Teaching Public Administration Ethics: A 20-year Retrospective

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The presenting question:

• What’s the right thing to do and how can individuals be encouraged to do it?
  - *the substance of ethics education*: virtue can be taught and in a meaningful way
  - *the mechanisms by which it is delivered*: andragogy and group work to enable students to acquire the practical dispositions evincing the critical thinking skills and character traits of public administrators
Purposes: largely defensive and reactive

“**high road**”: reduce unethical conduct; reinforce organizational culture; heighten with law; communicate and discuss ethical standards; make ethical decisions

“**low road**”: avoid litigation; reduce legal liability; encourage critical thinking about ethics; transform organizational culture.
• deliberating about what virtue requires;
• introducing a code’s principles and standards;
• applying ethical propositions to idiosyncratic situations and circumstances;
• deriving a well-reasoned decision considering ethical propositions “from the inside” and “from the outside” that, when enacted, reveals the character of a virtuous public administrator; and,
• identifying the independent reasons and evidence to support this decision as the best resolution when not every value can be perfectly realized or fully achieved.
Delivery systems:

“Ethics education”: a series of progressive, developmental learning experiences consisting of:

• *pre-service instruction*: classrooms

• *in-service training*: workplaces
Pre-service instruction:

A classroom climate promoting:

• students heal their ethical “blind spots” as ethics educators provide a foundation in ethical theory and professional codes as well as deliberation that challenges students to think beyond the subject-agent dichotomy;

• students feel increasingly comfortable to engage in public discourse concerning their reflections as a means for understanding and appreciating how ethical discourse is a primary administrative responsibility; and,

• students consider how they might design organizations whose members will exude the virtues which best support the organization.
In-service training:

A series of experiential and competency-based progressive, developmental learning experiences in workplaces

• Introducing and practicing the skills that are directly applicable to workplace decision-making processes and which emphasized developing higher levels of awareness, stronger problem-solving abilities, and active involvement.
Requires ethics educators:

• to create a climate of positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotive interaction, the appropriate use of social skills, and group processing;

• to use cooperative learning through group work to cultivate the critical thinking skills and character traits required to deliberate effectively about ethical issues;

• to ensure that each individual contributes to the outcomes of group learning; and,

• to implement activities that embody constructive forms of controversy and provoke uncertainty.
Educating ethics across the professions:
A conceptual view of the two dimensions of professional character development

The “end” of professional ethics education is the formation of professional character which involves two dimensions: 1) pre-service instruction and 2) in-service training. Integrating these dimensions into a complete system provides a series of continuous, progressive, and developmental learning activities that assists students to inculcate into their character the virtues specified by their professions with the objective they will conduct themselves as virtuous members of those professions.

**PRE-SERVICE INSTRUCTION:**
- learning ethics (classroom)
- “the mind of ethics”

**IN-SERVICE TRAINING:**
- applying ethics (workplace)
- the “heart” of ethics

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**PRIMARY EMPHASIS:**
- theory

**SECONDARY EMPHASIS:**
- [skill] + practice

**SECONDARY EMPHASIS:**
- [theory] + skill

**PRIMARY EMPHASIS:**
- practice

The methods used to convey this system challenges professionals to form ethical learning organizations that will inspire greater public trust in the professions.
To sum up: A premise and four propositions:

• **THE PREMISE:**

Those who teach public administration ethics endeavor to educate student *in* virtue not *about* virtue

**THIS MEANS:** Public administration ethics education is a complete system of continuous, progressive, and developmental learning activities that prepare those who will serve (or currently do serve) in the profession to conduct themselves virtuously and build more ethical learning organizations so that subordinate will “do right things” and increase the public trust.
PROPOSITION #1: The subject is the student.

- Those who teach public administration ethics use the content (the knowledge, deliberative skills, and professional virtues) to provide the requisite mental formation empowering students to be the formal causes of their education in the professional virtues associated with the practice of public administration.
PROPOSITION #2: Ethics education involves two aspects.

- *Pre-service ethics instruction* prepares students for ethical practice.
- *In-service ethics training* applies the content of ethics and administrative theory to the workplace.

Both aspects emphasize deliberation and reflection on practice, utilizing andragogy as the primary methodology.
• Ethics education challenges student to remember that “knowing that” and “knowing how” aim at virtuous professional conduct.

• Ethics educator utilize appropriate pedagogical methods to shape the learning climate for students to educate themselves in virtue as well as to make more conscious and ethical decisions about their lives and workplaces.
PROPOSITION #4:
The desired end—public administrators who provide ethical leadership in the workplace

• Pre-service ethics instruction closes with students learning how to build ethical learning organizations.

• Providing ethical leadership, public administrators support in-service ethics training by assessing their organization’s current learning orientations and formulating an integrated learning strategy for workplace ethics training that expands their learning orientations to develop the capability to solve ethical dilemmas for themselves.
IN SUMMARY:
Applied ethics education is a critical element of the public administration curriculum

- In their conduct, ethics educators must exhibit a sophisticated understanding of the content of professional ethics, experience in its applications, and highly refined expertise in teaching it to adult learners.
- Ethics education is important and can be meaningful to students and practitioners. However, it provides no guarantee that public administrators will implement what they have learned in the workplace.
- “Outcomes-based” research is required to ensure that ethics education is important, meaningful, and practiced in the classroom and workplace.
THANK YOU!