

Cultural Challenges in Teaching Ethics to Romanian Engineering Students

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Abstract: The paper sets out to present the cultural challenges of teaching ethics in an entry-level course to two groups of Romanian undergraduate engineering students in the 2nd and 3rd year of study at a renowned Romanian technical university. The objective is to show that the Romanian students' prior ethical values and norms might impede the students' ability to adapt to foreign business organisational ethical requirements. The paper will also explore the necessity of teaching such a course to engineering students (future employees) in order to familiarise them to the concept of ethics and to the cultural differences existing in terms of ethics between Romania and Western countries.

Keywords: teaching ethics, culture, Code of Ethics, case studies

1. Introduction

Ethics is a relatively new concept taught to Romanian engineering students. As Romania tries to align its educational curricula to the European ones, a course incorporating ethics (Engineering Ethics and Communication) has been introduced to the Civil Engineering and Electronic and Telecommunications Engineering students (2nd and 3rd years of study) of 'Politehnica' University, Romania, for one semester. I have been teaching the course and seminar for 5 years and, even though I am a linguist, I have been trying to self-train in the teaching of ethics and present it alongside engineering communication by communicative methods (Fărcașiu 2013).

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This paper presents the challenges I have been facing while teaching this course and my endeavour in trying to make the students understand that they will be part of foreign organisational cultures which will require them to adapt to business ethics and to a Code of Ethics, and that Romanian business ethical values are inadequate and need to be perceived differently.

The ethical challenges that Romanian students face concerning business ethics are related to cultural differences, i.e. to the background of the Romanian concepts and values of doing business, which are quite different from the Western ones. "It is known that most foreign multinational companies, which are active on the Romanian business environment, are guided by rules established at central level, so the implementation of some ethical values and social responsible actions at local level is sometimes a consequence of following those rules" (Georgescu 2012: 736). Therefore, it is vital that Romanian students should be prepared to embrace these ethical values by familiarising themselves with them through ethics courses taught at the University.

2. Ethics in different cultures

According to Shneiderman (2017), antropologists consider that humanity developed ethics even before the advent of agriculture. *The Random House Dictionary* (2017) defines ethics as 'the rules of conduct recognized in respect to a particular class of human actions or a particular group, culture, etc.'. That is why, when dealing with an unfamiliar culture, people apply their own cultural frame of reference and may consider those cultural behaviours and customs ethically unacceptable.

Culture refers to the attitudes, values, and practices shared by a group, organisation, or society. Primary cultural values are transmitted to the culture's members by parenting and socialisation, education, and religion while the secondary factors that affect the ethical behaviour are the differences in the organisational cultures, professional cultures, and codes of conduct (Pitta *et al.* 1999: 241). For example, the act of whistle-blowing, which means exposing any kind of information or activity that is considered unethical or illegal within an organisation, is viewed very differently by the French and the Americans. For the American companies, it is a natural part of business and is even encouraged, while in France, whistle-blowing is considered to undermine solidarity among co-workers and is not enforceable in companies.

2.1. Ethics in Romania

Being immersed in communist ideas, values, and practices for over 40 years, the Romanians are facing a lot of challenges when dealing with the Western business world. Many Western corporations have opened their businesses in Romania and are confronted with a different type of mentality and lack of business ethics. Irina Budrina (2011) offers some ideas to help Western managers implement ethics and business conduct to Romanian employees: a written company code, an ethics committee, training in ethics.

I believe that, in addition to Budrina's ideas, we have to start teaching these ethical concepts at the university level through courses targeting both ethics and culture, introducing the students to the Western business ethics through real-life scenarios, namely case studies. As we live in a globalised world, students will be likely to work in different cultural environments and thus, raising the students' cultural awareness is vital (Şimon and Suciu 2015).

3. Teaching ethics through case studies

Despite the fact that teaching ethics through case studies has strong and weak points (Heckert 2000; Healy 2005; Bowden *et al.* 2006) and due to such a short period of time for teaching ethics in my course, I have decided upon choosing case studies as the method of teaching ethics to my engineering students. I have tried to create cases that were as realistic as possible relating to Romanian lifestyle and culture, being spiced, of course, with the Western corporate culture brought along with the corporations into Romania, and to teach them in a communicative, interesting, and engaging way.

Examples of case studies

Four case studies called 'Ethics in practice' were created targeting different ethical dilemmas. The ethical problems discussed were specific to the Romanian corporate culture and were created to raise problems and to stimulate the discussion between participants.

The method:

1. The students are presented with the case study scenario.
2. The students are organised in small groups to discuss the issue. The discussion is guided by the questions on a worksheet.

3. After the discussion, the groups show their answers and explain how and why they took the decisions.

4. The teacher presents his/her personal opinions, and then summarises the main points of the case study to be kept in mind. (As many Romanian students work, they can be asked about similar situations in the local working environment).

5. 15-20 minutes are allowed to analyse each case study.

The case studies and their summaries are presented in Table 1:

Case study	Ethical issue	Case study summary
1.	Anti-corruption	A customer asks you to issue two invoices for products sold – one invoice reflecting the actual price, and another invoice reflecting a higher price. The customer will pay the first invoice, and will use the second invoice to justify charging a higher price from its end user. Is this acceptable?
2.	Giving gifts, entertainment, and travel	An important customer is celebrating a 35-year service anniversary. An account manager from your company presents the customer with a bottle of wine from a local winery and a card signed by employees. Is this ethical?
3.	Giving gifts, entertainment, and travel	The mayor of a city in which a company plant is located tours the facility. After the tour, she attends a luncheon with the company's employees. At the luncheon, the plant manager presents her with a sweater displaying the company logo valued at less than 100 EUR. Is this ethical?
4.	Data protection	You leave the office for lunch and you want to take your laptop with you because you have an offsite meeting afterwards. What do you do? a. Check your laptop at the host stand for the duration of your meal b. Leave your laptop in the backseat of your car after locking the doors securely. c. Hide your laptop in the locked trunk of your car where it is out of sight. d. Keep it always with you under your chair or next to you or leave it secured at the office or your home. e. All of the above are secure options.

Table 1. Case studies

Case study 1:

Ethical issue: Anti-corruption

Analysis: No. By issuing a second invoice at a higher price, the company may be helping a customer engage in misrepresentation or fraud. This could expose the company to liability, even if it was the customer who used the invoice improperly.

Case study 2:

Ethical issue: Giving gifts, entertainment, and travel

Analysis: Yes. Occasionally, offering gifts to third parties may be appropriate to strengthen relationships or comply with local customs. Employees may offer gifts to suppliers, customers, or other business associates outside the company for legitimate business purposes, such as building goodwill and strengthening working relationships (e.g., holiday or ceremonial presentations, service anniversaries, or retirement). Usually, companies have a policy in which the gifts may be under a certain value, e.g. under 100 EUR (it is mainly about merchandise of a promotional nature).

Case study 3:

Ethical issue: Giving gifts, entertainment, and travel

Analysis: Yes. Offering gifts to government officials may be permitted only if the gift is under a certain value and it contains the company logo. An inappropriate gift could have been tickets to a football game.

Case study 4:

Ethical issue: Data protection

Analysis: Mobile devices such as laptops and mobile phones are designed to let you take your work anywhere, but this can lead to a security breach if the device is lost or stolen. Your laptop and mobile devices are your responsibility—protect them when outside the office. The best option is to keep it with you at all times where you can see it. If there is no secure option, you can return it to your office or home where it can be locked and secured.

4. Students' feedback on the ethics scenarios

Students had to work in groups and give feedback. Seeing that many of them did not attend the course and were not familiar with the ethical principles, they responded based on their own beliefs and cultural norms. The majority of them gave answers which would be considered appalling by any ethical educator or by any common-sense Westerner, accustomed to the Western values and ethical norms.

For all of the above scenarios, Romanian students seemed to consider that being ethical is not profitable at all and that it showed stupidity to abide by such rules. Most of them viewed practices such as bribery and corruption as ethical and said that being ethical was against the goal of being profitable.

The students have also been introduced to the concept of whistle-blowing. When asked why they would not report an inappropriate conduct, students gave the following answers:

- It's better to pretend I didn't see anything. Anyway, nothing will change and no drastic measure will be taken.
- My colleagues and my manager will think I am a gossip and a big mouth.
- What if I lose my job? It's better to shut up.
- Why should I care? It's not like it's Daddy's company.

All these answers suggest fear of taking responsibility, lack of seriousness and the careless idea that the company is common property where everyone can do whatever they like.

I have found it difficult to explain to them why their perceptions were wrong and why they should change them, which shows again that a person's cultural values and beliefs learnt at a very young age are rooted very deeply. That is why, I tried to emphasise some ideas that might trigger ethical consciousness from their part by asking the students to ask themselves the three questions below:

- Would I be comfortable explaining my actions to my supervisor?
- Would I feel proud telling my family and friends about my actions?
- Would I be comfortable if my actions were reported in the news media?

5. Conclusions

This paper has presented the cultural challenges of teaching ethics to two groups of Romanian undergraduate engineering students in the 2nd and 3rd year of study at Politehnica University of Timisoara, Romania. The paper has also shown that the Romanian students' prior ethical values and norms impede the students' ability to adapt to foreign business organisational ethical requirements.

Some of the conclusions that could be drawn are the following:

- Engineering students viewed ethics as a supplementary course, not as an important one, a filler subject in the curriculum.
- Ethics does not seem important to them, as Romanian organisational culture is not based on strong ethical principles, but on a kind of comrade-thing approach.
- The students seemed to see the company as something that is a common property; the students' responses clearly indicated that the company might be prejudiced, as they did not care about it.

The paper has also presented the necessity of teaching such a course to engineering students in order to familiarise them to the concept of ethics and to the cultural differences existing in terms of ethics between Romania and Western countries. In my view, students have to be introduced to the concept of Code of Ethics so that, when they enter the organisational life, they could be prepared and should expect to read and abide by such a code. According to a study by Maria-Ana Georgescu, carried out in two medium-sized companies in Romania (one Romanian and one foreign), a significant percentage of the employees, 33.33% and 44%, respectively, did not know about the existence of a Code of Ethics (2012: 738).

Students also raised the question that their beliefs are in conflict with the ones presented in the codes of ethics; however, they should be explained that companies do not try to change their personal beliefs, but that they are expected to use the company's ethical principles when doing business on behalf of that company.

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