

# **Ethical challenges from the real world: student experiences in cooperative education placements**

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Developing a moral business person is not easy. Universities and polytechnics have always undertaken some degree of responsibility for teaching ethics. Increasingly students are exposed to real world work issues when assigned to cooperative education placements. The workplace demands graduates not only consider ethical issues, but also requires them to consider ethical action. In this research project the author reviewed the ethical requirements of the Industry Based Learning course in the Bachelor of Business at Unitec, Auckland with a view to informing teaching and learning practice. The aim of the research was to evaluate student learning in ethical issues and learn more about student experiences and how delivery and student support mechanisms for students could be improved. The author examined student writing (learning journals and reflective essays) and interview text to explore student knowledge of ethical values, their decision making processes and their ability to take ethical action. Students were completely comfortable with the ethical values on which the research was based. They spoke articulately about the ethical issues they found in their placements. Students used a variety of decision making processes with mixed success. Most students reported feeling vulnerable in taking ethical action and that their emotions prevented them from acting as professionals in the workplace. Ethics is an essential part of business education for both professional and non professional graduates. In the Industry Based Learning course in the Bachelor of Business placements gave students a unique opportunity to explore their ethical understandings, to practice their reasoning skills and to experiment with taking ethical action in a guided and supported environment. As a result of the research the course coordinator introduced a variety of teaching and learning strategies to support students in their placements and prepare them for the changing and variable nature of the workplace.

## INTRODUCTION

Developing a moral business person is not easy. Universities and polytechnics have always undertaken some degree of responsibility for teaching ethics. Increasingly students are exposed to real world work issues when assigned to cooperative education placements. The workplace demands graduates not only consider ethical issues, but also requires them to consider ethical action. In the Industry Based Learning course in the Bachelor of Business at Unitec Institute of Technology course learning outcomes required student to have an awareness and understanding of ethical issues. A research project was undertaken to evaluate student learning in ethical issues and learn more about student experiences and how delivery and student support mechanisms could be improved.

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### THE PROFESSIONS, BUSINESS AND ETHICS

At Unitec Institute of Technology business students graduate into either a 'professional' or 'non-professional' role. Professions and professionals are distinguished from general business people by the specialty of their work. There is a widely accepted 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, 1997; Guy, 2003). Professions have high expectations of their members including recent graduates.

By contrast non-professionals are informal groups of business people who may share common interests but whose membership and activities are not government regulated. Non-professional business groups, such as finance, human resource management and marketing, may form associations to serve the interests of their members but usually lack the formal disciplinary procedures that all professions share. Some students in the Industry Based Learning course were training to work as professionals and others belonged to the non-professional occupations, such as marketing and human resources.

After graduation, graduates ethical education takes place in the businesses and organizations in which they work (Andrews, 2003; Jones, 1995; Lave, 1991b). Senior practitioners provide essential information to new practitioners, explaining the standards and expectations of the profession. Individual practitioners demonstrate the practice of the professionals work. For graduates and students, trying to understand their profession and their place within it, both senior and individual practitioners are highly influential. Graduates and students observe their colleagues and managers at work. These observations and the meaning made from them influence the graduates' own behavior in their current workplace and for many years in their professional work (Bockarie, 2002).

The Industry Based Learning course was required to respond to the needs of both professional and non-professional students. Students needed a clear understanding of the ethical standards which applied to their role.

### BUSINESS STUDENTS AND ETHICS

Developing the moral businessperson is not easy. However, universities and polytechnics have always undertaken some degree of responsibility for teaching ethics. Increasingly students are exposed to real world work issues by being assigned to cooperative education placements. In the workplace students have the opportunity to observe interactions between colleagues, and the management styles and decisions of their supervisors. From these observations students enlarge their ethical knowledge gained while studying for their degrees. The workplace demands graduates not only consider ethical issues, but also requires them to consider ethical action.

Faced with the need to act ethically students may be insecure or fearful. Daloz Parks (1993) explains that an interpersonal ethic of trustworthiness and mutual accountability is essential but not sufficient for ethical management and ethical action. Something more is needed. She suggests students 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.

New professionals and new business people need preparation for working life. They need to be able to act ethically and maintain their careers. Cooperative education placements are the opportunity to practice, to reflect and to be mentored. It is this mentoring that provides the training for future moral courage (Daloz Parks, 2000).

#### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research project was designed to select a method of inquiry that not only made meaning of the students experiences but also, put the meaning in its place (Richardson, 2005). The challenge was to engage in a process which encouraged students understandings and knowledge to flow (Johnson, 2001). The research inquiry focused on finding 'deep learning' derived from real and personal experiences in which students' professional and personal beliefs were tested. In this context deep learning refers to learning with understanding as opposed to 'surface learning' which is a more temporary less developed learning (Boud, 1990). To capture these experiences were captured through meaningful conversations with students in which the emotional and spiritual aspects of ethical dilemmas could emerge. In-depth interviews with students provided the opportunity to learn the meanings of the participants' actions (Johnson, 2001).

The first stage of the research process was an extensive literature review, and this was followed by several drafts of interview questions. In the process of identifying common ethical values that participants could relate to and to stimulate discussion the researcher decided to select a small range of ethical values. These values were eventually taken from Mary Guy's 1990 book, *Ethical Decision Making in Everyday Work Situations*, and are ethical values acceptable across a range of occupations, nationalities and ethnic backgrounds. As Guy (1990) explains, these ethical values that are shared in both business and personal contexts, have survived the years and remain valuable to communities and individuals today. The 10 ethical values chosen were: accountability, honesty, fairness, pursuit of excellence, caring, loyalty, integrity, promise-keeping, respect for others, and responsible citizenship.

As part of the deep conversation interviews, each participant was asked to rank these values in order of importance to them. In this process the participants had to consider and place each value in personal context. This was a valuable exercise to focus the participants before moving on to the deeper, exploratory questions. The second set of questions asked the participants to explore an ethical dilemma they had encountered whilst on placement. The second set of questions, were exploratory in nature encouraging participants to talk about what had happened, to return to the physical and emotional environment of their placement. The research probed the participants not only what had happened but also how they had responded emotionally and what meaning they had made from the experience. The third set of questions focused on ethical decision making, exploring the thinking, and analytical processes of the participant when faced with the dilemma moving on to discuss whether the participant took action and how they felt about the outcome.

The participants were drawn from 35 placement students in the Industry Based Learning course in February to June, 2006. The participants were all business students studying the Bachelor of Business in the last or second to last semester of study. They were drawn from majors in accounting, finance, human resource management, marketing and operations

management. The students were personally selected to participate in the research on the basis of their ability to articulate their experiences clearly. Some 20 students were asked to participate in the research project and the first 10 students who indicated their willingness to engage in the research process were interviewed. The interviews took place over a two-week period. Each interview was transcribed; the script was then coded according to a pre-prepared topic guide. In the process of coding additional codes were added to the guide and some transcriptions were re-coded by the researcher 2-3 times.

The coded script was selected from the whole transcript, then sorted and grouped according to code. Significant portions of coded data were analyzed. Sub-parts and whole parts of all grouped data were reviewed and interpreted within the context of the three key exploratory areas of ethical knowledge, ethical decision-making and ethical action.

## DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

### *Ethical Knowledge*

Students were completely comfortable with the ethical values provided to them as part of the research. They spoke articulately about ethical issues they had observed in their placements. As an example of their ethical awareness, is it clear students are often disappointed in the behavior and ethical standards of others. One student told of an incident involving a colleague where she had expected loyalty: "As part of the management team I expected him to realize my authority was being publicly challenged and I had expected his support." When that support or loyalty did not eventuate she was left feeling unsupported and confused. One student acknowledged the situational nature of ethics, stating, "I have realized that my ethical stance has become more intense over the years due to the very nature of the work I am involved in."

### *Ethical Decision-Making*

Students need practical assistance and practice in managing ethical issues in the workplace. One our students encountered a colleague sneaking time off work for personal purposes. She stated, "she was absent for two and a half hours from picking up the table to sending it to her home and back to the office. It all happened within her working hours." However, our student was unable to raise this issue with her manager or workplace mentor. She found herself to be complicit to the action and was clearly uncomfortable.

Students worry about the impact of their ethical decision-making on their future careers. One student stated, "I did not want to put my career at XXX or my (Industry Based Learning) course in jeopardy." While students were concerned with the negative effects of unethical behavior on others, they were very concerned about the effects on themselves and their future careers.

One students explained their motivation for good ethical practice, she said "I have a valid need to ensure everything is 'squeaky clean and above board' in order to prove the criticizers wrong in their assumptions that unethical and immoral actions and decisions are taken daily by my XXXX, my colleagues and myself." Again this is a topic that can be discussed and explored with students prior to placement.

*Ethical Action*

Students felt vulnerable in taking ethical action at work due to the temporary nature of cooperative education placements. One student tried to take ethical action and then felt unsupported in the workplace. She stated, "When X didn't support me in my stance I had felt very vulnerable in front of the group. Supervision is very important to students."

Another aspect of work students found challenging was the unethical behavior of others in the workplace. Students were very aware of the negative impact of unethical behavior on others. One student encountered a very negative work colleague and stated "her behavior created a negative vibe." Another student, who had described her work environment as "toxic", stated, "you get discouraged and it's hard to be in that environment all day."

Emotions are difficult to manage and control. One student said she struggled to keep her emotions under control. She said, "I experienced immense feeling of self-disappointment as I had worked so hard on personal self-control to shed a previous fiery reputation." Another student who felt she had lost control at work said, "I have now set myself a new personal goal which is to work on my emotions and learn to cope in an emotional situation."

CONCLUSIONS

Clearly, students will encounter difficulties in the workplace and in cooperative education placements. Students can be supported by discussing with them the possibility of unethical action and preparing them for it. Ethical issues may arise in the placement or be apparent to them in the first few days. Either way, anticipating that there may be some issues at work and having some strategies for dealing with them will give students resilience.

There a number of challenges for staff teaching in the degree program. The first is to provide opportunities for students to engage in critical discourse, and room within this to explore their own ethical values. The second is the opportunity to practice ethical decision-making by using staff to encourage, celebrate and support students to take ethical action and demonstrate moral courage.

Workplace mentors and academic supervisors can support students by allowing them the space to make meaning of what they observe and consider. They can also prepare students for unethical situations so students can anticipate and prepare themselves.

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