

Chapter 23

Reflective Cycles and Reflexive Learning Principles: Teaching Ethics from the Learner Outward¹

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ABSTRACT

Ethics learning takes root when it draws on learners' experiences of encounters with others, a strategy that is a foundation of adult learning processes generally. These experiences, the authors have found, can be voiced by students and managers in training and then analyzed from an ethical perspective when a safe environment has been established. A safe environment emerges through a process of incremental disclosures by the teacher and the learners. Establishing such an environment represents part of the first of what they have identified as three "cycles" of increasing awareness and understanding. In the first cycle, the teacher not only elicits but legitimates the experiences and perspectives of the learner. Second, learners are introduced to the relevant context for ethical management as being the human community and not merely the organization for which they work. Third, learners are guided to instituting a pragmatic vision for ethical action and management, a vision that recognises inescapable human frailty in themselves and others. The authors also emphasize core ethical themes of values, integrity in decision-making, and, for the public sector manager, a responsibility to serve the public interest. Such an experientially-based and highly contextualised learning process builds a student's or manager's capacity for both reflection-in-action and for ongoing ethical dialogue with others. Such dialogue can then enable the manager to lead organizational learning around ethics in business.

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INTRODUCTION

Ethics in an organizational setting resonates from the perspectives of the lived experiences of the individuals involved. They argue, protest, defer, lose sleep over dilemmas, and recount those experiences in confidence. They often know what they feel is the right thing to do, but they face someone who disagrees with them but has the same righteous feeling.

We can teach managers and students of management about ethics by drawing on such experiences. These experiences can be voiced and analyzed once a safe environment for learning is established. Creating this environment enables the launch of ethical learning cycles that lead to a self awareness that involves what Schoen (1983) characterized as “reflection-in-action”. Ongoing ethical dialogue with others can result, where assumptions and biases can be examined and organizational learning potentially achieved, where the practices and culture of an organization improve. This process necessarily transcends ethical calculation, which can result in pronouncing the “right” and “wrong” of decisions or practices. We emphasise building a web of relationships within which the tensions that lead to, and from, ethical issues can be addressed. This approach is consistent with what Cunliffe (2002) calls for in management learning, a reflective and reflexive dialogue where tacit knowledge gained from experience is connected with explicit knowledge from the academic sphere (Fulop, Marechal, and Rifkin, 2009).

In developing this approach to ethics teaching and learning for university students and public sector managers and executives, we have identified a few key guiding principles to enable the learners to recognise and accept their capacities as skilled, though imperfect, ethical actors.

Here, we discuss the learning of ethics rather than the application of ethics. Little literature on applied ethics is cited as we developed our approaches by synthesizing insights from a wide

range of revealing works on human action, behavior, philosophy, and learning. To that, we add reference here to signal pieces from recent literature in management and business ethics recommended by this chapter’s reviewers, as such work fleshes out and endorses conceptual rationale for the strategies that we began employing over fifteen years ago. For example, Sekerka and Godwin (2010) highlight development of “professional moral courage,” a process that aligns strongly with the aspirations and strategies that we lay out below. That said, we have sacrificed attention that could have been dedicated to reviewing recent literature in depth in order to focus instead on linking key concepts and processes.

OUR TEACHING CONTEXT

We draw heavily on experience, dating from the mid-1990s, as described in Nancarrow and Rifkin (1998). We present what we have found to be effective approaches to learning about the practical application of principles of applied ethics. These approaches have been used in our consulting and our teaching of business ethics for graduate and undergraduate students in management in Australia. One such course, an undergraduate subject in business ethics, typically had thirty-five to forty students in their third and final year of a bachelor of commerce program. The subject was an elective, which meant that it attracted students with a keen interest in ethics but also those with an opening in their timetable at the scheduled class time (most students commuted from off campus to this regional, government-funded university).

An MBA subject that evolved from this class was a single-semester course covering both business ethics and business law. Nancarrow served as the law specialist and Rifkin the ethics specialist. This subject combined the two topic areas, ethics and law, because both the Commerce faculty and Law faculty desired the lucrative tuition fees from this last slot in the core of the revised MBA

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