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# Engendering Ethics through Practice in the Project-Based Business Communication Course

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ENGENDERING ETHICS THROUGH PRACTICE IN THE  
PROJECT-BASED BUSINESS COMMUNICATION COURSE

by

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Bachelor of Arts  
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## DEDICATION

To Nina. “Du älskar mig när jag minst av allt förtjänar det.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It was my good fortune to serve as Pat Gehrke's teaching assistant in the spring of 2014. In addition to receiving a wealth of practical training from a master teacher, I was privileged to be on board for the creation of a project-based business communication class. It was the research for and implementation of that class that led to this thesis. So my warmest gratitude to Pat Gehrke, whose understanding of my past, accommodation of my present, and encouragement for my future has been extremely beneficial to me.

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Finally I would like to acknowledge Professor Anne-Marie Sondergaard Christensen. Her excellent articles on Wittgenstein were a great help, and she was kind enough to not only respond to my emailed questions about Wittgenstein's philosophy, but also to send additional reading material. Any misunderstanding or misapplication of Wittgenstein's work in this thesis is entirely due to my own deficiencies!

## ABSTRACT

Business related degrees perennially make up roughly 20% of all college degrees awarded. At the same time, business ethics continues to be a much-discussed problem. I capitalize on the close connection between communication and ethics in order to offer a partial solution to the problem in the form of a project-based business communication class. After establishing a complementary view of business ethics, I go on to suggest the ethical focus for the project-based communication class. I then argue for the special suitability of business communication for such an approach, after which I go on to discuss the work of Wittgenstein as a philosophical basis. I then give a presentation of a model project-based business communication class, discuss some advantages of this model and then offer solutions to a number of possible problems with, or objections to, the project-based model. The solution presented here opens the door for business communication classes to make an ethical difference in business and ultimately in the world at large.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In 2016 major companies in the US, including Google, Microsoft, GM, Apple, Pfizer and PepsiCo, allegedly reduced their U.S. tax bills by an estimated \$111 billion through the legal use of elaborately structured tax schemes.<sup>1</sup>

In 2016, four young business students from Earlham College pitched their Magic Bus proposal at the Hult Prize Global Finals and won \$1million in seed funding. One of the judges had the following to say: Their idea uses an app to solve a serious transportation problem in Africa, and in doing so increase the livelihood of bus drivers (up to one million) as well as “provide dignified, reliable public transportation to the billion people in the world with the lowest income.”<sup>2</sup> Whereas before, people could wait for several hours for a bus, and drivers’ profit margins were so low that they were often reluctant to leave a stop without a full load of passengers, the new app allows people to find out what buses are available, get an estimate of the time they will be there, and buy tickets ahead of time. Purchasing the tickets ahead of time allows the drivers to plan their routes more efficiently, make more money, and provide more timely service. Initial implementation of the app in test markets has been very successful.

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<sup>1</sup>“Broken at the Top: How America’s dysfunctional tax system costs billions in corporate tax dodging.” Boston: Oxfam, 2006. [https://www.oxfamamerica.org/static/media/files/Broken\\_at\\_the\\_Top\\_FINAL\\_EMBARGOED\\_4.12.2016.pdf](https://www.oxfamamerica.org/static/media/files/Broken_at_the_Top_FINAL_EMBARGOED_4.12.2016.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Devin Thorpe, “Hult Prize Winners To Deploy \$1M Prize Improving Public Transit in Kenya,” *Forbes*, October 5, 2016, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/devinthorpe/2016/10/05/hult-prize-winners-to-deploy-1m-prize-improving-public-transit-in-kenya/#13b39d647449>.

On the one hand we have the amazing potential of business students, while on the other we have businesses that put profit before social good. This creates an excellent opportunity for educators to make a difference. In the pages to follow I make a case for making a difference through the implementation of an ethics-centered, project-based Business Communication course. My method here is somewhat unorthodox in that I am going against the trend in scholarship towards an ever-narrowing focus, and instead using a rather broad brush to make an overarching appeal. My aim is to create a space, propose a focus, suggest suitability, establish a foundation, give an example, and provide pedagogical reassurance in order to inspire the implementation of ethics-centered, project-based business communication courses. In Chapter 1 I create a space for the model course by an appeal to the history of business ethics and a differentiation between business ethics proper and ethics-in-business. In Chapter 2, I use the early history of ethics-in-business in the U.S. to propose the ethical focus for the model course. In Chapter 3 I discuss why business communication is especially suited as a class promoting ethics-in-business. In Chapter 4 I draw on the work of Wittgenstein in order to establish a foundation for approaching ethics in the model course and to argue for the value of practice in engendering ethics-in-business. Chapter 5 presents an example of the model class, based on a pilot course I assisted with at the University of South Carolina. Chapter 6 provides pedagogical reassurance by bringing attention to some of the advantages of such a class and answering a number of possible objections. I hope that this broad approach will encourage business communication professionals towards further research and refinement of the course model, and that this will ultimately result in increasing the number of students that become good people who communicate well.

## CHAPTER 2

### A COMPLEMENTARY VIEW OF BUSINESS ETHICS

“As with writing, what absurdity to think that one can teach ethics in a single course!”<sup>3</sup>

“The Real Reason New College Grads Can’t Get Hired” reads the headline, “lack of ‘communication and interpersonal skills’” reads the text (*Time*, Nov 10, 2013).<sup>4</sup> “This is the real reason new graduates can’t get hired”, reads the headline, “deficient in such key workplace skills as written and oral communication...” reads the text (*BBC Capital* Nov 19, 2015).<sup>5</sup> If news reports are to be believed, business ethics teachers may be the reason business graduates often get fired, but business communication teachers are the reason students don’t get hired. So why on earth would any sane teacher want to combine these two elements in one class? After all, the business communication teacher already has the overwhelming task of teaching students to produce good written and verbal communication in a variety of styles and media. One may think that a few case studies scattered around the course are fine, and maybe taking a few minutes here and there to point out ethical concerns is doable, but there really isn’t time to devote to ethics. Not to mention the difficulty of trying to master and explain all the various theories and techniques of a different discipline.

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<sup>3</sup> Ronald R. Simms, *Teaching Business Ethics for Effective Learning* (Westport: Quorum, 2002), 287.

<sup>4</sup> Martha C. White, “The Real Reason New College Grads Can’t Get Hired,” *Time*, November 10, 2013. <http://business.time.com/2013/11/10/the-real-reason-new-college-grads-cant-get-hired/>.

<sup>5</sup> Ronald Alsop, “This is the real reason new graduates can’t get hired,” *BBC*, November 19, 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/capital/story/20151118-this-is-the-real-reason-new-graduates-cant-get-hired>.

While it is true that business communication teachers have the primary responsibility of teaching business communication, it is not true that they have no responsibility to teach ethics nor is it true that they have to become business ethics teachers to do so. The following section provides a historical basis for why this is the case, and indicates a place for business communication teachers to inhabit relative to business communication.

Can business ethics be taught? Over 100 years ago, in a *Wall Street Journal* editorial from May 24, 1913 the writer says:

Without any desire to disparage scholastic courses in business conduct, and with every desire to hold up the hands of those who are trying to instill ethics (when it means moral principles) into the minds of the coming generation, it must be said that ‘business ethics’ can never be the product of schools. Plain, old-fashioned, unselfish honesty is all there is to it.”<sup>6</sup>

In an interview from *Economic Times*, March 19, 2013, David Wilson, president of the Graduate Management Admissions Council says, “We are not going to change the ethical fibre in a business school. Teaching ethics does not make students ethical. It has to be part of the DNA.”<sup>7</sup> As we see from the above quotes, this concern over whether business ethics can be taught has been around since business ethics began well over 100 years ago - or 40 years ago - depending on who you ask and how you define business ethics. This disagreement over the history of business ethics as a discipline is a problem for it, especially as it relates to the goals and expectations of business ethics courses. However,

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in James Melvin Lee, *Business ethics: a manual of modern morals* (New York: Ronald Press, 1926), 54.

<sup>7</sup> Saumya Bhattacharya, “Ethics can’t be taught in business school: GMAC president David Wilson,” *Economic Times*, March 19, 2013. <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/opinion/interviews/ethics-cant-be-taught-in-business-school-gmac-president-david-wilson/articleshow/19051640.cms>.

there is a potential solution that gives business communication, as well as other disciplines across the business curriculum, the opportunity and space to work alongside yet outside of the field of business ethics.

Richard De George, in an article from April 1, 1987 says,

“Business ethics is so recent a phenomenon that many might claim it is too young to have a history... As late as the 1970s it was still possible to ask whether there was such a thing as business ethics, by the mid – 1980s that question is no longer appropriate, even though it is not altogether clear just what business ethics is.”<sup>8</sup>

Almost exactly 29 years later, in a book published May 6, 2016, Michela Betta in commenting about an article from 1927 by Wallace Donham (dean of Harvard Business School from 1919-1942), says that after Donham’s book: “It took more than 30 years for a public discourse about ethics in capitalist business to emerge. Theorists such as Bowen (1953) and Baumhart (1961) can be credited with being the founders of modern business ethics.”<sup>9</sup> These sentiments are not confined to the two authors cited, but are representative of a common narrative in the field. Yet a simple date-restricted Google Scholar search troubles this narrative. During the course of my research I became disturbed by the apparent discrepancies between articles and books available from the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the common claim that business ethics sprang up in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The work of Gabriel Abend (2013, 2014) confirmed my suspicions. He has brought attention to this issues and states, “historically false statements about it [history of business ethics] are widespread,” and further, “the business

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<sup>8</sup> Richard T. De George, “The Status of Business Ethics: Past and Future,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 6, no. 3 (April 1987): 201, doi: 10.1007/BF00382865.

<sup>9</sup> Michela Betta, *Ethimentality – Ethics in Capitalist Economy, Business, and Society* (Dordrecht: Springer Nature, 2016), 20.

ethics literature is rife with inaccurate, vague, and downright false statements about it [the early history or business ethics].<sup>10</sup> While I am largely in agreement with Abend on this point and think that this is an area of concern and that it is part of the overall problem with business and ethics, it should be noted that a possible solution to this issue has been offered from within the field itself. In light of this solution, the apparent discrepancy has the potential to be something positive for the field of business ethics and opens a space for other disciplines to approach business ethics in their own classes. The key to this is provided by De George's differentiation between what he calls "ethics-in-business" and business ethics, a key that is reflected in Betta's phrase "modern business ethics."

According to De George, "ethics-in-business" refers to "the long tradition of applying ethical norms to business..."<sup>11</sup> This is what the phrase "business ethics" connotes to the general public (and arguably, many in academia). "Business ethics" on the other hand, refers to the academic field of business ethics, which De George defines as "the systematic study of the morality existing in business."<sup>12</sup> While ethics-in-business is largely concerned with ethical infractions, in the sense of those in business doing something that is seen as unethical, business ethics tends to be more concerned with the underlying structure of the entities themselves (e.g. capitalism). There is good reason to argue that even if De George is correct in this (and to me his points seem valid and his academic credentials are such that a mistake seems unlikely), this definition/separation is either largely unknown or else unaccepted, even within the field of business ethics. For

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<sup>10</sup> Gabriel Abend, "The Origins of Business Ethics in American Universities, 1902-1936," *Business Ethics Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (April 2013): 171 & 174, doi: 10.5840/beq201323214. Abend has also written a full-length work that addresses this issue. See Gabriel Abend, *The Moral Background: An Inquiry into the History of Business Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Richard T. De George "A History of Business Ethics," in *Values and Ethics for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. Francisco Gonzalez (Madrid: BBVA, 2011), 337.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 344.

example, the relatively new and highly touted GVV (Giving Voice to Values)<sup>13</sup> approach to teaching business ethics classes, “focuses on action rather than an attempt to use ethical theories or use ethical decision models”<sup>14</sup> and it seems to fit much better within De George’s category of “ethics-in-business” than in his category of “business ethics.” Yet the literature around GVV gives no indication that it does not belong within the realm of business ethics proper. My point is not to get bogged down in arguing about the discipline of business ethics. However, I do wish to follow De George’s potentially corrective understanding of “ethics-in-business” vs. “business ethics,” since it serves a number of useful functions for the ethics-focused business communication class. And while there is a great deal of overlap between the two (ethics-in-business and business ethics), such overlap is only natural and does not detract overmuch from the benefits of this separation.

The first benefit is that it allows the business ethics field to do what it should do, and that is teach business ethics and produce scholarly literature. The word “teach” here refers to teaching that is concerned with the structure of existing entities, ethical theories, and strategies for dealing with complex ethical decisions. An example of a complex ethical decision would be something like GMO crops, where common sense and a desire to do the right thing does not automatically and naturally lead to an easy answer.

The second thing this readjustment of purpose does is frees business ethics from the onus for all ethical business failures and places it on the academy and society as a whole. The necessity of this was recognized early on. Roswell C. McCrae of the Wharton

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<sup>13</sup> See Mary C. Gentile, *Giving Voice to Values: How to Speak Your Mind When You Know What’s Right* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> Tracy L. Gonzalez-Padron, *et al.* “A Critique of Giving Voice to Values Approach to Business Ethics Education,” *Journal of Academic Ethics* 10, no.4 (December 2012): 252, doi:10.1007/s10805-012-9168-1.

School wrote in 1913 of social ethical concerns that: “So far as the teaching of general social topics contributes to this result, it seems to me that they might well be an integral part of the curriculum of any school of business.”<sup>15</sup> When this sort of concern is an “integral part of the curriculum”, the business ethics class is allowed to be primarily concerned with teaching things that are measurable, instead of being open to having results judged by scandals and failures. Those who have tried to teach composition have a general idea of what this sort of blame feels like. However, there are a number of things that make it worse for the business ethics field. In the first place, while business ethics as defined, can certainly be taught, ethics-in-business is not teachable, at least not in the sense of teaching something like writing. In the second place, when composition students perform poorly they are not wiping out grandma’s savings or destroying huge swaths of rainforest. To put the blame for ethical lapses in business on one class in one discipline is like blaming high school health teachers for the latest STD epidemic.

The third advantage to this distinction is that it opens a place alongside business ethics that allows other disciplines the opportunity to fulfill their own responsibilities in the area of ethics-in-business without having to learn an entirely new field or seeming to infringe on the discipline of business ethics. As a business composition teacher I may not have the time or the knowledge to delve into the ethical issues surrounding chemical manufacturers, or get into the philosophical intricacies of ethics proper. However, any ethical instructor can make contributions towards encouraging ethics-in-business. In the following section we will look to history to see a simple solution to what the focus of our ethical aim should be.

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<sup>15</sup> Roswell C. McCrea, “The Work of the Wharton School of Finance and Commerce,” *Journal of Political Economy* 21, no. 2 (February 1913), 115, doi:10.1086/252164.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE ETHICAL FOCUS

Though the concerns of the early writers on business ethics may seem prescient, they were based firmly on events of the time. There was a common theme that business should be viewed as something that produced a social good, rather than something just to make money. Harvey Alden Wooster, in an article entitled “University Schools of Business and a New Business Ethic” that appeared in the *Journal of Political Economy* in January of 1919 presents a well reasoned and thorough treatment of this idea. The article is about the newest member of the academy, the business school. While Wharton was founded in 1881, Harvard’s business school started 1908 and MIT’s in 1914, so business schools were definitely still the new kids on the block in 1919.

Wooster begins by differentiating between the professions and business, saying that business is not yet a profession but that it may become one. This differentiation he bases predominately on “the nature of the service rendered,” and “the existence of ethical codes.”<sup>16</sup> He then argues that though there exists a sort of ethics in business, it is flawed at heart, since whereas the professional is taught that the aim of his profession is service to the public, the businessman is taught that his aim is the bottom line, or profit.<sup>17</sup> He suggests that individuals are not fully to blame for unethical behavior in business, due to this difference in the conception of business as opposed to the professions. In language

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<sup>16</sup> Harvey Alden Wooster, “University Schools of Business and a New Business Ethics,” *Journal of Political Economy* 27, no. 1 (January 1919): 48, doi: 10.1086/253150.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 50.

that foreshadows Gordon Gekko, Wooster says, “The difference is that the code of professions is in the main the code of service, while the code of business is that of the battle and the game, a game with few rules to regulate the conduct of the players and no umpire. A few individuals transcend it, but the majority do not.”<sup>18</sup>

Wooster goes on to identify the professional code as having a threefold standard of moral conduct towards the public at large, competitors, and patients (customers).<sup>19</sup> He then argues that though things have gotten much better since the late 1800’s, the world would be much better off if the university could help business mirror the ethics of the professions, since “even the better-than-average business man seldom has much vision into the operations of business as related to the social scheme of things. His business is his for the purpose of making money.”<sup>20</sup> He puts the weight of this responsibility on the business school as a whole, and says that through success in this area “they may easily justify themselves as serviceable and necessary parts of our general scheme of public education...” But if they do not, then “they are only with difficulty to be justified except as servants of the business group to be supported at the expense of business for its own benefit.”<sup>21</sup> This sentence is particularly disturbing, as it places educators in the business school in the position of minions for business. He goes on to warn that, “if the change is ever to be made [in business schools] it must be made before they themselves become a part of the mores of business as it is and was, and change in them becomes all but impossible.”<sup>22</sup> Giacalone and Thompson in an article from 2006, argue that business schools have done just what Wooster warned against. They contend that business schools

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 51.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 48-49.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 52.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 62.

are based on a worldview that seeks profit first, and that “instilling the primacy of a financially driven, materialistic superordinate set of goals ahead of integrity leaves ethics and social responsibility subordinate.”<sup>23</sup>

Wooster strikes a hopeful tone in stating that the government takeover of so many businesses during WWI, “is forcing upon an increasing number of business men, young and old, the notion that service is the proper aim of industry.”<sup>24</sup> However, he fears that instead of business adopting a code of ethics similar to that of the traditional professions, the opposite was already occurring, and states “if the professions are less marked by conduct clearly antisocial, it is because the professional man is less subject to temptation than the business man.”<sup>25</sup>

I think it is fair to say that the public opinion of lawyers, clergy, and even doctors has plummeted in the nearly 100 years since Wooster’s article. If anything, his fear that business was corrupting the professions seems to have been fully realized. His main point is more relevant than ever. Business needs to be reimagined as directed toward service rather than profit. Of course this raises questions in the modern age that may not have been problematic a hundred years ago. For example, it can be argued that Facebook is a social good based on the fact that it enhances communication between family and friends. However, Jaron Lanier argues that Facebook makes its profits by utilizing users as products not customers.<sup>26</sup> So what are the ethical ramifications of treating someone who perhaps imagines they are a consumer, as an actual product? Should Facebook pay users

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<sup>23</sup> R.A. Giacalone, and K. R. Thompson. “Business ethics and social responsibility education: Shifting the worldview,” *Academy of Management Learning and Education*. 5, no. 3 (September 2006): 274, doi: 10.5465/AMLE.2006.22697016.

<sup>24</sup> Wooster, “University Schools,” 62.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 63.

<sup>26</sup> For this and other thought provoking critiques of the Internet age, see Jaron Lanier, *Who Owns the Future?* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013), and *You Are Not a Gadget* (New York: Knopf, 2010).

for the content they create? These sorts of questions belong to business ethics proper and do not change the advantages of repositioning business as a service, though arguably if more businesses had social good as a higher motive than profit, such questions would be much more rare.

This change in focus from pecuniary gain to social benefit is the primary ethical goal for the proposed project-based class and places business in an entirely different framework, one in which ethical violations are not only immoral, but also antisocial in the sense that they are “opposed to the principles on which society is constituted.”<sup>27</sup> If students can be taught to understand business in the proper role of a social good, and to make that social good the focus, then ethics in business will take a great leap forward. And it is hoped that even in the act of practicing this viewpoint, students will benefit ethically.

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<sup>27</sup> "antisocial, adj.". OED Online. March 2017. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/8863?rskey=Liekmi&result=1&isAdvanced=false>.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE SPECIAL SUITABILITY OF BUSINESS COMMUNICATION FOR ETHICS

The business communication course is the most natural place in the business school for ethics-in-business. This claim is supported by the close correlation between communication and behavior, a correlation that may well have been recognized for as long as communication has existed. It's no stretch to imagine an early language-capable humanoid coming back from a foraging trip with a full belly and answering the inevitable query from his tribe about success with whatever passed for a communication of the concept "no". And the consequent condemnation by the tribe if they discovered the truth is easy to envision as well. A secondary consideration is the apparent link between written communication and commerce.

The recognition of the correlation between communication and morals is evident in the religious traditions of the world. The Judeo/Christian creation story presents communication as the entry point for evil into the world (Genesis 3), while in the New Testament Satan is called "the father of lies" (John 8:44). Buddhism has the fourth precept, "avoid false speech" and "while the precept specifically refers only to avoiding false speech, it is generally seen to entail avoiding other forms of 'wrong speech' ... which cause mental turmoil or other forms of suffering in oneself or others."<sup>28</sup> In Islam, the Devil figure Shaytan is a deceiver and "[l]ying is the source of all unethical deeds and

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<sup>28</sup>Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 74.

miserable acts...”<sup>29</sup> And in Greek mythology, Alethia (truth) is countered by Apate (fraud, deception) who has Dolos (trickery) as her male counterpart and the Pseudologoi (lies) as her companions.<sup>30</sup> Michael Peters in his article “The History and Practice of Lying in Public Life”, says, “There is a deep-seated tendency dating from early Christian sources that lying is a defective function of language and that its structure deforms communication to the harm of society generally...”<sup>31</sup> Peters goes on to argue through interaction with Max Urichs and Wittgenstein that this “normative” view doesn’t stand up to ‘formal and logical analysis.’<sup>32</sup> However, for all practical purposes, if all fraud, trickery, and lies were to be removed from all business communication, then there would be no more ethical violations in business.

This connection comes together nicely in the English proverb, “Evil communication corrupts good manners.” It is not surprising that the word communication, as used in the proverb, carries the meaning of “interpersonal contact”. The proverb comes from early English translations of the words of I Corinthians 15:33, where the Greek word *ὁμιλία* (homily – which later was used for a sermon) is translated “communication”. “The word *ὁμιλία* is related to the verb *ὁμιλεῖν* which means ‘to be in company with, to converse with, to speak to, to address, to talk.’”<sup>33</sup> The meaning can also

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<sup>29</sup> Abbas J. Ali, *Business Ethics in Islam* (Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2014), 49.

<sup>30</sup> See Brent Potter, “Eudaimonia, Faith (Pistis), and Truth (Aletheia): Greek Roots and the Construction of Personal Meaning,” *Journal of Constructivist Psychology* 30, no.1 (January 2017): 60, doi:10.1080/10720537.2015.1119090; Barbara Biscotti, “Debtor’s Fraud in Roman Law. An Opportunity for Some Brief Remarks on the Concept of Fraud,” *Fundamina: A Journal Of Legal History* 17, no. 2 (January 2011): 3, <http://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC120505>.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Peters, "The History And Practice Of Lying In Public Life," *Review Of Contemporary Philosophy* 14 (2015): 50, *Humanities Source*, EBSCOhost.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 50-52.

<sup>33</sup> Valeriy A. Alikin, *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering* (Boston: Brill, 2010), 185.

be stated as “social intercourse or a communal gathering.”<sup>34</sup> “Manners” in this proverb, is of course not related to acting polite around company, but rather the now obsolete meaning which is: “a person’s habitual behaviour or conduct; morals” (OED). So to give the proverb a more modern twist, “corrupt communication leads to corrupt behavior.”

Some go even further in the link between communication and ethics. Robert L. Ballard states that, “...communication is not merely the transmission of our thoughts to others as we have traditionally conceived it. Rather, communication is ethics. In communicating we actually engage in a moral act.”<sup>35</sup> How much one agrees with this sentiment likely depends on one’s definition of communication. Here I have no desire to get bogged down with defining communication, but neither do I want to go back to the view of the latter part of the last century when, according to Robert T. Craig, “it became conventional wisdom among communication scholars... that to argue over definitions of communication was pointless.”<sup>36</sup> The definition I have in mind in this work is communication as the transformation of information through writing, speech, and gestures. For me, on the basis of this definition, it becomes difficult to envision unethical behavior that does not involve communication. Even murder can be seen as the result of an unethical gesture. One is transferring the information to the victim that he either hates her, is angry at her, values material things over her life, or perhaps in extreme cases, sees no value in her at all. Of course one does not have to take it this far to still acknowledge the close relationship between communication and ethics. And in business the link is

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<sup>34</sup> Anna-Liisa Tolonen, “Preaching, Feasting and Making Space for a Meaning,” in *Spaces in Late Antiquity: Cultural, Theological and Archaeological Perspectives*, ed. Juliette Day, et al. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 119.

<sup>35</sup> Robert L. Ballard, “Granpa’s Call: Conscience, Ethics, and Aporias,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 15, no. 3 (October 2008): 472, doi:10.1177/1077800408318279.

<sup>36</sup> Robert T. Craig, “Communication Theory as a Field,” *Communication Theory*, 9, no. 2 (May 1999): 122, doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2885.1999.tb00355.x.

especially clear. Transparent, ethical communication and unethical behavior in business are simply antithetical.

One more thing to note before leaving this chapter is the close relationship between writing and commerce. While the origins of writing lie so far in the past that scholars are justifiably cautious, one common theory is that cuneiform was invented at the ancient city of Uruk in modern day Iraq sometime around 3200 BC.<sup>37</sup> Temple accountants used the system “to keep track of rations of beer and bread, and to monitor flocks of sheep and goats.”<sup>38</sup> How long it took for someone to falsify this writing is impossible to say, but it would not be surprising if unethical scribes learned early on that a convenient slip of the stylus could result in more beer at home. Jump forward 5,200 years and you have the falsification of written communication (as well as the subsequent destroying of written communication) resulting in the downfall of the Arthur Andersen accounting firm, the once highly regarded descendants of those first accountants who sat scratching records of goats, beer, and bread into soft clay.

In light of the entwined nature of communication and business, it should not be a question of whether ethics should be part of the business communication curriculum, or even a matter of different methods to cover ethics in our classrooms. Instead it should be a case of ensuring that ethics is the focal point of the business communication course. While it is true that our primary responsibility is to teach business communication, a proper understanding of the interwoven nature of communication and ethics means that if

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<sup>37</sup> Irving Finkel and Jonathan Taylor, *Cuneiform* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2015), 11; Amalia E. Gnanadesikan, *The Writing Revolution: Cuneiform to the Internet* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 13-18.

<sup>38</sup> Finkel and Taylor, *Cuneiform*, 11.

our students leave the classroom with exceptional “business communication” skills, but without a firm ethical grounding, then we have failed.

## CHAPTER 5

### WITTGENSTEIN AND ETHICS AS PRACTICE

Reading Wittgenstein I am repeatedly reminded of Karl Barth's joke that, "In theology one never knows: does he have me or do I have him."<sup>39</sup> This fear of "being had" in the sense of totally misrepresenting someone by arguing a position that is actually diametrically opposed to his or her position is particularly palpable in the case of Wittgenstein. In an email I received from the Wittgenstein scholar Anne-Marie Christensen, she said, "I do think that Wittgenstein could serve as a background and inspiration for that kind of practice. But of course there is a wide room for interpretation on the way from his ethical reflections to an ethical practice as the one you are trying to establish."<sup>40</sup> With all that in mind, this chapter is an attempt to utilize the work of Wittgenstein in order to build a foundation for ethics as practice in the business communication course.

So far in this paper I have argued for a separation between business ethics and ethics-in-business, and that social good should be the focus of any attempt to "teach" ethics in business. I have pointed out some of the advantages to this approach, but there are potential disadvantages as well. What is to be done when we have realized that what we are dealing with in ethics-in-business is not a lack of knowledge or even a lack of belief, but rather with free agents seeking the most convenient way to reach the goal of profit? Do we even have the right to approach business ethics when an appeal to some

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<sup>39</sup> Hans Küng, *Great Christian Thinkers* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 192.

<sup>40</sup> Anne-Marie Søndergaard Christensen, email message to author, March 2, 2017.

standard of ethical reasoning such as deontology or utilitarianism is no longer an option? Should we trust our students to do the right thing? Wittgenstein's view of ethics provides answers to these questions and helps provide a foundation for a practical approach to ethics-in-business.

The first thing we find is a rejection of theory. Wittgenstein says, "the Ethical cannot be taught. If it took a theory to explain the nature of the ethical to someone, then the ethical would have no value at all."<sup>41</sup> The inclusion of such a quote in a work that aspires to "teach" ethics may seem illogical. However, I have taken pains, sometimes at the risk of creating painfully convoluted phrases, to avoid using the word "teach." I have argued, following De George, that ethics-in-business is something different than business ethics. Ethics-in-business concerns violations attributable to will rather than violations attributable to lack of knowledge. Bernie Madoff, Ken Lay, Jordan Belfort, these individuals did not engage in unethical behavior because they did not have the theory at hand, or because they simply didn't understand what they were doing. Wittgenstein cuts to the heart of the matter by asserting that the ethical is not some theory that can be applied to problems in order to solve them.<sup>42</sup> To further illustrate this difference we can imagine a car that will not start. An internal combustion engine requires fire, fuel, and air in order to run and getting the car to start again is simply a matter of applying different theories until finding one that enables me to fix the car (or to determine that it is not worth fixing!). But Wittgenstein is arguing that ethical problems do not constitute something that needs to be fixed. The only conflict is between the way a certain situation

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<sup>41</sup> Friedrich Waismann, *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle: Conversations* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1979), 116.

<sup>42</sup> Anne-Marie S. Christensen, "Wittgenstein and Ethics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Wittgenstein*, ed Oskari Juusela and Marie McGinn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 797.

is, and the expectation a subject has in regard to that situation. If I want/need more profit for my business and the only way I can get it is through cheating, then there is no ethical problem to solve. The problem is between my expectations of profit and the reality of the situation. No theory is going to free me from ultimately having to make a choice. There is only an action to take, and the action I choose shows my ethics. In other words, as Wittgenstein states it, “an ethical sentence is a personal action. Not a statement of fact.”<sup>43</sup> As Christensen explains, since ethics comes out of actions, our active embracing or shunning of something shows what is ethical for us. So the problem so often in business ethics is that our embrace of profit is such that it leaves little or no room to embrace social good. There is no theory that can address that problem, and we end up like the proverbial monkey whose hand is stuck in the jar because he won’t let go of the prize within. This is why Wittgenstein talks of the necessity of having the right attitude towards the situations that occur in our lives.<sup>44</sup> He says, “If life becomes hard to bear we think of improvements [a change in situation]. But the most important and effective improvement, in our own attitude, hardly occurs to us, and we can decide on this only with the utmost difficulty.”<sup>45</sup>

The second thing we see is the affirmation of action. In saying that statements about ethics are meaningless, Wittgenstein is not implying that it is nonsense to talk about ethics or that we have to be silent about the subject.<sup>46</sup> Rather he is contending that we cannot conclusively say that our view is right, we can only act on our view. As

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<sup>43</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Wittgenstein’s Nachlass – The Bergen Electronic Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) “Tagebuch aus dem Koder” 183, p 76, 31.05.06 (trans. Anne-Marie Christensen), quoted in Anne-Marie Christensen, “Wittgenstein and Ethical Norms: The Question of Ineffability Visited and Revisited,” *Ethic@* 3, no. 2 (2004): 125, <https://periodicos.ufsc.br/index.php/ethic/article/view/14772>.

<sup>44</sup> Anne-Marie Sondergaard Christensen, “A Glorious Sun and a Bad Person’. Wittgenstein, Ethical Reflection and the Other,” *Philosophia* 39 no. 2 (2011): 209, doi:10.1007/s11406-010-9292-y.

<sup>45</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* Quoted in Christensen, “Wittgenstein and Ethics,” 798.

<sup>46</sup> Christensen, “Wittgenstein and Ethics,” 802.

Christensen explains it, “The only way to show that you think this particular way of living is the right one is to adopt this view.”<sup>47</sup> To illustrate this, Wittgenstein compares speech about ethics to speech about aesthetics and uses the example of a new suit that has been made for him. He says, “How do I show my approval of a suit? Chiefly by wearing it often, liking it when it is seen, etc.”<sup>48</sup> Christensen sums this up by saying that Wittgenstein “rejects the idea that ethics provides explicit standards in favour of the suggestion that the key to living ethically resides in the very aspiration to do so.”<sup>49</sup> This contention that ethics is not predicated on any particular set of rules to be applied externally stresses that the ethical is omnipresent and constitutes a practice, a relational way of living.

The third foundational element is found in Wittgenstein’s concept of *Weltbild*. Here I am following Christensen’s view of Wittgenstein’s *Weltbild* as “a system of certainties that form the background necessary for an understanding of the world.”<sup>50</sup>

Wittgenstein says, “I did not get my picture of the world [*Weltbild*] by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false.”<sup>51</sup> As such, the *Weltbild* cannot be, nor does it need to be, justified since it is not theory, it is our practice or way of acting. When questioned, the answer can ultimately only be “This

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 810.

<sup>48</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures & Conversations: on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007): 5.

<sup>49</sup> Christensen, “Wittgenstein and Ethics,” 815.

<sup>50</sup> Anne-Marie Sondergaard Christensen, “‘What Matters to Us?’ Wittgenstein’s *Weltbild*, Rock and Sand, Men and Women,” *Humana Mente Journal of Philosophical Studies* 141, <http://www.humanamente.eu/index.php/pages/32-issue18>.

<sup>51</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty/Über Gewissheit* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), 94. Quoted in Christensen, “Wittgenstein’s *Weltbild*,” 147.

is simply what I do.”<sup>52</sup> As Christensen says, “Life and *Weltbild* thus become two sides of the same coin: by living a certain way, we acknowledge a certain *Weltbild*, and by acknowledging this *Weltbild*, our lives take this particular shape.”<sup>53</sup> There is ultimately no real justification (in the sense of a provable proposition) for students to live according to a *Weltbild* that envisions business as a social good. However, while some see Wittgenstein’s thought as leading inexorably to relativism, he denied that charge. Newton Garver is one of a number of interpreters who defend Wittgenstein on this point.<sup>54</sup> Garver says that while it is “likely” Wittgenstein may have occasionally used ‘forms of life’ to refer to “variant patterns of living rather than to biological forms and patterns... there is no warrant for the view that Wittgenstein implies or suggests a plurality of human Lebensformen, in the sense in which the expression is used in the *Philosophical Investigations*.”<sup>55</sup> He goes on to emphatically state that, “first and foremost Wittgenstein’s forms of life are those of natural history: bovine, piscine, canine, reptilian, human, feline, leonine, etc.”<sup>56</sup> As for communication breakdowns between human beings in regards to ethics, he says, “These breakdowns, however poignant they may be, are contingent and corrigible, since they result from not having learned the practices rather than from not having the capacity to learn them. Therefore they do not connote any difference in form of life.”<sup>57</sup>

Can an individual’s *Weltbild* be changed? Wittgenstein declares that they can, and that though rational arguments have a place, this change requires “a kind of

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<sup>52</sup> Christensen, “What Matters,” 148.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 148.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 155.

<sup>55</sup> Newton Garver, *This Complicated Form of Life* (Chicago: Open Court, 1994), 240.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 248.

persuasion.”<sup>58</sup> Ultimately what is necessary is for the former *Weltbild* to either lose importance, or perhaps in some cases become repugnant.<sup>59</sup> It is not enough to change belief. As Bob Dylan sang in “Brownsville Girl”, “Most people don’t do what they believe in, they just do what’s most convenient and then repent.”<sup>60</sup> Wittgenstein argues that what is necessary is to persuade the individual in question to change her actual actions and the way that she lives.<sup>61</sup>

Once this change occurs, it is still necessary to engage in ethical reflection. After all, it is not as if all problems will disappear, they will just be problems of a different sort than before. Christensen identifies “three sources of normative guidance” for ethical reflection in the work of Wittgenstein.<sup>62</sup> The first source is the demand to see the world as it is, not like one would want it to be. Wittgenstein wrote in his diary, “To be in the world – that is what counts. Not to demand anything from it. But to be in it, as it is. That is: not to make up a novel and then be astonished and outraged by the lack of correspondence between it and the world.”<sup>63</sup> I take this as an indication that one cannot just simply sit back and say: “Well, I would like to do the right thing, but unfortunately the way the system is set up makes it impossible. It’s astonishing that I can’t engage more fully in all those wonderful ethical acts that I intended! Oh well, might as well give up.” This of course, is related to the attitude one has about the world.

The second source is the demand to strive to do better. “The only absolute is, to battle through life towards death, like a fighting, a charging soldier. Everything else is

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<sup>58</sup> Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 262.

<sup>59</sup> Christensen, “What Matters,” 150.

<sup>60</sup> Bob Dylan, “Brownsville Girl,” in *Knocked Out Loaded*, Columbia Records, July 14, 1986, CD.

<sup>61</sup> Christensen, “What Matters,” 150.

<sup>62</sup> Christensen, “‘A Glorious Sun,’” 208-209.

<sup>63</sup> Wittgenstein, *Wittgenstein’s Nachlass*, MS 120 8r, 22.11.37. Trans. Christensen. Quoted in Christensen, “‘A Glorious Sun,’” 210.

wavering, cowardice, sloth, thus wretchedness.”<sup>64</sup> While we may be hesitant to present ethics in this light to our students, it is disingenuous if we do not. I think a false impression is rather rampant, namely that doing the right thing will earn you great trust and admiration from those around you and will consequently result in great financial profit. Faced with the reality of an environment where the converse may likely be true, individuals may well crumble. This is something that is relevant to those in teaching positions as well.

The third source is the demand to see the “other” as “example and addressee.”<sup>65</sup> In other words, for Wittgenstein ethics is relational. Or as Christensen states it, “Ethical reflection does not present us with commands, only indeterminate demands...”<sup>66</sup> This focus is seen in the ethics of Jesus, where the commands of the law are subjugated to the command to love. This idea of the necessity of relationality shows up especially in the Christian idea of perichoresis.<sup>67</sup>

Wittgenstein says at one point, “You can open yourself to others only out of a particular kind of love. Which acknowledges as it were that we are all wicked children.”<sup>68</sup> This seems like an odd statement, especially these days when outrage at the action of the “other” seems to be the overriding response to most stimuli. And what are we to make of the picture of innocence (children) being tied to evil? Christensen argues that Wittgenstein is here pointing out that we all do things we should not, and that in our relational interactions with others we should forgive them in the way we tend to forgive a

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<sup>64</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Public and Private Occasions*, ed. James Klagge and Alfred Nordmann (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 197. Quoted in Christensen, “‘A Glorious Sun’,” 212.

<sup>65</sup> Christensen, “‘A Glorious Sun’,” 222.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* 221.

<sup>67</sup> See especially John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1993), and John D. Zizioulas, *Communion & Otherness* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006).

<sup>68</sup> Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 52.

child who does something wrong.<sup>69</sup> Do we genuinely care about students enough to treat them this way, or are we operating from a position of moral superiority and perhaps even judgment at their career choice? After all, those who are ultimately successful in business will almost certainly dwarf the salaries of their “lowly” business communication instructor.

This project-based business class model is an attempt to instill in students a *Weltbild* that envisions business as something to produce social good rather than a vehicle for profit. It should be immediately obvious when it comes to attempting this that we are dealing with a matter of the freedom of the individual and we cannot constrain ways of thought (and we should not want to do so either!). The freedom of the individual guarantees that, ultimately, the ethical cannot be taught. That said the difficulty of the attempt to influence the *Weltbild* of our students does not free us from the ethical responsibility to make an attempt. And if that attempt results only in the troubling of students conceptions about their responsibilities as ethical agents, and a disruption of the narrative that ethics is something external, some sort of chaperone to keep them out of trouble (while denying them a great deal of fun) then we have, in a real sense, succeeded.

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<sup>69</sup> Christensen, “‘A Glorious Sun’,” 217.

## CHAPTER 6

### A PRESENTATION OF THE MODEL

“Not having heard something is not as good as having heard it; having heard it is not as good as having seen it; having seen it is not as good as knowing it; knowing it is not as good as putting it into practice.”<sup>70</sup> Xunzi

The value of practice has long been recognized as the pinnacle of the learning process. This model has the distinct advantage of “putting into practice” both the communication skills students need for working in business, as well as the social responsibility vision that can empower them to be ethical businesspeople. It does so by first encouraging them to think of an idea for an organization that provides a social good and then providing them with the skills, guidance, and confidence to develop that idea into a viable business plan. The following excerpt from the syllabus makes the gist of the model clear:

Students will identify key problems or needs where they believe organizations of committed professionals can improve their communities or the lives of their clients. Students will write and present project proposals, select and build teams through interviewing, engage in group processes to plan that team’s progress toward a sustainable organization, provide written and oral reports as they

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<sup>70</sup> John Knoblock, *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works, Vol. II Books 7-16* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 81.

develop that organization, and complete proposals and pitch presentations for their final business plans.<sup>71</sup>

Students reach this goal in what can be seen as three distinct stages of the model, each comprising approximately one-third of the semester. I will use this rough division to present an overview of the model below.

In chapter two we saw the warnings from the early part of the last century, against the pervading view of profit as the goal of business. As soon as students in the model receive their syllabi that view is troubled and the persuasion to change perspective begins. It should come as no surprise that students are likely to be overwhelmed when they first encounter the project. However, instead of randomly placing students into groups and sending them off to create a business proposal right off the bat, this class model takes a different approach. Before the students break into teams and begin work on the projects, the class is run in a more traditional way. For the first third of the semester students listen to lectures, work individually on smaller assignments, and have time to become more comfortable with one another and with the instructor. This hybrid method allows students to start with the comfortable and familiar, and after some time and preparation move into the self-driven project section of the course. This gives them time to acclimate to the idea of the project, to receive assessment on their early progress, and to gain the confidence to work on their own.

Special attention is given, especially during the first part of the model, to providing students with the tools they need to communicate well in a public setting. In a recent article, Pat Gehrke asserted that teachers of communication have been neglecting

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<sup>71</sup> Pat Gehrke, "Business and Professional Communication" (syllabus, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC, 2014).

their core responsibility to teach actual communication, an assertion that seems validated in business communication by the continual lament from employers that graduates are lacking in communication skills. With that in mind, the early classes provide instruction on invention, arrangement, style, delivery, and memory, with special attention to “affect, performance, emotion, and their embodied articulation and evocation.”<sup>72</sup> It is vital that students be given time to practice being in front of the class in a low-stakes environment before they are expected to give their first presentations. In the model, we used a number of lighthearted speaking exercises designed to reduce student anxiety. The goal here is to increase confidence for future success, not create traumatic memories! Again, we can hardly claim to be concerned with ethics if we are refusing to even acknowledge the needs of our students.

For the first assignment, each student researches, creates, and delivers a pitch for an organization that provides a social good by addressing a need. These presentations are workshopped ahead of time, to ensure that students have the guidance they need and that they gain some familiarity with their peers. These workshops mark the start of the second part of the model. During this part the classroom will be partially flipped, with some lectures taking place on-line and the class becoming a mixture of student pitches, instructor lectures, workshopping of materials and working on mock interviews.

Students create and present these initial pitches individually, with the knowledge that their classmates will be voting for their favorite ideas. While there is only one official assessment for this pitch, the fact that their classmates are voting adds another level of assessment. Students are not just giving a pitch for a grade and hoping to avoid

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<sup>72</sup> Pat J. Gehrke, “Epilogue: a manifesto for teaching public speaking,” *Review of Communication* 16, no. 2-3 (June 2016): 255, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2016.1193943>.

humiliating themselves in front of their classmates in the meantime, but they are competing to have their ideas chosen by their peers. The possibility exists that students will not choose what the instructor thinks are the best or most viable ideas (my pick for the best idea in the pilot class lost out) but this method gives students greater ownership over the projects that are ultimately chosen, and is a good reminder to students that the class is not just about pleasing the instructor for a grade.

After the pitches are complete, students will complete an online project preference survey in which they choose their top three projects. The projects that the individual teams will work on are chosen from this survey. Students then move to the second assignment, which is to write a cover letter to their top two choices out of the winning projects. They also produce résumés and learn about interviewing during this time. Next come the interviews, which take place in front of the class. This helps to create some of the pressure of an actual interview, as well as enable students to become familiar with a wide array of interview questions and answers. After the interviews are completed, the instructor chooses team members based on student preferences and announces the results online.

The third part of the model is entirely taken up with the teams working on the business proposals for the chosen ideas. At this point in the semester the classroom is completely flipped and the role of the instructor changes from that of an expert to that of a guide. Lectures and instruction are online, with the occasional exception of instruction offered in the form of a brief workshop. The classroom takes the form of an office, with the disparate teams working on their respective tasks. The role of the instructor at this point is to offer guidance and reassurance, while encouraging students to work to solve

their own problems, and to make sure they stay on schedule. For the remainder of the term, teams complete short online assessments of team members every other week. Teams also produce weekly memos that briefly outline the ethical considerations that were part of the week's work. In addition, each team sets up a social media account to promote their business and team members take turns updating it twice a week, with special attention to the possible pitfalls and ethical ramifications of such communication.

By the time the class ends, students will have given one individual presentation, one group presentation, and will have had practice both interviewing and being interviewed. They will have composed a number of written documents, produced proper social media communication, and have practiced teamwork communication skills. They will have engaged in a number of self directed social communication situations, such as email, phone calls, personal interviews, etc. And they will have produced a business plan for an organization based on social need rather than merely profit. In short, they will have put into practice ethically focused business communication.

## CHAPTER 7

### SOME PRACTICAL ADVANTAGES OF THE MODEL

In this model students produce a product with the potential for real world success. The first advantage to this is psychological. The great Russian writer, Fyodor Dostoevsky, so admired by Sigmund Freud for his psychological insights, spent the years 1850-1854 in a hard labor Siberian prison. In *Notes from a Dead House*, the semi-autobiographical account of his time there, Dostoevsky writes about the necessity of finding meaning in labor. “It occurred to me once that if they wanted to crush, to annihilate a man totally, to punish him with the most terrible punishment... they would need to give the labor a character of complete, total uselessness and meaninglessness.” He gives the example of pouring water from one tub into another and back repeatedly, or carrying a pile of dirt from one place to another and back again.<sup>73</sup> Approximately 60 years later Nazi scientists actually tested a similar idea on a group of Hungarian Jews by making them carry sand from one end of the factory to the other and back again. One of the survivors, Eugene Heimler, who later became a psychiatrist, wrote:

From then on, day after day, week after week, we had to carry sand to and fro, until gradually people’s minds began to give way. Even those who had been working steadily in the factory before it was bombed were affected, for the work had some use and purpose, even if it was for the Germans, but in face of a completely meaningless task people started to lose their sanity. Some went

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<sup>73</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from a Dead House*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage Classics, 2015), 22.

berserk and tried to run away, only to be shot by the guards; others ran against the electrified wire fence and burnt themselves to death.”<sup>74</sup>

Now I am not claiming that a normal class in university is on the level of pouring water from one container to another or hauling sand back and forth, but writing an imaginary sales pitch for an imaginary company just to get a grade is arguably within the same general vicinity. Is it any wonder so many of our students are barely engaged as they do work that is meaningless other than for the theoretical development of a skill? It is not surprising that our students are so fixated on grades, since the relevance of course material can seem so detached from reality. Of course not everything in the academy can be taught in a way that addresses these issues, but in business communication we have an excellent opportunity to make the work meaningful for our students. Surely the clear choice for instructors is to embrace that opportunity and give students the chance to create something with meaning for them and potentially for society. This is one advantage that a project-based class has over a simulation. A simulation can certainly be valuable as a teaching method and is of course in some cases necessary. But the connection to real world usefulness is clearer when the immediate project at hand has the potential to actually succeed.

Incidentally, Heimler went on from this to argue that mental illness could be helped if people were given a sense of purpose. A bit of a stretch perhaps, but seeing business as a social good gives it greater purpose than just seeing it as a paycheck and therefore should contribute to mental health.

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<sup>74</sup> Eugene Heimler, *Mental Illness and Social Work* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), 108. This connection of texts comes from Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Years of Ordeal, 1850-1859* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 159.

A second advantage is that the change of focus in this class makes the ethical component more about the focus on a goal than the avoidance of bad behavior. This change in focus is a positive thing for the will. Some recent studies have shown that while willpower can be trained like a muscle, it can also become exhausted like a muscle.<sup>75</sup> For some time now it has been noted that the majority of dieters regain weight over the long term, which is indicative of this exhaustion of willpower. Incidentally, this exhaustion is apparently exacerbated by the fact that the body tries to combat the diet by reducing energy level, increasing appetite, and slowing metabolism.<sup>76</sup> Despite the plethora of constantly appearing diets and weight loss techniques, “The most successful way to date to lose at least modest amounts of weight and keep it off with diet and exercise, employs programs that focus on changing behavior.”<sup>77</sup>

We can see a corollary here with business ethics. Our system of competitive, individualistic, high stakes capitalism encourages unethical actions. And as long as profit is the driving force, the temptation to be unethical will be high. Following B.F. Skinner’s idea of Positive Reinforcement Psychology, an individual with an outlook that sees profit as the goal/reward will have a tendency to engage in behavior to achieve that reward. However, if that goal/reward is producing a social good, then the individual will have a tendency to engage in behavior to achieve that reward. In the first, ethics is at best a guide to keep one out of trouble, and at worst something to be circumvented in the desire for the reward. In the second, ethics is tied to the goal, so ethical behavior becomes in a

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<sup>75</sup> Joseph Heath and Joel Anderson, “Procrastination and the Extended Will,” in *The Thief of Time: Philosophical Essays on Procrastination*, ed. Chrisoula Andreou and Mark D. White (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 241.

<sup>76</sup> Priya Sumithran and Joseph Proietto, “The defense of body weight: a physiological basis for weight regain after weight loss,” *Clinical Science* 124, no. 4. (February 2013): 231, doi:10.1042/CS20120223.

<sup>77</sup> David H. Freedman, “How to Fix the Obesity Crisis,” *Scientific American* 304 (2011): 45, doi:10.1038/scientificamerican0211-40.

sense a part of the reward in and of itself. And yes, as long as there is freedom there will be unethical behavior. But a change in focus can make this behavior easier to resist and more rare. And while most students may not have the opportunity to work in a business consciously focused on social good, the hope is that the thought processes they engaged in during the project model course and the frequent reflections on ensuring that they were pointed towards the goal, will make a lasting impact and help them develop good habits for the future.

Thompson and Beak, pointed out in 2007 that “research on project-based learning in the university business classroom is scant...”<sup>78</sup> Based on my research I believe that this is still the case, though things are improving. At the same time, part of the reluctance to incorporate more classes of this sort could well be a result of the implication that it is a case of either/or. First, there is the role of the instructor, with the impression given that she has to choose between being a “sage on the stage,” or “guide on the side.” In fact, both can work quite well. Second there is the disagreement over the definition of project as well as the fact that both project-based and problem-based pedagogy use the acronym PBL, and they are often grouped together as merely variations on the same theme. Third, there is the idea that the project-based class should consist only of the project. In other words, the students choose everything they need (or think they need) in order to complete the project as they understand it, with the emphasis on students figuring things out for themselves. In the next chapter I will address some of these issues as well as a number of other possible objections.

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<sup>78</sup> Karen J. Thompson and Joel Beak, “The Leadership Book: Enhancing the Theory-Practice Connection Through Project-Based Learning,” *Journal of Management Education* 31, no. 2 (July 2016): 278, doi: 10.1177/1052562096297143.

## CHAPTER 8

### POTENTIAL PROBLEMS ACKNOWLEDGED AND ANSWERED

Howard Gardner, in *The App Generation*, speaks of how since the 1960's he has seen the increased desire by students in university to be told what to produce. Perhaps this trend is driven in part by the view of education as a step towards a career rather than as a good in and of itself. Whatever the case, Gardner describes a phenomenon that is likely familiar to most teachers.

“The light-hearted version of this attitude is the all-too-familiar question, ‘Will this be on the exam?’ The nuts-and-bolts version is ‘Just tell us what you want and we will give it to you.’ Even tougher, ‘If you don’t tell us what you want and how to deliver it, we’ll get our parents out after you and sue the university – and you.’”<sup>79</sup>

Gardner and Davis describe this as students looking to find the right app to complete the task, and argue that students become frustrated and feel that they are being mistreated when it is not forthcoming.

The business communication teacher has a double problem here. On the one hand there is an ethical responsibility to meet students where they are. In a very real sense, they are not responsible for their outlook, having been educated for the most part in grade-driven, app-rich environments. On the other hand, as mentioned elsewhere in this paper, there is an ethical responsibility to teach them the subject as well as possible.

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<sup>79</sup> Howard Gardner and Katie Davis, *The App Generation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 48.

Articles continue to appear in the press quoting business employer's complaints that graduates are lacking in communication skills and problem solving, so there is apparently a need to better equip students for the workforce. This model has a number of positive components that help address both of these issues. We will first look at the elements of the class that help students unaccustomed to thinking for themselves.

In the first place, the majority of the class is flipped, meaning the students watch the lectures on their own time and work in the classroom. This allows frequent opportunities for interaction with the teacher. The goal is to encourage students to work things out for themselves as much as possible, but the reality is that, especially in the beginning, students are likely to need frequent reassurance and encouragement, as well as guidance. Some proponents of PBL advocate something akin to throwing students in and letting them figure out how to swim.<sup>80</sup> While there are positives to this, the model proposed in this paper is closer to a hybrid. Students will find it necessary to figure out many things on their own, but as far as the individual components of the project are concerned, there will be ample guidance. In other words, students will be given guidance on creating the projects, but the details as well as recognizing and addressing ethical issues, will be mostly up to them.

Secondly, the students will be working in groups. The groups will be composed of people who have expressed a desire to work together and an interest in the project. Recent studies show encouraging findings in regard to students generally defined as having weak self-regulation. While motivation increased across the board for all levels of regulation, it rose the most for those with the least amount of self-regulation. The authors

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<sup>80</sup> See for example Michael Pennell and Libby Miles, "‘It Actually Made Me Think’: Problem-Based Learning in the Business Communications Classroom," *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly* 72, no. 4 (October, 2009): doi: 10.1177/1080569909349482.

speculate that the students may have benefited from scaffolding and from being able to work with others in order to determine what needed to be done, rather than being solo learners.<sup>81</sup>

Third, students are provided opportunities to practice vital communication skills with autonomy and without fear of getting a bad grade. For example, a student may need to determine what sort of insurance would be needed for a campus delivery service. The teacher will not be standing over them as they make this call, rather it is something they will do on their own as part of their task in completing the project. Success here results in the tangible acquisition of needed information and the appreciation of team members.

This model also has much to commend it when it comes to communication skills and problem solving. There are quite a few problems to solve when it comes to creating a business proposal. As mentioned earlier, many of these will be behind the scenes, meaning that they are not directly assessed. Again, this should be viewed as a positive, since students need to shed the mindset of working for a grade and learn instead to work for the successful completion of a task. Students will find it necessary to do research of written sources as well as contact experts and agents in various fields. In the pilot class for this model, students wrote emails, made calls, and set up face-to-face meetings, not only to find out information, but in some cases to persuade. There is room here as well for failure without grade punishment. If, for example, students have a meeting to persuade the university to set aside space for nap rooms (one of the proposals from the pilot class) and are unsuccessful, the failure does not result in a bad grade. Instead it is merely a setback, and provides an obstacle that has to be worked around in order to

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<sup>81</sup> Laura Helle, et al. “‘Ain’t nothin’ like the real thing’”, *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 77, no. 2 (June 2007): 408-409, doi: 10.1348/ 000709906X105986.

proceed with the project. This sort of “failure” will be a reality in their careers, so it is helpful for them to learn to respond to such things.

At the same time, the students are not cast out alone to figure out how to communicate well in the business world. They watch lectures and receive individual guidance on a wide range of business communication techniques. The primary difference between this model and a standard classroom is that the communication they are producing is for an actual project with real world potential. Consequently, the connection between the assessed task and the necessity of the knowledge for real world interaction is much clearer and there is stronger motivation.<sup>82</sup>

Another practical concern for some project-based and for service-based classes is logistical difficulties. Suitable projects or service needs have to be found, scheduling has to be worked out, students may have transportation needs etc. There is also the difficulty in providing class facilitators, tutors, and other personnel. In addition, assessment is cited as being a common problem. With this class model these difficulties are done away with, while still retaining much of what is beneficial in project-based and service-based classes. In addition, due to having to work through so many aspects of business in preparing the final proposal, students should be exposed to a greater range of ethical matters. The ethical considerations start with the germ of the idea for the proposed business, and are interlaced throughout the whole process of producing a business proposal. A partial list of ethical concerns includes: how to structure the business, ethical hiring practices, environmental concerns, social benefits, honesty, and transparency.

Another problem for outside project and service-based classes is cost. Despite institutes of higher learning typically protesting that they are not businesses, the evidence

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<sup>82</sup> Helle, et al. “‘Ain’t nothin’,” 405-409.

suggests strongly that they are. As a result, it can be difficult to procure the extra funds needed to implement such classes. This model project-based class incurs no additional costs over a typical lecture class. In addition, there is no need for a traditional textbook, so the students can avoid the often exorbitant cost of a textbook. A suggestion could be made for students to donate a portion of their savings to a local charity, thereby reinforcing the emphasis on ethics as a social concern.

Another legitimate concern is that the class will involve more work for the instructor and that it will require the relinquishing of the traditional role as an authority. As for the first part of this, that is likely to be true, especially in the beginning. However, that sacrifice is one that instructors should be willing to make in order to increase the learning and improve the ethical thinking of students. Additionally, with recorded lectures, the workload should level out once the class is established. As far as the role of instructor as expert is concerned, this model is a hybrid, so while the traditional role is definitely displaced in part, the instructor still functions in the role of expert. This is not in the sense of simply lecturing and requiring students to reproduce what is required, but rather in the sense of overseeing the various projects and providing advice when needed. Of course there will doubtless be specific elements of each project that are outside of the instructor's window of knowledge. Here the instructor should simply let the students do the work. These elements provide a chance for students to gain confidence and to learn the sorts of things that will be required of them as workers. Along the way, the instructor should be modeling a bit of what working on a project for a company would entail, by monitoring progress, requiring progress briefings, sitting in on in-class discussions, etc.

A final potential problem area is that of group dynamics. This should in no way be seen as a negative, since this mirrors a reality that students will have to deal with in their future careers. In this model class, the process of determining groups should help ensure that groups are at least on the same page. Students who do not have their project ideas chosen end up interviewing for their top choices. Students who have their project ideas chosen end up having some say in who gets chosen to be part of their projects. So those with no interest in a project are unlikely to end up being part of that project. At the same time, the possibility of personal dislikes, personality clashes, or other group disharmonies, is real. The instructor cannot simply throw people into teams and expect them to get along. Students need training in how to manage interpersonal relationships, just as they need training in delivery, style, or other elements of business communication.<sup>83</sup> After all, interpersonal communication is a vital part of business communication and the opportunity to teach this valuable skill is one of the advantages of this model. The methods of managing this learning include the instructor keeping up with the project progress, as well as requiring periodic peer reviews. While some Fortune 500 companies are moving away from performance reviews altogether, Facebook argues for their continued existence and includes peer reviews as part of this. “At Facebook, to mitigate bias and do things systematically, we start by having peers write evaluations. They share them not just with managers but also, in most cases, with one another—which reflects the company’s core values of openness and transparency.”<sup>84</sup> So, not only do peer reviews help the group projects run smoothly for the instructor, they provide additional

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<sup>83</sup> Gretchen N. Vik, “Doing More to Teach Teamwork Than Telling Students to Sink or Swim,” *Business Communication Quarterly* 64, no. 4, (December 2001): 112-113, doi:10.1177/108056990106400413.

<sup>84</sup> Lori Goler, Janelle Gale, and Adam Grant, “Let’s Not Kill Performance Evaluations Yet,” *Harvard Business Review* (November 2016): <https://hbr.org/2016/11/lets-not-kill-performance-evaluations-yet>.

benefits to the student. The student not only learns to navigate this bit of tricky communication, but also how to deal with the ethical issues of honesty and transparency involved.

With prior instruction and guidance on team communication and cohesion, students should learn to handle these problems on their own, rather than run to the instructor every time there is a problem. Instances certainly may arise that require instructor intervention, but these should be as rare as employees going to a manager over a coworker. Of course there is always the potential for failure with a project-based class. Marilyn Dyrud tells of a group in one of her project-based classes who procrastinated so long that they ended up plagiarizing in order to complete the project on time. The class? Professional ethics.<sup>85</sup>

To end, we go back again to the beginning. Albert Shaw, in his lovely little book *The Business Career in its Public Relations* published in 1904 wrote: “It is the positive and aggressive attitude toward life, the ethics of action, rather than the ethics of negation, that must control the modern business world, and that may make our modern business man the most potent factor for good in this, his own, industrial period.”<sup>86</sup> While in retrospect it may seem that Shaw was a bit naïve, he was right. When business is envisioned as a social good and ethics are seen as encouragements to action rather than possible hindrances to success, the potential for good is potent indeed. My work here hopes to make a difference by suggesting that project-based business communication classes may be able to change the *Weltbild* of students to one that creates this change of

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<sup>85</sup> Marilyn A. Dyrud, “Group Projects and Peer Review,” *Business Communication Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (December 2001): 111, doi:10.1177/108056990106400413.

<sup>86</sup> Albert Shaw, *The Business Career in its Public Relations* (San Francisco: P. Elder and Company, 1904), 60. <https://archive.org/details/businesscareerin00shaw>.

vision. The fact that students learned crucial business communication skills in the project-based pilot class was a real source of satisfaction. That they also showed great promise in envisioning business as a social good made that satisfaction sweeter still.

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