

Teaching Business Ethics Across Borders – A Revisit

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Abstract

This paper summarizes and reports preliminary results of an ethics project planned and implemented by the Louisiana State University Students In Free Enterprise (LSU SIFE) team. The project teaches business ethics through video skits and lectures and is delivered online via a web site. A brief introduction of what SIFE is and the history of LSU SIFE is followed by a description of the project that was developed. Preliminary results are a 74% increase in knowledge of business ethics. Future plans for the project are also described.

I. Introduction

This paper summarizes and reports preliminary results of an ethics project planned and implemented by the Louisiana State University Students In Free Enterprise (LSU SIFE) team. The project teaches core business ethics via a video lecture that is delivered via the World Wide Web. The viewers of the lesson are required to take a pre-and post-test in order to track the immediate impact of this lecture on the user's knowledge of core business ethics. An earlier form of this lecture was named the 2006 National Champion in the Campbell's/Sealed Air SIFE USA National Business Ethics Special Competition for showing "... that [LSU SIFE] created economic opportunity by helping others understand that the long-term success and prosperity of a market economy, business and individuals are dependent on ethical business practices."³

The next section briefly describes the SIFE program at the national level and its history at LSU. Section III will give the history of this particular project and how it developed. The details of the current form of the lecture are explained and preliminary results are reported in Section IV. Section V contains our future plans for the project and concluding remarks.

II. What is SIFE?

Talk to anybody affiliated with SIFE and they will tell you that this is one of the hardest questions to answer, unless the person asking the question is willing to listen to us talk for an hour. The way SIFE answers it is:

SIFE is a global non-profit organization active in more than 40 countries. SIFE is funded by financial contributions from corporations, entrepreneurs, foundations, government agencies and individuals. Working in partnership with business and higher education, SIFE establishes student teams on university campuses. These teams are led by faculty advisors and they are challenged to develop community outreach projects that reach SIFE's five educational topics: Market Economics, Success Skills, Entrepreneurships, Financial Literacy, [and] Business Ethics.

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³ 2005-2006 SIFE Information Handbook, page 32. The latest version of the Handbook is available via pdf format by accessing www.sife.org/acrobat/information_handbook.pdf (link working as of August 2, 2007).

SIFE team members leverage their personal educational experiences, the expertise of their faculty advisors, the support of their local business advisory boards, and the resources for their institutions to implement programs that create real economic opportunities for members of their communities. The effectiveness of their programs is judged by leaders from its business community. At competition, SIFE teams present the results of their educational outreach projects and compete to determine which team was most successful at creating economic opportunity for others. SIFE National Champion teams advance to the top level of competition, the SIFE World Cup.⁴

However, this two-paragraph blurb doesn't do justice to how influential and life changing this program is, not only for the people who are helped by the projects, but for the college students who are involved with SIFE teams. It is very fitting that the official slogan for SIFE USA is "Life change ahead." For the students involved with SIFE they get practical experience in project management and develop the teamwork and communication skills that businesses look for. These are opportunities the students would not normally get in the classroom.

At LSU, SIFE has been active since the fall semester of 2002. The team has been very successful from the start, being named a SIFE USA Regional Champion for each of our five years of operation. We were also named national Rookie of the Year team at the 2003 SIFE USA National Exposition, a finalist in the HSBC SIFE USA National Personal Financial Success Skills Competition in 2005 and twice named a finalist in the Campbell's/Sealed Air ISFE USA Business Ethics Competition (in 2005 and, as mentioned above, in 2006). In our five year history, we have implemented over 100 projects in not only the Baton Rouge community, but in several other countries as well.

III. Project Development

The seed for this particular project came out of two different projects LSU SIFE implemented in our first year of operation. The team's original business ethics project was simple classroom-based lecture. The highlight of the lecture was having the student play "Ethical Jeopardy" to try to reinforce the topics we addressed. The other project was a personal finance project where the goal was to demonstrate the perils of credit card usage. For this project, a video was made depicting how easy it was to misuse a credit card. The response to this project was overwhelmingly positive, especially in conjunction with our use of video as a teaching tool. It was at this time we decided to use video with our ethics lesson.

The second version of the ethics project was to shoot a video skit depicting a fictional accounting firm losing an account because deadlines were not met. As the group ponders what went wrong, there are flashback of their unethical behavior.⁵ The six ethical issues that were highlighted in this kit were: honesty, productivity, punctuality, organizational skills and neatness, sexual harassment and verbal abuse and intercultural tolerance, communication and teamwork. Each skit was surrounded by a lecture explaining the importance of each of these issues. The twist here is the team made two versions of this lesson, one in English and one in German. We had contacts in schools in not only the Baton Rouge Area, but also in Germany, Argentina and India.⁶ To implement this project, we sent VHS tapes, lecture notes, and pre-and post-tests to the different schools with instructions to have the students fill out the tests and have them sent back to us for grading so we could measure the impact results of the project. The biggest problem the team ran into was the lag time between sending out the materials and waiting for the results to be sent back and the team could foresee a problem with the cost of shipping tapes and materials if the project were to grow in scale. It was this version of the project that won SIFE's ethics competition.

⁴ www.sife.org. Accessed August 6, 2007.

⁵ For timeline purposes, the development of this version of the ethics project was happening right after the Enron scandal was just starting.

⁶ The Schools in Argentina and India were both English speaking schools.

IV. Current Form

After winning the ethics competitions, the team challenged itself to improve the project. The biggest problem was addressing the time lag in receiving results. The obvious answer was to convert the lesson to be made available fully online. It was during this time that we were approached by a promotional printing company, Geaux Promotions, to help them with a business plan for their company. It turned out that one of the owners of the company previously worked in the IT field developing websites.

A deal was struck that, in lieu of payment for LSU SIFE's consulting services, the owner would develop a web site for us and he would run the website from his company's server. The team decided to remake the videos since the quality of the original copies had deteriorated. Two versions were made again, but this time the languages were English and Spanish.⁷ Once everything was done, the website went active⁸ and it has been up and running since March of 2007.

As mentioned above, the primary tool LSU SIFE uses to measure results of the ethics lesson is pre- and post-tests. The same test is given before the user watches the video lecture and skits and then again right after the lesson. In the first six weeks of operations, just over 100 users viewed the lecture and completed both pre- and post-tests. Overall, there was a 74% gain in knowledge and 92% of the users received a perfect score on the post-test. In the future, as more users view the lesson, a more detailed analysis of the results can be carried out.

V. Future Plans and Conclusion

For the future, the LSU SIFE team wants to add more languages to the site in order to reach a wider audience; French and German versions are in the immediate plans. Also, as mentioned above, the team would like to do a more detailed analysis of the results, especially concerning any ethical knowledge difference between users from different countries.

In conclusion, the LSU SIFE team is convinced that using video can not only be an effective teaching tool, but the LSU SIFE team had a lot of fun making the videos.

⁷ The biggest determinant of which non-English language skit to shoot was the make-up of the LSU SIFE team. We had a German version because we had a German student on the team. By the time we remade the videos, this student had graduated and we had a number of Spanish speaking members.

⁸ <http://www.geauxpromotions.com/sife>