Designing ethics simulations for UAE students

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Designing ethics simulations for UAE students

Abstract
The 2005-6 academic year will provide students in the UAE and across the Gulf with access to a new learning tool – a dynamic and culturally tailored simulation on ethical decision-making. The challenge of dealing with ethical dilemmas – a key part of any Business Ethics course – can now be presented to students with the help of an interactive simulation, Managing Legal and Ethical Issues in Business. The series of three inter-connected simulations have been designed to assist students in addressing issues of firstly, cheating and academic honesty/plagiarism; secondly, discrimination in hiring practices; and finally conflict of interest in a typical business scenario.

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Designing Ethics Simulations for UAE Students

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The 2005-6 academic year will provide students in the UAE and across the Gulf with access to a new learning tool -- a dynamic and culturally tailored simulation on ethical decision-making. The challenge of dealing with ethical dilemmas – a key part of any Business Ethics course – can now be presented to students with the help of an interactive simulation, Managing Legal and Ethical Issues in Business. The series of three inter-connected simulations have been designed to assist students in addressing issues of firstly, cheating and academic honesty/plagiarism; secondly, discrimination in hiring practices; and finally conflict of interest in a typical business scenario.

Design considerations in preparing the simulation included: the need for the learning to be personal, private and anonymous, free from peer pressure; the need to create a stimulating discussion topic to gain active involvement; the need to create realistic and believable decision-making opportunities; the need to address the wide range of student learning styles, especially by providing visual and aural rather than just reading content; the need to appeal to students at different levels of experience; and the need to build-in feedback at multiple points, commenting on the students’ decisions to promote more thinking.

1. Ethics and moral dilemmas are uncomfortable public discussion topics where opinions invariably flow towards the ‘acceptable norms’ of society, especially if students lack confidence to promote a contrary point of view. Experience of teaching Business Ethics in the past reveals a tendency for students to choose their viewpoint according to which social, religious and national grouping they belong. For example, if students have spent time in the USA and UK and show more ethical awareness than locally educated students, then some students start to associate ‘being ethical’ with ‘being sophisticated and having international exposure’. This can tempt them to take ethical decisions based on what they think they ought to do, not on what they really would do. So we needed to create a simulation where students could make their own judgments freely.

2. With the use of the simulation as an educational tool, groups of students are provided with a stimulating discussion topic presented as an opportunity to gain a common experience, from which they can access further insights, and think
through a discussion on this sensitive subject matter. So we had to choose subject areas which would really get them arguing, which demanded active responses.

3. To be realistic and believable, we had to present a simulation that would challenge students in real-sounding ethical/moral dilemmas, placing them in situations where they would make decisions based upon their own set of beliefs, instinctively. The way in which the simulations were culturally tailored for the UAE and Gulf students helped to encourage authenticity, and were convincing as real episodes at university and the workplace. So we needed to use our experience of the Gulf environment to make the simulations come to life.

4. The real-life storylines are presented with the use of graphics, text, video and audio. This multi-modal presentation provides students with a wide range of information formats to suit their personal learning styles. Some respond to the text predominantly, many like the pop-up features and ease of navigation through the material, but all are influenced by the images, both still and through videos, of the protagonists, many wearing national dress. Thus we needed to prepare material to appeal widely, especially to a culture favoring more visual media.

5. The simulation is divided into three separate scenarios that involve the student as the main character, beginning in college and progressing on a career path to a senior executive position. For some students, the college setting is most attuned to their experience. For working students on Bachelor's programs and younger students on Master's programs without an extensive working experience requirement, the second scenario will provoke their interest. For more mature students, the last scenario is most relevant. It was important to present a range of scenarios to address different experience levels.

6. Feedback opportunities occur constantly during the simulation. Students have to make decisions to progress the exercise, and then are reminded of the implications of these decisions through pop-ups, describing incidents or acting as the student's conscience. Detailed final feedback, depending on choices made, was provided to make the points necessary in the learning process for the students. The students are not being told what to believe, and what is right and wrong, but the writers were aiming to raise awareness of the ramifications of different decisions. Thus comments that were non-prescriptive but discursive were built in to the material.

The theoretical basis of the project was to blend in-class and computer-based learning underpinned by constructivist learning theory. Building upon the strengths of the UAE oral culture, this simulation thus incorporates the theoretical approach of constructivism. This learning approach can be defined as a process of enculturation through social interaction, where learning is not just transmission of knowledge but an internal process of interpretation by the learner. Cunningham (1992) describes this form of learning where:
Learners do not transfer knowledge from the external world into their memories; rather, they create interpretations of the world based upon their past experiences and their interactions in the world.

Building upon this premise, this simulation incorporated these design considerations, especially to appeal to different learning levels and reach a wide student audience (see point 5. above). Cultural issues were included to add authenticity (see points 2. and 3. above), emphasizing the need to respect different cultures and to acknowledge differing views and opinions.

Although the simulation, for the sake of a ‘simulation,’ requires students to make choices that they might not necessarily have to make in real life, it provides them with an opportunity to present their ‘reasons for making their decisions’. The way students interpret the world is probed through the requirement for them to state why they chose a specific option, with the use of a text box. The students thus understand the learning process going on, even if they do not specifically link it to the learning theory.

During testing of the simulation, some students disagreed with the choices presented in the simulation, but after choosing one of the options in order to be able to continue the simulation, they described what they really wanted to do. There was thus an element of forced choice, but the text box included the possibility to explain the choice made. To ensure that the simulation captured these valuable augments the continue button will not appear until text is placed in the box. The data in each of the text boxes is carried forward to eventually appear again in the student summary, so that the student can print out a record of their choices to aid in discussion and providing material for future revision of points learned. In the testing process, many students recognized this feature as being very effective. They commented that they were able to provide individual feedback on their own views (especially if they saw other options besides those being presented) rather than the only options given to them being those that they could click on.

The text box was also designed to encourage individual thoughts and reasoning (as in point 1 above). If the input was to just click the button, students sitting beside each other could quite possibly mirror each other's answers. With the text box copying was more difficult, but it was essential to write something to progress the exercise. This was important to ensure that the simulation was an effective vehicle for addressing ‘prickly’ ethical subjects to be presented in a non-judgmental venue, uninfluenced by others. Testing produced a wide range of different responses, more so than in public class discussion.

Dealing with cultural issues was a vital aspect of the creation of the simulation. Norms and rules are based upon social consensus and this is what the simulation sets out to do, to provide a common framework from which students can approach this touchy subject of Business Ethics. Generally, if students were
asked if they ever cheated in school, they would be put on the spot and answer in a way that they felt was appropriate for the situation and not necessary the truth. This simulation thus provides a discussion platform for students to explore and analyze their beliefs. It could promote change in viewpoints, or at least open up the possibility of other views.

The simulation is designed to be non-judgmental in nature (no right or wrong answers, as in point 6.). Each of the three case studies in the simulation is open ended. Once the students reach the end of an individual case study, there is a compilation of their pathway presented as a summary. These listed comments are intended to be printed out by the student and become the focus for further classroom discussion.

Recognizing that UAE culture is based upon a strong oral tradition, it is intended that the simulation not be an end in itself but that discussions could carry on after the event to be based upon the student print-outs. Engaging group discussion based upon actual choices that students made, and backed up by their personal reflections captured from the text boxes, can bring about social consensus and thereby deeper understanding and learning changes. During the observation sessions, through group discussions after they have worked through segments of the simulation story-line, students reached a social consensus which may have been less immediate and less authentic with the usual international cases.

The culturally appropriate simulation thus made it easier for students as they talk about these issues, and they needed the chance to comment as they went along. Talk like this is arguably much better than having to go through on-line content (NetG course for example) and have to do the whole course, and cover all the content, and not be able to know what other students are choosing or learning. This makes for a much more flexible format where we can give our input as designers to further develop this and other simulations. As one student remarked, “in our culture, we are not able to say no to someone who needs help, but in school this is different. This is very important – a cultural issue. This program shows us the consequences of our decisions.”

Some students were observed spending a lot of time crafting responses to the decision points during the testing sessions. One student commented that they chose to cheat after they read the ‘Think’ popup. He felt that he needed to help if he was asked to by a friend. He said that this was a cultural issue – “he had been taught from youth that if he is asked by a friend for help that he cannot refuse”. Then another student commented that success at school was more important than a friendship. Such cultural issues and clashes came up clearly in the simulation, especially as it was grounded in the local context.

The development of the learning content of the simulation became a project for a consortium of higher education institutions in Dubai, and the writing was undertaken by academics with several years’ experience in the Gulf region. They
had also taught Business Ethics, in some cases to both undergraduate and postgraduate students. In the past, these contributors had presented the subject in a traditional way, mostly based on case studies of US and European origin from textbooks with minimal illustrative material.

The design considerations outlined above were of crucial consideration to the writing process. For example, to take the middle scenario – workplace discrimination – students were faced with several ethical dilemmas where decisions were required and opinions were sought, before the students could engage in open discussion and find out what other students thought. How did they feel about enforced localization through quotas? And what about conflict of interest over the needs of family members versus the business requirements of the company? And should you discuss issues in a transparent way with your boss, or ‘fix’ things behind the scenes and not tell him? Which decisions lead to improving quality for the products and services of the company and impact favorably on customers, and therefore make good business sense? Is this an important issue to be considered?

These topics were designed to create a lively discussion – on the importance of ‘wasta’, on the need to make decisions based on business reasons, on the choice between expatriates and locals, males and females. What is the relationship between customers and suppliers? And what about written and published company policy and pragmatic daily operational decisions? The use of local examples – changed to be unrecognizable – was designed to add to the authenticity. Much of the information presented to the students in the simulation was discovered as if by chance, also seen as more realistic than all of this being conveyed by official memos.

One of the most important discussion points built-in for students to discuss was the issue of being both legal and ethical. Many UAE and Gulf-based policies do not enshrine in the law practices seen in the more international context as heavily subject to legislation. Equal opportunities and strictly business reasons for hiring are paramount in US, UK and other company policies, which conflicts with compulsory Emiratisation. It might be legal (and encouraged) to choose an Emirati above an expatriate, but what if the expatriate is more highly qualified and a more reliable and high-performing employee? Are there moral issues here at stake for the economic viability of the company?

The illustrations and videos used in the simulation not only serve to make it more realistic and believable, but the local actors and local dress create a sense that the simulation was made for the students and is not simply another foreign import along with their textbooks and readings. The university and the company appear strongly authentic, UAE institutions such as Tanmia are mentioned by name, the managers, advisers, colleagues and other dramatis personae are talking and moving living people, and the frequent pop-ups give a sense of immediacy. It is all happening to the student engaged in the simulation in real time. What are you
going to do, now? And why? How will you justify your decision? Do you realize what the outcomes will be?

(Presentation of Ethics Simulation #2, Workplace Discrimination)

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