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# The ethics and practice of teaching the practice of ethics

## Rob Warwick



*I argue that business ethics is an important feature of humanistic management. It is a practice that needs to be developed in relation to each person's own values, wider societal norms and expectations, as well as to the various frameworks that enable decision making.*

*For business studies undergraduates, I contend that this reflexive practice can be socially facilitated by a series of guided group conversations, student-directed research, and supported by careful selection of theory.*

*This approach, which I liken to foraging rather than following a pre-set teaching path, enables deeper reflexive learning, and requires students and tutors alike to be open to surprise, challenge and vulnerability.*

### Key Words

ethics, reflexivity, corporate social responsibility, humanistic management, business studies.

### Introduction

Business ethics is a practice. Like many others, it is a heuristic process that needs to be developed. Drawing upon my work with business studies undergraduates on an innovative ethics and corporate responsibility module, I provide an example of how this might be carried out. I draw attention to the reflexive tension and learning between the development of each person's own values (including those of the tutors), wider societal norms and expectations, as well as to the various frameworks that enable decision making. To achieve this, I emphasise the important prerequisite that we are *all* learning together, engaging in a process where showing deep curiosity and vulnerability are important in the reflexive learning process. I introduce the metaphor that we are foraging together, rather than following a more traditional show-and-tell approach, whereby students are encouraged to follow a set teaching path, which I liken to following a trail of breadcrumbs that some knowing person has laid to lure them to a pre-determined goal.

In adopting this foraging approach, everyone involved is more likely to engage more meaningfully with ethical issues that arise in the course of their working lives, and thus enabled to embody principles of humanistic management.

### Context and orientation

Domènec Melé (2003) has traced the development of humanistic management from the mid twentieth century, with a focus on people's motivations, expanding in the 1980s to include organisational culture. Only later, he claims, has greater emphasis been placed upon regarding the business enterprise as a 'community

of persons' (Melé, 2012). Here he pays attention to the challenges and opportunities inherent in attempting to integrate a higher moral quality of management, the development of human virtue, and organisational efficiency.

[The Humanistic Management Network](#) (Humanistic Management Network, 2018) provide a conceptual framework around unconditional respect, an ethical approach to decision making and an emphasis to an active and ongoing engagement with stakeholders. Acknowledging this, my approach to this has been rather more intuitive, taking more into account how I *feel* how it is to be humanistic and how this might be reflected in my actions, in a way that would perhaps strike a chord with Melé's views, but without the structuring principles of the Humanistic Management Network.

Here, I explore these tensions from two perspectives: firstly, how do we pay attention to this 'struggle' in the here-and-now of everyday events? Here I use 'struggle' to mean the iterative sense by which we come to understand something from hazy and incomplete parts. Secondly, how can we (university business tutors) enable people who may have little experience in the world of work to develop such ethical acumen?

As a teacher and researcher in a university business school, my personal interest in ethics and organisational life relates to how we deal with and make sense of the present. Dealing with the ambiguities and uncertainties of the here-and-now is often experienced in stark contrast to the *post hoc* relative apparent clarity that is often perceived once the dust has settled (Warwick & Board, 2013) or to any policy that declares future intent. Previously this interest has led me to co-edit (Burden & Warwick, 2014; Warwick & Burden, 2013) two editions of AMED's journal *e-Organisations and People* on conscious business, which placed an emphasis on people writing about their practice of and struggles to create a better world of work.

### **The seeds of my current thinking**

In 2017, twenty-one undergraduate Business Studies students opted for a course on Business Ethics and Social Responsibilities, a fifteen credit Level 6 final year module. This was their last module before completing their studies. As Business School faculty in a small university, we pride ourselves in working closely with our students, so classes of this size are the norm, not the exception. We would meet ten times over the semester, each session lasting 2.5 hours, with a mid-point break.

Students had two tasks as part of their assignment. Firstly, they were asked to prepare for and engage in a ten-minute conversation, akin to a job interview, where they would explain and justify their perspectives on business ethics. Secondly, they were to assemble and present a portfolio of evidence of the ideas and theories that had captured their imagination, including organisational case studies, and accounts of their own experiences and thoughts. Central to all this was the way that the portfolio items were curated, with an explanatory editorial, to tell the meta-story of their own developing ethical stance.

On taking over this module from a colleague, an ethical challenge struck me: despite my deep interest in the subject spanning several years, who was I to tell students about ethics? I could of course explain various philosophical ideas going back to [Jeremy Bentham](#) and beyond, and refer to the frameworks and structures

that had been designed to improve Corporate Social Responsibility. But this alone would have failed to create an important bridge between these theories and models and students' own developing views, experiences and practices beyond the classroom. In these deliberations, [Wittgenstein](#) was my guide:

*'Not only rules, but also examples are needed for establishing a practice. Our rules leave loopholes open, and the practice has to speak for itself.'*

(Wittgenstein, 1969, Para 139).

Arising from this portfolio project, every student had something to talk about, reflect upon, develop and articulate. Most had experience of work (some of which was shocking) and/or a small number had an international/BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) background. I, too, had relevant experiences to discuss and share, which inevitably affected the way I worked with the students, given the variety of experiences and the importance of the unique way each person was developing their voice. I strove not to present as the lofty academic on a dais. However, at the same time I felt I had an obligation to provide some content and insight, if with a light touch, to enable the students in groups to take up and work with those ideas in practical ways.

Issues of reflexivity, noticing and challenging their own development of thought, had rarely been explicitly explored before with the students. For me, imagination and creativity were to be important reflexive enablers. This was reflected in the how students worked together and in what each had to produce as part of their written assignment, with some choosing to write posters, blogs, newspapers or magazines.

### **The thinking underpinning my design of this teaching initiative**

The analogy that I use with the students to reflect the change of pedagogical approach is that we are moving away from following a pre-determined trail of breadcrumbs – an approach that they might be used to - and instead towards an act of foraging for oneself, see figure 1 (below).

This visual metaphor reflects my aim to encourage students to take personal responsibility for developing and articulating their own ethical standpoints by using: 1) frameworks, models and philosophies, and 2) reflexive group coaching along action learning lines (Revans, 1998). For me, the image of 'breadcrumbs' conjures up the image of a trail left for students, head down, bird-like pecking the ground, taking one step after another with little thought to or active engagement with one's surroundings. 'Foraging' is different: foragers are heads up, exploring in different directions, coming together to discuss, exchanging ideas and understanding. It is a constant sensing and negotiating of one's context.

### **Foraging**

The key features of the foraging approach are:

- Exploring as a cohort – what does it mean to be a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).
- Mixing the students into groups, encouraging them to come up with a group name and to work out how they might work together.

- Each group leads a 30-minute session on an organisation they felt was interesting and relevant – good, bad or just struggling along. It was not just a presentation, they facilitated discussion involving the whole cohort, often in group work.
- Guests, including the local MP and an entrepreneur who had set up a [fairtrade scheme for gold](#).
- Some input from me, such as on [utilitarianism](#), exploring the attractive ideas by Jeremy Bentham and [John Stuart-Mill](#) concerning the greatest good for the greatest number. And then to explore their negative implications, such as the impact these ideas might have for minorities. The ethical contributions of [John Rawles](#), [Hannah Arendt](#) and [Ayn Rand](#) also featured in our discussions. Also, frameworks and schema such as Fairtrade and the [UN Global Compact, and](#).
- Time to explore. By this I mean taking my cue from the students to discuss subjects that emerge as important to them, and connecting these back to theories and ideas we have been discussing.

**Figure 1: A slide introducing my approach – from breadcrumbs to foraging**



## Rationale: phronesis over episteme

Academics engaged in research, and practitioners and managers engaged in business, face similar ethical challenges. In her paper exploring the teaching of research ethics in higher education to post-graduate students, Jan Smith (Smith, 2016) explains:

*'By its very nature, the topic of research ethics is difficult to teach as it does not deal with stable knowledge and, indeed, is characterised by dilemmas with no simple answers'.*

Smith goes on to explain the highly contextual nature of research ethics, with increasingly fewer shared points of reference to rely on in her teaching. There is a connection here to management education: how do we make accessible the tensions and discrepancies that exist between plans and strategies on the one hand, and what happens in day to day practice on the other? Issues can be sensitive. Examples include those relating to national and cultural heritages explored through discussing neo-colonialism in a mixed race group, or the terrors of the concentration camps highlighted by Hannah Arendt and the implications for human behaviour – 'the banality of evil' (Arendt, 1963). That said, these unsettling liminal spaces offer rich learning opportunities.

Thus, instead of shying away from such dilemmas, their contextual nature and how these rub up against ethical schema, I wanted to put these at the centre of our inquiries. To do this I felt that it was important that students contextualised these matters in relation to their own experience and interest.

Pedagogically, this represented a shift in exploring knowledge from the Greek classical notion of *episteme* (universal, scientific knowledge that is context independent) to that of Aristotelian approach of *phronesis* (a pragmatic, context-dependent reflection on values). In pointing to a richer and more reflexive understanding Bent Flyvbjerg (Flyvbjerg, Landsman, & Schram, 2012) points out:

*'Whereas episteme concerns theoretical know why ... phronesis emphasizes practical knowledge and practical ethics. Phronesis is often translated as "prudence" or "practical common sense" '.*

This was a very different way of talking about knowledge for many of the students. However, as this was their last module before most entered the world of work, I felt that exploring this practical way of knowing was important.

It also enabled conversations on issues such as power, politics, cunning and even knack in ways that were practical. When it came to such issues, it enabled me to share my interest in critical management studies in ways that seemed 'natural' when applied to student's experiences. Reflexivity (e.g. Cunliffe 2004; 2009) was a concept new to many of the students, an idea that we discussed briefly at an early session and returned to weekly in different forms. Also, an exploration of any movement of their thought in relation to their portfolio was explicitly assessed.

I was influenced in this way of working with students by studies on developing a learning community (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and by adopting a Mode 2 way of exploring knowledge (MacLean, MacIntosh, & Grant, 2002). Mode 2 is an approach that pays attention to the expertise and knowledge of the whole group, rather than

residing solely in the mind of the tutor. This enabled me to draw particular attention to the social reflexive processes of the group of learners, the importance of the diversity and difference of views within the group, and to the conversations we had as to what we meant by quality and utility of knowledge.

### **Impact upon students of foraging**

Right from the start there was surprise: 'Of course I would employ a pretty young woman – they are cheaper and attract the customers' said one slightly older student who ran a pub. A lively argument developed, with students holding and shifting their ground and with me giving a gentle nudge or two on the conversational tiller.

The example of Nestlé drew the attention of one student who learned that the company used to employ nurses to recommend that mothers in developing countries use formula milk. This led us onto a conversation on post-colonialism. How much have things changed: asymmetry of information, power, social capital, gender, all topics for today when we think about ethics.

A student who was quiet at the start, found her voice and confidence with #metoo. (The course was running at the time that the Harvey Weinstein case was in the news). And the Japanese student who became intrigued by the work of Hegel, started drawing cultural connections with the values with which she had been brought up and articulating how they had shaped her ethical views. In tutorial sessions she became intrigued by process philosophy and the connections this had with Eastern thought.

And of course there were some who saw the module more instrumentally, studying to get a 2:1 degree, to rig their sails to move as effortlessly as possible through the choppy business waters. For some of these students the balance between effort and progress was hard for them to fathom, with several asking me 'tell me what to do'.

That said, the module created the opportunity for the majority to develop, test and articulate their own views. The person who became interested in Nestlé had never heard of post-colonialism. For the student enraged by Weinstein, the issue of power became very vivid for her. These subjects emerged seemingly from nowhere – and here theories were used to understand, communicate and make sense. Having the space for free-flowing conversation was important.

Getting people to reflect, be curious and to find their voice came easily to some, more slowly for others, and for a minority not at all. Each had an individual take and approach.

### **On theory**

Reflection did not begin (or end) when I finished marking assignments. Nor did my interest in the subject start only when I took the module over last year and began the bureaucratic rigmarole of making changes. The issue of ethics, reflection and theory had started to become important to me long before, in my practice as an NHS manager curious about the interaction of healthcare policy and people's daily lives, particularly noticing how complex and fraught this can be. This was an interest that led to my later academic career that began in earnest with my doctorate (Warwick, 2010) in taking complexity analogies as ways to understand organisational life. This immersion forms the reflexive backdrop for this article.

Those students with adult experience of organisational life could relate to issues of ethics and politics in ordinary everyday life, and often had the ability to explore these experiences reflexively. In this sense reflexivity is a practice, drawing on phronetic ways of knowing (Flyvbjerg, 2001), rather than being introduced as an abstract concept. It reminds me of the genesis of David Knights and Hugh Willmott's book 'Management Lives' (Knights & Willmott, 1999), where they used fiction as a way of exploring these issues. I am intrigued to expand on this further, perhaps using film as well. Right at the start of the Module, I asked students to spend 20 minutes on 'free writing' (Lawrence, 2013) about their experience and understanding of ethics. In future, in a spirit of explication of experience (Franklin, 2007), I intend to return to their previous work and require a little more writing to enable the students to plot their movement of thought more clearly.

What did work well were the conversations between students on sharing experiences of work, ethics and power in groups of about five. We concluded with a plenary conversation on the themes and nature of the conversation, rather than on the specific content. To enable this, I briefed them on coaching principles and on some aspects of action learning (Pedler, 2011; Revans, 1998).

### Issues of power

I mentioned earlier my interest in Mode 2 learning. Although this is a useful idea to describe to students some of the ways we would be working together that might be different from what they were used to, it also had certain limitations. At its most fundamental, this came down to power again, particularly regarding my own power as a lecturer in relation to legitimating knowledge and the impact I had on how we worked together, as well as, of course, over their final mark. Next time round, I will make conversations on power and ethics more overt, particularly in relation to how we relate to each other in the process of our working together. Inevitably, this will draw attention to our own group dynamics and to the ethical choices we are making in our work.

Finally, it's worth pointing out that this module is about ethics and business responsibility; it is not about the philosophical nature of knowledge, phronesis, episteme, techne etc as such (Baumard, 1999). However, as yet I am still uncertain about the extent to which an explanation of this in relation to practice is needed. Perhaps it may be less to do with *if* and more to do with *when*; coming more naturally at a point when students can talk more confidently and relevantly about theory from a position of practical experience.

### Implications for teaching humanistic ethical practice: following the trail of breadcrumbs, or foraging?

Based upon my andragogical experiments so far, it seems to me that any university teacher attempting this approach must be prepared for surprises and for the different directions in which learning conversations might go. This means being confident over a wider landscape of knowledge than might otherwise be the case, and being able to recognise and value students' innate and experiential knowledge. This means being prepared to take some risks, to throw oneself into the mix – showing curiosity, vulnerability and sense-making when exploring students' ideas and concerns (which may be different from those of the teacher). In this, some theory is important as an enabler to exploring experience and views.

Some people like speaking in class, others prefer speaking in small groups, and some in one-to-one conversations. Getting to know students is important, as is remembering and keeping the conversation alive between sessions: 'Katie, have you had any more thoughts on Nestlé, and our conversation on post-colonialism?'. Thus the conversation develops, and new avenues of ethical exploration open up.

The virtual learning environment (VLE) was important too ([MOODLE](#)), and in some ways reflected our conversations. It became an eclectic array of materials, not unlike an artist's studio: podcasts, student presentations, papers, videos, each reflected fragments of our time together.

Another surprise may be that some deeper and personal issues come to light. One person spoke movingly of being of mixed race and the impact this had on how she saw the world and made ethical choices. Another, an overseas student, spoke of cultural dissonance on arriving in the UK and getting used to student culture. Questions of diversity emerged from individual experiences and ways of seeing the world. So sticking with this and exploring on individual terms was important – and very moving.

For some students this way of working was unwelcome, as there is nowhere to hide. Next time, I will make the way we work clearer to them from the start. For most students it did cause anxiety when it came to the written assignment. This for me was the saddest part. Given a blank sheet of paper to express themselves, the reaction was often 'will I get it wrong?' To me this raised wider questions about learning and higher education. Next year I will pay more attention to courage, creativity and imagination, to break down some of that anxiety and to develop a sense of reflexive play.

For some, a trail of breadcrumbs was what they wanted, head down, being led by the nose. But I do not think this prepares our (business) students for a world where truth seems to be increasingly mutable, and where working with others to understand and be critically reflexive might just hold an answer.

I'm aware that the way I've described this teaching process has limitations – as does the process itself. To some, the thought of working with 20-25 students 2.5 hours a week over a semester might seem unfeasible and far-fetched. Perhaps how we engage with students, how much time we spend with them, and how we enable them to shape the agenda are ethical questions in themselves that should be taken up by those responsible for the funding of higher education and pedagogy more generally.

## Conclusion

The title of this article 'The ethics and practice of teaching the practice of ethics', might seem clunky, but to me it conveys an important educational point in teaching ethics, and humanistic management more generally. Who are we, or any of us, to put ourselves on a pedestal as paragons of virtue? The practice of ethics is emergent and a shared endeavour, exploring the interactions between the here-and-now dilemmas and contexts with values we share as a society; and being alive to how they – and we - shape each other. I have shared my experience of this approach in the hope that it will be useful to others as we consider the relationship between business ethics and humanistic management.

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# About the Humanistic Management Network and AMED



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