Ethics and values: The need for student awareness of workplace value systems

Discussion paper

ABSTRACT

Increasingly the literature highlights the importance of having ethics and values taught at all levels of the education system. Governments, such as those of New Zealand and Australia, are increasingly focused on introducing curricular requirements for values education and ethics, and some universities in Australia have already introduced ‘core generic papers’ across all degree programmes, including ethics. Co-operative education provides a unique learning environment which leans towards exploring the practice of professional values and ethics. In the workplace, decisions are often made through consideration of adherence to a particular value system or ethical code. A co-operative education student, situated in a workplace environment, observes, explores, and practices the workplace value systems and codes. Such a conclusion presents several challenging issues for co-operative education practitioners. Firstly, there presents a need to investigate what core values are held as important within the workplaces that students will be placed within and, secondly, students need to be provided with learning opportunities to practice their ethical decision making before being exposed to the workplace. Co-operative education programmes need to scaffold opportunities to allow students to advance their understanding of ethical behaviour and identify skills required to engage with ethical issues. In addition, we need to consider that
graduates should not just be prepared to become acquirers of existing practice, but also become critical agents in the development and advancement of ethical workplace practice. Thus the aim of this presentation will be to explore considerations around workplace value systems, development towards a generic framework, and the opportunities work placements presents towards developing students to be critical moral agents.

INTRODUCTION

Professional ethics is gaining significance across the world and increasingly the literature highlights the need for inclusion of ethics and values education in the curriculum at all levels of education. Some governments have had well established and long serving curriculum requirements for moral and values education (Sakamoto, 2008), whilst other governments have more recently (re)introduced curricular requirements for values education and ethics. For example, the New Zealand Government recently legislated that primary and secondary education must include values education as part of their core curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007), returning to pre-1980’s policy and following a path the Australian Government has been pursuing since 2002 (Hamston, Weston, Wajsenberg, & Brown, 2010). Significantly, values education in NZ has been raised as one of the three ‘pillars’ of the National Curriculum, the other pillars being ‘key competencies’ (e.g. thinking, language, participation) and ‘subject learning’ (e.g. English, science, etc). It appears the compulsion of values education and ethics has been limited to primary and secondary levels, however, the need for values education should be of interest to the tertiary education sector. Some universities (for example the Australian Catholic University, Charles Sturt University and Macquarie University) in Australia have introduced, or are developing, generic core papers that cover subjects that were deemed of importance for every student regardless of subject
Of particular interest to co-operative education (co-op) is that work placement programmes facilitate ‘real’ experience in a community of relevant practice (i.e. workplaces) (Cooper, Orrell, & Bowden, 2010). Within these workplaces cultures are often developed whose ethical basis is founded in adherence to a particular value system or ethical code; which may or may not align with the espoused codes and policies of the organisation. Students on work placements are readily exposed to the cultures of workplaces and are required to navigate and develop their sense of self and professional identity in consideration of the suggestive pressures of the socio-cultural nature of the workplace (Billett, 2008; Nystrom, 2009). Work placements, thus, present a unique and rich learning opportunity to explore adherence to and reflect on a workplace value systems and the ethical nature of practice.

WHAT ARE VALUES AND ETHICS

In describing values and ethics there are numerous, often colloquially used, terms with overlapping meanings; such as values, ethics, principles, morals, fundamentals and virtues. Halstead and Taylor (1996) define values 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’. This definition is particularly useful for the discussion of this paper as it highlights that values reside both with the individual, in that they carry particular stances throughout the different facets of their lives, as well as with the social presenting a generally accepted guide to conduct. A co-op student engages with
the values and practices of the workplace through an interpretive lens shaped by the histories, dispositions and personal values developed over their lifetime. Discussion of ethics have a tendency to be more centred on moral values with a greater focus on the application or outcomes of adherence to such moral value systems (Buckeridge, 2002). In practice, ethics is essentially concerned about what is right or fair, and focussed on what we ought to do (i.e. actions) rather than describing (Preston, 1996). As Almond (1999) contends that if morality is judging what is good and right then ethics is the reasoning behind such judgement.

In discussions of values education the New Zealand Ministry of Education has clearly, and perhaps conveniently, taken broad meaning of the term values by defining it as ‘principles or standards [used for] judgements of what is valuable or important in life’ (Ministry of Education, 1999). Likewise with the Australian context a similar, community-based view of values has been adopted (DEST, 2005). It is likely that a state Ministry, such as the Ministry of Education, is focused on ‘public values’ (i.e. creating responsibly citizens, community morale) rather than moral values. Using a broad definition gives the flexibility for inclusion of values such as ‘participation for the common good’ and values that could be described as character attributes (e.g. curiosity, innovative, self confidence) or competences/skills (e.g. excellence, consistency, accuracy) (Ministry of Education, 2007). Within the preparation of students for the workplace through engagement in cooperative education programmes consideration needs to be given to the position taken in defining values. The emerging student needs to acquire and develop values representative of the broader community and society, as well as that of their chosen profession, workplace and, fundamentally, their sense of self. Therefore, discussions of values education, with respect to co-op, must consider this multi-layered reality of professional practice.
RATIONALE FOR EXPLORING VALUE SYSTEMS

Approaches to values education, such as those proposed within schools by the New Zealand and Australian governments, tend to assert a list of ‘commonly’ held beliefs or statements and then consider a process of enculturation for adherence to these values. For example within the Australian context the National Framework calls for schools to educate students around values such as integrity, respect, honesty and tolerance, imaged on a back drop of ‘Simpson and his donkey’ (a First World War iconic image). This framework presents an admirable list of ideals for the upright citizen. However, being truly ethical is more than merely being, for example, honest. There is a need to not only educate for honesty, but to develop the critical capacity to understand when it may not be morally right to be honest (e.g if being honest may result in harm to another person). That is, values and ethics education needs to engage in the critical discussions associated with these fields rather than mere application of absolutes.

The workplace presents an extension of this reality. It may be argued that educating students around the espoused values of their impending workplace would benefit the students. Students learning of a workplace’s value system could be based on the notion that students must be aware of, and be prepared for, established workplace value systems and to be able to demonstrate behaviour and conduct compatible with these. Social acceptance in the workplace is a critical element in being able to access learning opportunities (Billett, 2008). Such social acceptance often comes in the form of compliance to existing cultural values and practices. Students need to be equipped to navigate the increasingly important ethical aspects of their professions (Bowie, 2005). For example, a female worker going into a male dominated, sexist workplace may be seen as ‘causing trouble’ if she speaks up about these
practices, and therefore denied acceptance and learning. However, simple acceptance of these realities is also not compatible with the desired outcome of a critical-thinking professional graduate.

Although students cannot merely be taught with existing practices, culture and values, they need to be educated to acknowledge their commitment to their profession and the workplace in which they practice. Workplace values systems are inherently important for the everyday proper and effective function of the workplace. Many organisations have adopted codified statements of conduct and ethics, present mission and value statements and espouse a range of values to which they assert employees within the organisation should aspire to. Likewise, professional groups, such as engineers, teachers, nurses and lawyers, also have codes of ethics and conduct articulating the type of practice expected of the individual professional. An emerging graduate needs to be conscious of their commitment to be guided by these values. For example, it is not possible for a person to assert to be an ethical nurse if they do not consider the values of patient care to be important. However, even within these frameworks disagreement and interpretation can occur. So despite acceptance of ‘patient care’ as a priority of nursing, how this is realised and understood through enacted practice is reliant upon the critical capacities of the emerging professional. Students emerging from a university degree program should be considered as being members of occupational groups with high levels of education and with a critical mind serving the public good (Bowie, 2005).

FACILITATING THE LEARNING

Facilitating learning around value and ethics presents some considerable challenges and may at times be controversial (Hill, 2004). The learning of values systems needs to consider two important aspects; transferring knowledge of established values systems and the capacity to
practice such value systems. Goodman and Lesnick (2001) go further by arguing that little would be gained if education shapes the action without shaping the person, thus co-op practitioners would need to consider beyond the practice of value systems (action) and explore how students could also transform such value systems (shaping). Goodman and Lesnick’s thinking was paralleled by the argument that co-op students should not only know what is right but also develop ‘moral courage’ to do what is right (Ayling, 2006). The argument made here is that students need to be equipped with what may termed a moral compass to detect what is right and wrong, but also the ability to critical consider the proper response and course of action.

Approaching the learning of values by didactic delivery of a prescribed list of values is not sufficient (Crain, 1985) and explorative conversations are also required, which according to Lovat and Toomey (2007) needs to be explicit and clear. Work by Kohlberg argues that learning around values and ethics, should focus on the process of developing moral reasoning and capacity building rather than direct content knowledge (Crain, 1985; Lovat & Toomey, 2007). These capacities are best developed by using examples where ethical issues are discussed and moral reasoning is called upon (Meizrow, 1991; Pritchard, 1992). Well-known ‘paradigm cases’ are already used and includes examples such as Chernobyl Nuclear Plant Explosion, Ford Pinto Petrol Tank Scandal (Perlman & Varma, 2002) and the 1986 Challenger Space Shuttle Disaster (Reid, 2002). In addition, Kohlberg presents the Heinz Dilemma, which explores the interesting issues of conflicting values, forcing students to engage with moral reasoning around different value systems (Crain, 1985). Traditional approaches to the teaching of values and ethics have relied upon students engaging in ‘case studies’, such as those highlighted above, which are removed from the experiences and
realities of the students. Furthermore, they are often theoretical in nature and therefore difficult to transfer to the practice setting.

Work placements present unique learning opportunities for students. Engaging in work integrated learning involves complex learning for students as they are according technical skills, knowledge, soft skills as well as shaping their professional identity and subsequently their own values (Campbell, Herrington, & Verenikina, 2009). Thus, post-placement students are able to draw on real, relevant and highly contextualised examples, based on their experiences in their relevant workplace. Required to draw upon these experience and advance learning post-placement guided enquiring-reflection needs to occur, which is scaffolded in a co-op programme. This approach would draw on reflective learning techniques of reflection after action, as outlined by Schon (1983), which influences students views on their value systems and future responses when faced with a similar context. The use of group discussions where ethical situations are reflected upon and analysed would allow other group members to widen their contextual understanding of how workplace ethical situations, and the moral reasoning used, in the context relevant to their profession. Reflective essays could also be drawn upon, where on an individual basis students explain a practical real event and then expand on their reasoning. However, the above consideration does not consider the processes of preparation which students require prior to commencing a co-op placement.

Students do not present at tertiary education level as ‘blank sheets’ or tabula rasa, devoid of pre-existing histories and dispositions. Students already have an ‘interpretative lens’ which they use to understand the world around them including the workplace (Billett, 2006; Campbell, 2009). It is therefore important that students explore and understand their own
value systems. Therefore, prior to engagement in a co-op experience there is a need for students to engage in a form of learning which makes explicit their ‘interpretative lens’ and affords the students the opportunity to critically reflect on their existing value structures. Workplaces will shape the value systems of students, advancing their professional identity (2002). However, this process of modification and shaping cannot be permitted to occur in an uncritical manner as a result of students not developing an appreciation of their own personal values and principles.

DEVELOPMENT OF PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

Sweeney and Twomey (1997) argue that universities need to develop graduates for the workplace that are capable of more than a simple response to change, but are adaptable and transformative. That is, as university graduates, students need to be more than mere acquirers of existing practices and instead they should develop as critical agents of their learning and active in shaping their practice and practice settings (Billett, 2008). The argument by Billet, in essence, presents the notion that in order to be a true professional one must be a reflective practitioner, well aware of the norms of the community of practice, and to be critical moral agents shaping the future norms of that community. This requires students to be vocal when faced with an ethical issue and in order for students to be critical agentic professionals, relies upon the capacity of those involved to be aware, able to identify and judge objectively that an ethical issue is present within their profession setting (Bowie, 2005; Corbo Crehan & Campbell, 2007). Exploring workplace value systems, as observed in placement, therefore, is to develop this level of awareness, but moreso the critical capacity of students to interrogate their settings and experiences identifying the issues that lie within and develop strategies and practices to respond to these (Bowden & Smythe, 2008).
CONCLUSION

Following from recent crises in the business and professional worlds, it is timely for co-op practitioners to seriously look at scaffolding opportunities to explore professional workplace values systems and ethical issues as part of the co-op curriculum in order to advance student moral reasoning and development of professional identity. Work placement presents a wealth of opportunities to explore the practice of making ethical or moral decisions. Students are likely to relate well to exploring their experiences as observed in the workplace, as they would likely have personally been involved, allowing them in-depth insight.

Ultimately, it is important for co-op to included values education in the delivery of the placement programmes because having co-op graduates well-informed and rehearsed in making good ethical and morally sound decisions not only places these graduates in a position of high integrity, it would also make a positive contribution to the overall operation of their future workplace and profession.

REFERENCES


