

Using Backwards Design to Develop An Online Organizational Leadership Course

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The purpose of this paper is to describe the development process of an online organizational ethics course using a backwards design model, provide rationale and efficacy of this approach, and illustrate course curriculum output. Course competencies were divided into strategic, procedural and factual knowledge that integrate leadership and applied ethics.

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Introduction

Various authors in leadership studies have expressed that leadership and ethics are inseparable constructs (Ciulla, 2003; Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Trevino, Hartman & Brown, 2000). A comprehensive longitudinal study by Kouzes and Posner found that honesty was a variable frequently identified by constituents as the most admirable value, trait, or characteristic in leadership. Trevino, Hartman, and Brown explored the reputation of leaders and found that it is not enough to be an ethical person, but also to be perceived as an ethical leader. Leaders were seen as a critical thread to defining and weaving principles and standards within the moral fabric of the organization.

Although ethical leadership has been identified as a need in organizations, Ciulla (1995) found through a meta-analysis of 1800 article abstract that only a limited number of articles provided an in-depth exploration or discussion of ethics and leadership. Articles discussing ethics and leadership appeared fragmented in their focus on honesty, integrity, and morality of leadership. This extensive review led to an unveiling that research and teaching leadership ethics should not only focus on developing more ethical leaders, but also at re-conceptualizing what and how we think about ethical theory and leadership practice. The goal of this project was to integrate ethics into leadership education, not as a mere appendage, but as a deeply embedded and practical construct in the study of leadership. In effort to highlight ethics as a critical and applied leadership practice, a backward course design model was implemented to more efficaciously target the desired competencies gained in the course.

Background

The leadership ethics curriculum was developed using a “backward design” model developed by Wiggins and McTighe (2001). The curriculum was not conceptualized around a favorite or traditional ethics textbook, set of readings, or specific instructional methods to influence or elevate learning to a certain standard. The curriculum was developed with the end or desired result in mind. The end result is monitored by a set of evidence measures. Results will be mediated by standards and teaching needed to equip students to execute desired results or objectives.

Wiggins and McTighe (2001) also call this backward design planned coaching as it requires various lessons and practices needed to master key performances. The design requires operationalization of goals in terms of assessment evidence. Evidence of learning clarifies the direction of the teaching and learning target for the student. The authors found that increased clarity among desired results, key performances, teaching, and learning experiences leads to better student performance – the ultimate purpose of the design

The course is eight weeks long and divided into two-week module sessions. Every module focuses on a competency theme with required evidence of mastery (see Table 1). Competencies are developed through a video and book series that require weekly in-depth reflection, contemplation, and online discussion. The modules incorporate factual and reflective readings that lead to evidence of mastery conveyed in online discussion postings, responses, and module critical reflection papers. Modules have specific grading rubrics to evaluate evidence of mastery in online discussions and reflection papers.

Table 1. Module Themes

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| <p>MODULE ONE: Introspective reflection on worldviews and responses to ethical dilemmas MODULE TWO: Identifying personal values and appreciating diversity MODULE THREE: Developing community and discovering a common ground MODULE FOUR: Morality in the organizational setting and solving ethical dilemmas</p> |
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How it works/Results to date

First Stage

Backward design is a four-stage process. The first stage is to first identify course competencies. Course competencies were divided into strategic, procedural, and factual knowledge (see Table 2). Strategic knowledge represents complex thinking strategies and processes that students will develop in the course. Procedural knowledge encompasses the procedures, techniques or methods that students will learn to use in the course. Factual knowledge includes facts, details, concepts, and terminology that students will learn throughout the course.

Table 2. Levels of Knowledge

STRATEGIC

- Develop a strategy to identify and describe their worldview and appreciate diversity
- Develop a strategy to balance personal virtues with organizational values
- Develop a strategy to create a cooperative community with shared values
- Develop a strategy to analyze ethical dilemmas and recommend a course of action

PROCEDURAL

- How to define personal virtues
- How to balance personal virtues with organizational values
- How to create a cooperative community with shared values
- How to analyze ethical dilemmas

FACTUAL

- An understanding of traditional philosophical ethics
- An understanding of organizational ethics
- An understanding of personal morals and virtues
- An understanding of ethical-decision making model
- An understanding of modern ethical dilemmas in organizations

Second Stage

The second stage in the design is to develop evidence of student mastery while taking in consideration the identified competencies of the course. Evidence represents student thinking or behavior that indicate student mastery of the strategic knowledge competencies in the course. Students will be required to generate questions and gather information on their responses to ethical problems and construct a matrix to describe responses to ethical problems. The course will require students to identify their personal virtues and explain methods to balance them with organizational values. Upon completion of the course students will be able to explain methods or practices from professional experience proven to be successful in developing cooperative community. Lastly, student will be able to generate questions and gather information on substantive content related to ethical misalignments in order to compare substantive content to the vision and mission of the organization and stakeholder values. This will in turn lead to the ability to proceed and talk through ethical decision-making steps and recommend a course of action (Cooper, 1998).

Third Stage

The third stage requires instructors to reflect on the primary differences between the way an expert, graduate of this course, and a novice in this discipline think and respond to complex problems. The main method of assessing students will be through informal blackboard discussions and formal writing assignments. Blackboard discussions are guided by case method. Students are required to transfer factual knowledge to analysis of cases and discussions. In addition, students are also required to develop personal cases that reflect ethical problems or dilemmas from their work setting and write critical reflection papers. The final assignment will

require students to identify an ethical problem from work and implement an ethical decision-making model. The goal of the final assignment is to simulate current and postmodern ethical problems encountered in leadership and organizations, apply the decision-making model, and recommend a course of action. Students will find they are combining “real-world” scenarios with varying ethics theories, and implementing course content from previous modules to develop well-grounded and rigorous recommendations.

Fourth Stage

The final stage of backward design requires the instructor to conceptualize methods of teaching identified competencies. The pedagogical methods used to teach competencies reflect an electronic Cognitive Apprenticeship Framework developed by Bonk and Wang (1999). The goal of this framework is to develop an environment to support teaching of case-based learning through the online platform. Electronic apprenticeship generates a collaborative learning environment that mediates exchange of information, dialogue, and collaboration. This pedagogy allows for dissemination, application, and transfer of knowledge without in spite of geographic limitations.

Table 3. Cognitive Apprenticeship Framework

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Modeling• Coaching• Scaffolding• Fading• Reflection• Articulation• Exploration |
|---|

Conclusions/Recommendations

This course responds to the need of leadership ethics education identified in literature by directly addressing competencies needed in the field. This leadership ethics course provides opportunities for students to learn to identify and describe their worldview and how their background molded their personal and professional character. Students will introspectively analyze and increase awareness of responses to ethical problems and develop appreciation for the diverse values of constituents. Students will depart from this course having gained leadership competencies deeply grounded in applied ethics.

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