Paper 74 – Full Paper

Leveraging learning experiences to promote student engagement in a business ethics class.

Authors

Dr Carolyn Dickie
Associate Professor David Pick
Dr Theodora Issa

Address for correspondence

Dr Carolyn Dickie, Curtin University. Level 3, Building 408, Curtin University, GPO Box U1987, Perth Western Australia 6845. carolyn.dickie@cbs.curtin.edu.au

Associate Professor David Pick, Curtin University. Level 3, Building 408, Curtin University, GPO Box U1987, Perth Western Australia 6845.
david.pick@cbs.curtin.edu.au

Dr Theodora Issa, Curtin University. Level 2, Building 407, Curtin University, GPO Box U1987, Perth Western Australia 6845. theodora.issa@curtin.edu.au

Abstract

The number of students choosing to undertake business education has expanded dramatically over the past two decades concomitantly with exponential growth in business courses offered. However, the focus tends to be on the 'business of business' while the ethical, moral and social responsibility of business practice is neglected. This study evaluates students' responses to a new approach to teaching business ethics to an undergraduate cohort; a new, creative teaching model emphasizing a unique learning experience designed to encourage students to experience critical thinking, to analyse and synthesise ethical situations and reflect upon their learning experience. The model, with the acronym S.T.A.R - See, Talk, Act and Review - was introduced. Students were provided with conceptual tools and techniques to examine, act and reflect on ethical issues. Using a mixed methods approach, students' responses to the course were collected and their views of the new approach examined. Results suggest that, as well as a discernible shift in their view of the place of ethics in business, students have been far more engaged in the course and developing their learning experience.

1.   Introduction

Business schools are attacked regularly in the media for failing to provide students with a comprehensive understanding and experience of how business organisations function, raising the learning/teaching question of the degree to which university students engage with the task of studying and developing skills related to business.

 Schoemaker (2008: 119) argued that "business education should be based on a curriculum for managing emerging technologies in a fast changing world and maintaining a balance between business and society". Nevertheless, valid, consistent data demonstrates that constituents regularly "criticise business schools for failing to provide students with a

comprehensive understanding of how business organisations function" (Athavale et al., 2008: 295). Also, the potential benefits and transformational nature of integrative teaching/learning curricula have resulted in some universities turning to a three-pronged approach of changing, modernising and promoting the context of business and its responsibility to society through their tertiary business education programmes. Not only does this approach engage students in their studies to provide an optimum learning experience, but also equips students with practical skills that can be transferred from the classroom to organizational workplaces.

Generally, the development of engaging pedagogies are ways of teaching that "generate high quality learning because they encourage students to be active learners, persuade students to be involved learners, harness student interest, channel student energy, promote understanding, motivate students to learn and discourage passive learning" (Field, 2009: 2). In the current case, a blended model of student engagement was proposed that would be student centred and outcome focused to motivate students in making high level cognitive connections to develop skills to promote self sufficiency in learning.

For the purpose of the current study, two questions were established:
- How would students respond to a course using a challenging and unique pedagogy requiring different engagement activities?
- How would students view the alternative teaching/learning experiences of the course?

The overall aim in the study was to test student willingness to engage in a different teaching mode in which students were encouraged to engage in more self directed and self managed learning. An innovative teaching model, using the acronym S. T. A. R. (see, talk, act and review) was introduced into a business ethics course. Using this model, students were encouraged to recognise an ethical business dilemma, debate and discuss the issue, decide on appropriate action and consider the consequences of their decisions. A secondary aim of the study was to develop a deeper understanding of student expectations of university and their learning experiences.

To make both practical and academic contributions the study provides insights and a deeper understanding of student responses related to the uncertainty and challenge of studying within a different paradigm. Secondly, the practical contribution and added value of emerged insights provide suggestions that could be adapted and employed in other courses of university study.

The paper is structured into four parts;
- a literature review used as a basis for the arguments for using alternative pedagogies and formative evaluation of suggested changes;
- the methodology and research process;
- the study results and
- key insights from the study which suggest that when presented with learning challenges students will respond positively and learn in a novel environment.

2.   Literature review

2.1   Student engagement
Engagement is a multi-dimensional phenomenon (Guthrie & Anderson, 1999; Chism, 2003). More recently, Blaylock, Wiggs and Lachowicz (2008) argued that business students engage

best when provided with an adult learning environment. Colquitt, LePine & Noe (2000) and Bell & Kozlowski (2002) all argued that learning outcome is the best predictor of a successful class. Therefore, there is increased recognition that the learner is as important as the teacher and the learning environment in determining the extent to which learning occurs. Thus, optimum learning requires an interesting learning environment and actively engaged students.

Burke, Scheuer and Meredith (2007) focus on the importance of dialogue to facilitate learning, reflection, knowledge and skill acquisition. This approach is consistent with Kraigers's (2008) third-generation learning models that promote the importance of interaction and engagement among learners, and the need to provide students with an environment that encourages them to hypothesise, question, interpret, explain and evaluate issues and problems. The learning model formed the basis for development of the business ethics course. Included in the design was the recognition that individual differences including conscientiousness, anxiety, cognitive ability and self-efficacy influence learning outcomes (Beier & Kanfer, 2010; Gully & Chen, 2010). With this in mind, a number of alternative learning strategies and assessment types were included in the course design to encourage maximum engagement by all students. For example, concept maps, debate, role plays, videos, case studies, critical analysis of written works and open discourse were strategies developed.

When referring to the engagement concept, Steele and Fullagar (2009: 5), despite finding that "existing definitions lack a strong conceptual foundation and often confuse the antecedents and outcomes of engagement with facets of engagement", have suggested that restructuring of academic work involves flow experiences, academic work experiences such as role clarity and support for autonomy and feedback and attention to psychological and physical health. Earlier, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) suggested flow was related to three components: an optimal balance between challenges in the task and the skills necessary to meet the challenges; a state of total absorption, with students focused and immersed in their activities; and, flow experiences so enjoyable and optimal that students are motivated intrinsically by the task itself.

2.2   Student experience
Pine and Gilmore (1998) proposed the concept of the experience economy to suggest successful businesses will provide a distinct offering by experientialising the product or service provision. Thus, a product or service that is a commodity may be transformed into an experience that provides the opportunity for differentiation and consumers obtaining a feeling of greater engagement with the business. The experience economy requires development of a memorable event such that the event adds value to the product or service on offer. The experience concept is easily transferred to the model used in the current study.

Early 21st century students experience university education in very different ways than previous generations (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnes, 2005; Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). Current students are among a generation identified by Brennan, Patel and Tang (2009) as often working more than 20 hours per week in paid employment and who are motivated by gaining a qualification quickly and entering the workforce in a well-paid job. These students are juggling multiple demands and can become jaded and disillusioned about their study very quickly. The traditional focus on curriculum content is not sufficient to maintain student engagement and, as a result, universities and academics must become more creative in their design and delivery of materials. The term "student experience" is attributed to Harvey,

Burrows and Green (1992) who, in relation to the quality of higher education noted that "this is not restricted to the student experience in the classroom but to the total student experience" (Harvey et al., 1992: 1).

Pitkethly and Prosser (2001) suggested that each university must develop an understanding of the specific needs and expectations of its own students rather than accept student experience as a universal construct. Students must be engaged interactively in their learning so that it becomes a holistic experience for them. Because notions of student experience are idiosyncratic and viewed from many perspectives (Benckendorff, Ruhanen & Scott, 2009), experiences are a distinct educational offering, quite separate from the product or service provided. Therefore, educators must see themselves not just as providers of an educational product or service, but also as deliverers of experiences. Field (2009) exhorted educators to encourage active learning by harnessing student interest. By listening to the students' voice about their experiences at university (Hu, Kuh & Li, 2008) and looking at student engagement in the context of modern day higher education, its potential as a powerful construct for engaging students can be extended in pursuit of achieving intended outcomes.

3.   Methodology and research process

3.1   Participants

Research participants were required to provide insight into the research questions; therefore, purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2003) was used. A single case design was chosen and Creswell's (2003) definition that a case study is an exploration of a system bounded by time and place was accepted. A cohort of 100 undergraduate business ethics students formed the population for this study. The student cohort was extremely diverse in areas such as age, educational experience and workplace or business experience. Ethics approval for the study was granted (approval number SOM-03-10) by the University Ethics Committee which also oversees any research involving students.

Yin (1984) argued that case study design enabled researchers to capture the characteristics of real-life events and, while the results themselves may not be generalisable, some theoretical propositions may be relevant. Interest in trialling a creative and innovative teaching model and in gathering student responses to their learning experiences was the motivation for selection of a single case design. The study was conducted within a particular context (a business ethics course) at a single location (a Western Australian university) and at a particular time (a single semester's study – 12 weeks).

3.2   Procedure

In response to Ghoshal's (2005) contention that business schools need to re think their curriculum and recognise their responsibility in shaping the behaviours of future managers, and based on Drumwright and Murphy's (2004) concept of 'the seeing-talking practitioner', a See, Talk, Act, Review (S.T.A.R) model was developed for use in a business ethics course. Students were encouraged to *See* (correctly recognise) an ethical business situation, *Talk* (debate and discuss) through the issue, *Act* (decide on appropriate action using role plays and case studies to test the outcomes) and *Review* (consider the consequences of their decisions and behaviour). Resources such as concept maps, readings, on-line case studies focussed on business ethical situations and a range of decision making models were provided. Activities introduced into the course included role plays, debates, discussions and peer evaluation. Assessment tasks were chosen to encourage critical thinking, creativity and imagination in

ethical decision making, and to stimulate a depth of learning that students could transfer to their workplace. The assessment in this course was focussed on case studies, giving students the opportunity to demonstrate their ability to apply theoretical concepts to a practical situation. Students are assessed on how well they identify the ethical dimensions of the cases, their development and explanation of their position on the problems identified and the quality of the decision they make.

In the first class students were introduced to the idea of a course that was unique and challenging in terms of content, design, delivery and assessment. The course was designed around each of the four major S.T.A.R. concepts; each concept covering 3 weekly sessions of 3 hours developed to cumulatively cover the 12 week semester. In the fourth session, students were asked to provide, anonymously, their reflections on the course, the content, delivery and their learning experiences using de Bono's (1994) PMI (plus, minus, interesting) model. This model allows participants to see both sides of their experiences, consider different points of view and make informed decisions about their response to the learning environment. Students were asked to dot point their responses with no limit to the number of items they listed in each PMI section.

Students were allocated class time to complete the task. Responses were collected and placed into a sealed envelope for transcribing by a third party who could not identify the students' handwriting. In this way, students felt they could be more honest in their responses and could evaluate the course without fear or prejudice. Jabri (2006) postulated that honest reflections and narratives provide insights into, and an understanding of, the environment, structure, dynamic relationships, real life events and experiences within the context of the participant. This data collection process was replicated in session 8. At the end of the 12 weeks of classes, students completed, again anonymously, the university provided evaluation of the course and those data, quantitative and qualitative, were made available to the course controller.

3.3   Analysis
No biographical data were gathered from students to reassure students of the anonymity of their responses. Some students fitted into a very specific demographic, so any data of this kind would have identified them easily.

The focus of the analysis was student engagement and experience and followed a 3 step approach. The first step comprised an initial read of all the students' comments for each section of the PMI to gain an overall understanding of responses. The second step was to identify sub themes from students' comments. Lastly, sub themes were allocated to key engagement and experience themes. The 3 step approach is recognizable as 'thematic analysis' (Aronson, 1994) and is used to identify relevant tags (key words), links (codes or sub themes) and categories (main themes).

A diverse range of students was represented which provided the advantage of gathering a variety of responses. Whilst student comments could be coded into a number of different themes, only comments related to engagement and experience are included in the following tables and only the top three sub themes are listed. Frequencies were allocated to tags associated with each link but no further quantitative analysis was completed as statistical significance of responses was not the aim in the study. Selected verbatim quotations from

participants have been included to be consistent with recommendations by Jabri (2006), to reflect the participants' perspective and voice.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 First round of formative feedback

Skinner, Furrer, Marchand and Kindermann's (2008) explanation of student engagement as being related to more subtle cognitive, behavioural and affective indicators was the basis for assigning student comments to the engagement category. Similarly, using Li, Daugherty and Biocca's (2003) suggestion that experience is related to consumers undergoing an emotional or psychological reaction to a product or service, comments related to activity and environment were assigned to the experience category.

4.1.1 First round Plus (positive) feedback

In the first round of feedback a total of 155 comments were made by students in the Plus section. 70 of those comments were related to student engagement and 71 comments were related to student experience.

Table 1: First Round - Plus feedback

Categories (Themes)	Links (Sub-themes)	Tags (Student Comments)
Engagement	Student participation (20)	*Lots of student participation – keeps lesson interesting*
	Critical thinking (9)	*Critical thinking questions; no fixed answer; flexible*
	Challenging (9)	*The seminars are interactive and I find them challenging*
Experience	Support materials (16)	*Good, relevant materials; I like the concept maps and one page notes we get*
	Shared opinions and real life activities (15)	*Small groups ... let us communicate among ourselves to solve problems that relate to real life decisions*
	Group discussion, debate, problem solving (14)	*Interactive seminars with many discussions, debates and different opinions being explored*

It is clear from the comments that students were experiencing a sense of challenge about the course and semester. Although happy with the level of interaction and the participative nature of the class, there is a sense of trepidation and anxiety evident in the following Minus comments.

4.1.2 First round Minus (negative) feedback

A total of 105 Minus comments were made by students. 32 comments revealed sub-themes related to engagement and 38 comments were related to student experience.

Table 2: First Round - Minus feedback

Themes	Sub-themes	Comments
Engagement	Boring/confusing (9)	*Can be confusing at times of the order in which things are presented. Boring – sometimes the class discussion is not that effective. Need more guidelines to help in study.*
	Textbook doesn't match course (4)	*Textbook is not very good, hard to understand*
	Insufficient learning materials (3)	*Lack of structured lecture notes – may be helpful to provide where a student isn't able to attend class.*
Experience	No lecture slides (8)	*It is disappointing that there are no lecture slides, although it forces us to think more holistically, it will certainly make it difficult to prepare for the final exam*
	Some concepts confusing and unclear (5)	*Confused with each concept, not clear about some concepts*
	Local students dominate (3)	*Just some local students talking in class. Certain people don't seem interested and do not participate.*

In the Minus section, participants' responses focussed on the confusion, uncertainty and anxiety they felt, and there were many more single or individual responses than in the Plus section. It is interesting to note that items seen as Pluses by some students have also been noted as Minuses by others. This outcome supports Beier and Kanfer's (2010) contention that differences in individual perceptions must be at the forefront of curriculum design to facilitate good learning outcomes for all students.

4.1.3 First round Interesting feedback
A total of 71 Interesting comments were made by students in the first round of data collection; 49 comments related to engagement were identified. A total of 20 comments were related to student experience.

Table 3: First Round - Interesting feedback

Themes	Sub-themes	Comments
Engagement	Discussion opinions (8)	*It's hard to get your head around some of the information because it is very much based on opinion sometimes*
	Critical thinking and challenges (7)	*Challenging – always have critical thinking which I never had this in other courses … always have to speak out.*
	Different perspectives (4)	*You must consider many different perspectives*
Experience	Sharing opinions in discussions (4)	*Get to discuss with others, know more about their opinions on the matter during class discussions*
	Individual and group	*It's interesting to see the positions that other*

| | interpretations (2) | *hold – whether it's different or the same to yours* |
| | Responding to case studies (2) | *The use of case study to be analysed is already good for individual to learn* |

The Interesting section has fewer comments than the Plus and Minus sections. Students, having already ascribed a 'good' or 'bad' response to conditions in the classroom seem less confident about what constitutes 'Interesting'.

4.2   Second round of formative feedback
After four weeks of the semester, students understood what was expected of them and were enjoying the learning opportunities more. There were many more positive (Plus) comments in this round of data collection.

4.2.1   Second round Plus feedback
A total of 175 Plus comments were made by students in the second round of data collection; 74 comments related to engagement and 56 comments were related to experience sub themes.

Table 4: Second Round - Plus feedback

Themes	Sub-themes	Comments
Engagement	Class online discussions (10)	*Discussions in class. MP3 feedback.*
	Open participation (10)	*All students expected to have open minds and participate with others.*
	Interaction between students (9)	*All people encouraged to discuss ideas*
Experience	Mind maps/concept maps (20)	*Unique mind maps that no other university gets*
	Develop understanding through entertainment or interests (11)	*Learning feels more personal, creates good understanding ... exciting class*
	MP3 feedback for assignments (7)	*MP3 feedback clips for assignments valuable for future assignments*

Plus comments indicate that students have become more aware of the unique learning tools being used. There is a high degree of student approval and appreciation of the resources provided. Less sub-themes emerged from the second round of Plus data than from the first round.

4.2.2   Second round Minus feedback
80 Minus comments were made by students in the second round. This figure represents 20% less Minus comments compared with the first round of data collection. 7 comments related to engagement were identified and a total of 65 comments were related to student experience.

Table 5: Second Round - Minus feedback

Themes	Sub-themes	Comments
Engagement	Concepts hard to learn (2)	*Concepts hard to get your head around*
	Structure of study (1)	*Course could be better structured to help studying*
	Discussions get off topic (1)	*Discussions can get quite off topic sometimes*
Experience	Assessments (11)	*Exam will be hard and challenging … so many different ways you can answer it*
	Need more PPT slides (9)	*Powerpoint notes needed to set out contents of the seminar in case of absence*
	Group work issues (5)	*Discussion have some people talking and being asked questions*

Although 80 Minus comments were made in this round, very few engagement sub themes emerged indicating that students were reporting very individual responses rather than common concerns. The experience sub-themes indicate that students were becoming concerned about assessment outcomes and that was influencing their perception of their learning experience.

4.2.3 Second round Interesting feedback
Only 45 Interesting comments were made by students; 24 comments related to engagement and 18 comments were related to student experience.

Table 6: Second Round - Interesting feedback

Themes	Sub-themes	Comments
Engagement	Multiple answers to questions (4)	*So many ways and approaches to a specific situation*
	Challenging (3)	*The course is challenging; understanding all the concepts is difficult*
	Variety of shared opinions (2)	*Everyone has different opinions. Good to discuss questions and see all different views*
Experience	Discussions (2)	*Discussions are insightful and eye-opening*
	Communication (2)	*Two way communication – staff always talk to students*
	Mind maps (2)	*Mind maps useful for linking new ideas*

The limited number of sub themes in the Interesting category indicates that students tended to respond more readily to the Plus and Minus categories.

4.3 End of semester feedback
A university managed evaluation (*eVALUate*) of every course taught is conducted every semester. Primarily, it is a quantitative instrument with an opportunity for students to add qualitative comments under the headings of 'what was good about this course' and 'how could this course be improved'. The university evaluation is not mandatory for students but elicited a 41% response rate from students in the business ethics class. This is above the average course response rate of 35%. Table 7 presents four of the items included in the university evaluation and indicates that an overwhelming majority of students who responded enjoyed the experience of the class and were actively engaged in their learning.

Table 7: End of semester evaluation

Quantitative Item	Class agreement	University average
2. The learning experiences in this course help me to achieve the learning outcomes	93%	85%
8. I am motivated to achieve the learning outcomes in this course	91%	85%
9. I make the best use of the learning experiences in this course	91%	86%
11. Overall I am satisfied with this course	95%	84%

5.   Conclusions

As a once only case study, the insights cannot be extrapolated blindly and generalised to all other contexts. Nevertheless, confidence about the wider validity of conclusions can be increased if the context for generalizing findings goes beyond immediate case results towards generalization of theory (Yin, 1993; Stake, 1995). This research study illuminated issues, ideas and approaches that can be used to inform, encourage and enable effective curriculum design and management of tertiary classrooms. Additionally, the S.T.A.R. approach has been shown to meet the needs of students in a business ethics course in particular, and can be adapted to business education in general. Moreover, students in this case demonstrated that they were able to benefit from the S.T.A.R. model teaching approach and overcome concerns expressed in the business education literature and in responses in the first PMI data collection by:

- increasing their engagement with ethics studies and business-related skills,
- acknowledging a broad base of business curriculum,
- achieving greater understanding of how and why ethical businesses function, and
- being empowered to become 'active' learners.

The end of semester *eVALUate* results indicate that the development of new approaches can leverage the learning experiences of students to result in a greater level of student engagement. Overall, the case has provided specific information for future development of the concept of leveraging student experiences as a means of establishing sound student engagement; results which warrant a broadening of the concept to other tertiary disciplines and courses of study.

6.   References

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