What are we teaching them? The impact of study level and age upon ethical decision-making by tertiary communication students from the United States and Aotearoa/New Zealand

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Abstract

This article reports the results of an international survey (USA and Aotearoa/New Zealand) that tested age and education-level effects on ethical decision-making responses among university students studying communication. The findings point to some influence from students' age and employment status on their ethical decision-making, but suggest that their level of tertiary education is having almost no measurable impact. The article discusses some implications of these findings for educators involved in designing and delivering ethics education curricula in communication programmes. The authors suggest that while there has been some adoption of constructivist models in communication curricula to date, the apparent low impact of involvement in university education on ethical decision-making suggests that a much more sweeping and drastic adoption needs to be trialled and tested.

Introduction

It is "commonplace" (Barrie, 2005) to suggest, normatively, that university graduates should attain from their studies not only disciplinary knowledge and related analytical and applied skills but also personal character traits that have moral aspects: "qualities that also prepare graduates as agents of social good in an unknown future" (Bowden, Hart, King, Trigwell & Watts, 2000, p. 1). Key among these qualities is "ethical social and professional understanding" (Barrie, 2005, p. 4). In communication studies in particular, it has been argued that globalisation and new media have contributed to an ever-increasing need for a diverse, flexible and effective ethical education (Makau & Arnett, 1997). In response, as Lee and Padgett noted in 2000, "mass communication programs have tripled the number of mass media ethics courses since 1977" (p. 27).

The authors of this paper, as communication educators who include ethics material in every subject we teach and also research in ethics, certainly liked to think that we were inculcating in our students a high awareness of ethical issues and a range of tools for application to moral reasoning, such that they would be better equipped at the completion of our courses to make decisions that contributed

to the social good. Beyond positive reinforcement from our colleagues who tended to comment anecdotally that our students were ethically attuned, however, we had no evidence of this. In analysing the results of an ethical decision-making survey we had conducted with our students for other purposes, then, we decided to also check for the influence of level of education on their ethical responses. Were our communication students more likely to choose ethical options on our survey when they were at the beginning of their university course of study, or when they were at the end? Separately from this, but calculated as a way of comparing and contrasting with the impact of level of study, what was the impact of students' age? Were students more likely to choose ethical options on our survey when they were younger or older?

The main purpose of the original survey instrument design (Appendix 1) was to test for an ethical 'kinship' effect. Prior research by the team who designed this study had suggested that a 'kinship' motive (thinking that a member of one's family will be affected by one's actions in a given situation) can alter ethical responses (Fredricks & Hornett, 2007; Hornett & Fredricks, 2005). The survey was based in real-life-derived narrative scenarios about 'realistic' situations suggested by communication students themselves. When asked what ethical issues they understood to be typical in daily and working life, they nominated the scenarios in Appendix 1, which range from a supermarket theft and a large-scale workplace fraud to borrowing money from one's own parents. The scenarios as written do not explicitly signal to respondents that they are about 'communication situations' (although the response options all involve choosing communication principles such as assertiveness, disclosure and truthfulness) but they reflect the kinds of dilemmas that communication students see as realistic and meaningful to them. This student-led approach was developed as part of a search for ethics teaching materials that would be perceived as relevant to students' own lives or concerns.

The prior research found that undergraduate students in both the United States and New Zealand universities were statistically likely to change their course of action when a kinship relationship was introduced to the scenarios—that is, they were more likely to be assertive or truthful if they felt that a member of their family would be detrimentally affected by an unethical choice (Fredricks, Ramsey, Hornett & Mueller, 2009; Fredricks, Ramsey & Hornett, 2010). Prior analyses of the data also found that there were significant geographical and gender differences between the students but that kinship effects overcame those differences (Fredricks & Tilley, 2011; Tilley, 2010; Tilley, Fredricks & Hornett, in press).

For the purposes of this article, however, key research questions were addressed to the entire data corpus: do respondents' answers to the scenarios differ by level of education, do they differ by age, and do they differ by any other study-related variables such as full-time or part-time enrolment? We hypothesised (optimistically and based only upon our observations, given that the literature actually suggested otherwise) that students would learn to be more ethically discerning during the course of their university communication studies experience, both because of what they were learning and because of their developing maturity. We expected that a fourth-year student would be more likely to recognise and avoid actions with unethical consequences than a first-year student, and that an older student would be statistically more likely to nominate forthright and candid communication responses where they were ethically desirable, than a younger student. In both cases our expectations were proved predominantly wrong.

Literature review

Our literature review covered firstly the known influence of age on ethical reasoning and secondly the influence of study. In both cases we have only provided here for scope reasons some key items from the literature, but in the latter case the pool of available literature is in any case particularly small.

Age

In the broad context of ethics research generally, age is sometimes found, if it has any impact, to correlate with a more reasoned approach to ethical decision-making. Ford and Richardson (1994) conducted a meta-analysis of the personal attribute variables shown to be significant in ethics research up to 1992. Of eight studies of age (all of them using quantitative surveys except one that used open-ended questions), only half found age to have any significant impact, and of these one found the significance to be only weak. Of these four, three found older respondents to have what was termed a 'more ethical' stance. The remaining study, which was conducted with managers who were members of a professional association, found the younger managers had "a more ethical viewpoint" than older managers (Ford & Richardson, 1994, p. 208).

Perhaps the best-known theorist of moral responsibility and its relationship with developmental maturity is Kohlberg, who built on Piaget's (1932) foundational work, *The moral development of the child*, to develop a six-phase theory of moral development (Kohlberg, 1958, 1969, 1971, 1973, 1981, 1984). Kohlberg's initial work was with boys up to the age of 16, rather than with adults, but as he considered moral maturity to develop as a result of experience facing and actively thinking about the implications of ethical issues, rather than automatically following physical maturity, his work has subsequently been applied to the moral development of adults (Baxter & Rarick, 1987) and even to the moral development of organizations (Falkenberg, 2004). Kohlberg's original study has also been extended longitudinally to follow his child participants into their 30s (Colby, Gibbs, Lieberman & Kohlberg, 1983).

For Kohlberg, a person reaches moral maturity when they are able to apply a sense of justice that is independent of their sense of how the outcome might impact on them personally. Children begin with an egocentric motivation to avoid pain and pursue pleasure but, if they have opportunities to think about wider implications and practice empathetic approaches, can move through phases in which they increasingly develop the ability to apply abstract principles of fairness and concern for social, rather than individual, good (Kohlberg, Levine, & Hewer, 1983). Kohlberg's colleague Blatt conducted classroom sessions where he challenged study participants to discuss and especially to debate ethical issues (Blatt & Kohlberg, 1975). It appeared that children who attended the 'dilemma discussion' sessions moved through the phases of moral reasoning faster than those who did not, leading the researchers to conclude that stimulating thinking about ethics enhanced their moral reasoning capacity (Blatt & Kohlberg, 1975).

Kohlberg and colleagues' substantial longitudinal work sits within a particular cognitive–developmental paradigm of moral psychology. To explore it in depth is beyond the scope of this paper (and the research instrument used in this study is of a different disciplinary orientation not

specifically designed to align with or test Kohlberg's psychological constructs). However, Kohlberg's oeuvre needs acknowledgement both because of the influence that it has had on other disciplines broadly (including communication) and on popular understandings of 'moral maturity', and because (despite its own evolutions and controversies over time) it does draw two convincing and enduring general conclusions: that ethical reasoning does not automatically develop with age and that particular kinds of educational intervention (constructivist, not instructional) can enhance moral development. According to Arnold (2000), Kohlberg's unwavering, underpinning belief throughout his scholarly career was that a person's ability to reason was at the absolute core of their morality: "that it is the logic of a person's reasoning that most strongly influences his or her moral behaviour" (Arnold, 2000, p. 368). Therefore, education could influence ethics, but only if that education developed logic and reason (independent capacity to analyse, evaluate and make balanced judgements in ethical situations), as opposed to simply imparting knowledge of moral principles. Just as enduring as this idea, however, has been the criticism that it is only that—an idea—and that evidence of the exact nature and extent of any impact on ethical decision-making provided by education to develop reasoning capacity is lacking (Arnold, 2000).

Level of education

Within the paradigm of organisational ethics research, research into the influence of education on ethical outcomes is not lacking, but it is sparse and conflicting. Ford and Richardson (1994) overviewed studies of educational levels and ethics, up to 1992. Of six studies, only three found education level significant, and in one of these the significance was relatively weak, with differences on only four of 12 items. Where differences were found to be correlated with educational level, more education correlated with greater awareness of ethical issues and higher likelihood of prioritising broader moral responsibility over personal interest. However, other research specifically suggests completing a business ethics course has absolutely no significant effect on ethical attitudes (Jewe, 2008). Sims (2002) notes that there is a school of thought suggesting that ethics simply "cannot be taught" (p. 393).

In communication pedagogy specifically, Canary (2007) found that students who completed interactive, role-play-based interpersonal conflict resolution courses "demonstrated significant gains in moral reasoning abilities, whereas students in communication ethics courses demonstrated small but insignificant gains in moral reasoning" (p. 193). Lee and Padgett (2000) noted that the "few studies assessing the effectiveness of classroom instruction in ethics have been limited to stand-alone ethics courses" (p. 27). Their study of the effectiveness of a mass media ethics course in improving mass communication students' values and analytical skills found that:

> The ethics course focusing on the logical thinking process, even the short-term one, had a positive effect on making students think more extensively and deeply. But it did not bring a significant change to students' moral values. Ethics education focusing on decision making cannot turn an immoral individual into a moral one. But immoral decisions or actions that a moral person may be involved in because of ignorance could be avoided by training in moral imagination and systematic moral reasoning. (Lee & Padgett, 2000, p. 38)

Lee and Padgett (2000) concluded that, on balance, communication ethics education was more likely to result in enhanced moral reasoning capacity if it focused on "how to think, rather than what to think" (p. 38). A subsequent article in the same journal that overviewed Lee and Padgett's and other mass-communication-focussed ethics pedagogy research, in order to summarise progress and problems in media ethics teaching in the 21st century, concluded that the most pressing issue was to facilitate greater connectivity between communication and media practitioners, students and educators, such that professional and scholarly understandings of ethics could mutually inform and cross-fertilise each other (Lambeth, Christians, Fleming & Lee, 2004).

In other disciplines—for example science education (Barak, Ben-Chaim & Zoller, 2007) and medicine (Fischer & Arnold, 1994)—our review of the literature found more wide-spread and in-depth evidence of educators measuring the specific impact of ethics curricular design on the development of 'higher order thinking', including attributes relevant for ethical reasoning capacity such as "nuanced judgment and interpretation ... [and] application of multiple criteria which sometimes conflict with one another" (Resnick, 1987, p. 3). However, beyond Canary's (2007) comparison of ethics students' reasoning with interpersonal communication students' reasoning and Lee and Padgett's (2000) evaluation of a mass media ethics course, we could not locate research conducting specific reasoning capacity testing to check the impact of communication education for moral reasoning capacity in communication ethics. Therefore, there appears to be limited understanding to date of what outcomes in terms of independent reasoning capacity communication teaching is producing for communication students.

Method

Undergraduate communication students in the United States provided situations and discussions that resulted in the development of a number of scenarios. Additional research and evaluation of current events, led to a total of ten scenarios (Appendix 1). The scenarios involved emergent ethical dilemmas and ranged from speaking up at the supermarket if it appeared that chicken was being stolen to going out with a co-worker for a drink after work. Subsequently, these scenarios were given to different groups of students to solicit their ethical responses. Students were asked to indicate their preferred course of action from among a variety of possible responses to particular ethical dilemmas. They were also given opportunities to provide other answers, of their own construction. Some of the scenarios test the students' family values ("familiar" decisions or kinship), while others test decision-making priorities in potential ethical dilemmas. Scenarios I, II, V and IX test the theory of kinship relationship while Scenarios III, IV, VI, VII, VIII, and X tested ethical decisions regarding workplace dilemmas including those of supervisor-subordinate relationships.

The present research tested the ten scenarios with students (N=568) in both the USA and New Zealand. Some small wording adaptations (replacing 'cart' with 'trolley', for example) were necessary for the New Zealand context to ensure that the sense of the survey was the same in each country, but the instrument and its administration were otherwise identical. University ethics approvals were obtained in both countries. Participation was voluntary. The sampling was both

purposive and convenience-based, in that students currently studying at the researchers' institutions were invited to participate, but only those studying a communication subject were included.[1]

Basic frequencies were calculated for all ten scenarios. To test for significance between age, level of study, and the scenarios, a Chi-Square with the Pearson Correlation Coefficient was used see Appendix 2 for data on respondents' age and level of study). The Chi-Square test can be used for almost all types of data and is one of the most frequently used. The Pearson Correlation Coefficient tests the level of significance between the variables and indicates that the lower the significance value, the less likely it is that the two variables are independent (unrelated).

Limitations

While surveys can be strong on reliability, they can be weak in validity and artificial in testing (Babbie, 1998). Since the survey questions are experientially based but artificial, how participants respond does not necessarily mean that they will take that particular action in real life. Also, this study could not test what might happen after the survey or after an ethics course or discussion nor what courses students have taken related to ethics. The findings are also very narrow, in terms of the specific questions asked—a different set of scenarios may have generated entirely different response patterns.

However, the strength of the survey approach is the reliability of asking the same standard questions of all participants. Therefore, we are able to provide a comparison of answers at this particular time for a large number of respondents, and compare those answers by different groupings such as age and study level.

Findings

Level of study

Pearson's Chi Square correlations conducted for each scenario by level of study found significance in only one of the ten scenarios. Scenario IV, which was based upon students' interpretations of what they believed had occurred during some aspects of the Enron scandal, asked respondents what they would do if they perceived a large number of people in their workplace participating in an unethical action to deceive a regulatory agency. This was the only scenario designed to test a peer effect

[1] Communication subjects in which the sample students were enrolled ranged from business communication, communication theory, public relations, marketing communication, journalism studies and speech theory, to cross-cultural and interpersonal communication. The intention was to sample only students who had had contact with the body of communication knowledge (in its broadest disciplinary sense) during their studies. As the survey was only administered in communication classes, this criterion was met. Because parental permission is required in NZ to survey under-18-year-olds, the NZ survey was restricted to those 18 years or older. In addition, because the NZ researcher taught a core first-year class and ethics approval requirements prohibited any survey of students she was currently teaching even if surveyed during another class, all first-year communication classes were excluded from the NZ sample. Ethics requirements also prohibited the NZ researcher from collecting ethnicity data. Data for the total sample by age and level of study are provided in Appendix 1.

(which it did by repeating the circumstances of the previous scenario but this time with the added factor of observing a large number of other employees already participating in the unethical activity) and it was the only scenario where level of education was a significant variable, albeit a relatively weak one at 0.10. Level of study impacted in the following way: the greater the level of education, the more likely students were to take an interventionist stance such as speaking to the boss or contacting the company's ethics officer (see Table 1, below). The lower their level of education, the more likely students were to do nothing: in fact, postgraduate students (with five or more years of study) were half as likely as first-years to follow instructions without questioning them. The students with more years of higher education, then, appeared to be less susceptible to a peer pressure effect.

Table 1: Aggregated responses to Scenario IV, cross-tabulated by current year of study.

Variable	Response				Count
Study year	Do nothing		Do something (speak to authority figure such as boss or ethics officer or take other action)		
	Count	%	Count	%	Total
1	47	40.5%	69	59.5%	**116**
2	51	30%	119	70%	**170**
3	32	25.8%	92	74.8%	**124**
4	33	26%	94	74%	**127**
5 or more	4	18.2%	18	81.8%	**22**

Age (see discussion below) was also a significant variable for this scenario, with younger students likewise less interventionist and more susceptible to the peer effect. However in Table 1, level of study has been isolated as a variable and is showing significance independently of age, so we can safely conclude that it is highly probable that study level did contribute in its own right to the change in respondents' answers. In every other scenario, whether testing family situations or workplace situations, level of study had no measurable relationship with the way respondents answered, even in scenarios where age was an influencing factor. In other words, for 90% of the particular ethical dilemmas posed, level of education made no difference to responses.

Age

Five of the ten scenarios showed significant difference by age. In Scenario I, which tests behaviour when observing unethical activity in a public situation (a supermarket theft), while students of all ages were most likely to speak directly to the wrongdoer, older students were more likely than younger students to eschew the offered 'tick a box' survey responses in favour of providing a qualitative 'other' response.

Interestingly, students of all ages responded in statistically equivalent ways when a 'kinship' factor was introduced into this same situation, in Scenario II. As the researchers have found for other variables in research published elsewhere, a kinship factor often seems to be a 'uniting' factor that

cuts across personal attributes to bring the ethical thinking of a diverse group of respondents into alignment. As discussed elsewhere, this research therefore provides support for Hamilton's Rule, which is that humans are influenced by a biological imperative to act ethically towards our own kin. Our research suggests that a perception of kinship ties can in many circumstances be strong enough to overcome other differences such as culture and gender (Fredricks & Tilley, 2011; Hamilton, 1964; Tilley, 2010; Tilley, Fredricks & Hornett, in press). The calculations performed for this article indicate that kinship feeling is also strong enough to overcome age-related differences between respondents, at least in the circumstances outlined for Scenarios I and II.

In Scenario IV, which as noted above tests a peer effect, there was a statistical difference by age, with older students more likely to challenge authority. Likewise, in Scenario V, which tests ethical responses towards parents who have loaned their son or daughter money, there was a difference by age in the degree to which respondents prioritised their kin over their own needs. Older students were less likely than younger students to choose the option to keep some of the money or use it to pay off their credit cards. Older students displayed more independence from their parents. Here, then, the kinship effect was not a unifying factor. We can only speculate as to causes of the age-related difference, but perhaps older students felt a sense of reversal of family moral responsibilities in which they saw themselves as responsible for their parents' wellbeing rather than the other way around. Whatever the cause, a greater proportion of younger students were willing to keep money that they had obtained from their parents on a now-inaccurate pretext. Older students were functioning more in alignment with higher levels of moral reasoning in which personal gain or loss become less relevant than abstract principles of fairness. The same change was not detectable for this scenario by level of study, however.

A statistical difference by age was also evident in Scenario VII, which tested respondents' behaviour in a workplace situation. Respondents were asked to imagine that they were selling jewellery on commission to a customer who clearly could not afford it, and to choose whether to let them make the purchase, refuse to make the sale, or try to steer them to a less expensive item. Older students were much more likely than younger ones to try to steer the purchaser to a less expensive item, while younger students preferred to ignore the customer's financial situation and sell the expensive item. Few students of any age would have refused altogether to make any sale. Older students were functioning at what could be interpreted to be a higher level of Kohlberg's moral reasoning hierarchy, in that they balanced another's wellbeing with their own but, as noted above, this was not correlated with their educational level (which was not significant at all for this scenario), only with their age. Whatever they had learned or experienced that caused them to respond differently from the younger students, the data suggest that they did not learn it as a result of longer exposure to education.

Finally, a statistical difference was evident by age in Scenario X, which asks students whether they would correct a workplace error, even if nobody else had noticed it. Interestingly, here, the age differences were somewhat mixed. Although older students were slightly more likely to tell a supervisor about the error than younger students, they were also more likely than younger students to do nothing. Younger students were the most likely to let the client who had been overcharged know about the error. In Aristotle's virtue ethics terms, older students were probably taking the most 'reasonable' course of action by picking the middle road, but if other tests of deontological

morality were applied it could be argued that the younger students, in informing the victim of the injustice directly of the issue, were taking the most ethically uncompromising route. Either way, there was an age difference. Again, older students were also more likely to choose to make a qualitative 'other' response rather than tick a box, suggesting that they did feel more inclined than younger students to take time to think hard about the questions they were being asked and consider carefully the way they wanted to answer them.

Other study-related demographic variables

Out of interest, two other study-related demographic cross-tabulations were tested for significance: whether the students were studying full time or part time, and whether the students were also in employment of any kind while studying. There was no statistical difference whatsoever for any of the scenarios between answers from students studying part time and answers from students studying full time but, interestingly, there were statistical differences for three scenarios between those students who were employed and those who were not.

In Scenario I (supermarket theft), students who were employed were less likely to do nothing and more likely to speak to the cashier (although each group exhibited about the same likelihood to speak to the would-be thief). Employed students therefore appeared slightly more comfortable speaking to another employee than unemployed students. Again, we can only speculate as to reasons, but they were perhaps showing greater comfort with communicating in workplace contexts or perhaps even displaying some empathy with the employee's situation based upon their own work experience. In Scenario IV, which tested the peer effect in the workplace, employed students were more likely to take the slightly more interventionist stance of expressing discomfort to the boss (as opposed to unemployed students, who were more likely to ask their boss for clarification). Employed students were also less likely to do nothing than currently unemployed students and more likely to consult the company ethics officer. Being in current employment therefore enhanced the students' ability to respond proactively when witnessing unethical behaviour in the workplace.

Discussion

The tested students are gaining some skills in ethical intervention and reasoning as they grow older, but, in terms of these scenarios at least, they are gaining almost no change in how they respond to ethical situations as they proceed through their education. Even commencing postgraduate education has not, for these students, made a significant difference to their ethical responses in more than one out of ten situations. A rate of change of 10% or less would, to us as educators, suggest that we are failing abysmally in our aims to inculcate these students with the ethical reasoning skills they need to contribute to a moral society. They are attaining a better rate of change simply by participating in the workforce while they are studying than by attending our classes. (Interestingly, this correlates with research into medical students' ethics, which found that students develop moral reasoning during residency, but not during classroom training. However, having

guided ethical reflection training *during* residency and based upon their residency experiences created the greatest reasoning gains of all (Fischer & Arnold, 1994).)

Kohlberg argued unequivocally that ethical reasoning does not automatically develop with age. Rather, if it does increase as an individual ages (which occurred in 50% of the scenarios tested here), that is because they have been exposed to experiences and situations in which they have had to actively develop their moral reasoning capacities by thinking through choices, impacts, consequences, and principles of justice. Our respondents did show a correlation between more developed ethical reasoning capacity and age half the time, but clearly, given level of study was not a significant impact factor on their answers, this reasoning enhancement came from exposure to experiences other than study.

The statistical difference for those in employment gives one clue as to where some of those experiences may be occurring. This lends support to arguments for the importance of an internship as part of the educational process, particularly a critically reflexive one where students are required to analyse and critique both their workplace experience and their educational learning against each other, and to consider the role of moral principles in both. In a study of public relations student interns, Lubbers, Bourland-Davis and Rawlins (2007/8, pp. 9 & 1), found that "the internship is a point of socialisation and professional awakening for a student" and a process "through which interns learn the values associated with the profession". They also found, in line with our results in this research, that "while students recalled addressing ethics in classes, they generally did not feel prepared for managing the issues especially related to office politics when confronted with them during their internships" (p. 1).

Conversely, research with journalism students suggests that obtaining workplace experience *before* studying may actually *negatively* impact ethical reasoning. Ball, Hanna and Sanders (2006) found in a large-scale study of first-year British journalism students that, when the commencing students were surveyed "within the first few days of the program" (p. 22) about their views on a range of professional ethical dilemmas, those with prior newsroom experience were statistically more likely to consider it acceptable to badger unwilling sources, use personal documents such as letters and photos without permission and use hidden cameras, than those without previous exposure to newsroom culture. This suggests that an internship that first introduces students to workplace realities in their desired profession *after* some initial study that stimulates awareness of ethical and legal issues, and provides opportunities for critical and ethical reflection through analytical assignment work during the internship, may therefore be preferable to courses that begin with an unreflexive immersion placement before the student has had a chance to build awareness of some of the likely professional dilemmas they may encounter and possible ways of thinking about their ethical implications.

For educators, the continuing challenge is to identify what is it about actively participating in employment and study at the same time that delivers ethical decision-making changes in ways that the present survey indicates classroom study alone does not. What are the best methods to try to prepare our students for workplace ethical realities before they leave our programmes? How can we capture the benefits to moral reasoning that those students who work or intern while they study

are gaining and ensure that all students have similar opportunities across more of their curriculum design?

Constructivist models of teaching and learning are clearly more aligned with the kind of education that Kohlberg believed would develop reasoning capacity than are traditional 'sage on the stage' methods. Particularly where classes have a mix of older, younger, employed, and unemployed students, the peer-to-peer co-construction of knowledge attained through ethical scenario discussion and team problem-solving may help to replicate the kinds of 'real life' learning the employed students are getting in the workplace and the older students have gained through life and/or work experiences. This assertion would need to be tested before any definite conclusions could be drawn, but the data here are certainly conclusive in indicating that change is needed.

Whatever we are doing now in the five universities across two countries where this survey was administered, it is not greatly altering students' ethical reasoning other than to induce some resistance to peer pressure. Empirical validation for the impact of other methods of teaching on the development of moral reasoning should be urgently explored, particularly for communication education where moral capacity is central to the professional communicator role, yet understanding of how to develop it during education may not be widespread across all the communication sub-disciplines. (For example, in the specific case of public relations pedagogy, Roberts (2006) notes that "academic societies … tend to overlook support and encouragement (and even tools) for public relations pedagogy, and academics have undertaken very little rigorous research into pedagogical issues" (p. 1).)

One of the quite explicit ways that Kohlberg suggested education might enhance capacity to reason ethically was to develop role-playing facility, that is, to give students the experience of adopting another's view (Crain, 1985). The authors of this paper each use role-playing in our communication classes, including ethical scenario role-plays, and it would appear both that these efforts are supported by the literature and, from the data, that we could be doing far more in this regard. In their book *Lawrence Kohlberg's Approach to Moral Education*, educationalists Power and Higgins team with Kohlberg to argue that education must deploy participatory democracy to enhance students' moral capacity (Power, Higgins & Kohlberg, 1991). They suggest that rather than just teaching democratic principles, classrooms and whole schools should actually operate as working democracies in which the students are full and equal participants. Students would best develop moral reasoning, they argue, when they had to directly problem-solve ethical situations (such as how to deal with a classmate who cheated on a test) and live with the consequences of their own decisions. Ironically the book was criticised by a student who had been part of the researchers' study for not including any student voices in its "one sided" account of the 'democratic' experiment, but the student nonetheless acknowledged that "the lessons I learned in those classrooms put me far ahead of my peers in college. I have been promoted many times in my professional life because I learned early on to face issues head on, be honest, and most importantly treat everyone you meet with dignity and respect regardless of their opinions" (Mauterio, 2011, para. 1).

Arguably, future curriculum design for communication ethics might undertake similar experiments to explore how classrooms and whole universities can best enact participatory ethical communication, rather than just preaching ethical communication principles, with students directly involved as

evaluators of and commentators on the entire process. If, as Loeb (building upon the work of Caplan, 1980) argues, “ability to measure educational outcomes [is] a prerequisite to the implementation of an educational innovation” (1991, p. 83), student-developed survey instruments such as the one used in the present research might conceivably contribute to such measurement and, hence, support the implementation and evaluation of this kind of participant-centred pedagogical evolution in communication ethics teaching.

Conclusions

If it is commonplace to suggest that graduates *should* develop moral reasoning capacity, it is also fairly routine to observe that, as yet, such qualities are not demonstrably being created in widespread measure. Some educationalists have suggested that somewhat radical changes to educational practices and even our entire educational philosophy might be necessary to alter that situation. In the words of Barnett (2004):

> Construing the pedagogical task as the formation of authentic being turns us towards neither knowledge nor skills as central categories but rather to certain kinds of human qualities. They are the qualities that both make authentic being possible and are also, in part, generated by a drive towards authenticity. They are qualities such as carefulness, thoughtfulness, humility, criticality, receptiveness, resilience, courage and stillness. The achievement of qualities such as these calls for a transformatory curriculum and pedagogy which are themselves understood to be and practised as endeavours of high risk; high risk not just for the participants but also for the academic staff in their educational roles. (pp. 259-260)

Given the elements of change and risk involved, it is not surprising that, while there is a small body of literature suggesting positive outcomes from constructivist approaches to communication education (e.g., Demetrious, 2004; Fall, 2004; Knabe, 2004), there appear to be as yet no large-scale tests (that we are aware of) to validate the educational outcomes of student-controlled democratically run ethical communication learning projects, and find out what kinds of projects, support structures and educator roles best develop the human qualities referred to by Barnett (2004). Psychologists at Konstanz University in Germany have developed an updated version of Blatt’s dilemma discussion method, which they claim is easier to teach and has “greater effect sizes” (Lind, 2005, para. 1), but methods, such as this, appear relatively unknown outside specific curricula focused on teaching democracy and citizenship. The methods used for those classes may also be applicable to communication and particularly communication ethics courses, but with more specific communication-focused course material, and concurrent participatory evaluation to gather data as to the outcomes. Such research and teaching would involve making some quite radical changes to existing practices and taking some incalculable risks. Given what is at stake, however (which we perceive to be the moral stagnation of our students during their time in our courses), such a shake-up seems well overdue.

Our survey showed us, to our surprise and chagrin, that our students were not learning the 'human qualities' of ethical reasoning and discernment that we might have expected (and hoped) they were. Although their answers to ethical dilemmas changed somewhat as a result of increased age and involvement in employment, they exhibited very little change in association with their years spent exposed to our teaching. In this, however, the literature suggests we are not alone. Our next step will be to consider what we can do about it. How best can we design some pedagogical interventions that stimulate active moral reasoning? Repeating administration of the instrument used in the present research after the delivery of such deliberate interventions may enable us to gather longitudinal data of a kind that appears almost unknown in the literature to date—empirical evidence of whether when we 'teach' our students about communication ethics, we are really teaching anything at all.

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Appendix 1 - Scenarios

Scenario I:

You are shopping at the local supermarket and are second in line at the checkout. The man in front of you has emptied his cart on the conveyor belt. You start to empty your cart and notice that he has a large package of chicken down below on the bottom rung of the cart. It is hidden from the cashier's view. The cashier does not notice. What do you do?

Nothing

Speak to the man

Speak to the cashier

Other (please explain): _____

Scenario II**:**

You are shopping at the local supermarket and are second in line at the checkout. The man in front of you has emptied his cart on the conveyor belt. You start to empty your cart and notice that he has a large package of chicken down below on the bottom rung of the cart. It is hidden from the cashier's view. The cashier does not notice.

Your closest relative is the manager of the meat department in this store and personally pays for inventory shortages. What do you do?

Nothing

Speak to the man

Speak to the cashier

Other (please explain): _____

Scenario III:

You are working for a major corporation in your home town. The pay is good and the benefits are what you classify as exceptional. As part of your benefits, your retirement provides for stock options. In fact, the basis of your retirement is company stock options. The company

seems to be doing well and the stock price is rising. You feel on top of the world, your stock price is increasing and you are getting an increasing share of a rising stock. Your job is flexible and is providing significant opportunities for you. You are sitting at your desk when you get a phone call from your boss, asking for your assistance. The Security and Exchange Commission is conducting a spot check on your company and its trading behaviours. The phones on the trading floor need to be covered by personnel. It is well known throughout the company that these phones are not staffed because there is no trading activity. Your boss encourages you to drop everything and to proceed to the trading floor in order "to put on a good show" for the S.E.C. What do you do?

Nothing, ignore the request and continue with your work

Talk to your boss about the request

Proceed to the trading floor as directed

Tell one of your friends at work and you both agree to stay behind.

Tell one of your friends at work and convince your friend to go with you to the trading floor

Other (please explain):_____

Scenario IV:

Assume that you proceed to the trading floor no questions asked because your boss requested it.

As you proceed up to the trading floor, you notice several more employees making their way there as well. As you enter the trading floor, you are given instructions to find a desk and pick up the phone and pretend to place calls to people from an established list. You watch more and more company employees enter the floor and realize that there are over seventy (70) employees relocated to the trading floor. As you find a desk, and start placing calls, members of the S.E.C. staff arrive and are given a tour of the floor. Once they have gone, further instructions are given to have you return to your normal duties. What do you do?

Nothing, go back to your normal duties as instructed.

Speak to your boss and ask for further clarification about the situation

Speak to your boss and tell him/her that you are uncomfortable doing this

Speak to the company's Chief Ethics Officer.

Other (please explain): _____ _____

Scenario V:

You are beginning a new semester at your college/university. Your financial aid has not arrived on time and if you do not pay your tuition, you will have to drop out. Although you do not live at home, you call your parents and ask to borrow some money. They are pretty broke right now but they reluctantly agree and send you the money needed and you pay your bill. The financial aid arrives and you now have more money than expected. Your parents did not know that you would be getting financial aid. What do you do?

Pay your parents back

Keep all the money and not tell your parents

Pay off your credit cards with the money

Pay some of the money back to your parents

Other (please explain): _____

Scenario VI:

Someone you supervised was putting hours on his timecard that he was not working. S/He was a very good employee and always completed projects under budget. All of the hours were billed directly to a client, and they were happy with the costs they were incurring to have the work done. What do you do?

Confront the employee

Pretend you did not know what was happening

Adjust the client's bill to accurately reflect the hours

Other (please explain): _____

Scenario VII:

As a sales representative, you often have to balance your personal gain with the customer's gain. You are compensated for a sale even if you believe that the customer should not purchase the product.

At the same time, if you did not produce your quota, your job would be in jeopardy.

A customer approaches you with a purchase of an exceedingly expensive watch. With this purchase you will receive a huge commission. Based upon their credit situation, paying for the watch through various credit cards, you deduce this may not be the best watch for them. What do you do?

Let them purchase the watch anyway.

Refuse to sell them the watch

Try and steer them towards other less expensive watches

Other (please explain): _____

Scenario VIII:

While you were employed as a production supervisor, you occasionally went out with the group for drinks. One subordinate, whom you found attractive, let it be known that s/he would like to date you. The company has no policy on work relationships. What do you do?

Ask the person out on a date

Tell the person that it would be inappropriate to mix business and

pleasure

Ignore the person's comments

Other (please explain): _____

Scenario IX:

You work in a retail establishment and see your supervisor taking home merchandize at least once a week. Your uncle got you this job and is a good friend with the owner of the store. What do you do?

Nothing

Contact your uncle

Start taking merchandise too!

*Other (please explain):*_____

Scenario X:

While auditing one of your client's accounts, you came across something in the contract that had been overlooked by everyone involved. This item wasn't very large, just a few dollars here and there. However, the contract was from a few years ago, and your client was very large, so the dollars added up. The client was overcharged significantly. To correct this error, a credit would have to be applied to every single error, which would be extremely time-consuming for you and the client. You are short on staff and in the middle of your busiest season. You were the only one who recognized the error. What do you do?

Nothing, no one else has noticed it

Tell my direct supervisor so that s/he can make the decision

Let the client know about the error

*Other (please explain):*_____

Appendix 2: Sample demographics by age and level of tertiary study

Age	Count
Under 18	67
18-19	175
20-21	162
22-23	95
24-25	23
26-27	18
28-29	10
30-39	12
40+	6
Total	**568**

Study year	Count
1.00	118
2.00	172
3.00	128
4.00	128
5+	22
Total	**568**