From Classroom to Boardroom: Teaching Practical Ethics Outside the Academy

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Socrates had it right all along. Philosophy cannot be taught, at least not in the usual way. The philosophy class is not merely a room where instructor lectures to student, but a place, indeed anyplace, where teacher and student collaborate in the pursuit of knowledge. This is particularly true when the content is practical ethics taught under, for example, the course title "Business Ethics."[1] Such a course may best be explored not in the classroom, but in that place where the subject lives—the boardroom.

Not Business as Usual

Much progress has been made introducing practical ethics students to the art of philosophizing by way of ethics committee simulations[2] and role-playing.[3] One might ask, however, why stop there? Why limit the opportunity for debate and discussion to activities within the walls of the academy? Why not leave the classroom and give students a chance to "do" philosophy in the real world? For instance, instead of simply forming debate teams which tackle the pros and cons of euthanasia or habitat destruction, why not let students participate in actual decision-making processes at a local hospital or state agency? Similarly, instead of simulating the workings of a business ethics committee, why not send students into the community to participate in the actual workings of one?

Pre-class Preparation

In preparation, I appealed to the chambers of commerce of two counties—one in which the school was located and an adjacent highly industrialized county. In addition, I contacted two local newspapers, both of which ran in their business sections a small article about my forthcoming class . The point of the appeals and articles was to attract area businesses[4] to my project. I asked that they permit me and the students either to assist in the on-going operation of the company's ethics committee or, if

the company had no ethics committee, to allow us to participate in the instantiation and development of one.

Fortunately, several businesses responded favorably to the appeal. Six weeks before the beginning of spring term, I was invited to meet with the head of the ethics committee at a Large Power Company[5] (which employed over 2,000 people). In addition, I was asked to discuss my project with the CEO (and other members of the board of directors) of a Large Manufacturing Company (which employed over 500 people). During these meetings[6] I was able to convince both companies to participate.

By the time classes began two more large corporations had signed on: an International Chemical Production Company (whose local plant employed over 100 people) and a Smaller Power Company (which employed 60 people).

In-Class Preparations

Eight students signed on for the class[7]. I created four groups and paired the students up woman/man and philosophy major/non-major, so as to maximize the diversity of backgrounds and ideas.

Business Ethics 401 was divided into three sections: 1) Four weeks of normative ethics[8] and business ethics[9], 2) Three weeks examining case-studies in business ethics[10] and, 3) Eight weeks of alternating on-site[11] visits with class presentations about the visits by each of the four groups.

The in-class presentations and discussions were to focus on what was learned at the company and what steps might be taken during the next visit to make company practices more ethical. Although each pair of students was in charge of its own company, every member of the class was expected to participate in all discussions.

During these intermediate classroom sessions (between company visits), my role was mainly that of moderator. I helped maintain philosophical focus and remind students that it is only by way of a critical method of analysis and the proper use of theoretical constructs that rational decisions are reached. I encouraged the students to question and challenge management, their own views and the normative ethical theories they were attempting to apply; while maintaining an eye on the students' goals for change, their precarious position as "outsiders" and the psychological and economic factors peculiar to their company.[12]

The Teacher On-Site

I viewed my role while on-site as that of nurturer. I reminded the students prior to each on-site visit that I worked for them, and that I was available if they needed me—as teacher, senior philosopher, person unable to be intimidated by management, etc. However, I also instilled in them the belief that this was their education and that, in the final analysis, they were responsible for their projects.[13]

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In addition to just being there for the students, I also saw this as an opportunity to cast a critical eye on their philosophical performances. Although I never corrected the students while on-site I did take careful notes during each visit[14] and met with each group informally soon afterward (usually at a restaurant somewhere on the route home) for discussion. I told them what I thought was good (or could have been better) about their performances.

Practical Accomplishments

Practical accomplishments were achieved. In the case of the Large Power Company, this translated into the students convincing the head of the ethics committee that his organization must undergo changes, both in form and content.

These changes required the inclusion of two additional groups to the committee—employees from sections of the company whose interests were not being represented and non-employees from the community which the company served. Furthermore, it was suggested that certain areas of serious ethical concern (for example, decisions which directly or indirectly affected the environment) be incorporated into the committee agenda and that certain questions of a purely legalistic nature be eliminated. Finally, and much to the dismay of the committee head, it was determined by the class that insofar as the committee was not attended by the CEO (who could override any and all decisions it made), the committee was impotent and mere window dressing. The students urged committee members to fight for empowerment.

Parenthetically, when challenged by the ethics committee officer to demarcate ethical decisions from other kinds of decisions, the students responded by claiming that there was an ethical component to all decisions and offering case studies learned in the classroom and examples from their colleagues' experiences on-site to back up their position.

In the end, all members of the committee concurred that these changes were needed and in the best interest of the company.

Understandably, since none of the other companies had existing ethics committees, the students working at those three sites had different projects and successes.

The students working at the Small Power Company made two bold suggestions: 1) A complete revamping of the existing "Code of Ethics" (which was essentially a one-sided legal document in which employees promised to behave in certain ways, regardless of the conduct of management) and, 2) The development of a committee first to oversee the reworking of the document and then to continue to play a role in its evolution. Both suggestions were taken seriously and the students were asked to develop a more ethical code, as well as a proposal for the development of an ethics committee to oversee incorporation into company policy.[15]

The students working with the Large Manufacturing Company and those working with the International Chemical Production Company started with existing mechanisms for employee/employer relations (for example, employee grievance committees) and attempted to expand the scope of employee representation and the types of employee concerns which could be addressed. Here the students found a great challenge in convincing management that it was not only ethically important but also "businesswise" to allow workers to play a larger role in the decision-making process of the company.

The success of the students working with the International Chemical Production Company was marked by the fact that they were asked to moderate discussions at the company's monthly employee/management meetings. Management agreed to this change in procedure after it was convinced that employees were more frank and open with the students present. Workers agreed because they felt that student involvement lent credibility to their comments and complaints. The two sides viewed the students, appropriately, as impartial advocates for better relations.

The last pair of students (who worked with the Large Manufacturing Company) met with more difficulties than the students working at the other three sites. And, in the final analysis, their contribution to the company's amelioration was minimal. At best it can be said the students showed management that it was unjustly elitist and that the present committees were hierarchical and tyrannical.[16] This, however, did not prevent the students from learning something. Although all too often when the students approached management with ideas for giving the workers more freedom and autonomy they were met with comments to the effect that if these rights were extended they would be abused, the students pressed on undaunted. By using their philosophical tools— offering competing scenarios, in which rights and privileges were extended to the workers resulting in greater productivity and profit—some progress was made.

What the Students Learned

Although there were days in which I spent many hours meeting CEOs and plant managers for lunch and discussing personal tensions with top-management and students, the overall feeling from the students and the members of the business community was positive.[17]

For a teacher, however, success is ultimately measured by student learning. Judging from the performances both in and out of the classroom, I believe the students did indeed learn. Upon reading each student's personal testimony, I grew even more convinced.

All eight students learned the value of philosophy, in terms of gaining a background in ethical theory[18] and in developing critical thinking skills. Here are a few comments which attest to this: One philosophy major

claimed to have discovered that, "philosophy is not just some abstract pursuit but has real, practical applications outside the classroom." A business major stated, "I learned the correct technique for asking provocative questions that would facilitate the company's self-questioning process." Another business major claimed to have learned that "ethics is in every part of the life/work experience." And yet another business major (a returning student who is a partner in an engineering firm) claimed to have learned "never to accept the first answer: question, debate and analyze everything." The one psychology major in the class learned "to defend my beliefs with conviction and confidence." Lastly, the other philosophy major learned that "the term 'business ethics' is not only an oxymoron, but the fact that the concept exists at all is a tribute to the hypocritical propaganda that is the calling card of the new bourgeois socialism."[19]

Evaluation of Student Work

At the beginning of the course, I announced the distribution of evaluative weight as the following: 20% of the final grade was to be determined by the quantity and *quality* of their classroom participation.[20] An additional 20% of the final grade to be determined by the professionalism, creativity, and philosophical acumen shown in their four in-class projects (5% each) following each of their five on-site activities. Here the students were to offer a description of the company, what plans they were attempting to carry out in the future, what results were actualized and any philosophical comments concerning the nature of philosophy, ethics or business ethics that they thought need further investigation or analysis. The final 60% of the final grade was to be determined by the quality of their written work—an (approximately) ten page philosophy paper on any topic in business ethics.

This heavy emphasis on the final paper, in retrospect, was misguided for it did not specify that the student focus their final paper only on the company they worked with. The original reason for not insisting that their papers focus on their company was to allow students who did not have a successful experience to work in some other area of business ethics. I should have realized that the success (or lack of success) of an on-site experience would have no bearing on the prospects for coming up with a good topic or writing a worthy piece of philosophy.

Further, not placing greater emphasis on the practical projects was a mistake, given the dynamics of the class. After their first on-site experience, the students were so excited and wrapped up with the workings of their respective company that a separate writing project seemed relatively unimportant and the quality of work on it reflected lack of interest.[21]

It would have been better to forgo the final paper altogether, or, at the very least, insist that the paper pertain to the on-site experience *and* have

its weight toward the final grade drastically reduced. In either case, the remaining percentage of weight should have been distributed *unequally* amongst the projects presented in class (the first project weighing the least, etc.)[22]

Conclusion

Conveying the richness that is philosophy is no simple mission. When the subject is practical ethics, the task becomes all the more arduous. For while the theory behind ethics may come alive in a classroom, even a seasoned pedagogue finds relating the practical application of that theory difficult using only chalk and blackboard. Perhaps the practical ethics teacher can do more justice to both students and subject by holding class in the boardroom, or wherever the praxis of ethics resides.

Notes

I give special thanks to the students who participated in my Business Ethics Class: Josh Buchman, Heather Donovan, Alex Heintz, George Holm, Jim Luff, Kate Pynn, Kristen Schneeloch, and Dianna Zaring.

1. What follows is a case study of my business ethics course, "Business Ethics 401," but I believe a similar format could be used for any practical ethics course.

2. Sometimes these are acted out and sometimes they are played out on a computer with the help of programs like BRIBES, SCARCITY and TRANSPLANT; or in conjunction with videodisc technology like THEORIA. For more extensive comments on the usefulness of such software see Pieter Mostert, Fokke Fernhout and Theo van Willingenburg's article "Computer Assisted Instruction in Ethical Decision Making," *The Computers and Philosophy Newsletter*, 4:1 + 4:2, July 1989 and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 4, 1992, pp. A22-A24.

3. For an excellent account of the usefulness of this technique see Morton E. Winston's "Ethics Committee Simulations," *Teaching Philosophy* 13:2, June, 1990.

4. Only businesses with more than fifty employees were approached because these are more indicative of corporate America.

5. I apologize for the use of cumbersome definite descriptions like 'Large Power Company,' but the use of proper names would violate our (my and the students') promise of confidentiality.

6. The meetings took quite a long time and certainly tested my ability to argue with non-academic types.

7. I realize this is a small number of students and not at all indicative of the numbers usually enrolled in such courses. I do think, however, that this format, without modification, can be used with courses which enroll up to thirty students. I would recommend, though, that the teacher not attempt to work with more than six businesses in any one semester and have no more than five students working with any particular business. If the class has more than thirty students' modifications will be needed.

8. I offered this part of the first section primarily for the non-philosophy (mostly business) majors in the class. Fortunately, the philosophy majors found

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the review helpful. The text I used was James Rachels', *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*. The format was that of a senior seminar, mostly lecture combined with discussion.

9. This, too, was purely theoretical work and was tackled in seminar fashion. The difference between this part of the first section and the first half was simply that the normative ethical disputes were discussed with an eye toward business ethics. (Only business ethics examples were brought to bear on the arguments.) The text I used was Bowie and Duska's, *Business Ethics*.

10. In this second section, the students were asked to actively participate in the decision-making process. Cases were examined and debated. Although I used a popular collection, Donaldson and Gini's, *Case Studies in Business Ethics*, I think in the future that I would use specific selections from the Harvard Business School collection of case studies.

11. "On-site" always refers to the time students and/or I spent at one of the four companies which participated in the project.

12. For some helpful hints on how this can be achieved see Frances Myrna Kamm's, "The Philosopher as Insider and Outsider: How to Advise, Compromise, and Criticize," *Business and Professional Ethics Journal* 9, 1991. Although Kamm's article is directed at professional philosophers, my students found the article very helpful. In addition, contact with students was found to enhance the relationship between "insiders" and "outsiders" in ways that having professional philosophers in similar roles cannot. (See the objections to having professional philosophers sit on ethics committees in Dan Brock's, "Truth and Consequences: The Role of Philosophers in Policymaking," *Ethics* 97, 1990.) Student intervention, it seems, is viewed as less intimidating and hostile. I think it would be one more way to facilitate the process of enabling philosophy and philosophers to get "inside."

13. Although I truly believed this, I must admit that keeping my comments to myself was often very difficult. I had to work at staying quiet, especially when a student faltered or developed a poor argument. However, with practice, I better perfected the valuable teaching technique of silence.

14. It was impossible to attend every on-site meeting. Scheduling conflicts are, of course, one of the drawbacks of taking philosophy class off-campus. But I did attend most meetings whenever I thought it was important (for example, the meetings when the students met with the CEOs for the first time); or when the students thought it important I be there (for example when they were having difficulty presenting a particular view or when they were feeling especially good about their progress and wanted to show me what they had accomplished.)

15. Copies of the code were distributed and worked on by all of us. The students responsible for this company then incorporated the best ideas from the group. Their final product was a more equitable and accessible document. In addition, the two students responsible for this company were invited to the head office where similar changes were being considered.

16. I am speculating, but I think the main reason the students had so much difficulty with this corporation was that the business was still family owned and run (the CEO was the son of the founder). Conservativism is what made them, and change was not welcomed. But another reason was simply that the students in this group did not work as hard—this was told to me by one of the members. The two students, I was told, did not get along and this resulted in less planning and less hands-on work than was the case with the other three groups. This, of course, is one of the pitfalls of any kind of group work—mismatched students. (For other pitfalls common to group work, and ways to

avoid them, see Neil Thomason's useful and insightful article, "Making Student Groups Work: To Teach is to Learn Twice," *Teaching Philosophy* 13:2, June, 1990.)

17. I handed out a questionnaire to the students and received responses from each. A similar questionnaire was sent to each of the four participating businesses, to date, only one has replied in writing. It said that: "The major benefit [of participating in this project] was to have input from unbiased 'outsiders' involved in resolving several conflict of interest [ethical?] issues in Employees' Committee discussions. Although we do not intend to establish an ethics committee *per se*, we have mechanisms in place for resolution of ethical dilemmas. Participation in your program heightened our awareness and will help ensure that existing mechanisms will function effectively…. In broadening the concept of an ethics committee, we are considering establishing a 'community advisory panel' to utilize input from unbiased outsider within the community on major expansion and other long term decisions—your students provided names of several good candidates for such a panel." Therefore, with such little written evidence, I base my belief of the success of the project (from the point of view of the businesses) primarily on informal discussion throughout the eight weeks and on the fact that all four businesses have requested that a relationship be maintained with the students for as long as they are in the area and with the college indefinitely.

18. Most of the non-majors claimed they would have benefitted from a richer theoretical background. One business student suggested the course be expanded to two semesters, the first semester devoted entirely to theoretical and case work, the second semester entirely for application on-site. Another student suggested that philosophy classes be incorporated into the primary and secondary educational system, so that both the people in business and the academy will have had some theoretical background for facilitating ethical discussions in a practical setting. One other student suggested that this kind of course be incorporated in colleges and universities (especially those with business schools or majors) throughout the country.

19. It may be important to note that this student was simultaneously attending a social policy class taught by a Marxist (and was working with the difficult Large Manufacturing Company).

20. I mention quantity so as to discourage absenteeism, I emphasize quality so as to discourage any student from monopolizing the discussions.

21. There were those students who chose to write their final paper on some philosophical aspect of their on-site experience. The writings produced by these individuals were a bit better. But, alas, only the work of one of the philosophy majors was a legitimate piece of philosophy, i.e., a sustained focused argument.

22. If (and only if) a formal presentation is being made to the company at the end of the project should the teacher suggest that on-site time be evaluated directly. This should be "played by ear" and determined near the end of the term—the syllabus should be open-ended enough to allow for such occasions. Forcing on-site evaluations can only hurt the student-philosopher/businessperson relationship that this project is intended to develop. If such an evaluation is jointly decided upon, the grade can be substitute for one of the in-class project grades.

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