Transformative Learning:

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Transformative Learning: A New Model for Business Ethics Education

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Abstract

Although many scholars and practitioners acknowledge business ethics education to be an important priority for business schools, they criticize the current approach to teaching business ethics at many schools as ineffective. This article introduces a new integrative model for teaching business ethics that integrates key elements of Bloom's Taxonomy, Fink's Taxonomy of Significant Learning, and Transformational Learning. We briefly describe the current status of business ethics education and identify nine elements of the proposed model of Transformative Learning. After explaining these nine elements, we identify propositions that business faculty may use to assess the application of Transformative Learning on business ethics education.

Keywords

Business ethics education, transformative learning, Bloom's Taxonomy, Fink's Taxonomy of Significant Learning, and Transformational Learning.

Introduction

Scholars and business professionals alike have criticized business schools for being slow to change, irrelevant in their focus, and ineffective at teaching students behavioral models that prepare them for the workplace (Ghoshal, 2005; Krehmeyer, 2007; Mintzberg, 2004; Mitroff & Swanson, 2004; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). Training tomorrow's business leaders to make decisions that benefit organizations and honor duties to their stakeholders is essential for improving the long-term profitability of business while honoring their duty to society (Solomon, 1992). Despite the compelling evidence that current practices are not effective, the status quo in business ethics education has remained largely unchanged for the past decade (Swanson & Fisher, 2011).

Swanson and Fisher (2008) state business schools deemphasize their focus on teaching ethically-based learning objectives. According to Senge (2006), business schools should teach more complex behaviorally-based skills that can prepare students to become lifelong learners. Goleman (2007) believes that developing insights about the application of business ethics concepts may show students how to relate more effectively with others. According to the Arbinger Institute (2002), students may develop an enhanced understanding of themselves and their values through an ethics-based course. In addition, students who learn to distinguish between what they know and do not know about business concepts will be more capable of assessing the application of business ethics principles (Meyer, Land, & Baillie, 2010). Teaching higher level skills to students about moral values and the consequences when businesses do not honor duties to stakeholders requires a more comprehensive and insightful approach to ethics education than simply providing basic definitions and concepts about various ethical theories (Datar, Garvin, & Cullen, 2010; Kouzes & Posner, 2008a, 2008b). Unfortunately, the predominant approach to teaching business ethics at most business schools is to attempt to teach business ethics "across the curriculum" on a piecemeal basis, rather than offering a stand-alone course on business ethics (Cavanagh, 2009; Swanson, 2004).

This article begins by introducing the status of business ethics education. It then introduces a new integrative model for teaching business ethics that goes beyond current teaching methods. This new model integrates key elements of Bloom's (1956) Taxonomy of Learning with those of Fink's behaviorally-based Model of Significant Learning, and change-oriented Transformational Learning (Mezirow, Taylor, & Associates, 2009). The model of Transformative Learning encourages a holistic approach to teaching ethics. This model also increases students' understanding of moral dilemmas while helping them to evaluate clearly their own ethical lenses and duties that those facing moral dilemmas owe to others (Badaracco, 1997).

The Current Status of Business Ethics Education

Although teaching business ethics should be a priority for every business school, less than one-third of all Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) accredited business programs offer a stand-alone course in ethics and fewer require one (Cavanagh, 2009; Swanson, 2004). Business schools that do not have a stand-alone ethics course rely on the ability of faculty to incorporate ethics topics in their courses, despite the fact "most (business) professors lack ethics training" (Ferrell & Ferrell, 2008, p. 225). Schools that adopt this across-the-curriculum approach do so under the AACSB standard that enables schools to "assume great flexibility in fashioning curricula to meet their missions and to fit with the specific circumstances

of particular programs…(and to) meet the needs of the mission of the school and the learning goals for each degree program" (AACSBa, 2012, Standard 15). According to Swanson (2004), "hundreds of professors and practitioners launched a collective effort to try to persuade the AACSB to require at least one ethics course as a condition of accreditation" (p. 43).

Swanson and Fisher (2008, 2011) suggest business school deans play a key role in determining whether business schools will emphasize the teaching of business ethics. Several scholars report that business school administrators have a responsibility to align their schools' ethical values with those promoted by their university's mission (McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2002; Weber, Gerde, & Wasieleski, 2008). In a survey of business school deans, Evans and Weiss (2008) noted "more than 80% of the CEOs, deans, and faculty agree that more emphasis should be placed on ethics education" (p. 51). Evans and Weiss (2008) also found "between 73% and 81% of the respondents (of CEOs, deans, and faculty) agree with the statement 'A concerted effort by business schools to improve the ethical awareness of students eventually will raise the ethical level of actual business practice'" (p. 51).

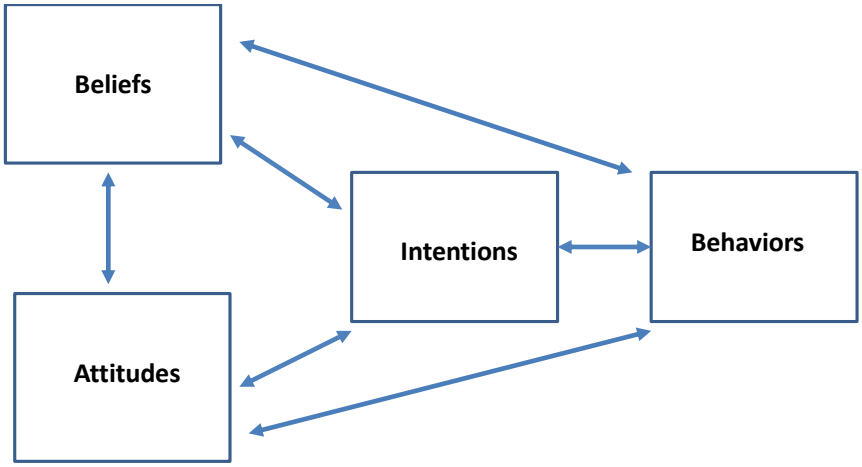
According to Swanson and Fisher (2008), two-thirds of all AACSB-accredited business schools claim to deliver ethics without requiring a stand-alone business ethics course (p. 1). This claim suggests professors from every business discipline are adequately knowledgeable about ethics to teach the application of ethical principles within their own disciplines (Swanson, 2004). Both academics and practitioners have urged campus administrators to rethink their assumptions about business ethics education (Mitroff & Swanson, 2004; Krehmeyer, 2007). It is within this context that Transformative Learning is a sound approach to teaching business ethics.

Modeling Transformative Learning: Propositions for Business Ethics

The terms "transformational" and "transformative" have described educational theory for some time (Mezirow, *et al.*, 2009) to explain the pursuit of excellence in meeting the demands of change while creating added value for organizations and individuals. We introduce Transformative Learning as an integrative model that combines essential elements of other learning approaches.

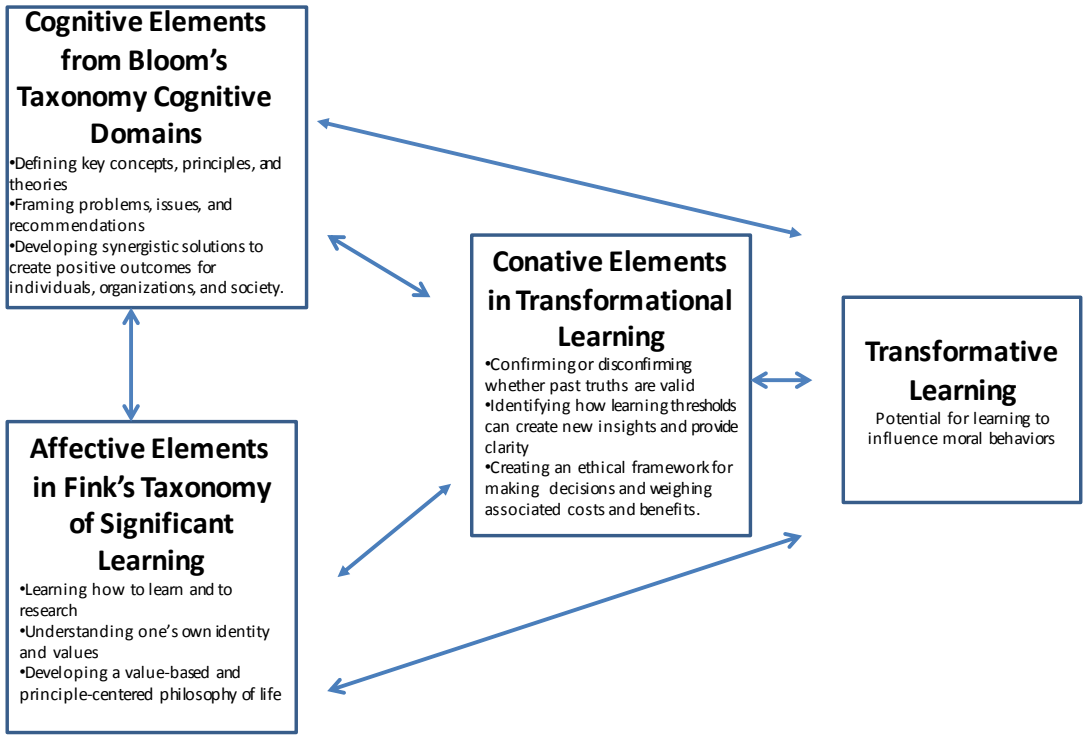
Transformative Learning involves key elements of Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning, Fink's Taxonomy of Significant Learning, and Transformational Learning. It develops how to understand and apply knowledge aimed at creating greater value for themselves, organizations, and society. Transformative Learning combines elements found in the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) develop the Theory of Reasoned Action to describe the relationships between beliefs, attitudes, intentions to act, and the actual behaviors in which people engage (Hale, Householder, & Green, 2003). According to this model, an individual's behaviors are an interrelated combination of how one thinks and feels about a concept or idea, which then promotes the intention to act that results in actual behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2009). Figure 1 shows the relationship between the factors that make up the Theory of Reasoned Action.

Figure 1. Theory of reasoned action



In applying the Theory of Reasoned Action to influencing students' behavior, the degree to which faculty influence student ethical behavior is a function of the impact of their cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions of teaching (Vallerand, Pelletier, Deshaies, Cuerrier, & Mongeau, 1992). Hence, the model of Transformative Learning includes three cognitive elements from Bloom's Taxonomy, three affective elements from Fink's Taxonomy of Significant Learning, and three conative elements from Transformational Learning. Figure 2 represents correlations that are consistent with the Theory of Reasoned Action.

Figure 2. The Transformative Learning Model



Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning

Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of learning is a well-established model for higher education. Bloom and colleagues saw this taxonomy as a vehicle for developing a common language for learning goals; a basis for understanding the meaning of educational objectives; a means for determining the congruence of objectives, activities, and assessment; and a tool for framing the possibilities for specific courses or curricula (Krathwohl, 2002, p. 212). Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) summarized the six cognitive domains of Bloom's Taxonomy in ascending order:

1. *Knowledge:* The ability to recall previously-learned materials by recalling facts, terms, basic concepts, and answers, including knowledge of terminology, categories, theories, principles, and abstractions.
2. *Comprehension:* The ability to demonstrate an understanding of facts and ideas by organizing, comparing, translating, interpreting, giving descriptions, and stating main ideas.
3. *Application:* The ability to solve problems to new situations by applying acquired knowledge, facts, techniques, and rules in a different way.
4. *Analysis:* The ability to examine and break information into parts by identifying motives or causes, evaluating relationships and organizing principles, and making inferences or finding evidence to support generalizations.
5. *Synthesis:* The ability to compile information and elements in a new pattern to propose alternative solutions.
6. *Evaluation:* The ability to present and defend opinions by making judgments about information, the validity of ideas, or quality of work based upon a set of criteria.

Notwithstanding the fact that understanding key definitions and terms is a valid foundation for learning, scholars have been critical of how Bloom's Taxonomy consists primarily with learning facts and concepts, rather than how to think reflectively about them (Wineburg & Schneider, 2009). Although basic knowledge is an appropriate and "fundamentally sound concept," Wineburg and Schneider (2009) note "knowledge possessed does not mean knowledge deployed" (pp. 57-58). It is the application of knowledge that is at the heart of both great education (Piper, 1993b) and successful business performance (Pfeffer, 1998).

Apparently, faculty claim to require students to achieve the upper level skills of Bloom's Taxonomy, but struggle to do more than ask students to learn facts and to demonstrate their ability to recall definitions, concepts, and theories. For example, in a survey of 140 university faculty by Paul, Elder, and Bartell (1997), nearly 80% of teachers say they value and do things in their classrooms to promote critical thinking skills, but only 19% actually were able to give a clear explanation of what constituted critical thinking. Moreover, only 8% were able to identify important criteria and standards by which they evaluate the quality of their students' thinking.

Below are three of the nine elements of the Transformative Learning model that relies heavily on Bloom's Taxonomy:

> *Element One:* Defining Key Concepts, Principles, and Theories. Business ethics incorporates multiple theories and perspectives about duties, social and economic outcomes, freedoms, and justice. Defining these concepts requires familiarity with a great

deal of information (Brady, 1999; Hosmer, 2010). Ethical theories, as well as theories about moral values, are foundational to personal, organizational, and societal decision making (Solomon, 1992). As part of Transformative Learning, correct understanding of basic concepts and knowledge is vital.

Element Two: Framing Problems, Issues, and Recommendations. Understanding the consequences of decisions for others and formulating recommendations for improved decision making are essential to understanding ethics, and identifying and assessing ethical dilemmas (Badaracco, 1997, 2002).

Element Three: Developing Synergistic Solutions to Create Positive Outcomes for Individuals, Organizations, and Society. Covey (2011) notes that creating such solutions is dependent upon the ability to consider creative options that are not immediately apparent. Ethics education requires students to understand and apply ethical and moral concepts and to propose creative, synergistic, positive solutions corresponds to these higher level cognitive skills and is critical to Transformative Learning.

The importance of these three cognitive elements suggests that faculty need to deliver ethics education holistically. Although standard business ethics textbooks adequately summarize these cognitive elements of business ethics education (Carroll & Buchholtz, 2012; Trevino & Nelson, 2010), other business textbooks are often limited in their explanations of ethical issues and theory. Therefore, faculty members from other disciplines who teach ethics "across the curriculum" are unlikely to understand this limitation.

Additionally, business faculty who teach courses in Accounting, Economics, Statistics, and Finance, which tend to have "right and wrong answers," will emphasize teaching concepts and ideas that are more cognitive and analytical in their focus (Datar, et al., 2010; Mintzberg, 2004). With regard to student perceptions, the prediction is that students who take a stand-alone ethics course will tend to adopt the attitude of their professors in the rating of learning objectives (McCain, 2005). Therefore, we propose the following:

P_{1a}: Faculty in schools that do not require a stand-alone ethics course will rate learning objectives aimed at defining concepts, principles, and theories as sufficient for delivering ethics education.

P_{1b}: Faculty in schools that require a stand-alone ethics course will rate learning objectives aimed at defining concepts, principles, and theory as necessary but not sufficient for delivering ethics education.

P_{1c}: Faculty who teach Accounting, Economics, Statistics, and Finance will rate learning objectives aimed at defining concepts, principles, and theories as sufficient for delivering ethics education.

P_{1d}: Students in schools that do not require a stand-alone ethics course will rate learning objectives aimed at defining concepts, principles, and theories as sufficient for delivering ethics education.

P_{1e}: Students in schools that require a stand-alone ethics course will rate learning objectives aimed at defining concepts, principles, and theory as necessary but not sufficient for delivering ethics education.

Fink's Taxonomy of Significant Learning

Fink's Taxonomy of Significant Learning integrates the cognitive dimensions of Bloom's Taxonomy with attitudes and dimensions in the affective domain (Fink, 2003). Piper (1993b) emphasizes "ethics is as much an attitude as it is a set of skills and knowledge" (p. 119). The three elements from Fink's Taxonomy included in the Transformative Learning model can facilitate the creation of important learning experiences, assist students to become more self-aware (Caldwell, 2009), teach students key skills associated with how to learn (Fink, 2003), and enable students to develop critical attitudes about ethical and moral conduct (Piper, 1993b, p. 119).

These learning outcomes can, in turn, enable students to develop personal insights into their own identities and values. Accordingly, Levine, Fallahi, Nicoll-Senft, Tessier, Watson, and Wood (2008) explain that Fink's model "goes beyond rote knowledge, or even application" (p. 247). Ultimately, this affective approach to student learning can encourage students to reflect on how they make decisions, be responsible for their own learning, and become owners and partners in their learning process (Fink & Fink, 2009; Piper 1993b). Fink's Taxonomy is made up of six categories of learning that are integrated and interactive, rather than hierarchical. Fink (2007, pp. 13-14) described them as follows.

1. *Foundational Knowledge:* This knowledge constitutes the facts, principles, relationships, and theories that students must learn and remember.
2. *Application:* This category incorporates the use of key information to accomplish a desired outcome, solve a problem, make a decision, or utilize creative thinking for an intended purpose.
3. *Integration:* Students are given the opportunity to identify the similarities or interactions between ideas, events, theories, and subject matter.
4. *Human Dimension:* This category is about the process of learning about oneself and/or how to interact with others.
5. *Caring:* Caring encompasses changing one's feelings, opinions, values, or interests in relation to a subject.
6. *Learning How to Learn:* This category includes helping students to understand how to keep on learning about a subject after they have completed a course.

Fink (2003) acknowledged that his model incorporated cognitive elements of Bloom's model but introduced affective elements that he noted were critically important in the learning process. Fink (2003) proposed that higher order learning incorporated an affective process that linked greater self-awareness, a commitment to understanding the importance of values, and the impact of learning in creating connection with others. The following are the three elements of Transformative Learning that derived from Fink's Taxonomy.

> *Element Four:* Learning How to Learn and Research. Teaching students to learn how to learn, how to research key ideas, and to communicate what they have learned are fundamental to Fink's model. This includes the ability to seek out insights independently, rather than simply relying upon the information that makes up a course (Fink, 2003).

Element Five: Understanding One's Own Identity and Values. The importance of understanding one's values and articulating a personal identity is essential to developing a sound ethical perspective (Trevino & Nelson, 2010). Ideally, this leads to a clearly articulated personal identity, which enhances the capacity for high achievement and a sense of purpose toward others in society.

Element Six: Developing a Value-Based and Principle-Centered Philosophy of Life. This is the element in Fink's taxonomy that goes directly to the ability to creating moral meaning and coherence in one's life. Covey (1992, 2003, 2004, 2011) repeatedly identified the importance of a value-based and principle-centered personal philosophy as a foundation for discovering one's voice and for honoring one's personal moral code or conscience.

These three elements of Transformative Learning go to the importance of the affective domain in student learning and suggest that business faculty members have the obligation to deliver learning experiences that require students to learn to learn, reflect upon their values, and develop a philosophy of life that has meaning to them and their relationship with others. Scholars have noted that many business faculty tend to focus narrowly on definitions in the cognitive realm (Orlich, Harder, Callahan, Trevisan, & Brown, 2012). Because of such influences, business faculty at schools with a required ethics course will be more attuned to the affective elements of learning. Hence, faculty members rate affective learning objectives associated with Transformative Learning higher than faculty at schools that teach ethics across the curriculum.

Management faculty will value the behavioral and affective aspects of teaching more than faculty who teach more analytical coursework (Mintzberg, 2004). Students who have not taken a stand-alone ethics course are less likely to be exposed to the affective elements of ethics in a significant way (Fallahi, Levine, Nicoll-Senft, Tesser, Watson, & Wood, 2009). On the whole, faculty are not as likely to teach classes that emphasize affective learning outcomes. Consequently, students in business schools that deliver ethics across the curriculum will be less likely to value the importance of affective learning objectives. Consistent with these affective elements, we propose the following.

P_{2a}: Faculty in schools that do not offer a stand-alone ethics course will rate learning objectives associated with Fink's Taxonomy lower than faculty in schools that offer such a course.

P_{2b}: Faculty in schools that offer a stand-alone ethics course will rate learning objectives associated with Fink's Taxonomy higher than faculty in schools that offer such a course.

P_{2c}: Management faculty will rate learning objectives associated with Fink's Taxonomy higher than faculty in who teach Accounting, Economics, Statistics, and Finance courses.

P_{2d}: Faculty who teach ethics courses will rate learning objectives associated Fink's Taxonomy higher than other faculty.

P_{2e}: Faculty who have published in ethics journals will rate learning objectives associated Fink's Taxonomy higher than other faculty.

P_{2f}: Students in schools that require a stand-alone ethics course will rate learning objectives associated Fink's Taxonomy higher than students in schools that do not require such a course.

Transformational Learning

Transformational Learning is a positive and growth-oriented learning model (Merriam, 2004) that integrates the cognitive with the affective in the pursuit of personal and organizational excellence (Mezirow, 2000). This transformational view places individual learning within an organizational context--an important consideration for business students. Transformational change typically results from critical reflection after dealing with a dilemma or significant emotional event (Mead & Gray, 2010). Such an event may require a person reconsider previous paradigms and assumptions and modify his or her mental models (Boyd & Myers, 1988).

In terms of Transformational Learning, organizational leaders need to strive to confirm or disconfirm what is and is not true (Schein, 2010; Weick, 2009). Pfeffer (1998) explained that leaders have the obligation to confirm the validity of conventional wisdom by adopting an evidence-based approach for governing their organizations (cf., Pfeffer & Sutton, 1999, 2006). It is within an organizational context that business students will face many moral choices that ultimately have an impact on society. Accordingly, students are more likely to change their behaviors if the faculty who teach them about ethical concepts understand the complex practical relationships between cognitive, affective, and conative elements and individual behavior. Scholars who have written about Transformational Learning suggest that it is the following:

1. Voluntary and self-directed, once learners have developed the foundations skills to engage in learning about a particular subject area (Knowles, 1975, 1980).
2. Practical and problem-oriented in addressing issues that have application in the learner's life (Cranton, 2006).
3. Action-oriented in motivating the learner to follow a course of conduct that requires personal growth (Mezirow, 1991).
4. Participative and collaborative and involving shared experiences (Cranton, 2006).

These qualities mesh with the aspect of intentionality that distinguishes Transformational Learning from the cognitive and affective (Cranton, 2006, p. 1). Transformative Learning seeks to optimize the ability of individuals in organizations to create long-term value while honoring duties owed to stakeholders while pursuing continuous improvement (Caldwell, Hayes, & Long, 2010).

The following are the three conative elements of Transformative Learning for the proposed model of Transformational Learning.

Element Seven: Confirming or Disconfirming whether Past Truths are Valid. The capability to think deeply about issues, to examine whether assumptions are correct, and to discern their applicability within specific conditions are practical skills that are critical for personal growth (Arbinger Institute, 2002) and business success (Pfeffer, 1998; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006).

Element Eight: Identifying How Learning Thresholds can Create Learning Insights and Provide Clarity. The constant testing of assumptions challenges a threshold view of reality and provides a basis for adopting new insights that add value. This ability is a fundamental element of personal growth and organizational innovation and meaning (Meyer, Land, & Baillie, 2010; Novak & Gowin, 1984).

Element Nine: Creating an Ethical Framework for Making Decisions and Weighing their Costs and Benefits. The responsibility to achieve superior outcomes involves weighing costs and benefits associated with organizational goals that balance the creation of long-term financial success with other important social considerations (Hosmer, 2010: Schein, 2010; Swanson, 1999).

Faculty in schools that teach business ethics across the curriculum will not have the benefit of in-depth training in individual and organizational ethics possessed by faculty in schools that require a stand-alone ethics course. Therefore, faculty from schools that teach ethics across the curriculum will be more likely to rate the importance of the complex conative elements of ethics lower than other faculty. Faculty members from schools that teach ethics across the curriculum will not rate such elements highly since no such faculty will be on hand at their schools.

Management faculty who are more likely to be familiar with the importance of conative learning concepts because of their training in those concepts will be more likely to give importance to understanding factors associated with laying the foundation for organizational and individual change (Datar, et al., 2010) and related learning objectives. The following propositions are based upon these elements of Transformative Learning:

P_{3a}: Faculty in schools that do not require stand-alone ethics courses will rate conative learning objectives lower than faculty from schools that require such a course.

P_{3b}: Faculty in schools that require a stand-alone ethics course will rate conative learning objectives higher than faculty from schools that do not require such a course.

P_{3c}: Faculty who teach Management courses will rate learning objectives associated with Transformational Learning higher than faculty who teach Accounting, Finance, Economics, and Statistics.

P_{3d}: Faculty who teach ethics will rate learning objectives associated with Transformational Learning higher than all other faculty.

P_{3e}: Faculty who have published academic in ethics journals will rate learning objectives associated with Transformational Learning higher than all other faculty.

P_{3f}: Students from schools that require a stand-alone ethics course will rate learning objectives associated with Transformational Learning higher than students in schools that do not require such courses.

Contributions and Implications for Further Research

This article has introduced a model that potentially can inform and aim how business ethics education can create long-term value for organizations and their stakeholders. This approach makes four main contributions to the literature.

1. It provides an integrative model for teaching ethics that incorporates key elements of well-accepted learning theories and is consistent with effective learning practices. The model of Transformative Learning in context with the Theory of Reasoned Action provides a logical connection between cognitive, affective, and conative elements that impact human behavior. Transformative Learning is both internally logically sound and consistent with behavioral theory.
2. Our new perspective about teaching business ethics lends additional credence to the view that business ethics education is likely to be ineffective within a context that lacks a stand-alone ethics course in the curriculum.
3. Empirical research can test the propositions provided that are related to Transformative Learning. These propositions are an opportunity to assess the ultimate value of Transformative Learning in having an impact on student attitudes, knowledge of ethical issues, and appreciation for the importance of moral choices in business decision making.
4. In context with research that has suggested improvement in business ethics education, this article adds to that literature and encourages scholars and administrators to examine more closely the importance of reassessing business ethics education in the modern business school.

Furthering research may substantiate the vital role ethics experts can play in business schools, not only in teaching an ethics course but also in assisting other faculty to understand how to deliver ethics effectively in their courses. Additional research also may indicate that efforts to garner support for ethics learning objectives are likely to fall short, absent a required ethics course in the curriculum. If student motivation to behave ethically is greater in business schools that require an ethics course and that apply Transformative Learning concepts within the business classroom, the potential benefit from reconsidering current business ethics education models is worth careful evaluation.

Conclusion

At a time when the world's economy continues to feel the repercussions of ethical missteps in many sectors, the need for sound business ethics education is more valuable than ever. Improving the quality of business ethics education is no guarantee that future leaders will act ethically, but there is no longer any uncertainty about the potential consequences of dishonesty and unethical practices in today's business world. Nearly twenty years ago, Harvard scholar Thomas Piper (1993a) observed that placing leadership, ethics, and corporate responsibility at the center of management education is "a call for a deeper sense of purpose, a broader sense of responsibility and accountability, a more proactive spirit, and a more encompassing set of questions, rigorously reasoned" (p. 7) about ethical conduct in business and education. Great teaching is far more than the dissemination of information. Transformative Learning is a learning model that reminds business faculty, administrators, and accrediting bodies that their responsibilities extend far beyond the current standards for teaching ethics which are inadequate to address today's demands and tomorrow's hopes.

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Discussion Questions

1. How does this model of transformative learning change how faculty members prepare for teaching business ethics principles?

2. How can adding affective and transformational learning elements enable faculty members to encourage students to think about the application of ethical principles and values?

3. Why might business school deans and faculty members be reluctant to create stand-alone business ethics courses as required classes in business school curricula?

4. How can the propositions presented in this paper be applied by faculty members interested in helping their students to do a better job of understanding how they can honor ethical duties in tomorrow's business world?

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