

Teaching Ethical Decision-Making Using Frameworks and Interactive Case Studies

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Abstract

Students are often not taught intentionally how to manage workplace ethical dilemmas. This study adopted onsite teaching of ethical frameworks and interactive videos to examine their impact on students' decision-making process for two case studies presented. Workshop results from 111 internship students revealed that students' primary considerations in decision-making were conscience, law, and fairness. Furthermore, 87.3% of them found the frameworks moderately, very, or extremely useful. Lastly, the use of interactive videos was supported by 76.5% of the students, rating it moderately useful and above. Students also suggested incorporating more realistic scenarios and role-plays in future implementations of the workshop.

Keywords: Case Studies, Ethical Decision-Making, Frameworks, Interactive Videos, Internship, Workplace Learning

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Introduction

The Need for Teaching on Ethics

In recent years, workplaces have grappled with escalating ethical challenges, prompting deep concerns among industry practitioners regarding the ethical conduct of their employees. This concern is particularly pronounced in the hospitality industry, where the repercussions of unethical behaviour extend far beyond, impacting the success and reputation of businesses. Despite this, a disparity persists in students' perceptions of ethical statements, underscoring the need for a more comprehensive and intentional approach to teaching ethical decision-making (Teng & Cheng, 2021). Furthermore, research indicates that students often underestimate the gravity of ethical misconduct, underscoring the necessity for early and explicit education on ethical behavior (Huang, Lalopa, & Adler, 2016).

Recognising this gap, our study aimed to address the challenges in teaching ethical decision-making within hospitality education. Teaching ethics is multifaceted, encompassing cognitive knowledge, behavioral skills, and character development dimensions (Siegler, 2001). Drawing inspiration from Siegler's dimensions, our study incorporated critical thinking processes and ethical frameworks proposed by Kallet (2014) and Sherfield and Moody (2013) to guide the development of students' ethical decision-making capabilities. While existing literature recommended synchronous interactive methods, such as role plays and case study discussions, scalability and curriculum time issues led us to explore an asynchronous interactive delivery approach.

In our study, the workshop was conducted over three hours during a break in the internships of 146 students. This method, supported by classroom teaching, is designed to maintain an active-participative model suitable for accommodating large class sizes. We hoped that this approach could empower students to navigate complex ethical scenarios with acumen, with a heightened sense of responsibility and a well-rounded understanding of the ethical considerations crucial in their academic and professional journeys.

Objective

The primary objective of this study was to assess the effectiveness of leveraging ethical frameworks and interactive videos in teaching ethical decision-making to hospitality students within a blended learning setting.

In this paper, we present the significance of teaching ethical decision-making, scrutinise conceptual frameworks within the realm of hospitality management, and explore diverse delivery approaches as recommended in existing literature. The study's methodology, including the profile of respondents, lesson plan, and data collection and analysis methods, are presented to provide a transparent view of our research approach. This holistic examination aims to contribute valuable insights to the ongoing discourse on ethical education within the hospitality industry, shedding light on effective teaching methodologies that can enhance students' ethical decision-making skills.

Literature Review

The Importance of Teaching Ethical Decision-Making

Practitioners have acknowledged that ethical challenges in the workplace have become more complex and critical, with practitioners showing an increasing concern about the ethical behaviours of employees (Teng & Cheng, 2021). In their study that compared practitioner and hospitality students' perceptions on ethical statements, they found that there was a high level of agreement on statements related to 'personal moral', 'customer integrity', 'manager leadership', 'corporate integrity', 'customer equity', and 'personal behaviours'. However, there were gaps in the agreement with all unethical statements for the first two factors above. Students tend to underestimate the seriousness of ethical misconduct while practitioners ranked these statements higher because they were more aware about the legal complications and cost of unethical behaviour, and violation of company rules that could affect the success and reputation of the business.

Huang, Lalopa and Adler (2016) and Goh and Kong (2016) reiterated that students tend to ignore the importance of ethical behaviour in the workplace as it's considered 'basic' and thus advocate that students be taught not to succumb to unethical behaviour at the pre-employment stage.

Conceptualisation

Siegler (2001) recommended the teaching of ethics to include the cognitive knowledge, behavioural skills, and character development dimensions. Jaszay (2002) identified the following dimensions for hospitality managers: honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, loyalty, fairness, concern and respect for others, commitment to excellence, leadership, reputation and morale and accountability. Vallen and Cadado's (2000) findings based on their survey on 45 hotel general managers were similar with a focus on leadership, accountability, commitment to excellence, integrity, honesty, and fairness.

The teaching of ethics could be taught as a stand-alone course, integrated in all courses in a discipline or as a combination of both (Ruiz, Warchal, & You, 2020). The University of Chicago for example teaches medical ethics based on clinical situations involving real patients or cases (Siegler, 2001). There is a core set of lectures, supplemented by reading materials. Ethics teaching is continuously emphasised throughout the entire duration of medical school, clinical attachment, and residency training. There is also an integration of classroom teaching with clinical training where students would read up, observe, and then practise.

The common factor observed in the various modes of delivery in the teaching of ethics is the active-participative model (Beca, 2014) as it enhances students' engagement with the content learnt. McWilliams and Nahavandi (2016) stressed that as the learning goal is to aid students in reflecting and applying what they have learnt, instructional strategies which include discussion and application of theoretical concepts; active engagement and emotional involvement of students; critical thinking skills; relevance to students; integration with other knowledge that students possess; accountability and transfer of learning to real life should be core. Lyon (2021) supported that the teaching of ethics must be practical and applied in learning.

Approaches that could be adopted include case studies (Ellison et al, 2018; Jaszay, 2002; O’Flaherty & McGarr, 2014) and live case projects which involve students analysing critically and presenting on real cases of their choice (McWilliams & Nahayandi, 2016). Roy (2012) adopted the debate approach where students take a position on a particular marketing practice and defend it while Cochran and Weaver (2017) prompted students to reflect on their structured experiential learning activities. Grose-Fifer (2017) used role-play to enhance his students’ critical thinking about ethics in psychology. The students opined that role-play helped them better comprehend theoretical concepts and evaluate an issue from different perspectives. This outcome concurred with the findings from other studies that role-play increases the understanding of a topic (McCarthy & Anderson, 2000; Poorman, 2002), developed their perspective-taking (Pusateri, Halonen, Hill, & McCarthy, 2009), critical thinking (Poling & Hupp, 2009), and communication skills (Nestel & Tierney, 2007).

In our study, the workshop was conducted in three-hours during their work attachment time out. Due to the short time frame and large class size, we explored the use of interactive videos to maintain the active-participative model (Beca, 2014), supported by classroom teaching instead of the approaches above. Following the criteria mentioned by McWilliams and Nahavandi (2016) and Lyon (2021), the videos were developed based on inputs from the authors who were also the students’ internship supervisors. Five scenarios were written based on issues that their past internship students faced, with sufficient complexity in the scenarios for discussion and to help students develop their analytical skills, judgement, and decision-making. These scenarios were further discussed and finalised by the authors to be developed into interactive videos by the university’s media team. The videos were interactive as they stopped at various junctures and prompted students to make decisions, after which the decision made will be played out, leading to specific consequences. The students could restart the videos again to find out what were the consequences if other decisions were made.

In line with Siegler’s (2001) three dimensions, our study used Kallet’s (2014) critical thinking process to help develop students’ cognitive knowledge. Kallet’s process consisted of three steps: *Clarity*, *Conclusion* and *Decision*. *Clarity* refers to spending the time to develop a clear definition of a problem. *Conclusion* refers to deciding based on multiple solutions explored while *Decision* refers to acting on the decision made.

To develop students’ behavioural and character development dimensions, Sherfield and Moody’s (2013) framework was chosen as they were like those identified by Jaszay (2002) and Vallen and Cadado (2000). The framework consists of six components or questions that students should ask themselves when faced with choices, namely: Law (Is it legal?), Fairness (Is it fair?), Conscience (Can I live with my decisions?), Time (Is this decision in my long-term best interest?), Pride (Could I tell somebody about it?); and Publicity (How would I feel if this showed up on the front page of the newspaper?). This framework encourages students to think of the long-term implications of their actions to their reputations instead of just opting for a quick fix to challenges.

The conceptual framework for this study, as adapted from Kallet’s (2014) and Sherfield and Moody’s (2013) frameworks is shown in Figure 1.

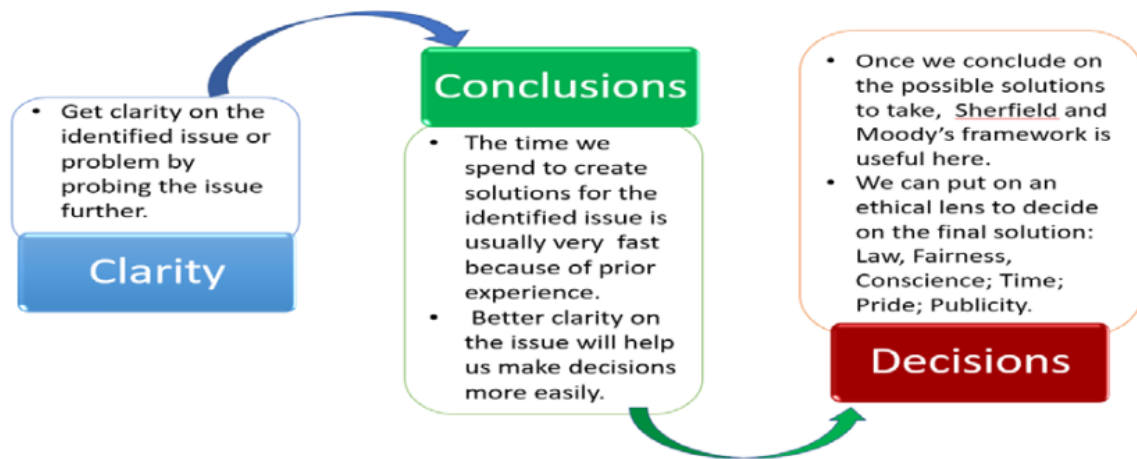


Figure 1: Conceptual framework for this study, adapted from Kallet's (2014) and Sherfield and Moody's (2013) frameworks.

Methodology

Profile of the Respondents

This study employed a non-probability convenience sampling plan. The respondents consisted of 146 Hospitality Business students who were in the final year of their degree programme. This study took place in a mandatory back-to-campus workshop lasting 3 hours with a 15-minutes break in-between. This workshop was the students' first formal and intentional exposure to the ethical decision-making process. The workshop was not introduced earlier as it was felt that by the month of September of their eight-month long internship, students would have gained sufficient workplace experience to be able to relate to the job-related ethics scenarios (Chen et al, 2013) in the interactive videos more meaningfully.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study has been approved by the university's Institutional Review Board. The workshop was held in a large hall with students seated in groups of eight to ten. The students were informed by the first author about the objectives of the study, the anonymity of their inputs and the voluntary nature of their participation at the beginning of the workshop verbally and via the Participant Information Sheet. They were then invited to fill in the consent form.

In the first segment of the workshop, the third author presented on the relevance of critical thinking in the workplace and introduced Kallet's framework to the students. After which, the students were prompted to evaluate how their current thinking process differed from Kallet's framework. The second author then elaborated on Sherfield and Moody's framework using examples for each of the factors. After a 15-minutes break, the students were asked to individually watch and respond to prompts in the first video. The students then discussed in groups their responses to several discussion questions with reference to Kallet's framework. A debrief on the discussion questions was held before the students proceeded to do the same for the second video. The students were also debriefed after that.

All the students were invited to respond to an online survey at the end of the workshop. The following were the questions posed in the survey:

- 1) What were the factors that they considered when making ethical decisions in the workplace?
- 2) Were the frameworks taught helpful in aiding them to make ethical decisions?
- 3) Were the interactive videos helpful in aiding them in making ethical decisions?
- 4) How could this lesson on ethical decision-making be improved?

The students' quantitative responses were analysed and themes from the open-ended question discussed and rationalised by the authors.

Results

Findings

There were 111 responses to the online survey which represented 76.6% of the cohort of hospitality students who were undergoing IWSP. The first question required the students to select the factors that they would consider when making ethical decisions in the workplace. The question was intended to measure the learning outcome, be it the recollection or the internalization of variables from the two frameworks taught.

The top three most frequently selected factors were: conscience (95%, n=106), law (87%, n=97) and fairness (84%, n=93). The other three factors reflected considerably lower frequency counts: namely, pride (58%, n=64), time (56%, n=62) and publicity (51%, n=57) (Figure 2).

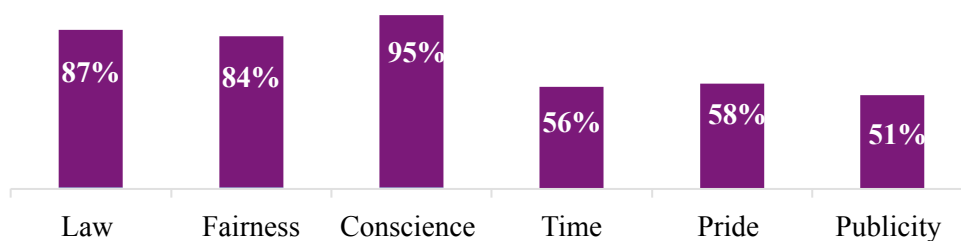


Figure 2: Selected factors from framework.

When asked if the frameworks taught were useful in helping them make ethical decisions, the mean score was 3.51 out of a maximum of 5. Figure 3 shows that 87.3% of the students found the frameworks to be moderately, very, or extremely useful. There were four students (3.6%) who indicated that the theoretical structures were not useful.

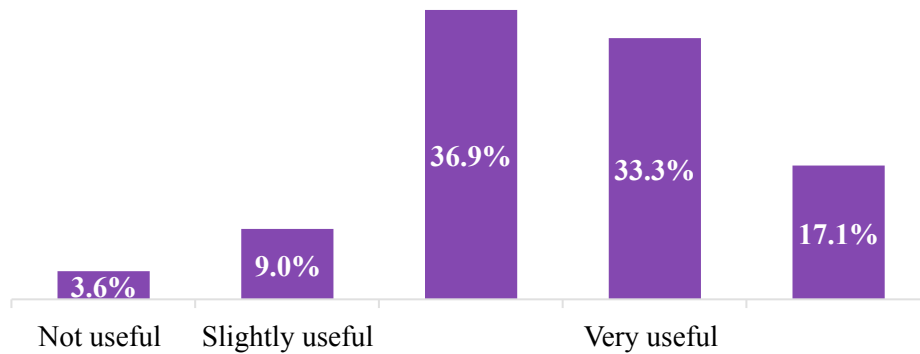


Figure 3: Usefulness of frameworks.

Regarding the usefulness of the interactive videos in helping them learn to make ethical decisions, the mean score of 3.51 (out of a maximum of 5) suggested that most of the students did find the teaching tools to be of instrumental value. About 76.5% of the students assessed the interactive videos to be moderately, very, or extremely useful, while 23.4% indicated ‘slightly useful’ as well as ‘not useful’ in their responses (Figure 4).

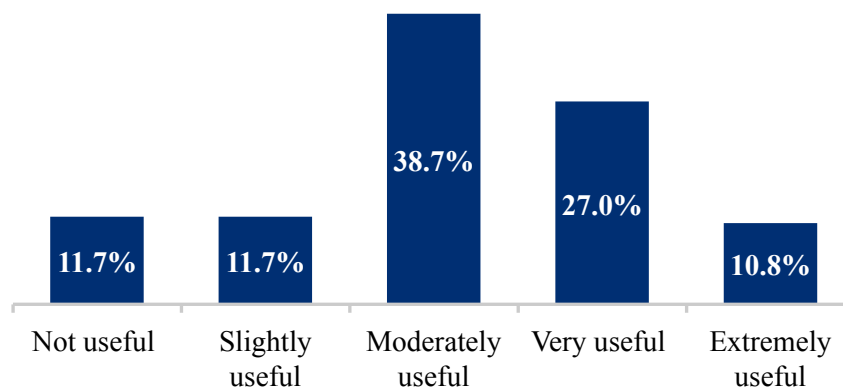


Figure 4: Usefulness of interactive videos.

In addition to the quantitative questions, there was an open-ended question for students to share their opinions on how the lesson on ethical decision-making can be improved. Among the 81 written comments that were collected, only four were explicitly in favour of the current pedagogical method:

“Interesting, short and sweet.”

“Video was engaging in displaying what is right or (sic) wrong.”

“The current way of giving real life examples is good.”

“This lesson has been useful.”

At least 21 comments highlighted how the interactive videos could be improved. The suggestions included:

- Easier-to-view format on different devices
- Inclusion of learning points beyond the clicking of choices
- Provision of more than two options for each decision-making juncture
- Design of less black-and-white scenarios, as reflected in the comment below:

“... harder decisions where the situation was more morally and ethically grey, therefore challenging our thinking more ... Do not be afraid to give us harder issues that we may face in the working world.”

The students also proposed alternative ways of delivering the lesson on ethical decision-making. One proposal is to use discussions of issues that the students themselves encountered at their workplaces, or actual incidents that are published in the news. The other suggestion is to utilise role-plays. Both methods reflected that the students preferred pedagogical designs that offer more complexity, realism, engagement, and interactivity.

Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion and Implications

The findings showed that the top factors that students considered when making ethical decisions in the workplace were conscience (95%, n=106), law (87%, n=97) and fairness (93%, n=93). The high percentage for ‘conscience’ contrasts findings by Huang, Lalopa and Adler (2016) and Goh and Kong (2016) that students tend to ignore the importance of ethical behaviour in the workplace. Furthermore, the students do consider the legal repercussions of their actions and fairness to themselves and their colleagues. The findings in this study are also interesting as they reflect the differences in considerations between hospitality students and those of hospitality managers by Jaszay (2002) and Vallen and Cadado (2000). These findings imply that there are complex practical issues that influence students’ response to ethical dilemmas.

In addition, about 87.3% of the students found both frameworks to be moderately, very, and extremely useful. This implies that frameworks do help them to break down the ethical issue more systematically and to be aware of factors that need to be considered. This finding also provides credence to the use of these two simple frameworks as compared to other available frameworks used in literature, in the teaching of ethics at the undergraduate level.

Furthermore, 76.5% of the students found the interactive videos to be moderately, very, or extremely useful even though the pedagogical approach could be improved. The interactive videos were voice recorded with only two options for decision-making at various junctures. Students might have felt that this approach was detached and not realistic. Thus, the students suggested making the interactive videos more authentic with added complexity and varied decisions. They wanted more “grey” (not simple black and white) situations because the students perceived the workplace as grey - black and white situations were easy to decipher. This finding indicates students’ desire for more engaging and challenging pedagogical approaches and signals a need for tutors to adapt the teaching approach to better sustain student engagement and active learning (Ellison et al., 2018; Grose-Fifer, 2017; McWilliam & Nahayandi, 2016).

Future delivery of ethics teaching could be made using a flipped learning mode with the interactive videos provided as pre-learning materials. 21 students mentioned that they would prefer watching the videos from other devices besides their handphones and for learning points to be clearly indicated in the videos. These improvements could be implemented in the future.

Conclusion

As academic supervisors, we see the need to teach students ethics as part of workplace learning and to support them during their internship. Besides cognitive knowledge, students should understand that industry practitioners regard ethical conduct as important to their business practice and reputation. This is of particular concern as research from Huang et al (2016) indicated that students often underestimate that importance.

In the three-hour workshop, students were exposed to two frameworks and interacted with the videos to make decisions. The findings revealed that students' primary considerations in ethical situations were conscience, legal and fairness. Moreover, 87.3% and 76.5% of the students found the frameworks and interactive videos moderately useful and above respectively.

The findings from this study have encouraged us to further refine our pedagogical approach and teaching material to prepare our students adequately and efficiently to face workplace ethical challenges during their internship and their future careers.

Limitations of This Study

This study is limited to responses from a survey which was conducted after a three-hour workshop in a large lecture room. Thus, the responses might be influenced by the level of engagement afforded by the physical constraints, and a lack of comparison of their perceptions of ethical statements prior to the workshop. No focus groups could be conducted either as the students were still doing their internship and thus had tight time schedules.

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