Fostering Moral Courage: What Do Business Students Learn About Professional Ethics in Cooperative Education Placements?

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This paper examines recent literature and research into business students' experiences in cooperative education placements with a view to exploring their experiences and learning of professional ethics. In recent times, the business world has been rocked by scandals such as Enron, WorldCom and Parmalat. At the heart of these business collapses is the realization that the business world has fallen short in terms of professional and business ethics. As cooperative education students enter the workforce for the first time, they have the opportunity to learn from their colleagues' and mentors' attitudes and behaviors that will influence them for a life time. These may be positive strong attitudes to ethical behavior and practice or poor attitudes and questionable practices. This examination of the recent literature and research will serve as a foundation for a small research project into students learning and experiences of professional ethics in their cooperative education placements.

Introduction

The relationship between business and ethics is not always an easy one. The desire to make a profit and the need to act ethically are not always compatible. In recent times, the business world has been rocked by scandals such as Enron, WorldCom and Parmalat. At the heart of these business collapses is the public realization that the business world has fallen short in terms of professional and business ethics. As educators we have a responsibility to ensure our business graduates and new professionals are trained to recognize ethical dilemmas, develop moral reasoning skills and have the courage to act ethically. Even if we achieve this, does business want ethical graduates? Can the cooperative education placement encourage development of moral courage in our graduates and new professionals?

Students, Ethics, the Professions and Business

While the professions, such as accounting and law, set codes of conduct and professional standards for their members, the broader business community can ignore and give scant regard to ethics. Disciplines such as marketing, human resource management, and finance do not have the same professional standards as accountants and lawyers. It is easier for the accounting student to identify the standards expected for them as they enter their profession for the first time, than the new marketing assistant. Further professions continue to educate graduates with professional exams and continuing education programs. Graduates of non-professions are less likely to have further ethical training after graduation. However, there is no doubt that all business people, including professionals find there are ethical issues and situational pressures at work (Tamminen, 1996).

Professions have high expectations of their members including recent graduates. Accountants and lawyers have always ensured their professions were based on strong ethical codes. These codes are published, available to the public and disciplinary action may be taken against members for breaches of the codes. Professions and professionals are distinguished from general business people by the speciality of their work. There is recognition of professionals' social obligation to apply their skills and wisdom for the general benefit of the community. Such skills and wisdom require the practice of independent judgment and adherence to codes of ethics (Clarke et al., 1997; Guy et al., 2003).

It is these values, rules, knowledge, skills and practices that differentiate a profession from other business activities. Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi and Damon, (2001) distinguish between individual practitioners of a profession, domains of a profession, where knowledge, practice and ethical values are shared, and fields, where men and women actually practice a domain's procedures. Domains and fields are protected and defended by expert practitioners, who 'gatekeep' the profession. Business students who enter their profession for the first time, engage with both the domain and the field.

Gatekeepers provide essential information to new practitioners, explaining the standards and expectations of the profession. Individual practitioners demonstrate the practice of the professionals work. For students, who are trying to make meaning of their profession and their place within it, both gatekeepers and individual practitioners are highly influential. Our students observe their colleagues and managers at work and they influence their own behavior in the current placement and for many years in their professional work. Surprisingly, ethical behavior does not often appear in the generic competencies of students in business degrees (Groenewald, 2004) or in employer surveys of desired generic competencies of employers, business students or graduates (Hodges & Burchell, 2003; Rainsbury et al., 2002). While the community may have high expectations of professionals, employers are seeking entirely different skills and attributes. Although employers seek technical and soft skills from graduates they do not expressly identify the need for ethical behavior and attributes. There appears to be a division between the expectations of the community and the expectations of the employer.

Developing the moral business person is not easy, and while universities and polytechnics have some responsibility for teaching ethics they do not focus on developing students for ethical action. After graduation, most ethical education takes place within the businesses and organizations (Andrews, 2003; Jones & Hiltebeitel, 1995; Lave, 1991b). Daloz Parks (1993) explains that an interpersonal ethic of trustworthiness and mutual accountability is essential but not sufficient for ethical management. Something more is needed. She suggests graduates need moral courage, to not only know what is good, but how to act. This requires attention to educating and training students to both reason and act within a social formation at work and in their communities. Teaching and encouraging students to reflect develops their reasoning skills. The challenge for educators is to provide the space and the opportunity for students to practice ethical action. Cooperative education placements and the mentoring relationships are opportunities within business education to develop both the critical reflection and encourage ethical action within a social context.

McFarlane, Ricks and Field (1999) acknowledge the educators responsibility to teach students how to make good ethical decisions at work. In their research they divided ethical issues into two categories. Firstly, they identified professional standards issues, such as accommodation of exceptions, harassment, inappropriate practice and interpersonal conflict. Secondly, they identified moral/ethical reasoning issues, such as personal/professional conflict, balancing conflicting needs, and recognition of ethical dilemmas. It appears easier to teach students about professional rules and codes of conduct, which address professional standards issues, than it is to empower them to manage moral/ethical issues at work. The later are more complex and may involve the need for action, which may be unpopular and unrewarded at work. Students need opportunities to practice ethical action to develop moral reasoning skills and to increase confidence in their own abilities.

Research across four different professional cultures indicates that ethics is linked to national culture, and while accounting students may have awareness of some ethical issues they are not fully aware of ethical issues, or capable of ethical decision-making or ethical action (Agacer, 1997). Recent research indicates accounting students are not developing ethical awareness as students in other disciplines with similar socio-economic backgrounds. Dellaportas et al. (2006) suggests that accounting education inhibits progression because of the emphasis on rules based thinking rather than developing moral cognitive development. In recent years ethical decision-making models have provided a new focus for ethics in business education. Guy (1990)and Nash (1990), developed models for professionals, business people and business students when faced with ethical dilemmas. The models themselves provide frameworks for decision-making. However, they often assume shared moral values rather that recognition of the personal nature of moral decision-making. The models themselves do not necessarily encourage ethical action.

Bodaracco, (2003) explains that ethics develops through defining moments in which professional responsibilities conflict with personal values. These moments provide opportunities for inspired action and personal growth for professionals and business people. Again the cooperative education placement provides the opportunity to experience some defining moments while a safety net, of mentoring and supervision, is still in place. Sadly, many people leaving business careers often complain that they were forced to give up the values and purposes that led them to choose business careers and workplaces in the first place (Damon, 2004). Many of these people were professionals, who professions failed to given them the ethical training and the moral courage to do what is right and

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good in a business setting. Training in rules, codes of conduct and ethical decision-making models, is not enough. New professionals and new business people need preparation for working life. It is the opportunity to practice, to reflect and to be mentored that provides the training for moral courage.

Opportunities for Developing Moral Courage in Cooperative Education Placements

How students learn in cooperative education placements is of great interest to researchers. Piaget's cognitive development theory (Piaget, 1985), Bandura's Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), and Kolb's Experiential Learning Model theories (Kolb, 1984) explore the sociocultural context of learning and find a complex set of challenges. Researchers have focused on exploring the learning environment, and the unique relationships and circumstances which encourage learning within a social context. Kolb (1984) acknowledged the value of learning outside the classroom, where there are new challenges to practice and reflect on their outcomes. Bandura explored how students learn from others, both by instruction and observation. The sociocultural context of learning highlights the roles colleagues and workplace mentors in student learning in cooperative education placements.

It is widely accepted by educationalists that cooperative education placements provide a unique and valuable learning experience for students. Most cooperative education placements provide students with a range of personal experiences which relate to and integrate with their prior academic experiences, allow for participation in the workplace and include supervision by the host organization and the academic institution (Kumar, 1996; Wilson, 1987). The workplace both welcomes and encourages the student to participate in the adult world of work (Daloz Parks, 2001). Within the work environment are "real world" processes, people and problems with which the student can engage. Learning becomes less theoretical and distant to more practical and contextual (Lave, 1991). Students become aware of the social context of their work, and its role in society. For the first time students engage as new practitioners in their chosen professions. Students enter communities of practice, in which, as Lave (1991a) explains, learning is situated in communities of practice, where all participants engage in social activity based around learning, thinking and knowing. They all share common constructs of their work.

When students engage in meaningful work within the social context of the workplace, they experience the best of deep learning. Students transform their information and ideas into personal knowledge and understanding (Entwistle, 2000). Piaget, (1985) describes the cooperative education student as being de-stabilised as they encounter new knowledge, skills and experiences. As they re-stabilize and regain their equilibrium they internally process their learning experiences. The cooperative education experience is a deeper one than that of the classroom learning experience, providing opportunities for both critical reflection and critical discourse (Van Gyn & Grove-White, 2004). Students acknowledge the personal development benefits of the placement including development of interpersonal skills, personal development, better understanding career perspective, increased awareness of the relevance of their studies, improvements in both technical skills and expertise (Comerford, 2004). Students acknowledge they learn more deeply by integrating classroom knowledge with real world experiences. As Kolb (1984), cooperative students engage in a process of encountering new situations and problems, of reflecting on their experiences, and drawing out their new learning. The process of reflection is extremely important and allows students to order their thinking and make sense of the chaos of their new experiences (Alfred, 2002; Moon, 1999) .

Most cooperative education courses encourage and foster student reflection through learning journals, formal mentoring, or reflective essays/reports. The academic supervisor is uniquely placed to challenge the student assumptions and thinking (Zachary, 2000). In this process the students have the opportunity to develop life long skills of reflection and commitment to improving professional practice. Part of this process is developing moral reasoning skills and finding moral courage. The relationships students form with mentors and colleagues is at the heart of their learning in their placements. Mentors and colleagues are hugely influential in forming student attitudes to work. In cooperative education, mentors are a valuable resource, allowing the aims of significant learning, and optimum student performance to be achieved by students. Within the mentor-mentee relationship which provides guidance, support and appropriate challenges, students experience flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Flow enables students to work at a higher level of competence, and engage in transformational learning in which students reject assumptions of the past and develop new

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perspectives (Mezirow, 1998). The mentor provides an environment for student learning, fostering learning, and developing a unique person.

As cooperative education students enter the workforce for the first time, students will encounter a range of ethical dilemmas which challenge their personal values and moral reasoning skills. From these experiences they have the opportunity to observe their colleagues and mentors attitudes and behaviors. These observations and reflections are likely to influence their values and their actions for a life-time (Lave & Wenger, 1991b). These may be positive strong attitudes to ethical behavior and practice or poor attitudes and questionable practices.

A Possible Research Project?

The prior research into business ethics and the need to foster moral courage in graduates in new professionals identifies an interesting and challenging topic. As educators we should ensure our students are prepared for the world of work in all aspects, including moral development. The proposed research project will explore the ethical learning opportunities in the cooperative education placements in a business degree with 6 majors. At the end of their placements students will have had the opportunity to experience and reflect. Students may have revisited a particular ethical dilemma two or three times, in journals, meetings with mentors and reflective essays before they are interviewed for the research. In the process they will have considered the ethical standards of their profession (if relevant), observed colleagues and mentors actions, possibly considered and used an ethical model for decision-making. The students may have taken action, and demonstrated moral courage, reflected on the consequences, and made meaning of the outcomes. The student experiences provide rich data to explore.

The ethical questions used in the student interviews will be based on the shared values identified by Guy (1990). She identified a number of basic and shared values, which are found in both personal and business ethics. These include caring, honesty, accountability, promise keeping, pursuit of excellence, loyalty, fairness, integrity, respect for others and responsible citizenship. Guy (1990) concludes that these values have survived the ages, are shared among professions and cultures alike. These values are applicable to professional and non-professional students. They provide a good starting point to converse with our students and explore how they develop their moral courage at work.

Conclusion

Clearly, the community does want ethical graduates, professionals and business people. The cooperative education placement is a unique and valuable learning experience, not only in aspects of developing technical and interpersonal skills, but also in the development of values and ethical behaviors. Students are not immune from experiencing ethical dilemmas and observing the actions and behaviors of others (both ethical and unethical). The placement provides a unique learning opportunity, and an environment in which to learn about ethics, practice ethical decision-making, and engage in ethical action. The cooperative education model supports and encourages ethical behavior through the mentoring model.

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