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Developing an ethical professional through work-integrated learning

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Background

Students emerging into professional fields need to understand and navigate the increasingly important ethical aspects of being a professional, transforming the workplace and themselves (Campbell & Zegwaard, 2011a). A primary goal of a work-integrated learning program, and likewise professional ethics education, is the evolution within the student of a sense of self and the development of an identity within their chosen profession and/or workplace. Students need to develop as critical moral agents (actively making choices whilst critically evaluating their moral implications) whilst developing their understandings of professionalism and professional obligations.

Ethical practice emerges through a negotiated position between the individual and collective. The ideal professional has, therefore, an obligation to affect positive change and actively respond to ethical ideals and misconduct; that is, the professional, at any stage of their career, must be actively engaged in the construction and negotiation of acceptable ethical practice. An argument is made in this paper for approaches to work-integrated learning to provide support for the development of critical mind and moral courage of the emerging professional and engaged student.

Aims

This paper aims to provide a justification for a research study, which will closely examine the transformation in student perceptions and responses to ethical issues before, during, and after work-integrated learning placements.

Approach

The paper presents a proposed methodology of the research study evolving from a consideration of the current literature. The paper employs a literature analysis as a tool for framing an argument for the development of critical moral agency within students with a suggested pedagogical and research approach to better understanding this development.

Discussion

Emerging from the literature are the argument for the centrality of concepts such as practical wisdom within an applied professional ethics education for students as part of a comprehensive understanding of work-integrated learning. The paper suggests that pedagogical approaches that are grounded in notions of 'situationalism' provide the most useful educative tools for the mature development of a critical moral agent.

Implications

It is intended that this research will provide a foundation for professional ethics education which moves beyond the traditional approaches, to an authentic and engaged curriculum which equips students with the capacities for critical decision making required to navigate the world of work.

Keywords: Professional ethics, agency, values education

Critical moral agency

In understanding the nature of professionalism there is an almost inevitable reference made to notions of values, ethics, morality, and decision making as key attributes of the professional. For example, in his attempt to define professionalism with respect to lawyers in the United States, Rizzardi (2005, p.42) draws the conclusion that, 'the core essence of professionalism can be expressed as follows: character, competence, commitment and courtesy'. Therefore any educative process, which focuses upon the development of a professional, must

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consider the key elements of values and ethics. However, this is a different conclusion to laying claim that students need to be indoctrinated into a particular set of values, instead they need to be empowered to examine and critique their world through a values lens that contributes to their own personal moral development. Students should graduate with the capacity to enact values-driven decision-making. There is, it is argued here, a role for work-integrated learning programs to contribute to this development of critical moral agency.

Critical moral agency derives from three positions of understanding of human learning and existence. Firstly it contests that the individual learner in a practice setting has agency in developing and shaping their learning (Billett, 2008). That is the learner is not merely beholden to the demands of the social world of the workplace, but that they are able to be agentic in deciding the value of particular endeavours. An individual enters a workplace with existing ontogenies, histories, and dispositions that shape their intersections with the social workplace; that is the individual is not *tabula rasa* but instead already formed in a number of ways (Billett, 2006; Campbell, 2009). This challenges the common notion of the socialisation of the individual as a subject of the dominant social norms, and asserts that the learner is an active participant in the formation of their practice. As evidenced in the work of Campbell (2009) as the individual transitions into the workplace, although being aware of dominant social norms and practices, they form practices that are unique and individual. As Campbell (2009, p.21) argues:

Although there exists a significant power differential between the novice and expert within the community, and access to learning within a social setting can be directed significantly by proclaiming adherence to the values of the community, the trajectory undertaken by an individual is not pre-determined and unchallenged.

The second aspect is the construct of criticality, understood here as the ability to critique the social structures and norms situated in an environment that produces particular subjectivities and behaviours. This concept finds its origins in the work of Foucault and his positioning of ethics as the defence of the free self. As argued by Infinito (2003), deriving from Foucault (1988), there is a desirability to equip students with the capacities to be imaginative about how they understand themselves in the world, and be able to critically assess the social structures that subjugate them to a norm of practices. In Infinito's (2003, p.70) words:

If ... we constantly practise care of the self, if we are intimately involved in making judgments, in thinking critically and imaginatively about who it is we wish to be and the actions we perform, if we are practiced at reflection and in dialogue with others, then we will be able to bring about a self who is free.

Within this quote there is evident several elements of practice that facilitate the freedom of self and criticality needed to be transformative agents of change. Firstly, Infinito makes mention of the concept of 'care of self'. This phrase carries with it two meanings; namely, assurance of individual wellbeing and maintaining the freedoms of individuality. These ideas are not mutually exclusive in so much that being aware of ones desires, values and motivations assists in the maintenance of environments that are supportive and enabling of these ideas, thereby creating environs which support personal growth, development and wellbeing. Secondly, Infinito highlights the important role of reflection and dialogue as enablers of imagination and criticality. Reflection has often been regarded as a key component of any successful work-integrated learning curriculum (Winchester-Seeto, Mackaway, Coulson, & Harvey, 2010). However, Infinito challenges also for the inclusion of dialogue as an instrumental practice in realising the freedom of self. Often discussions of work-integrated learning have strong tendencies towards reflective practices, but consideration of the position and role of dialogue (student-academic, student-mentor, academic-industry) as being a core component to the development of a critical graduate is often neglected in designs of work-integrated learning curriculum. Therefore, it is argued here that there is importance to the development of criticality amongst students when they engage in work-integrated learning experiences, and this is achieved through dialogical practices that enhance the imagination of the self.

The third element of the critical moral agent, which this paper argues as a goal of importance for work-integrated learning, is the notion of the moral being. Accepting that students enter situations of learning with pre-existing ontogenies and dispositions it must also be accepted that students have pre-existing values, morals and ethics. As a student transitions to the workplace or profession there is an expectation that these personal morals will be translated and understood through a lens of professional and workplace ethics. However, the student should not merely conform to expected norms, but must critically engage with the workplace norms. As contested by Campbell & Zegwaard (2011b), there is a power imbalance evident in work-integrated learning experiences with the student often being subject to the dominant norms of the workplace. On the other hand, a student empowered through explicit ethics education can draw power from the knowledge of values frameworks and the ability to use these as a lens to critique practice. Furthermore, where a student is more aware of their value position they are less likely to conform to practices that they perceive to be wrong. There is a role for

higher education institutions, who engage students in work-integrated learning programs, to ensure that students have a developed sense of their personal values framework and have considered this with respect to professional expectations, thereby equipping them to be critical agents in the formation of their professional practice. This relationship is depicted in Figure 1 (adapted from Campbell & Zegwaard, (2011a, p. 365)). A student engages with the values and practices of the workplace through an interpretive lens shaped by their histories, dispositions and personal values developed over their lifetime. The role of ethics education, therefore, becomes the ability to have students reflect upon each of these elements and develop critical moral agency so as to avoid mere conformity, but instead promote active decision making and, if necessary, transformative practices (Crain, 1985; Lovat & Toomey, 2007). Ethics education, in this sense, is not just a theme that maps across existing programs but is explicit teaching of values and critical moral agency to enable the students to identify, and constructively engage with, ethical issues in the workplace (Bowden & Smythe, 2008; Reiss, 2010). Furthermore, a work-integrated learning experience should encapsulate this entire system of moral development, reflection and dialogue.

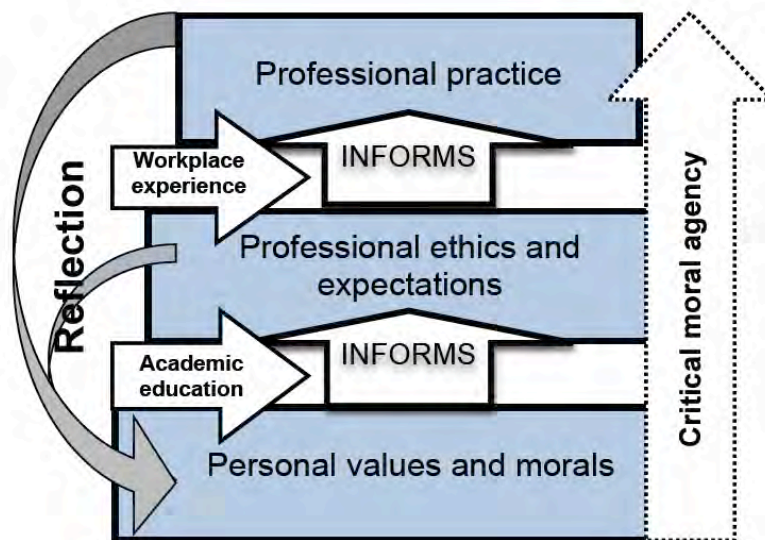


Figure 1 - The relationship between personal values and professional practice. (Adapted from Campbell & Zegwaard, 2011)

What is being argued here is that students engaging with work-integrated learning should evolve what is sometimes referred to as practical wisdom, drawing on the work of Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics* VI.5). Practical wisdom, as a focus of ethics education related to work-integrated learning, requires not only the knowledge of what is right and wrong, but a capacity to act on this knowledge. As defined by Aristotle, practical wisdom is ‘a true and reasoned state of capacity to act with regard to the things that are good or bad for [humanity].’ Its realisation requires the student to have a moral knowledge and awareness of good and bad, right and wrong. But extends this to also requiring the student to have expectations of a particular situation, ability to deliberate well and make judgments, and most importantly the capacity to act on that deliberation (Trede, 2012). That is ethics education, as described above, is not merely the education of students into the expectations of the workplace, but the development of capacities to evolve their own moral sense and understanding of self and the agency to act upon this.

Educating for moral agency

An important consideration in the argument for the value of critical moral agency through work-integrated learning is the role of education in the process. It is contested that where a practice (or behaviour) is able to be acquired by an individual then there must equally exist a process through which this is learnt, and consequently taught. This learning / teaching process does not always exist within the current paradigms of education, nor within existing frameworks of practice evident in higher education. The ‘learning’ of critical moral agency falls within the category of those types of learnings that may not be possible within existing practices. It is often argued (Bowden & Smythe, 2008; Campbell & Zegwaard, 2011b) that it is an almost impossible task to teach moral behaviour. Therefore ethics education has traditionally tended towards models which develop critical

capacities and decision-making, avoiding, to greater and lesser extents, values education. Professional ethics education should be a cornerstone in the facilitation of the exploration by students of the existing moral and value frameworks, allowing them to actively reconstruct these through reflection on (and in) the experiences of the practice setting. Furthermore, there is a role for professional ethics education to facilitate a critical engagement within cultural norms and workplace value systems facilitating the ethical transformation of the workplace, and therefore there must be an acknowledgement of the importance for engagement in discourses of power and hierarchy with respect to moral courage. Proposed here, based on the arguments of Bagnall (1998) is an approach to ethics education that he labels as 'situationalism'. Situationalism involves:

the deconstructive problematisation of modernist ethical rules, principles and codes of moral conduct. It involves the freeing of the moral impulse from the strictures of modernist moral precepts; and it involves the development of moral judgement and action to the point of a highly sophisticated expertise, informed intuitively by the wisdom of individual experience (Bagnall, 1998, p.322).

As Bagnall (1998) acknowledges, a situational ethical reasoning is best summed up as 'respect for experience', where experience is seen as the intersubjective realities that give form and value to the particular practice setting. Therefore, within approaches to ethics education, particularly with respect to its relationship to work-integrated learning programs, there is a need to develop skills within students that facilitate sensitivity to their context (such as issues of power, hierarchy, culture and position) allowing them to act in an empathetically informed manner, and with the ability to draw upon personal moralities and evolve values frameworks. It is beyond the scope of this paper to articulate exact pedagogical practices, with the intent of the proposed research to clarify and explore new approaches to the teaching of ethics, akin to Bagnall's situationalism, which extend and extrapolate upon student experiences in the workplace beyond current dominant practices with focus on the assessment and education of codes and decision-making models.

The moral experiences of students in work-integrated learning

This paper proposes the need for research into the development of critical moral agency by students through the experience of work-integrated learning. Students, whilst on work placement, situate in a rich learning environment (Billett, 2011; Eames & Cates, 2011). Whilst situated in this relevant community of practice, they will inevitably encounter, observe, and perhaps be challenged by situations that are ethical in nature affording a valuable learning experience (Campbell & Zegwaard, 2011a). Students will experience in the workplace a range of practices that extend from a variety of values frameworks, which may, or may not, compliment the personal values of the student or the espoused values of the workplace (Ayling, 2006). These experiences will further shape the students professional self, modifying the interpretive lens by which they discern the activity around them. The extent of the preparation of students to critically engage with the practice setting should have an impact upon the level of influence the shaping will have.

Literature keeps reminding us that tertiary education is expected to create work-ready graduates (DEST, 2007). Such work-readiness includes readiness to engage in workplace norms and ethical readiness to navigate around ethical issues in the workplace, and modify ones own views whilst improving the ethical practice around them. It is important to recognise that students on placement are still, despite holding personal values, in formative stages of developing their professional values and ethics, holding narrow conceptual understandings of professionalism (Grace & Trede, 2011). Unknown is to what extent students are prepared to engage in such challenges and if a preparatory curriculum, incorporating a critical reflective process, based on the ideas explored previously in this paper, would enable a greater awareness of ones own values, and would better prepare students for they workplace. However, given the rich learning environment that work-integrated learning affords, a valuable relationship between WIL and professional ethics exists, and this needs to be developed further to allow students of these programmes to be true professionals upon graduation.

It is proposed to undertake a study of students across two university settings which will examine the development of values, ethics and critical moral agency through engagement in work-integrated learning experiences. This proposed study will contribute to a broader development of curriculum approaches that better support students in the development of their ethical capacities and professional identities as part of a work-integrated learning program. For this study the overall aim 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-learning program, through both qualitative interviews and a larger quantitative survey based on Chaar, Brien and Krass' (2009) psychometric measure of moral reasoning. The aims of the study can be described through three sub-aims identified as:

To determine student's current (pre-placement) perceptions of professional ethics and personal values.
Investigate student experiences within the workplace that present with particular ethical concerns and issues.
Review changes in student perceptions of professional ethics and workplace values following completion of an embedded workplace experience.

Conclusion

As professionals, graduates are required to be autonomous in their decision making. To exercise this responsibility the graduate needs the capacities to critically interrogate the workplace and its espoused and tacit values frameworks. Furthermore the graduate must be agentic in shaping their moral frameworks and professional ethics, but to be able to do so requires educative support from the university. There is considerable need to understand what student awareness is of workplace values, what expected behaviours are of new graduates and norms of the workplace, and how we as educators best prepare students for this. Imparting students with a good understanding of identifying ethical issues and values important to engaging with such ethical issues is significant not only for the student potential success as a professional, but also for the success of that workplace.

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