

*Full Length Research Paper*

# The role of ICT in business ethics courses: Evident from Bangladesh

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Business education is one of the growing phenomena both in the developed and developing world. Global argument in many contexts from the areas that are more connected to profit and loss (that is marketing, accounting, finance and management) activities of business have been heavily given emphasis recently. As a result, motivation of academics in teaching and students' motivation in learning the course has recently maintained a low profile. However, a well established argument is that without adopting updated business ethics course as a fundamental of business education, neither long term business goal can be achieved nor a decent national development can be ensured. After the invention of ICT, most of the courses are trying to have a maximum benefit through the usage of IT. It is thus important to have a greater role of ICT in business ethics course. Based on the experience of courses taught by the author, this paper argues that an adequate use of ICT in the teaching of a business ethics (BE) course depends on clarifying the assumptions about ethics and the place of the course within a programme. For this purpose, it explains how ICT can be used to strengthen a view of business ethics based on dialogue and mutual learning and it encourages the combination between virtual and face-to-face teaching. Data used for this paper are the teaching and observation experiences in two universities in Bangladesh. One of them is public, while the other is included from a private counterpart. Finally, the paper examines the relationship between the use of ICT, individual learning processes and communities of practice.

**Key words:** Business education, business ethics, corporate citizenship, ICT, learning processes.

## INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH ISSUES

The introduction of Information Communication Technology (ICT) has generated, in the field of teaching and learning, a variety of debates on the pedagogical possibilities opened up by these technologies, with positions that range from enthusiasm to skepticism (Hashim et al., 2010). Although this debate is not foreign to the field of Business Ethics (BE), the progression towards ICT has been very sluggish (Alam and Khalifa, 2009). The relationship between the content of BE and the use of ICT has not yet been sufficiently clarified. While there has not been a debate to promote a wider inclusion of ICT in business ethics courses, the setting of the context of using ICT itself is fundamentally important.

ICT can be used in many different ways with various

ends. It has the potential of becoming one of the most successful pedagogical tools when introduced as an element in the process of re-elaborating the content of a BE course. This might turn out to be a relatively basic use of ICT, taking its potential into consideration (Alam, 2009a); but from an educational perspective, it will mean getting as much as possible from it. The study's conviction is that without face-to-face dialogue, a BE course can be planned with an assurance of 100% quality education. Thus, this paper will focus on the following questions particularly: What role can ICT play in a course that is not based only in practice, but also in a deep principle of face-to-face dialogue?

## Research aims and context

The aim of this paper is to discover the answer to the

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question stated earlier. To show one way of answering this question, the author's own experience of redesigning the 'corporate citizenship' course in the MBA programme at Southeast Business School, Dhaka, Bangladesh will be given as an example. Moreover, experiences of Malaysia will be included where authors are involved with teaching and administrative works for more than twenty years.

The study will also include some of the observations that were gathered from the author's experience in teaching at the Bangladesh Open University<sup>2</sup> as a visiting professor. This course, by Southeast University, introduced a website as a support tool, but the core of the course continued to be a face-to-face interpersonal dialogue. An extensive number of data are also used from the interviews conducted.

Through the exposition of this experience and of the presuppositions behind it, an attempt will be made to show that the introduction of ICT in teaching should not be seen as a mere technological add-on or a concession to fashion and current trends, but should rather go hand in hand with rethinking the ethical and social issues faced in a Master of Business Administration (MBA) program (Alam, 2009b).

This incorporates the type of content that anyone would want to include in the course, particularly a learning process that is consistent with the understanding of business ethics and philosophy. Since the introduction of ICT in teaching business, ethics is yet to receive high recognition as a matter that can be reduced to its technological aspect. The first part of this paper will present the role of business education on national development and fundamental assumptions about the place, ethical and social questions faced in an MBA context, as well as the study's approach to ethics in general. In the latter part of this paper, a brief explanation will be made on the relationship between content and learning processes in the challenge of designing a course that occupies one intensive week of full-time study. In the last section, an examination will be made on how these reflections on the study's basic assumptions, the content of the course and the learning processes are translated into a very specific use of ICT.

## THE ROLE OF BUSINESS EDUCATION ON NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

There is the need for a marked and sustained improvement in the social, political and economic conditions on the continent. Improvements in socio-economic conditions would require a sustained investment in people, good governance and political and economic stability (Alam, 2008, 2010). A critical factor in that direction would be improvement in the quality and capacity of

leadership in business and industry, public administration and good governance. In modern economies, political and business leaders are "made and not born" as we are made to believe in this part of the world. They are made largely by training in higher educational institutions. In the case of business leadership, relevant business education is an indispensable incubator and catalyst for building leadership (Paine, 1991).

Universities and management institutions play a more important national role in all regions of the world (Alam and Hoque, 2010). They are the most capable institutions in our countries. They are often the only national institutions with the skills, equipment and the ability to generate new knowledge through research or to adapt knowledge to solve local problems (Bowie, 1991). The roles of these institutions in research, evaluation, information transfer and technology development are therefore critical to national progress and economic growth. In short, higher education institutions are key actors in national development. However, rapid expansion of private higher education was considered to be the solution since they work mainly at the field of business education and ICT (Alam, 2009b). Unfortunately, because of their priority in making profit from the education sector, they have failed to provide a better outcome. Moreover, while they are producing some naïve business graduates, the low level of business ethics for the graduates cause many corporate and social problems. The essential problem confronted by higher education is that the quality of education in the region has declined significantly as a result of dwindling national resources coupled with growing enrolment figures.

## GROWTH OF BUSINESS EDUCATION AND ITS FUTURE

While the concept of Faculty/School of commerce was invented by the UK, institution of higher education in USA contravened the concept of business school. This had become very popular internationally, thereby providing a scope to USA for exporting its business education. This was done through diplomatic business technique with a main consumer target of the developing nation (Alam, 2008).

There are two main reasons for making a business administration course market-driven in a developing nation. One is the success of the Institute of Business Administration (IBA<sup>3</sup>)- mostly found in Southern Asia and African region, while the other is the employers' perception. The business administration programme was introduced in many developing countries by the IBA in the early 1960's in collaboration with the Indiana University, USA, mainly with the objective of providing professional

<sup>2</sup> The only public open and distance learning university in Bangladesh

<sup>3</sup> The establishment of IBA in developing nation was made through the direct involvement of USA engaging ford foundation as a working prater with the best university located a specific country.

training in business administration (Sayed and Rose, 2002).

The IBA is an autonomous institution which works in association with the best university of a country. While most of the universities in developing countries suffer huge 'academic season jams', the IBA produces graduates in due time even reaming under the umbrella of the university. However, the so-called 'student politics' does not exist in the IBA (Alam, 2010). A Masters in Business Administration (MBA) has been offered since late 1960's, and a PhD was introduced in the late 1970s. IBA candidates were not only academically outstanding but also expert professionals. IBA's strong commitment to its system of admission tests, semester scheme within the academic calendar and carefully-designed curricula have also helped to achieve this success.

In most of the countries, the IBA was late in offering the BBA (it has only offered it since the early 1990's), and the enrolment were too small to meet the demand. Using this opportunity, private universities established in the first phase began their operation by offering a BBA. Success in this field has led them to offer an MBA.

Business Administration degrees are now perceived as prestigious. People perceive 'Business Administration' as an educational model imported directly from America, and employers believe that employing a business graduate will bring prestige with it. As a result, commerce graduates are neglected by the local job market. The composition of business structure in the country is changing dramatically in favour of the small scale service-oriented businesses (financial institutions, product distribution and garment product sales), while factory-based businesses are gradually declining. As a result, this is raising the demand for innovative sales tactics. Accordingly, entrepreneurs are more concerned with employing a Jack of all trades rather than an expert in a specific field (Patrons, 2000).

This notion has changed the face of Bangladesh's higher education and many of the public universities have renamed their commerce faculties as 'Faculty of Business Studies'. Private universities never had a commerce faculty, but now have a School of Business. As a result, a dangerous trend is emerging; if all graduates become a 'Jack of all trades but master of none', who will be the specialists in any specific field (for example, economics, banking, finance and marketing)? Ultimately, there will be a dearth of competent scholars.

There is reason for one to be concerned about the lack of competence amongst graduates studying business courses. Since the country has been following colonial rules and regulations for different course areas, (for example, Corporate Law, Taxation, Income Tax and Labour Law), graduates of business administration who have been taught rules and regulations applicable in the USA will be incompetent in related jobs. This will result in a clash between older and newer graduates, which will affect the work atmosphere. A business graduate from a

reputed private university explains the situation: A student product of a well-known business school in Bangladesh commented

"After graduating from the NSU, I applied for jobs in the public sector. I failed to obtain one, as graduates who had studied the colonial course and curriculum were examiners on the interview boards. Finally, I joined a nationally reputed private organisation where IBA graduates are in the majority. Graduates of IBA are familiar with the American and colonial system and can easily cope with all situations. I can adjust to the IBA graduates but cannot cope with other graduates who have studied in public universities. I feel uncomfortable when I am assigned to the public sector for different tasks."

In public universities, Commerce Faculty has been renamed as Faculty of Business Studies. On the other hand, private universities offer business administration degrees with Americanism curricula. To conclude this section, we noted an observation made by an academic, which states:

"Renaming a course<sup>4</sup> without making essential changes cannot distinguish the actual job market for business graduates and their competence in carrying out the job. Business graduates are not working in their own field, but instead, they are working in an area that would have been filled previously by Commerce graduates. Accordingly, offering Business Studies cannot open up new employment markets for the graduates."

## FUNDAMENTAL ASSUMPTIONS

One of the aims of raising ethical and social questions in MBA programs is to facilitate the development of "reflective practitioners" (Schön, 1987). These days, it is widely accepted that future managers should not regard themselves as purely technical and operative professionals, but should become conscious of the values involved in their professional practice (Hoque et al, 2010b). The "triple bottom line approach" (Elkington, 1998) will only be possible if there are professionals who are committed to the values that are underlying each type of approach (economic, social and environmental values) and who are able to lead organizations that possess these values.

As a result, business schools have the challenge of developing a comprehensive view of the organization. This understanding would usually shun the risk of becoming "separatist", as Gewirth pointed out (Gewirth, 1986) making clear the relationship between, on one

<sup>4</sup> For example, the renaming of Bachelor of Commerce in Accounts as Bachelor of Business Administration – Accounting.

hand, the commitment of organizations to their social responsibility and sustainable development, and on the other, the professional attitudes and values that make this commitment possible.

For this reason, one of the tasks of business schools of the modern world is to make it possible for students and professionals to understand the role of organizations in a globalised world and in the so-called knowledge society (Alam et al., 2009). This means that business schools need to rethink what role organizations play in society and what legitimizes their activities (Alam, 2009b; Alam et al., 2010). The thrust for a new overall vision is implicit when one talks about developing socially and environmentally responsible organizations. We will only outline the following issues, which are particularly relevant in relation to this vision:

Multi-stakeholder approach and dialogue.

An inclusive understanding of 'innovation': Rather than reducing innovation to a question of technology and processes, innovation should include values and a broad view of the organization in the society.

Social responsibility and sustainability as part of a 'learning' process.

A broad and complex understanding of the nature of corporate or organizational 'success'.

'Reflective' organizations: Just as one can talk about reflective professionals or practitioners, we should start talking about reflective organizations, that is, organizations that become a space for developing a distinctive approach to what it means to be committed to the triple bottom line.

All these issues converge in the idea that a full education in a business school should include studies aimed at fostering a critical analysis of the society. Rather than emphasizing applied or professional ethics (Hoque et al., 2010), the stress should be on making students sensitive to social reality and on trying to situate the organization in its broad social context (Alam, 2008). Now, how is this to be done? Clearly, trying to impose a particular doctrine or ideology is far from being the appropriate approach. Instead, professors and schools should respect and foster pluralism. Thus, dialogue with and among the students is an essential pedagogical strategy (Alam, 2010).

It is within this social and educational framework that the content of a business ethics course needs to be reformulated, along with the right technological instruments to convey this content (Hashim et al., 2010). From this perspective, the incorporation of ICT is not only a chance to engage in new pedagogical activities, but also the opportunity to encourage all participants in the course (in this case, within a MBA program) to ask themselves questions which reflect this social and educational framework in a more explicit fashion than usual (Alam et al., 2009b). Such questions might include the role of

organizations in society, their source of legitimacy, the meaning of professional and organizational success, the importance of innovation in relation to organizational values and the meaning and strategies of multi-stakeholder dialogue. From the author's experience of Bangladesh, a country should emphasize on the incorporation of ICT, which has shown itself to be an excellent support in achieving this goal and enhancing dialogue between participants of the program regarding such issues. Moreover, before delving into more detail, an explanation on why this is consistent with the study's views about business ethics and philosophy would be given (Patrons, 2000b).

## ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT ETHICS AND BUSINESS ETHICS

Any academic and educational project related to social and ethical issues hinges on a particular approach to ethics. In the study's view, the plural and ever-changing world which we live in is marked by the absence of a shared axiomatic framework and the feeling that some key communal values are being shattered. In this context, the main concern should be to move from talking about ethical theories towards imagining learning processes that include a creative commitment to certain humanizing values. In other words, one should be able to discuss ethics without falling into the so-called problems of "application", where the aim is to move downward from discourse to reality by deduction (Natshoe, 2004). Talking about ethics should then start to acknowledge the diversity of social practices. This should, however, not amount to conformism; instead, it should ignite a process of inquiry and a process that takes personal and social reality as its point of departure and moves ahead to seek new possibilities. This is a process that can lead us to respond to humanity's real expectations and desires (Ekanola, 2010).

This is not the place to justify this general approach in great detail (see Lozano, 2000a), but it is indispensable in indicating some of its defining traits, especially those that make it easier to understand how IT can be incorporated into a BE course. We intend to point out five of these traits. For the sake of succinctness, we have highlighted them in the form of contrapositions or issues that depend on emphases and tensions. Nevertheless, in each case, the study obviously places itself closer to the second term:

Not a normative ethic, but a dialogical ethic.

Ethics understood not as a management tool, but as a support for inquiry and innovation in professional and organizational contexts.

Not an abstract or conceptual ethic, but a contextual and relational ethic.

Not an ethic that deals only with problems and dilemmas,

but an ethic which is, at the same time, attentive to complexity and integration.

Not an ethic relevant only to concrete moments or isolated decisions, but an ethic that accompanies and nourishes a professional and organizational itinerary. The study will now review each of these traits briefly.

### **Not a normative ethic but a dialogical one**

The term “not a normative ethic,” does not necessarily espouse an ethic without norms. Norms are an essential component of ethics, but they should not be considered necessarily as obligations. One can understand norms as a constitutive component of all practices, and hence as an essential ethical dimension (MacIntyre, 1985). However, we want students to question the idea, which is still widespread, that ethics is almost universally valid, self-sufficient and context-independent on normative formulations.

It would be tantamount to say that professionals only need to “apply” ethical principles and norms deductively in searching for agreement insofar as it is possible (Ekanola, 2010) (top-down). Brown (1987) clearly pointed out the presuppositions behind this approach: (a) applied ethics is an application of an ethical theory; (b) there is a complete body of ethical theory with well-founded moral content waiting to be applied to practical problems; (c) a division of labour takes place between non-philosophers who bring forward the problems and philosophers who bring forward the theory. Professional and organizational ethics would then be the result of applying general ethics to each occupation, profession and type of organization.

This approach does not seem suitable for BE (Bowie, 1991; DeGeorge, 1991; Frederick, 1991; Lozano, 2000a). Furthermore, from a pedagogical point of view, it does not seem suitable either for an MBA programme in which participants do not enter the classroom expecting doctrines, but instead enters it with their own views and a desire to debate them. This is why it is necessary to adopt a dialogical approach, that is, an approach which is not only a pedagogical method but also an ethical option, situated in the wake of proposals such as those by Habermas (1981) and Apel (1987), which allows people to place themselves beyond dogmatism and relativism in ethical discussions.

We will not recall here the basic traits of dialogical or communicative ethics because its fundamental features (proceduralism, universalism, deontologism and cognitivism) are well known and have been widely discussed. What we are interested in is one of its main sources, the reflection on language and consequently, the importance it grants dialogue as the basis for the construction of an ethical view that is appropriate in a world marked by pluralism. Such an approach signifies that ethical deliberations should start with a mutual recognition of valid interlocutors of all those involved in

the issue at hand. This means that firstly, the conditions have to be created so that all the concerned parties can participate in this dialogue (Kurt and Hacıoglu, 2010).

Secondly, there is a need to develop the attitudes that make the dialogue possible: respect, tolerance, justification of one's own views through arguments, availability for cooperative inquiry and willingness to search for agreement insofar as it is possible.

### **Ethics understood not as a management tool, but as support for inquiry and innovation in professional and organizational contexts**

From the above statements, it follows that the study's intention is to avoid turning BE into a set of pre-established formulae applicable when one wants to act “ethically”. Giving participants of the MBA program an “ethical toolbox” for later use is not the goal of the program (Padioleau, 1989). Contrary to what it may seem, the toolbox image is not in any way neutral: ethics is never a conceptual material at the disposal of whoever wants to use it, independent of context and situation (Paine, 1991: 69).

Nonetheless, the absence of formulae does not mean that there are no answers to the moral challenges that reality poses (Cortina, 1999). The dialogue referred to in the above section is not talking for the sake of talking, but talking to make it explicit. This is why we insist on the need to develop the capacity of asking oneself about the questions and challenges posed by professional and organizational reality (Hoque et al., 2010a). What is at stake here is not only the capacity to argue, but also the capacity to ‘interpret’ situations: to ask what elements are relevant, what values are at stake and what the options are. One of the study's goals is to suggest to participants that reflection and dialogue do not, from the ethical perspective, necessarily shut off possibilities (in the sense of forbidding certain practices), but on the contrary, they can open up new ones. This approach is clearly captured in Paul Ricoeur's question about whether, instead of trying to unify ethics, it is preferable to preserve its openness or not, which comes from the fundamental tension between a morality of what is absolutely desirable (that is a morality of convictions) and a morality of what is really possible (Ricoeur, 1975). The dialogue between positions cannot be settled once and for all, but can propel continuous innovation insofar as it forces the reinterpretation of reality and insofar as this reinterpretation discloses new professional and organizational possibilities for discovery and exploration. This means that, from the study's perspective, imagination is an essential component of any approach to ethics (Camps, 1983; Werhane, 1999).

In the organizational context (and the same certainly applies to the study's BE course), it would also be reductionist to link the idea of innovation only to

technology and processes; instead, we need to acknowledge that innovation also has to do with values and attitudes, which allow us to reformulate our understanding of what we do.

### **Not an abstract and conceptual ethics, but a contextual and relational one**

Since the 1980s, the quarrel between liberals and communitarians (Mulhall and Swift, 1992) has brought about some of the most fruitful productions in contemporary ethics. It is obvious that neither of these two groups is homogenous or presents uniform positions. Nonetheless, what is interesting for us here is to recall the two main contributions of the so-called communitarians who, in spite of the pertinent criticisms one can make of their views (Barber, 1998: 22-33; Larmore, 1996: 143), have rightly pointed to the importance of history and tradition in the treatment of moral questions (in contrast to approaches that gave excessive importance to 'pure' reasoning) and to the importance of community and sociability (in contrast to excessively individualistic views) (Donaldson and Dunfee, 1999). According to these contributions, the contextual peculiarities and the historical and cultural nature of the goods and values we use to define and give meaning to our lives should not be seen as shortcomings of our limited human condition (as if the ultimate ideal were to free oneself from them and be left alone with one's own rational capacity), but as a condition for the possibility of any ethical development, be it personal or organizational.

The role granted to context makes it possible to speak of an ethic of authenticity in the particular sense Taylor gives to this expression (Taylor, 1991) and of different spheres of justice, as Walzer does (Walzer, 1983). The first questions the tendency to take the individual as the exclusive centre of reference in the attempt to give sense and orientation to life. On the contrary, Taylor proposes openness to the "horizons of significance" that come from our belonging to a social and cultural context. The second reveals that justice is not a general, abstract criterion, independent from the goods one wants to distribute, but rather the opposite: whereby individuals conceive and create in their own context the goods they will later distribute. Consequently, the type of good and its meaning will condition the way it will be distributed.

This takes us back to the hermeneutical perspective mentioned in the previous point, but now we explicitly add the importance of context in the process of creating orientation and meaning for human action; for what we are constantly interpreting and reinterpreting is this context. This means that contexts are not passively accepted but are received critically. Yet, in any event, it also reveals two things: first, the importance of context as an ethical space (and consequently, the importance of making an explicit declaration that organizations are also moral spaces) and secondly, it reveals that any dialogue

with interlocutors is always a contextualized dialogue, which has to be understood not statically but as part of a process of establishing relationships (Dorasamy, 2010).

### **Not an ethic that deals only with problems and dilemmas, but one which is, at the same time, attentive to complexity and integration**

Many BE programs share a common trait: the presentation of a number of problems which can transmit not only the image, already criticized above, that ethics is like a toolbox but also the impression that there is a progressive fragmentation in the diversity of issues concerning corporate life. Such fragmentation leads to a view of BE as made up of aggregated topics, almost like independent atoms, with their own approaches and solutions. The use of case studies in teaching can also lead to such atomism, since cases can be seen as mere illustrations of previously defined topics. Consequently, what is more can suggest that BE consists of confronting and solving specific dilemmas, as if in business life ethical issues are always about choosing between both the ethically correct and incorrect option.

Hosmer (2000) made this point very clear with his methodological proposal which, among other things, makes it possible to tackle the complexity of the situations under discussion. Given that real situations often raise value conflicts and make it necessary to interpret and distinguish the diversity of perspectives (which in turn also requires the capacity to engage in dialogue with them), the main task is to integrate and complement various approaches to ethics. Each of them allows us to identify a relevant aspect of the reality we are trying to deal with. However, this should not end up in an aggregate of doctrines or a rivalry among ethical views (MacIntyre, 1990), rather, the goal in each situation is to develop a critical hermeneutics (Cortina, 1993) or a hermeneutics of responsibility (Lozano, 2000a).

By this, we do not mean that professors should devote themselves to solving concrete problems as if they were "teaching ethics without ethics to teach" (Bahm, 1982); rather, the study suggests that ethical presuppositions and implications should be made progressively explicit throughout the learning process, as systematic contributions to the dialogue in the spaces of reflection and deliberation, and not as prior and separate elements. In the words of the authors' colleague, Alfons Sauquet:

"Thus, the educational activity that has [traditionally] privileged the program as a learning structure and the educator as the privileged actor of the process is [today] shifting the protagonist in the process towards the individual and the group, thereby opening itself up to more open and thematized learning structures. This shift, whose goal is to facilitate the individuals' development by fostering

the exercise of their autonomy, raises new challenges [...]”.

In this new educational paradigm, the term ‘learning’ acquires, in its turn, new meaning. Learning is not merely adding knowledge to an established structure, but giving meaning to the information one has access to” Sauquet, 2001: 115 (the study’s translation).

The study could add that the main educational task (specially at the MBA level) is not to add new pieces of knowledge, but to set the conditions that make possible the understanding of complexity by forming new and flexible mental structures.

**Not an ethic relevant only for concrete moments or isolated decisions, but one that accompanies and nourishes a professional and organizational itinerary**

When one considers cases that are frequently presented as paradigmatic references to illustrate issues on BE, one realizes that they often refer to extreme situations, bad practices or disastrous consequences of a corporate action. This can easily convey the message that, BE is relevant only in some concrete moments or as a corrective to condemnable behaviour, and not as an intrinsic component of organizational management. Thus, when talking about management and BE, many people think about decision-making. Indeed, if ethics does not integrate decision-making, BE clearly loses a great deal of relevance (Nash, 1981; Trevino, 1986; Jones, 1991). Yet to focus excessively on this aspect may suggest that BE is, certainly, very important, but only for specific moments. One would be presupposing (again) the existence of ethical atoms that have entity and consistency of their own, segregated from any process or itinerary. However, it is imperative to bring forward the view that ethics also nourishes and accompanies management processes.

In their well-known study, Robert Bellah and his colleagues showed that a technocratic and instrumental understanding of management reinforces the view of managers as professionals who are unable to link their practices to any evaluative and meaningful project (Bellah et al., 1985). Our society runs the risk of having professionals who are increasingly “competent”, but at the same time unable to see and imagine the moral and ethical aspects of both their professions and tasks within a complex world. It is for this reason that the development of “reflective practitioners” should avoid turning professionals only into technical experts, and should encourage them to build a narration of their own personal and professional itinerary. For, as Paul Ricoeur writes:

“[The] narrative unity of a life integrates dispersion, alterity, and is marked by the notion of the event, with its contingent and aleatory nature. In addition,

Narrativity is an essential component of any approach to ethics (MacIntyre, 1984), so much so that the very moral and social identity of individuals, and also of organizations and institutions, become associated with their ability to narrate their own life as a meaningful itinerary. These five basic assumptions in the study’s approach to ethics will inescapably have an impact on the way it prepared a BE course. To develop just one example, it follows from the last assumption that it is important to focus not so much on specific decisions but on trajectories and identity formation (organizational and individual). As a result, a narrative and emotional approach is used to accomplish this development, that is, professors should try to avoid turning this identity formation into an intellectual approval of some particular values, however noble they might be.

These considerations make more relevant the standard question for those working in the field of Business Ethics: “Can ethics be taught?” (Piper et al., 1993; Bunke, 1988; Park, 1998; Stead and Miller, 1988; Furman, 1990). Yet, despite its obvious relevance, we feel that the challenge lies in changing this question for another: “Can ethics be learned?” and evidently, in asking what learning means in this perspective and on what processes it rests. Obviously, there is no necessary contradiction between the standard question and our new question, but there is a change in perspective from teaching to learning, and this shift matches with the view of ethics that has already been sketched: it focuses on dialogue, inquiry, context, complexity, integration and trajectory.

One of the consequences of assuming this shift in perspective is that it makes the BE course to be seen as a stage in the trajectory of the participants, in their overall formation and development, and in the educational itinerary they follow at the school. Thus, professors should not only take into account as much as possible their background (age, professional experience, knowledge, etc.), but also the place that their courses take in the curriculum. In the study’s case, at Southeast, the course occupies one week with a full-time schedule during the second quarter of the first year of the MBA programme, in which all courses, including the study’s BE course, are required. At the same time, the course in itself is presented as an itinerary that a group of participants experience and help to shape.

During this itinerary, the participants can experience the vertebral role of dialogue, ask questions, pay attention to the contexts and the relationships that shape situations, and take into account their complexity. Here is where the incorporation of IT reveals itself as a highly relevant support, insofar as it enables us to put on record the itinerary followed over the week and turns the dialogue into something beyond a rhetorical exercise. For, by putting the students’ comments “on record”, it increases the personal commitment with what is said in the face-to-face dialogue. In this connection, though it

might be only symbolic, one should note that the opinions and interventions of the participants in the virtual space always appear next to both their names and pictures. In short, a BE course in an MBA program, rather than being a provider of content, will be directed towards facilitating a process in the participant, that is, a process in which each participant, in dialogue with the others, has the opportunity to build his or her framework of comprehension and (re)endorse some values more consciously than before.

### **NEW FORMAT: THE DESIGN OF AN INTENSIVE WEEK DEVOTED TO BUSINESS ETHICS**

As we understand it, the introduction of IT in a BE course becomes something more than fashion or fascination for the possibilities of technology when it goes together with a reflection about what the study's approach to ethics is and what place and meaning the course has within the entire curriculum. This reflection is all the more meaningful if it leads to redesigning the course. In the following, we briefly present the results of our redesigning process, without going into the details of the content and method used in each of the sessions.

In the case of the study, the main structural change that was faced was to think over a course with a format of 10 weekly sessions of 3 h and turn it into an intensive, one week course of 30 h. As a result, it was a complex challenge. On the one hand, it seemed as an advantage that during this week there would be no interference from other courses. However, on the other hand, it would seem, at least before hand, that a certain amount of time between sessions would be severely missed, because the issues discussed in the course might need time to "sink in". Keeping the interest of the participants alive over a course with an intensive and exclusive format seemed to pose an additional difficulty.

To pay closer attention to the needs of each participant and to promote active engagement with the ideas and concepts presented in the course, it is useful to work in smaller discussion groups rather than in large lecture halls. Group activities are done at two different levels: at one level, a tutor leads seminars with 15 participants who analyze and comment on readings and case studies related to the content of the main lecture. At a different level, participants, grouped in teams of 4 or 5, prepare papers and/or presentations about a real case and do small scale research, in which they are expected to discuss and put in the context, the conceptual tools provided through the course.

In this context, the use of IT was introduced, and in particular, the webpage format for courses at Southeast. One of its main functions is for a space to be devoted to the written reflections of the participants, that is, a space which remains visible to the whole group. In the study's view, the use of this tool has proven very successful:

among other things, it has helped to increase participation in the classroom, improve the assimilation of the content and heighten awareness of the main issues raised during the course.

The main task should always be directed at building a learning itinerary that is conceptually appropriate, inspiring and "digestible" for the participants, given the conditions and the context of the course. In the case of the study, this meant that a preparation of a one week full-time course was been taking into account. The intention to use a webpage in the course can be there from the beginning, but in our view, it should not have top priority. The question of what we will both do virtually and face-to-face emerges naturally during the meetings for designing the course.

In addition, one needs to diversify teaching methods in order to keep the students' attention, and especially when a course is taught with an intensive schedule. This means that one should consider how many long lectures one can deliver and how often it can be delivered. Given our basic assumptions about how to introduce ethical and social questions, as mentioned above, it does not appear detrimental to reduce the lecture time somewhat. Given our general objectives, we developed several methods to achieve them. Of course, this is not an exhaustive list of possibilities, it is only meant to show that professors have a variety of methods at their disposal:

Talks and lectures for the entire group of participants (around 55 participants).

Debates in groups of 15, led by a professor acting as a discussion leader (smaller groups allow better acquaintance and facilitate interaction).

Use of case studies.

Guest speakers who present their experiences in various fields, such as research on the risk society.

Workshops on particular topics such as ethical investment funds, NGO-corporation partnerships, corporate social responsibility, business in the community, etc.

Discussion of a film.

Readings. An exercise on organizational values.

Writing down one's own opinions and reflections on the course webpage.

The selection and use of these (and other) methods make sense when one takes into account the context in which the BE course takes place. By adopting the one-week intensive and exclusive format, we were accepting that content would not have the same emphasis as in a conventional extensive course. Nonetheless, if we look at the context of the place this course occupies in the MBA curriculum, we would realize that prior to our course, our students have also had:

An inaugural session of the MBA programme, in which it is some times devoted to talking about the role of



organizations (in particular, corporations in society).

A required course, in the first phase of the programme, called "Geopolitics, Society and Culture".

A required course called "Environmental Management", which deals with questions such as why business managers should care about the environment, what sustainability means, and what strategies and management systems are available.

The ethical and social dimension referred to in various prior courses: for example, when dealing with governance, the quality management model, human resources and corporate policy.

In other courses, some concepts that are relevant for the topics we will raise in our course have already been introduced, for example, stakeholder theory, organizational culture, governance, quality management, etc.

The course we are presenting here is located at the end of the common period of the MBA program and is required for all participants. This position makes it more reasonable to shift the course's focus towards integrating and reconstructing different views, concepts and strategies than might have been seen previously. Further, the fact that this is the only subject that takes an entire full-time week may help to increase the attention devoted to the subject, and the fact that it comes at the end of the common period may help underline the idea that 'corporate social responsibility' (CSR) could be the pivotal element around which an understanding of the corporate action would be built.

Apart from the variety of educational methods and taking into account the place our course takes in the programme, each day of the week is organized so that it focuses the participants' attention on one topic. The distribution of topics is as follows:

Monday: the division and intersection of problems in three levels (individual, organizational and social) and the introduction of two categories, convictions and responsibilities.

Tuesday: the notion of 'corporate social responsibility' (CSR) and stakeholder dialogue.

Wednesday: values in organizations.

Thursday: managers and professionals; the concern for human rights.

Friday: the learning process.

The sequence of days has a meaning as a whole. Thus, the first day provides an analytical frame of reference for the general group of topics under the rubric of 'corporate citizenship'. The second day tackles the issues of looking "outwards"; while the third tackles the issues of looking "inwards". The fourth emphasizes the professional and social connections of the topic (from an organizational perspective) and the fifth reviews the entire itinerary of the week and proposes a synthesis, both from the point

of view of processes (how we have worked, what dynamics we engaged in, what methodologies, etc.) and of content.

## **A REFLECTION ON THE ROLE OF ICT: INTEGRATING BOTH VIRTUAL AND FACE-TO-FACE SPACE**

In the preceding sections of this paper, we have presented the context in which the introduction of IT has taken place in our course. In our view, the key to the success of this experience is due to the fact that the main objective was not the introduction of IT but the re-elaboration of the learning process of the entire BE course. IT is just another tool at our disposal, but not "the tool". This is why we have thought it crucial to explain thoroughly the assumptions on which this re-elaboration rested, the changes introduced and the new design of the course. In this third section, the role of IT will be discussed more specifically (in particular, a virtual space in the form of the course webpage). In terms of learning processes, what differentiates our approach from other approaches will be shown. If virtual spaces are most often thought of as substitutes to face-to-face sessions, in our case, we have closely intertwined the virtual space with the face-to-face activities, to the extent that they are inseparable. Instead of the former complementing the latter, virtuality and physical presence forms a single learning space.

There are three conditions behind an adequate introduction of IT in a course: the professors' reflection on how they understand ethics and the place of the course in the whole programme, together with the objectives to be achieved and the methods to be deployed. These considerations led us to conclude that it would be interesting to integrate virtuality and face-to-face activities as much as possible. However, there would 'not' be two completely demarcated areas and times of work: one for face-to-face teaching (for example, in the mornings) and one for virtual education (for example, in the afternoons and evenings); instead, we decided to ask the participants to stay in the building full-time (from 9 am to 6 pm), but alternating the two types of work in a variety of combinations. From 7 pm onwards, there would be no additional tasks. The effect was that the participants worked intensely for some hours but were guaranteed some time for rest and distraction afterwards, something that seemed necessary when dealing with issues that require significant personal involvement.

How is this integration of virtual space and face-to-face teaching implemented? First, it is indispensable for all the participants in the course to have access to a computer connected to the internet (that is, with personal laptops or using the computer room of the building) so that all of them can introduce their written comments on the course webpage at the same time or engage in short research exercises (for example, about corporations and human

rights). Nevertheless, there must be a webpage system with interactive options that can be activated when the professors decide. In our case, these options were called threads, activities and debates, and they were the spaces where the participants in the course could introduce their opinions, comments or answers to specific questions, readings, films or guest lectures. Thirdly, to further this integration, there must be constant references by the professors to what has been done in the virtual space during the face-to-face activities to strengthen the connection between the two aspects of the course and increase the relevance of the written exercises. Overall, the effect of the use of this webpage was a significant increase in the students' involvement in face-to-face debates and activities.

To conclude, the view of the study on the use IT can have in a BE course can be summarized in one last point. In recent courses and conferences, e-learning and its contribution to teaching is often discussed in terms of a clash between new and traditional approaches to education. This tendency to place new and traditional teaching methods in opposing camps is a recurring theme in the educational field. However, this is a false dichotomy which probably also emerges in other disciplines. In this respect, it is interesting to read Dewey's comments in the first chapter of his work experience and education, entitled - Traditional versus progressive education:

"Mankind likes to think in terms of extreme opposites. It is given to formulate its beliefs in terms of either-ors, between which it recognizes no intermediate possibilities. [...] Educational philosophy is no exception. The history of educational theory is marked by opposition between the idea that education is a development from within and a formation from without, that is, it is based upon natural endowments and that education is a process of overcoming natural inclination and substituting in its place habits acquired under external pressure. [...] At present, the opposition, in so far as practical affairs of the school are concerned, tends to take the form of contrast between traditional and progressive education (Dewey, 1938: 17)."

Dewey's comments are as valid today as they were in 1938. IT is often presented as a new approach to education when compared with the kind of schooling we supposed to have received. Such ideas are often heard at conferences, especially from educational suppliers who have joined the IT bandwagon.

An enthusiasm that feeds on those who claim that we are either on or over, depending on whom you speak to, is in the threshold of the information society (Castells, 2001). Of course, there is some truth in all this, but it is also true that many of the so-called "new issues" are in fact not so very new. The teaching issues raised by IT

were already raised a long time ago and many ideas have already been tried in the field. It is one thing to try these ideas out on a large scale and identify its problems and is quite a different thing to ascribe a pioneering role to IT in resolving educational issues. It is therefore time to acknowledge that the role IT can play has probably been blown out of proportion. Jordi Riera, Dean of the Blanquerna Faculty of Psychology and Education at Ramon Llull University, provides an interesting reflection on this subject:

"[...] We have to find the right place for IT as part of a face-to-face model. Put in another way, we have to settle on our dot-com strategy. [...] We should not change our role in the educational process [...]. The presence and use of new means of communication and information does not guarantee socio-cognitive success. Ausubel has repeatedly demonstrated that meaningful learning for students does not lie in the technical aspects of the methodology adopted, but rather in basic decisions affecting the way the study contents are organized and the way the overall learning process is planned. In this respect, it is quite possible that a superb lecture can achieve what any number of wonderful IT tools and resources cannot. Once again, success is not the product of the technology employed, but of the proper planning of contents and theory (Riera, 2001, p. 53)".

## Conclusions

In the learning company, Pedler et al. (1991, pp. 49 - 51) argued that an innovative organization does not inevitably need to embark on massive projects involving everyone, but rather encourage small-scale experiments from which everyone can learn and reflect on their results, which is the first necessary step that can prove extremely worthwhile, before complementing measures within larger frameworks. Our experience had a similar goal: the use of IT in our course can in a way be considered modest, but at the same time the aim is to gain as much, an advantage, as possible from this limited use.

This paper has focused on describing the introduction of IT in a BE course, specifically as a support tool through a network of course websites – which performed the functions of what in commercial circles are called "technology platforms". Overall, the success of this experience is seen through the use of these websites, and as a result, student participation and commitment to the course increased. The main lessons that we have gathered from both our experience and thoughts on it could be summarized in three main ideas that have been exposed in this paper.

First, the introduction of IT need to include some reflection on the basic assumptions about the place and meaning of the course, the teaching methods one deems most suitable and the learning processes. Taking all of

this into account yields the framework within which learning takes place. Secondly, enthusiasm for the possibilities of virtual education should not blind us to the need for interpersonal dialogue and physical presence; rather, IT could contribute in both respects. Thirdly, the mere fact that something is possible does not mean that it is automatically necessary. Instead of trying to introduce innovation in one fell swoop, it is better to ask what each new IT item contributes to learning.

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