Virtue and virtuality: challenges and opportunities in educating the ethical manager online

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Purpose:

In the wake of a number of corporate scandals, business schools have been called to account for neglecting effective ethics education (Ghoshal, 2003; 2005).

International initiatives such as the Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME, 2014), and the requirement to demonstrate commitment to ethics, social responsibility and environmental sustainability from accreditation bodies such as the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) and EQUIS, have renewed the salience of ethics for the business and economics curriculum. Yet while there is apparent consensus on the need for ethics education, debate continues on what it should cover and how it should operate. This paper sets out a case for the efficacy of e-learning in a practice-based context as a route to effective ethics education which places the student's own moral development at the centre of the process.

Design/methodology/approach

The paper synthesises selected literature from practice-based education, business education, business ethics and technology-enhanced learning, as well as the author's reflections on his own practice as a business educator. The paper's theoretical scope recognises the 'embodied, agential, and socially-historically constructed' nature of practice (Higgs, 2012, p. 2), and its value as a resource for authentic learning in ethics as in other aspects of business.

Results

The paper's argument is that current methods of business ethics education cited as good practice such as case studies, problem-based learning & constructivist frameworks (Bell, et al.,2014) may underplay the goal of character development in the virtue ethics tradition (Hartmann, 2006). Practice-based learning positions learners as ethics participants rather than observers or critics, sharing the advantages of action learning as an

approach to ethics education (Brook and Christy, 2013) but with greater flexibility. In particular, practice-based online collaborative learning activity creates a social and rational context for ethics education which mobilises the potential for reflective learning at at three levels: the learner's immediate interactions with peers, the learner's personal affective domain, and the learner's professional life. Online learning activities can also achieve a range and diversity of learners which is particularly suited to relevant ethics education because of their potential geographical and cultural inclusivity (Painter- Morland et al.,2003).

Research implications/limitations

The paper advances a model of learning and teaching in a particular context, but does not attempt an empirical test for it beyond studies in the literature synthesised (which is mainly theoretical) and the author's own reflections on practice. Aspects of the model would form a useful agenda for future empirical research with learners and business educators.

Practical and/or social implications

The research has important implications for educational practice because of the urgency of demands for effective ethics education in business and economics. It is hoped that educators will find it of use in their approaches to learning design, and that learners and wider society will benefit from more holistic and effective approaches to ethics education. Envrironmental and social responsiblity issues feature large on the business ethics agenda, and by suggesting more effective and economical ways of teaching and learning the research will have positive outcomes for education policy and quality of life more generally.

Originality/value

To the author's knowledge this is the first time that practice-based learning and online learning have been combined as a recommended approach to business ethics education based on literature and reflection on practice. It is hoped that the paper will stimulate debate, improve practice and lead to further useful research in this area. Interested audiences include business educators, learning designers and practitioners**.**

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