

Learning strategies for a postgraduate educational model for ethics management

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses an important – yet least investigated – problem of ethics management outcomes at universities. It specifically addresses outcomes to develop feeder and general competencies for management positions in the public sector. The article covers issues, such as the importance of ethics curricula for public management and the improving teaching methodologies for ethics at postgraduate level for South Africa universities. An ethics management educational model is also posited. This model could be used to address and streamline ethics management training at postgraduate level. Ethics management capacity training and education at universities are complex issues. Therefore, it is difficult to find a clear-cut ethics-teaching model to recoup the management ethics-training backlog that has built up over years. For this reason, the ensuing article advocates an integrated approach – instead of a parochial one – for addressing ethics management skills.

INTRODUCTION

“One of the foremost tasks of any effective management education ... must be to improve the ability of managers and embryo managers to make wise decisions and make plans for their successful implementation” (International Labour Office 1974:11.1).

One place to acquire ethics management skills is in an educational setting. In South Africa, this refers to management and development training in schools,

colleges and universities as well as through organisations that offer in-house management training and development (Smit and Cronje in Nethonzhe 2008:3).

Ethics management training and education is of major importance to the South African public service. The Transparency International in South Africa, Public Service Commission (PSC) also echoed this sentiment in an ethics survey (Nethonzhe 2008:3). Their main findings included the following: a) ethics management strategies and procedures are not broad enough; and b) ethics training and education sessions are too brief to be effective and do not focus on important groups of employees such as senior managers and new managers. A lack of ethics curricula and feeders at postgraduate university level were cited as a major deficiency. In order to meet this need, comprehensive ethics management training and development programmes are required if the South African public service is to foster a culture of ethics management.

Stewart (in Nethonzhe 2008:4) argues that, "... although organizational (stet) roles, climate and structure always interact with personal responses remain critical practicing public administrators fall back on institutions when faced with ethical quandaries". She further states that: "From an ethical theory perspective, there is a problem with institutions alone. Hence, professional societies developing codes, professors and lecturers teaching theories, departments formalizing (stet) rules of good practices for transmission to new employees". All of these instructional efforts may shed only a dim light on actual quandaries public administrators encounter. At the critical moment of choice or decision-making, the public manager may be left defenseless with no capacity to evaluate and justify his/her own moral values / feelings. Researchers in applied fields often eschew fundamental questions for higher learning institutions. Notably, these questions relate to the way in which to teach ethics management most effectively and to determine the best method to achieve this end at the postgraduate level. Strategies such as high-quality experiential learning methodologies, with ethics strongly infused in the content; dramaturgical teaching and the use of live cases will be discussed. This article examines deficiencies in ethics training in the South African public service. Furthermore, it proposes solutions and suggestions on how teaching approaches and methodologies can be reshaped or revamped in order to adapt to the fluid South African situation.

IMPORTANCE OF ETHICS MANAGEMENT COURSES

Public Administration and Management academics have stressed the importance of ethics in public management courses. They have commented on the risks associated with blatant ethical failures, such as long prison terms, loss of

confidence, loss of goodwill, as well as the moral need for public organisations to do what is right – purely for moral purposes. While the above reasons are all legitimate, they fail to identify the main reason why ethics courses are important, namely to improve organisational performance to achieve goals that would satisfy their customers in all respects.

It seems that, as a management feature, ethics has been stuck in a *neutral* or *external failure mode* for decades. During this time, it has focused only on addressing the blatant issues at hand. It especially relates to those associated with a high failure cost associated with unethical behaviour. This is the result of corruption or failures due to unproductiveness within the organisation largely taking place unnoticed and unmanaged. The leading causes of many governmental organisational problems – client dissatisfaction, high employee turnover, poor service delivery and a lack of training effort and innovation – have all been linked to the organisational failure, which in turn relates to unethical actions by employees.

Ethics is concerned with norms that guide human conduct. As a science concerning human behaviour, ethics must follow the same logic that is required of the real sciences. When ethical reasoning is properly applied, ethics becomes a useful tool for identifying the acceptable and unacceptable components of complex human interactions.

At this level, ethics is about determining what values to acknowledge and to what extent they have to be maintained. Because ethics contains characteristics associated with a science, it generates new knowledge and applies it to support decisions acceptable to society or the clients of an institution. For this reason, a study of ethics has been at the heart of intellectual thought since the early Greek philosophers. Notably, its ongoing contribution to the advancement of knowledge is undeniable. It is relevant and is a vital aspect of management. Ethical principles have a profound impact on many fields of modern management. This includes managing quality, human resources, culture, change, risk and ethics.

IDENTIFYING THE OBJECTIVES OF ETHICS EDUCATION PROGRAMMES

According to Denhardt (in Nethonzhe 2008:4), the most frequently stated goals of ethics education in Public Administration are the following:

- Capacity building to tolerate ambiguity and differences of opinion.
- Conveying knowledge of democratic values and public employees' obligations in terms of knowledge of code of ethics and constitutional norms and rules.

- Developing skills in managing ethics by influencing institutional culture and bureaucratic norms.
- Modeling ethical conduct.

Cooper (in Nethonzhe 2008:5) states that the main goals for ethics educators include:

- Developing an awareness of ethical issues and problems.
- Fostering ethical conduct in the public service.
- Building analytical skills in ethical decision-making.
- Cultivating an attitude of moral obligation and personal responsibility in the public service.
- Stimulating a sense of moral obligation among public service employees.

Hilliard (in Nethonzhe 2008:5) states that a country as culturally heterogeneous as South Africa is characterised by divergent values and norms that must be upheld. Moreover, they could lead to ethical dilemmas and conflicting situations. One can therefore argue that an effective response to the challenge of developing or reinforcing sound ethical dispositions and behaviour depend on adopting mutually reinforcing education and training programmes that incorporate ethical behaviour and actions.

INCLUDING ETHICS IN A CURRICULUM

“The aim of ethics ... is not to teach the difference between right and wrong, but to make people comfortable facing moral complexity.”

Robert C Solomon (1992)

A curriculum within a public sector environment, should ensure that qualifying students are capable of:

- Explaining the core ethical values and standards that apply to the public sector.
- Outlining ethical values and standards contained in legislation and codes that are relevant to the conduct of employees in the public sector.
- Describing areas of ethical conflict for public sector employees.
- Explaining the importance of ethical values and standards in relation to the public sector workplace.
- Discussing the relevance of established professional ethics and codes of conduct in public sector administration.

Many Public Administration programmes at postgraduate level face challenges

concerning the incorporation of ethics into their normal educational curricula that already provide only limited coverage to competency teaching or training. One solution is a modular approach that incorporates ethics as integral component of competency course work. Over the past years, many institutions incorporated ethics education into the management skills content of each course.

As part of the curriculum Public Administration and Management, ethics teaching, could achieve a variety of goals; namely:

- becoming aware of the ethical standards that govern public servants;
- gaining a useful framework for evaluating ethical dilemmas;
- having the opportunity to address an ethical dilemma;
- making an ethical judgment; and
- defending their decisions.

At the very least, incorporating ethics into a curriculum would introduce students to the codes of conduct that govern public servants' behaviour. Examples should include – but not be limited to – the public's expectations, the nature of democratic governance, the need to encourage voluntary compliance with the code of conduct, as well as accountability requirements. While students may become familiar with the public service code of conduct in their pursuit of an academic qualification, they may be unaware of other, equally important codes of conduct. This includes the ethical requirements in national, provincial and local legislation, regulations and the international code of ethics for public servants. Examples should also be imbued with the spirit of *Batho Pele*, concern for the public interest, being efficient, as well as how to maintain appropriate standards of integrity and personal responsibility.

Providing students with a practical framework for evaluating ethical dilemmas could be an important part of the ethics module. With such a framework in hand, students could be required to evaluate an ethical dilemma and recommend a course of action to correct the unacceptable conduct. The final recommendation must include a viable solution to the ethical dilemma, with reference to the relevant code of conduct. This requirement will assist students to apply philosophical ethical challenges to real-life situations.

PRACTICAL ETHICAL TRAINING

Educators face the daunting task of giving a clear account of what ethics is. According to Barclay (in Nethonzhe 2008:6) the definition of *ethics* varies, depending on the situation. In some contexts, ethics is synonymous with moral philosophy, the area of philosophy pursuing answers to theoretical questions concerning the nature and rationality of morality. In some other contexts, ethics

refers to morality, which is described as standards of conduct everyone wants everyone else to follow – even if it means that they have to follow them too. In other cases, the word *ethics* refers to special codes of conduct that apply to members of a profession.

It may be useful to consider philosophical theories in a lecture devoted to ethical issues. However, it may be of dubious value in a presentation dealing with management skills and competency matters (Gauras and Garafalo in Nethonzhe 2008:6). An adequate explanation and discussion of theories generally require more time than is available. Therefore, insufficient time may be available for ethics modules.

As course schedules generally leave little discretionary time, a superficial explanation of the theoretical underpinnings of moral philosophy could confuse students at a Masters level even more and impede their ability to think clearly about the issues concerned. Catron and Denhardt (in Nethonzhe 2008:7)) suggest that it is more beneficial to focus briefly on the theoretical underpinnings of ethics in an introductory module and to attend specifically to the evaluation of real ethical dilemmas via a user-friendly framework. In their book entitled *Practical Ethics in Public Administration*, Gauras and Garafalo (in Nethonzhe 2008:7) explain that ethics is a matter of real concern to students who have only limited exposure to managerial responsibilities. Students have to ask the fundamental question of ethics: “Within a specific context what should an individual do when confronted with a case of a conflict of interest?” (Gauras and Garafalo in Nethonzhe 2008:9).

The framework for ethically acceptable decision-making should consist of the following steps (Smit and Cronje in Nethonzhe 2008:9):

- identify the ethical dilemma;
- determine whose interests are involved;
- determine the relevant facts;
- determine the expectations of those involved;
- weigh up the various interests;
- determine the range of choices;
- determine the consequences of these choices for those involved; and
- make a choice.

Testing the alternatives is typically the most difficult function to execute. It is important to have benchmarks against which to measure proposed solutions. To assist the students to evaluate the alternatives, a number of tests should be developed that focus on the moral evaluation of the options under consideration. These tests should hinge on relevant professional standards of conduct and common sense morality rather than on philosophy and are as follows:

- A *rules test* where students answer the question “Does this option violate the rules or codes of conduct that govern my profession?”

- A *publicity test* – “Would I want to see or hear my choice reported on the news?”
- A *harm test* – “Does my choice do less harm than another option?”
- A *defensibility test* – “Could I defend my choice to my peers or my parents?”; and
- A *reversibility test* – “Would I approve of my choice if I were among those adversely affected?”

Other tests can be devised and should be used when appropriate to provide standards for evaluating alternative solutions. Armed with these tools, students (future public managers) should be better equipped to deal with ethical dilemmas – both in an academic context and in their professional lives.

ETHICS TEACHING STRATEGIES

There are several key questions that must be addressed before teaching ethics effectively. Among these are:

- Is the coverage of ethics primarily theoretical and conceptual, or mostly applied, or a combination of both?
- Which methods are used to impart ethics to our students?
- Does lecturing concern ethical and philosophical concepts or should a variety of hands-on methods be used to focus on applied ethics?

The methods used to teach ethics range from formal lectures on theories and principles to hands-on projects and internships (Mastracchio 2005). Some scholars support teaching the philosophical concepts and theories (White and Taft 2004) and Socratic dialogue to discuss ethics. While others advocate applied and hands-on methods that engage students in the learning process (Thorne in Nethonzhe 2008:10).

Carlson and Burke (1998) propose that students must live ethics rather than simply learn it by heart. One of the most popular methods for teaching ethics is case analysis (see Winston 2000 for examples). This type of analysis can provide for discussing simple issues or complex dilemmas, requiring students to draw on their cognitive skills, personal insight, and imagination for their conclusions and recommendations.

Other pedagogies include using student-produced videos (Ziegenfuss 1996), cartoons (Dyrud 1998), film (Lauder 2002), religious parables (Coate and Mitschow 2002) and the identifying students’ heroes (Apostolou and Apostolou 1997). Several faculty members have relied on local issues (Baetz and Carlson 1999) and used news articles to make ethics relevant to their students. Others

have integrated the students' own experiences into teaching ethics (Laditka and Houck 2006), had students write letters of complaints to companies about violations of ethics (Jurkiewicz *et al.* 2004), or used classic literary sources (Coutu 2006) to teach ethics. Finally, one of the most engaging and effective pedagogies for teaching ethics, albeit a challenging one, is engaging students through experiential methods such as games, role-playing and behavioural simulations (Coutu 2006).

It is important to note that, regardless of which method is used, it is an indispensable requirement for effective teaching / learning. Notably, students should feel safe and supported in expressing their opinions (Fry and Kolb 1979 and Sims 2004). While this applies to any teaching setting, it is particularly crucial when discussing a value-laden and often controversial topic such as ethics.

Teaching ethics through drama

In dramaturgical teaching, the instructor display leadership style(s) in and out of the lecture room. This enables students to experience the leadership style while learning about it. The positive impact that experiential learning has had in the ethics leadership education field has been well documented. Leadership education programmes have been experiencing trends to move away from form learning structures, such as standard lectures and discussions, and has seen a shift towards highly-interactive teaching strategies that encourage integrating learning and experience (Fry and Kolb 1979).

A recent approach called *dramaturgy* takes the basic tenets of experiential learning and extends them to a more holistic and fully encompassing lecturer / student experience (Hartog and Frame 2004). This pedagogic method, termed dramaturgical teaching, may be perfectly-suited to teach ethics for application in the public service.

The following are principles of dramaturgical teaching:

- A proposed course topic outline; followed by
- Strategies for teaching suggested topics; and
- The preliminary assessments results regarding the effectiveness of dramaturgical teaching.

As a pedagogic approach, dramaturgy has its origins in theatre and the performing arts (White and Taft 2004). However, it has also drawn attention in the broader conversation surrounding language and meaning making. Applications of this pedagogical method have resulted from increased attention to experiential learning. This type of interactive teaching currently has a stronger presence in the fields of leadership and organisational behaviour (Brady 1999).

Dramaturgical teaching has been described as the most student-centered course design structure available in the leadership / management education field (Felton and Sims 2005). Such leadership education courses are more frequently aimed at the learning and developmental needs of the student. To date, the topic of dramaturgical teaching has received limited coverage in the leadership education field. Among its most attractive features is its potential for connecting theory and practice for creating knowledge, meaning-making and developing critical thinking and wisdom (Felton and Sims 2005).

Applying a dramaturgical approach to leadership education coursework involves several principles (Felton and Sims 2005) such as the following:

- Instructors should inform students that they will be adopting a dramaturgical teaching method and explain what this entails.
- The topics covered should last at least two to three weeks. This will allow students to fully appreciate the nuances of the ethical leadership style(s) the instructor is displaying.
- Instructors should adopt the ethical leadership style for the time that the specific topic is being discussed.
- Instructors should structure assignments and teaching methods to be consistent with the ethical leadership style being studied.
- The course content should be consistent with the teaching methods.
- Instructors should process the experience with students at the end of each *topic* to ascertain how modeling the ethical leadership styles impacted the students' ethical leadership impressions and experiences.

Live case projects

Live cases include four components: independent research, an article, a presentation and a debate. The project requires students to find a department or an individual who is viewed by the press and public, or the courts, to have undertaken unethical or illegal activities. Students thoroughly research the background, events and people involved and write an 8-10 page report describing their findings. If the department is the basis of the case, students identify the individuals responsible for the violations and describe the events. If an individual is the focus, students identify events and others affiliated with the case. To facilitate the debate described below, students also write a two-page synopsis summarising key facts and issues in the case. The synopsis, due at least two days prior to the class discussion and e-mailed to all students, should contain sufficient information to set the stage for the discussion and debate.

A student has 25-30 minutes to present his / her case and conduct a debate in the classroom. The presentation portion is limited to five minutes and relies on the synopsis. The intention is to spend only a few minutes reviewing

the case, and the rest of the time discussing and debating the ethical issues. Therefore, once students summarise details, they are required to provide their interpretation of whether an ethical requirement was violated and to present the reasoning behind their position and conclusions.

Moreover, students are also required to take a position regarding their case. They should and explain what they would have done differently had they been the person or department in question. At this point, other students are given the opportunity to agree with the conclusions or challenge them. If a student challenges the conclusions, s/he must provide justifications and reasons. Furthermore, the discussion leader is expected to defend his/her position.

This process should generate lively debate. The students are required to act professionally throughout the process, challenging the accused executives and managers in the case. The discussion leader should act as analyst. Thus, s/he should not be part of challenging the accused parties. Generally, there is little need to facilitate the debate. However, the lecturer occasionally has to play devil's advocate to encourage further discussion.

The students usually present a number of different perspectives and opinions than they are able to defend. At the end of the allotted time, students vote by a show of hands on whether the behaviour identified in the case study was ethically justifiably. In most situations, the debate ends in consensus, although this outcome is not required.

The case write-up and discussion should count towards the students' grade. The assignment evaluation is based on the thoroughness of the research and the clarity of the arguments. The criteria for evaluating the debate include the student's ability to keep the discussion focused and effectively defend his/her position. In the event that a student defends someone that appeared to be an obvious violator, the student's logic; arguments and ability to counter challenges from others in the class become the focus of the grading.

Goals for live case projects

The live case project has several goals, as summarised in *Table 1* below. *Firstly*, it serves to increase students' awareness of issues related to ethics within the public service. In recent years, the public has become increasingly aware of unethical and illegal conduct among top-level officials and political office bearers in the public service. Increasing awareness is one of the key goals of ethics education (McDonald and Donleavy 1995; Williams and Dewett 2005).

The *second* objective is to provide students with a thorough understanding of the facts of the case selected. Students have to gather facts, analyse them, integrate information and draw conclusions based on critical thinking about the issues researched. Students should have a full analytical, rational or cognitive understanding of ethical challenges (Freeman 1991; Winston 2000).

Table 1 Goals and components of live cases

| Goals | How goals are achieved through live case |
|---|--|
| Awareness Understanding of facts and application Emotional connection Accountability Application of concepts Critical thinking | Research Research and assignment Research, taking and defending a position Assignment presentation and debate Assignment; presentation; and debate |

The *third* goal is to provide an emotional connection to the case and to engage students in it. It should require them to investigate the actual and potential consequences of unethical behaviour for the public service participants, and various stakeholders, by taking a specific position in the case. Students should be guided to consider the consequences, particularly the negative impact on various stakeholders and the serious consequences for the public service and individuals being accused or legally prosecuted for violations. Inextricably, students should supplement their cognitive knowledge with an emotional connection to the event.

Ethics violations impact on people’s lives. By being asked to defend their position in writing and during the debate, students make further emotional connections with the ethical issues. Notably, this emotional connection makes their ethics education that much more effective (Warren 1995).

The *fourth* goal of live cases is to hold students accountable for their analyses and judgment. This accountability is related to emotional engagement and is yet another key aspect of effective ethics education (Carlson and Burke 1998). Students have to publicly take a stand and defend their position verbally or in writing. Additionally, the debate exposes them to various interpretations and points of view. This further allows them to become aware of the complexity and intricacy of ethical challenges and ethics violations.

The *fifth* goal of using live cases is to provide students with an opportunity to apply the ethical concepts they have learned. By definition, the case analysis provides an excellent opportunity to consider the application and relevance of concepts to concrete examples.

Finally, live cases allow the development of critical thinking. Through research, analysis, synthesis of information, taking and defending a position in their assignments and in class presentations and debates, students must think critically about the ethical concepts and their applications and implications.

The live case project fulfils many of the criteria of effective ethics education. Students develop awareness, gain knowledge, become engaged, are accountable and learn to think critically about ethical issues.

Benefits of live cases for postgraduates

The live case project is particularly successful in the finance capstone course. When paired up with a course or series of courses that cover ethical theory and concepts, live cases allow for achievement of all but a couple of the goals of ethics education (integration with other knowledge and transferring of learning to real life).

Students gain in-depth understanding of the issues. Moreover, they learn to apply concepts, understand their relevance, and are actively engaged in understanding a multitude of black, white, and gray areas related to ethics. They challenge one another about their interpretations of events and conclusions. Furthermore, they leave the discussions with a clear understanding of the distinct differences between ethical conduct and illegal or unethical behaviour and action. On numerous occasions throughout this process, students could express dismay and outrage about many actions. While some of these actions could be viewed as unethical, they were performed within the realm of existing legislation. This indicates that an action may be legally justified but unethical.

The case becomes personal – rather than being just an abstract study. Therefore, the project provides both the cognitive and emotional involvement that is essential to effectively learn about ethics. While live cases do not engage students as fully as experiential methods such as simulations, they do actively engage students in learning.

CONCLUSION

The debates about teaching ethics have moved from whether ethics should be taught, to determining the best methods and strategies for teaching ethics. A question to resolve is whether one should rely on a single ethics course or integrate ethics as topic throughout the curriculum. Furthermore, sing a dramaturgical approach, or live case, seems to be more appropriate than a traditional teaching mode.

Dramaturgical teaching is an innovative teaching method to use in an ethics education classroom. In this article the theoretical basics of dramaturgical teaching and how it works were discussed in detail. The teaching benefits of live cases were also discussed. It was argued that live cases could be used where the curriculum offers separate ethics courses, as well as the concept is integrated throughout the curriculum. Live cases provide a powerful method for teaching ethics as part of the Public Administration and Management curriculum. Institutions are encouraged to consider using a dramaturgical approach and live cases to assist students to internalise both the concepts underlying ethical actions as well as the actions.

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