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Rethinking 'business is business': a criticalist perspective on teaching business ethics

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Abstract

This paper reports on a study into student perceptions of a Socratic approach to teaching business ethics. The paper lays out a criticalist proposition that there is a discourse of 'ethics-in-business' in which ethics are, pragmatically, subsumed by a more strategic economics focus to business management practice. This discourse of ethics-in-business is claimed to be so pervading that the education of business ethics is likely to come under its influence. Thus, from within the dominant discourse, ethics education has the potential to further that discourse. Against this backdrop, there is a place for a critical approach to teaching business ethics, and critical management education offers a framework from which to question the taken-for-granted mind-sets about ethics-in-business. Critical management education is claimed to find some theoretical sympathy with the Socratic method, and this paper focuses on a modified Socratic approach to teaching business ethics in a coursework graduate business program. There is an outline of the Socratic classes and the context in which they were delivered, and the use of data triangulation in the research methodology is explained. The conclusion positions the study in a wider context about the pedagogy of ethics in business. While the research appeared to show some support from students for the adoption of the Socratic method in teaching business ethics, opportunities to refine the class delivery mechanisms were identified. The conclusion also proposes areas for further research. This study did not claim to determine whether the Socratic method would produce ethical business managers. This is surely because the true measure of students' learning of business ethics must reside, somewhat anxiously, in those students' ultimate *practice* of it.

Introduction

This paper reports on findings from a research project aimed at evaluating student perceptions of a modified Socratic approach to teaching business ethics. The paper avidly adopts a criticalist perspective which, according to Kincheloe and McLaren (2005), accommodates researchers who use their work 'as a form of social or cultural criticism … Research thus becomes a transformative endeavor unembarrassed by the label "political" and unafraid to consummate a relationship with emancipatory consciousness' (2005: 304–305).

The importance of ethics in business education has long been recognised (Power and Lundsten 2001). In the early 1990s, for example, some 91 per cent of accredited business schools in America were claimed to have had at least one 'course' in which 10 per cent of classes was devoted to ethics education (Schoenfeldt, McDonald and Youngblood 1991).

Yet, 'the protagonists of the recent financial scandals in the United States were successful students of business ethics in prestigious international business schools. Some even taught business ethics' (Oliva 2004: 11). In the somewhat competitive environment in which business schools operate (Pfeffer and Fong 2003), this realisation has had the effect of driving some business schools to rethink their approaches to the teaching of business ethics (Stewart 2004; Weisman 2004). The move is even more compelling when it is suggested that

> Business schools are complicit in the corporate scandals – one, for not educating managers in their legal and ethical responsibilities and, two, for not condemning the unethical and illegal practices that are devastating society now. (Willen 2004)

Up to the 1990s, there had been support for the notion that business ethics education had a positive impact on students (Allen, Davis, Ruhe and Geurin 1998). However, in view of the raft of subsequent corporate scandals, it is perhaps not surprising that more recent studies do not appear to support the earlier positive sentiments (Allen, Bacdayan, Kowalski and Roy 2005).

These developments provide an impetus for the current study into a modified Socratic approach to teaching business ethics in a coursework Masters business program. The Master of International Tourism and Hospitality Management program – offered at an Australian tertiary institution – consisted of eight coursework units, which were taken over two half-year semesters. The business ethics classes, representing approximately 15 per cent of one of the units (in terms of class contact hours and assessment weighting), were delivered to a class of 17 students during 2004.

The cohort consisted almost entirely of international students, from disparate cultural and disciplinary backgrounds. The Masters program provided students with a strong strategic emphasis on business management knowledge and skills, which generally emphasised business and professional achievements from financial and market perspectives.

Following the classes in business ethics, data in three forms were gathered from the students. This enabled a triangulation of data, which was aimed at providing a measure of rigour and depth to the study (Denzin and Lincoln 2005).

This paper commences with a consideration of the practice of business ethics. The paper lays out a criticalist proposition that there is a discourse of 'ethics-in-business' in which ethics are, pragmatically, subsumed by a more strategic economics focus on business management practice. Such a discourse is argued to permeate much of the business community and, in such ways, it has the potential to exert influence not only over business school curricula but also over student attitudes to what constitutes proper business practice. From the criticalist perspective, this discourse of ethics-in-business could be expected to be so pervading that the education of business ethics is likely to come under its influence. Thus ethics education would have the potential to further the dominant, pragmatically inspired ethics-in-business discourse.

The paper goes on to suggest that, against this backdrop, there is a place for a critical approach to teaching business ethics. Such an approach has the capacity to call into

question the pervading dominant discourse of ethics-in-business. This is because 'engaging and questioning the use value of particular theories of power is central to' the criticalist perspective (Kincheloe and McLaren 2005: 310). The proposition is that, from that perspective, students are then able to connect with their own value systems to ground an 'experienced' understanding of ethics in a business context. The Socratic method is taken to provide a framework for this type of criticalist perspective and, therefore, to offer students an opportunity to connect with their own values.

The paper outlines the structure of the classes in which the Socratic approach was adopted, explains the data collection methods and contains an analysis of the data that emanated from the mixed qualitative and quantitative approach. The conclusion points out that, while the research appears to provide some support from students for the adoption of the Socratic method in teaching business ethics, there are opportunities to refine the class delivery mechanisms. Also, there would seem to be scope to explore additional avenues for a more rigorous and deeper mining of such data, and to contemplate how gender and cultural differences in learning styles might impact on students' experiences of the Socratic approach. The paper's concluding remarks also contemplate the applicability of this approach to ethics education for undergraduate business students.

A discourse of 'ethics-in-business'

The often-quoted Friedman edict that a corporation's social responsibility is to increase its profits for shareholders (Friedman 2005) can perhaps be loosely paraphrased into the somewhat more unconsidered dictum that 'business is business'. From that perspective, the corporate environment is fuelled by notions of 'survival of the fittest' and 'dog eat dog'. Such expressions are usually claimed to legitimise an approach to business that prefers an economics perspective, often to the extent of overpowering more socially inspired attitudes (Solomon 2004). While such expressions might not find favour explicitly – whether they are simply thought of as either unfashionable or, in a crass way, lacking a sense of political correctness – the mere existence of contemporary corporate 'scandals' constitutes proof that the corporate community, at least in part, still maintains a 'business is business' attitude to corporate strategy and operations (Willen 2004).

In contemporary corporate culture 'CEOs have been institutionalized to pursue the making of money and profits rather than production serviceable to basic human needs. Corporate leaders are intent to maximize profits without considerations of social responsibility' (Brinkman and Brinkman 2002: 742). Such perspectives contribute to a globalisation of commerce, which is fanned by corporate strategy, but sparked by ideological, political and technological forces (Korten 1995).

High-profile scandals like those involving Enron, WorldCom and Martha Stewart are played out against this backdrop (Taylor 2003; Kakabadse and Kakabadse 2003). However, the Enron bankruptcy, for instance, was recorded as just another example in the 'monotonous and repetitive litany' of corporate disaster (Vinten 2002: 4). What's more, errant executives are brought to account, and perhaps even attain notoriety, not because their activities lack an ethical perspective or fail a social responsibility. Instead, such executives are penalised for simply falling foul of a law. Any ethical shortcomings

inherent in such activities seem to serve only as a form of justification for the legal sanction.

But 'the criminal misconduct of managers in a few companies is really not the critical issue': Ghoshal (2005: 75) has explained how managers, obsessed with 'the real world' and influenced by well-known theories of management, 'have learned to think in these ways because these theories have been in the air, legitimizing some actions and behaviours of management, delegitimising others, and generally shaping the intellectual and normative order within which all day-to-day decisions are made' (2005: 75). Such 'taken-for-granted elements of management practice' have the effect of furthering amorality (Ghoshal 2005: 76).

This points to an identifiable discourse in the corporate landscape about the pragmatics of operationalising – that is to say, practising – ethical perspectives in the 'business is business' corporate environment. This view of a discursive *practice* of ethics draws not only on the undeniable existence of unethical behaviours in the contemporary corporate landscape (and Enron, WorldCom and Martha Stewart are notorious examples). But this discourse also draws on the identification of a dominant ideology that countenances – at least implicitly – behaviours that stretch the limits of legal boundaries, apparently without regard to the ethical cost (Ghoshal 2005). In its most generous light, the business community's *practice* of ethics could be understood (from the criticalist perspective) to suffer a degree of uncertainty about the true, practical weight to be given to ethical perspectives. Not that there need necessarily be any overt intention towards unethical behaviour; the preferred pragmatic view might simply relegate ethics to the category of a 'good' theory, something to aspire to but ultimately impractical and unfeasible in the taken-for-granted cold, hard reality of business.

So, it is possible that some *practical* notions of business ethics may be capable of bending under the weight of 'the intellectual slavery of the "practical men"' and their pervading discourse (Ghoshal 2005: 75). In this way, the pragmatically inspired discourse of 'ethics-in-business', which could accommodate ethically deficient activities in the pursuit of a strategic or financial advantage, is distinguishable from what might be considered a more idealistic assessment of 'business ethics', which is not so motivated by that strategic or financial advantage.

Business schools and ethics

This discursive backdrop of a pragmatically applied ethics-in-business can be taken to so pervade the corporate landscape that it has the potential to impact on business and management education. In fact, according to Ghoshal, 'business school faculty … need to own up to our role in creating Enrons. Our theories and ideas have done much to strengthen the management practices that we are now all so loudly condemning' (2005: 75).

At the same time, from the criticalist perspective, graduate and undergraduate students can be expected to be well versed in this dominant discourse, if not from personal experience of business then at least from their studies in areas like strategic management, marketing, and accounting and finance. There is even a suggestion that

'business education not only fails to improve the moral character of the students but also actually weakens it' (Allen, Bacdayan, Kowalski and Roy 2005: 178).

Because this entrenched economic perspective of business is so loudly proclaimed from so many disparate directions, it might be that the education of ethics in business is fated from its outset. From within the dominant discourse, ethics education – when viewed from the criticalist perspective – might really only further that prevailing discourse. Any attempt, therefore, to effectively stimulate the genuine 'moral imagination' of students (Maclagan 1995: 172) might really only be heard as a tremulous, weak and uncertain voice, whose language is actually out of step with the taken-for-granted prevailing commercial wisdom of the dominant discourse about 'ethics-in-business'.

Critical management education and ethics

Imparting meaningful knowledge and skills about the practice of business ethics would therefore require students to journey beyond the dominant pragmatically motivated discourse of 'ethics-in-business'. In any case, it has been discovered that, 'although ethics has found a place in the curriculum of … business schools, we may be teaching it incorrectly or not at all' (Allen, Bacdayan, Kowalski and Roy 2005: 178).

This sets up an opportunity for a more critically inspired approach to teaching business ethics. The critical perspective gives students an opportunity to question the prevailing economics-driven discourse about ethics-in-business, or at least to be aware of its existence as a pervading voice in the commercial landscape (Kinchloe and McLaren 2005). So in the educational setting, critical management education 'offers the kind of radical … challenge to prevailing mind-sets' (Grey 2004: 178). Critical management education proposes that 'profitability should be set alongside other values, such as justice and ecological well-being' (2004: 180). However, actually engaging students in this exercise must surely require more from educators than a chalk-and-talk approach, or an information dump onto learners.

In a climate where higher education students engage in the 'relentless pursuit of marks' (Maher 2004: 52), students' motivations and expectations are striking: 'tell us what we need to do, [and] we'll do it' (Ottewill and Macfarlane 2003: 34). Maher (2004) suggests that, in spite of this, educators can encourage creativity by taking a less controlling attitude to students' learning activities, including taking an open view towards learning outcomes and assessments. At the same time, there have been calls for a new management paradigm (Jamali 2005), with more 'reflective practitioners' who have the capacity to cope with the fluidity of contemporary business (Jack and Anderson 1999). So, for management educators, 'the emphasis is generally on active experimentation, reflective observation and nurturing the ability to deal with new problems in context specific ways' (Jamali 2005: 111).

In the case of ethics education in particular, Romm and Mahler (1991) proposed that 'experimentally oriented dramatisation' would be more effective than the traditional lecture format, especially when stimulating feelings and emotional responses in pursuit of affective learning. Maclagan (1995) seemed to take this a step further. Ethics programs, this author wrote, should have two aims: first, to enable learners to appreciate the 'ethical shape' of a situation and, secondly, to stimulate the moral imagination.

Engaging students in a Socratic dialogue is claimed to be one method that may meet these objectives. According to van Hooft (2003), the dialogue involves group discussion – devoid of ego concerns – as well as reflection; and insights in the form of 'learning' are discovered in the course of these discussions and reflections. The Socratic dialogue can therefore become a practice of self-examination and enquiry, with capacity to attend to values and ideals (Boele 1997), and this would seem to be most useful in the study of ethics.

'Socratic seminars' have been identified as an appropriate educational medium in management education generally (Paraskevas and Wickens 2003), and the approach has been proposed as a suitable method of instruction for teaching business ethics (van Hooft 2001; Morrell 2004). The study reported here seeks to apply these propositions and to understand, albeit in a limited way, the degree to which the Socratic dialogue might be perceived by students to be useful in the education of business ethics. The following sections of this paper outline the Socratic classes and the context in which they were delivered; the paper explains the research methodology, analyses the findings and concludes by aiming to position the study in a wider context about the pedagogy of ethics in business.

Background to the Socratic classes

The Socratic classes were delivered during 2004 to students of the Master of International Tourism and Hospitality Management degree, a discipline-focused business management coursework program for graduate students. Applicants into the program were generally required to hold an undergraduate degree, preferably in a business or management discipline. Almost all of the students were international students, mainly from Asia or the Middle East. Of the class of 17, all were full-time students and approximately half were continuing students who were completing their second and final semester of study in the program. The remaining students were new to the program in that semester, and it was normally accepted by the program's academic staff that commencing international students are prone to experience a period of adjustment during the initial few weeks of their first semester of study in the program. These students are susceptible to a type of aculturisation both towards the program of study and towards the Australian higher education system (Handa 2004).

The Socratic classes were delivered in one of the program's eight units of study: the classes consisted of 2 three-hour sessions delivered in weeks 2 and 3 of the 14-week semester. The class objectives contemplated that students would, on successful completion of the sessions, be able to:

- demonstrate an understanding of the moral dilemma for management as outlined in Hosmer's 'Analytical process for the resolution of moral problems' (Hosmer 2003); and
- apply this understanding to the student's own experience at work, at home, as a customer or as a student.

The classes followed the nine-step Socratic process identified by Paraskevas and Wickens (2003). Students were introduced to an ethical case study, and an '[a]nalytical

process for the resolution of moral problems' (Hosmer 2003). During the classroom discussions, students collectively explored the moral and ethical issues inherent in the case. These discussions occurred in the foreground of two overarching questions for the class: 'Why should corporations be socially responsible?' and 'What is business ethics?' For the educator, the classes were designed to adopt the Maclagan (1995) contemplation of an ethics program; first, by providing students with an opportunity to discover the 'ethical shape' of both the case and the overarching questions (through the 'analytical process' discussed in class) and, secondly, by seeking to stimulate their moral imagination.

During the first class, students were advised that the assessment task relating to the ethics classes consisted of a written reflective report. The report was due in week 6: this was considered sufficient time for students to explore and articulate their reflections about the classes, but not so long as to entirely dim any echoes of their classroom experience of ethics. Students were to use their reflective reports to identify their learning from the case and the classroom discussion, and they were to apply the case to their own experiences. To assist in the formulation of individual reflections, students were invited to consider a list of questions, which included these:

- Does the case have application to hospitality or tourism enterprises? How?
- With reference to the ethical dimensions of the case, can you apply what you have learned to your work, to your studies or to any other aspect of your life (past, present or future)? How?
- Are there any factors that might prevent you from applying what you have learned? Why? What are these factors?
- How has the case confirmed or changed your ideas about management?
- Can you see any connections with other units you have studied, or any other experiences?
- What else have you learned from the case?
- What have you learned from writing your reflective report?

Student's reflective reports were graded on the basis of four assessment criteria which were explained to students at the end of the Socratic classes. These criteria included students' ability to show how they had applied their learning beyond the immediate scope of the in-class discussion of the case, and their ability to couple their experiences with some of the moral and ethical issues discussed in class.

Research data: student evaluations and results

The research data for this study was drawn from three sources:

1. surveys of students' opinions, thoughts and feelings about the effectiveness of the class discussions and reflections, as a medium of learning;
2. students' responses to a standardised evaluation of the educator; and
3. students' identified learning from the classes, as exhibited in the results awarded to their written assessments completed following the relevant classes.

The university's Human Research Ethics Committee gave its approval to the study in this form.

The collection of data from these three sources is claimed to facilitate a triangulation of data. By this combination of data collection methods, there is no claim to validate the data gathered (Flick 2002). Instead, the triangulation is simply thought to go some way towards providing 'a strategy that adds rigor, breadth, complexity, richness and depth' to the study (Denzin and Lincoln 2005: 5).

Surveys of students

The surveys were administered to students at the end of the Socratic classes. The two survey instruments used in this study had previously been developed in the context of research into experiential learning in management education (Fallon and Daruwalla 2004; Daruwalla and Fallon 2005), and were therefore thought to have some relevance here.

Survey 1 invited students to complete an open-ended statement about their opinions, thoughts and feelings about the classroom discussions and the role those discussions played in the students' learning. Survey 2, administered after responses to Survey 1 had been completed, invited responses (on a five-point Likert scale) of students' perceived level of knowledge in five identified topic areas. These topic areas were extracted from Hosmer's 'Analytical process for the resolution of moral problems' (Hosmer 2004), and a demonstrated knowledge of this process had been initially identified as one of the objectives of the classes. The Likert scale ranged from a rating of 5 representing 'detailed and extensive knowledge' to 1 being 'no knowledge at all'. After completing Survey 2, students who felt that their recall in Survey 1 was insufficient to record what they really wanted to, were invited to include any revised or additional opinions, thoughts and feelings in a designated section on the reverse of Survey 1. The purpose of accommodating students' later reflections in this way was based on research practice aimed at not contaminating or leading data resulting from recall.

Students' evaluation of the educator

A further survey instrument was administered to students at the end of the Socratic classes. The standardised Student Evaluation and Educational Quality (SEEQ) instrument was widely used at the university, and was claimed to have been validated over a number of years (March and Roche 1994). This instrument was essentially used to evaluate an educator's teaching on dimensions like: learning and academic value of the classes, instructor enthusiasm, organisation and clarity, individual rapport, breadth of coverage, assignments and readings. The SEEQ survey also contained provision for students' open-ended comments about the educator's strengths and areas for improvement.

The SEEQ process meant that the educator was blind to student responses. The survey instruments were recorded and analysed by a separate department at the university, and this analysis was released to the educator after the assessments were graded and returned to students.

Students' identified learning

After students' reflective reports (the assessable activity covering the classes) were graded and returned, students were invited to give their consent to the anonymous use of their assessments in this research.

Research findings and analysis

Surveys of students

Data collected from student's open-ended responses in Survey 1 were analysed using a thematic investigation of the responses within an interpretivist qualitative framework. This framework allowed the identification of key conceptual clusters (Pearce and Sutton-Brady 2003), which aimed to couple student responses with any of the themes from the literature. On this analysis, six prominent key concepts were mined from students' responses. Table 1 lists these key concepts, with a fuller explanation of each concept and a sample of specific responses which contributed to the development of the concepts as so stated.

In general terms, students' responses were taken to have provided a confirmation of the Socratic approach. This is because the content of their responses indicate that students had engaged in some measure of self-examination and reflection (which are taken to be characteristics of the Socratic method), with what were expressed to be positive outcomes.

Table 1: Key concepts mined from students' responses in Survey 1

Key concept	Description of the concept	Samples of students' responses
Awareness of the moral dilemma for corporations	This refers to a student's perception that corporations need to balance economic responsibilities to shareholders with social responsibilities to non-investor stakeholders	'Gives students new vision to think about social responsibilities' (S10)
Classes contributed to learning	This refers to any view that related the manner in which the classes were conducted to a positive learning outcome for students	'Better than telling someone what ethics means' (S2) 'This way, students understand ethics clearly.' (S11)
Classes assisted to understand others and other perspectives	This refers to any comment that noted the student's expressed ability to contemplate different points of view, or to accommodate a broader perspective on the topic	'Now I am able to look at a corporation in different ways and look at issues in depth … I have noticed that this is becoming more natural with my thinking.' (S3)
Classes assisted students to understand themselves	This refers to any comment in which students expressed some measure of reflection about their own understanding, thoughts, feelings, values or beliefs	'I was able to ponder my own feelings and thoughts.' (S2) 'Interesting to see other people's thinking … and I can develop my own understanding of the topic.' (S6) 'It makes one question himself.' (S7)
Classes could be applied to work situations	This refers to any statement that related the content or process of the classes to current or future work, or to a work environment	'Learning was a good experience … through these activities I can be more familiar with the responsibilities of being a manager.' (S4)
Interactive classes were beneficial	This refers to any positive comment about the class processes and activities	'The discussion was great. It gave me a broader and in-depth picture.' (S2) 'These activities are more useful in helping me understand and analyse the topic than the normal teaching methods.' (S6)

Survey 2 required students to indicate their perceived level of knowledge of five theoretical concepts taken from Hosmer's 'Analytical process for the resolution of moral problems' (Hosmer 2003). The survey required students to rate their level of knowledge on a Likert scale, with a score of 5 representing 'detailed and extensive knowledge', and 1 indicating 'no knowledge at all'. The results of Survey 2 are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2: Student scores of perceived knowledge of theoretical concepts

Theoretical concept	Total value of all scores	Mean score
Identification of the stakeholders in a corporation	60	3.53
Identification of the corporate ethical environment	52	3.06
Identification of economic and social responsibilities	64	3.76
Identification of the moral dilemma for management	62	3.65
Identification of ethical duties in analysing moral problems	61	3.59

The mean scores from students' Survey 2 responses suggest that students considered themselves to possess a level of knowledge in the theoretical concepts mentioned. In percentage terms, their level of knowledge, on average, ranged from 60 to 75 per cent. This is taken to indicate that, while students felt that they had learned from the classes, those classes were not entirely successful in imparting the full measure of knowledge about the concepts covered. It is thought that a better understanding of the meanings to be attached to these results could be obtained from some type of comparative benchmark, perhaps across progressive cohorts.

Students' evaluation of the educator

The students' SEEQ (Student Evaluation and Educational Quality) questionnaire rating of the educator was 7.6, on a nine-point scale, with 9 the most favourable response. This was taken to indicate a high level of approval of the educator's 'teaching', and students' open-ended comments taken as part of the SEEQ process supported the high rating. Such responses are not claimed, by themselves, to add any significant weight in support of the benefits of the Socratic approach. This is because the educator had worked with the students previously, and was thought to have already had a close rapport with many in the cohort. Also, it was thought that students had derived some personal satisfaction from the Socratic experience, including the values-based discussion which had the effect of uncovering 'self-knowledge' (Paraskevas and Wickens 2003); and this had probably contributed to the students' positive impression of the educator.

This is not to say that data from the SEEQ questionnaire could not contribute to an understanding of students' perception of the Socratic approach. While the students' relatively high rating of the educator's performance *in itself* carried little weight, data from this source could be claimed to offer a disconfirmatory perspective. So, if the students' evaluation of the educator's performance had run contrary to the tenor of data from the other sources, that disconfirmation may have had the capacity to identify apparently conflicting attributes of the class delivery mechanisms. In this study, however, this was not the case, because data from all three sources generally tended towards positive outcomes for students.

Students' identified learning: students' grades

Students' grades on the assessment task (the reflective reports) were taken to suggest the level of students' learning from the classes. Table 3 lists the numbers of students who were awarded a distinction, credit, pass and fail grade, with an indication of that number as a percentage of the cohort.

Table 3: Analysis of student grades

Grade	Number of students with this grade	Percentage of the cohort
Distinction	1	6
Credit	4	24
Pass	7	41
Fail	5	29

In terms of the university's statistically preferred spread of grades over a normal distribution, this result indicates that the number of students who failed the assessment task was higher than what was considered desirable. The number of students awarded a pass grade was lower by a similar percentage. This is taken to suggest that students experienced some difficulty with the assessment task in the form of a reflective report. This form of assessment was not previously adopted in the graduate program, and students had expressed some concerns when completing the assessment task.

Also, because the cohort was comparatively small in number, generalised conclusions about the level of students' learning based on a normal distribution of awarded grades can be called into question on statistical grounds.

Concluding remarks

This paper finds support for the proposition that, based on students' perceptions, the Socratic approach appears to have some traction in the education of ethics in a business context.

At a theoretical level at least, the pedagogical philosophy of critical management education – with its 'challenge to prevailing mind-sets' (Grey 2004: 178) – can be understood to have some sympathy with the Socratic method, with its focus on discussions and reflections (van Hooft 2003). Additionally, the findings of this study lend some, but not unqualified, support for the adoption of the Socratic method. In terms of the two preferred aims of an ethics program, the nature of students' Survey 1 responses (listed in Table 1) could be taken to suggest that they did in fact have access to the 'ethical shape' of the matters discussed in class and, in some measure at least, their 'moral imagination' was stimulated (Maclagan 1995). Nonetheless, a more rigorous and deeper mining of the data would be possible by analysing the content of students' reflective reports.

The study outcomes can be interpreted to offer a clearer understanding of areas for further research. These include the following:

- In order to verify the emergent themes of the current study (including the key concepts mined from the Survey 1 data), additional research could be conducted with similar cohorts of graduate students, perhaps with refinements to the lesson plans. These refinements would at least provide students with clearer direction in the preparation of the reflective reports.
- In the design of subsequent studies, further research could consider the cultural and gender differences in learning styles of the student cohorts (Chan 1999; Barron 2004; Simga-Mugan, Daly, Onkal and Lerzan 2005).
- Further research could investigate the applicability of the Socratic approach beyond the scope of ethics education. By focusing on other topics forming part of business management programs, Socratic classes could be considered a suitable method of instruction in a wider application of critical management education at graduate level.
- Additional studies could investigate the Socratic method in ethics education of undergraduate business students. Because these students undertake programs of longer duration, there may be scope to use longitudinal studies to explore factors like the cultural and gender differences in learning styles.
- Beyond the educational environment, separate research might investigate the commercial community's receptiveness to working with graduates who have had some exposure to a criticalist approach to teaching ethics, using the Socratic method.

This study surely did not claim to determine whether the Socratic method would produce ethical business managers. In a pragmatic sense, the effectiveness of ethics education should not be simply represented by what students are assessed to know, or even by what they perceive themselves to know – although such knowledge might go some way towards understanding their 'moral imagination'. Instead, the true measure of students' learning of business ethics must reside, somewhat anxiously, in their ultimate *practice* of it.

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