



## CAN ETHICS BE TAUGHT?

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### ABSTRACT

*In order to understand the feasibility of conducting ethical education on campus from the standpoint of business school faculties, the study employs qualitative method to explore the issue. Interviews and classroom observation were utilized to be the ways to collect data. The results indicated that from the perspective of instruction conducting, it is because time limitation and school authority's neglect that makes the teachers were not able to let ethic education soundly go effect into instructional activities.*

*Therefore, the study suggests school authority should emphasize the importance of students' ethical concept and connect the concepts with the related subjects or courses.*

**Key words:** Ethics, Qualitative method, Interviews

### I. Introduction

Ethic is the base for individuals to tell right from wrong and school education is one of the most important ways to learn knowledge and value. The cases happened in Taiwan recently make us wonder: Is our society sick? Is there anything wrong with our education? Truly, the related government branch should be responsible fro the re-occurrence of the similar cases. However, what the public's most concerned is: Don't we have a way to fix the problem at a time?

The issues of ethic education have long been the most concerned issue of educators and the public. Meanwhile, could the ethical concept be taught has long been the dispute point for scholars. Some researchers (Beggs & Dean, 2007) pointed that the control of ethical behavior

should be started from external strength (that is, the constraint of law), rather than inner control (which implies education). On the other hand, researcher (Duska, 1991) also reported that why managers and entrepreneurs would not distinguish right from wrong, so the issue about ethic is not the point that educators should intervene. Therefore, the topic about whether ethic can be taught was always not settled. However, one thing that education has impacts on students' perception and value on everything is always recognized and accepted by the public. In other words, how teachers think and do would highly influence on students' ethical judgments in the future.

The objective of school education is firstly to make students be able to tell right from wrong and ethical value is the very important accordance to impact on individual's judgment ability. For the students of business school work everywhere in the society after graduation, they do have more chances to touch the decisions about ethic. If the teachers could guide them to do decisions with ethical concept, then students can receive ethical concepts in an organized way. Therefore, the study employs a qualitative way to understand how the business teachers view the professional ethic problems. The selected interviewees are responsible for marketing and the question to be replied is to understand the feasibility of conducting ethical education in school education from the teachers' standpoint.

## **2. Theoretical context**

The range of business activity includes almost everything. For example: the fields like food, clothing, lodging, transportation, education and entertainment as well as medical all cover business concepts. Hence, in the activities of business transaction, how the practitioners communicate with customers actually has a great impact on the society, because it is highly related to the rights and welfare of the public (Stark, 1993). Consequently, ethical concepts usually substitute customs or legal items to be the standard to fix the issues. In other words, the steps of business competition is therefore always ahead of custom change and law enactment (Stark, 1993). People usually think that there's no relationship between business and ethic, it is mainly because that the objective of business activity is to make profits, and the goal (or motivation) for business men to provide products or services is profit rather than ethic. Alternatively, if we restrict business campaign with ethical standards, the business operation and value creation will surely be limited. However, it does not imply that business men could do anything without restriction; business activities should still be operated in the

range of law (Beggs & Dean, 2007). That is, ethic is also an important factor when making decisions except profit. From another perspective, without the restriction of ethic, business activities would violate disciplines for the sake of making profits. If so, the final victims are the general public.

Professional ethic refers to the ration or principle that practitioners have to abide by in order to maximize social profits when providing services to the public. Accordingly, professional ethic including the constructs such as: acts, norms, social values and ethical theories (Bayles, 1989; p:19-20). Their relationship depends on the closed logical connection, for example: if practitioner's behavior is appropriate has to be evaluated by social norms; while weather professional norms are just has to see if they match with the social values; social values' legitimacy is considered by ethical theories. Gowthorpe & Blake (1998) reported that the principles of professional ethic have to be judged by the social profits. If a professional's behavior is not accepted by the team or the public, then s/he will be severely punished; that is, the norms of professional ethic have to be constructed by social values.

The concepts of professional ethic can be applied to any industry. Take marketing professional ethic as an example; though marketing information is transparent and advanced in the modern era, consumers' privilege is often sacrificed for the sake of making profits. In other words, most of the consumers do not understand how to protect their own privilege under the circumstances of asymmetric information. For example: the Century Tobacco Fraud case that happened in the U.S.A. in 2004, the government accused that the tobacco companies intentionally hide the fact that the nicotine in the cigarettes will make people be addicted to smoking. The long-term smoking will not only lead the consumers be addictive but also harmful to their health. If the case is approved to be fraud, then the companies' great revenues are illegal. On the other hand, the Nestle milk company ever advertising tremendously in Africa, claiming that their milk powder is so nutritious so that it can replace mother's milk, this mislead the African mothers to be miscognitive. The company even sends a lot of free milk powder samples to lure the African to consume their products. When the African mothers stop secreting milk, the company had stopped producing the milk powder. The African mothers were forced to feed their babies with highly diluted milk powder. It is regretful that many babies died for poor nutrition.

Inappropriate marketing methods are numerous, for example: hiding the fact, advertising

exaggeratively, marking product ingredients ambiguously, and ignoring product safety responsibility..., and so on. The above-stated cases are only a small part of the fact, the marketers' illegal behavior can not be soundly constructed unless depends on the government legislation. The essential way to solve the problem is to call back the essence of professional value so that the marketers would be self-disciplined.

## **2.2 Is it workable to teach ethics?**

The issue about "Can ethics be taught?" goes back as early as the argument related to virtue by Socrates and Meno (Plato, 1949). Socrates insisted that virtue can be taught. The two argued for a long time, Meno eventually consented that education does not change anything in terms of spiritual level, virtue is included.

Kant (1966) reported that without the help of virtual education, people would yield to self-interested and immoral behavior. Some researchers (Gioia, 2002; Swanson, 2004) reported that teaching ethics just like teaching the subjects that have influences on student behavior (for example: organization behavior or human resource management), it is doubtless necessary in the field of business courses in the decades. However, another researchers (Kohlberg & Hersh, 2001) hold quite conservative opinions upon the issue, they claimed that education is truly one of the many effective tools to lift virtue reasoning ability, but it is because virtue judgment is the necessary condition rather than the sufficient one, the effect of ethic courses is therefore unable to judge.

Suppose ethic can be taught, then the issue should go back to: Who has to be the instructor? How to teach the course? Actually, parents, corporate managers or bosses and groups or institutions could be the mentor of ethical learning, while educators play the role to assimilate the concept into the courses (Pelton & True, 2004). Basically, those who recognized that ethic can be taught regarded that ethical concepts and behavior are inter-connected, that is, if someone owns correct ethical concepts, then s/he will present ethical behavior. However, regrettably, there's no evidence indicates that ethical concept can be connected to ethical behavior. Therefore, the issue about that weather ethic can be taught on earth is still disputable.

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1 Research design**

The study employed qualitative method and selected a marketing professional instructor to be the interviewee. The reasons are as follows: the course range of business school is wide; it covers both theoretical type and theoretical and practical one. Of which, theoretical courses stress theory and professional concept interpretation (such as accounting, economics and statistics); while theoretical and practical courses focus on conceptual application and emphasize how to build up observation and decision-making ability (such as marketing). The instructors that are responsible for the courses have to explain many cases or examples to let students learn situation analysis and judgment. Relatively, the instructors would have more opportunities to share their experiences and values with students. The study therefore selected a marketing instructor to be the interviewee. The instructor has been teaching for more twenty years, who is mainly responsible for the courses like marketing or management. For a strong sense of mission, the instructor strictly requested whose students to obey classroom ethic (for late: no late, no absent and no eating and sleeping in the classroom). Additionally, the instructor often illustrated social real cases to interpret ethical cases to increase students' ability about ethic and right/wrong judgment.

#### **3.2 Data collection and analysis**

The study collected data through interview. In order to precisely record the data, the entire interview process were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim right after the interview was finished.

Then the transcript was coded and thoroughly and repeatedly reviewed by the researcher until findings were emerged.

### **4. Results**

After analysis, the results and findings are disclosed as follows:

Finding 1: Professional ethical education is necessary.

Finding2: Professional ethical concept should be assimilated into the class through the related cases.

Finding 3: It is difficult to make professional ethic soundly go effect into the class.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

Based on the findings revealed above, the researcher proposed the following points:

First, school authority should provide teachers with the related information to guide them how to bring professional ethical concepts into the class.

Second, teachers should be provided with meetings or workshop to share experiences about how to make ethical instruction plan in order to improve ethical class learning.

Finally, the teachers who are currently performing well in ethical teaching should be encouraged and awarded.

Limited to time and resources, the study only interviewed one marketing profession. Future studies are suggested to select more different participants (such as instructors or practitioners) to collect data and deeply understand the fact so that ethical education would be implemented in school education more deeply.

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