

The role of critical literacy in business ethics education: A Taiwanese case study

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, a number of corporate scandals have made headlines in the news media, as a result of which many universities now consider ethics to be an important component of the curriculum.

However, a number of important questions need to be considered: What are the best approaches for training students in ethics? And do we need to tailor those approaches when teaching students from cultures whose education system does not typically reward critical literacy and reflective thinking? The authors consider responses given by Taiwanese university students to case studies taken from a Western textbook. The students tended to choose an alternative which most Western readers would likely consider to be less 'ethical'.

Based on these responses and the authors consider the extent to which the students responses can be seen as a deficit in 'critical literacy'.

Keywords: ethical thinking, critical literacy, students, Taiwan

1. INTRODUCTION

The collapse of large investment banks such as Lehman Brothers and Bear Sterns during the 2008 financial crisis brought the discussion of business ethics and responsibility into the everyday conversations of common people around the world. How, they wondered, could such a small number of companies bring the world economy to its knees? Why, given that some specialists had seen the signs of impending disaster, was this crisis not prevented? And how could so many top executives walk away from their bankrupt companies with not only their personal fortunes intact but with additional bonuses after the government bailout?

The circumstances surrounding the 2008 global financial crisis do not stand in isolation; they are just the most recent and most prominent among a long history of questionable ethical practices within large corporations. Fortunately, one positive outcome has been that universities increasingly consider the subject of business ethics education to be an important and necessary component of any business management degree course (Jagger & Volkman, in press). But in an era of globalization, where companies have subsidiaries in several countries, or at a minimum, strong business ties to companies in other cultures, one of the essential questions is: whose ethical standards should be taught to university students? Can we, for example, expect members of collectivistic East Asian cultures to respect the rights of the consumer to the same degree as do members of individualistic Western cultures? And even if they did, is it possible to teach ethics at Asian universities in the same way that it is taught at Western universities? While there have been some suggestions on how ethics might best be taught at tertiary level (Marnburg, 2006; Jagger & Volkman, 2013; Kalaitzidis & Schmitz, 2012; Eschenfelder, 2011; Pup, 2013; Caciuc, 2013), none of the authors offers any explicit advice for teaching ethics in an Asian environment, where uncritical attitudes to the written word may create difficulties for teachers who take a typically Western approach to instruction (Yang, 2006; Durkin, 2004; Richmond, 2007).

This paper reports on an informal preliminary investigation that was undertaken in order to get a clearer picture of Asian students' needs with regard to ethics instruction. A class of marketing students at a Taiwanese university were presented with a number of scenarios and asked to consider what action should be taken, while taking into account the various ethical and financial dimensions of the situation. Based on observations and reflections on the students' responses, the authors make a number of suggestions for customizing teaching methods to students whose education system may not cultivate critical literacy or reflective thinking to the same degree typically found in Western education systems.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Lefkowitz (2006) and Jagger & Volkman (2013) state that recent corporate scandals have encouraged most universities to develop ethics courses in order to show that they take very seriously their job of educating future generations of managers in transparency, accountability and sustainability. Lefkowitz describes in detail how, due to the changed working environment, globalization has impacted upon the moral behavior of a company's employees. International economic conditions have put pressure on organizations to increase efficiency, which has often been accompanied by massive and frequent downsizing and the relocation of operations to countries with cheaper labor costs. This has put an increased pressure on staff members and resulted in a drastic change to job security, job tenure and the notion of a 'career' in a single company. In addition, employers' demands have remained unchanged, and a wider variety of competencies are expected with respect to a more specialized skill set. Companies have also introduced the practice of dismissing full time employees and hiring them back at much lower wages with little or no benefits, and never in agreement with their wishes. Against the background of such management practices, one should not be surprised to find employees drifting into unethical behavior, as they naturally copy the conduct of the executives in their company. Lefkowitz (2006), Logsdon & Hood (2002) and Hood & Logsdon (2002) all found that the attitudes of superiors strongly influence the ethical behavior of employees. Moreover, a study conducted by Marnburg (2006) revealed a perception among the students who were the subjects of his research that when it comes to blame, it was the managers who were at fault. Students had to write narratives about managers

who were confronted with ethical dilemmas, and more of 50% of them pointed up the managers' foolish behavior due to greed or lack of experience and ability.

Many authors have emphasised that the application of ethics in real life situations is the key point to strengthening moral values (Marnburg, 2006; Jagger & Volkman, 2013; Kalaitzidis & Schmitz, 2012; Ali et al, 2012, Eschenfelder, 2011). In addition, any form of interaction between students and industry professionals strongly increases their sensitivity towards ethical issues and their ability to behave in an ethical manner since the theoretical knowledge acquired in classes can be applied in real life situations (Kalaitzidis & Schmitz, 2012; Marnburg, 2006) This adds an emotional value to the topic and causes students to be more personally involved in their study. Eschenfelder's (2011) and Marnburg's (2006) approaches were greatly welcomed by students and professionals and have demonstrated a significant outcome for improved learning. Eschenfelder's course participants teamed up with an industry professional in the field of public relations and developed narratives describing ethical situations in their business environment, with guaranteed confidentiality for the participating professionals. The results show that students better understood what ethical situations they might face in the future and how to prepare for them. Eschenfelder adds, however, that her way of teaching can only be applied to more mature students, as typical undergraduates might face difficulties. In Kalaitzidis & Schmitz's (2012) case, students participated in group discussions on matters of ethical theory, principles, codes and practices for a duration of six weeks. This was accompanied by a one-hour weekly lecture supplemented by readings and tutor-facilitated online discussion forums, which generated considerable activity. The authors then surveyed the participants after one year, during which they were required to participate in clinical practice placements in which they experienced ethical dilemmas in real life. Students in general stated that their ethical education helped them significantly, especially the discussion of scenarios led by experienced clinicians during the introductory lectures. As in Eschenfelder's case, here too students' learning was closely linked to practical experience and the exchange of knowledge between professionals and students. This is also a point supported by Caciuc (2013), who stresses that in order to rethink one's attitudes towards oneself and others, one must develop empathy, compassion, and altruism—qualities that can only be developed through the exchange with people intimately connected with the subject. It is also supported by Marnburg (2006) who points out that students already have very strong opinions about ethics before entering university, which can only be amended by testing and practical cases with stakeholders.

Successful teaching methods cannot be seen isolated from the cultural context in which they are used (Yang, 2006). All the above stated strategies were applied in a Western setting, and there are voices that argue that such approaches cannot be used in Asian classrooms due to the lack of critical literacy (Kim, 2012; Yang, 2006; Richmond, 2007, Durkin, 2004). Critical literacy, has been described as "the ability to think about and through written texts: to read not only for facts but also for intentions, to question sources, to identify others' and one's own assumptions, and to transform information for new purposes" (Kern, 2000, p. 33). The perceived lack of critical literacy in Asian classrooms may be seen as part of a wider problem of a lack of critical thinking. Although Flower (1990, in Kern, 2000) makes a distinction between critical thinking, which can be done without written texts, and critical literacy, which involves reading and writing, this distinction may not be particularly relevant as far as most university students are concerned, since they generally heavily rely on written texts to learn their subjects. Thus, whether or not it involves written texts, the root of the problem can still be seen as a lack of critical thinking since without it, the development of critical literacy would be impossible.

Although critical thinking is a stated aim of the higher education system in Britain (Durkin, 2004), the US and some European countries (Kim, 2012), this is something that Chinese-speaking students have difficulty with for two reasons. One is that Chinese culture has a different approach to argumentation and how debates should take place. They may apply different communication strategies when expressing disagreement, especially in public contexts. In such situations, students risk personally insulting the authors of ideas—a notion almost unthinkable in an upbringing based on the Confucian system, where the role of the teacher is to 'teach' and the role of the student is to listen obediently and 'be taught' (Freire in Kim, 2012; Richmond, 2007). Durkin (2004) found that the Chinese students she surveyed rejected the Western style debating system as they were too deeply rooted in their traditional cultural ways and saw academic critique as offensive, threatening and inconsiderate. Second, as was pointed out by Yang (2006), Chinese students are trained to recite the correct information received from teachers rather than searching for any meaning in it, and as a consequence, active or critical thinking is suppressed. In Chinese education systems (including Taiwan's, where the medium of instruction is Mandarin) texts are typically seen as authoritative and not open to a wide range of interpretations; they are often seen as containers of knowledge that the student must read and memorize. As Maley (1983) describes, "for many Chinese students and teachers, books are thought of as an embodiment of knowledge, wisdom and truth. Knowledge is 'in' the book and can be taken out and put inside students' heads" (p. 101). Although it must be acknowledged that such views risk stereotyping Asian students, one of the purposes of the current study is to consider to what extent their ethical decisions may be the result of a deficiency in critical literacy.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

As teaching ethics to Asian students is a little researched topic, a qualitative research design was chosen as most appropriate. Thirty-nine students aged 18–20 taking a Marketing course in English at a Taiwanese university were given several case studies on ethics taken from Kotler et al. (2011), *Principles of Marketing – An Asian Perspective*. No instructions were given regarding Western business ethics during the entire duration of the course. This was done in order to find out how applicable to our Taiwanese subjects was Marnburg's (2006) conclusion that students already have strongly formed ethical views before entering university. The students were asked to discuss in small groups a number of ethical questions relating to each case study and submit their responses in writing after one week. Hair et al. (2013), Diekmann (2012) and Atteslander (2008) provide an in-depth description of how focus groups are useful as a qualitative research technique, and their guidelines for conducting interviews and were duly applied in this project.

4. RESULTS

The results reported in this section are a selection of students' responses to two of the case studies considered by the class. Apart from some additional explanation of the case studies which was intended merely to assist comprehension, no special provision was made for the fact the students were Taiwanese despite the fact that the case studies had been written for Western audience. Each case study was extracted from a section of the textbook labeled 'Focus on Ethics'. Questions pertaining to the case studies are briefly summarized below, followed by a representative sample of answers by the participating groups.

4.1 Case Study 1 – Cigarettes

Should marketers stop selling cigarettes even though they are legal? Discuss the legal situation in Taiwan.

Yes, we are the profit-seeking company the main idea for us is to make money so if we are the cigarette marketers we will still selling it.

I think the government should not restricted selling cigarettes. First reason, the government doesn't have the power to limit the people not to smoke, so any country has smokers. And if the government restricted selling it, it doesn't mean people will quit smoking, but it is means the people will smuggle cigarettes, and it will be hard to control, which is the second reason. Third reason, if the government restricted selling cigarettes, then they cannot get the taxes on it. I think if the government wants to decrease the smokers, they can sell the cigarettes at a higher price.

If government bans the sale of cigarettes, the tax will decrease because like China it's about 10% of the Government income, imagine how much money it is.

No, they should not. There are two reasons to support our idea. First of all, most of the smokers are adults who have the knowledge and responsibility to know and control what they are doing. Smoking could cause many diseases but for some people, it gives benefits such as refreshment, keeping warm, feeling comfortable and calm. If the legal selling is stopped, they may find some illegal ways to buy cigarettes. Secondly, they could give detailed information about the bad side of smoking into the advertisements which will be good for both side: the sellers and the customers. Even though they may not quit smoking, they will reduce it because they have the knowledge about the health risks of smoking and its bad effects.

4.2 Case Study 2 – 'Toning Shoes'

Should companies claim things that the products cannot actually fulfill? Do you believe a company not joining the production of 'toning shoes' will miss out or gain customers?

Yes, the shoemakers of the "Toning Shoes" should be allowed to continue selling the product because the decision to purchase the product rests on the shoulders of the consumer alone. It is not the company's responsibility to present the truth to the public, it is their job only to make as much profit as possible. Whether or not the consumer chooses to purchase the product falls 100% on them. They should be capable of researching and discovering for themselves what is true and what they want to own. It may not be viewed as ethical for accompany to abuse the consumers hopes and naiveté. However, it is within their rights to advertise their product as they see fit.

We think it should be appropriate cheat the consumers. If we want to sell the products to consumer we need to tell some truths and lies. This is a kind of marketing way. To businessmen if they do not exaggerate their products, the products will have less attractive to consumers.

We think Nike should cheat consumers. If this way can increase aggregate sales and profit, we think this is a right way. ... Sometimes businessmen need to exaggerate their products, as this way will attract consumers and they buy the products.

Yes, they should because they are a company, which wants to make profit, no matter how bad they are, making money is the main point. The first thought through to most people's mind is money and profit. Nowadays, there are a lot of companies similar to these shoemakers, with fake advertisement, and who lie to customers. For this case it is just one little part of business problem.

5. DISCUSSION

The common theme running through the responses to each case study is that making as much profit as possible is the fundamental principle under which any business should operate. If products are potentially harmful or do not deliver the benefits that they claim, then dissatisfied consumers have no one to blame but themselves for not thoroughly investigating the product before purchasing it. What is noteworthy, however, about the responses is not just the fact that the profit motive is an over-riding factor, which does not in itself necessarily point to a lack of critical thinking. Rather, it is the fact that the students' answers are rather simplistic and ignore a host of not just ethical issues but also economic issues surrounding each scenario. In first case study, for example, the idea that a marketer could sell alternative products to cigarettes yet still make a profit (possible even a greater one) was not mentioned by any students. Similarly, while governments rely on taxes for income, the fact that they must spend money on public health is completely overlooked. Even the whole thrust of the questions seems to have been misunderstood by those students who argued that governments should not ban the sale of cigarettes. In the second case study, the fact that selling a product that does not live up to its promises may impact on a company's reputation and long-term profitability is completely ignored. The possibility that a company may have to pay damages to people who suffer injuries as a result of using their product is also not considered.

One explanation for their superficial responses might be that the students lacked what may be called 'general knowledge'. Why might this be the case? Thinking of 'general knowledge' as something that is not necessarily something written in books but as unwritten understandings among members of communities provides a clue. Having, for most of their student lives, studied in an education system that rewards rote learning, the practice of using texts as a point of departure for "acting upon and transforming knowledge and experience" (Wells, 1987, p. 110) may be something our subjects neither recognize nor value since it does not lead to what is traditionally considered to be knowledge. That is, text-based, book knowledge.

To better understand our subjects' responses, it is helpful to consider ethics as being related to literacy. Doing so allows us to apply the concepts of 'literacy practices' which are "the socially regulated, recurrent, and patterned things that people do with literacy" (Brandt & Clinton, 2002, p. 342) and of the 'literacy event', a term that was introduced by Heath (1982) to describe "occasions in which written language is integral to the nature of the participants' interactions and their interpretive processes and strategies" (p.50). The two concepts are related, with the latter being the discrete observable happenings that instantiate the former, which is more abstract. Heath's famous study contrasted the literacy practices of the academically successful children from mainstream American communities with the practices of their less successful counterparts from minority communities. One such community consisted of white, working class, religiously oriented families who considered as paramount what Wells (1987) calls the informative level literacy, which is simply the comprehension of a certain fixed meaning that was believed to inhere in all texts. Children from this community were less successful at school because they did not read analytically or critically to make active use of texts to develop and articulate their own perspectives. Yet this is precisely what the American education system, and indeed, Western education systems generally, expect from and reward in students.

From here, it is not hard to identify the somewhat superficial responses of the subjects in this study in terms of a literacy event that instantiates the uncritical literacy practices to which they were accustomed. Students appeared to almost uniformly adopt the same narrow profit-oriented perspective. Whether or not they would have come up with more 'ethical' responses typical of what we would expect from Western students is hard to say. But one thing seems obvious, their capacity to interact with texts seems limited to comprehending

them, and without guidance, encouragement, and rewards for validating their own opinions and conclusions as knowledge, it is unlikely that a Western-style text-based ethics education will produce significant results.

The university in which this study was conducted lists a number of learning goals to be achieved by all students. Among them is "ethics and morality", which means that solutions must be found for the problem of how such a goal is to be achieved. While certain characteristically Chinese literacy practices such as reading in order to comprehend meanings that are believed to be contained with texts may be seen as creating obstacles to applying Western style teaching methods in Asian classrooms, overcoming these limitations is likely to take more time than is available to a teacher of a one semester course. We therefore suggest that one strategy that may workable in the short-term may be to teach ethics in such a way that lessons no longer become literacy events. The advantage would be that students are no longer restricted by their practice of relying on written texts as the sole, or even major, source of knowledge. It has already been shown that collaboration with industry professionals is an effective teaching method. We believe that a potentially fruitful avenue for further research would be to invite local industry professionals to present students with real ethical problems that they had encountered. The fact that such cases are based on personal experience, rather than simply created by textbook writers may allow students to explore the many dimensions of the problem, not just immediately obvious ones that appear in the text.

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