

Learning from Students' Ethical Dilemmas: Insights into Pedagogy and Practice

Maureen Snow Andrade

Utah Valley University, USA

Paige Gardiner

Southern Utah University, USA

Jill Jaspersen

Utah Valley University, USA

Abstract. Teaching ethics is a critical aspect of coursework in higher education business schools and to future business success. Recent research, however, indicates that business schools are focusing on the sustainability aspect of ethics, or grand challenges such as poverty and inequality, rather than helping students understand the underlying ethical considerations (Jaganjac 2024). A shift is needed to reclaim personal ethics education to develop future business leaders with the ability to act ethically. This calls for new pedagogies to help students form personal ethical frameworks and make appropriate ethical decisions. This research examines the outcomes of an ethical dilemma assignment. Using content analysis, the findings indicate that while students are able to identify ethical conflicts, they lack a fundamental personal ethical framework to understand the philosophical aspects of ethical conflicts. Additionally, they need training to equip them to intervene and address ethical dilemmas. Faculty who teach ethics in business schools should consider including practical assignments such as ethical dilemmas. They must also incorporate specific training to help students develop conflict management skills and know how to intervene.

Keywords: ethics, business schools, pedagogy, ethical dilemmas and conflict management skills.

1. Introduction

Ethics and integrity is a guiding principle of business school accreditation with favorable societal impact as an expected outcome of business education (AACSB International 2020). Past accreditation standards specified expectations that business schools focus on the following aspects: the responsibility of business and society, ethical decision making, ethical corporate responsibility, and ethical leadership (AACSB 2004, 2007, 2011). These standards did not prescribe how

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ethics should be taught but required evidence that students be provided with opportunities to learn the concepts, develop related skills, and achieve desired learning outcomes (AACSB International 2004). This lack of specificity regarding the depth and breadth of ethics curricula has led to suggestions for widened discourse that includes insights from the domains of humanities and social science (Franks & Spaulding 2013). AACSB's 2020 standards, by contrast, do not identify required curricular content in ethics; however, ethics remains a key value along with quality, diversity and inclusion, a global mindset, social responsibility, and community.

Certainly, an understanding of ethics as well as ethical behavior and role modelling is a critical need within organizations and must be addressed in the business school curriculum. A literature review on business ethics education from 1982 to 2021 identified 862 scholarly articles on the topic with older research focused on integrating ethics into the curriculum along with pedagogical approaches while more recent research has emphasized sustainability goals and Principles for Responsible Management Education (Jaganjac *et al.* 2023). The de-emphasis of accreditation standards related to ethics along with the findings of the literature review suggest the need for a renewed examination of ethics education in business schools.

The current study contributes to closing this gap by examining students' experiences with ethical dilemmas in the workplace and their personal lives based on an assignment in a course entitled, "Individual Action and Corporate Social Responsibility." The purpose of the study is to examine students' self-reported experiences with ethical dilemmas and their strategies for approaching them to inform pedagogical practice and help students develop ethical behaviors. As such, the larger objective of integrating ethics into business school culture in order to transform society and achieve sustainable development goals can be reached (Jaganjac *et al.* 2023). The study has implications for pedagogical practice and the integration of ethics into the business school curriculum.

2. Literature Review

Many schools of business require students to take an ethics class to prepare them to make the right decisions when faced with moral dilemmas, and by doing so, to promote integrity within organizations and gain the trust of stakeholders (University of Redlands 2021; Western Governor's University 2021). Ethics courses form the foundation for a successful business career, and particularly, for avoiding scandal and financial ruin. Students need to understand the importance of doing business ethically while also attaining desirable financial outcomes (Webster 2023). Typically, ethics courses focus on examples of people and companies that failed due to not doing the right thing and those that thrived due to applying ethical principles (Western Governor's University 2021). Courses in

ethics provide students with the opportunity to consider their personal ethical codes and determine the consequences of their actions such as who will be harmed, who will benefit, whose rights are upheld, and who are threatened (The University of Utah 2013).

Some business educators favor integrating an ethics component throughout the curriculum while others favor stand-alone courses (Beddewela *et al.* 2017; Christensen *et al.* 2007; Kolb *et al.* 2017; McDonald & Donleavy 1995; Painter-Morland *et al.* 2016; Rutherford *et al.* 2012; Storey *et al.* 2017; Weybrecht 2017). Similarly, business schools must decide if these courses will be required or an elective. Barriers and drivers for teaching ethics have also been examined. The former focus on the expertise of available faculty and their interest in teaching ethics (Beddewela *et al.* 2017; Cornelius *et al.* 2007; Matten & Moon 2004; Painter-Morland *et al.* 2016; Rutherford *et al.* 2012) while the latter entail business community directives (Matten & Moon 2004; Sims & Sims 1991) as well as accreditation requirements (Annan-Diab & Milinari 2017; Beddewela *et al.* 2017; Storey *et al.* 2017; Rutherford *et al.* 2012).

Certainly, current events impact shifts in research and curriculum. For ethics, these include the Enron scandal (Sims & Brinkmann 2003) and the dot-com bubble burst (Ofek & Richardson 2003), which created a renewed interest in ethics in the business school curriculum and in associated research (Ghoshal 2005; Mitroff 2004; Pfeffer 2005; Sims & Brinkmann 2003). Ethical failures frequently appear in the media and add strength for today's business students who are likely familiar with these situations. Examples include the failure of Silicon Valley Bank (Filabi 2023; Huynh 2024) or the call for the Supreme Court to impose a binding ethics code on its justices (Durkee 2024).

Varied approaches for teaching business ethics are evident in the literature with some advocating for a reactive approach focused on legal requirements and regulations and others a proactive approach with an emphasis on moral reasoning (Cornelius *et al.* 2007). Other voices call for integrating the philosophical and behavioral (De los Reyes 2007). Experiential learning has been identified as a means to developing ethical behaviors (Shrivastava 2010). Case studies, guest speakers, digital tools, games and simulations, excursions, role play, team projects, and co-curricular learning are also represented as effective pedagogical tools for teaching business ethics (Jaganjac *et al.* 2023).

A review of the literature on business ethics education reveals a shift in the past ten years from emphasizing the integration of business ethics into the curriculum and related pedagogical approaches to a focus on sustainability and sustainability development goals (Jaganjac *et al.* 2023). The latter research at times uses the terms *ethics*, *Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)*, and *sustainability* interchangeably, and in fact, suggests integrating the three areas (Annan-Diab & Molinari 2017; De Los Reyes 2017; Greenberg *et al.* 2017; Kolb *et al.* 2017; Storey *et al.* 2017; Weybrecht 2017). Certainly, business school accreditation requirements have an impact on curricula by advocating for the

integration of responsibility and sustainability (Kolb *et al.* 2017; Storey *et al.* 2017). However, this shift has made “discussions pertaining to the integration and teaching of fundamental ethics concepts . . . nearly obsolete” (Jaganjac *et al.* 2023, p. 16). Jaganjac *et al.* (2023) argue that the development of business leaders with the ability to address sustainability issues must have a strong foundation in ethics as sustainability is about responsibility to others and to future generations.

Teaching ethics is firmly established in business schools. However, current trends emphasize the need to integrate ethics, CSR, and sustainability (Jaganjac *et al.* 2023). The Transforming Ethics Education in Business Schools (TEEBBS) framework advocates for reclaiming “the ‘ethics’ in business ethics education” (Jaganjac *et al.* 2023, p. 3). The framework accounts for antecedents (e.g., grand challenges such as climate change, inequality, human rights violations, corporate scandals), *enablers* (e.g., exposure to a wide range of pedagogical approaches and practical learning tools), and consideration of *catalysts* such as accreditation and *barriers* in the form of business school culture and limited faculty interest. Ethics serves as the core of the framework.

The emphasis of the current research is to evaluate the TEEBS framework on the *enablers* aspect of the framework, specifically, pedagogical approaches, practical learning tools, and barriers. Insights gained from students’ ethical dilemmas inform the integration of business ethics into the business school curriculum to create a better society and achieve sustainable development goals.

3. Methods

Study participants were enrolled in an ethics course required for business majors at an open admission university in the US with approximately 45,000 students. Participants were enrolled in six online sections of the course over six 15-week semesters from Fall 2020 to Spring 2024. The course was taught by one professor. The number of participants was 134 (30% female and 60% male). The study met the requirements for human subjects’ research as determined by the university’s Institutional Research Board, approval number 1633.

Students completed an assignment reporting on an instance where they witnessed someone making an unethical decision within the last six months. They provided a brief description of the situation, including the relevant context and details. They were asked to analyze the situation using the following steps: determine the facts; identify the ethical issues; identify the stakeholders and consider the situation from the stakeholder point of view; consider the alternatives; compare and weigh the alternatives; and report on their own actions. The purpose of the assignment was to engage students in reflecting on real-world ethical dilemmas in order to practice systematic ethical decision-making, develop critical thinking skills, enhance ethical reasoning, and apply theoretical concepts to practical scenarios.