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Business Ethics: How to Develop Ethical Awareness and Introspection in Our Students

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I developed a business ethics course addressing the need to provide a foundation in business ethics for Business Studies students at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID). The purpose of the course was to ensure that our students develop an awareness for appropriate practices and behaviors as they enter a place of work. The design of the course was based on current literature connected to the best business practices that are based on ethical values and behaviors.

Many students, both deaf and hard-of-hearing and hearing, graduate from college not being aware of ethical behavior and business practices in the work setting. It seems apparent that our students' hearing loss adds to the lack of understanding of general proper ethical conduct in society. In addition, many businesses such as Enron, Arthur Andersen, and CEOs like Martha Stewart, to name a few, have created ethical violations which have breached the public trust and become a concern for citizens in the United States and throughout the world, now necessitating more corporate governance. Recently it was noted at NTID, as well as from research from various sources, that some deaf and hard-of-hearing students who copied another author's work and presented it as their own have been caught cheating because their papers were being run through an anti-plagiarism program, which showed at least 60 to 70 percent of the information was copied. The CNN.com website showed an article stating a national survey by Rutgers' Management Center that out of 4,500 high school-age students, at least 75 percent engage in

cheating (Slobogin, 2002). This is quite a very serious concern that we must address and make changes in our academic culture to value education itself for learning and professional growth.

Other issues noted by a good number of researchers show that many deaf and hard-of-hearing students also have deficiencies in social, emotional, empathy, communication, social perception, social problem solving, moral development just to name a few (Suarez, 2000, p. 324), showing that deaf and hard-of-hearing students are rather disconnected due to their hearing loss. For instance, because of their hearing loss, they miss out on typical environmental cues and normal verbal interactions which can result in having difficulty in distinguishing facial expressions and having difficulty “fitting in” (Berke, 2007). Also, the hearing loss can cause language development delay and lack of incidental learning in many young deaf and hard-of-hearing NTID students. Therefore, it is not the Business Studies Department’s desire to graduate our deaf and hard-of-hearing students only to have them fail an ethics questionnaire needed in order to be hired or to inadvertently display unethical behavior upon hire.

We are quite aware that successful and sustained businesses are focused on giving value to and sharing values with the employees and society where they work (Stewart, 2007). With this in mind, college education is now more focused on learning and gaining the necessary skills to succeed in the workforce, but not necessarily focused on learning ethics.

Learning about ethics is different from teaching ethics, as Koeber, et al’s quote from Bertolami in *Enhancing Ethical Behavior: Views of Students, Administrators, and Faculty*. Koerber and her colleagues have noted that students consider the memorization of ethical theories, codes, acts, and so on, to be easy in comparison to solving an ethical dilemma. Hence, an ethical dilemma requires more introspection. Koerber’s article showed an example of some dentists, but not all, who believe that obtaining insurance money by charging insurance

companies for additional procedures that were not performed on their patients is all right. This would be considered wrong, but do they understand the consequences of unethical behavior (Koerber, et al, 2007)?

Regarding the consequences—we can use Enron, Arthur Andersen, Martha Stewart, WorldCom, as a few examples from which our deaf and hard-of-hearing students can learn. Ferrell and Ferrell's PowerPoint presentation stated that the Wall Street Journal/NBC public opinion poll indicated that at least 57 percent of the public felt that the corporate standards and values conveyed by business leaders and executives have dropped in the last 20 years. Also, Ferrell and Ferrell cited another survey by ABC News and the Washington Post indicating “63 percent of the public felt that regulation of corporations is necessary to protect the public” (Ferrell and Ferrell, 2002). Atsushi Nakayama's interview with the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics' executive director, Kirk Hanson, stated that the most important lesson learned from the Enron scandal was that it required significant reforms in accounting and corporate governance, and a closer look at the ethical quality of the business culture (Nakayama, 2002). The Business Roundtable Institute for Corporate Ethics has noted that, due to increasing challenges of unethical conduct in business and the expected role that ethical business leaders will be called upon to fulfill, ethics has now become an academic necessity facing business educators (Stewart, 2007).

We can safely conclude that due to the decline of corporate standards and values, a business ethics course should be integrated into the curriculum at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf geared toward deaf and hard-of-hearing students primarily in the Administrative Support Technology and Accounting Technology programs at the associate level. According to The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB)'s website, a business

ethics course can and should be part of a business program curricula so the students would be able to deal effectively with ethical dilemmas, understand the responsibility of appropriate business practices, and know the appropriate principles and practices of sound corporate governance. This also will help to counterbalance the unethical behavior in the business settings; students are able to develop a set of skills to bring together the ethical concepts into decision-making practices in order to become more self-aware in order to make good contributions to the organization and society in general. (Stewart, 2007).

In order to make the development and implementation of a business ethics course successful, there are several factors that will need to be taken into consideration. Deaf and hard-of-hearing students have different kinds of learning styles, experience, knowledge, and strategies compared to their hearing peers which can influence their learning course material (Marschark, Lang and Albertini, 2002, p. 41). It is well-known that the hearing loss is a major obstacle to mastering overall English literacy skills. Berent, et al, has noted that deaf students lag years behind their hearing peers in knowledge of English grammar (Berent, et al, 2006, quoting Berent, 1988, 1996; Quigley & King, 1980), hence students need to rely on visual communication to fully comprehend information such as business ethics in the workplace. This involves using visual aids as well as using American Sign Language (ASL). When students are better able to understand the logic of business ethics through classroom instruction, they are more likely to participate in the classroom learning process and activities. Business ethics scenarios would be discussed with the deaf and hard-of-hearing students, and “how are the decisions involved to perform appropriate ethical standards, how are consequences of the decisions to be based on what is best for all the parties involved,” as stated by Alan Axelrod, author of *My First Book of Business Ethics*, during an interview with Sun News’ Joseph Gidjunis (Gidjunis, 2005). With this

in mind, according to Marschark, Lang, and Albertini, most deaf and hard-of-hearing college students are dependent learners which means they need their professors to provide structured and organized presentation materials. Also, students need to be more involved in classroom activities rather than passively receiving lectures. When they are more participative, they are more likely to achieve academically (Marschark, Lang, and Albertini, 2002).

Bennett stated that “office ethics” is generally defined as having common sense in knowing that “it is something judged as proper or acceptable based on some standard of right or wrong. At the very least, an activity should be legal, as well as to be of great benefit to most people” (Bennett, 2003, p. 3). This is the kind of common sense that we would like our students to have so they would be more aware of the best business practices and be able to make informed ethical decisions for ethical dilemmas they may face in the workforce.

As part of my Capstone Project toward my Masters’ degree in Multidisciplinary Professional Studies at Rochester Institute of Technology, I did extensive research on articles and literature to develop a workshop in order to gather formative analysis to fine-tune the business course to be taught during academic year 2008-9. I consulted with several advisors from my department as well as an external Human Resources consultant regarding the course design and development.

I chose three textbooks and one videotape which aided with the course development and topic selection. Again, due to deaf and hard-of-hearing students’ communication differences and limited accessibility, the material had to be designed in way that it is comprehensible and conducive to learning. The textbook *My First Book in Business Ethics* by Alan Axelrod, is a basic and comprehensive “primer” which offers matter-of-fact and introspective advice and procedures for best business practices—it is highly likely that deaf and hard-of-hearing students

will find this book easy to follow. There are other quite comprehensive and easy-to-follow textbooks called *Ethics in Business* by Carole Bennett, *Business Ethics Applied* by Goree, et al, and a videotape called *Not For Sale*. These were used as supplemental references for topic-related ideas, scenarios and situations in order to develop lesson plans for the ten weeks of the quarter.

When the workshop was implemented, I invited two presenters W. Scot Atkins, Director of Organizational Development and Human Resources of Interpretex and Dawn Lucas, Employment Advisor of NTID's Center on Employment to present with me. The workshop was a combination of lecture, role play, and interactive discussions which produced good results which surpassed my expectations. It was clear that after viewing the PowerPoint slides, information communicated in ASL, and role-playing by me and my colleagues, the students started to realize that making good ethical decisions started within themselves such as what kind of decisions they are making everyday that can have lasting consequences—either good or bad. They were beginning to develop a sense of introspection. The pre- and post-assessment questionnaires were provided for the students at the beginning and end of the workshop, so I would gain further insight on their comprehension of the questions in order for me to fine-tune future workshops as well as the business ethics course to be taught soon after.

In Spring Quarter during AY 2008-9, the business ethics course was taught for the first time to nine students. I provided the same pre-assessment questionnaires to them to determine their initial knowledge of business ethics, and taught a variety of case studies, showed the *Not For Sale* videotape depicting several unethical work scenarios, readings and discussions on selected topics from *My First Book in Business Ethics* by Axelrod, and a few invited speakers, who came to the class to discuss unethical scenarios and what kind of steps were taken to

approach these situations, including problem-solving. At the end of the quarter, I had my students do the post-assessment questionnaires to determine if their understanding of business ethics had substantially improved or not. It was clear that their responses had improved greatly as compared to their initial knowledge, which was evidence that they learned how to become more introspective and improved their ethical sense of values in order to succeed in the world of work.

Since the course will be taught again in the subsequent quarters, I collected feedback and observations from my students along with my own teaching experiences to further modify the course. I plan to be more specific on what kind of business ethics-related articles students bring to class—they were unclear on how to research for appropriate articles as they brought some articles related to violence and so forth, which were not entirely correct. Students have stated that they would like to have more practice on steps on analyzing ethical dilemmas, and find and do further study on ethical companies' policies. I have noticed that they used the terms such as “percolate,” “integrity,” “accountability” quite well in their essays or journals, so I will continue to encourage my future students to use any term such as these and any new terms they have learned in class. I plan to include visiting presenters with activities to help students to make the connection with ethical issues. Also, I will continue to find even more case studies and perhaps show at least one ethics-related movie, and then have a discussion and assignment to follow up after the movie. I also plan to research and include another workbook called *Ethics in the Workplace*” by Keith Goree, where students can read the case scenarios and answer questions at the end of each chapter, including classroom discussion. The course will continually be modified as any new ethical issues appear in the business world, and they will be used as real-life

examples to help our students to stay current and continue to self-check on their values and be introspective should they encounter any dilemma at some point in their careers.

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