

Form Follows Function: A Backward Design To Develop Leadership Ethics Curriculum

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to describe a backward design model implemented to develop a leadership ethics course taught in a graduate leadership program. Backward design was implemented to deeply embed the construct of applied ethics within the fabric of leadership curriculum while capturing intended course competencies. Course curriculum integrates a servant leadership theoretical framework and pedagogy that serves to shape and develop moral imagination in leadership students. Backwards design contributed to clarity, integrity, and alignment of course curriculum with program objectives and university mission.

Introduction

Principal authors in leadership ethics have expressed that leadership and ethics are inseparable constructs (Ciulla, 1995; Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Trevino, Hartman, & Brown, 2000). In spite of advances in leadership studies, Ciulla (1995) found through a meta-analysis of 1800 article abstracts that studies emphasized general philosophic theories of ethics with limited exploration of applied ethics. An additional finding was that ethics was typically a mere appendage to a leadership course rather than a deeply embedded construct in the study of leadership. Disjointing the study of ethics from leadership in leadership development programs divorces the student from the responsibility of recognizing ethical issues let alone the preparation to deliberate on moral problems within organizations. Within the last decade, escalating scandals in private, public, non-profit, and faith-based organizations have generated increased interest in the role of ethics and morality in organizations. Corporate scandals, betrayals, embezzlement, suspicion of power, and other egregious conducts contribute not only to reasons for cynicism and disillusionment (Kouzes & Posner, 2003), but also to a vivid call and need for ethical leadership. This perfect storm carrying disastrous economic,

social, and political implication has created a global crisis that highlights the nexus of ethics and leadership.

Capturing the significance and transformative qualities of ethical and unethical behavior is tantamount and as equally important within curriculum design of a leadership ethics course. Curriculum design is traditionally grounded in the assumption that the purpose of pedagogy is to deliver content of a specific subject. Subject naming and prescriptive integration of content dates back to early developments of curriculum design. The history of curriculum development dates back to the late 1800 when high school education transitioned to a standardized curriculum (Gibson, 2005; Kliebard, 1995). This prescriptive, discipline oriented, college preparatory curriculum process continues to represent the premise of curriculum planning and its components of subject naming, categorizing content, and regulating the delivery (Walker & Soltis, 1986). These practical approaches were philosophically supported by educational theorists who believed that “the task of the school was to deliver a prescribed body of subject matter, based on idealist and/or realist views of knowledge” (Dittmar, 1993, p. 6). Kelting-Gibson’s (2005) historical review of curriculum development shows that the technical-scientific approach of the 1920s was the next influence to inform curriculum developers and design. Curriculum design models developed by Tyler (1950) and Taba (1962) continued to inform curriculum developers in the planning process for a number of years by promoting a process that emphasized (a) definition of goals, purposes, or objectives, (b) definition or activities related to goals, (c) organization of experiences and activities, and (d) evaluation of goals.

Traditional assumptions of curriculum development rooted in prescribed activity based instruction (Tyler, 1950; Taba, 1962) were challenged by Wiggins and McTighe (2001) by introducing a contrarian design model that reversed the planning order of pragmatic intentions rooted in prescribed activity based instruction. In the conventional method of curriculum development the goal of an educator may exclusively be to implement a number of theoretical texts and course content that introduces students to a breadth of topics related to leadership ethics. This conventional approach and activity based instruction exclusively grounded in normative theories and philosophical ethics is susceptible to overlook cognitive challenges that contribute to ethical failure, underestimate the affective concern in ethical decision making, and underestimate the role of the individual in ethical situations. Focusing on the intended competencies a student is expected to gain in a leadership ethics course will clarify and inform required activities and pathways to course objectives. Moral imagination (Werhane, 1999) is an overarching competency gained throughout the leadership ethics course and refined through strategic, procedural, and factual knowledge, and evaluated through a number of methodical activities. Using a traditional model to develop curriculum will more likely lead curriculum designers to first consider material

and instructional activities that may potentially generate learning opportunities and a myriad of competencies, whereas starting with the end product in mind challenges curriculum designers to begin from desired core competencies, implement measures to assess those competencies, and integrate curriculum content and activities generating learning opportunities specific to core competencies. The proverb “if you do not know where you are going, any road will take you” is the antithesis of standard-based teaching introduced by Wiggins and McTighe (2001). The backward design the authors are promoting is “logically forward and commonsensical but backward in terms of conventional habits, whereby teachers typically think in terms of a series of activities or how best to cover a topic” (p. 8). Placing competencies at the front-end of design will amplify the focus on desired results, ways to measure them, and activities to initiate them.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the philosophical underpinnings of backward design implemented to develop a leadership ethics course taught in a graduate leadership program. Backward design was implemented as a methodical process to purposefully develop a set of course competencies rooted in servant leadership and moral imagination theoretical frameworks. The overarching goal in designing the organizational ethics course was to intentionally integrate ethics within the context of leadership studies and refrain from studying the two constructs independently.

The organizational ethics course is eight weeks long and divided in two week modules. Every module focuses on a competency theme with required evidence of mastery manifested throughout structured blackboard discussions and critical reflection papers (see Table 1). Competencies are developed from case study videos requiring weekly in-depth reflection, contemplation, integration and application of course content, and online discussions. The modules incorporate content based and reflective readings that contribute to evidence of mastery conveyed through online discussion postings, responses to students, and critical reflection papers. Grading rubrics to evaluate evidence of mastery in online discussions and reflection papers are available for students to use as a guide to inform, challenge, and actively engage in learning.

Table 1. Module Themes

MODULE ONE: Introspective reflection on worldviews and responses to ethical dilemmas within the framework of normative theories of ethics.

MODULE TWO: Identifying personal values and appreciating diversity in the organizational setting.

MODULE THREE: Developing community and discovering a common ground in ethical decision making.

MODULE FOUR: Identifying morality in the organizational setting and solving ethical problems/dilemmas.

What is Backward Design

The leadership ethics curriculum was developed using a backward design model developed by Wiggins and McTighe (2001). The premise of this design is to allow the vision of desired results to inform and shape methods and materials used in teaching. It requires a shift in thinking first about the specific learning outcomes and the evidence of such learning prior to integrating the role and function of the teacher and activities. A student centered design complements a constructivist pedagogical orientation often used in online education where teacher and student collaborate within a learning community to introduce and interpret implications through coaching, mentoring, and active participation (Knowlton, 2000).

The focus in this design is on the needs of the learner required to reach learning goals prior to process, materials, and teaching. The curriculum was not conceptualized around a favorite or traditional ethics textbook, set of readings, or specific instructional methods to influence or elevate learning to a certain standard. Rather, the curriculum was developed with the end or desired result in mind. The end result is monitored by a set of evidence measures. Results are mediated by standards and teaching needed to equip students to execute desired results or objectives.

Wiggins and McTighe (2001) also call this backward design planned coaching as it requires various lessons and practices needed to master key performances. The backward design also requires operationalization of goals in terms of assessment evidence. Evidence of learning clarifies the direction of the teaching and learning target for the student. Wiggins and McTighe found that increased clarity among desired results, key performances, teaching, and learning experiences, leads to better student performance – the ultimate purpose of the design.

Backward design in curriculum planning is grounded in decentralized instruction and centralized learning. Traditional or common designs may focus on coverage or activities with limited intellectual purpose or clear priorities that frame the learning experience (Wiggins & McTighe, 2001). The emergence of this content is typically delivered and integrated exclusively from the knowledge base of the educator. This centralized knowledge dictates the direction of design and instruction. On the other hand, decentralizing design and instruction to conceptualize the learning sought and evidence of such learning more efficaciously informs the appropriate teaching needed to fulfill course objectives. Increasing the validity of both process and outcomes contributes to greater confidence in alignment between results, program objectives, and university mission.

How Backward Design Works

First Phase: Identify Desired Results

Backward design unfolds in three phases. The first phase requires the instructor to identify specific competencies for students to master. This phase is marked by categorizing the acquired knowledge as (a) factual, i.e., what content will students need to be familiar with, (b) procedural, i.e., what procedures, techniques or methods will they need to know, and (c) strategic, i.e., what strategic knowledge or higher-order thinking skills should students develop (Snyder, 2007). Students begin the course by developing factual and conceptual knowledge contributing to foundational knowledge that students continue to scaffold throughout the course. For example, in organizational ethics students gain understanding of traditional normative theories of ethics that provides a framework for conceptualizing personal morality and virtues by which they live their personal and vocational life. Understanding theories of ethics and the self contribute to a renewed contextual understanding of relationships in the organizational setting and their role in developing a synergistic community. Students develop an understanding of ethical decision making in times of organizational crisis and the role of work groups in addressing ethical problems or dilemmas. Lastly, students apply the acquired factual knowledge in developing an understanding of an ethical decision making model that contributes to their development of a resolution.

Foundational competencies developed through factual knowledge are further expanded by scaffolding knowledge and developing procedures, techniques, and methods that students need to know how to use upon completion of the course. Students integrate normative theories of ethics to develop a visual model or matrix to inform, deconstruct, and frame responses to ethical problems. Upon developing a model to clarify responses to ethical problems, students are challenged to contemplate and develop procedures to address situations that

present either a good or bad outcome clarifying the moral acceptability of actions in balance with personal virtues and organizational values. Through the use of a video case study and foundational knowledge, students develop and explain techniques to foster cooperative community with shared values. After students gain clarity or learn to identify their morality and learn to develop a cooperative community, students work on developing techniques to analyze ethical problems or dilemmas.

Lastly, strategic knowledge represents complex thinking strategies and processes that students need to develop throughout the course. The overarching goal in organizational ethics is for students to develop competencies that contribute to moral imagination within a theoretical fabric of servant leadership. Werhane (1999) describes moral imagination as the “ability to envision and evaluate new mental models that create new possibilities and the capability to reframe the dilemma and create new solutions in ways that are novel, economically viable, and morally justifiable” (p. 93). It is within this framework that students will gain strategic knowledge to more methodically question and articulate their personal worldview, strategies to balance personal virtues with organizational values, and strategies to develop a cooperative community with the skills of analyzing and recommending a course of action on ethical dilemmas in organizations.

Second Phase: Determine Acceptable Evidence

The second phase of backward design requires the instructor to identify the evidence needed to indicate student mastery. Evidence represents student thinking or behavior that indicate student mastery of the strategic competencies developed throughout the course. Blackboard discussion postings, responses, and critical reflection papers provide opportunities to identify evidence indicating student mastery of the strategic knowledge competencies. The backward design encourages thinking about a course in terms of collected evidence required to validate that learning has occurred, in comparison to simply covering content with a series of learning activities. Thinking like an assessor and conceptualizing evidence that verifies gained competency needs to occur prior to designing learning opportunities (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). There are three questions to address in thinking like an assessor:

- What kinds of evidence do we need to find hallmarks of our goals, including that of understanding?
- What specific characteristics in student responses, products, or performances should we examine to determine the extent to which the desired results were achieved?
- Does the proposed evidence enable us to infer a student’s knowledge, skill or understanding?

Using Bransford, Brown, and Cocking's (1999) framework for how people learn, Snyder (2007) captured the process of identifying acceptable evidence within a framework of articulating evidence of student mastery across three levels of performance. A novice level student is at the beginning stages of a course. A graduate level student represents someone that has completed the course, whereas an expert is a faculty or practitioner with several years of experience. Identifying evidence begins by articulating a thinking strategy and asking four prompting questions that guide faculty in developing scoring rubrics that characterize the expert, graduate and novice performance levels. Developing an evidence analysis rubric contributes to increased clarity and diagnostic for both students and faculty. A rubric should be developed for each of the strategic knowledge competencies with the description of a learning situation that provides evidence of student mastery at all levels of performance (see Appendix).

Third Phase: Plan Learning Experiences and Instruction

The final stage of backward design requires the instructor to conceptualize methods of teaching that focus on development of strategic knowledge (Snyder, 2007). The pedagogical method implemented to teach competencies is Cognitive Apprenticeship (Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1989). The goal of this framework is to develop an environment to support teaching of case-based learning through an online platform. Cognitive apprenticeship generates a collaborative learning environment that mediates exchange of information, dialogue, and collaboration. This method creates a setting for delivery, application, and development of knowledge in either asynchronous or synchronous methods of communication. As evidenced in Snyder's (2007) Cognitive Apprenticeship Framework table (see Table 2), every strategic competency in a given course should be described in the context of seven cognitive apprenticeship concepts in order to provide a learning environment in which students are encouraged to develop strategic knowledge that is required to solve complex problems in their area of expertise.

Table 2. Cognitive Apprenticeship Framework (Snyder, 2007)

Modeling	How and where will demonstrate your thinking process and provide an explanation of your actions?
Coaching	How will you guide students as they try to complete tasks and provide hints and tips when needed?
Scaffolding	How will you incorporate hints and tips to solve specific problems?
Fading	How will you gradually reduce the amount of scaffolding, shifting more and more of the control to the learner?
Reflection	How will you encourage students to look back over their efforts to complete a task and analyze their own performance?
Articulation	How will you encourage articulation among students to give reasons for their decisions and strategies, thus making their domain and strategic knowledge more explicit?
Exploration	How will you promote explorative opportunities for students to try out different strategies and hypotheses and observe their effects?

Conclusions and Recommendations

Curriculum and competencies in this organizational ethics course purposefully respond to the need of leadership ethics education expressed by various leading authors (Ciulla, 2003; Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Trevino, Hartman, & Brown, 2000). This leadership ethics course provides opportunities for students to understand and gain factual, procedural, and strategic knowledge within cognitive apprenticeship pedagogy that more directly integrates ethics within leadership studies. The challenge in applying backward design is the required shift in thinking about the role of faculty member. Besting many designs, “form follows function,” thus, pedagogy and course content should be informed or shaped by a clear conception of the vision of desired result (Wiggins & McTighe, 2001). This requires a clear articulation of what students should understand and be able to do as a result of completing organizational ethics. Efficacious instructional design is not only about developing ingenious activities that develop technical skills, but about requiring the educator to be accountable to what the course purpose implies and the available evidence generated to establish that mastery. Overall, the model serves as an effective tool for developing curriculum that contributes to gaining educational competencies directly reflective of the kinds of changes desired in students enrolled in leadership programs.

Appendix

Evidence Analysis

<p>Learning Situation For a selected strategic knowledge competency, describe the learning situation that will provide evidence of student mastery levels.</p>	<p>Students will write about a situation at work related to an ethical problem or dilemma, and apply an ethical decision-making model. <u>Students will be asked to:</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Write a 2 page case study describing relevant details of an issue or problem manifested in a professional setting (2) Write about the implementation of Cooper’s Ethical Decision-Making Model to deconstruct the ethical dilemma and recommend a course of action (5-6 pages). 		
Prompting Questions	Expert	Graduate	Novice
<p>What are the <u>strategies or processes</u> an expert, a recent graduate and a novice student will use in the learning activity?</p>	<p>Recognizes an existing problem, efficaciously implements Cooper’s model and works to redesign organizational dynamics to limit future ethical problems</p>	<p>Recognizes a problem exists and is able to apply Cooper’s model to evaluate the ethical problem.</p>	<p>Recognizes a problem exists but fails to develop a plan to implement Cooper’s model</p>
<p>What features of the problem or <u>situation will they focus on?</u></p>	<p>Strategically applies the model to fit the cultural fabric of the organization</p> <p>Integrates in-depth analysis of decision-making tiers with specific relevancy to the organization and professional field</p> <p>Gathers key resources and efficacious evidence specific to the organization and reflective of the professional role to guide and inform dialogue</p>	<p>Theoretically and logically applies the model</p> <p>Integrates in-depth analysis of varying decision-making layers</p> <p>Gathers sufficient and credible evidence to guide dialogue and examine varying positions and points-of-view</p>	<p>Limited application of the model</p> <p>Integrates limited or superficial in-depth analysis of varying layers of the model</p> <p>Overlooks evidence to guide development and progression through the model</p>

<p>What will they <u>take into consideration</u> as they attempt the problem or situation?</p>	<p>Incorporates moral principles and values of organization to guide dialogue and decision-making</p> <p>Responds to ethical problems on a post-ethical level considering the worth of ethical behavior in the context of professional/industry priorities, image, and values to set priorities.</p>	<p>Considers and integrates moral principles to guide decision-making</p> <p>Responds to ethical problems on an ethical analysis level linking values with specific actions to determine priorities</p>	<p>Limited consideration of moral principles that guide decision-making.</p> <p>Responds and deconstructs ethical problems at an expressive level</p>
<p>What <u>actions or behaviors</u> would exhibit the ability to think analytically in the discipline?</p>	<p>Proficient application of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Identifying the ethical problem & moral principles - Applying relevant ethical codes, laws - Obtaining counsel - Considering probable courses of action - Specifying probable consequences of various decisions - Establishing best course of action <p>Model increases the degree of ethical autonomy in the workforce.</p>	<p>Skillful application of model through</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Identifying the ethical problem & moral principles - Applying relevant ethical codes, laws - Obtaining counsel - Considering probable courses of action - Specifying probable consequences of various decisions - Establishing best course of action <p>Model develops moral imagination to increase level of ethical autonomy.</p>	<p>Identifies with the model but does not manifest understanding of application</p>

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Biography

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