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**Author(s):** Lämsä, Anna-Maija; Pucétaitè, Raminta; Kujala, Johanna; Medeišienè, Raimonda Agnè; Riivari, Elina; Bulatova, Julija; Kooskora, Mari; Brinkmann, Johannes; Heikkinen, Anna

**Title:** Mixed Learning Approach to Teaching Ethics in Leadership and Management : A Case Course in a Multicultural Group

**Year:** 2015

**Version:**

**Please cite the original version:**

Lämsä, A.-M., Pucétaitè, R., Kujala, J., Medeišienè, R. A., Riivari, E., Bulatova, J., Kooskora, M., Brinkmann, J., & Heikkinen, A. (2015). Mixed Learning Approach to Teaching Ethics in Leadership and Management : A Case Course in a Multicultural Group. In G. D. Sardana, & T. Thatchenkery (Eds.), *Managing Complex Organization Change : Action-oriented Approaches for Sustaining Positive Interventions* (pp. 352-364). Bloomsbury Publishing India.

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## Case Code 116

### MIXED LEARNING APPROACH TO TEACHING ETHICS IN LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT: A CASE COURSE IN A MULTICULTURAL GROUP

**Abstract.** The purpose of the paper is to analyse how a mixed learning approach (MLA) (e.g. case studies, applied drama) can facilitate teaching and learning ethics in business management. Partners from five different countries organized an international higher education course in the years 2013, 2014 and 2015. The aim of the course was to provide the students with skills to evaluate and solve ethical problems constructively in a multicultural group. This case portrays the benefits and challenges of the MLA and discusses what it takes from teachers and students to make the use of the approach successful.

**Keywords.** Business ethics, case course, constructivism, management education, mixed learning.

#### Introduction

The state of business management pedagogy has been criticized by several scholars (e.g. Mintzberg and Gosling, 2002; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002; Doh, 2003; Ghoshal, 2005; Lämsä et al., 2008). Typically, criticism is directed to the lack of effectiveness of education for business performance of students (Ghoshal, 2005). A reason for this can be that in business management education theories are often taught first and practical knowledge comes after that. Such an approach results in abstract ideas in students' thinking and may not have any significant effect on their performance. Furthermore, Ghoshal (2005) argues that business and management pedagogy can have remarkably negative effect on the practice of management. Ghoshal continues saying that by teaching ideologically inspired amoral theories, business education has freed its students from any sense of moral responsibility. Based on their empirical study of business students' attitudinal change during business education, Lämsä et al. (2008) reported that business education may be contributing to a narrower idea of corporate responsibility in society and devaluation of equal-opportunity employment. Furthermore, many scholars argue that business management education can be considered masculine by prioritizing "hard" competences and instrumentalism in the classroom compared to more feminine "soft" competences such as interpersonal skills and personal development (Simpson, 2006; Kelan et al., 2010; Lämsä and Savela, 2014).

Given the importance of ethics and responsibility for good and long-term business (Crane and Matten, 2010; Freeman et al., 2010) and the important role of business management education to students' – future decision-makers in working life – competences (Lämsä et al., 2008), we argue that educational programmes which instill ethical and responsible behaviour among students who are studying business management are necessary (Ghoshal, 2005; Kashyap et al., 2006; Lämsä et al., 2008). In particular, such programmes which pay attention to the interaction between ethical theories and practical knowledge in teaching and learning processes, emphasize students' reflection, participation, critical thinking, discussion and dialogue, and increase ethical awareness and decision-making skills are vital. Instead of understanding students only as objects of teaching, which is a typical view in traditional teacher-centered approach to (studies) teaching, students should be understood as actors who construct knowledge and meaning for themselves through various individual and social learning activities (Rauste-von Wright and von Wright, 1994). In this paper, we suggest a mixed learning approach (e.g. cases, applied drama, e-learning) to teaching ethics in business management as a means to teach and support students' learning of business ethics. The paper has two aims. The main aim is

- *to present the principles, objectives and implementation of the mixed learning approach in an international higher education case course of organisational ethics.*

Additionally, based on the students' feedback,

- *perceived benefits and issues from the viewpoint of the students are analysed and discussed.*

This paper contributes to increasing our knowledge and understanding of business ethics education in higher business management education context by describing a specific pedagogical approach to increase the effectiveness of education.

## **Mixed learning approach (MLA) and its application**

### *Theoretical background*

The approach called a mixed learning approach (hereafter MLA) in this paper draws upon constructivist learning theory. According to it, learners, i.e. students, who are studying business ethics, construct their knowledge and understanding actively in learning situations. Students are regarded as active participants, not passive receivers of knowledge while making meaning of a topic that is taught and learnt (Rauste-von Wright and von Wright, 1994). Learners construct new concepts, ideas and meanings by drawing on their past and current knowledge (Bruner, 1973). Consequently, they use cultural, social and situational knowledge while making meaning of a topic. According to Piaget (1955), this assimilation process makes the learner place new ideas and experiences into the old ones. This stimulates her/him to rethink former knowledge and integrate a new experience and/or idea into her/his existing mental structure (schema). Accommodation, another important idea of Piaget, means that the experiences and perceptions are transforming the learner's knowledge base and capacity, and new schemes of the topic are created by her/him.

According to constructivism, in learning processes learners can reach the "zone of proximal development" (Vygostky, 1978; Engeström, 1995). It refers to the idea that there is a difference between what a learner can do without support and help and what she/he is able to do with support in learning and development (Atherton, 2013). Besides, spontaneous learning is important, for example, students can learn business ethics from their experiences in practice. However, they may not advance far enough if they need to learn just on their own (Atherton, 2013; Engeström, 1995). Therefore, learners need support from the teacher which includes methods, tools, theories, models to solve problems and learn new ideas. Moreover, other students with diverse backgrounds that provides a learning environment with broader and more multiple views to the topic compared to a homogeneous group are important (Vygostky, 1978; Engeström, 1995). So, the MLA stresses the social form of constructivism which presumes that learners are constructing new ideas and meanings in common learning together and with the teacher, therefore, social interaction has a pivotal role in learning (Vygostky, 1978). Additionally, the MLA adopts an idea of Piaget (1955) that learners construct their understanding through various methods and channels such as reading, discussing, listening, telecommunication tools, software education tools, video disks, e-learning etc. Therefore, teaching based on constructivism needs to provide and use several methods and activities to be able to challenge learners' existing knowledge.

### *Objectives and implementation of the MLA: international course of organizational ethics*

With the goal to create a curriculum for future business decision makers that addresses the principles of the MLA, the project partners from five countries (namely, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Norway) developed a Baltic-Nordic context sensitive higher education course called "Cases in Organizational Ethics". Organizing the course was supported financially by the Nordic Council of Ministries (Nordplus Higher Education programme) and the participating universities.

The course was designed so that it constructively aligned attention to the outcomes of students' learning and teaching and assessment of those outcomes. In constructive alignment, the outcome statements contain a learning activity, a verb that students need to perform to best achieve the outcome, such as "*analyse* ethical problems" or "*create* proposals". The verb articulates the important learning activities that the students need to undertake in order to reach the intended learning outcome. Learning is constructed by what activities students carry out; learning is about what they do, not about what teachers do (Biggs, 1996; Nevgi and Lindblom-Ylänne, 2009). However, as brought forth above, the role of a teacher is to support and encourage students' learning process and provide appropriate conditions and tools for it (Atherton, 2013; Engeström, 1995).

Following the idea of constructive alignment, the learning targets for the course were set to meet the relational and extended abstract levels of the SOLO taxonomy (Biggs, 1995) as well as the Master's level course in the Bologna process (Sweeney, 2011). The SOLO (Structure of the Observed Learning Outcome) taxonomy is a means of categorizing learning outcomes in terms of their complexity, allowing the teacher to assess students' work in terms of its quality instead of what they did (not) know. The idea is that first the students pick up only one or a few aspects of the task (unistructural level), then they learn several aspects but they are unrelated (multistructural level). These aspects then become integrated into a coherent whole (relational level). This level is referred as an adequate understanding of the topic. Finally, the students are able to conceptualise the new whole at a higher level of abstraction and generalise it to a new topic or area (extended abstract level). The last two levels require qualitative assessment (Biggs, 1995). As learning progresses, it becomes more complex and at Master's level the learning outcomes need to be expressed at the relational and extended abstract level. Following this idea, learning objectives of the course were planned together in a group of the course instructors from the participating universities. They stated that by the end of the course the student will be able:

1. To recognize and critically reflect ethical dimensions of organisational life.
2. To analyze, evaluate and solve ethical problems through theoretical frameworks.
3. To take a role as a moral decision-maker in ethically challenging situations and participate constructively in a moral dialogue in a multicultural group.
4. To create proposals and argue for how ethics can be promoted by management and leadership activities in different organizational and socio-cultural contexts.

The contents of the course included the following topics: ethics management and an ethical workplace, responsible leadership, stakeholder management, gendered organisations and diversity management, community mobilization, corporate volunteering, and environmental management. Beside the cases, most of which were published in the textbook "*Cases in Organizational Ethics*" (Pučėtaitė, 2012) as a result of the project development in 2009-2011, the course material included relevant readings which introduced theoretical approaches to the studied topics.

Implementation of the course was organized in three phases:

1. Students' preparation to an intensive course through e-learning (1 ECTS)

The course material was placed on Moodle learning environment. Course materials, detailed course description, cases, articles to be read beforehand, introduction of students and teachers were presented there. In this phase, the students became familiar with the materials and started reflecting the course topics. A short paper summarizing the articles was required from the students before the intensive course to ensure proper preparation for the face-to-face classes.

2. The intensive course which lasted six days (2 ECTS)

The intensive course took place in Tallinn (Estonia, 2013), Oslo (Norway, 2014) and Riga (Latvia, 2015) with 12, 22 and 19 students respectively. Each year the composition of the students was

diverse in terms of nationality and socio-cultural background. Additionally, the composition varied to some extent by age (range from early twenties to fifties), working experience (some students with extensive professional experience, in managing positions), and gender (female students were the majority). Some examples of the cases and teaching methods applied in the course are described in a nutshell below.

*The Nokia case/a clothing company* focused on ethical challenges and problems of a western company operating in a developing country. The activity was based on a documentary film *A Decent Factory* directed by Thomas Balmes (2004) and a BBC report *Dying for a Bargain* (2013). The aim was to reflect the reality and challenges of embedding organizational ethics, in particular, in human resource management practices in a globalizing world. Besides, the aims were to discuss an ethical problem from a conceptual and practical viewpoint as well as learn some frameworks of an ethical organization. Before watching the film the students organized themselves into pairs in small groups consisting of four people. In each group one pair watched the film paying attention to problems arising to the subcontractor, employees, and company as a result of actions portrayed in the film. The other pair watched the film by paying attention to advantages received by the subcontractor, employees, and company. After the film, the small groups consisting discussed their views and prepared to defend them. This helped the students to get a broader view of the topic and avoid moralizing. Then, a discussion in the whole group of students followed. Theoretical frameworks and concepts were presented by two instructors during the final discussion, applying team teaching.

*The Botnia case* focused on the use of stakeholder dialogue in a situation where a multinational company's foreign green field investment raises both opposing and supporting views among the local interest groups (in Uruguay). The aim was to deepen the students' understanding of the multitude of stakeholder interests and advance their skills to facilitate a dialogue, which seeks to find solutions and avoid a conflict in a situation of a stakeholder dispute. When teaching stakeholder dialogue with the help of this case, the students needed to act in different stakeholder roles and, thus, empathize with the different stakeholder views in order to understand the complexity of the situation (Heikkinen et al., 2012). Team teaching (two instructors) was applied in this case as well.

*Nina Case* focused on gendered practices in organisations and, specifically, on the barriers to women's career. The aim was to facilitate students' understanding that managerial careers in organizational life are not gender neutral phenomena but rather have a gendered nature. Another aim was to describe and analyse different gendered practices from the viewpoint of managerial careers, reflect their advantages and disadvantages. A fictive case of a person called Nina and challenges in her career advancement were studied and discussed. Even though the case was fictive, it was developed based on 38 women managers' stories of their experiences in real working life (Lämsä et al., 2012). Beside the case, the students were asked to read the latest Global Gender Gap Report of the World Economic Forum before coming to the intensive course. Based on it, country rankings of the students' home countries were discussed and reflected in a learning situation. Then, the students discussed the case in small groups and each group prepared a presentation with the discussion outcomes to the other groups. Theoretical frameworks and concepts were presented by two instructors during the final discussion.

*Corporate psychopathy* session consisted of theoretical explanation of the phenomenon and its relation to the concepts of unethical, destructive and toxic leadership, discussion of statistical data and mini cases, and exercises (psychological techniques) for raising self-awareness and reflecting unconscious desires for power. The aim of these exercises was to develop students' skills to

recognize the situations when power starts to take control over the personality and human remorse stands back. The ability to empathize as a measure to prevent devastating consequences of destructive leadership and toxic organizational environment at individual, organizational and societal levels was reflected.

*Applied drama methods (ADM)* were used to support case teaching. In general, applied drama can be described as forms of dramatic activity that exist outside conventional theatre institutions (Nicholson, 2005). In this course, ADM were targeted to benefit the students in various learning situations during the intensive course. ADM in this program was applied first time in 2015 as a relatively brief intervention leading to common discussions and reflections with students and ADM practitioner after each application. The main responsibility of ADM practitioner was to build a safe and trustful environment for learning, communication and teamwork, taking into account that the course participants differed in age, professional experience, nationality, cultural and social skills. Besides, the students' level of the English language, knowledge of business ethics and motivation to take part in the programme were different as well. The applied drama techniques were selected to go from relatively simple techniques (e.g. team building) to the more complex ones (e.g. board game *INTERNOTA*: discussion and role playing). The application of ADM gave much room for the students' spontaneous reactions, behaviour, cooperation and learning. The method was explained to the students shortly before it was used.

A *company visit* was organized during each round of the course to assist classroom learning. The companies for a study trip demonstrated ethical and/or environmental awareness and applied respective principles in practice. The students were hosted by Nortal, a growing IT company, known for its social responsibility in Estonia, a Norwegian bank DNB that presented both its ethics programme and CSR practices, and Getlini, a Latvian waste management company that built its premises on a swamp and produces energy from the landfill gas.

### 3. Independent studying: Study journal (2 ECTS)

After the intensive course, the students wrote a study journal based on the course literature and class experience. The study journal had to be a reflective text that covers the central theories, concepts and research in the area as well as the personal process of becoming familiar with the studied topic. The study journal consisted of two parts: 1) a concept map and 2) a critical essay. Detailed instructions how to write a study journal and the evaluation criteria for it were given to the students in the Moodle learning environment. Examples of concept maps (e.g. <http://cmap.ihmc.us/publications/researchpapers/theorycmaps/theoryunderlyingconceptmaps.htm>) and programs for devising them (e.g. CMapTools) were also provided to the students.

In the first part, the students were expected to examine the course topics as a comprehensive and coherent whole. A concept map had to disclose students' understanding of the key concepts, their relationships, hierarchies, similarities, contradictions etc. In the second part, they could focus more on a specific topic/problem/phenomenon of their own interest. For example, in the field of ethical leadership and human resource management the students could choose to have a closer look on how ethical leadership relates to other leadership theories. Students could choose the topic freely, as long as they justified their choices. The chosen topic had to be examined critically from various perspectives and theoretical viewpoints based on the course literature. Students were encouraged to ask questions and express their own thoughts on the readings. The advised length of the study journal was 8 pages with 1.5 line space.

### *Diagnosis and Analysis*

After each course round, feedback from the students was collected. After the first and third rounds an internet survey was used. The first round survey consisted of 22 statements in four thematic blocks related to the quality of the course management online (e.g. *The structure of the course in the Moodle environment was clear*), gained knowledge (e.g. *The course gave an opportunity for self-reflection*), overall satisfaction with the course (e.g. *The course met my expectations*) and evaluation of the cases (e.g. *Please evaluate the course topics by their potential to arise your interest*). The statements were evaluated on a 7-point Likert scale in which 1 meant “totally disagree” and 7 – “totally agree”. Some open-ended questions for students’ suggestions for improvement of the course and/or comments on their highest/lowest evaluations were included.

In the third round, the survey kept almost the same thematic structure and measurement scale, yet, twelve new statements were added to cover new contents and teaching methods (e.g. ADM) and the scale for rating the cases as eye-opening and recommending the course and cases to peers was changed to five items, 1 meaning “totally disagree” and 5 – “totally agree”. The survey was filled in after submitting the study journal for grading. The response rate to the survey was 67% after the first round and 84% after the third one.

Feedback in the second round of the course was collected after the last class. The students were asked to write down the course advantages and the fields for improvement on a sheet of paper and give a short oral evaluation of the course afterwards. This type of feedback-giving was aimed at eliciting both rational/constructive comments and emotional reactions to the course.

Overall, the students’ feedback indicated that they perceived the importance of “soft issues” in their education as well as considered multicultural interaction during the intensive course as adding value for their future career and work. Students appreciated the opportunity to relate to others with similar values and be “not the only ones who believe that ethics is important” on the one hand and acknowledged that cultural backgrounds cannot be taken for granted when speaking about ethics and following values in practice on the other hand: “I do not take it for granted any more that ethical and environmental points of view are familiar to all business students”.

From the gained knowledge perspective, most students were positive about their progress and evaluated it much above the average. After the first round, the means of the statements measuring a new knowledge perspective ranged from 6,3 to 6,6; yet fell down by 0,5-1 point after the third one. For example, problems raised in the cases were considered as less actual in the third round. From the content perspective, leadership topics (i.e. ethical and psychopathic leadership) were evaluated among the most interesting ones in the first and third round, followed by the topics of gendered organizations and ethical workplace. In particular, the class on ethical workplace in developing countries was reported as eye-opening in the third round (mean 4,4 out of 5 points). The course management and information structure in the e-learning environment received similar evaluations in the first and third round (respectively, overall means 5,4 and 5,3), although the coordinators have reacted to the comments received in the first round by restructuring the layout of the topics and sending reminders about the cases to be discussed on a particular day of the intensive course. The work of institutional coordinators was evaluated most highly among all the statements of the course management: its mean was 6,9 after the first round, and 6,2 after the third one. In all rounds, classes from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. were reported as very intense and demanding, disregarding change of teaching methods and visits to the companies. Eventually, the introduction of ADM was reported as improving the cognitive abilities by giving moments of relaxation and fun.

Although the organizers made efforts to facilitate group dynamics and networking by organizing a get-together dinner on the day of arrival and encouraged the students to have more intensive social

life after the classes, there were remarks in all rounds that an organized excursion or some other social program would do good to the course. That was the least problematic during the first round in which the group of students was the smallest and the hosting institution recruited a representative number of students who took care of social life of the group.

The most important challenge was ensuring that students from all partner institutions experience similar progress in learning. In this course, one partner sent in the students from the Master programme of Responsible Business who had been studying related topics for at least one year already while the students from the other institutions had not even had a course on Business Ethics or Corporate Social Responsibility. As expected, some students were learning much more than the others, which was also reflected in the feedback. It stated that the discussions did not go deep enough into the subject and reiterated what they already had known. The response from the course organizers to this feedback was that the students have a chance to reflect particular topics more deeply in the study journal. The study journal was also a type of assignment which was not familiar to all the students. Finns and Norwegians felt much more at ease with it compared to the students from the Baltic universities where a study journal is not widely practiced.

### *Recommendations*

Team teaching and several instructors as well as multiple methods prove to be advantageous to effective learning in the intensive course. Experience-based learning combined with theoretical learning provides significantly higher effect on learners' understanding of the cases and related problems and phenomena studied through compared to a situation that either way would be solely applied. Discussion and dialogue between instructors and learners are useful in case teaching but require that both parties develop their communication, interaction and social skills. These aspects have to be considered when recruiting the students.

A diverse group (e.g. in terms of ethnicity, age, gender, level of knowledge, work experience) is useful in a case course but students need to be trained to face and deal with diversity before participating in the course. Otherwise there is risk that people graduate the course with disdainful attitudes to other nationality people because they have not studied something as they have. Besides, it is important that the group does not exceed 20 persons as it undermines the possibilities to discuss the group work and presentation more critically and deep enough, creating an impression of rush and superficiality of discussion.

Despite the fact that experiential learning through drama techniques gives a lot of positive emotions, it is an intervention activity, which can arouse painful experiences. An instructor has to be prepared to analyse and deal with it in learning situations. Participants have to leave the session with positive attitudes and emotions.

Company visit is useful in a case course. However, it should be prepared carefully so that students know the company and the aim of the visit beforehand. The visit should have a focus which is agreed upon with a company representative. Additionally, the company people need to have information of the course and visitors to be able to make a presentation meeting the visitors' expectations. It is useful for a teacher to prepare questions for which students should seek answers during the visit. A (short) paper required from the students after the visit could also increase the chance for achieving the learning outcomes.

The e-learning environment should be made as user friendly as possible. Testing it with a pilot group would help to overcome negative experience in searching for the information or related readings.

### *Conclusions*

Drawing on the idea of Piaget (1955), the MLA presented in this paper stresses the importance of using several teaching methods, activities and tools in effective learning. We suggest that the MLA gives credit to differences in learners' learning styles and therefore has advantages over the single-method/activity/tool approach when teaching cases. This is important since students tend to process and construct knowledge in various ways. However, it can be so that many teachers have a tendency to prefer a specific teaching style (or a mixture of some styles such as lecturing, conversation, drama, role play etc.), which can be challenging to match students' learning styles and teachers' teaching styles. Therefore, we conclude that when a case course is organised several instructors, team teaching, a variety of teaching methods can enhance the effectiveness of students' learning.

Applied drama methods seem to be helpful in case teaching since they can contribute to building a constructive and open team atmosphere among students. This is specifically important in a multicultural and diverse group in which challenges of misunderstandings between participants can be higher than in a homogeneous group. However, an instructor's competence of organising motivating drama exercises, dealing with group dynamics and various emotional reactions is crucial. In general, we suggest that group learning, which is an important part of the MLA, can be more effective in diverse groups compared to homogenous groups.

Finally, success of case teaching depends on the extent to which they relate situations in practice with theories. This may increase students' motivation to learn and result in more meaningful learning experiences. Teaching needs to be organized so that it provides conditions for a student to understand what is expected and required from her/him and advance her/his own thinking, reflection and imagination of the topic. So, both clear instructions and spontaneous learning situations are necessary.

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