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ABSTRACT

In this discussion of ethics instruction in a distance education course the question is raised of how to develop a "fit" between the objectives of a course and the strategy for instruction, interaction, and evaluation. The paper discusses specific problems confronting distance education course planners. First, while the objectives of professional ethics courses appear to be obvious, they are, in fact, often unstated and obscure even to the instructor. Can the course planner clarify what a particular course is trying to achieve? Are there any typologies which might assist in this process? Second, depending on its objectives, each ethics course will require its own unique blend of instruction and interaction. Are the techniques and technologies required to develop the correct "mix" available to the course planner? In particular, can the interaction required by most ethics courses be transposed effectively and at reasonable cost from the classroom to the distance mode? Finally, when one is talking about right and wrong, grading becomes a problem. Are any evaluation techniques especially relevant to professional ethics courses offered at a distance? These considerations are discussed in the context of a description of three distance courses developed at the University of Victoria. What emerged from this experience is the fact that ethics courses can have quite radically different objectives, thus illustrating the potential dimensions of the goal identification dilemma. (JD)

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TEACHING PROFESSIONAL ETHICS AT A DISTANCE

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ABSTRACT

In common with trends across North America, professional degree programs at the University of Victoria (UVic) have been under strong pressure in recent years to add courses on ethics to their curricula. As these programs are offered in an open learning context, this development has confronted distance education course planners with one of the classic dilemmas of distance education course design: how to develop a "fit" between the objectives of a course and the strategy for instruction, interaction and evaluation.

Based on the experience at UVic, this paper deals with the following specific problems confronting distance education course planners. First, while the objectives of professional ethics courses appear to be obvious, they are, in fact, often unstated and obscure even to the instructor. Can the course planner clarify what a particular course is trying to achieve? Are there any typologies which might assist in this process? Second, depending on its objectives, each ethics course will require its own unique blend of instruction and interaction. Are the techniques and technologies required to develop the correct "mix" available to the course planner? In particular, can the interaction required by most ethics courses be transposed effectively and at reasonable cost from the classroom to the distance mode? Finally, when one is talking about right and wrong, grading becomes a problem. Are any evaluation techniques especially relevant to professional ethics courses offered at a distance?

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In our experience, this has posed the following specific problems for the course planner. First, while the objectives of professional ethics courses appear to be obvious, they are, in fact, often unstated and obscure even to the instructor. Can the course planner clarify what a particular course is trying to acnieve? Are there any typologies which might assist in this process? Second, depending on its objectives, an ethics course will require its own unique blend of instruction and interaction. Are the techniques and technologies required to develop the correct "mix" available to the course planner? In particular, can the interaction required by most ethics courses be transposed effectively and at reasonable cost from the classroom to tne distance mode? Finally, when one is talking about right and wrong, grading becomes a problem. Are any evaluation techniques especially relevant to professional ethics courses offered at a distance?

SETTING OBJECTIVES

What is a professional ethics course trying to achieve? On the surface, the objectives of such courses would appear to be straightforward. All of them are intended to focus the student's attention on right and wrong

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behaviour and the nature of duty and obligation in a particular profession. Below the surface, however, and often only implicitly recognized, each course can have quite an unique purpose.

The three courses developed at UVic illustrate the potential dimensions of the goal identification dilemma. The course in public administration is concerned to sensitize the students to the kinds of ethical problems confronting public servants, to give them the opportunity to clarify and rank the values and rules to which they presently adhere--probably at an implicit level--and to provide students with an opportunity to reflect on these values in the context of what their peers and supervisors profess to believe. The social work course sees ethical education as part of a more comprehensive process of growth and maturation. It is intended, therefore, to move students to new and higher levels of ethical decision-making related to their level of professional experience. In part, the course attempts to "speed up" the student's achievement of higher stages of ethical reasoning. The third course, in bio-medical ethics, offered by the School of Nursing, is much more deeply rooted in traditional moral philosophy and is concerned to develop the student's capacity to apply ethical theories (eg. utilitarianism) to concrete dilemmas. In this course, the normative element is quite powerful. Moral relativism (or even pluralism) is discouraged, and students are instructed that there is a correct answer to any ethical issue confronting a professional in a medical context.

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What emerges from our experience is the fact that ethics courses can have quite radically different objectives. Moreover, while they may have been teaching professional ethics in a classroom setting, most instructors are not really conscious of the uniqueness of their own goals and the difficulties this may provoke for the distance education course planner. When confronting this dilemma, the latter may benefit from the employment of a simple typology which differentiates--as we have above--courses which "preach" from those which "sensitize" or those which attempt to "force" moral growth. Clearly this emerging typology could be expanded to contain courses with still different objectives.

DEVELOPING A DELIVERY STRATEGY

On the premise that the course planner and the instructor can clarify the instructor's particular objectives for the course, the next step is to sort out delivery strategies which best serve these goals. If the instructor believes that there is only one way to solve an ethical dilemma, then the preferred strategy may be to provide students with the theoretical basis for that reasoning and examples to demonstrate the approach. If, on the other hand, the major instructional objective is to sensitize students to the ethical dimension of their professional activities, then the best strategy may be to provide them with different perspectives on a wide range of value problems found in their profession and also with an opportunity to rehearse ethical decision-making in the company of their peers. Finally, if forcing

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the student's ethical growth is the underlying purpose of an ethics course, then the delivery strategy has to be heavily weighted towards the provision of opportunities for enhancing students' ethical reasoning skills and measuring their progress. These points may be useful as generalizations, but what really happens when you try to operationalize the instructional, interaction and evaluation components of a delivery strategy for a specific course?

THE INSTRUCTIONAL COMPONENT

At UVic there is a wide variety of methods available for delivering at a distance the instructional component of a classroom-based course. These include print, audio and video cassettes, audio-teleconferencing, broadcast television and computer-assisted learning. In the case of the course in public administration, the instructional materials are contained in a series of eight one-hour broadcast television programs accompanied by a book of readings and a study guide. Each television program is broken into three components--a discussion of the major issues involving the content specialist and experts in public service ethics, a series of dramatized case studies (3 in each program) interspersed throughout the discussion and reactions to the case studies from middle-level public sector managers. To broaden the "cultural base" of the discussion, the experts and middle-level public servants are drawn from universities and from federal, provincial and municipal jurisdictions across Canada.

The social work course relies on a print-oriented delivery format. The course is structured around the use of two textbooks and a series of case

studies based on critical incidents in social work practice. A course book containing study questions and exercises serves as the primary means by which students organize their learning and draw parallels between theory and practice.

The course in bio-medical ethics utilizes a course book, three one-hour television programs and a series of audio cassettes to deliver the instructional message. The television programs are designed to enhance the student's understanding of the process of ethical reasoning. The audio cassettes provide the instructor's detailed analysis of the thirteen case studies presented in the course.

INTERACTION AND EVALUATION

Each of these courses employs the case study method as a central device to illustrate and practice ethical sensitization and reasoning. This method is widely used in the classroom as a strategy for teaching professional ethics, and it is generally understood that the method involves an exchange of opinion and opportunities to reflect on alternate lines of reasoning. However, the case study method does not always require a significant degree of student interaction to achieve the set objectives. One important dilemma for planners of these three ethics courses has been to determine what kind of interaction is appropriate to the objectives of the courses and, given the relatively limited techniques and technologies that are readily available to

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assist the process, how best to build in this interaction and relate it to the instructional and evaluative components of the delivery strategy.

In the bio-medical ethics course for nurses, student interaction is seen to be useful, but not necessary to course completion. Several techniques have been employed to allow for interaction, but such participation is not required. After each of the television broadcasts, the instructor is available by teleconference for one hour to respond to questions arising from issues aired on the program or raised in the case studies. While on-line, students can listen to comments of classmates or enter into the discussion. In addition to participating in the teleconference, students are encouraged to form study groups with classmates living nearby. Class lists are sent to those who request them, and suggestions about how to use the study group method effectively are included in the course book. The instructor is also available at set "office hours" for one-to-one discussion by telephone.

Student evaluation is conducted by means of a mid-term and final examination. These examinations are based on case studies and require the student to discuss and analyse the problem from an ethically relevant position. The examinations are enclosed with the course book materials, and the students are encouraged to think about their answers as they work through the course materials.

In the social work course, student interaction with the instructor and with classmates is managed through three 90-minute teleconferences spaced equally over the term. One or, at most, two major case studies are analysed

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during each of these sessions, and opportunities are provided to assess development of each student's ethical reasoning skills. The instructor and the course planner felt it would be necessary to organize these lengthy telephone seminars in order to accomplish the "growth" objective of the course. Although participation in these teleconferences is mandatory, student performance is not assessed. The instructor also maintains set "office hours" for one-to-one discussion by telephone.

The student evaluations are based on a mid-term examination and a comprehensive paper in which they outline a philosophy for social work practice.

To provide students in the public administration course with opportunities to practice expressing their views on ethical problems, telephone seminars are employed as an analogue for "real life" bureaucratic meetings. The class is divided into seminars of eight students which meet by telephone with the instructor for one half-hour every week during the course to review the three cases presented during that week's television broadcast. Using a set of study questions prepared for each case, the instructor works the students through the cases encouraging them to focus on the identification of the ethical problem and how, as public-sector managers, they should deal with it. Because of the short length of each seminar, discussion is highly structured and there is less opportunity for detailed analysis and informal interaction among the students. The instructor is also available for one-to-one discussion at set office hours.

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The student's evaluation is based on their participation in the telephone seminars and three written reports, the first analysing case studies presented in the course, the second, developing new case studies, and the third, constructing a code of conduct for their own place of work.

CONCLUSION

While we are still experimenting at UVic, the development of these three courses has led to an increasingly formal effort to develop a "fit" between the objectives of the particular course and the techniques of delivery, interaction, and evaluation. Where the instructor has determined that assimilating a message and learning how to reach the "right" answer is the purpose of the course, then the planner can focus on techniques which provide information on a specific approach to ethical reasoning and allow the student to see how the instructor reaches particular conclusions in a series of case studies. Interaction can be more limited and more concerned with enhancing the message than with exchanging views. An examination can be used to test for assimilation of the message.

Where the instructor is more concerned with the growth of the student's ability to handle the ethical dimension of increasingly complex work situations, providing the means to assist, encourage and monitor that development becomes a major concern of the planner. In this instance, a series of teleconferences involving the students and the instructor in an extensive dialogue around one or two cases became the centre piece of the

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interactive process. The examination and the paper become vehicles for measuring and evaluating the change in the student's approach to complex value problems.

Finally, where the focus of the course is more on sensitization to the ethical dimension of public service and the difficulties of making value choices when there is little widespread agreement about what is "right", the delivery strategy is bound to be different. Here the television programs are used to acquaint the students with the variety of views which are held by experts or role models on specific issues. The dramatization of the case studies and the televised "reaction" to them are designed to make students aware of the wide variety of ethical dilemmas which may confront them as public sector managers and to encourage them to reflect upon and express their own reactions to these dilemmas. They then get to measure these views against those of peers through the interactive device of weekly teleconferencing seminars. Evaluation is designed to measure their ability to identify and think creatively about value problems in the work place.

While there obviously is a measure of similarity in the objectives of professional ethics courses, our fixation with the differences between the three courses developed at UVic is essential to the thesis of this paper. All ethics courses are not trying to achieve the same objective, and the course planner cannot contribute usefully to the design of a strategy for instruction, interaction and evaluation if the underlying objectives cannot be teased to the surface and made more explicit. Even if the objectives are

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clearly understood, we are really still at the experimental stage in terms of developing strategies to meet these objectives. Especially where interaction is deemed to be a crucial factor in delivery, we are far from understanding what kinds of techniques and technologies best fill specific interactive needs. At the very least what we hope to discourage is the development of delivery strategies for ethics courses without adequate respect for the problems associated with dovetailing such strategies with course objectives.