USING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING TO INTEGRATE ETHICS INTO AN UNDERGRADUATE SALES COURSE

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Abstract

Despite broad attention given to research on marketing ethics education, research efforts have not attempted to understand the learning outcomes of students who have participated in ethics-related learning activities. This study addresses that gap by examining the ethical reasoning students brought to bear on ethical dilemmas that emerged from an experiential learning project. We employed qualitative research methods to interpret how students judged the ethicality of their actions while participating in a semester-long personal selling project. We provide a review of experiential learning to highlight the value of that pedagogical approach for teaching marketing ethics. We report findings from a 2 ½ year study aimed at understanding 1) if the ethical dilemmas students recognized in a personal selling project reflect ethical dilemmas in real-world selling situations and 2) if those experiences reflect the range of conceptual domains suggested by ethical decision-making models that typically frame the content of teaching units that cover marketing ethics. We interpreted both our methodological approach and our findings in terms of six learning categories presented in Bloom's taxonomy. Drawing on that interpretation, we describe three examples of how active learning exercises can be integrated with an experiential learning project to encourage students to employ the highest order of thinking skills to learn marketing ethics concepts.

Keywords: Marketing Ethics, Ethical Decision-making, Bloom's Taxonomy, Experiential Learning, Marketing Education.

Introduction

The scholarly business literature is replete with studies about how colleges of business can strengthen ethics education in marketing curricula. In their review of research on marketing ethics, Nill and Schibrowsky (2007, pg. 268) (Nill & Schibrowsky, 2007) found that among all articles addressing marketing ethics published between 1981 and 2005, "articles pertaining to the teaching of marketing ethics were the second most researched sub-discipline…." Debate has centered around whether ethics should be taught as a stand alone course (Ferrell & Keig, 2013) or infused across curricula (Brinkmann, Sims, & Nelson, 2011). While that debate lingers, it is reasonable to assume that some combination of the two approaches likely is optimal (Ogunyemi, 2017).

Despite broad attention given to research on marketing ethics education, research efforts have not attempted to understand the learning outcomes of students who have participated in ethics-related learning activities. Lack of insight into learning outcomes of ethics education leaves scholars' understanding of the effectiveness of different pedagogical approaches largely to speculation. This study addresses that gap by examining the ethical reasoning students brought to bear on ethical dilemmas that emerged from an experiential learning project. We employed qualitative research methods to interpret how students judged the ethicality of their actions while participating in a hands-on personal selling project.

Experiential Learning

Experiential learning takes place through processes of doing and reflecting (Felicia, 2011). Experiential learning is distinct from rote, didactic or other forms of learning that do not incorporate direct experience in their pedagogical approach (de Stavenga, Wierstra, & Hermanussen, 2006). Key pedagogical components differentiate experiential learning activities from academic learning. According to (Kolb, 1984), learning through experience requires learners to progress through four distinct phases: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Internships, computer simulations, live case projects (Gentry, 1990), and a variety of service-related assignments (Gremler, Hoffman, Keaveney, & Wright, 2000) are examples of experience-based activities commonly administered in marketing courses.

The value of using experiential learning projects to teach business ethics lies in the fact that experience-based activities require learners to understand complex issues in context (Radford, Hunt, & Andrus, 2015). Students struggle to understand and apply broad, complex concepts presented in theoretical models of business ethics. In contrast, it is much easier for students to recognize when they personally encounter an ethical dilemma (Sunley & Leigh, 2016). And once students recognize ethical dilemmas, they can reflect on those experiences to interpret in concrete terms complex theories about ethical decision-making. But do experiential learning activities produce learning outcomes that will provide marketing students the tools they need to identify and evaluate ethical issues?

Method

With that research question in mind, we conducted a study aimed at understanding 1) if the ethical dilemmas students recognized in a personal selling project reflect ethical dilemmas in real-world selling situations and 2) if those experiences reflect the range of conceptual domains suggested by ethical decision-making models that typically frame content delivery of more traditional approaches to marketing ethics education. Data were generated from focus group discussions and in-depth interviews conducted over a 2 ½ year period. Five initial focus groups with 25 participants in a college sales program and six follow-up depth interviews with participants of the sales program who went on to work in professional sales provided data for the study. This context offered access to students with comparable levels of sales experience and sales training. Approximately 20 hours of recorded conversations generated over 400 pages of verbatim transcripts.

Participants were drawn from a senior-level sales management class at a large North American University. The central component of the sales class involved a semester-long sales management activity that included sales training, sales management, and sales negotiations with prospects. Students were tasked with selling professional quality cutlery. All of the revenue generated by students' sales was donated to a charity that grants wishes for sick children. Sales incomes were based on the margin earned by each sales representative. Individual sales representatives could offer discounts or promotions based on a point discount program. As such, the final selling price was a major point of emphasis for participants' sales negotiations. Performance was evaluated on both behavioral and outcome-based reward systems commonly used in sales incentive programs (Anderson & Oliver, 1987).

In focus group discussions and depth interviews, we phrased questions in conversational terms to help elicit discussion and to bring familiarity and comfort to an inherently intrusive setting (Patton, 2002). To orient discussions around ethical dilemmas, we asked participants to discuss experiences during sales negotiations when they recalled feeling "icky" or when they thought they were potentially "crossing an ethical line." We then asked participants to discuss how they determined what to do and why they believed their actions were right or wrong. This research design follows an established tradition of using qualitative methodology to understand ethical reasoning processes (Granitz, 2003) (Rodrigo & Arenas, 2008).

Results

We used TAMS Analyzer to code and organize textual data in an iterative fashion comparing verbatim quotations with conceptual themes suggested by relevant theory (Gioia, Price, Hamilton, & Thomas, 2010) (Locke, 2001) (Thompson, 1997). First, transcripts were analyzed independently. In level one coding, we identified reasons participants gave for the moral decisions that they made. Using reasons as a starting point provided a systematic frame by which to identify influences upon participants' moral decisions (Simonson & Nowlis, 2000). Further, a way that "…culture influences decisions is through the reasons that individuals recruit when required to explain their choices" (Briley, (Briley, Morris, & Simonson, 2000) pg. 157. Because reasons account for outcomes with respect to selves and others, and because reasons carry cultural influences to the fore of people's minds, we could be confident that data culled during the first round of coding reflected a broad range of personal, social, and cultural influences on participants' ethical decisions. This yielded 340 unique quotations relevant to our research question.

In level two analysis, we identified quotes relevant to the domain of sales ethics. We did this by labeling reasons with code descriptors such as *role conflict* (Chonko & Burnett, 1983) (Singh & Rhoads,

1991), *performance targets* (Johnston & Marshall, 2008), *high-pressure tactics* (Johnston & Marshall, 2008), *competing needs/expectations* (Jaramillo, Mulki, & Solomon, 2006) (Schwepker Jr., Ferrell, & Ingram, 1997), *disclosure, and deceptive tactics* (Johnston & Marshall, 2008). We arranged the data according to these classifications. We also classified reasons as deontological or teleological evaluations (Hunt & Vitell, 2006) (Murphy & Laczniak, 1981) to ensure that data included for subsequent analysis reflected both types of ethical positions depicted by extant theory.

Table 1 depicts select quotes from each ethical domain coded in our analysis.
The quotes depicted in Table 1 illustrate that data generated from the focus group interviews reflect ethical dilemmas identified in the literature as regular issues in sales negotiation contexts. Data also reflect both teleological and deontological evaluations. For example, Anna [FG 01] evaluated the ethicality of using a high-pressure sales tactic by observing that her statement "…was true; it wasn't a lie." That is, her actions adhered to a principle of categorical imperative – Anna judged the normative aspects of her action (not technically lying) as more important than the consequences of her actions (the pressure she put on the prospect). Thus, Anna's quote reflects a deontological evaluation. In contrast, Audrey [FG 05] justified withholding information about the point discount system based not on the principle that doing so is wrong, but on the consequences of her actions for the charity – "…if I give them two things for free, it still deducts from the value of the amount of money that's going to the [charity]." Audrey's quote reflects a teleological evaluation. Categorizing data in terms of deontological and teleological evaluations is appropriate because being new to sales, it is not likely that students would employ the full range of ethical determinants reflected by current models [e.g. professional, industry, and company ethical norms, etc.

Discussion

To understand the value of experiential learning to teach marketing ethics, we interpreted our methodological approach and our findings in terms of six learning categories presented in Bloom's taxonomy. Bloom's taxonomy provides a way to classify learning into levels of complexity. While the full taxonomy includes cognitive, affective and sensory domains, scholars have predominantly focused on the cognitive domain as a basis to assess learning outcomes in both K-12 and post-secondary education (Anderson, et al., 2001). The six categories range from lower order thinking skills such as remembering and understanding through higher order thinking skills such as evaluating and creating. Table 2 provides definitions of each of the six categories.

The semester-long sales activity provided a concrete experience as a basis for students to observe and reflect on ethical dilemmas they encountered during the project. Following Bloom's taxonomy, the activity itself aligns most closely with *applying* information in a specific situation. However, the information students applied in the project was not specifically focused on ethical issues. Instead, students put into practice personal selling and sales management techniques they learned during the project's sales training component in advance of contacting and negotiating with prospects. While students did discuss ethics as part of their sales training, the topic was not the primary learning goal of the project.

We introduced ethics as a conceptual topic through the questions we posed during the focus group sessions. By asking students to recall situations when they felt they potentially crossed an ethical line, we provided them an opportunity to identify experiences with ethical content and to differentiate their actions in terms of right and wrong. This process required students to *analyze* their actions – level four in Bloom's levels of thinking skills.

Insights revealed in our analysis suggest that marketing instructors can design classroom activities that achieve high-level learning outcomes similar to those achieved in our study. Assuming students participate in an experience-based project that exposes them to ethical dilemmas similar to those in real-world business contexts, many interactive classroom techniques could be administered to achieve the same level thinking we achieved through our focus group discussions. For example, instructors could

engage students in a *think-pair-share* activity (Morrison-Shetlar, 2001). Students would talk in pairs and share their experiences with ethical dilemmas that stemmed from the experience-based project. The instructor asks students to compare their experiences, their ethical judgments, and then share with the rest of the class similarities and differences in their assessments. Instructors could also engage students in *forced debate* (Silberman, 1996). Similar to think-pair-share, students debate the ethicality of their actions in pairs. However, instead of asking students to report on the debate to the class, the instructor would require students to defend the opposite side of their personal opinion. This approach requires students to critique and judge the reasoning behind their ethical assessments. *Role playing* could also provide rich insights into ethical lessons. Students could be assigned to different roles according to stakeholders involved in an ethical dilemma they experienced during the experiential activity. Then they act out the ethical situation in class allowing observers to critique and ask questions about the consequences of the students' actions on the various stakeholders involved in the situation.

The three examples of classroom activities replicate the learning outcomes we elicited in focus group settings. These three examples are by no means exhaustive. There likely are as many active learning approaches that would accomplish similar outcomes as there are instructors to administer them. The point is, that by asking students to reflect on their experiences, we enabled students to identify ethical dilemmas and analyze and evaluate the ethicality of their actions.

The questions we posed in our focus groups did not require participants to create. As such, nothing in our methodological approach illustrates how to use experiential learning activities to push students to the highest level of learning presented in Bloom's taxonomy. Nonetheless, data generated from our questions could provide students with insights to hypothesize how the lessons from a concrete experience might apply more broadly to other contexts. Instructors could design follow-up classroom activities to build on elicitation activities such as think-pair-share, forced debate, and role playing. For instance, students could use results of the elicitation exercises to organize lessons into common themes or to develop a sales ethics training manual based on their personal experiences. The opportunity to develop an ethics manual would require students to draw on skills from multiple levels of the taxonomy including their *understanding* of complex ethical concepts, their interpretations of ethical dilemmas they encountered during the activity (*application*), and the judgments and critique they employed in *evaluating* the ethicality of their personal and their peers' actions.

Conclusion

Unlike studies that focus on approaches to teaching marketing ethics, our study examined learning outcomes reflected in students' lived experiences. By so doing, we provide empirical evidence that experiential learning projects can reflect ethical dilemmas experienced in practice and that reflections on those experiences elicit a range of conceptual domains suggested by ethical decision-making models that typically guide content decisions of traditional approaches to ethics education. Finally, by interpreting our findings in terms of Bloom's taxonomy, we provide evidence that experience-based projects paired with other active-learning classroom activities can engage students' highest order of thinking skills to learn business ethics.

References Available upon Request

Table 1. Selected verbatim quotations reflective of personal selling ethical issues.	
Ethical Domain	Select quotes

Role conflict	*I know he wanted to buy it. And I know he wanted to help me out. But I knew that they couldn't afford it. So I said, "Maybe not. Maybe I can buy it and maybe you can use it sometime. Because it was my responsibility to be a good family member, too, and to watch out for their needs.* [Angelina, FG 04]
Performance targets	*Everything I've sold so far, I didn't mention the points, unless it was the thing that would make the sale. Because with the point system, you have to deduct it from the total amount, and it's that much less that's going towards the [charity]. So I tried not to do that. Because if I give them two things for free, it still deducts from the value of the amount of money that's going to the [charity]. So, I stayed away from explaining it to them...* [Audrey, FG 05]
High-pressure tactics	*There was this one sale and you know I totally played on the fact that she had children...I was totally pulling on her heartstrings, being like, "you know, because he's had a few different operations. He's in high school getting his last chance at bone marrow. And since it's his last chance, they don't know if it will work." So, I totally played that up. "He still has the disease," I said. "They don't know if he'll come through it." She's got young kids, and I started to feel a little bit bad with this...I knew I was manipulating her...It was true; it wasn't a lie. In the moment, I was a little unethical about it, because with her situation and her little kids, that really helped the cause of selling...But, I felt a little bit morally unethical.* [Anna, FG 03]
Competing needs/ expectations	*They're trying to get me to sell to him, but I know that he has like thirty thousand dollars of credit card debt, because he just can't stop buying. So, I didn't, because I like him, and I knew him. I said, "I know he'll buy it; he'll buy packs, but he will put them on his credit card and can't afford them. So, I didn't even tell him about them." I thought selling him was crossing the line.* [Belle, FG 01]
Disclosure	*If the salesperson wasn't hiding something or keeping something back, there would be no sales...The price would be the price advertised. Come in and buy it at that price. There would be no negotiations.* [Kitty, FG 03]
Deceptive tactics	*You can stretch the truth with [This Brand] and the points. You can say, "Oh, you bought three hundred dollars, so you can get thirty points. You can say that, because they don't know.* [Caitlyn, FG 03]

Table 2. Conceptual definitions of Bloom's six categories of learning.					
Lower-order thinking skills					Higher order thinking skills
Remember	Understand	Apply	Analyze	Evaluate	Create
Retrieve relevant knowledge from long-term memory	Construct meaning from instructional messages, including oral, written, and graphic communication	Carry out or use a procedure in a given situation	Break material into its constituent parts and determine how the parts relate to one another and to an overall structure or purpose	Make judgments based on criteria and standards	Put elements together to form a coherent or functional whole; reorganize elements into a new pattern or structure
(Table 2 adapted from Anderson et al., 2001, pp. 67-68.)					