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# Addressing student cynicism through transformative learning

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# Addressing student cynicism through transformative learning

## **Abstract**

This paper reflects on insights that emerged from the findings of a qualitative study conducted by the author in 2007 with third year management students from an Australian university on their perceptions in relation to business ethics. The findings revealed an attitude of cynicism with regard to the application of ethical principles beyond university years – in “the real world of business’. This led the author to engage in more systematic efforts to address this problem, and to this end, she found Mezirow’s notion of transformative learning inspiring and valuable. It is contended that reflection and critical thinking are crucially important skills to enable consciousness shifts that will lead to a deeper understanding and greater appreciation of the importance of ethical conduct in management. They can act as antidotes to attitudes of cynicism which make students feel powerless and dejected, disinclined to apply the knowledge gained during their training beyond university years. A selection of examples of class activities and assessments to foster transformative learning is provided.

## **Keywords**

cynicism; transformative learning; critical thinking; reflection; business ethics

## **Cover Page Footnote**

I would like to thank the reviewers for their constructive comments and suggestions which significantly enriched my manuscript.

## **Introduction**

The last three decades have witnessed something akin to a shift of consciousness in the business sphere, reflected in an increased preoccupation in management education with business ethics. This topic is now an integral feature of business schools curricula (see Block & Cwik, 2007; Crane, 2004; Harris & Guffey, 1991; Milton-Smith, 1995; Pamental, 1989; Sims & Felton Jr, 2006) and has been the focus of extensive pedagogical research (Block & Cwik, 2007). However, as a teacher of business ethics, the author often wonders whether management students feel sufficiently confident to apply the theoretical knowledge gained in their training, beyond university years. A qualitative study carried out in an Australian university in 2007 to investigate the perceptions of undergraduate management students in relation to business ethics, suggests that this confidence is lacking (Duarte 2008). While the students' responses generally indicated approval of the study of ethical principles, a significant number revealed an attitude of cynicism in relation to the possibility of applying ethics in the "real world of business". For the purpose of this paper, cynicism is defined as a deeply entrenched pessimism about the world, involving an "attitude of scornful or jaded negativity" (Johnson, 2005, p. 45). A cynical person has a general distrust about the integrity of others, in particular people in positions of power and influence. Cynicism goes hand in hand with apathy, a lack of concern for the well being of society and a lack of interest in taking action to address social and moral issues. Cynicism and apathy have been identified as causing factors of civic disengagement (Jones, Henfler, & Johnson, 2001; Loeb, 1999) which is a rather negative outcome for future business managers, given the centrality of business in contemporary society. Civically engaged, ethical managers are strongly needed to ensure a sustainable future.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings of the above study point to a need for more systematic efforts to encourage higher degrees of reflection and critical thinking among business students. Not only are these skills pivotal for a greater appreciation of the importance of ethical conduct in management, but they also help foster self-confidence to operationalise abstract ethical principles in the workplace, which may lead to greater levels of commitment to positive social change among the students. As noted by Wenger (1998, p. 105), the teacher can play a "brokering" role in the boundary crossing between university and work, enabling not only a smooth transition between these two domains, but also a "consequential transition" – that is, a shift which is "consciously reflected on [and] struggled with" creating opportunities for individuals to be actively involved in the transformation of society (Beach, 2008, pp. 42-43).

In this paper, the author reflects on some vital insights that emerged from the findings of her 2007 study on students' perceptions of business ethics, and on important changes in her teaching approach prompted by these insights. She re-visits the seminal works of Jack Mezirow (Mezirow & Associates, 1990) and Donald Schön (1983, 1987) to explore pedagogical concepts and practices that can be used to address the problem of student cynicism.



The first part of the paper contextualises the discussions to be developed through a brief examination of the core findings of the above mentioned study; the second reflects on the pedagogical insights that emerged from the study and explores the notions of *transformative learning* (Mezirow & Associates, 1990) and *reflective practice* (Schön, 1983, 1987); the third provides examples of class activities and assessments that can be used to operationalise these concepts.

## Students' perceptions of ethics: findings and insights

The idea to conduct the study in question emerged from a comment made, some time ago, by one of the author's students about what he perceived as "too much ethics and social responsibility" in the Bachelor of Business Management. This comment was a source of concern, as it made the author wonder whether this was just the personal opinion of one individual or whether it was a general attitudinal trend amongst management students. She therefore conducted a study with 119 students from a third year subject called *Contemporary Management Issues* to address the following questions:

1. To what extent do students believe that ethics is a relevant topic for future managers?
2. Do students in the Bachelor of Business Management believe that they have gained any benefits from studying business ethics?

The instrument of data collection was a qualitative (anonymous) questionnaire survey containing open-ended questions on the participants' views regarding the study of business ethics, and a single multiple choice item stating:

*It's all very well to talk about ethics in business management, but the reality is that, at the end of the day, what matters is a company's ability to remain competitive and profitable.*

The above statement was deliberately framed in polemic terms for the purpose of eliciting a visceral response in the participants. They were instructed to tick a box indicating whether they "Agreed", "Disagreed" or were "Indifferent" in relation to the statement. Space was provided for further elaboration, if so desired.

Analysis of the questionnaires revealed that the findings were largely at odds with the comment made by the student who believed that there was "too much ethics" in the Bachelor of Business Management. The great majority of participants (95%) were of the opinion that the study of ethics is important for future managers, and a significant number (84%) believed that they had benefited from studying ethics. There was nevertheless a disturbing pattern in the responses to the polemic statement: a significant percentage of students (42 %) indicated that they *agreed* with it.

This pattern reflects what Desjardins (2006:9) describes as the "daunting gap between ethical judgement and behaviour" – that is, a disjuncture between the *ideal* and the *practice* of ethics.

This finding resonates with the moral dilemmas that often confront contemporary managers based on the tension between their individual beliefs and their role as professional managers (Boatright, 2007, p. 22). Whereas as individuals, business managers may earnestly believe in the importance of ethical practice, as professionals they often find themselves in a conundrum where there is a temptation, or shareholder pressure, to place economic performance above ethical principles.

Reflecting on the findings of the study, the author wondered whether the attitudes observed in the survey could be due to her students' inability to *imagine* alternatives to the dominant business paradigm which puts profits above everything else, including ethics. Could it be that the students felt so helplessly "trapped" in this particular version of reality that they could not envisage alternative frames of reference? With this pressing question in mind she decided to review her pedagogical approach, and began to search for a suitable alternative geared more specifically towards personal transformation. While a significant body of work has been published on critical management education in the last decade or so (Alvesson & Willmott, 1996; Burrell, 2001; Cunliffe, 2002, 2004; Cunliffe & Jong, 2002; Fournier & Grey, 2000; French & Grey, 1996; Grey, 2004; Grey & Mitev, 1995; Grey & Willmott, 2005; Reynolds, 1997, 1998), the author felt that the ideas of educational theorists Jack Mezirow and Donald Schön resonated particularly well with her aim of addressing student cynicism, given the emphasis of these theorists on the transformative dimension of education. Their ideas are explored in the sections below.

## **Transformative learning as an antidote to cynicism**

The core message in Mezirow's (1990) writings is that education should play an emancipatory role; that is, it should free the learner from any form of authoritarian control – in particular the more insidious forms of social control stemming from dominant "meaning perspectives". Mezirow (1990b, p. xvi) defines meaning perspectives as "the structure of assumptions that constitute a frame of reference for interpreting the meaning of a given experience". These assumptions shape the belief system of individuals and also those underlying dominant discourses and practices in society. Meaning perspectives, Mezirow explains, are constituted by "higher order schemata, theories, propositions, beliefs, prototypes, goal orientations and evaluations". These elements provide the criteria for making value judgments and for the creation of belief systems.

An example of a pervasive meaning perspective that is critically relevant in the context of management education is the assumption that profit is the only goal of business. This essentially instrumental way of thinking provides a widely accepted, generally taken-for-granted frame of reference that no doubt influences the way management is taught in business schools, and thus how business students perceive their own role as future managers. This meaning perspective does not leave room for consideration of ethical principles in business decision-making. Therefore, it is important that teachers encourage students to imagine alternative meaning perspectives in order to create a more humanistic and socially

responsible approach to business management. This can be potentially accomplished through emancipatory education.

Emancipatory education is defined by Mezirow (1990a, p. 18) as an “organized effort to precipitate or to facilitate transformative learning in others.” This means that learners are encouraged by teachers to become more conscious and indeed critical of the dominant meaning perspectives that shape thought and action in contemporary society. This approach can open up possibilities for the creation of alternative meaning perspectives consistent with counter-hegemonic discourses that have been emerging in the past two decades (e.g., business ethics; corporate social responsibility; sustainability). While the narrative of the instrumental rationality paradigm was premised on relentless economic growth, 21st Century narratives are increasingly premised on notions such as social and environmental sustainability, and intergenerational equity (e.g., Adebowale, 2002; Cave, 2007; Cheney, Nheu, & Vecellio, 2004; Dale, 2001; Kohn & Gowdy, 2001; Koning, 2001; McKenzie, 2004). It is therefore essential to encourage students to embrace these new ways of seeing that can be a suitable complement to the more technical aspects of management studies that currently dominate business school curricula.

Emancipatory education is dependent upon what Mezirow (1990a) calls transformative learning, a process that can change the way students understand their experience of the world and that of other people and social groups. Transformative learning goes beyond the passive acquisition of abstract knowledge in the classroom. It is aimed at creating a conscious commitment to engage in action that will contribute to positive social change. Indeed, for Mezirow (1990a, p. 1) learning is “the process of making a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience, which guides subsequent understanding, appreciation and action”. In his framework, transformative learning is facilitated by two closely related pedagogical concepts – reflection and critical thinking.

## **Reflection and critical thinking**

The ability to reflect is crucial for transformative learning because reflection entails deep thinking about the “justification of one’s beliefs” in order “to guide action [and] give coherence to the unfamiliar” (Mezirow, 1990b, p. xvi). Reflection involves a deep and thorough exploration of one’s own belief systems, and also of the extent to which these belief systems influence problem solving in ever changing contexts. Most importantly, the ability to reflect is fundamentally important to understand the structure of the different meaning perspectives operating in our society, and also to challenge negative attitudes and approaches that hamper positive social change. Reflection, thus, goes hand in hand with critical thinking, an “elusive activity” (Moon, 2007) defined in different ways by different people.

In his work, Mezirow examines definitions of critical thinking provided by Langsdorf and Brookfield. Langsdorf’s (1988, p. 45) definition resonates well with Mezirow’s transformative learning framework, as it emphasises the importance of attitudinal shifts. For Langsdorf (1988, p. 45), critical thinking

is concerned with developing the ability to assess both explicit and implicit claims, so as to determine what I ought to do, or which claim I ought to accept, on the basis of good reasons for that decision – rather than on the basis of force, chance or custom.

The above definition is further enhanced by the one provided by Brookfield (1995, p. 13) who notes that critical thinking engenders *more* than just cognitive activities such as logical reasoning or looking for empirical evidence; it involves awareness of the assumptions that underlie our beliefs and behaviour. This means that by thinking critically we are able to both justify our ideas and actions and judge the rationality of these justifications.

Applying Brookfield's definition to the context of management education, critical thinking encourages students to question the assumptions underlying established belief systems, discourses and practices regarding the role of business in society. It also prompts the realisation that although these beliefs, discourses and practices are often promoted as “the only way to go”, they are in fact ideological constructs, deployed and maintained to serve the interests of the powerful. Critical thinking is essential to create reflective thinkers who are able to use critical judgment to solve problems (Kitchener & King, 1990, pp. 159-160), and not just passively accept the *status quo* because they feel too powerless to challenge it.

Critical thinking leads to what Mezirow (1990a, p. 1) calls “critical reflection” which is not only concerned with the *how* and *how-to* but with “the *why*, the reasons for and consequences of what we do” (Mezirow, 1990a, p. 13; italics added). Critical reflection, he warns, can be a daunting activity, as it engenders the possibility of “negation of values that have been very close to the center of one's self-concept” (Mezirow, 1990a, p. 12). For example, in the competitive world of business, it is not easy for managers to relinquish Friedman's (1970) corollary that “The business of business is to increase profit”. It can be speculated that to some extent, this is because this corollary is routinely imparted to undergraduate management students during their university training which tends to construct management as a purely instrumental activity (i.e. a means to achieve productivity and profit). The moral aspects of the profession are often played down or altogether disregarded.

For Mezirow, critical reflection (1990, p. xvi; italics added) “results in the *reformulation* of a meaning perspective to allow a more inclusive, discriminating and integrative understanding of one's experiences”. In this context, learning engenders both achieving insights as well as *acting* on these insights, which is a distinctive feature of the transformative learning framework (1990a, p. 18). At this point it is opportune to bring Schön into the discussion, in particular his assertion that the reflective thinkers of today will be the reflective practitioners of tomorrow (Schön, 1983, 1987).

Reflective practitioners are never afraid of asking themselves probing questions about their competence and ability to make ethical decisions; are constantly looking for different ways to further their knowledge and expertise, and are prepared to reassess and modify their meaning perspectives to ensure that they are relevant to contemporary social realities.

One of the core skills of reflective practitioners is their ability to engage in what Schön (1983, pp. 241-242) terms “reflection-in-action”, defined as “on-the-spot surfacing, restructuring, and testing of intuitive understandings of experienced phenomena”. This often takes the form of a “reflective conversation” with the situation to ensure that the best possible decision will be reached – that is, a decision that will not be based on personal bias or prejudice but on well considered, critically assessed reasons. An ethical manager must be prepared to ask her or himself reflective questions such as:

1. How did this situation emerge in the first place?
2. Have I defined the problem accurately?
3. How would I have defined the problem if I stood on the other side of the fence?
4. Could my decision be harmful to other people or the environment?
5. What is my real intention in making this decision?
6. Can I discuss the issue with the affected parties before making a decision?
7. Am I confident that my position will be as valid over a long period as it seems now?
8. Could I comfortably disclose my decision to my boss, my chief executive officer, the board of directors, my family and society as a whole?<sup>1</sup>

Schön (1983, p. 242) points out that when a manager reflects-in-action, s/he draws on the vast repository of organisational knowledge, acting as “an agent of organisational learning” who extends in their present inquiry the stock of knowledge which will be available for future endeavours.

Summing up, Mezirow’s transformative learning framework and Schön’s concept of reflective practitioner are useful heuristic tools to help teachers understand the pivotal role played by reflection and critical thinking in preparing students for the “consequential transition” that Beach (2008) writes about. It has been suggested in this paper that reflection and critical thinking can act as antidotes to cynicism because they encourage a deeper understanding of complex issues, and also the realisation that it is possible to take a more active role in addressing problems for which we believe there is no solution. This insight can empower students to play a more active role as future professionals, contributing meaningfully to the betterment of society.

Within the specific context of management education, the deep learning generated by reflection and critical thinking can facilitate the belief that it is possible to act ethically and equitably in the sphere of business. It is thus important to select the right types of activities and assessments to foster reflection and critical thinking in management education.



## **Enabling transformative learning in business ethics teaching**

### **Encouraging reflection**

Transformative learning can be effectively enabled through experiential learning, the idea that “there is an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education” (Dewey, 1938, pp. 19-20). Experiential learning is an ideal pedagogical approach to foster reflection, as it is based on activities that face students with real-life ethical dilemmas, and encourage them to ask themselves: *What is the right thing to do in this particular situation?* Experiential exercises, note Sims & Felton Jr (2006, p. 307), provide effective training and teaching tools “to prepare students to understand and cope with the ethical minefields that they are likely to encounter” in the sphere of work.

“Hypotheticals” is an effective and enjoyable experiential exercise to encourage reflection in business ethics subjects (see LeClair, Ferrel, Montuori, & Willems, 1999 ). Providing an example of this type of activity, Sims (2001, p. 180) suggests that the teacher presents students with “problems involving improper gifts, kickbacks and conflicts of interest” in order to “develop their ability to analyze unstructured ethical dilemmas and discern alternative courses of action.”

In these exercises, students are placed in the role of a manager or employee in different types of companies and given a scenario involving a complex ethical dilemma, for which there are no black-and-white solutions. Students can be split into small groups of 3-4 and given different dilemmas to analyse. They are then asked to share with the class the decision-making processes used to address the dilemma. Below are two examples of management-related ethical dilemmas that can be used in hypotheticals:

#### *Dilemma 1:*

You are the general manager of a software company. A female employee tells you that one of the middle-managers has been making unwanted sexual advances towards her and that she will no longer tolerate it. The offender happens to be an old friend who was in the same MBA course as you some years ago. When you tackle the matter with him, he denies what the woman has reported. How do you resolve a situation like this? Explain why.

#### *Dilemma 2:*

You are the manager of an orphanage which is struggling for survival. You need a vehicle for the orphanage, and go to a car dealership. The salesperson offers you a new van worth US\$15,000 for free, but only if you declare in your organisation’s taxation documents that the donated van was worth US\$30,000. You really need that van, not only because it will make the day-to-day running of the orphanage more effective, but it will also make the children very happy. Do you agree to take the van or not? Justify your decision. (Adapted from Thompson Rivers University, 2007)

Role play exercises are also effective tools to foster reflection in ethics teaching, as they encourage students to be “in the shoes” of different stakeholders, prompting consideration of alternative ways of interpreting a given situation. As noted by Brown (1994, p. 106), role play exercises also have the advantage of “creating low risk conditions for expression of extreme opinions by students”. They require limited interference from the teacher, avoiding the old fashioned practice of “preaching by the authority figure.” Role playing works better with small groups of students (8-10), as large groups can make students self-conscious, which can inhibit participation. However, it is also possible to use role playing effectively with larger groups. For instance, for a medium-sized classroom (maximum of 18 students) a complex scenario can be developed with multiple roles that are allocated randomly to the students. In larger classes (more than 25 students), small groups of students can be invited to create and enact a particular ethical dilemma involving multiple stakeholders (e.g. the CEO; the managing director; the middle-manager; suppliers; community; government; unions; environmental groups and so on). Each student can play the role of a different stakeholder, creating their script in line with the meaning perspective of their stakeholder (i.e., shareholders will talk about saving costs; government representatives will talk about policy; environmental activists will talk about saving the environment, and so on). Also in larger classes, the teacher can divide students into two groups and cast them into conflicting roles. For example, the left side of the class will take the shareholders’ perspective on a given ethical issue, and the right side will play the role of customers challenging the instrumental shareholders’ stance on profits (Goodpaster, Nash, & de Bettignies, 2006, pp. 4-5).

Following the role-play exercise, it is crucially important to carry out a *debriefing* session with students (Sims, 2001; Thatcher, 1986; van Ments, 1983). This often neglected processing stage of experiential learning refers to the “post-experience analysis designed to provide insight into the cases, journalizing, role plays or other experiential learning approaches used in teaching business ethics” (Sims, 2001, p. 179). Debriefing has also been described as “reflective observation” that establishes a vital link between experience and process of change (Thatcher, 1986, p. 161). It has important implications for transformative learning, as it is the part of the reflective process from which attitudinal shifts will occur. In debriefing exercises, the teacher becomes a facilitator who ensures “an integration of the experiences with concepts and applications to outside situations, so that appropriate generalizations can be made” (Hunsaker, 1978).

Case studies based on real life situations are also effective experiential learning activities, as they create “inductive, interactive, real world based experience” (Sims & Felton, 2006, 308). A case study does not need to be a formal, academically approved text referring to a real organisation, but can be an anecdote, a fictitious organisational story, or a clipping from a business source (e.g., *Wall Street Journal*; *Fortune Magazine*; *Business Weekly*) used for the purpose of illustrating a given ethical issue. It can also be a report on a controversial issue or event (e.g., fraud, embezzlement, whistleblowing), or a summary description of a judicial proceeding (e.g., Harvard Law Cases). As explained by Goodpaster, Nash and de Bettignies (2006, pp. 2-3):

The idea of the case method in the ethical arena is to offer the learner a vicarious decision making opportunity so that both moral and managerial judgement can be exercised, indeed actively *practiced* (original italics).

The teacher plays a pivotal role in the analysis of case studies, as they guide the special “partnership” with students by using techniques such as structured questioning, Socratic dialogue, feedback, role playing, break out team activities and written case analysis assignments. In the last few years, the case method has also enhanced teaching and learning through threaded discussions in “virtual classrooms” (Goodpaster, et al., 2006, p. 3).

Commercial film is another effective pedagogical tool (Duarte, 2006) that can be used to encourage students to reflect critically on the complexities of business ethical dilemmas. As noted by Giacalone & Jurkiewics (2001, p. 79):

*Connecting the ethical issues interwoven in cinematic characters, plots and outcomes to business ethics provides students with an interesting way to learn the nuance of ethical decision making. It helps to assert for the students that ethical issues in everyday life are not distinct and separate from those at work.*

Corporate on-site visits (Jones & Ottaway, 2001) and guest speakers from ethics education institutions (e.g. St James Ethics Centre in Australia; Institute of Business Ethics in the United Kingdom) are useful to encourage a more positive, less cynical attitude towards business, especially when the company visited is actively engaged in ethically based activities such as corporate social responsibility or sustainability programs. A more positive attitude in relation to business can no doubt lead to greater confidence to apply ethical principles beyond university years, as students will not feel totally dejected and powerless because they believe that “all business is bad”.

### **Fostering critical thinking**

Given the importance of critical thinking in transformative learning, it is essential that a few sessions be devoted at the beginning of the semester to an exploration of this notion with the students. However, it is also essential that teachers themselves have a sound grasp of the meaning of this elusive concept. To this end, an electronic book by Moon (2007) is a valuable resource that provides an in-depth exploration of the different definitions of critical thinking, and offers some thought-provoking class exercises which have proved very successful with the author’s students.

With regard to students, the first step to foster critical thinking is training them to be able to differentiate between opinion and evidence. To this end, Kitchener and King (1990, p. 169) offer some useful guidelines:

1. Give the best evidence you can find for a specific point of view. Identify what makes it count as evidence.
2. Identify the evidence and arguments for a view that an authority in the field is presenting. What makes the evidence for the argument strong or weak?
3. Identify two or more points of view in an issue.
4. What do you believe about the issue? Is there any evidence that supports what you believe? What is the evidence that is contrary to what you believe?

The above guidelines enable students to grasp, for example, the constructed nature of news on TV and in the print media; in other words to identify the meaning perspectives underlying what has been reported. An effective class exercise to enable students to identify different meaning perspectives goes as follows. First, the teacher encourages discussion to ensure that students understand the notion of meaning perspectives. Then, students are asked to imagine that they are writers of news reporting a business ethics issue from different perspectives. Finally, students are asked to write reports on the issue from different points of view, explicitly identifying the meaning perspectives that underpin the different narratives that they have created.

### Assessing for transformative learning

In a transformative learning program designed to address student cynicism, it is also essential to consider the types of assessment that will be used. This is because assessment can potentially provide learners with an indication not only of what is important to learn (in the current case positive attitudes to business ethics) but also of how to frame their developing reflectivity through writing. As a tool for representing students' learning, assessments can effectively promote reflective thinking because the written word expresses thoughts and ideas that arise out of deep reflection on the materials prescribed by the teacher.

It is important, nevertheless, to ensure that assessment methods are *constructively aligned* with learning outcomes and class activities. Constructive alignment is based on the premise that teaching for effective learning should be “a balanced system in which all components support each other, as they do in any ecosystem” (Biggs, 2004, pp. 26-27). This will enable the teacher to test whether their teaching has been indeed transformative; whether it has made a difference in how students think and act.

Reflective journals are particularly suitable for transformative learning, as they require time and space for reflection, encourage independent thought, and enable students to work with ill-defined problems (see Carroll, 1994; Moon, 2007). In management courses reflective journals can be used, for example, to record students' observations and critical analyses of real-life issues with ethical ramifications reported by the media (e.g., recent cases of corporate fraud and embezzlement).

Filmic analysis can also be used as an experientially-based assessment method aligned with learning outcomes to enhance reflection and critical thinking. Giacalone & Jurkiewics (2001, pp. 79-80) suggest an assignment in which students are asked to choose, view and analyse a

film that includes a work-related ethical issue. Students are given specific guidelines that will help them to identify the ethical issue/s explored in the film, the different meaning perspectives portrayed, and the types of strategies used to address the issue/s in question.

Another effective assessment task to encourage transformative learning is storytelling. As commented by Zemke (1990), stories entertain, evoke emotion, trigger visual memories, and strengthen recall of the points illustrated (cited in Morgan & Dennehy, 2004, p. 376). Within the specific context of management education, suggests Waddock (1999, p. 190), stories can potentially encourage “student commitment to and understanding of the issues that managers face in their social, political, and ecological environments”. For example, in a subject that analyses organisational power and politics, one of the assignments is to write a story about a situation in work settings involving the use of power and politics, and to analyse the ethical implications of the actions described. As stated by a student in the 2009 formal evaluation of this subject, “The storytelling assessment allowed me to think critically and analyse a topic using my own creativity and perspectives”.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the author’s concern with the problem of student cynicism, and on insights derived from the work of Mezirow and Schön, a case has been made in this paper for a transformative learning approach in the teaching of ethics in management courses. Mezirow’s transformative learning approach and Schön’s concept of reflective practitioner were discussed as valuable heuristic tools to help teachers understand the role of reflection and critical thinking in shifting negative attitudes, and endowing students with the confidence that, as future professionals, they will be able to make positive contributions to society.

It was suggested, borrowing from Wenger (1999), that through class activities and assessments conducive to reflection and critical thinking, the teacher can play a “brokering” role in the boundary crossing between university and work, equipping students with the required skills for a “consequential transition” (Beach, 2008, pp. 42-43) into the workforce – in other words, a transition that creates opportunities for individuals to be actively involved in the transformation of society. To this end, it is essential that students are able to deal with ethically complex and ambiguous situations which they are likely to encounter in their working lives.

Since the author has introduced class activities and assessments purposely designed to foster higher levels of reflection and critical thinking among her students, she has noticed some encouraging changes. For example, the class discussions in her subjects have been more reflective and engaging, and students seem more consciously aware of the application of abstract concepts to real-life situations. Greater levels of student satisfaction were observed in the 2009 formal evaluation survey for the unit on organisational power and politics, reflected in comments such as:

*Tutorials got you to critically think about the practical application of theory.*

*The topics of this unit were/are relevant to future work after uni, and were presented in an easy to understand format. The assessments have been good to synthesise our learning.*

*This unit allowed me to see something I have never thought of.*

Nevertheless, further research is needed to ascertain more systematically the extent to which transformative learning are effective to counteract cynicism among management students. Ideally, studies of this nature should have a longitudinal design to monitor the attitudes of the same cohort over a period of time. Future research could also compare the attitudes of management students who have been through a structured transformative learning program with those of their counterparts who have not, in order to ascertain whether there are significant differences in the learning patterns of the two groups. This type of research could be taken a step further with a survey of a group of management students from the same cohort in their final year of university, and some time later, in their work-settings, to see if transformative learning has had long-term effects on their attitudes. This is a quintessentially important area of study as it acknowledges “higher order goals” as part of educational curriculum, contributing to the creation of more sustainable worldviews.

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<sup>i</sup> These questions are based on those proposed by Nash (1981) in an article entitled 'Ethics without the sermon', in *Harvard Business Review*, 59(4).