

Chapter 15

Hate Studies in Business: A Course on Recognizing and Combating the Ways Business Organizations Exert Violence on Individuals, Families, and Society

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes a course called “Hate Studies in Business” which seeks to help students to recognize business cultures and practices that treat people as “others” and, in the process, inflict wounds that undermine the dignity of individuals and society. The course is taught by a team of business professors who lead the students in examining hate in the context of each instructor’s discipline. The course grew from a conscious effort among the faculty to develop a business curriculum that encourages moral development and prepares students for the many ways they will be challenged as they enter the workforce, including assaults on their own and others’ integrity. The chapter includes a discussion of the educational setting, an overview of the course content, the impact of the course on student attitudes toward pluralism and diversity, and a discussion of the lessons learned in the initial offering of the course.

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INTRODUCTION

What does unethical business look like? Certainly there are media images from the recent past that come to mind: for example, handcuffed corporate executives leaving the court room or press conferences in which top level managers point fingers at other parties for safety issues or environmental disasters. Students can likely identify these examples if asked. But what about less public examples of “business behaving badly,” i.e., the kind of moral and ethical lapses that graduates are likely to encounter firsthand in their professional lives, perhaps even in their first job? And at what point do students learn that there are accepted ways of doing business and elements of workplace culture that violate human dignity or breach the boundaries of social justice?

This chapter describes the manner in which one group of faculty sought to develop students to become managers with integrity by teaching the many and varied ways that they might encounter the opposite. To that end, we created a course called “Hate Studies in Business.” The course was taught by a team of eight, including professors of business ethics, management, marketing, economics, management information systems, and accounting. Each instructor led the students in examining hate in the context of the instructor’s discipline. Course content included a philosophical account of “hate” from a virtue ethics perspective, the villainization of “dirty workers,” human trafficking, cyberterrorism, the promotion of hate towards self and others in advertising, profit maximization and greed, and the divide between management and workers. The course was offered as a three-credit elective course that business students could opt to take to help fulfill a requirement that they have six credits of integrative, international, or experiential coursework. All of the students who took the course were seniors in their final semester at the university.

EDUCATIONAL SETTING AND BACKGROUND

Gonzaga University is a Jesuit university with a total enrollment of about 7,800 students, located in Spokane, Washington. The university has been at the forefront of the developing field of Hate Studies, including the founding of the Institute for Hate Studies (formerly known as the Institute for Action Against Hate) in 1997. The Institute supports the study of the causes and effects of hate from multiple academic disciplinary perspectives and is dedicated to developing strategies to combat hate. The Institute formally defines Hate Studies as “inquiry into the human capacity to define, and then dehumanize or demonize, an ‘other,’ and the processes which inform and give expression to, or can curtail, control or combat, that capacity.”

In Spring 2009, the Institute created a class called “Why People Hate” as an initial foray into the realm of hate studies education. The class was housed in the Sociology Department and taught from the perspectives of history, psychology, sociology, business, and criminal justice. The following spring, the School of Business followed suit with a course of its own which expanded on the business portion of the prior class. With support from the Dean, all business professors were queried about their interest in team teaching the course. Eight professors responded and worked collaboratively to develop the “Hate Studies in Business” course.

The first task of the teaching team was to define hate in the context of business. The word “hate” is a difficult and polarizing one, and some might question whether “hate” is really the right word for the underlying motivation of the business practices that we sought to explore in the course. The teaching team’s view was consistent with the work of scholars in the discipline of hate studies who recognize that hate is not necessarily grounded in “extreme hostility or pathology. Rather, it is more often foreseeable, and rational, at least from the world view of the perpetrator.”

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