



“Ignorance was bliss, now I’m not ignorant and that is far more difficult”

Transdisciplinary learning and reflexivity in responsible management education

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Abstract

Purpose – The collapse of world economic systems brought the interconnectedness between business and global events sharply into focus. As Starkey points out: “leading business schools need to overcome their fascination with a particular form of finance and economics [...] to broaden their intellectual horizons [...] (and to) look at the lessons of history and other disciplines”. The purpose of this paper is to provide evidence from three years of research on the Aston MBA suggesting that an emphasis on developing capabilities within a far broader, connected and reflexive business curriculum is what business students and practitioners now recognise as an essential way forward for responsible management education.

Design/methodology/approach – This research paper examines the reflective accounts of 300 MBA students undertaking a transdisciplinary Business Ethics, Responsibility and Sustainability core module.

Findings – As Klein argues, transdisciplinarity is simultaneously an attitude and a form of action. The student reflections provide powerful discourses of individual learning and report a range of outcomes from finding “the vocabulary or the confidence” to raise issues to acting as “change agents” in the workplace.

Originality/value – As responsibility and sustainability requires learners, researchers and educators to engage with real world complexity, uncertainty and risk, conventional disciplinary study, especially within business, often proves inadequate and partial. This paper demonstrates that creative and exploratory frames need to be developed to facilitate the development of more connected knowledge – informed by multiple stakeholders, able to contribute heterogeneous skills, perspectives and expertise.

Keywords United Kingdom, Transdisciplinarity reflection, Learning, Ethics, Sustainability, Responsible management education

Paper type Research paper

The context of business and business schools

In the aftermath of the recent banking crisis, the media were quick to blame business schools with headlines such as “Did poor teaching lead to crash? – Business Academics are accused of ignoring social and political questions” (*Times Higher Education*, 2005). This is not new. One fact that emerged after previous financial scandals was that most of the senior executives involved at Enron, Arthur Anderson and World Com had MBAs from top business schools. In 2003, a survey of MBA students asked for definitions



of business ethics at top US schools and all described ethics in market terms. In 2008, the same survey found that students had a broader view of business responsibilities but maximising shareholder value was still far ahead, followed by customer satisfaction. The environment was a very low priority and the respondents saw the main benefit of meeting social responsibilities as reputation and image (The Aspen Institute, 2008). Thus, issues of ethics, social responsibility and sustainability activities were perceived more as impression management or “green wash”. This may not be surprising since ethics and sustainability was still an optional extra in many of the schools surveyed. It is what Starkey (2008) referred to as a “fascination with a particular form of finance and economics” that sees the context of many business programmes explaining all activities and phenomena in terms of the market which in turn reinforces beliefs in both self-interest and the power of extrinsic incentives.

The notion of self-interest is at the core of the ideas which have dominance in economic discourse, “This view of man has been a persistent one in economic models and the nature of economic theory seems to have been much influenced by this basic premise” (Sen, 1987). Social responsibilities and sustainability are also normally considered as “externalities” which creates a disconnect between the business and the social and environmental issues. As Davis (2005) contends in a rejoinder to Friedman’s (1970) assertions (that there is one and only one social responsibility of business – to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits), even the “business case” for social responsibility and sustainability (which centres on considerations of reputation and risk) does not support this approach. Davis (2005, p. 69) writes:

In all such cases billions of dollars of shareholder value have been put at stake as the result of social issues that ultimately feed into the fundamental drivers of corporate performance. In many instances a “business of business” outlook has blinded companies to outcomes (or shifts in their implicit social contract) which often could have been anticipated.

It is the dominance of markets and the market metaphor that also pervade assumptions and language in many business programmes. As Eccles and Nohria (1992) contend, “The way people talk about the world has everything to do with the way the world is ultimately understood and acted in”. These assumptions and language become “self-fulfilling prophecies” in that they become taken for granted and normatively valued and therefore create conditions which make them come true (Ferraro *et al.*, 2005). The question of language is critical to this debate; we have so many terms that appear to describe the same thing – or do they? Although corporate social responsibility (“CSR” and its synonyms) or sustainability are gaining dominance as the terms used to describe this area, many writers prefer to talk about the ideas underpinning them. For example, all definitions of sustainable development include ideas of continuance and long-term perspectives, such as the one often quoted from the Brundtland Commission Report (UN, 1987), “Meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. The problem with this definition, like many others, is that critics often view this term as an oxymoron because economic development, particularly when interpreted as continued and continual growth, conflicts with the needs of living within the carrying capacity of the planet’s ecological systems (Blewitt, 2008). Another term used (mainly in the USA and implies agency) is corporate citizenship. Whilst the terms differ and the emphasis varies, the key point is that they are all concerned with social, economic and environmental considerations.

One useful and often-repeated definition of CSR is “business decision-making linked to ethical values, compliance with legal requirements, and respect for people, communities, and the environment” (Business for Social Responsibility, 2006). This definition positions CSR firmly in the context of ethical values but this is sometimes interpreted as being confined to individuals, whereas it is important that such values should also fully extend to organisations in the worlds of business and management. As with all emerging fields, there is a danger that the teaching of CSR and sustainability does not draw sufficiently on the context of the broader “business ethics”, environmental and social justice movements that have always promoted the obligation for behaviour to be guided by ethical principles and values that are sensitive to the need to protect our failing ecosystems. Interestingly, the MBA survey referred to earlier (The Aspen Institute, 2008) also reports that most students reported that they felt likely to encounter conflict between personal values and what they are asked to do in business, yet the majority of respondents did not feel that their MBA programme prepared them for this. This may not be that surprising because although values (defined as, a small number of core ideas or cognitions present in every group or society about desirable end states, Rokeach, 1973) and value-led management (an approach to align corporate values with management practice) has gained popularity in organisational discourse and practice, the degree of fit between individual values and organisational culture (and its role in shaping the perception of workplace values) is rarely considered. Where values-based management aligns corporate values that are predominantly maximising shareholder value with perceived employee values, many organisational processes include this in reward and recognition systems. For example, promoting careerist behaviours of individual promotion and impression management could militate against behaviours required by values promoting sustainability and social responsibility such as transparency and collaboration.

In addition, although social responsibility and sustainability are not new concepts, the expectation for businesses to provide visible evidence that they are behaving ethically is increasing. In surveys of graduate expectations of potential employers, an alignment of personal and organisational values has been rising in importance for many respondents. A UK HEA (2007) survey found that respondents “considered the social and environmental ethics of an employer before making a career choice”. This trend also mirrors some of the changes in consumer behaviour and growing public awareness of social responsibility and sustainability issues. However, CSR and sustainability are often positioned in the marketing or public relations/communication departments of organisations which may reflect the way they are perceived and business schools can reinforce this approach by couching social responsibility and sustainability purely in the context of the business case and “competitiveness” or “reputation”. The emergence of the UN Principles of Responsible Management Education (UNPRME, 2007, www.unprme.org), set up under the umbrella of the UN Global Compact, aims to “inspire and champion responsible management education, research and thought leadership globally”. The PRME initiative provides the opportunity to place these issues at the heart of business education and will be explored further in this paper.

The study

In examining the challenges for education in this area, we need to not just respond to the adverse publicity and critique the situation. As Gentiles (2009) contends, it is not sufficient to “blame a few bad apples” and run a “school for scandal” in the classroom

but change little. If we are to enable students as future business leaders and managers, we need to prepare them for the complex ethical dilemmas and difficult choices they will encounter. This involves not just reviewing the content of such programmes but the approach and philosophies that drive them and “to broaden the intellectual horizons” (Starkey, 2008). Whatever titles and definitions are used to describe the issues, some of the key questions to be addressed include:

- What is the approach and philosophy behind the teaching and what is included?
- Is it taught from one discipline or one perspective or is it multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary in nature?
- Are ethical principles included at the heart of business programmes or is it on the periphery?
- To what extent are personal values explored and are students encouraged to reflect on their learning and experiences?

This paper presents evidence from the reflections of 300 MBA students on their experience of taking part in an ethics module that is core to their programme. It adopts a transdisciplinary approach and is taught by staff of different disciplines drawn from within and outside the business school. It was clear from the outset of the module that it would need a different approach and mode of learning – learning that involves emotion and not just rational thinking and that promotes reflexivity. The module encourages students to wrestle seriously with ethical quandaries, difficult disagreeable tradeoffs between efficiency and justice and moral contradictions encountered in everyday life. It uses experiential learning to make students aware of the ethical, social and environmental dimensions of the business-making process and enable students to understand the ethical components of managerial decision-making. Students are supported in developing skills of critical thinking, analysis and reflection and teaching methods are highly interactive. Students critically analyse contemporary case studies and ethical dilemmas and apply their knowledge of theories, models, ethical frameworks and concepts to local and global issues. They also discuss live case studies with business practitioners and on a metacognitive level this invariably entails engaging with the intellectual and practical imperatives of transdisciplinarity and reflexive practice.

On transdisciplinarity

The terms multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary are frequently used in academic and professional discourses. Although sometimes their meanings are defined quite tightly there is still, occasionally, a certain looseness in how the concepts are applied in practice. However, when studying, discussing or practicing business ethics, social responsibility and sustainability, whether in the workplace or the academy, what is clearly and immediately evident is that the concepts, perspectives and actions involved transgress disciplinary and professional boundaries. It is not possible, or even desirable, to contain ethical and sustainability interventions and practices without harming the capacity to make connections, to perceive the world holistically and to recognise that human behaviour contaminates all manner of fields and socio-economic dimensions. As Nicolescu (2002) has written in her *Manifesto of Transdisciplinarity*, transdisciplinarity concerns that which is between, across and beyond disciplines. Its principal goal is a fuller understanding of the contemporary world, one of the

imperatives of which must involve exploring a putative unity of knowledge and a new art of living and working. Key to this is engaging with complexity and connectedness, shifting attention away from mechanistic root metaphors to those that profoundly and sensitively embrace ecological ones (Capra, 1996, 2002; Bowers, 1995, 2001). With this literally in mind (Bateson, 1972) socio-economic and other practices that respect the ecological integrity of planetary ecosystems will have a greater opportunity of taking hold in the committees and boardrooms of business, government and higher education. A wide variety of thinkers operating within or influential in the field of education for sustainable development have consistently promoted a bio-systems-orientated episteme and ontology (Varela and Maturana, 1998; Varela, 1999; Sterling, 2004). Such an approach works towards realising a coherence through linking, or rather articulating, as in the articulation of one thing with another to produce a new unity, what may be marginal to one or indeed many disciplines and professional perspectives. The French sociologist Edgar Morin has noted that transdisciplinarity actualizes the notion that the whole is greater than the sum of its individual parts and that knowledge and experience, whether it be within science or business, always needs to be contextualised in order to be properly understood. For Morin, links can be created through concepts which he termed “opérateurs de reliance” or “linking operators” (quoted in Ramadier, 2004, p. 427). These new combinations or unties often require and motivate new thoughts, actions and processes of intellectual apprehension. For the Chilean economist Manfred Max Neef, whose work on human scale development has been seminal to many debates around sustainable development, transdisciplinarity offers considerable opportunities for reflection, reflexivity and research. He writes (Max Neef, 2004, pp. 14-15):

If I were asked to define our times, in few words, I would say that we have reached a point in our evolution as human beings, in which we know very much, but understand very little. It goes without saying (evidences are clear) that linear logic and reductionism have contributed to our reaching unsuspected levels of knowledge. The knowing has grown exponentially, but only now we begin to suspect that may not be sufficient, not for quantitative reasons, but for qualitative reasons. Knowledge is only one of the roads, only one side of the coin. The other road, the other side of the coin, is that of understanding.

Transdisciplinary understanding also marries closely with Portwood's (2000) notion of the learned worker being one who can exercise the capabilities of intellectual scepticism and focused intelligence. Indeed, professional development, or work based learning, may have its roots in transdisciplinarity. It is grounded in a range of professional, academic and experiential communities of practice and uses tools that interpellate knowledge in a multi dimensional manner that is frequently situated in different organisational and professional contexts. As Gibbs and Costley (2006, p. 346), “the primary concern of WBL [work based learning] is with application rather than being theory led. The theory and reflection upon self in situ thus follows the practice”. Thus, reflection is a critical factor in this form of work/professional learning as it is for transdisciplinarity and education for sustainability more broadly, but it must go further. It must go beyond the personal, personalised and often depoliticised articulation of the reflective practitioner (Schon, 1983) and the many disciplinary frameworks characterising university study. Schön focuses on individualised professional learning that is deeply rooted in organisational and business aims, proclivities and cultures. A critical, self-confronting reflexive approach to the learning undertaken in the field of business ethics inevitably, and necessarily, cannot be contained with a “business as usual” approach to business

education where the “bottom line” and neo-liberalist assumptions regarding wealth creation, economic growth and efficiency dominate. Only through engaging with contestations that have developed beyond the logic of the cash nexus will the reflective practitioner have a chance of becoming a critically reflexive one (Foster *et al.*, 2010). Thus, by its very nature, and indeed a sign of its success as a site of critical reflection, this module often elicited personal, political and economic challenges to students’ pre-given assumptions and value frames.

On reflexivity

Consequently, going further means a deep intellectual and practical engagement that is consciously and self-consciously reflexive. For Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992) modernity, together with all its consequent natural, environmental and anthropogenic risks, inevitably nurtures reflexivity as a defining part of modern life. Social practices are constantly being scrutinised and reshaped as a result of new information about the effects and consequences of those very practices. “What is characteristic of modernity” writes Giddens (1991, p. 39), “is not an embracing of the new for its own sake, but the presumption of wholesale reflexivity which of course includes reflection upon the nature of reflection itself”. For Beck (1992, 1996), reflexivity means self-confrontation, self-criticism and self-transformation, thereby confronting the risk society with a new modality he characterises as “reflexive modernization”. However, in drilling down into the meaning and development of reflexivity, Holland (1999) argues that transdisciplinarity is itself a form of reflexivity for it enables practitioners to disinter the underlying assumptions on which arguments, disciplines and indeed whole paradigms rest. Such disinterring facilitates critique of those metaphors, thought styles, cosmologies, rules, rituals, mechanisms, intuitive strategies and meaning schemes that filter out inconvenient considerations and possibilities. For Holland (1999, p. 472), reflexivity is an “inalienable human capacity” that can itself be categorised in a number of different ways and at a number of different levels. The highest level of reflexivity regards disciplinary and professional paradigms as human constructs, potential obstacles to enlightenment, and entrapped by a blinkered ideological vision. This higher form of reflexivity is therefore, of necessity, uncompromisingly radical. Holland (1999, p. 476) writes:

This is transdisciplinary reflexivity. Thus, the kind of enlightenment we seek at the end of the pathway to radical reflexivity is not simply another paradigm; it is a way of handling and transcending the interminable debates which have laid down disciplinary and paradigm boundaries. [...] It invites re-entry into the epistemological and sectional complexities of our human condition to intervene, “knowingly” according to our ethical priorities.

All this can be experienced as deeply troubling and uncomfortable by both academics, students and professionals, for traditional and expected certainties can quite easily be overturned. Reflexivity places the emphasis not so much on what is known but how we think we know (Pillow, 2003). It is part of that deconstructive turn whereby our claims to knowledge, that is how we think we know what we know, is contested and contestable. This is the perennial challenge of reflexive learning and to recognise and live this in one’s academic or professional practice is to perceive knowledge and understanding as no longer innocent. As Bourdieu (1990, p. 21) writes in *The Logic of Practice*, social scientific analysis, particularly when exploring forms of classification, needs to objectify “the objectivity that runs through the supposed site of subjectivity” that is social categories of thought, perceptions, unthought principles and representations of the “objective world”.

Reflexivity, and the accretion of reflexive knowledge, requires a degree of autonomy as well as a perspective that is neither distant nor abstracted from contextual realities nor completely focused on real world practical issues and problems that demand uncontextualised solutions. Given this, Bourdieu links epistemology to questions of power and the generation of a reflexive knowledge that can only flourish in a cultural space not totally dominated by hegemonic interests and practices such as those often associated with politics and business. The reflexive practitioner needs space to think. S/he needs to inhabit an intellectual field that values reflexivity, autonomy and critique. In such an environment, reflexivity may take the form of a metaliteracy that is able to transcend restricted practical knowledge without denying the ontological reality of being in the world (Schirator and Webb, 2003). As Klein (2004) writes, transdisciplinarity is simultaneously an attitude and a form of action. The university has traditionally been such a space although it has not always been characterised by an institutionalized reflexivity and where this does exist is likely to be continually challenged by those hegemonic powers and conventional wisdoms referenced above.

On reflective learning

Reflective learning is the process of internally examining and exploring an issue of concern, triggered by an experience, which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self, and which results in a changed conceptual perspective (Boyd and Fales, 1983). Moon (2004) notes that reflection is involved in some forms of learning and not in others. It appears and develops in intensity as learning moves along the continuum from a surface concern to remember the facts to a deeper approach to make sense of what they mean. For Moon, learning may be conceived as consisting of a sequence of stages running from a superficial noticing through to working with meaning and finally to transformative learning relating very closely to the SOLO taxonomy (structure of learning outcomes) outlined by Biggs and Collis (1982) in their work on the evaluation of learning. "In the latter stage", Moon (2004, p. 85) writes "the learner is willing extensively to modify her cognitive structure and is able to evaluate the sources of her knowledge and her process of learning".

Scanlon and Chernomas (1997) offer a three-stage model of the processes involved in reflective learning. The first stage of reflection is awareness; this might be stimulated by some uncomfortable thoughts or feelings or positive thoughts or feelings about a learning situation or event. Without such awareness, reflection cannot occur. In this study, students are in the second stage, where the individual critically analyses the situation, bringing to bear their relevant knowledge and experiences as well as the application of new knowledge resulting from the analysis process. This stage should involve critical thinking and evaluation, and self-examination with accompanying growing self-awareness. The third and final stage involves the development of a new perspective based upon one's critical analysis and the application of new knowledge to the (learning) situation under reflection. It is at the second and third stages where reflection may graduate into a form of critical reflexivity. It is here where ethical challenges, self-confrontations, ideological contestations and alternative practices may be interrogated and explored. As the critical theorist Kompridis (2005, p. 332) writes:

Critique does not aim at truth but at the reflective disclosure of possibility, [. . .] the genuine possibility that things might be otherwise than they are.

In this study, students have been encouraged to develop their awareness through examination of their own personal values and use these to critically analyse their previous experiences and current challenges. These are important stages in reflection and are crucial to the final stage of application. Awareness and analysis provide insights but if students are to move beyond this, they need to use this knowledge to initiate changes.

UN Principles of Responsible Management Education

The PRME are intended to serve as guidelines for management education providers to better prepare current and future organisational leaders in their dual roles as economic developer and socio-environmental steward. The PRME are aimed at changing some of the traditional mindsets that have dominated business and management education for almost a century (Rasche and Kell, 2010). This provides academics working in this area an opportunity to use their agency through membership of an external organisation to redirect the strategy of their institution. The first Global Forum for the UN Global Principles Responsible Management Education in December 2008 (attended by 84 universities) looked at moving the principles into action. One of the key issues discussed at the forum was the extent to which PRME could be effective, especially since it is not planned to incorporate it into accreditation processes. This could be seen as a strength because a “light touch” may encourage more deans to participate; yet without the framework of accreditation, some fear that it will not have priority. Business schools that are signatories to the principles are required to report annually on their progress within two years of joining and the first group of schools has now reported. The outcomes of this were reported at the second UNPRME Global Forum in June 2010 that had 215 delegates from 37 countries. Over 300 business schools from 62 countries now endorse PRME, which in just over two years is very encouraging. Yet with more than 12,000 business degree granting institutions worldwide, there is a way to go. PRME aspires to the goal of 1,000 PRME schools by 2015.

Data analysis

The study comprises of 300 reflections of MBA students completing a Business Ethics, Responsibility and Sustainability module. The students come from over 30 countries with very different legal, social, cultural, philosophical (and theological) traditions. The study explores the impact that the module has had on the students approach to issues of ethics, social responsibility and sustainability. As part of the assessment for the module, the students reflect on their own organisational experience in discussing the themes, topics and issues raised as a result of their learning. They submit a reflective account of their own values, experiences and comments about whether their future decision making may be influenced by their studies. In using the data from the student accounts consideration is given to Scott’s (1990) criteria for evaluating data of this nature. This includes considering whether the data are:

- Authentic – is it genuine?
- Credible – minimising bias.
- Representative – is it typical of the group?
- Meaningful – does it make sense?

Therefore, all students were required to complete the reflective account and they were submitted anonymously using a confidential numerical system. It was made clear to students at the outset that this is very much a personal account and therefore the content is a matter of personal choice. The published assessment criteria does not assess the individual views of the respondents but awards marks for the extent to which students demonstrate the ability to reflect on own personal values and their origin; awareness of the themes and issues raised in the module; analysis of the issues arising from this; application to their own experiences and thoughts about future decision making and actions.

These reflections provided a “rich” but unsystematic file of data as is common to qualitative studies so the reflections were ordered into themes and coded. Grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000) was used as a method of analysis because it seeks to generate theory that is “grounded” in the data. The approach seeks to establish relevant categories that correspond to emerging concepts (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The reflections were therefore analysed by two researchers working each with two sets of transcripts (one kept intact and the other dissected into categories and coded) moving between the data and emerging themes. Descriptive and open codes were used and these were then ordered into axial coding so that the connections could be shown. These codes were discussed and categories developed. The categories were then tested with a group of the respondents to maximise internal validity (Bradburn, 1983). The AoM code of ethical behaviour (Bryman and Bell, 2003) and good ethics practice (Dingwell, 1980; Burgess, 1982; Lee, 1993) were followed to honour confidentiality.

Findings and discussion

The core categories from the analysis included: the origin of own values and personal ethics, experience of ethical dilemmas; previous approaches and thought processes; future impact and thought processes; perceived barriers and changes implemented or planned. The approach and philosophy of the module featured strongly in the reflections with students commenting on the transdisciplinary nature of the module and the exploration of a wide range of theoretical approaches. They discover that transdisciplinarity concerns that which is between, across and beyond disciplines (Nicolescu, 2002). Throughout the reflective accounts there is also evidence of self-confrontation, students recognising that “they did not know what they did not know” and the revelation of new knowledge and experiences:

The diversity of the lecturers, each with their own area of expertise has afforded me a more detailed reflection on intellectually and mentally challenging issues (Group 1, 44).

I did not expect that this module would take me down unexpected paths concerning literature, but that has been the case (Group 3, 9).

The theoretical elements of the module have enabled me to gain a better understanding of my values and their drivers (Group 4, 78).

I have to admit that before I started this module my expectations were not that high. Another student said how can we spend 3 months studying ethics and sustainability? (Group 1, 71).

Over the three years of the study-many students have taken the opportunity provided by the reflective account to share very powerful discourses of their own learning journeys in exploring the real ethical dilemmas they face in business and the influence this has had on their lives. This often leads to a reflexivity that nurtures critique and reappraisal:

Students are often pressured into defending their knowledge rather than exhibiting their thinking. We were taken out of the passive role and placed into an active, thinking mode (Group 1, 53).

Self reflective writing is hard work; it makes you confront the reality that you may not always act in line with. The assignments really made us think about how we would act (Group 2, 14).

The reflections have formed an important part of the module not only in the reports but also in the formal and informal class discussion. Students reflected on how their studies made them confront their own (and others) assumptions of what they know and experience feelings of unease in facing up to this. As discussed earlier, awareness often promotes uncomfortable thoughts in challenging the status quo:

One of the first real “big hitters” for me was the realisation of how easy it is to find yourself demonstrating behaviours within a business context that go against the basic moral judgement that you apply to personal life (Group 2, 45).

Somewhere between my ambition and my ideals I lost my ethical compass (Group 1, 17).

Students describe their experience of “revelation” where they are taken outside of their “norms” and confronted with situations and approaches not usually encountered in their own lives. This is consistent with Beck’s (1992, 1996) definition of reflexivity as a means self-confrontation, self-criticism and self-transformation. The accounts cover a range of views. Many report that the module “provided them with the vocabulary” or “the confidence” to raise issues and concerns or that they had previously thought about but did not know how to construct their arguments. This issue of “voice” is an important theme. Others mention “realising that others have similar thoughts” or that their studies provided “legitimacy” for their own views.

Many students discussed having a “heightened sense of awareness about issues in the media and thinking about matters at a much deeper level” or “thinking about everyday activities such as shopping and travelling in a way they had not done so before”:

The course has made me aware that the responsibility rests on me to translate what I have learnt to my work place, personal life and in the society around me (Group 2, 87).

I am much more likely to ask questions about the ways in which companies help the environment and the local community (Group 4, 10).

I am certainly in a position to challenge the board of directors and leaders in the organisation to consider our position and move ethics and sustainability higher up on the agenda (Group 3, 39).

In experiencing “self-enlightenment”, a number of students felt the module empowered them to act as agents of change in their place of work. One started to question details of contracts because of health and safety concerns that had not occurred to them before; another changed the distribution system of the company because of the environmental impacts; and a company director, who was negotiating to outsource the manufacture of products to India, realised that there were many more factors to consider in taking

such decisions, other than price and quality of the goods. What had seemed a simple decision (when considered purely in market terms) required far more careful thought and planning to effect a more appropriate, responsible and sustainable outcome. This can be summed up by a student whose complaint inspired the title for this paper:

Ignorance was bliss, now I'm not ignorant and that is far more difficult.

With reflexivity students moved beyond personal reflection, prompting many to develop their awareness through analysis and evaluation into application in the workplace. A number of international students grappled with issues that they saw as matters of conscience and discussed ways in which their own position may enable them to make a difference to future policies and practices when they return:

[I will] be morally courageous and encourage others to do the same [...] put decision making process in place that requires people to consider the ethical dimension of business decisions [...] favour hiring and promoting people with a well grounded sense of personal ethics (Group 1, 61).

There were also Western European and US students who found the discussion of social, environmental and ethical issues in such a diverse group challenging. For example, it often brought home the connections between poverty and sustainability and emphasised the moral and cultural complexity of issues that are not black and white but often many shades of grey:

Taken me out of my comfort zone – my safe western existence (Group 2, 16).

At the other end of the spectrum, there are those who said that “without overstating the case – this module has changed my life”. An example of how such transformative learning has the potential to transcend simple accommodation or adaptation is exemplified by a student who worked for a scientific organisation where the ethics of the “science” was frequently raised but there were no such discussions about the ethics of the organisation. As a result of studying the module, the student proactively spoke to the chairman of the company and she was asked to help develop ethical codes for the company. Other students realised that the uncomfortable feelings they had extended to thoughts about working for particular organisations. Taking the module had helped to “crystallise” their thoughts about the type of organisation they wanted to work for and this prompted them to change career:

Completing this course in Business, Ethics, Responsibility and Sustainability has made me uncomfortable in my current workplace and prompted me to start looking for alternative employment (Group 4, 56).

I grew more critical of the way I was expected to behave [...] I began to notice that the requests to meet certain targets by the business were simply unethical [...] I decided to resign [...] At the end of my third week in a new job, I find it to be the best decision of my career (Group 2, 21).

Finally, many students reviewed their approach to business in a manner that challenges Friedman’s notion that the business of business is just business:

I realise that I need to place myself in other shoes by listening more to people around me [...] Being humble and following moral practices is a success factor for good management in this century (Group 2, 83).

I realised there is more to being ethical in business than knowing right from wrong or good from bad (Group 2, 30).

Laws alone cannot be used as a defence against acting unethically (Group 4, 96).

I have learned that it is possible to become a success whilst maintaining an ethical and social backbone (Group 3, 65).

Conclusion

Unfortunately, although ethics, social responsibility and sustainability have gained a higher profile in the current academic environment, a survey of UK deans at an Association of Business Schools (2008) conference in October revealed that these issues had not yet become embedded in the mainstream of business-related education. The reflections of the students overwhelmingly reported an awakening and connection between their personal values and a desire for change in business. For most of the students, the programme was not the first university business education they had undertaken but very few had encountered approaches that enabled them to think beyond traditional business models. This traditional approach, that focuses on profit maximisation to the exclusion of other human and organisational stakeholders and emphasises management training rather than leadership education, has been criticised by leading management educators including Ghoshal (2005) (London Business School), Pfeffer (2007) (Stanford University) and Khurana (2007) (Harvard Business School). A critical, self-confronting reflexive approach to learning (as used in this study) challenges the “business as usual” approach to business education where the “bottom line” and neo-liberalist assumptions regarding wealth creation, economic growth and efficiency dominate.

The PRME promote positive methods that encourage values-based leadership education that is grounded in the principles of the UN Global Compact (the UN organisation working with businesses, mainly MNCs, on the agenda of sustainability, human rights, anti corruption and labour rights). In celebrating its 10th Anniversary, the number of organisations joining the Global Compact has risen to from 300 at its inception to over 4,000 today. What is interesting and may provide lessons for PRME is that in recent years, over 1,000 organisations have been “delisted” for non-compliance over reporting. This has also led to not only listed organisations paying more attention to their responsibilities but has increased the number of organisations applying to join up to the Global Compact. The final words of the Principles state that, “We understand that our own organisational practices should serve as example of the values and attitudes we convey to our students”. As business schools, it is not sufficient to simply review ethics, social responsibility and sustainability within the curriculum and research practice but it should also be mirrored in the way the organisations are run. It is important that after being part of the problem for so long, businesses and business schools become a key part of the solution to irresponsible management and unsustainable development and irresponsible and unsustainable education. There are already a large number of well-known green businesses, the most well known probably being interface (Anderson, 1998) and green business gurus such as Hawken (1994) who have been promoting environmental and socially business practices for a great many years. Similarly, there are good examples of ethical and responsible businesses. Even so-called baddies of the corporate world, such as Wal-Mart, are concerned

to clean up their act, and the emergence of ethical MBAs particularly in the USA, as well as other sustainability programmes specifically aimed at the corporate sector, is clear evidence that Orr's (1994) famous quip, about universities over the years producing highly educated people ably equipped to trash the planet, has finally hit home. In a world where we are running out of oil, producing far too many unnecessary goods and services, where climate change is an accelerating and increasingly alarming reality, where global poverty and hunger is an ever present reality not to mention banking practices that create global financial instability, it is important that business schools are themselves reflective, reflexive and critical practitioners. If they are not, then their students and clients will not be able to access the knowledge, understanding skills and capabilities necessary for fashioning a business practice that truly meets the needs of this and future generations. They need to allow themselves to consider the "genuine possibility that things might be otherwise than they are" (Kompridis, 2005, p. 332).

Changing established conduct, deeply rooted practices and ways of thinking is not easy (as the quote in the title of this paper suggests, "ignorance can be bliss") but it is certainly possible as this study suggests. However, changing the ways whole institutions think and behave is another matter, and, given the economic challenges higher education institutions face in the UK and elsewhere, presents an even greater challenge. The point, of course, is that business and business schools cannot afford to ignore the social, economic and environmental agenda, for if they do, the critics who suggest that the term "ethical business", like the term "sustainable development", is an oxymoron, will be proved right.

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