Teaching social justice through experiential learning

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TRACK 3: Curricular Materials, Processes, and Ideas that Reflect the Significance and Practical Wisdom of Business and Leadership Reflection on the Common Good

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Abstract:
The role of universities in promoting the common good was emphasized by Pope Francis during his last pastoral visit to Kenya in 2015. Specifically, the Holy Father underlined the importance of universities in shaping the minds and hearts of new generations toward the building of a more just and inclusive society, respectful of human dignity and attentive to the needs of the poor. One of the ways in which universities contribute toward promotion of the common good is by teaching ethics courses to future business leaders.

Traditionally business schools have relied on the use of case studies as dominant teaching strategy in teaching business ethics. Underlying this approach is the intent of developing student moral reasoning skills to solve complex moral dilemmas embedded in these cases. More recently, however, educators have challenged this traditional approach and argue that developing student ability to solve ethical dilemmas can be useful but is not sufficient to ensure ethical behavior. Equally important is the need to employ teaching strategies which aim at enhancing students’ capacity for developing virtues.

This paper describes an experiential exercise on social justice in a business ethics course taught at a private university in Kenya. The activity was designed to enhance students’ moral awareness about the plight of Kenyan workers and the responsibility that business firms have in fostering the dignity of human work. Divided into small groups, students did home visits in a poor neighbourhood and conducted face-to-face interviews with heads of families about their household income, living expenses, and working conditions. Students were asked to share the insights they learnt as a group and submit individual reflection papers about lessons drawn from these visits. Analysis of student experiences reveal how this exercise has significantly enhanced their appreciation of the dignity of the poor. Students’ insights also show how they personally benefited from the values of the people they interacted with during the visits. These values include resilience, sense of solidarity, generosity, hope, optimism, hard work, love for their children, and a strong faith in God.

Introduction
The role of universities in the promotion of the common good was emphasized by Pope Francis during his last pastoral visit to Kenya in 2015. In his homily at a Mass celebrated at the Nairobi University Campus, the Holy Father underlined the importance of universities in shaping the minds and hearts of new generations toward the building of a more just and inclusive society, respectful of human dignity and attentive to the needs of the poor (Pope Francis, Homily during the Holy Mass, Nairobi University Campus, 26 November 2015). In a subsequent visit to an urban slum, the Holy Father further emphasized the need to recognize the rights of the poor to basic needs such as access to safe and drinkable water, security from violence and crime, dignified housing, and basic amenities such as toilets, sewers, drains and
refuse collection. (Pope Francis, Visit to the Kangemi slum, 27 November 2015). To address these grave social inequalities, Catholic social teaching has highlighted the need for virtuosity: structure and institutions alone cannot solve the problems of social injustice. Through business ethics courses, universities contribute toward promotion of the common good by educating future business leaders in the virtues. Critics of business ethics education, however, argue that teaching ethics is not likely to cause much impact because individual character is normally formed long before a student reaches university level. Universities, however, counter that business ethics teaching continues to be relevant in developing student moral competencies and maintain the need for continuous review of the design and delivery of ethics courses to increase their effectiveness.

To date, numerous studies have focused on developing effective business ethics course design covering instructional components such as student learning outcomes, teaching and learning strategies, instructional materials, and methods of assessment (Sims & Felton, 2006). Implicit in these studies is the thrust to constructively align the various components of the teaching and learning process by setting appropriate learning goals or outcomes and selecting teaching-learning activities and assessment tasks that could best enhance the learning process (Biggs & Tang, 2007). Traditionally business schools have emphasized the use of case studies as the dominant teaching strategy in business ethics instruction (Felton and Sims, 2005; McDonald, 2004; Ritter, 2006; Cagle & Baucus, 2007; McWilliams & Nahavandi, 2006). Underpinning this teaching approach is a curriculum design which focuses on developing moral reasoning as goal of ethics instruction, a position inspired by the moral development theory advanced by cognitive developmental psychologists Lawrence Kohlberg and James Rest (Catacutan, 2013).

**Moral development paradigms and business ethics curriculum design**

Lawrence Kohlberg (1969/1984) identified moral development with moral judgment and postulates that it develops over time through a series of six stages grouped into three levels: the pre-conventional, the conventional and the post-conventional level. Moral development is characterized by the type of moral reasoning individuals use in their moral behaviour, ranging from self-interest and fear of punishment at the first level, concern for others at the second level, and sense of justice and respect for rights at the third level. The theory maintains that moral reasoning based on internal principles of rights and justice corresponds to the most advanced form of moral development. Hence for Kohlberg, the aim of moral education is to stimulate people’s thinking ability over time in ways which will enable them to use more adequate and complex reasoning patterns to solve moral problems (Kohlberg and Hersh, 1977). To attain this goal, he proposed the use of classroom discussions of moral dilemmas as a teaching strategy for stimulating cognitive conflicts.

However, in the wake of recent cases of corporate malfeasance, business ethics educators have challenged this teaching approach and argue that developing student moral reasoning is useful but inadequate to ensure ethical behaviour. Equally important is the need for a curriculum design which focuses on students’ character or virtues and the use of experiential learning exercises as complementary teaching strategy (Sims & Felton, 2006; Mele, 2005; Catacutan, 2013). Implicit in this curriculum design is a distinct moral development paradigm inspired by virtue ethics theory as advanced by Aristotle and his main commentator, Thomas
Aquinas. In contrast with the claims of cognitive development theory, Aquinas relates moral development not only to cognitive development, but also to the development of the will—to which the human capacity to intend and choose is attributed—through the virtues. Virtues are stable and lasting habits that confer predictability in actions. As habits, virtues presuppose stability of dispositions, acquired through consistent repetition of good actions. Virtues cannot be acquired by instinctive repetition nor by indoctrination as both entail the elimination of deliberation and choice. Virtues can only be acquired when one freely or voluntarily desires and chooses to practise them.

Some significant implications for business ethics curriculum design can be derived from this moral paradigm. One implication is that character is not a permanent trait that remains fixed at an early age. Hence, contrary to claims by critics of business ethics education, individual character can significantly undergo transformation through a person’s free choice and with appropriate educational interventions. This also suggests that a business ethics curriculum design that aims not only at developing moral reasoning but also at educating students in virtues is more likely to be effective in achieving ethical behaviour in business. Another important implication is that business ethics classes can facilitate the acquisition of virtues by providing theoretical knowledge of what virtues are, whether they exist or not, and how they can be acquired. However, ethics instruction of its own accord cannot cause the development of virtues; the acquisition of virtues depends not only on individuals possessing moral knowledge but also on their willingness to live a good moral life. There is therefore a need for students to have deep convictions so that they can truly desire and practise the virtues. This in turn has significant implications on the need for the use of appropriate teaching strategies in business ethics classes that can motivate students and provide them with meaningful experiences that could lead to the practice of the virtues. Hence, apart from employing conventional teaching strategies such as lectures, class discussions, and case studies, virtue ethics theorists have given increased emphasis on the use of non-traditional approaches such as group processes, collaborative learning, role-playing, use of literature, and live cases (Mintz, 1996; Armstrong, Ketz & Owsen, 2003; Mele, 2005). Included also in this category are a wide variety of activities which are commonly recognized as characteristic of experiential learning exercises such as prison visits (Castlesbury, 2007), field exercises (Sims & Felton, 2006), interaction with moral exemplars (Dobson & Armstrong, 1995), and work-based attachments with social enterprises (Baden & Parkes, 2017).

**Experiential education**

Experiential education gives emphasis on first-hand participation by learners in a diverse range of activities conducted in real-world settings under pedagogical supervision (Allison & Seaman, 2017). Popularized by Kolb (1984), experiential learning conceptualizes learning as a four-stage cycle consisting of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Learning initially begins as a passive activity, that is, when a learner is exposed to observe a concrete experience purposefully set out by the instructor as a trigger to elicit a corresponding response from the learner in the form of reflection based upon that experience. At the reflective stage, learners interact with experience: they recapture, think about it and evaluate it. Boud, Keogh and Walker (1995) names three elements crucial to this reflective process: returning to experience, attending to
feelings, and re-evaluating experience. Returning to experience entails the process of recalling the salient events, replaying the initial experience in the mind of the learner, and recounting the experience to others. Attending to feelings involves focusing on positive feelings with a view to fostering reflection about the experience, and removing negative feelings that could obstruct the exercise of reflection. Finally, re-evaluating experience consists in re-examining experience in the light of the learner’s motives, associating new knowledge with pre-existing knowledge and attitudes, and assessing whether such knowledge is meaningful and useful leading to integration and appropriation. Jakubowski (2003) identifies these three elements of the reflective process with critical thinking. It involves the internal examination and exploration of an issue of concern that has been triggered by experience, leading to the creation and clarification of meaning in terms of self and which results in a changed conceptual perspective or a behavioural change. In the field of philosophy, incorporation of experiential learning in philosophy classes is slowly gaining ground. Advocates claim that philosophy is not limited to analysis and abstraction, and teachers can make use of activities that are suited for the goals of their course to teach associated philosophical concepts. These also maintain that successful implementation of experiential learning require that activities are well chosen and relevant to the course being taught; students understand the reasons for engaging in these activities; and activities are connected with the course material directly and in a way that allows for reflection. Examples of these experiential activities include organization of seminars on animal ethics that includes volunteering at animal rescues for a class on care ethics; site visits to poor neighbouring communities for a class on bias, race and gender; service learning for a class on social justice; and student projects involving community engagement for a class on the just war theory (Oxley & Ilea, 2017).

**Description of the field exercise**

The aim of this paper is to describe an experiential exercise on teaching social justice in two business ethics courses taught to undergraduate students at a private university in Kenya. A total of 214 students participated during the academic year November 2015 to March 2016 and July 2016 to November 2016. The activity consisted of field visits to an urban slum designed to enhance students’ moral awareness about the plight of the minimum-wage earners in the country and the responsibility that business firms have in fostering the dignity of human work (The Vocation of the business leader, Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2012). Divided into small groups of six to eight members, students were asked to organize home visits in a poor neighbourhood and conduct face-to-face interviews with heads of families about their average household income, living expenses, and the working conditions they experience as minimum-wage earners. Students were instructed to explain to the families the purpose of the interview and how the data gathered will be shared and disseminated. They were also asked to obtain verbal consent from the families prior to any attempt to document the visit either by recording the interview or taking group photos with the families. Further, students were advised to take some food items to families visited as a token of appreciation.

Following the model for field visits by Felton and Sims (2006), students were required to share their insights from the exercise and present their findings in class after the visit. In
addition, students were asked to submit individual reflection papers to describe their experiences and lessons drawn from the home visits. Prior to the visit, students were instructed to liaise with the university’s community outreach office to ensure safe access into Kibera, considered the largest slum in Nairobi, Kenya’s capital. The community outreach office gave valuable assistance to the students in planning the visits in two ways. First, they helped students in identifying families who would be willing to be visited and interviewed. Once identified, students communicated with these families and agreed on a date when the home visit would take place. Second, the community outreach office held meetings with small groups of students to provide orientation on safety measures and appropriate conduct to be observed during the home visits. Students were also provided with contacts who could assist them and ensure safe passage into the area. In majority of cases visits were done on Saturday afternoons as most interviewees were casual labourers who needed to look for work during weekdays. Most visits lasted approximately three to four hours; overall students spent a total of 8 hours as they had count on additional time to purchase food items for the families they visited and walk to and from the university into the interiors of the slums.

Students’ learning experiences on social justice

Student experiences reveal how this experiential exercise has significantly enhanced students’ appreciation of the dignity of the poor (Laudato Si, 158). Specifically, it contributed to students’ awareness of the need to address social inequalities and improve the working conditions of minimum-wage earners in their country. Interestingly, students’ insights also show how they personally benefited from the attitudes and values of the people they interacted with during the home visits. These values or ‘the wisdom of the poor’ (Pope Francis, Visit to Kangemi slum, 27 November 2015) include strength and resilience in the face of hardships, sense of solidarity and generosity despite their meagre resources, sense of gratitude, hope, optimism and hard work, love for their children, and a strong faith in God.

Content analysis of student written narratives show how this experiential exercise has contributed to enhancing students’ understanding of social justice in three specific ways. First, many of the students described the home visits as an eye-opening experience as they acquired first-hand knowledge of the living and working conditions of their fellow Kenyans living in the slums. In narrating their experiences, a number students expressed their “shock” as they observed the humble living conditions of the families they visited and the surrounding environment. Most the students provided a description of the exterior and interior aspects of the homes as “structures built with mud walls and corrugated tin roof”, “homes with a dirt or concrete floor” and “a small room with two beds separated by a curtain”. Some highlighted the absence of toilet facilities and the fact that residents use communal bathrooms and toilets outside their homes, paying as much as Ksh5 and Ksh10 every time they use them. A number of students also recorded their observation of the surrounding environment as “a place littered with garbage” and expressed their concern for the health of the families they visited. In many instances, students admitted that the living conditions they witnessed were far worse than they have imagined them to be.

Apart from observation, students also acquired first-hand knowledge of the plight of the poor Kenyan worker through personal interaction with them and their families. Lack of money, unemployment and insecurity were the most common challenges faced by these families.
Some described extreme cases such as families “going to bed without food” or “children sent to school with a cup of boiled water as breakfast because parents had no money to spend on food”. However despite these situations, many of the students expressed their admiration on learning the sacrifice that these families go through in order to survive with very meagre resources. For instance, one student narrated: “We met Kamau who lives with his uncle who is a casual labourer earning a paltry of Kshs 9,000 per month (this amount is equivalent to $90). His uncle has two children and a wife. With his salary, he does not manage to have any savings. On average, the family spends Kshs2,500 for rent, Ksh6,000 on food, and Kshs2,000 on school fees. However, despite all these odds, the family is not only hopeful but also works extremely hard to make ends meet.”

Another wrote: “Mr. Njoroge ensures that there is food for his children. But for him, he only has one meal a day and this has become a habit.”

A third student shared: “One of the challenges that he faced among many were the security and upbringing of his children… he explained how insecure the place was…All he did was to keep them in his prayer every single day they leave the house and hope that they would return safely home.”

Apart from gaining first-hand knowledge of the living and working conditions of the Kenyan poor, students also benefited from this exercise by learning from the attitudes and positive values of the poor families in responding to their situation. Most of the students expressed their admiration for the families’ positive outlook in life, sense of gratitude, cheerfulness, generosity, and a strong faith in God. Many commented that the families were “happy and cheerful as they narrate their challenges to us” and “are grateful for the little they have”. A number also mentioned that they were impressed by their determination, hard work, and resilience, and that despite their difficulties “they could still manage a smile on their faces” and “remain hopeful”. In many instances, students highlighted the sacrifices that parents and guardians make to educate their children and grandchildren and provide for them so they can have a better future. One of the students wrote: “We visited the home of a grandmother who is taking care of her grandchildren because they became orphans. She told us that with her little income, she managed somehow to feed her family and buy a small piece of land upcountry. She considers this one of her biggest accomplishments because she has always wanted to have a place that she can call home, a place to bury her children, a place to show her grandchildren where their parents rest. I realised that hardwork plays a crucial role in one’s life. She worked twice as hard for her goal and in the end she managed to achieve it.”

Several of the students also commented that they were “amazed” at the people’s generosity, sense of friendship and solidarity among those they visited. Lending and borrowing of food items to those in need, giving monetary and physical assistance to sick neighbours, and adopting relatives who become orphans was common practice they observed. In one instance, students noticed that the chairs in the home they visited was not enough and that the father asked his daughter to borrow from the neighbours. Another commented that the family they visited had to borrow sugar and milk so that tea could be served to them. As one student observed: “The support given by the neighbours to each other is just an extraordinary thing considering that some of us who live in the suburbs do not even know some of our neighbours. They told us that when one of them is sick and cannot afford the money to go to
the hospital the neighbours come and support that person. When another one has no food, they also come together and give them food.”

Similarly another student shared: “I liked the sense of community that the people have of taking care of each other to ensure that their neighbours are fine. For example, the person we visited told us that there was a time when she could not afford to buy water to wash her son’s clothes and the neighbours helped her, gave her the money to get the water she needed.”

Finally, students’ reflection show not only a deeper understanding and appreciation of the conditions of the Kenyan poor but also a critical awareness of their personal and social spheres. In majority of cases, students offered a critical reflection of their own values vis-à-vis those which they perceived in the people they interacted with. A number of students commented that the home visits was a ‘life-changing experience” as “they grew up very sheltered” and had not had a chance to have first-hand interaction with poor people. For one student, meeting these families “exceeded their expectations” as it was a chance for him to “experience and walk in the shoes of their daily struggle”, and understand them in a way much different from what he knows by simply watching news or reading from books. Common themes that emerged include a critique of a marked sense of self entitlement, apathy and feelings of superiority toward the poor. One student for instance wrote: “We met Alfred who is indeed a very determined and hardworking man and he really inspired us all. From this whole experience I got to learn that we sometimes take so many things for granted and we are not thankful enough to God and to our parents, yet there are many young people who are forced to take up so many responsibilities just to make ends meet. These people have very little or nothing but can still afford a smile, and they still pray to God and appreciate their lives.”

Another wrote: “I am from a sheltered family and always complain when I do not have money to go out with my friends but I realize that these families have much less and they do not complain. On a typical day I could easily spend Ksh10,000 on things I ‘crave’ and on a weekend having Ksh5,000 would seem like a ‘broke weekend’. However, after meeting Mr. James, I realized that we need to start appreciating more of what we have and that a simple act of giving and sharing with the less fortunate goes a long way. I have also decided to take my youngest brother to visit a family in Kibera because I think he will also benefit from it. I also learnt that it is the little efforts we make to interact with each other that sometimes makes the world a better place for someone. For instance, when my group and I finished the interview, Mr. James told us that he was really inspired that students from a prestigious university would create time to interact with the less fortunate. For me, this is not just another group project; it was an experience that I shall never forget.”

A third student shared: “The visit was a ‘wake up call’ for me. I have never been to Kibera before but I am glad that I got the opportunity to go because having witnessed all this I was able to ask myself some difficult questions: What am I doing to give hope to the hopeless? This is a question that comes into my mind from time to time when I hear about people’s suffering in the news. I have always managed to distance myself from those stories and convince myself that there is little I can do. But this visit is a ‘wake up call’ and I have realised that in my own way there is something I can do. I am glad that I had this opportunity because it had a real impact in my life.”
Finally, these home visits also made students evaluate their biases and misconceptions about the poor and reflect on concrete actions they could do to address the social inequalities that they perceived in their society. A number of students mentioned that they offered as a group to go back and raise funds to meet some specific needs of the families they visited such as paying for school fees or some medical expenses. As one student wrote: “The visit to Kibera was a humbling and life-changing experience for me. I learned that I should never fall a victim to stereotypical misconceptions. This is because my initial conception of Kibera was entirely different from what I actually experienced. The people in Kibera are just normal human beings who are trying to make an honest living and make ends meet like every one of us...”

Another shared: “In all this I learnt that we should never look down at poor people, thinking perhaps that they are lazy or cursed. From what I have seen, they are doing the best they can for a better tomorrow. It is an experience I will never forget and I will make it a habit to visit the place to offer a helping hand when needed.”

Conclusion

Business ethics education is one of the ways in which universities can contribute to the promotion of the common good. By exploring themes related to social justice in business ethics courses, universities prepare students who are likely to become future business leaders to have greater sensitivity toward unjust social conditions existing in their societies and the role of business in promoting the rights and dignity of the worker and just distribution of wealth. It is therefore of concern that business ethics curriculum designs should aim not only at developing students’ moral reasoning skills but also at educating them in the virtues. However, ethics instruction on its own cannot cause the development of virtues, as this also depends to a great extent on individuals truly desiring and exercising them. This implies the limits of the use of conventional teaching approaches such as lectures and case studies as these aim at transmitting theoretical knowledge about the virtues and developing critical thinking skills to solve ethical dilemmas, but are inadequate in motivating students to be virtuous. This paper argued that use of experiential learning can significantly contribute in enabling students to become intrinsically motivated toward acquisition and practice of the virtues. Findings of this study show that field visits to poor homesteads and personal interaction of students with families of minimum-wage earners contributed significantly in their understanding of social justice. Through these home visits, students acquired first-hand knowledge not only of the living and working conditions of their fellow Kenyans but also of the positive attitudes and values of these people. More importantly, they also acquired a greater understanding of their own values and consequent need to develop the virtues they perceived exemplified in those people they interacted with. Overall, findings of this paper suggest that moral experiences which are authentic and meaningful could serve as trigger for critical reflection, generate moral motivation, and lead to ethical behaviour (Rest, 1980). Experiential learning strategies are therefore key in teaching business ethics because in the realm of the moral life human beings experience what virtues are and learn how to be virtuous principally through personal involvement and interaction with others. This study has shown that students can learn about the need for social justice, respect for the dignity of the human person, solidarity and concern for the common good not only by reading, discussing
and theorizing about these values in the classroom, but also and more importantly by providing them with experiences to have first-hand knowledge of these realities through personal interaction with those who are less fortunate in their society. As MacIntyre (1999) asserts, perceptions play a part in the causation of behaviour and virtues are learnt “in those contexts of practice in which we learn from others how to discharge our roles and functions in society” (p.89).
References:


