Efficacy of Ethics Education in Library and Information Science:
A Case Study

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This work explains the need to adapt the content of ethics training programs in library and information science (LIS) studies to two fundamental aspects: the future professional requirements of students and the beliefs of the students in this field of study. A purely qualitative investigative strategy, including the use of vignettes, was employed to demonstrate that a theoretical-practical methodology of teaching-learning, supported by a combination of ethics theories and a model of ethical reasoning, changes the attitude of students, adapting individual and professional ethical values for the future exercise of the profession.

INTRODUCTION

In Library and Information Science (LIS) studies, training on ethics and deontology of information requires continuous efforts by teachers and investigators to adapt the content of training programs to two fundamental aspects: the future professional needs of students and the beliefs of the students in this field of study. A student's training in ethics must take into account, on one hand, the moral considerations that affect information as a resource, product, or objective in a specific informational context (Floridi, 2006). On the other hand, it must also acknowledge the different theories and models of ethical reasoning. The objective of this is to develop critical thinking regarding individual and professional ethical values that the student will face in the future. It is thus to be expected that in the practice of ethics teaching, students show individual values that may or may not coincide with those that they will assume in their professional life. Therefore, in the ethics teaching-learning process, deontological theories help understand ethical

behavior in a professional environment, and the theories of responsibility help the student develop moral values and an individual sense of ethics that match universal values according to the student's personal and professional environment.

From a methodological point of view, the study of this adaptation of individual and professional values of students for future application has traditionally been achieved through the use of quantitative-qualitative research techniques based on case studies or questionnaires, and through the use of tests and pre-tests or scales.

This study is based on the hypothesis that, after an effective training period, there is a change in the attitude of students regarding the values that will shape their professional ethics, starting from their individual principles. It is of interest to determine how this change takes place. For this purpose, the following objectives were established: first, to confirm that the student training methodology used is effective for achieving this change of attitude. Second, the use of a purely qualitative technique, such as the vignettes technique (Urquhart, 1999), was tested because it will provide additional information on the ethical reasoning of the students during their change of attitude towards professional ethical values.

BACKGROUND

Ethics investigation, given the multidisciplinary characteristics of LIS, relies on importing techniques and methodology from other disciplines (Carlin, 2003). University students receive ethics training for future professional careers using disciplines related to LIS, such as Business ethics for future management professionals, or Information technology ethics for those responsible for information and communications systems. These two ethics education fields related to LIS both address decision-making regarding ethics and are based on theories that make this possible from a sociological, psychological, or philosophical perspective (O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2005, Craft, 2013, Walker, 2013, Mulhearn et al., 2017, Wang, Wang & Wang, 2020), as well as on educational methodologies and evaluating the impact of such education. Among the variables managed, the deontological code is used as a tool for decision-making. However, Lau (2010) suggests that ethical decisions should be made based on a model of moral reasoning. This author hypothesizes that university students with adequate ethics training are better equipped to make decisions, and he proves this hypothesis using vignettes and a quantitative analysis of the results. This author's work is valuable because it provides a review of the literature investigating how ethics education is affected by the technique used (tests, scenarios, questionnaires, interviews, vignettes, measures such as scales, reasoning stages, lists of values) and the pre-post analysis of all referenced works. On the other hand, Carlson and Burke (1998) demonstrate the flexibility of the ethical behavior of students, who change attitude after starting from a rigid point of view at the beginning of the course. This study is based on a qualitative strategy, namely, a single case study in which they apply content analysis.

Regarding Information Technology ethics, Stahl (2011) developed an ethical and moral conceptual frame for information systems students that demonstrates the complexity of ethical reflection and the need to develop adequate training programs. The works of Chang (2011, 2018) in the field of information technology are of interest because they use the ethics theory and the model of ethical reasoning of Kohlberg to measure the impact of e-learning on specific values in students, such as privacy, accessibility, intellectual property, and respect for rules. Other authors, such as Cohen and Cornwell (1989), Granitz and Loewy (2007), or Strittmatter and Bratton (2014), observe a change in the students' attitudes after

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