The Ethics of Teaching Business Ethics: A Reflective Dialogue

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Abstract. This paper takes the form of a reflective dialogue between three teachers of business ethics working in different continents. Originating as a conference debate, it takes as its theme the notion of ideological "neutrality" and the role of the business ethics teacher. A position statement outlines an argument for "restraint" as a modern day Aristotleian mean to protect student academic freedom. Two responses follow. The first of these provides a moderate advocacy position based on Socratic principles. The second response outlines the notion of teaching as a relational process necessitating delayed disclosure and moral courage on the part of the teacher. The paper concludes with a brief reflection by the author of the position statement.

Keywords: ethics of teaching, reflective dialogue

1. Introduction (Bruce Macfarlane)

This collaborative piece takes the form of a position paper followed by two responses; a conversation between three teachers of business ethics working in different institutional, national and cultural contexts. The paper has its origins as a debate at the *Teaching Business Ethics 2: Innovation and Technology* conference, held at Brunel University in December, 2002 in conjunction with the European Business Ethics Network (UK). The theme of the conference debate was whether the business ethics teacher should "sit on or come off the fence." In other words, is it right for the teacher to explicitly advocate particular ethical, social and economic theories or should they seek to "sit on the fence," an approach based on what is sometimes referred to as a position of "neutrality" or being "balanced"? (Hanson, 1996).

The theme of this debate raises important and enduring moral questions for all teachers. Many normative doctrines are associated with the teaching of ethics including socialism, communitarianism and altruism. However, while teachers of ethics may hold strong ideological and religious commitments, tolerance for the values of others can act as a powerful metaethic curbing the expression of the

educator's personal beliefs. Accordingly "the teaching of ethics neither rules in, in principle, nor rules out, in principle, espousal of a particular moral viewpoint" (Macklin, 1980, p 82).

This moral question is particularly relevant for teachers of business ethics many of whom are passionate advocates of the importance of the need for a university education to incorporate explicit attention to the ethical attitudes of students (Bampton and Cowton, 2002). Convincing, often sceptical, academic colleagues that business ethics deserves intellectual space in the curriculum also demands commitment and passion. One of the classic responses to the argument in favour of "neutrality" is whether deliberately concealing one's ideological beliefs is compatible with intellectual integrity. Moreover, more practically, is it even possible to keep commitments hidden from view or will they always "seep out" in the end?

The design of the curriculum entails a process of editorial selectivity although some courses in business ethics tend to wear their ideological commitments more openly on their sleeve. Normative doctrines strongly represented within the business ethics field include economic sustainable development and Rawls' theory of social justice. While some courses give roughly equal space to the presentation, discussion and application of a series of ethical theories, such as Kantianism, utilitarianism and virtue ethics, others explicitly follow a more committed agenda. Furthermore, regardless of the nature of the business ethics curriculum, teachers may adopt widely contrasting positions on the question of concealing or revealing their moral standpoint.

In this reflective dialogue the stance of two teachers of business ethics will be presented in response to an initial position statement set out by Bruce Macfarlane. The exchanges are inevitably somewhat static in nature rather than a fluid dialogue but they represent an attempt to open up a wider debate on this issue within the business ethics teaching community.

2. A Position Statement: Protecting Student Academic Freedom (Bruce Macfarlane)

In *The History Man*, Malcolm Bradbury's satirical campus novel set in early 1970s Britain, the central character, Dr Howard Kirk, is a radical sociologist who victimises a politically conservative student by giving him low grades and humiliating him in class. As the student states plaintively:

> I fit in, or I fail. And if I try to fight back and preserve myself, well, you're my teacher, you can tear me to pieces in public and mark me down in private. Can't I exist as well? (Bradbury, 1975, p 148)

Fortunately, academic life is not full of charismatic, intellectual bullies like the fictitious Howard Kirk. However, it is easy to underestimate how the public

commitment of a teacher to a particular ideological stance can have an adverse impact on student academic freedom. Students, especially business undergraduates, lack experience in intellectual argument and are vulnerable as a result. While as sensitive and sincere teachers we may feel duty bound to declare our own ideological and/or philosophical predisposition, assurances that students should feel free to develop their own perspectives can have unintentional consequences.

Here, I am also speaking from personal experience. As a student of politics during the early 1980s I was only too keenly aware of the ideological persuasions of my Professors. My University had been a hotbed on radicalism and student activism during the 1960s. But by the time my contemporaries and I arrived, in 1980, a harsher set of economic circumstances prevailed. My generation of students had more pragmatic, and perhaps selfish, concerns than those of our idealistic predecessors. We were worried about our job prospects on graduation given new record levels of unemployment in the UK at that time. The expansion of higher education in Britain during the intervening years meant that competition for graduate jobs was keener than before. We were also influenced by the failure of successive Labour governments to deal effectively with economic problems and the power of the Trade Unions during the 1970s. However, the students of the 1960s had become the Professors (or at least junior lecturers) of the early 1980s. This led to a strange reversal of the usual stereotype: politically radical staff teaching generally more pragmatic students. This formative experience has had a significant impact on how I later approached my role as a teacher.

Professors can "come off the fence" about their own ideology in a variety of ways. These can range from reluctant self-revelation through to aggressive advocacy. However, either extreme can have unintended and detrimental effects for student academic freedom. Firstly, the traditional model of learning means that students view their Professors as experts rather than co-learners. While students are often referred to as "partners" or "co-learners" in the modern lexicon of higher education, a harsher reality lies behind the rhetoric. Students know that they are in a dependent relationship with their university teacher (Matthews, 1991). Moreover, research has shown that students expect to receive lower grades if they disagree with their professor or teacher in class (Lusk and Weinberg, 1994). As a result of such expectations, game playing attitudes follow. In the age of mass higher education, "strategic" students (Kneale, 1997) act as hardened instrumentalists who seek to minimise their real contribution to the learning process and maximise their grades. Such students may calculate that less effort will be required to convince the teacher of their academic ability if they construct an argument in sympathy with that of the tutor. Other students, simply lacking self-confidence, may self-censor their own oral and written work to similar effect.

I know that as a student of politics I regularly self-censored my written work during the 1980s. This is not something I am proud of. In fact I feel quite guilty about it but it is instructive in understanding why self-censorship occurs. At

Essex, we knew only too well if we were writing an essay for a Marxist or Liberal Democrat and this did have a significant impact on the development of our lines of argument. Quite possibly we underestimated the integrity of our own teachers to deal even-handedly with all perspectives. However, these perceptions were powerful enough to make us "hold back" both in writing and, sometimes, in class.

My experiences mean that I favour a position which lies somewhere between the need to conceal or proselytise one's ethical and/or ideological commitments. This modern day Aristotelian mean might be termed "restraint" (Macfarlane, 2003). A lack of restraint can result in self-indulgent posturing while too much restraint may lead to an uncommunicative evasiveness. Restraint, it may be countered, is both uninspiring to the student and a disingenuous act on the part of the teacher. While these are important objections, students may get to know the teacher's position by reading their publications or through their appearance in the public media. Moreover, in circumstances where students express a curiosity about the position which the teacher holds it would be appropriate to reveal this stance once trust has been established with the student group. Primarily, however, I believe that the teacher's role should fall between apathy and advocacy as an exemplar of how to make the best possible defence or criticism of *all* ethical and ideological positions (Hanson, 1996). Apart from the classroom, there is, afterall, no shortage of additional avenues for academics to express their own stance, notably through publication and relations with the media, where they can debate with others on the basis of more equal power relations.

Teachers of business ethics have a particular responsibility to nurture student self-confidence in evaluating ethical and ideological issues in a supportive and non-judgemental learning environment as a counterweight to the largely technical and value-neutral presentation of the business and management curriculum,. But our role should be that of raising moral awareness rather than trying to bring about some kind of moral "conversion" to any one particular position (Cooke and Ryan, 1988; Trezise, 1994; Gowen *et al*, 1996).

The protection of the academic freedom of students is one, if not the first, academic duty of teachers in higher education (Kennedy, 1997). However, while this entitlement is traditionally associated with freedom for academics to express *their* opinions, academic freedom must be meaningfully extended to the student body if it is not to become a merely empty slogan. I believe that the business ethics teacher should refrain from advocating particular ethical theories but, rather, practice a liberal pedagogy which explicitly values tolerance of disagreement, mutual respect and models a healthy scepticism of *all* knowledge claims. It is, as Eric Ashby (1969) has argued, about teaching in a way that the student learns the discipline of dissent.

Response 1: Between Dogma and Relativism: Towards Socratic Advocacy (Joe DesJardins)

I should like to begin by considering more generally the role of neutrality in teaching. A colleague who teaches geology tells me that occasionally he gets a student who believes in Biblical creationism enrolled in his class. Such a student enters his class believing that some of the most fundamental ideas of geology (for example, that the earth is older than a few thousand years) are wrong. Would we believe that a geology teacher should, or could, remain neutral in respect to this student's beliefs? My colleague certainly makes no pretence of neutrality about the age of the earth. So why should we be more reluctant than this to advocate a position in an ethics class?

It seems to me that there are four general explanations for why ethicists are more inclined to remain neutral in the classroom than are scientists. First, student autonomy (encouraging students to think for themselves) is taken to be a goal in any ethics class and neutrality is thought to further this goal. Second, tolerance for diverse opinions is another ethical goal that can be furthered by neutrality. Third, philosophical ethics is often seen as essentially meta-ethics and therefore teaching normative ethics is not the role of philosophical ethicists. Finally, some form of ethical relativism, ethics is not a science after all, suggests that there are no impartial and objective values to teach.

By training and by personal inclination, my classroom approach has, in the past, always favored neutrality. As I discovered my students' own beliefs, I would take on the role of "devil's advocate" challenging students to better articulate and defend their own conclusions, but never suggesting that their conclusions were wrong. Throughout this period, I would try to be diligent in hiding my own views from students, regularly telling them that "I don't care what position you take, as long as you are able to defend it adequately." As further encouragement in case this was insufficient, I would also claim (truthfully I believe) that people who disagreed with me tend to get better grades. I would explain that students who thought they knew my own views, tended to be a bit more complacent in developing their reasoning than students who anticipated a teacher disagreeing with what they said. Hence, students who took positions opposed to what were perceived to be my views tended to write more carefully developed papers and exams.

But with this said, in recent years I have been moving towards more of an advocacy position in the classroom in two distinct ways. I take what might be called a strongly non-neutral position early in the semester when arguing against those who hold positions which deny the intellectual legitimacy of the class. I take a more moderate position later in the semester when we examine the specific ethical issues involved in business.

Many of my students enter class with one of two positions which are incompatible with the presuppositions of business ethics. Many believe, in a way

that can fairly be described as an ideological commitment, that the pursuit of profit within the law is the only ethical imperative for business. It would seem that this is the position being promoted, implicitly if not explicitly, within many of the finance and economics classes that many of my students take. Based on a particular understanding of neo-classical economics, this perspective effectively provides an in-principled answer to every issue that we address throughout my course. Since market capitalism has all the answers, one can ignore the concerns of other alleged ethical perspectives. Still other students enter class as ethical relativists, believing that there are and can be no rational ethical standards. If there are no rational standards in ethics, once again one can ignore the concerns of ethicists.

I approach both of these perspectives in the same way that my geology colleague approaches the student who adopts Biblical creationism. If either of these two positions is valid, then an academic course in business ethics is, at best, irrelevant. Therefore, for the credibility of my own class, I am a strong advocate against these views. Neutrality here would be a serious mistake. I tell my students that these views are unreasonable, wrong, mistaken, and misguided. Of course, I give reasoned arguments for such conclusions. But, such views are as wrong in an ethics class as creationism is in a geology class, and I believe it is my professional responsibility to explain why. Surely we cannot remain neutral on the questions of the ethical sufficiency of unregulated markets or ethical relativism and remain a competent teacher of business ethics.

Once these views have been disposed of early in the semester, I adopt a more moderate advocacy position. As we examine specific issues of marketing ethics, employee rights to safe workplaces, employee privacy, environmental protection, and so forth, I acknowledge that I have reached conclusions about many of these issues. After working in business ethics for many years it would be strange indeed if I haven't yet reached any conclusions. It would be particularly odd if I were to ask students to defend their own conclusions when, after years of study, I myself am unable to do so. Nevertheless, I willingly admit that the position which I believe most reasonable might be wrong. For example, I might ask students to read one of my own published essays. In this case, I cannot feign neutrality; I really do believe that drug-testing of employees is unjustified and I really do believe that business has strong environmental responsibilities. But, I encourage students to disagree and present arguments to show where I am mistaken. I tell them that I am willing to change my mind if they can provide persuasive arguments. I admit to being an advocate for a particular conclusion (and in some cases admit that I have not yet reached any strong conclusion), but I try to be non-dogmatic in doing so.

Let me conclude by returning to the four reasons for neutrality mentioned at the start of this essay. I believe that student autonomy is fostered rather than hindered by this approach. Autonomy should not mean that students are free to hold just any belief that they desire. Our goal should be to foster rational

autonomy, wherein students are encouraged to hold only those beliefs that can be rationally defended. I believe classroom advocacy can be helpful in furthering this goal.

Tolerance for diverse opinions, as the converse of dogmatism, is also a worthy classroom goal. But to prevent tolerance from degenerating into relativism, it seems to me that it must be based on the willingness for all sides to engage others in respectful dialogue. Not all beliefs are equally rational, and nowhere is this more true than in the classroom. Respecting our students beliefs should not commit us to denying the rational legitimacy of our own.

Third, I do not believe that meta-ethics exhausts the legitimate domain of philosophical ethics. Although I was trained in the British-American analytic tradition, I have come to reject many of its assumptions as a too narrow understanding of philosophy. I suspect the same is true for many others. Philosophical ethics involves much more than the analysis of ethical language and concepts. Engaging in normative ethics is a legitimate role for professional philosophers. Finally, as suggested above, I deny that ethical relativism is a valid position and therefore it can provide no reason to support classroom neutrality.

My own position, then, is what I take to be fundamentally Socratic. Socrates' ethical teaching sought a mean between the dogmatism of religious and political authorities on the one hand, and the relativism of the sophists on the other. Socrates became more of the advocate when debating skeptics such as the sophist Thrasymachus. He adopted more the neutral role of Socratic ignorance when debating dogmatic authorities such as Euthyphro. This, I think, is not a bad model for business ethicists.

Response 2: Teaching Business Ethics as a Relational Process (Diannah Lowry)

Teaching business ethics is, in my view, an inherently relational activity, and this relational and processual aspect in turn impacts on the emergent content of what we include in our teachings. Ideally our relationship with students would be an equal one, where students are indeed partners in the pursuit of higher learning. As Bruce Macfarlane asserts however, the actual experience of both students and teachers presents a more vexed account. A more realistic view is that we are perceived as authority figures on which students depend for successful graduation from the systemic constraints of student-hood, into the world of work and its associated perceived "freedoms."

As teachers of business ethics then, we need to engage in processes of continued and critical reflection as to how this type of underlying perceived power imbalance impacts on the way we approach our relationships with students both individually and as a group. We need to acknowledge our unavoidable reflexive role as value-laden teachers of values, and accordingly make certain

decisions in the way we approach our teaching, including decisions related to our own transparency of values and measures of restraint.

I agree with Bruce Macfarlane that a measure of restraint *is* necessary, however I feel that the levels of restraint are fluid and contingent on circumstance. In some cases, less, rather than more restraint may be called for. In my own experience whether or not I "come off the fence" is dependant on a number of issues related to the types of relationship I am able to establish during the process of teaching and associated interactions. The characteristics of my students (individually and as a group) are an important determining factor. For example, their level of engagement, curiosity and inquisitiveness in the subject matter will affect the extent of my disclosures, as does the number of students I have in any one group. In all of my disclosures related to my own ethical position I take pains to stress that this is simply one person's way of viewing the world, and that all views (including of course the views of students) should be approached with openness and tolerance.

While it is unlikely that at some point I do not come off the fence, I do try to gently climb down it rather than take a flying jump. This is not "reluctant self-revelation." Rather, it is a form of delayed disclosure, which is useful on a number of accounts. It serves to stimulate (interested) students' level of engagement over the time-span of the subject, which in turn allows them the freedom and time to formulate their own positions as well as questions and points for debate. Delayed disclosure also serves to eliminate the dreaded evangelical tone which tends to accompany aggressive advocacy. Importantly I try to create an environment whereby students feel safe to explore their own views and to express them in an atmosphere of tolerance. Depending on the group, I also discuss how my own ethical stance has changed over the course of time (and indeed continues to subtly shift and change), with the intention of demonstrating an openness to engaging with different moral views.

The teaching of business ethics is perhaps most usefully conceptualised as a processual pedagogy, one that involves an emergent discourse which is dependant on the actors engaged in the discourse and the relationships which flow from this process. Embedded in the process of this emergent discourse are successive ethical disclosures from both teacher and students. Within this process I do think restraint is necessary, but I do not think it is possible or even advisable to completely conceal one's own ethical stance. Intentional communication is only one aspect of the discourse. Students pick up on the entire range of communications that a teacher will exhibit, including a subtle heightened enthusiasm for one theory over another evidenced by rapid speech, arm gestures, changed tone and other forms of "leakage." In such cases, students are likely to ponder why a teacher of business ethics would aim for strict neutrality, and may (rightly or wrongly) go on to assume that a guarded ethical stance is the "correct" approach.

In my view, (the facade of) extreme ethical neutrality in the teaching of business ethics is a type of "bracketing" (Jackall 1988), whereby we are separating our *self* from our teaching. This particular form of bracketing is undesirable when we consider the aims of teaching business ethics. In categorising three basic aims of teaching business ethics, Roussow (2002) provides a useful framework that I feel implicitly supports an argument against strict neutrality among teachers of business ethics. Roussow (2002) distinguishes three compatible areas which teachers of business ethics attempt to address: 1) cognitive competence (including moral awareness, moral understanding, moral reasoning, moral decision-making and tolerance); 2) behavioural competence (including moral sensitivity, moral courage, and moral imagination), and 3) managerial competence (incorporating systemic and instrumental morality, moral efficiency and moral leadership).

With regard to cognitive competence, how can we encourage moral reasoning in our students if we don't set an example or provide the means to compare, weigh and evaluate different ethical perspectives? This does not imply enforcing our own evaluation, it means providing at least one considered example of what an attempted reasoned stance *may* look like while emphasising the plurality of such reasoned positionings. Against this backdrop, why not present ones own reasoned ethical stance? As for behavioural competence, how can we foster moral courage if we are intent on keeping our own ethical position hidden from view? And in relation to managerial competence, how can we expect students to understand that organisations are systems of interpersonal interaction requiring certain skills to deal with moral dilemmas, if we decide against engaging the students themselves in debate about our own values, their values, and the values of others?

In conclusion, I agree with Bruce Macfarlane's emphasis on the importance of restraint and wholeheartedly agree that we must refrain from using the lecture hall or classroom to attempt to convert students to a particular moral position. I do not believe however, that as teachers of business ethics our central or only role is to raise moral awareness. On par with raising moral awareness, I believe that we should also nurture moral courage and moral leadership, and to do so, we should perhaps attempt to exhibit these very same qualities.

3.   Concluding Reflections (Bruce Macfarlane)

The responses to my initial position statement have provided me with considerable food for thought. Through their contributions, Joe and Diannah have helped me to re-evaluate my own position. Joe DesJardins provides a fascinating insight into how he has moved gradually to an advocacy position, notably in arguing against those students who doubt the intellectual legitimacy of his class. I am sure every teacher of business ethics will recognise this challenge. We have

all faced sceptical students, arms-folded, who think they are the first to make the joke about business ethics being a contradiction in terms. This is a challenge which those teaching what are generally regarded as "mainstream" business subjects, such as accountancy or marketing, are less likely to face. My response over the years has been probably quite similar to Joe's. I also tend to play "devil's advocate" strongly at this stage and set out to deliberately confront a few deeply held beliefs, especially the moral relativism which underpins the view that business and private life can be neatly separated. What is at stake, at this stage, is whether students are going to take the subject seriously. In a wider sense, as a teacher of business ethics the scepticism of one's own colleagues tend to make you into an advocate for your subject by challenging their pre-conceptions. Perhaps I am not as neutral as I would like to think I am, afterall.

In Diannah Lowry's response I was struck by her powerful argument that we should seek to "nurture moral courage and moral leadership." She implies that as teachers of business ethics we should be prepared to role-model these qualities. I do believe strongly in the notion of the teacher as role model. Even at the routine level, such as referencing our teaching materials, we frequently fail to model the kind of behaviour we demand from our own students in their written work. At a different level it takes moral courage to act as a "pioneer" (Bampton and Cowton, 2002) in a frontier subject such as business ethics arguing for space and attention in a crowded business curriculum.

I also see a lot of myself in Diannah Lowry's notion of "delayed disclosure" within a processual pedagogy. As in any relationship, as trust develops disclosures follow. Teaching is no different. I just hope my own disclosures are not so rapid, either intentionally or through "leakage," that they restrict the development of the student's own "voice." While I can see its inconsistencies my own, more "neutral" position than Diannah or Joe's stems, in large part, from educational experiences I had as a politics student.

I would like to close by thanking my colleagues for entering into this reflective dialogue. I have been in the privileged position of opening and closing the discussion by reflecting briefly on our various positions and hope that this paper will serve to stimulate more dialogue about the ethics of teaching in the business ethics community. It illustrates, I believe, that what we share in common as educators is more important than what separates us. All three of us ultimately want the same for our students: to come away with the self-confidence to articulate their own reasoned intellectual judgements.

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