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A whole of curriculum approach to teaching business ethics

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Charles Sturt University

1. Introduction

Until recently literature on the teaching of business ethics has focused too narrowly on individual subjects or upon making suggestions for a whole of curriculum approach (Brady & Kennedy, 1999) without adequately recognising and taking into account current practices across the curriculum (Molyneaux, 2005; McDonald, 2004). In addition, little attempt has been effectively made to consider the role that educational theories can play in incorporating business ethics into the curriculum. This paper extends the literature by examining how ethics is taught across undergraduate business subjects at a multi-campus regional university, and by using a review of literature on the cognitive apprenticeship approach and the findings of the study into business subjects to suggest a whole of curriculum approach to teaching ethics.

Prior research into business degree programs has identified two predominant but contesting approaches to including ethics in the curriculum offered by higher education institutions. The first is to include a compulsory stand-alone ethics subject in the program, and the second involves delivering ethics content integrated within subjects throughout the degree (Murphy & McGrath, 2007; Dellaportas, 2006; McDonald, 2004; Molyneaux, 2005). It has been suggested (Murphy & McGrath, 2007; Carroll, 1998; Milon-Smith, 1995; Armstrong, 1993) that a third approach, a mixed model, combining the two approaches referred to above, in which a stand-alone ethics subject is combined with ethics integrated into other subjects, establishes a contextual base and provides the best learning experience for students. Murphy and McGrath (2007) have presented a model of ethical understanding adopting this third way of structuring ethics content, which is based on Kohlberg’s six stages of moral development, highlighting the need for a structured whole of curriculum approach to ethics development. Few authors however, have examined the structure of the ethics curriculum from an educational paradigm. Instead, most have used their own classroom experiences in their analysis, other literature on teaching business ethics and literature from areas such as moral development.

All three approaches to placing ethics within the curriculum were found to exist within the undergraduate business degrees examined in this study. Further, the findings support a cognitive apprenticeship whole of curriculum approach to the teaching of ethics, which can be systematically implemented within a degree.

The cognitive apprenticeship approach is normally associated with teaching design within individual subjects rather than across a degree. Using the cognitive apprenticeship approach within a subject, the teacher/master uses authentic contexts and activities including cases, scenarios and role-plays, scaffolding (Ghezzi, 2003; Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989), modelling, coaching, collaboration and reflection to give students experiences which will help them master the content of the subject. Mastery is not limited to content; the teacher explicitly models the way a master of the discipline thinks so that students can also develop these ways of thinking. Within individual subjects, this
approach has been used to help students arrive at the point at which they can autonomously use the subject specific knowledge and skills that they have learnt.

Nevertheless, a new approach is to suggest that the cognitive apprenticeship model be used as part of a whole of curriculum development approach where it could be effective as a way to develop mastery of professional skills across a whole degree. In this respect, a cognitive apprenticeship approach (Ghefali, 2003; Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989) has been identified as an effective critical tool for use in curriculum development for concepts, like ethics, that are frequently linked to a university’s stated graduate attributes, and which are expected to be developed across a whole degree.

2. Applying the cognitive apprenticeship model to the whole of curriculum

Curriculum has had little consideration in Australian higher education with the concept being ‘unfamiliar to many academics, who developed and taught units or courses to reflect their own interests with little attention to ensuring coherence’ (Candy, Crebert & O’Leary, 1994, p. 60). However, there is now a growing interest in curriculum, which is in part the result of the work of the Australian Learning & Teaching Council which has funded a number of curriculum-based programs (see, for example, Kift, 2009 and Hicks, 2007). Hicks (2007) argues that reinvigorating institutional recognition of the importance of curriculum can help improve discipline-based courses by providing an integrated approach that will allow scaffolding of learning, a greater collective responsibility, and more student focus, including the ability to integrate assessment and generic skills across the curriculum. As ethics and ethical practice are often identified with generic skills, it can be argued that evaluating the content and context within which ethics is included in a degree from a curriculum approach based on the cognitive apprenticeship approach should be part of this process and thus will help the development of discipline-based courses.

Cognitive apprenticeship is recognised as a constructivist approach to student learning (Ghefali, 2003). ‘Constructivist views of learning emphasise the active role of the learner in building understanding’ (McInerny & McInerny, 2006) so that students learning from within a constructivist paradigm are empowered to take ownership of their own knowledge. The constructivist curriculum encompasses the learning and includes how that learning is scaffolded within the degree; it also includes the student experiences with lecturers and administrative staff and other students. (Scaffolding is a metaphor used loosely in educational research to refer to the role of adults or more knowledgeable peers in guiding students’ learning often through a laddered approach to the acquisition of knowledge and skills (Verenikina, 2003)). Ghefali (2003) identified key drivers of the cognitive apprenticeship approach to learning. The first is the socio-cultural theory of learning in which it is argued that knowledge and skills develop out of interaction with others and the cultures within which learners are embedded. Following from this is the idea that cognitive processes are situated within a context that can be both physical and social. Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development is another driver (Hedegaard, 2005). This is the gap between what can be done unaided and what can be achieved with the guidance of or scaffolding by a more knowledgeable mentor. By providing the contextualised coaching and scaffolding on one side, a cognitive apprenticeship approach helps students build a bridge to autonomous actions on the other side of the gap. This bridge building in many ways emulates the traditional apprenticeship approach to learning.
Connections do exist between the constructivist, cognitive apprenticeship literature and moral development literature. Damon and Colby (1996), writing within the moral development domain, suggested that 'reasoning and reflection play an important role but they are incomplete and insufficient as the basis of moral behaviour without practice-orientated systems such as goals, habits, affect and commitment' (p. 32). In further suggesting that 'moral habits are embedded in emotional and behavioural reflex systems that are bolstered by the cultural context and years of practice' (p. 33), a direct connection can be made to a cognitive apprenticeship approach to learning. Authentic context and practice are key components of this constructivist learning approach.

2.1 Contextual learning aids skill development

Strong evidence for the context-based nature of ethical learning can be found in Dellaportas, Cooper and Leung (2006), Levitt (1999), Armon (1998), Jones and Hildebeitei (1995) and Elm and Nichols (1993). In particular, Dellaportas, et al. (2006) found students’ scores on ethical decision-making deteriorated after moving from university to a one-year work-based cooperative learning program. Prior to the cooperative learning program students had completed a one-semester subject on ethics, gaining higher scores in ethical decision-making. The drop in ethical decision making scores after the cooperative learning program suggests that a one semester course will have little impact on students’ ethical judgment. It also suggests that the cultural context in which they learn needs to be one in which the students are able to construct a ‘habitat’ of ethics and also one that is similar to the cultural context in which they will have to apply their ethics. Rather than limiting learning about ethics within business to one subject as was done in Dellaportas’ study, a cognitive apprenticeship approach which integrates business ethics across a whole degree program is suggested as an effective alternative.

The importance of context as a key factor in learning has also been reported in relation to teaching learning skills. Paterson, Burmeister and Evans (1995) demonstrated that university learning skills were adopted by first year students more effectively if taught not by instructional design experts, but by business lecturers who were the same lecturers who taught first year business subjects. The finding was that context mattered, further supporting a constructivist approach to learning. Students appeared to associate the learning skills with the business subjects, learning more effectively when the same staff taught both the learning skills and, later, accounting or economics or other business subjects. Similarly, it is suggested that business ethics is best taught by the same staff from whom students learn business subjects, rather than by ethicists who do not have the same business discipline knowledge as the business lecturers.

Dellaportas, et al. (2006) also found that students scored higher on ethical decision making when a general socially framed instrument was used rather than an instrument framed within a business context. Reall, Bailey and Stoll (1998) suggest that similar differences may be the result of students seeing themselves within a competitive game context, using game rules to determine behaviour rather than social rules. The implication for business educators is to provide models and coaching within a context that emphasises the impact of business on society and removes the game approach that can be found in much business education. In teaching students to master the game of business rather than the real world of business, which sometimes adversely affects the lives of others, lecturers may be inhibiting the growth of ethical understanding. Ensuring that there is a real world context and developing authentic activities that coherently represent purposeful business conduct becomes a necessary, though likely difficult, task when applying the cognitive apprenticeship approach to including ethics within the business degree curriculum.
One approach to doing this can be to scaffold ethics within the degree starting with simple examples that relate directly to the content being taught and progressing through the degree to more complex examples and more complex decision processes. This can be facilitated by lecturers making explicit and modelling their own decision processes within authentic contexts at each level, coaching the students in using these processes, facilitating reflection and gradually letting the students make their own decisions. These processes, which are integral parts of the cognitive apprenticeship approach, were used in analysing the explicit and implicit teaching of ethics at this regional university.

3. Method

A combination of document analysis of undergraduate business subject profiles and interviews of lecturing staff was determined to be the most appropriate way to collect information about the ethical content within the undergraduate business degree and the way this content was structured throughout the degree. Initial data collection involved an analysis of all the (155) undergraduate subject profiles to determine if the subjects included any topics or objectives, which specifically identified ethics as content, or which could be interpreted as including ethics as content. A content search was completed using the find function in Microsoft Word and searching for terms that were identified as synonyms of ethics, morals, and professionalism. As a result, searches of the subject profiles used the following search terms: ethic/s/al, moral/s, professional/ism, responsibility/ies, value/s, principle/s/d, belief/s, code/s, duty/d/ies, accountable/ability, right, good, honest, honourable, justice. Searching for ethics terms within subject profiles resulted in identification of 28 subjects within which ethics or a related term was specifically mentioned. These subjects are listed in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject Code</th>
<th>Subject Name</th>
<th>Subject Code</th>
<th>Subject Name</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACC100</td>
<td>Accounting 1</td>
<td>LAW350</td>
<td>Advanced Commercial Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACC200</td>
<td>Accounting Systems</td>
<td>MGT100</td>
<td>Organisations &amp; Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACC240</td>
<td>Small Business Management</td>
<td>MGT110</td>
<td>Business Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACC260</td>
<td>International Accounting</td>
<td>MGT230</td>
<td>Business and Professional Ethics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACC331</td>
<td>Auditing &amp; Assurance Services</td>
<td>MGT220</td>
<td>eCommerce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACC341</td>
<td>Accounting Theory</td>
<td>MGT320</td>
<td>Managing Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIN211</td>
<td>Financial Management</td>
<td>MGT330</td>
<td>Business Strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HRM210</td>
<td>Human Resource Management</td>
<td>MGT340</td>
<td>International Business Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITC105</td>
<td>Communication &amp; Information Management</td>
<td>MGT367</td>
<td>Leadership Issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITC182</td>
<td>Foundations of Information Technology</td>
<td>MKT230</td>
<td>Marketing Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITC331</td>
<td>Security, Privacy &amp; Ethics</td>
<td>MKT310</td>
<td>Promotions Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITC309</td>
<td>Software Development Project</td>
<td>PAD210</td>
<td>Public Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITC332</td>
<td>Site Operation for Webmasters</td>
<td>STA382</td>
<td>Research Methods &amp; Statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITC374</td>
<td>Information Technology Management</td>
<td>TRM340</td>
<td>Tourism Project</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Undergraduate business subjects with ethics content.
Major themes and questions that arose from this initial analysis included reasons for teaching ethics or not teaching ethics within the subject, the ethics content taught, whether the lecturer felt that they had sufficient knowledge to teach the content, and how and why the content is taught. A semi-structured interview schedule, which incorporated the themes of the research, was developed by the research team and is attached as Appendix 1. This schedule was trialled over a teleconference link to ensure that all interviewers at each campus experienced the trial and had an opportunity to re-evaluate the schedule ensuring that probes and follow up questions had been appropriately included (Cousin, 2008). All interviewers supported a meaning-making direction for interviews (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997) by focusing on the how and the what of the interview, thereby accessing and expanding upon the interviewees’ understandings (Cousin, 2008, p.74).

Purpose sampling was used to select the interviewees, i.e. staff who were identified as teaching subjects with ethics content and staff who taught subjects without any specifically identified ethics content were asked to participate. Some staff who taught subjects with ethics content also taught subjects without specific ethics content and this, it was decided, could confound the findings. Teaching subjects with specific ethics content could influence their teaching of subjects without specific ethics content. As a result, the pool of staff to be interviewed was widened to ensure that staff who did not teach ethics in any subject were also interviewed and that there was a selection of staff from a range of disciplines within the Faculty. This enabled a range of views about ethics content within the degrees to be gathered and analysed.

The pool of subjects was adventitiously extended as lecturers usually teach more than one subject. Part of the interview schedule asked if they had recently taught other subjects and if so data was gathered about these other subjects. For example, the lecturers of mathematics and statistics who were interviewed identified that they had taught thirteen other subjects (Table 2, next page). This is what Patton (2002) calls a ‘convenience sample’. That is, by including this line of questioning in the interviews, further information was gathered about the teaching of ethics across many other undergraduate business subjects, not just those identified in Table 1 above. In total, interview data was collected with respect to 39 of the 127 subjects for which there was no specific ethics content mentioned in the subject profile. This created a richer data set of business ethics teaching, than would have otherwise occurred.

Lecturers who taught 15 of the subjects that specifically identified ethical content were interviewed, resulting in multiple interviews with respect to four of the 15 subjects. This occurred because different lecturers on different campuses taught the same subject to different cohorts of students. Nineteen (23%) of the 96 academic staff within the Faculty were interviewed. A number of staff refused to be interviewed and this appeared to relate to the fact that during the period that this research was being undertaken the Faculty was undergoing a significant restructure with forced redundancies, some staff members leaving and some feeling threatened by the restructure. Most of the interviews were conducted face-to-face while some were conducted over the phone or through Skype. The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed through a transcription service and uploaded into Nvivo. Nvivo was used as it allows for detailed and complex coding and therefore a richer analysis of meaning.
Each of the researchers individually read and coded the same four transcribed interviews. All researchers then discussed and compared these codings and a final coding system was agreed and used to code all interviews by one of the researchers. An additional check on coding reliability was then made with all researchers discussing and where necessary amending the coding of another interview.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject Code</th>
<th>Subject Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MTH100</td>
<td>Foundation Mathematics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MTH101</td>
<td>Computer Aided Mathematics Applications 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MTH102</td>
<td>Computer Aided Mathematics 2 with Applications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MTH105</td>
<td>Introductory Mathematics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MTH135</td>
<td>Maths &amp; Stats in Health Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MTH218</td>
<td>Multivariable Calculus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MTH219</td>
<td>Linear Algebra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MTH220</td>
<td>Ordinary Differential Equations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MTH307</td>
<td>Mathematical Modelling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MTH328</td>
<td>Complex Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QBM117</td>
<td>Business Statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QBM217</td>
<td>Advanced Business Statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STA201</td>
<td>Scientific Statistics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Table 2: | Example of the convenience sample of other undergraduate business subjects |

4. Results

4.1 Mode of curriculum approach

Three modes of approach to the inclusion of ethics within the curriculum were identified as a result of this research: ethics taught explicitly as the main content of a subject; ethics as a topic or significant component of a topic in the subject; and ethics as context for the content of the subject. Within a number of the degrees all three modes were used, in others only the second two were used and frequently the inclusion of ethics as context for the content was not formally documented within the course and subject profiles.

4.1.1 Ethics as the main content

Ethics was identified as the main content for two subjects, Business and Professional Ethics (BPE) and Security, Privacy and Ethics (SPE). BPE was an elective subject for students in any of the Bachelor of Business (Specialisation) degrees and a mandatory subject within four double degrees, whereas SPE was a core subject in the Bachelor of Information Technology and associated double degrees: Bachelor of Computer Science and Bachelor of Computer Science (Games Technology). The inclusion of ethics within the Information Technology and Computer Science degrees follows the mixed model (Milton-Smith, 1995; Armstrong, 1993) but it is not integrated across the degrees.

The Australian Computer Society (ACS) obliges accredited courses to include ethics within the degrees and was the first computing society in the world to require that ethics be taught in a computing course, though not necessarily as a single subject. Since then
many other Information Communication Technology (ICT) societies have followed the ACS example. Security, Privacy and Ethics, a subject with a significant ethics component is included in the computing degrees at the university being studied and there are a number of other subjects, in this sample at least five, that students can do which also include an ethical component. Other subjects include ethics but inclusion is not a requirement of the course structure. As a result, the university more than meets the requirements of the ACS.

There was no accreditation requirement forcing the university to make Business and Professional Ethics a core subject within the major business degrees, and in a crowded degree structure, it was included as an elective subject. No coherent curriculum approach to including ethics was initially identified within the various Bachelor of Business (Specialisation) degrees.

4.1.2 Ethics as a topic or significant component of a subject

Ethics was a topic or significant component of a number of subjects within the Bachelor of Business (Accounting) degree. In part, this was driven by The Institute of Chartered Accountants in Australia and CPA Australia who require accredited courses to have an ethics component. Ethics was formally included in one first, second and two third year subjects. Within a first semester first year subject, ethics was presented as part of a topic that explored the role of a professional accountant. Students were shown how to use an ethical decision model and then how to use that model to resolve ethical decisions within a professional accounting context. The lecturer considered that the decision model was:

an approach to help students think through the issues surrounding a particular situation in an accounting context.

Here the lecturer was providing a simple model of how to approach an ethical issue, using a key technique from the cognitive apprenticeship approach. As a response to why ethics was included in this subject, the lecturer stated:

I suppose the way that ethics has been pitched in Accounting 1 is that it's to start a conversation about ethics.

In this way Accounting 1, a first semester, first year subject for accounting students begins the journey through the ethics curriculum.

In the second year subject ethics was not specifically included in any one topic but incorporated throughout the subject. As different issues were raised such as privacy, and issues dealing with people and how systems are set up for people, the ethical implications were discussed with students. In responding to a question about why the ethics content was taught, the lecturer stated:

I think ethics sort of is an overriding concept that should be brought in and contextually based. So if you bring it in at the same time you're bringing in the content and look at the issues within that specific context, I think it's a lot more practical and a lot more relevant to the students, they then can associate the ethics directly to the content to a practical situation.
While real world context is not always possible within the lecture, this lecturer recognised the importance of the context (Ghefrali, 2003; Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989) in which learning takes place as critical to the learning.

Ethics content within one of the third year subjects is taught within a specific topic in the subject with the content based on the Code of Ethics for Professional Accountants (APES 110). In responding to a question about how ethics was included in the subject the lecturer replied:

\[ I \text{ stress to the students, it's a unique role that auditors have got because they're effectively financial reporting police, their objective at the end of the day is to give an opinion that the financial statements are true and fair, free of material misstatement.} \]

In this subject as in the second year subject, the lecturer is teaching ethics within the context of the subject.

For the other third year subject ethics is included as a topic within the subject as well as a context within which to evaluate various accounting theories. As the lecturer said:

\[ \text{it's pervasive throughout the whole thing really ... there's a discussion of how ethics relate to all of the other topics.} \]

Some attempt at following a cognitive apprenticeship model can be seen from examining the way ethics has been scaffolded across the three years of the Bachelor of Business (Accounting) degree program. Ethics was taught at a simple level in the first year with a relatively straightforward decision model being used to start developing students' cognitive skills with respect to ethical decisions. There may however be the potential for more opportunities for reflecting on and contextualising the ethical content. Further opportunities for contextualisation existed in the second year subject but no mention was made by the lecturer of how the cognitive ethical skills were being developed and this is something that needs to be explored.

At the third year level, students were introduced to the Code of Ethics for Professional Accountants which provided them with more complex ways of considering ethical situations. The contexts in which the students considered these were also more complex with lecturers modelling more complex cognitions and subsequently providing the students with the opportunity for autonomous cognition. Within the other third year subject more intricate methods of cognition were further presented to the students through the analysis of ethical and accounting theories, giving the students opportunities to operate in the zone of proximal development. Unfortunately, the time available within these subjects did not allow the ideal extent of development of student cognitions. Including a compulsory ethics subject within the degree at a second year level would enable sufficient development to occur and take fuller advantage of the contextual learning within the third year subjects.

4.1.3 Ethics as context for the content

4.1.3.1 Required inclusion of ethics in subjects

Within a number of subjects ethics was required to be included as part of the subject. For example the profile of a third year management subject included a topic Leadership Issues - Ethics and Social Responsibility. A lecturer of that subject indicated that:
so then the content is just how ethics sort of play out in the workplace as such and we

go to things of more formal expressions, so through things like ethically [sic] codes of
practices and things like that, through to just individuals making their own choices, so
the more informal system of ethics I suppose,

Within this subject, the lecturer was very conscious of contextualising the ethics content
and providing some scaffolding from a formalised decision approach through codes to a
more informal approach. The lecturer recognised that many if not all of the students
would have completed BPE and would therefore have some grounding in the theories that
she could build upon in helping the students develop and understand their own approach
to ethics within leadership issues.

4.1.3.2 Voluntary inclusion of ethics in subjects

Although ethics was only specifically identified as being required content in 28
subjects a number of instances were found where the lecturer considered that ethics was
so intrinsic to the nature of the subject that it should be taught within that subject. Often
these lecturers included ethics acting out of a responsibility that they had to society
without being limited by the subject profile. Marketing lecturers were particularly
conscious of this, with one stating:

So, when I come to talk to them about ethics it’s trying to say to them, you have to be
-- well, I suppose good, sort of...

Further this lecturer suggested:

I think it’s because we’re teaching the next managers, if we tell them you need to
consider these things and, perhaps the flow-on effect will be that the companies will
start to change their perspective. So, I mean that’s really why I push it.

Another marketing lecturer found it hard to articulate reasons why he included ethics
when it was not formally part of the subject and was very determined not to teach ethical
theories or to assess ethics. He stated that he had to do ethics training when he worked
outside academia and said that it was the most boring experience that he had. Regardless,
he still saw including ethics in the course as important.

So a lot of what we do is, you know, ambush marketing, viral marketing and those
sorts of things ... I guess ask the question to the current sort of ethics morals you
know that cover that sort of stuff ... yes this is what they’re doing but whether it’s
right or wrong is a different ... Whether it’s ethical?

Computing and mathematics lecturers also included ethics in the content when it was
not specifically required because they recognise a responsibility to society. One
computing lecturer stated:

Well partly from a personal perspective in that I think it’s better if people act in
ethical ways.

Lecturers also recognised that ethics is integral to the professional role the student
will be taking on with that same computing lecturer commenting:
it's part of being a professional and part of training someone to be a professional is informing them and encouraging them to sort of take on a series of, yeah, professionally related ethics, to do with professionalism and competence and duty of care and all that sort of stuff.

Other computing lecturers made similar comments:

and ethics is, of course an essential part of the whole thing.

Three of the interviewees commented that there was no requirement in the subject profile to include ethics in the subjects that they were describing. Interestingly, however, for each of these subjects there was a requirement to include ethics in the content taught. For example, one of the lecturers identified that:

No, ethics is not taught in these subjects, as a topic ... It's not on the subject profile.

Yet there is a topic in the profile identified as 'The role of accounting and ethical decision making'. Another lecturer argued that ethics was not in the subject profile:

ethics should definitely be a very specific topic within (the subject)

But again the subject profile listed one of the topics as 'The role of ethics in accounting'.

All three of these lecturers recognised the importance of ethics as part of the role of the professional and included ethics in their subjects but did not seem to be aware that there was a requirement to teach ethics within these subjects or did not interpret what was to be taught as being ethics. One of these lecturers seemed to consider teaching ethical theories as teaching ethics but considered that teaching ethical decision models was not.

One lecturer was surprised that a subject that he taught included a requirement in the subject profile that ethics be covered within the subject:

I'm a little surprised that (subject) is identified as a subject with ethical content, because it's pretty much just the second half of the (another subject).

Unlike the examples above, this is an instance where there was a requirement to cover ethics but the lecturer did not do so because he was unaware of the requirement. Such a disparity between the required content and the understanding of the requirements identifies the need for staff to regularly meet and discuss the required content of subjects and ways in which this content could be taught.

4.1.3.3 Ethics included without conscious design

Some of the interviewees included ethical content without being aware that they were doing this. One area in which this was particularly evident was in the teaching of business statistics. Two of the staff members interviewed spoke about the importance of teaching students how to report statistical findings in a professional manner. Though neither staff member thought that those subjects included ethics, the emphasis that they placed on professionalism was a form of professional ethics.

One mathematics lecturer who said that ethics was not included in any of his subjects indicated after some questioning that:
the ethical aspect of it is that the experimenter must report anything that may affect their results or invalidate them. And that's something mentioned. That's not something that's intrinsic... not examined. It's simply – it's mentioned...

He was demonstrating that ethics forms part of the professional duty of the statistician and taught it within the context of the subject.

All of the lecturers who included ethics within the subject included it within the context of other subject material that they were teaching. They were implicitly recognising the value of part of the cognitive apprenticeship model by contextualising ethics, making it relevant to the subject and to the students' roles as professionals when they leave the university and where possible using authentic activities as in the mathematics example above. What had not necessarily happened was the scaffolding of the content across the degree programs and teaching of the cognitive skills that help students learn how to problem solve within the ethical domain of their chosen profession.

4.2 Multiple understandings of what ethics is or is not

The mathematicians were surprised to find that the interviewer identified professionalism as a component of ethics and this highlights a finding from this research which should not be unexpected, i.e. that different people have different views about what constitutes ethics and what constitutes the teaching of ethics. A further example was provided by a lecturer of the first year accounting subject who taught the ethical decision model but who did not consider that that was teaching ethics as various ethical theories were not taught. The interviewers, in asking questions, were in part scaffolding and providing a context within which lecturers could further construct their own understanding of ethics.

5. Conclusions

In including ethics in the curriculum in the degrees examined many of the lecturers demonstrated that they were attempting, possibly without formal knowledge, to apply a cognitive apprenticeship approach to ethics curriculum development. Ethics was only specifically identified as being required content in 28 subjects, yet in a number of cases lecturers had considered that ethics was so intrinsic to the nature of the subject that it should and was taught within that subject. This demonstrates the importance that many lecturers give to ethics. What is needed, is to build upon that work and more formally plan how the scaffolding, modelling, coaching and articulation intrinsic to a cognitive apprenticeship approach are included in the curriculum design process for these degrees. That lecturers are currently attempting this on an ad hoc basis provides hope for acceptance of a more rigorous approach.

The disparity between the required content and the understanding of the requirements identifies the need for staff to regularly meet and discuss the content of subjects and ways in which the required content could be taught. Including sessional staff in such meetings is crucial as more lecturing becomes casualised with the potential to jeopardise a whole of curriculum approach unless good systems of communication are developed and maintained. Such systems of communication are intrinsic to a cognitive apprenticeship approach including making explicit tacit knowledge about what should be included in a subject. Lecturers communicating in this way model cognitive apprenticeship as a tool of the design as well as a framework for that design. By modelling ethical practice in all that
they do, lecturers can further apply the cognitive apprenticeship approach so that students see lecturers across a degree program as not only teaching ethics but being ethical as well. In this way, the students have a model for ethics and a context in which the ‘habit’ of ethics can be constructed.

Thus in summary, within the cognitive apprenticeship model, mastery is developed through contextual models that build upon each other. Single subject ethics teaching is insufficient, as that mastery requires further contexts through which the students can refine understanding and skills. A graduate level mastery of ethics requires multiple contexts and therefore multiple subjects across the whole of the curriculum.

References


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