Changes in students perceptions of professional ethics after work placement experience

Introduction

When students are undertaking work placements they are immersed in a community of professional practice which creates social demands on students being able to perform within the norms of the community. Community, or social, norms are shaped by underlying cultural beliefs informed by ethical considerations and moral positions, that place demands on the nature and boundaries of practices acceptable amongst members of these communities. Through workplace experiences students start to shape and understand their own identity as a professional, central to which is an understanding of their personal and professional morality and ethics. Increasingly values education, enhancing ethical knowledge and conduct, and professional identity development are being identified as an important facets of student development (Campbell & Zegwaard, 2011a; Herkert, 2000; Keown, Parker, & Tiakiwai, 2005; Trede, Macklin, & Bridges, 2011). With increasing industry demands for work-ready graduates (Archer & Davison, 2008; Lomax-Smith, Watson, & Webster, 2011) there needs to be further consideration of the relationship between 'work-readiness' and a sound understanding of one's own professional identity and professional ethics. However, teaching ethics and values is fraught with difficulties (Bowie, 2005) and, to this point, the teaching of ethics is largely limited to raising awareness rather than causing or changing action (Spier, 2002).

To discuss professional ethics and workplace values, one needs to also discuss the concept of professionalism, and it is our argument that for someone to be acting professionally implies that this person must also be acting in an ethical manner. However, students

engaged in undergraduate studies, tend to have narrow conceptualisations of professionalism (Grace & Trede, 2011). Literature argues that to have effective development of professional ethics awareness and practice, then explicit teaching of professional identity development and professional ethics must be embedded into the curriculum (Campbell & Zegwaard, 2011b; Trede, 2012). Such curriculum must recognise that students are not *tabula rasa* and come with pre-existing identities and moralities. Furthermore, that identity development is strongly related to how a student engages with professional work-life (Reid, Dahlgren, Peticz, & Dahlgren, 2008), that is the individual student exercises agency in selecting appropriate points of engagement and learning, and these decisions inform and shape their professional identity.

Methods

The aim of this study was to investigate student's pre- and post-placement understandings and experiences of professional ethics and workplace values as they engage with the engineering and science work placement program. The study tracked a cohort of students prior to their first work placement and after completion of the work placement. The study focuses on the development of students' awareness of professional ethics and values, and how these change after having completed the work placement.

Data was collected using online surveys, through LimeSurvey® software and one-to-one, semi-structured, audio recorded interviews. An electronic invitation (email) was sent, with two weekly reminders, to potential participants one month prior to commencing work placement and one month upon completion of the work placement. The survey instrument asked students to respond, using ordinal 10 point Likert scales (where 10 = strongly agree) to a number of statements, open ended questions, and responses to two case study examples where a core issue was ethical of nature. An invitation to partake in the survey

was sent to a cohort of students ($n =119$) prior to commencing their first placement and to the same cohort of students ($n = 96$) after completion of the first placement, providing response rates of $n = 31$, 26%, and $n = 27$, 28%, respectively – a favourable response rate for a lengthy online survey without incentives (Deutsken, de Ruyter, Wetzels, & Oosterveld, 2004; Dillman et al., 2009). A comparative demographic analysis of survey respondents to the demographics of the sampling cohort indicates the respondents are representative of the sampling population.

At the completion of the first online survey, an invitation was made to take part in interviews, which collected four self-volunteered participants. These participants underwent two 45-minute interviews, one in the first week of work placement and the second two weeks after the placement was completed. Interviews were audio recorded and thematically analysed. This research has ethical approval granted by the human ethics committee at University of Waikato.

Gender distribution of participants were 58% male and 41% female (reflective of engineering, and to a lesser extent science, typically being male dominated) with 95% being aged between 19 and 22 years. Participants were asked to identify what ethic group(s) they identified with, which was predominantly European (66%), followed by New Zealand Maori (8%), Asian (12%) and other (14%). When the survey Likert data was subjected to the Cronbach's Alpha reliability test, the results indicated strong internal consistency with low variance (pre-placement $\alpha = 0.92$; $\bar{x}$SD $= 2.01$; post-placement $\alpha = 0.81$; $\bar{x}$SD $= 2.35$).

Results

Pre-placement

When asked who influenced their personal ethical positioning the most, students believed that parents/caregivers had the greatest influence on their personal values (Likert 9.22), followed by their friends/peers (Likert 6.64), and wider family (Likert 6.12). However, students tended to be unsure or disagreed that prior workplaces (Likert 5.88), teachers/lecturers (Likert 5.30), media (Likert 5.90), community leaders (e.g., coaches, youth leaders) and wider community (each Likert 4.26), and religious leaders (Likert 3.30) had influenced their personal values development. Of the participants, 32% indicated (Likert $\geq$ 6) they held religious beliefs, with 12% indicating they attended regular service, with the latter sub-group correlated ($r^2 = .61$; $p < .05$) to their view of religious leaders having influenced their values.

Students were not convinced that they had a sound understanding of their professional values (Likert 5.83) and tended to believe that professional ethics were complex (Likert 6.73). All students agreed that their personal values will inform their professional values while in the workplace (Likert 7.80) and most thought they will be able to adhere to their personal values during their placement (Likert 7.53). However, respondents also indicated that they were unsure if their personal values would conflict with their professional values (Likert 4.47). Students also thought that the source of their professional values would come from codes and regulations (Likert 6.47), with a more limited influence from managers and supervisors (Likert 5.93). Students were also unsure if they could positively change the ethical behaviour in the workplace (Likert 5.93).

Similarly, students thought they behaved ethically (Likert 7.94), however, were unsure if society had good values (Likert 5.10). Interestingly, students held somewhat conflicting views of others around them. Students tended to believe they did not struggle to determine the right ethical choice (Likert 3.42 – statement was negatively worded), however, when

asked if others around them (who were included in the survey) did not struggle, students were less convinced (Likert 5.03).

Post-placement

When asked who or what influenced their thinking around ethical issues encountered in the workplace, students indicated that their own personal values had the greatest influence (Likert 8.55), followed by their workplace supervisors (Likert 7.60), their peers in the workplace (Likert 6.95), their family (Likert 6.05), the company codes of ethics/practice (Likert 5.90), senior managers (Likert 5.85), other students (Likert 4.85), and, interestingly, their friends least (Likert 4.70).

After their placement experience, students felt that the placement had increased their understanding of professional ethics and workplace understating (Likert 7.00), and they now believed that they held a sound understanding of professional ethics (pre-placement Likert 5.83; post-placement Likert 7.24; p <.05). Students believed their ethical practice during their placement mostly reflected their personal values (Likert 8.26) and did not believe their personal values conflicted with their professional values (Likert 3.48 – statement was negatively worded). The pre-placement interview data suggested that students thought that professional ethics essentially were personal ethics applied in a professional context, and post-placement survey data supported that students still held this perception (Likert 7.52). After the placement experience, students tended to be significantly less inclined to speak up if they saw something unethical happening (pre-placement Likert 7.60; post-placement Likert 6.58; p <.05), even if speaking up would cause offense (pre-placement Likert 7.23; post-placement Likert 6.58; p <.05).

However, some views, including some less favourable views, did not change after the placement and perhaps were even enhanced. Somewhat in line with pre-placement perceptions of themselves and others around them, students thought that they struggled less with making the right ethical choice (Likert 3.42) than other students (Likert 4.48), their colleagues (Likert 4.15), and 'others around them' (Likert 5.27). Half of the students indicated that they observed, or were aware of, unethical behaviour in the workplace, which may link in with students' views of the ethical capacity of others in the workplace.

Students still believed that they had good values (Likert 7.65), however, were also still unsure if society, in general, had good values (pre-placement Likert 5.10; post-placement Likert 5.38). Post-placement, students responded at the same level as pre-placement with regards to the idea that professional ethics was complex (pre-placement Likert 6.73; post-placement Likert 6.68).

Despite students believing they had mostly positively impact the workplace values (Likert 6.48), that they always made good ethical decisions (Likert 7.17), and that they believed the experience will result in them responding differently in the next workplace (Likert 6.70), students held virtually the same level of uncertainty that they could positively impact the values at the next workplace (pre-placement Likert 5.93; post-placement Likert 5.76).

Discussion and Conclusion

Within the data there is evidence that student perceptions of ethical conduct and professional practice have changed across their placement. Students who had undertaken work placements reported positive experiences engaging with professional ethics and workplace values, including that they believed that they had successfully and positively

impacted workplace values. Students believed that they had developed a better understanding of workplace and professional ethics; however, they did not indicate that they had yet begun to fully appreciate the complex relationships between professional conduct and personal values. Largely students were still compartmentalising their professional selves from their personal selves. This is indicative of students not realising their personal agency in shaping the workplace and were more in a position of having ethics 'done onto them' rather than being active in shaping ethical practices.

Prior to placement students indicated that they were unsure whether they would positively impact the workplace values. However, after placement, students did express that they felt they had shaped practices in the workplace. Surprisingly, and also indicative of a lack of realisation of personal agency, even though students perceived that they had positively impacted the workplace values on placement, they were still unsure if they would positively impact their next workplace. In addition, despite having a generally positive learning experience in their placement and believing that their understanding of professional ethics had improved, students still tended to struggle with more complex understandings of professional ethics. This was borne out in their responses to the posed case studies which in both pre- and post-placement surveys showed a lack of understanding of ethical complexity. The data suggests that students do have agency in shaping practices in the workplace, yet lack understanding of the complex relationships that inform and shape ethical conduct and practices. Therefore, whilst feeling that they were personally ethical, students still needed further guidance about how to actively inform cultural norms in their community of practice.

Prior to their first work placement, students indicated that they would readily speak up if they saw unethical actions in the workplace, even if speaking up offended others; however,

this readiness to speak up declined significantly ($p < .05$) after the work placement experience. This decline may partially derive from naïve or idealistic views students held prior to entering the workplace which, when confronted with the socially complex nature and individual power differentials in the workplace, caused students to have greater hesitancy to speak up. Similarly, such a response reinforces the previous ideas about the realisation (or lack therefore) of personal agency, yet is somewhat contradictory to the previous perception of students having made positive changes within the workplace.

It would appear that the workplace experience, even though it extends understanding of professional ethics and workplace values, also seemed to maintain, and perhaps re-enforce, student views of the lack of ethical capacity of those around them, and society in general. Such a perception of oneself being morally and ethically better than others, is in contrast to the generally accepted view that individuals tend to judge themselves harder than others Kirshenbaum (2008). However, Trivers (2011) argues that in regards to moral status, individuals not only judge others more harshly than themselves, they are quicker to forgive themselves for moral indiscretions than others for the same offense. It may well be that students perceive others around as having a lower moral status because of knowledge of their peers activities (or perceived activities) as well as a general pessimistic view on society in general, coupled with a greater readiness to forgive oneself rather than others. The challenge presented here to the teaching of ethics is that students may quickly dismiss alternative and externally offered challenges to their own ethical positioning if they believe they are ethically, and morally, superior to others around them. That is, there may be an inertia to learn as they do not see a need to change their current beliefs and practices.

To ensure the ongoing ethical development of the workplace and the empowered professional there is an imperative to overcome this natural inertia to learning ethics, with

students being challenged to better understand their own personal ethics and values, and to be self-critical and reflective of their own actions. Importantly students need to evolve, prior to entering the workplace, a better understanding of their personal positioning and a greater sense of personal agency, thereby being better positioned to respond positively and agentically to dominant workplace values and norms.

This paper has highlighted some of the changes of perceptions by students whilst on placement. Students have shifted perceptions of workplace values and have begun a process of uncovering their personal agency in shaping the workplace community of practice. However, there is also evidence that students do not feel overly empowered and ready to speak up when encountered with an unethical event and there is an uncertainty of their ability to positively contribute to the workplace values of future workplaces. These findings highlight key considerations for the relationship between workplace experiences and student ethical development; however, there is a still a gap in demonstrating the causal relationship between particular elements of workplace experiences, and student moral and ethical development. Thus this paper also highlights the need for significant further research to more fully understand the causes of student perceptions of people around them, their uncertainty on their ability to positively impact the workplace values (despite already successfully having done so) and their greater hesitancy for speaking up when confronted with an unethical event or action. More importantly, ongoing consideration needs to be given to better understanding the causes for students to gain competency in exercising personal moral agency in the workplace.

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