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Business Teaching, Liberal Learning, and the Moral Transformation of Business Education

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Business ethics often draws from the content of liberal arts disciplines, but rarely from the practice of liberal education. Reconceptualizing the relation of business and liberal education offers a new strategy for promoting ethics within business schools. Under this strategy, ethics develops into more than a supplement to established functional courses. It becomes the locus for a more significant moral transformation of business education. *Organization Management Journal*, 9: 114–119, 2012. doi: 10.1080/15416518.2012.687995

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In this essay, I'd like to approach the field of business ethics from an unusual perspective. It's a perspective that's informed by the distinctive trajectory of my career, one that spans teaching at both business schools and a liberal arts college. With this distinctive career path, I've often found myself at work at the intersection of liberal and business education. Indeed, for a business ethicist, it's an intersection that's hard to avoid. This is because business ethics so often draws from disciplines, such as philosophy, that have well-established places within the liberal arts curriculum. In this sense, business ethics has long been an exemplar of the integration and cross-disciplinary collaboration increasingly called for in business schools (e.g., Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002; Quelch, 2005). As is true of many business ethicists, I find working at the juncture of these two academic environments both personally engaging and professionally satisfying.

But particularly as of late, I have begun to see how those of us in business ethics have failed to appreciate fully how our understanding of the relationship between liberal and business education has influenced the development of our field. Underlying much of business ethics today is a notably traditional understanding of this relationship, one captured by what E. Byron Chew and Cecilia McInnis-Bowers (2004) call the

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bridging model. Under the bridging model, liberal and business education are seen as two separate realms. Thus, for business to draw on the insights of the liberal arts requires the development of an intellectual bridge—often in the form of an adaptation or application of theory—that reveals how the insights of the liberal arts may be of use to business. This is evident, for instance, in the way long-standing theories from philosophy have been brought to bear on contemporary ethical issues of management, providing practical insights into managerial roles, challenges, and responsibilities.

But significant contemporary trends within liberal education contemplate a very different conception of the relationship of liberal and business education. Central to this contemporary thinking is the idea that liberal education at its core depends not on the study of particular disciplines, but rather on the development of particular dispositions and skills (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2002). This opens up the possibility that business as a discipline—or, more precisely, as a cross-disciplinary field—might itself find an intellectual home within liberal education. This contemporary development within liberal education mirrors significant calls by business scholars for a greater infusion of various conceptions of liberal learning in business schools (e.g., Duncan, 2004; Grey, 2004; Schwandt, 2005).

Chew and McInnis-Bowers (2004) proposed a blending model that offers a conceptual framework for developing this vision of business as a cross-disciplinary field rooted in liberal education. Key to the blending model is a rejection of the bridging model's assumption of business and the liberal arts as two separate domains. Chew and McInnis-Bowers advocate "blending these domains, rather than bridging the phantom yet palpable chasm between" the two (p. 56). Taking this approach entails exploring how traditional business disciplines—ranging from management to accounting to marketing—can, if properly framed and developed, embody the values and perspectives of liberal learning.

The Carnegie Foundation's recent BELL (Business, Entrepreneurship, and Liberal Learning) Project discovered examples—and potential examples—of the blending model at work in a number of business disciplines (Colby, Ehrlich,

Sullivan, & Dolle, 2011). In pointing to a successful blending approach, the authors of the study recount, for instance, how a business strategy class focused on “profit-making strategies in a competitive market” provided an effective forum for a rich discussion of the value and significance of patents (p. 86). Prompted by the instructor’s question of “Who are the stakeholders and who are the beneficiaries of patents?” (p. 86), the class’s strategic analysis broadened to include an evaluation “of both the positive and negative consequences to the public from patenting scientific discoveries” (p. 86). In doing this classroom exercise, the instructor not only engaged a key element of many companies’ profit-making strategies—their ownership of intellectual property—but also generated in students a variety of critical viewpoints on an important public policy issue.

The authors also pointed to some unrealized potential in courses they visited. In observing a business operations class in which students calculate “process cycle time” and “throughput time” with the aim of increasing a process’s efficiency, for example, the authors comment: “But an additional benefit might have followed if students had been asked to address the concepts’ central assumption—that maximizing process efficiency is an overriding goal of business operations—or to the associated concept of workers being much like machines” (pp. 75–76). In focusing on and probing more fully such assumptions, the authors argue, a business operations course can better foster in students an orientation toward liberal learning.

This blending model holds particular promise for the field of business ethics. The promise is one that could enable the field to enrich its moral impact on business education beyond what has already occurred.

Seeing this particular promise requires grasping the way in which liberal education is a distinctive form of moral education. The moral character of liberal education resides in the way it fosters in individuals the development of specific and morally significant dispositions. Previously, I have identified four such morally significant dispositions: “an awareness of the needs of others, respect for their differences, recognition of the dignity of all, and an engagement with the public good” (Nesteruk, 2004). These dispositions are at the core of developing the capacity for moral reflection in a morally diverse world.

This is because these four dispositions reflect the basic nature of the morality underlying such diversity. The social nature of such morality requires we develop an awareness of the needs of others. The volitional nature of such morality requires we recognize the dignity of others as autonomous beings and respect their differing choices. The normative nature of such morality requires engagement with the public good.

To be sure, liberal education often falls short of its ideals in this regard. Liberal education’s aim of encouraging the “recognition of the dignity of all” necessarily requires a continuous commitment to probing its potential biases from racial, gender, class, and cultural perspectives. These biases often give rise to controversies and new developments in liberal education. Thus, we see current efforts to produce a vision of liberal education

that is truly cross-cultural and global in nature (Nussbaum, 1997).

But combining this moral capacity of liberal education at its best with the integrative aim of the blending model reveals the fuller potential of ethics in the business curriculum. Scholars within business programs now regularly design practical exercises aimed at fostering ethical decision-making and reflection in business students (e.g., Christian & Gumbus, 2009; Golden & Dechant, 2006). If developed in innovative ways, business courses can also promote the morally vital dispositions we have traditionally associated with an education in the liberal arts. This possibility is particularly intriguing because of the growing recognition in business schools of the importance of developing the dispositions of business students (e.g., Hartman, 2006; Tyson, 2005).

Such a possibility can also aid those emphasizing the value of fostering critical thinking throughout the business curriculum. This is because such morally significant dispositions synergistically support the current emphasis on critical thinking in business schools. Such dispositions do so because of their core character that encourages respecting and engaging the differences in others. To the degree to which critical thinking develops from exposure to differing viewpoints, the blending model can thus buttress and expand the character of critical thinking in such professional venues.

THE MORAL POSSIBILITIES OF THE BLENDING MODEL FOR BUSINESS EDUCATION

When business ethicists draw upon the theories of specific liberal arts disciplines, such as philosophy, but disconnect those theories from the larger practice of liberal education, we are acting on an often unexamined commitment to the bridging model. What is involved in drawing upon these disciplines is an application or adaptation of a more general theory to the specific needs or issues of business. This application or adaptation becomes the intellectual bridge between more traditional liberal arts disciplines and the field of business education.

But the blending model seeks to do more. Calling into question the underlying assumption of business and the liberal arts as two separate realms, this model opens up the possibility of bringing the practice of liberal education to the pedagogies of business. It asks those of us who teach in business schools or programs to reexamine how we teach, what we teach, and, perhaps most importantly, how we think about what we teach.

Business pedagogy is traditionally rooted in a different kind of practice than that which prevails in the context of liberal education. This different kind of practice has its roots in a particular philosophic conception of professional education, one that emphasizes training. When professional education aims at providing individuals with the training for particular occupations or jobs, the ends of such occupations or jobs tend to be incorporated—often uncritically—into professional education. In many respects, business education has moved to a broader

and richer form of professional education, one marked, for instance, by a commitment to ethics. And there are calls for a professionalization of business education designed to infuse that education with a larger social purpose (Khurana, 2007). Still, such developments reflect the distinctive role the end of profit has played in business education. Whether profit is put in the more precise, technical form of shareholder wealth maximization as occurs in finance or is couched in terms of sustained competitive advantage as happens in corporate strategy, profit as an end informs the practice of much of business instruction.

Jennifer Moore (1991) has noted this tendency of vocational education. Such education, she writes, “prepares the student to pursue certain fixed goals. These goals are given in advance, and although they can change over time, it is generally fair to say that in vocational education, the goals themselves rarely become objects of inquiry. The purpose of vocational education is not to question one’s goals, but to see how best to achieve goals that have already been chosen” (p. 62).

But the practice of liberal education proceeds from a very different set of aspirations. Liberal education has traditionally been rooted in a conception of individual liberty. It fosters the development of a free and responsible person, one whose choices are based not on the dictates of authority or tradition, but derived from that person’s own critical reflection and experience. The character of such freedom does not allow for the uncritical acceptance of any particular end, even the goal of individual autonomy itself. Liberal education rather involves evaluating the worthiness of multiple, often competing, ends.¹

It is here that we see the special relevance to the business curriculum of the moral education that a liberal education provides. To the degree that the end of profit—or another end—uncritically prevails in the teaching of the functional areas of business, the practice of business education will foster a set of dispositions that instrumentally furthers a pregiven end. But the specific and morally significant dispositions liberal education promotes have a markedly different orientation. Together they constitute a set of dispositions that foster the collaborative evaluation of multiple ends. In this way, the blending model supports current developments toward a broader and richer conception of professional education in business schools.

Such a broader and richer form of professional education is buttressed by the way these dispositions bring to the fore what an overly instrumentalist conception of business instruction overlooks, namely, our own character as relational beings.² It is this very character that gives rise to the multiple, often competing, ends that permeate our lives and thus call for evaluation. An awareness of the needs of others gives emphasis to how the ends of others may compete with our own. Recognizing the dignity of others and respecting their differing choices bring a multiplicity of ends into the fabric of our social life. Engaging with the public good arising out of the interaction of individuals with differing ends entails the commitment to evaluate such ends together.

Bringing the practice of liberal education to the teaching of business thus involves exposing the multiple ends at stake in business instruction and promoting the collaborative evaluation of such ends. In bringing the practice of liberal education to business teaching, our aspiration should not be to eliminate the instrumental dimensions of business disciplines, whether the goal is increased market share or stricter OSHA compliance or higher quarterly earnings, but rather to reenvision such dimensions, incorporating them into a broader framework. Indeed, calls by business scholars to better integrate theory and practice within business schools often emphasize this broader focus (e.g., Bennis & O’Toole, 2005; Kayes, 2002; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). The key is to bring into view and reintegrate the ends that are conventionally obscured or marginalized within traditional business functions. In doing so, we can hope to foster not only more liberally educated individuals, but more effective and successful managers.

TEACHING MANAGEMENT

I now turn to the discipline of management to illustrate the kind of instructional changes the blending model promotes. Such changes are in keeping with the call for greater reflection upon management education (Stork et al., 2010). Bringing the practice of liberal education to the education of managers requires fostering the collaborative evaluation of multiple ends that are often in play in the teaching of management courses. For purposes of illustration, I’d like to look more closely at four basic instructional strategies: (a) teaching from multiple perspectives, (b) exposing instrumentalist biases, (c) promoting critical stances, and (d) contextualizing basic inquiries. Each of these instructional strategies proceeds from the need to promote collaborative evaluation of often competing ends. Teaching from multiple perspectives exposes the ends of differing persons at stake in any area or approach. Exposing instrumentalist biases and promoting critical stances fosters the reconsideration of any purely instrumental inquiries and the evaluation of their unscrutinized goals. Contextualizing basic inquiries provides the broader frameworks often needed to bring into view obscured or marginalized ends.

Consider, for instance, the pedagogic technique in management’s time-honored practice of teaching from business case studies. Notably, such case studies are often analyzed from a single perspective. Jeanne Liedtka (as quoted in Mintzberg, 2004) confirms this view: “Too often, students are asked to play only one role in a case conversation—that of the ‘executive’ asked to make a decision of some sort—and the quality that we value as instructors is a kind of “decisiveness” born of a willingness to ignore the complexity of the situation at hand” (pp. 59–60).

But Liedtka points out a richer use of cases is possible, one that would teach them from multiple perspectives: “Yet the potential exists within the case method to do exactly the opposite—to give students real practice at looking at any given

situation from varied perspectives, at uncovering the richness of the many ways that different people make sense of the same situation. After all, every case already has (or can be tweaked to include) a whole cast of characters who are likely to see the world in ways quite startlingly different than that of the ‘executive’ in question” (p. 60).

By bringing out in class the often competing aims that arise in “the many ways that different people make sense of the same situation,” Liedtka’s alternative approach allows for the collaborative evaluation of such ends. By encouraging students to collaboratively evaluate these multiple ends, Liedtka brings the practice of liberal education to managerial instruction. Such an alternative approach, Liedtka believes, better prepares students for the managerial environments they will face. “By asking students to help each other try on these multiple hats as they diagnose a situation and search for solutions, and by challenging facile interpretations of the views and motivations of others, we endorse a view of decision making in organizations as complex, nuanced, and multifaceted, and target a set of skills that we know will stand students in far greater stead in the years ahead than a naïve decisiveness” (p. 60).

Beyond the pedagogic techniques management instructors choose, the models they select for explaining business topics can affect the potential for fostering in class the collaborative evaluation of multiple ends. This is because some models draw upon instrumentalist biases, rather than promoting critical stances.

Consider, for instance, how those teaching management topics select models for understanding business operations. Henry Mintzberg (2004) describes how business operations may be modeled as a chain, as a hub, or as a web. Viewed as a chain, business operations are organized as a linear sequence of activities. Viewed as a hub, they are organized more as “focal points, to and from which people, things, and information flow” (p. 139). Viewed as webs, they are “loosely interacting networks of collaborative relationships that flow every which way” (p. 140).

Each model of the operations of a business fosters a different conception of the role of management. Seeing business activities as a horizontal chain, for example, stations the manager, as Mintzberg (2004) puts it, “on top” (p. 140). The organizational structure is one in which “over each link is a manager, and over each manager is another manager. . . . In other words, naturally laid over the horizontal chain of operations is the vertical chain of command” (p. 140).

This conception of a manager’s role flows naturally from the single-perspective approach that is frequently used in teaching business case studies. The single-perspective approach brings to the fore the manager “on top”—a high-ranking, autonomous decision maker whose individual choices are implemented through a hierarchical structure.

But Mintzberg (2004) points out, “In a world of increasing prominence of hubs and webs . . . we shall have to see management differently” (p. 140). A hub places managers not at the

top, but at the center. “To get to strategy in a hub, managers have to reach out, to others; they can not just deem them down, from on high” (p. 140). In a web, management is “everywhere,” flowing with “the activity, which cannot by itself be predicted or formalized” (p. 141). Even more pointedly, management “also has to be potentially *everyone*” (p. 141). Within a web’s network, “authority for making decisions and developing strategic initiatives has to be distributed, so that responsibility can flow to whoever is best able to deal with the issue at hand” (p. 141).

The needed relationship building and networking of the hub and web arrangements exposes the instrumental bias and lack of critical stances implicit in viewing business operations as a linear sequence of activities. With a manager on top independently setting the strategic end, the activities of business—and the personnel that carry them out—assume an instrumental structure and character. The institutional arrangements and rewards are designed to implement, but not to evaluate the ends, given by a hierarchically situated manager. Neither in the setting nor in the implementing of strategy are others encouraged to take critical stances or given the power of evaluation.

Modeling business operations as hubs and webs and drawing on the managerial roles they inspire thus can foster in class more collaborative evaluation of the multiple ends in play in business activities. Managers in a world of hubs and webs expose such ends and commit to their collaborative evaluation. Within hubs, managers need to reach out to others, understanding their multiple goals in formulating business strategies. Within webs, managers have to promote more collaborative evaluation, as responsibility for making choices flows to “everyone.” Modeling business activities as hubs and webs thus entails opportunities for liberal education that the chain model obscures.

Yet another central aspect of bringing the practice of liberal education to the education of managers lies in the basic way management instructors conceptualize their subject matter. James March (as quoted in Mintzberg, 2004) states that business students need to learn about “business disciplines like organizations, accounting, finance, production, and marketing” (p. 70), but they also need “to deepen an intellectual understanding of the relation between activities of business and the major issues of human existence” (p. 70). Illuminating how the “activities of business” relate to the “major issues of human existence” requires management instructors to contextualize more richly their basic inquiries.

Mintzberg (2004) is critical of the specialization within business schools in which the functional areas of the sort March mentions—“organizations, accounting, finance, production, and marketing”—have come to dominate the scholarly discourse. Most notably, he feels management has lost its way by conceiving of itself as simply one more specialized function. “Management,” he writes, “found its place in the contemporary school of business by becoming yet another specialized function—in other words, by disappearing again” (p. 35).

Bringing the practice of liberal education to the pedagogy of management involves reconceptualizing its subject matter

from a “specialized function” to a kind of area studies. Like more established area studies within liberal education, such as environmental studies, women’s studies, and leadership studies, management draws on multiple academic disciplines to understand some critical domain of practical experience and then provides students with the knowledge needed for effective action in the area.

Viewing management in this way both enlarges and enriches the field. It does so by exposing management’s roots in a wide variety of disciplines, including, notably, psychology, sociology, and economics. Broadening the understanding of management in this way can enable instructors to more readily connect its study with the “major issues of human existence.” Thus contextualized, the basic inquiries of management now more visibly draw from and contribute to the larger ends of its underlying disciplines—ends such as understanding the human psyche, as is the case with psychology.

By broadening the understanding of his or her subject matter, the instructor does more than bring into view the differing ends of the disciplines that contribute to the field. The instructor also promotes the collaborative evaluation of such ends in whatever synthesis his or her application of these disciplines to managerial problems generates. In management theory, for instance, the socially embedded conception of self from sociology must contend with the more abstract version of self that often prevails in economic analysis.

In such ways, even in the professional context of teaching management, the specific and morally significant dispositions of a liberal education can flourish. They flourish whenever the practice informing instruction fosters the collaborative evaluation of multiple, often competing, ends. In doing so, they contribute to the kind of professional education that marks the best in management thinking.

NEW ASPIRATIONS FOR BUSINESS ETHICS

What I hope these examples from the teaching of management help to illustrate is the transformative potential of ethics in business schools. In working to bring the morally vital dispositions of liberal education into business programs, business ethicists have the opportunity to more deeply influence the business curriculum. The distinctive potential here lies in the way the practice of liberal education can alter the pedagogies of business. Because much of business ethics today is often unwittingly under the sway of the bridging model, ethics in business programs often aims merely to supplement established functional courses, rather than to morally transform business education in a more fundamental way.

But the blending model—with its commitment to broadening the practice of liberal education—has greater aspirations. Because such a broadening requires enriching fundamental business pedagogies, it has the potential for remaking the basic nature of business education. Under this model, ethics can move from a curricular “add-on” to something that infuses the

teaching in all business areas, from marketing to finance to corporate strategy.

For the moral transformation of business education to occur, we must give closer and more sustained attention to the dispositions students develop within business study. Attending to the dispositions students develop (and not simply the theories or other informational content they acquire) helps to bring into view the implicit moral education of business schools, the part that remains hidden if we focus only on the overt content of the curriculum. Business scholars critical of business education often emphasize the hidden contradictions of business schools (e.g., Donaldson, 2000; Ghoshal, 2005; Giacalone, 2004). The hidden moral education of business schools consists of the dispositions students develop even when course content lacks an explicit ethical focus. How we teach, what we teach, and how we think about what we teach are never value-neutral activities. We need a greater awareness of how our practices may—in some subtle and not-so-subtle ways—undermine what we say when we explicitly address the pervasive moral issues of business.

NOTES

1. To be clear, I mean to construe “end” broadly here to include any goal, purpose, aim, or aspiration. On this understanding, human beings can certainly have ends, but ends also can inhere in methods, models, and even entire fields. Ends are thus part of any approach human beings adopt or any practice in which they participate.

2. This is so even though business success can lie in the other direction. For example, Tom Chappell (1993) notes how he put our relational character at the core of his business vision. “Running a business by *utility* was precisely what Kate and I had tried to avoid from the beginning. . . . Our way of doing business corresponded more to . . . that inner sense of obligation and human connection that people feel for their friends, neighbors, and family. Kate and I acted out a recognition of these human bonds” (p. 11).

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