# Using Discussion Teaching in an Online Ethics Course

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*The use of discussion teaching in an online ethics course is described. The course AC435 Ethics for Accountants received the distinction of being recognized by Quality Matters in 2009. The course utilizes groups to bring about interaction of case studies in an eCollege course management system. Virtual world communications are practiced in the course giving actual social interaction experience to students. This touch of solving realistic ethical dilemmas is a favorite for students.*

When teaching adult business students, interaction and discussion come with the territory. Adult students especially have considerable experience to bring to the classroom. When teaching a course in ethics, active interaction in case study discussion can aid in understanding concepts in case studies. The way an ethics teacher thinks about a case study comes across during discussion of the details. Values can be emphasized, and corporate cultures are conveyed. In today's world, we certainly need an exchange of values that are more integrity- based and enriched. An ethics course is the place where ethical theories can be emphasized and ingrained in the students. With the many nuances in corporate case studies, students definitely benefit from active discussion of business case studies.

Online courses pose challenges when teaching ethical dilemmas. Interaction is somewhat constrained in asynchronous discussion thread postings. Integrity-based strategies cannot be articulated with conversational tones and interactions, which can be problematic for the teaching of concepts in an ethics course. Facilitating discussion teaching is difficult, if not impossible according to some educators. Nevertheless, the need for active interaction and discussion sorely exists.

The purpose of this paper is to tell the strategy I used to obtain social interaction in an online ethics course. In preparation to develop an online course called Ethics for Accountants, I took on the challenge by reading the book <u>Education for Judgment: The Artistry of Discussion Leadership</u>, edited by Harvard Business School. The purpose of this paper is to describe the group experience and how discussion teaching elements were utilized in an online course Ethics for Accountants. Even though the course does not have actual face-to-face interactions to discuss the dilemmas posed in ethics, this application achieves social interaction with students, which is the ultimate goal. As higher education makes strides to incorporate synchronous methods in online courses, distance education with technology will be even better.

The book, <u>Education for Judgment: The Artistry of Discussion Leadership</u>, explains how Harvard faculty facilitate discussions in their business school with case studies. The book seeks to help in solving recurring problems with classroom discussion. It examines ways to think concretely about the task of teaching, puts forth ways to get a discussion started, tells how to guide a discussion without stalling, and gives ideas on how to create a sense of closure and accomplishment when finalizing a class discussion. The book forces instructors to take a deeper view of teaching by getting students to take charge of their

learning and to make informed judgments about the world. The book suggests that the subject matter should be designed in such a way in order to bring about sound professional discourse.

## THEORETICAL FRAMWORK FOR USE OF DISCUSSION TEACHING

Educational models for learning have long said that active learning in a classroom is necessary in order for true learning to take place. Active learning requires interaction – the exchange of information between teacher and student, or between student and student, or in other such exchanges. Only with a true partnership between teachers and students will the true ends of education be achieved, according to Dewey (Christensen, p. 5). Such goals are unlikely in situations dominated by the instructor, which is reason for discussion teaching with interactive and collaborative processes; such goals are especially challenging in an online class.

When teaching ethics in an online classroom, the need for interaction is paramount as the instructor facilitates the discussion of complex case studies. Opinions of other students can range from one course of action to several diametrically opposed courses of action depending on the circumstances. Interaction is sorely needed to bring out concepts and articulate the values in organizations. Discussions force students to articulate and defend positions, to display their reasoning to others, and to accept and respond to criticism (Christensen, p. 288). Social interaction, the foundation for learning when teaching ethics, is obviously absent in online classes – without a concerted method to apply alternative procedures that make interaction happen.

Any case study involving ethical analysis has questions of fairness; discussions force students to articulate and defend their positions. Discussions also display the way one can analyze or reason the situation to others, and discussions give students experience in learning how to accept and respond to criticism. The mentality of "group think" and other group dynamics can start to simulate a work team; students can experience such situations in an ethics class before the actual work environment. The challenge is how to incorporate these kinds of interactions in an online class of adult students, most of whom have their own values and ideas of the cases studies.

## APPLICATION OF DISCUSSION TEACHING IN AN ONLINE COURSE

This paper addresses one successful application of learning that utilized grouped threaded discussions to teach ethics.  First of all, the course implements a variety of interactions – "at large" discussion threads, peer review of individual answers to discussion posts, individually written papers, and group experiences, which simulate a work team in the office.  Even though this experience does not include face-to-face interactions, it does incorporate many elements from discussion teaching. The Ethics for Accountants course is an upper-division course that fulfills the ethics requirement for accounting majors. The course is taught on an accelerated basis for eight weeks.

The group work involves teams during Weeks 2, 4, and 6 of the class.  The groups are assigned the same case studies as follows:

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| Week 2 | A Faulty Budget (Mintz, p. 38) | Case study about finding errors, a common occurrence in many accounting offices |
| Week 4 | Phar-Mor (Mintz, p. 132) | Case study about a chain of drug stores that had significant fraud in the organization, a poor tone at the top, and eventually went bankrupt |
| Week 6 | Busyboto Scooter Sales, Inc. (Mintz, p. 214) | Case study about scooter company who sold to Asian markets, raising many international ethical concerns |

Students are given the task of solving dilemmas in the case studies concurrently within their groups by doing three activities with distinctively different grading techniques. Part 1 is a Grouped Threaded Discussion for 3 days of the respective weeks. Students interact for three days within their group (only within their respective group; not with the entire class). This gives opportunity for each group to thoroughly answer the case study questions, to articulate their positions and values within the group, and other typical exchanges appropriate for the case studies. Each student is expected to be actively involved or engaged with the case. Students are expected to arrive at a point of consensus in the case. The aspects of working as a team or group are that students see the case study from other viewpoints, and they hear the other students' views. Comments continue to be made by students that they never had considered some dimensions to the case study until another student brought up a particular point.

This phase of the interactions is where the instructor can enter the discussion, guiding the students to understand ethical principles or theories. Instructors can emphasize appropriate behavior in the circumstances of the case. Reinforcing values can take the form of being candid about ourselves, which gives opportunity to the instructor to open up to the students. As Hugh Prather pragmatically states, "In order to see, one must be willing to be seen (Christensen, p. 20)." Students seem to enjoy that aspect of the interactions and the benefits of candor with others.

eCollege, the provider of the course software at my university, closes the discussions to within the group only, which is a semi-private aspect of the discussions with students. All postings to the discussion threads are captured within the group for evaluation by the instructor.

Part 1 of the case study requires interacting within the group. Interactions are evaluated by a grading rubric. Each student is evaluated on the number and quality of their posts to their group representing 30 percent of the case study grade. Facts are expected to be accurate; reasons for a course of action are expected to be stated and supported by ethical principles and theory as appropriate. An overall command of the issue/dilemma should be articulated in the thread by students.

Part 2 of the case study requirements requires a Group Answer for the case study, due on Friday of the respective weeks. This is the official Group Answer to the questions provided in the Case Study. Each member of the group is graded on the end result or final resolution of the case study. Because the input in Part 1 drives the answer in Part 2, all students within the group are awarded the same grade; this score represents 30 percent of the case study grade. Pressure is on the group to write a diplomatically correct answer to the case study. Most groups designate a student leader to draft the Group Answer.

Part 3 of the case study is for students to individually compose a paper on ethical lessons learned during the week, including ethical principles learned from the case study; also, the benefits of the team discussion are to be set forth in Part 3; and lastly, students are expected to state who within the group exhibited ethical leadership during the week. This paper is to be individually composed by students and represents 40 percent of the case study grade. Students seem to enjoy recognizing their peers for outstanding leadership in the case study, and I post comments within the group for recognition of quality leadership. When an outstanding student leader emerges, the instructor can post a class announcement detailing the leadership characteristics exhibited by that individual.

In summary, the group work experience represents 30 percent of the total grade with the remaining aspects as follows:

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| Case Studies (grouped threaded discussions) | 30 percent |
| Discussion Threads (at large on textbook material) | 24 percent |
| Quizzes (after each chapter) | 14 percent |
| Final Exam | 30 percent |
| Contributory journal | 2 percent |
| Total | 100 percent |

The case study score is varied in that there are group discussions, group report writing, and individual writing assignments within the 30 percent. Again, there is need to keep the course methodologies varied and to keep the course content focused on good ethical behaviors.

Comments from students during the evaluations of the course are that students benefited from the case studies. The groups develop collegiality similar to a work team throughout the case study activities. Students gain from the viewpoints of other students in the group. Comments are made that they never would have thought of certain aspects of the cases. Working in a group can have both positive and negative consequences, but most students say the advantages outweigh the negative aspects, if any. When the course concludes, many students mention that while they typically do not like group experiences because they get in "bad groups;" they go on to mention the positive aspects and memorable events from the case studies.

A byproduct of the discussion teaching experience is to teach students to think more critically, a skill that accompanies the teaching of ethics. The group experience definitely adds value to an online course where students cannot interact in conventional ways. When the material is structured in this manner, independent thinking and values education is definitely encouraged. Another byproduct of the process utilized in Ethics for Accountants, an online course, is to build community within the online class. I believe the group work creates camaraderie among the students and instructor, which is a rare consequence particularly in an online class. Additionally to add a "human touch," I routinely telephone each of the students to introduce myself and to meet them. We also discuss the progress of the course. The ideals presented in discussion teaching – the building of community - come through in different ways in my online class, which is critical for a successful course. By exhibiting the sense of community that I am seeking to build, that really develops a "sense of community" in the course. In an ethics course, this is called "leading by example."

## SIMILAR CHALLENGES IN CORPORATE E-LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Similar challenges in providing opportunities for social interaction plague the corporate E-learning environment as well. With advances in technology, students demand to be entertained when it comes to learning as with other aspects of their lives. E-learning is beneficial for those students who are reserved in a face-to-face classroom; often the anonymity of online learning allows for students to more actively participate and ask questions.

Collaborative measures that can enhance an online class include a mixture of different learning techniques, live video or audio conferencing, whiteboards, and any other means which enhances the exchange of ideas among students (http://wiki.media-culture.org.au/index.php/E-Learning_-_Social_Interaction). Until the E-learning industry can bring about real-time solutions to counter the isolation felt by "solo" adult learners in online environments, such applications for social interaction will create an effective environment needed for true learning.

The course received the Quality Matters seal of recognition in January, 2009. Quality Matters is a faculty-centered, peer review process designed to certify the quality of online courses and online components. Sponsored by MarylandOnline, Inc, Quality Matters has generated widespread interest and received national recognition for its peer-based approach to quality assurance and continuous improvement in online education.

## REFERENCES

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