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Creating ethical awareness through interactive group work

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1. Introduction

This case story describes how interactive group work was used as a pedagogical method to develop first year undergraduate students' awareness and appreciation of corporate responsibility. The University of Huddersfield Business School signed up to PRME in 2012 and steps are being undertaken to integrate Principle 3 into the School's curriculum, mainly via a review of 'responsibility' across the teaching and learning strategy of the School. The case story is related to a first year undergraduate module titled Contemporary Issues in Business. The cohort of students mostly comprise of home (UK) students as well as international students, from Asia, Africa and Europe. The module aims to develop firstly an awareness of the ethical and social responsibility issues related to business practices and secondly, enable students to engage critically with these issues, and develop viable business solutions to resolve the issues.

2. Challenges

There were several challenges identified in achieving the two module aims mentioned above. Firstly, it was important to select suitable pedagogical methods which would *engage* the students while encouraging *collective thinking*. Secondly, students had to be taught ethics and social responsibility, so that they could not only *identify* and *understand* these concepts, but more importantly be able to resolve related issues from a *business perspective*.

The question of pedagogy is pervasive across subjects related to the broader domain of business ethics. Several authors have highlighted the difficulties in resolving the theoretical with the practical (Small and Dickie, 2003), as well as the philosophical, principle-based moral reasoning domain of ethics with the strategic domain of business and management (Singer, 2013). A range of pedagogical methods were used in this module, from simple case studies exploring different ethical and social responsibility dilemmas, to documentary videos to provide students with a visual representation of socially irresponsible business activities.

There is, at present, increased attention being laid upon teaching business ethics in higher education in the UK (Cowton and Cummins, 2003). Therefore, in addressing the second challenge, it was important that an *objective* point of view was maintained. Students were required to critically analyse the cases and provide viable solutions to the identified ethical and social responsibility dilemmas, and then justify their solutions taking into consideration the resultant consequences on society, business and global markets.

3. Actions Taken

In order to address the above mentioned challenges, several actions were taken. Firstly, real-life cases, highlighting ethical and/or social responsibility dilemmas, widely publicised in the news media and which were deemed to explore practical business challenges, were selected for group discussion and debate. The main objective here was to provide the students with a pervasive *appreciation* of social responsibility and ethics. In practice, once students were handed the case, they were asked to first (within 10 to 15 minutes) generate individual solutions for the business dilemma that the ethical and/or social responsibility issue raised. Then the students were asked to work in groups and discuss their individual solutions with the other group members. This was considered to be an effective method, as each student was motivated to justify their own individual solution and/or perspective of the ethical dilemma. Given that the student cohort was culturally diverse, the above method resulted in a robust discussion of the dilemma.

The bipolar components of ethical analysis proposed by Singer (2013) were used to guide the group discussions. For example, the students were asked to utilise bipolar components such as value priorities (efficiency vs. justice), strategic responses to market limitations (exploit vs. compensate), stakeholder vs. shareholder-oriented business systems (Freeman's vs. Friedman theories) and timing (change over time, between now and the future). The groups were then asked to present their *collective* solutions or perspectives to the class.

One of examples used in the seminars related to the use of child labour in the supply chain of a leading UK clothing retailer. Value priorities of the company were used as the bipolar component in the ethical analysis of this particular case. The discussion focused on how the values of 'efficiency' (i.e. cost minimisation and economies of scale), could result in the sacrificing of 'justice' values. Students also argued that the 'perception' of child labour is different across countries and it could be perceived in a more positive manner in some

developing countries as the company is providing a livelihood for the children and their families.

The approach discussed above (using similar examples) not only encouraged student participation in the module seminars, but also encouraged them, via the interactive pedagogy, to engage in a high level of critical thinking. While an exposition of ethical/social responsibility theory, may provide students with an appreciation of the subject matter, if as future business leaders students' *actions* and *perceptions* related to social responsibility are to be influenced, then it is important that students *think critically about the consequences* of business activities.

4. Results

Student feedback (53 out of 70 students) was obtained after a 12 week teaching period. Students were asked to state their level of agreement with the following points:

1. The module helped me in realising the importance of ethics and corporate responsibility in my personal decision-making as a student and as a future business leader
2. The materials, processes and environment supported effective learning experiences for responsible leadership
3. The module encouraged me as a student to debate current issues related to global corporate responsibility

The percentages of students who strongly agree and agreed on the previously mentioned three points were calculated as follows; 74%, 83%, and 77% respectively. There was also a general consensus amongst the students that they would like to engage more with guest speakers from industry, who manage social responsibility and sustainability in businesses, so that a more practical experience can be obtained.

5. What next

The same cohort of students at present have been tasked with developing viable strategies (in groups) to overcome identified business dilemmas, related to ethical and social responsibility issues across a range of business activities. This is integrated into the assessment of this module in the form of a group presentation. Looking forward, the expectation is to revise and

reshape this module, keeping the above-mentioned *discussion and debate* method for seminars, but integrating more practice-based teaching via guest speaker sessions for the lectures.

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