Ethics and Values: Work Placement Influences on Students’ Perceptions

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INTRODUCTION

Students undertaking work placements as part of work integrated-education programmes are situated in a relevant community of professional practice and over the course of the placement exposed to situations that are ethical in nature. In the process, these students, in addition to developing the technical and behavioural skills, also develop and acquire professional attributes, including understandings of professional conduct. It is through these experiences that students begin to shape, and understand, their own identity as professionals. Increasingly the literature identifies the importance of values education, enhancing ethical knowledge and conduct, and professional identity development (Campbell & Zegwaard, 2011a; Herkert, 2000; Keown, Parker, & Tiakiwai, 2005; Trede, Macklin, & Bridges, 2011). Universities are under increasing pressure to develop work-ready graduates (Archer & Davison, 2008; Lomax-Smith, Watson, & Webster, 2011), and with the focus on graduate outcomes, a move towards developing ethically and socially aware graduates (Barrie, 2004). However, teaching ethics and values is fraught with difficulties (Bowie, 2005) and teaching ethics is largely limited to raising awareness rather than cause action (Spier, 2002).

In recent times, there has been a trend towards greater emphasis on ethics and values in education for professionals. This trend has in part been driven by high profile collapses and corporate misadventures, such as Enron and Leehman in the USA, and HIH in Australia. Likewise in other professions, such as policing and health, several significant public reviews, such as the Royal Commission into the New South Wales Police Force (1997) and the Queensland Public Hospitals Commission of Inquiry (2005) identified a need for greater awareness and articulation of professional ethics and processes that could better encourage employees to respond to ethical concerns. Discourses of values education have permeated from professional education to considerations across all levels of education. Within school-based education values education was introduced as a compulsory component to the curriculum by the governments of Australia (DEST, 2005) and New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 2007), similar to other countries such as the US and Japan. This investment in values education aims to develop citizens that have a greater awareness of the desirable social values. Students coming into higher education have already developed an awareness of values and ethics based on past experiences and/or education. However, there remains a challenge as to how university education can build on this awareness and better prepare students for engagement in the workplace.

Definitions of ‘values’ and ‘ethics’ are contested. Both terms have been appropriated in many different ways and have come to represent a variety of ideas. It is not intended to explore in great depth the nuances of these definitions, but it is important to acknowledge the position from which the
ideas presented here are located. In this paper, we take the Halstead and Taylor’s (1996) definition of values, understanding these as ‘principles, fundamental convictions, ideals, standards or life stances which act as a general guide to behaviour, or as a reference point in decision-making, or the evaluation of beliefs, or action’. Both Buckeridge (2002) and Preston (1996) offer suitable descriptions for ethics, with the former describing it as having a focus on the application or outcomes of adherence to a moral value systems, and the later describing it as essentially concerned about what is right or fair, and focussed on what we ought to do (i.e., actions) rather than describing. In short, our focus is in the acquisition and development of notions of good and right with respect to actions in the workplace.

Inherent in this definition is the concept of professionalism. It is our position that to argue for someone to act professionally implies that this person must also be acting in an ethical manner. Ethics, and ethical conduct, are essential components of professionalism and professional conduct. Students engaged in undergraduate studies, though, tend to have narrow conceptualisation of professionalism (Grace & Trede, 2011), including professional ethics and workplace values. The literature has argued that to have effective enhancement of professional ethics development, then professional identity development and professional ethics must be embedded into the curriculum (Campbell & Zegwaard, 2011b; Trede, 2012). However, this identity development does not commence from tabula rasa, instead it builds upon existing dispositions and prior experiences (Billett, 2006; Campbell, 2009). The manner by which the student engages with professional work-life is strongly related to their prior identity development (Reid, Dahlgren, Peticz, & Dahlgren, 2008), thus it is important for students to be well engaged and aware of their personal values and ethics and be able to interpret and apply these to the profession around them.

AIMS AND METHODS

The aim of this study is to investigate student’s pre- and post-placement understandings and experiences of professional ethics, values, and decision-making as part of a work integrated-education program. The study will track a cohort of students through pre- and post-placement perceptions of professional ethics and values. The study focuses on how these perceptions change or develop as a consequence of engagement in a work placement experience. This study includes several different disciplines across two universities, University of Waikato and Griffith University. The study is ongoing and reported here are only the findings for the Science and Engineering students perceptions prior to undertaking a work placement. These students are undertaking the Bachelor of Science (Technology) or the Bachelor of Engineering at the University of Waikato, which has a comprehensive work-integrated education programme (Zegwaard & Laslett, 2011).

Data was collected using surveys before placement and interviews in the first week of placement. The study used an online survey instrument asking students to respond, using ordinal 10 point Likert scales (where 10 = strong agree) to a number of statements, state their views to open ended questions, and respond to case study examples where a core issue was ethical of nature. For the questions exploring who influenced their personal values development, Likert scales of 1-5 were used. The invitation to partake in the online survey was sent using Moodle to a class of 119 pre-placement second year science and engineering students, with a follow-up invitation sent a month later. A total of 31 students responded, giving a response rate of 26% - a response rate not unusual, perhaps even favourable, 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. The interview data was collected using semi-structured face-to-face interviews of 45-minute duration, utilising four self-volunteered participants. Interviews were audio recorded and thematically analysed. This research has ethical approval granted by the ethics committees from University of Waikato and Griffith University.

RESULTS

All but two survey participants had previous work experience in a field not related to their studies (it is common for students to hold part-time work whilst studying), with five indicating that in addition to non-related work they also had some related work. Analysis of these student responses does not indicate different responses compared to the remainder of the sampling population. No students had yet completed work placements. When the survey Likert data was subjected to the Cronbach’s Alpha test, the results indicated strong internal consistency with low variance ($\alpha = 0.92$; $\overline{SD} = 2.01$).

Students strongly believed that parents/caregivers had influenced on their personal values the most (Likert 4.61 out of 5; with 7% indicating that their friends/peers were equally influential), followed by their friends/peers (Likert 3.32), and wider family (Likert 3.06). However, students tended to be unsure or disagreed that prior workplaces (Likert 2.94 out of 5), teachers/lecturers (Likert 2.65), media (Likert 2.19), community leaders (e.g., coaches, youth leaders) and wider community (Likert 2.13), and religious leaders (Likert 1.68) 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, however, the latter sub-group correlated ($r^2 = .61; p < .05$) to their view of religious leaders having influenced their values.

Most students indicated they had a good understanding of their own values (Likert 7.61) and believed it was important to understand one’s own values (Likert 8.35). Most students did not think they often struggled to determine the ethical good decision (Likert 3.42), however did tend to think that their peers around them struggled more (Likert 5.03), and were not particularly convinced that society generally had good values (Likert 5.10).

There is a tendency for individuals who believed that it is good ethical practice to strictly adhere to codes to also agree ($p < .05$) that following the law is always right, that adherence to codes is more important now than before, and the current economic crisis stems from poor ethical behaviours.

Students were not particularly convinced that they had a sound understanding of their professional values (Likert 5.83; however this question had the greatest data variance, $SD = 2.79$) and tended to agree that they were complex (Likert 6.73). All students agreed that their personal values will inform their professional values (Likert 7.80) and most thought they will be able to adhere to their personal values during their placement (Likert 7.53), however, indicated that there were unsure if their personal values could 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 limited influence from managers and supervisors (Likert 5.93).

Most students agreed that workplaces should have codes of ethics and stated workplace values (Likert 6.83). Even though students thought it was important to adhere to a code of ethics (Likert 8.57), they did separated into two distinct groups on the view if good ethical practice requires strict adherence to codes (43% strongly agree, 31% strongly disagree, 26% unsure).
Students tended to believe they would speak up for what is right even if it offends (Likert 7.23), however, when presented with a case study of a colleague unfairly, publically, and harshly rebuked for a mistake, only 40% said they would speak up (27% would not, 33% were unsure). Students were also unsure if they could positively change the ethical behaviour in the workplace (Likert 5.93).

**DISCUSSION**

One’s own self-identity, and personal disposition and values framework within, is build up over time from experience and personal reflections (Bowie, 2005; Nystrom, 2009), and used as an interpretive lens to attempt to understand the world around them (Billett, 2006; Campbell, 2009). When students were asked whom they perceived had the greatest influence the development their personal values, all students identified multiple sources.

When asked who influenced the development of their personal values, the results indicate that students did not see other person(s), aside from family and friends, as a factor of influence. However, literature has long argued that teachers (Weissbourd, 2003; Yost, 1997) and media (Entman, 1989) have a significant influence, and the results here suggest that students have not appreciated the complex long-term development of their dispositions. To better understand such positioning arguments such as Foucault’s constructs of governance and power need to be considered, where it is argued people often unknowingly and uncritically comply to the socially dominant positions. When further investigated in interviews, some students thought they developed their own values framework, that is, as an internal reflective cognitive process rather than one significantly influenced by external factors. However, each interviewee noticeably had difficulty answering this question, stating that they had not given this much thought before (despite prior warning of this question). This may indicate that the influences on their value’s framework development had been an implicit learning development that was influenced from both external (but not explicitly noticeable) factors and internal processes.

In the survey, students perceived that they mostly did not struggle in determining good ethical decisions, but did more strongly believe ($p < .01$) that the people around them tended to struggle in determining the good ethical decision. Given that their peers were part of the same sampling group, it implies that students tend to have a higher view of their own ethical capacity than that of others. This implication is supported by that students also held a significantly ($p < .05$) stronger view that they ‘behaved ethically’ than compared to the view that ‘society had generally good values’. Such a response highlights either a tendency to have falsely elevated beliefs of one’s own ability to act ethically or a cynical view of the external world. Fundamentally, it presents a challenge for ethics education as it indicates there may be a reluctance to have personal positions challenged because their own personal positions are reinforced by a belief that they are already ethically superior to the people around them and, thus, their externally offered alternatives.

There was a degree of uncertainty of what values were important and what ethical behaviour was. This uncertainty was reflected by the varied response given to what students first thought of when thinking of ‘values’ and ‘ethics’. Most students described values broadly akin to the definition commonly accepted as values; such as something held as worth or importance, morals, personal qualities, standards of a moral nature, principles, in the context of (personal) beliefs, culture, community, and religion. Ethics (according to Preston, 1996, focusses more on actions) was described by students much more broadly, from action based statements to determining right from
wrong, that ethics was synonymous to morals and virtues, and consisted of codes and rules. The later may reflect that, particularly for the engineering students, when ethics are discussed (which interviewees suggested was seldom) it was around the codes of ethics and codes of practice for their discipline. However, codes themselves are not ethics per se, rather ethics is action based (i.e., the expression of values by action) whilst codes are merely an articulation of defining principles that help shape what these actions may look like.

When students were asked about codes of ethics and articulated workplace values, they presented some interesting views. Most students thought that their professional values will stem from codes and regulations (seconded only to deriving from their personal values) and thought it was important to adhere to a code of ethics. This perception is reinforced by the current practice of emphasising the importance of the professional code of ethics in conversations of ethical conduct. However, interestingly students separated into two distinct groups on the view if good ethical practice requires strict adherence to codes, where 57% were either unsure or thought ethical behaviour did not require strict adherence to ethical codes. The later view may be better understood when considering the positive, but not overwhelming, responses to the question exploring if students struggled to determine the ethically good choice (suggestive of at least some struggles). Interview data exploring this aspect further indicated that the struggle to determine the best ethical choice was mostly around complex social situations where it was difficult to determine which decision causes the ‘greater good’ and when the significance of the impact of the decision on other individuals had to be taken in consideration. That is, when different desirable values conflict and adherence to a list of values (or codes) may not always result in a decision that serves the greater good. When students were considering the ‘rightness’ of particular actions, there tended to be a conflict to what may be considered broadly as ‘consequentialist ethical positions’. It was the conflict between this personal framework, and the duty bound concept of a code of ethics that was the source of frustration. Whilst pedagogical practices in ethics education tend to favour explorations of ethical framings, such as deontological and teleological frames, a student’s ethical decision making will likely to draw on multiple frames. Further to the conflict around the ‘greater good’ verse ‘codes and obligations’ the survey data also showed students recognised that some values are more important than others and that different values can be more important than others in different circumstances, therefore presenting a neo-Aristotelian perspective of what constitutes ‘good’ and ‘right’. The ability to recognise and engage in thinking across these levels was identified by Kohlberg as indicative of higher-level moral reasoning (Kohlberg, Levine, & Hewer, 1983).

There is clear evidence that students felt unprepared for complex ethical situation in the workplace, thus there is a need for greater student awareness of professional ethics and values before commencing work placement. Prior to commencing the work placement, students almost unanimously thought it was important to understand their professional values, however, considered professional ethics to be complex and were unsure if they had a good understanding of their professional values. The literature discusses the need for young professionals to be moral agentic in their workplace and to have voice (speak up) at the times when required (Billett, 2009). However such voice needs to be mindful of the positions of workplace power (Spencer, 1981), particularly in that students are in a position of lesser power. Students did indicate a readiness to speak up, however, this contrasts to the 60% that indicated in the example that they would not or were unsure. Despite students believing that they adhered to good ethical behaviour, they were also not particularly convinced that they would positively impact the ethical behaviour in the workplace. Likely, the source of these dissonances stems from expected differing positions of workplace power, the
perceived complex nature of professional ethics, the uncertainty around what their professional ethics are, and what these would present in the workplace.

CONCLUSIONS

Most students felt they had a good understanding of their personal values and believed they behaved (mostly) ethically, they clearly felt unprepared for the complexities of professional ethics and workplace values. Their perceptions of their understanding of their own professional ethics and values were that of uncertainty. Each student thought that their professional ethics will be sourced mostly from their own personal values and from workplace codes of ethics, however, they were unsure how adherence might look in practice in the workplace, highlighting the need for greater preparations programmes around professional ethics prior to entering the workplace. Even though greater ethical preparation of students prior to entering the workplace is required, likely the actual ethical practice in a relevant community of practice as part of a work placement will grant the student the greatest learning experience. This experience should be supported by structured post-placement reflection on professional ethics and values to enhance the overall learning experience and development. The data presented challenges current pedagogies evident in ethics education by suggesting that students already have fairly well developed personal ethical frameworks, but are instead lacking in criticality in analysing the social world and concepts, such as power and conformity, and lacking in real experiences to properly apply ethical concepts. It is suggested that there is opportunity to reshape current pedagogies to engage more readily with contemporary philosophy, particularly drawing on post-structuralist and post-modernist understandings, to evolve a new approach to ethics education.

This work has established some knowledge of students understanding of professional ethics, the research is only at an early stage of a longitudinal study. Further work will inform how students perceptions change around values and professional ethics after a situated learning experience in a relevant community of practice. It is intended such findings will then inform work integrated-education practitioners on how to better cause greater student awareness of, and preparedness for, engagement with professional ethics in the workplace.

REFERENCES

cooperative and work-integrated education: International perspectives of theory, research and practice