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THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING ETHICS IN PROFESSIONAL STUDY PROGRAMMES

Abstract

Analysed in this paper are two aspects of teaching ethics in professional study programmes. The first part discusses the importance of teaching ethics, and the second part discusses the responsibility of professional study programmes in educating future managers, executives, and businesspersons. Scientific and higher education institutions emphasise how important it is to acquire knowledge, skills, attitudes and values in response to the challenges and requirements of some particular role or function in life. Therefore, highlighted is the importance of teaching ethics as a generic competence that is general, mutual and transdisciplinary, and necessary for a wide spectrum of jobs and situations. Business ethics is of vital significance for success in the contemporary world and this is a fundamental condition for any higher education study programme. Key reasons for teaching ethics are: to allow students to develop critical thinking skills, to expose students to opposing opinions through debates, to prepare students for making decisions, as well as to familiarise them with flawed rationalisation and social pressures. Ethical values are under the influence of culture and the upbringing of each individual. For numerous students, their studies are places of encounters with diverse attitudes and opposing opinions. By teaching ethics and applying ethical debates, not only are students exposed to opposing opinions, but they are also provided with the opportunity to understand diversity. As a result, students can expand their understanding of ethics, sometimes changing their own values and decision-making processes. Skills related to decision-making, such as creating values, critical thinking and leadership, are considered superior attributes for students who have graduated. The development of decision-making skills provides young people with the opportunity to set themselves apart from others and respond to the demands and challenges they are faced with. The objectives of this paper, based on the research conducted so far and the existing, recent literature, determine the importance of teaching ethics in professional study programs. An added contribution to the work of an internal survey conducted among students that substantiates claims in previous researches.

Keywords: ethics, generic competence, values

1. INTRODUCTION

As a philosophical discipline, ethics, and its teaching, takes on great importance in higher education. Institutions around the world emphasise ethics through various learning objectives

which include ethical decision-making and social responsibility. The real purpose of teaching ethics is to introduce students to ethical dilemmas which will allow them to develop critical thinking skills they will use in decision-making. Business ethics and its teaching are of vital significance for success in the contemporary world, which is a fundamental requirement for any kind of business study programme. Without ethics and trust, there can be no foundation for developing a successful career. Therefore, education institutions have the obligation to instil such values into students.

This paper analyses two aspects of studying ethics in professional studies. The first aspect is the importance of studying ethics and the second is the responsibility of higher education institutions in teaching ethics and educating future business professionals. Scientific and higher education institutions stress the importance of acquiring new knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will help young people to make personal and business decisions and which will serve as responses to challenges and demands they face. It is, therefore, essential to highlight the importance of teaching ethics as a generic competence which is general, mutual, transdisciplinary and needed in a wide spectrum of businesses and situations. The quality of higher education is an important concept that refers to defining and establishing the mission and objectives of the institution and thereby the establishing of certain levels of values. Business-making is not merely an area of creating and maximising profit – it presents human excellence and ability which is seen in decision-making and the behaviour of individuals and organisations. With that in mind, ethics is an important prerequisite. The complexity of the global and dynamic business world, in which non-economic and economic issues coexist, provides ethics with the key role in human activity, always bearing in mind the development of potential to achieve human excellence.

1.1. Responsibility, importance and values

In order for the results of every undertaking to be successful, it is important to establish objectives. As far as the importance and responsibility of teaching are concerned, every teacher, professor, lecturer considers the following objectives important:

a) Create good people.

b) Create good citizens.

c) Encourage every individual to achieve his/her maximum.

These objectives are constantly being emphasised and most of us accept them as the definition of education. They can be achieved only by combining the dual approach of teaching: applying the various mechanisms of the education system and developing critical thinking skills but also encouraging young people to beyond their stereotypical assumptions and create experiences and decisions which are in line with values in life.

In the world of changes, it is essential to be a change. By changing the approach and deviating from the standardised student evaluation and testing ever so slightly, it is possible to achieve better results in teaching business ethics and social responsibility. After introducing new didactic methods such as workshops, discussions, panels and debates, the teaching of ethics resulted in a greater number of interested students and higher satisfaction with the course. This paper will also interpret the comments made by students in the evaluation poll of the Business Ethics course and its instructor at Zagreb School of Business.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING ETHICS

Ethics has an important place in all areas of life, as does education which is a fundamental process of human life. Ethics in education plays a vital and efficient role and in order to understand the importance of it, ethics needs to be included in the teaching curriculum. This paper brings forward the reasons why it is important to teach ethics and what the responsibility of a higher education

institution is in that process. Before presenting the theses, a brief introduction to ethics and education is in order.

Ethics is the most important and the most functional branch of philosophy. Generally speaking, ethics is a moral philosophy that speaks of values and virtues that make our everyday deeds and experience the subjects of ethics. Human beings are the only living beings with the ability of introspection, self-examination and reflection about own actions which enables them to take responsibility for their decisions and actions. The philosopher Edgar Morin said that the central ethical problem of each individual is his/her own internal barbarity. In order for humans to overcome the barbarity, autoethics constitutes a single true mental culture which is much more difficult but more needed than physical culture (Morin, 2008, p. 93). Autoethics is first and foremost the ethics of self towards self which naturally leads to ethics towards others. It requires us to make the effort to think well and to think well of ourselves: integrating the observer into one's observation and coming back to self with the aim of understanding, being objective, and correcting, which is what at the same time makes both a single principle of thought and ethical need (Morin, 2008, p. 94).

Education is an act or experience that has a formative effect on the mind, character, or physical ability of an individual. Education is a process of learning and acquiring information and at the same time, it is both teaching and learning which turns us into civilised individuals with the ability to maximise our own capital. The thoughts of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle on education contribute to the development of the education system. They believed that the aim of education was, or is, to improve the entire humankind. Plato, the founder of the Academy, the first school in the world, believed that the main goal of education was to develop abilities of an individual which would better serve the society (Plato, 2000, p. 209). On the other hand, Aristotle claimed that only citizens can be educated. He believed that an educated person is a fulfilled person and that education helps to develop motoric and mental abilities. In ancient Greece, education was a tool for society and state but also for its citizens. Education institutions are the basic frameworks of education which help to create a model citizen and human, all of which is greatly contributed by the teaching of ethics.

2.1. The role of ethical education

Ethical education can be divided into four stages:

a) Ethical education in the family
b) Ethical education at school
c) Ethical education at higher education institutions
d) Ethical education in business

Ethical education in the family focuses on children observing the action of their parents and acquiring social facts on ethical behaviour. At school, children learn what is right and wrong, that is, they learn what values are and they become equipped for making ethical decisions. Schools encourage children to become reliable, responsible, and fair people. Higher education institutions should teach business ethics. This type of teaching enables students to understand what is right when making business decisions. In addition, students should be ready to evaluate different moral standpoints and develop critical thinking. In the ethics of business, people learn how to act morally through the codes of ethics of their line of work. These serve as guidelines and instruct how to behave and conduct themselves in the business world.

Graduates of business schools will become businesspersons and leaders which is why it is essential to instil them with the responsibility and importance of business ethics which they will utilise in their working environment. Those who teach ethics play an important role in that process. Ethics should be taught in an astute and interdisciplinary manner by putting forward various

ethical theories and learning about how to best use them and apply them in businesses when making important decisions. There is no single best method because each method has its importance and role, as well as the impact of the one who teaches it. Moreover, it will never be possible to determine where that impact stops – it stretches into eternity.

2.2. Reasons for teaching ethics

It is today, in the current crisis of civilisation and the crisis of interpreting value, that there arises a sudden need not just for ethics, but also for what is clumsily referred to as spirituality (Morin, 2008, p. 103). Ethics points to the need of having a bit more consciousness which would encourage and be encouraged by self-reflection and self-criticism, a part of which is the consciousness of human complexity (Morin, 2008, p. 103). It is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine a society in which there are no codes of conduct, ways of determining what is desirable and undesirable. Even if such codes are considered to be a means of survival, there still exists an implicit obligation to understand what is right and wrong.

Studying ethics offers opportunities and chances of thinking deeply about the values that shape life. Without thinking, there are slim chances of expanding one's consciousness and the consciousness about the values of other people. A study of ethics should lead to development of the skills of articulating own values, discerning the reasons behind certain politics, institutions and social values in general. Science cannot be carried out without a society that respects the laws which protect its citizens from violence, enslavement, torture, discrimination… Without a stable ethical foundation, not even the common practice of using the Internet would be possible. The question "What should I do?" can only be answered if we can answer another question first "What story or stories am I a part of?" In other words, we enter a human society with one or several assigned attributes and roles and we must learn them in order to understand how others react to us and how our reactions to them might be interpreted (MacIntyre, 2002, p. 236). Ethics teaches us to face the world and endure everything that happens to us, and it helps us develop mechanisms which we will use to confront life and appreciate it. Ethics arises as the necessary moral need.

2.3. Methods and approaches to teaching ethics

To develop abilities, competences and skills in students, a diverse approach to education must be applied and developed, which is not solely focused on learning from books. Teaching should focus on the concept of dialogues and certain forms of cooperative learning. All this would have an impact on a somewhat different method of examination and student assessment (Vujčić 2013, p. 463).

Several methods and approaches to teaching ethics have brought about excellent results, reactions and student feedback:

1. Encourage and develop critical thinking skills

Case studies, articles that put forward moral dilemmas, and examples of personal experiences help students to learn ethics first-hand. Such real-world examples can help when examining ethics and moral responsibility. By studying and deliberating case studies, students are provided with possibilities of participating in business decision-making and solving moral dilemmas or doubts. By using the Socratic method, students interested in deep thinking achieve a greater level of certainty when adopting an attitude. Critical thinking means analysing facts in order to form a judgement and an opinion. It also means having the efficient ability to communicate and solve problems as well as remain dedicated to overcoming egocentrism and sociocentrism.

2. Debate: expose students to opposing viewpoints

The culture and upbringing of every individual have a great impact on ethical values. For many students, studying is the first opportunity to leave their home and face different and opposite experiences and standpoints of their colleagues. Ethical discussions not only expose students to contradicting opinions but they also – first and foremost – provide them with the opportunity to understand differences and diversities. As a result, students expand their understanding of ethics and each other, sometimes changing their own values and their decision-making process.

3. Introduce students to rationalisation

Debates and discussions on the issue of moral thinking and decision-making enable and help students to comprehend and recognise rationalisation. It refers to making up non-existing reasons to mask the real reasons for failure, mistakes, or wrong decisions. Debates and dialogues are, therefore, highly desirable and acceptable in teaching.

4. Preparing students for successful and moral business upon completion of studies

Skills related to decision-making such as critical thinking and leadership are considered to be the top attributes of graduates. However, recruiting business organisations often experience the rarity of such skills. It is, therefore, essential and desirable to encourage the development of ethical skills of decision-making in students because that is what makes them more competitive in the labour market, properly preparing them to become future business leaders.

2.4. Interpreting the comments made by students in the evaluation of the Business Ethics course and its instructor at Zagreb School of Business

This section lays down and describes the results of an evaluation of a course and its instructor by students, carried out each semester. The poll was not carried out by the authors of this paper – it was conducted by an external agency engaged by Zagreb School of Business. The authors of this paper believe that the results of this poll are extremely important in order to support the arguments, thoughts and methods of teaching ethics in order to prove the hypotheses put forward by the authors. The polls are available to the conference organisers upon request. The poll was an evaluation of the course entitled Business and Communication Ethics and its instructor. In this poll participated 73 students. The poll gives the possibility of qualitative evaluation of the professors, and from the comment section we can see how satisfied students are with the Business and Communication Ethics course on the study programs they are performing. Their comments confirm the thesis of how important ethics is to teach in professional study programs.

Students who attended the course participated in the evaluation. The poll consisted of four tables with questions, the first of which referred to the information on the student sample, the second on the average value related to the instructor's performance, the third on the frequency of the choice of a certain value related to the instructor's performance, and the fourth concerned the average value of the evaluation of the questions on the instructor's performance. Students are very pleased with clearly defined learning outcomes, methods, examples and tasks that facilitate learning outcomes and well-structured teaching. The teacher's work and the use of different teaching materials and techniques that raise the quality of teaching (pre-prepared materials, discussion questions, everyday examples) are highly evaluated. At the end of the poll, there was a comment section comprising four questions. It is these comments that provided a valuable contribution to this paper as it also confirmed the hypotheses and theses brought forward in this paper.

When asked about the methods and manners of teaching in this course, as well as on the interdisciplinary approach, the instructor received largely excellent marks. The instructor also received high marks in the questions on dialogue teaching and the utilisation of methods

discussed in the previous section of this paper. The use of debates and opposing viewpoints were assessed by students as an excellent method for analysing and acquiring course contents. Furthermore, the students stated that the concept of dialogue in class was what pointed them to pay attention to the opinions of other colleagues and different attitudes they may have had, which resulted in a change of their own behaviour, making them more tolerant. They emphasise the expertise of the instructor during lectures in terms of providing examples and interacting with students. Ultimately, to develop competences and skills in students, it is essential to apply and develop a diverse approach to teaching which was confirmed by the student satisfaction upon completion of the course.

3. TEACHING ETHICS IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Teaching ethics at higher education institutions is the question of responsibility towards the society and its citizens. Ethics, as a course, belongs to generic competences in teaching students, which are general, mutual, transdisciplinary and not directly linked to a field or an area of study, but which are needed in a wide spectrum of businesses and situations. As a generic competence, ethics is important for the labour market and the society of knowledge and the social community that wishes to consist of active citizens. It is right and sound to carry out courses in study programmes which belong to the group of generic and general competences because they are common to all programmes. In his theory of ethics, Kant places the rightness before the goodness, because the moral law, derived from pure reason, is a thing-in-itself, always good and which is required for all other goods (Kant, 1974, p. 101). Taylor criticised Kant's approach because he believes that morality is solely a guide for action; he claims that we should only deal with what should be done because it is right, rather than what should be good. The idea of the priority of rightness before goodness or goodness before rightness is a thing to ponder for everyone studying ethics.

3.1. Responsibility and obligations of higher education institutions in teaching ethics

As higher education institutions educate and train future businesspersons, business leaders and managers, it is essential they set high standards of education and teaching in their courses that belong to generic competences, i.e., that are common to all study programmes, such as ethics. This represents a great challenge but also the necessity of creating and organising an innovative approach to education and teaching. The good news is that students have reacted positively to developing competences and that they are fond of thinking about ethics and corporate social responsibility. Students have shown positive attitudes towards CSR with a major focus on ethical action and a somewhat minor focus on financial questions. The course contents of business ethics should encompass learning about values, humanism, solidarity, the common good, business culture, corporate social responsibility, virtues, responsibility, and the ethical fundamentals of management.

The awareness of responsibility is a trait of a single individual-entity gifted with autonomy. Responsibility, however, should be intertwined with the feeling of solidarity, that is, the feeling of belongingness to a community. We must take responsibility for our lives (not allow strange forces or mechanisms to take over our fate) and at the same time our responsibility towards others (Morin, 2008, p. 101).

3.2. Methods and manners of teaching ethics at education institutions

Teaching approaches at professional higher education institutions benefit from the dual method of teaching. Apart from the theoretical aspect, which is invaluable, a great emphasis is placed on the

practical aspect of teaching. One method supplements the other and the success thereof is reflected in the application of theoretical knowledge on practical examples and in practice. What follows are a few methods of implementing acquired knowledge in practice:

1. Guest lecturer

Professional universities of applied sciences provide their students with frameworks and theories that help them learn how to take decisions on investments, recruiting, marketing, etc. However, it is much harder to introduce the real world into the classroom without concrete and tangible examples. Apart from case studies, one of the efficient and valuable methods is to bring in guest lecturers. Such lecturers are usually persons from the real sector, from the reality which is not simulated and which brings with itself authentic experiences which are then shared and discussed with students.

2. Case studies

Business and professional education institutions have been using case studies for some time. Stories from the real world and cases that really occurred encourage the discussion on how a certain situation could have been dealt with or how someone would have responded. Such methods provide a valuable application of acquired theory and prepare students for making decisions.

3. Simulation

A simulation is an active learning method. Modelling the functioning of a real process or a system enables students to learn a lot from practice. Replicating ethical dilemmas during a simulation enables students to evaluate their own values and decide where they are ready to compromise. Often times, these simulations require students to work in teams which presents one of the greatest challenges they have to face when dealing with ethical difficulties and dilemmas in real life.

4. Self-assessment and deliberation

Developing critical and independent thinking. Solidarity and empathy – values that should always be present in order to develop the strategy for future career and work, the integral part of which will be founded on ethical principles and which will act as a compass for managing future challenges.

In the processes of finding an appropriate way of developing entrepreneurial knowledge, skills, and competences, the traditional methods of teaching and coursebooks are certainly relevant for establishing the foundations of entrepreneurship. However, in order to achieve a higher level of critical deliberation, it is vital to study, test, analyse and adapt one's knowledge. To achieve skills, we need to practice our trade and to achieve competence, we need a lot of knowledge and skills (Cadotte 2014, p. 280). It is in that context that active teaching methods provide the desired approach.

4. CONCLUSIONS

After everything that has been said, it is safe to establish that education is, in fact, an ethical strain. The aim of ethical education is to enable people to make decisions at their own will. Studying ethics, therefore, has a profound and essential place in the education process. Students who graduate from faculties and universities are highly educated professionals but that is simply not enough. The wish of every professor is for his/her students to be good and civilised individuals who will in their respective business environments become desirable colleagues and leaders. Today, ethics has an important place in all areas of life. Education is the fundamental process of human life and teaching ethics has a very important and efficient role. It represents success in life, both personal and professional.

Business ethics is of vital importance for success in the contemporary world. Without ethics and trust, there are no foundations for building a successful career. Organisations and society as a whole recognise that ethical and corporate social responsibility plays an important role in good business practices. This cognition should act as a guide and motivation for studying ethics and social responsibility in the spirit of solidarity and the common good.

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