined our scoring system and even believed we had high inter-rater reliability, we have not found an acceptable method of implementing the concept.
- **Exams (or some other competency evaluation) may be needed.** Some of the reasons for eliminating exams were that we wanted to promote the idea of shared responsibility for learning, avoid excessive competition, and get away from the idea of regurgitating material for the professor (even if applied, essay exercises). Students, of course, find the policy appealing. However, we are concerned that the integrity of the degree requires some fundamental competencies and our approach does not adequately provide such assessments. This raises the knotty, if not intractable, issue of evaluation of student performance. One of the central issues for us is the tension between faculty as “coach and mentor” and faculty as “evaluator.” Options that we are exploring to deal with this issue include using outside evaluators and using a “portfolio” approach to demonstrate competencies and abilities.

Conclusion

The fundamental goal of our course is the development of the individual as a person, manager and leader. To further that objective we have proposed an alternative to traditional lecture based class. The model de-emphasizes the role of the professor as sole possessor and transmitter of knowledge. Our work is a preliminary and partial description of an effort to more directly engage the student as an active and co-participant in the classroom and beyond.

Clearly, our work to date is rather modest. And yet it attempts to grapple with some fundamental issues in the philosophy of education. Our hope is that the paper encourages reexamination and critique of the respective roles of the student and instructor.

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