

Transforming Business Ethics Teaching through Experiential and Writing Practices

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how writing-based teaching practices can improve the teaching of Business Ethics. The study is based on the author's own teaching experience over four semesters at the American University of Central Asia. Using an action research approach, the paper describes how the Institute for Writing and Thinking's (IWT) pedagogical strategies such as Freewriting, Loop Writing, Dialectical Notebooks, and Process Writing were added to lectures, films, and case studies. The results show that these methods made classes more interactive, encouraged students to reflect on ethical dilemmas, and helped them connect theory with personal and professional experience. Student evaluations and grades also improved, suggesting higher engagement and deeper learning. The paper concludes that combining experiential methods with writing-to-learn practices can make business ethics education more effective and meaningful.

KEYWORDS: business ethics, pedagogy, IWT writing practices, low-stakes writing, experiential learning, reflective practice

1 INTRODUCTION

Can business departments really teach business ethics? For many years, teachers and researchers have debated this question. Some argue that values are formed long before university, making classroom instruction ineffective. Others emphasize that while we may not “teach” ethics in the sense of prescribing moral codes, we can teach ethical reasoning and create conditions where students learn to navigate ambiguity and dilemmas. Sims (2002), for instance, contends that effective business ethics teaching requires more than lectures; it depends on experiential methods, interactive learning, and structured reflection that help students connect theory to practice. López (2010) also explains that students need role models, real cases,

and clear frameworks to reason through dilemmas. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that business departments not only can teach business ethics when they adopt reflective and participatory pedagogies, they equip students with the skills and courage needed for ethical decision-making in their professional lives.

In addition, scholars have highlighted the role of writing in fostering learning. Fry and Villagomez (2012) show that writing-to-learn practices offer important pedagogical benefits by fostering reflection, metacognitive awareness, and student engagement, even if they do not directly improve test scores. Their study highlights that the value of writing lies in its ability to help students make sense of complex material and connect it to their personal experiences.

The review of existing literature shows that writing in higher education is often used for two main purposes: first, as a means of demonstrating knowledge through general academic assignments, and second, as a tool for professional socialization through discipline-specific tasks.¹ However, there is limited research on how writing-to-learn practices, beyond report writing and reflective essays, can be used to enrich business courses. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to explore how the integration of diverse writing-based practices can increase the effectiveness of teaching business ethics and management. In particular, the study will focus on how professors can use Institute for Writing and Thinking (IWT) strategies to foster effective learning environments. *The main research question is: How can IWT writing-based practices be used by professors in business ethics and management courses to foster effective learning?*

The objectives of the study include:

- 1 To explore the potential of writing-to-learn strategies as pedagogical tools that complement experiential methods in business ethics teaching.
- 2 To develop practical guidance for business professors on how to adapt IWT writing-based practices into management courses in a sustainable and effective way.
- 3 To evaluate the impact of IWT writing practices on students' ability to connect theory with personal experience, engage in ethical reasoning, and participate actively in business ethics discussions.

2 METHODOLOGY

This study is designed as a reflective, practice-based study of the integration of IWT practices into a business ethics course. The methodology combines elements of action research and self-reflection, since the author analyzes and reflects on her own teaching practices, student responses, and classroom dynamics over several

years of teaching. The study was conducted in American University of Central Asia, School of Entrepreneurship and Business Administration, where the author works as Assistant Professor and teaches business ethics courses mainly for second and third-year business students.

3 LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 TEACHING PEDAGOGIES OF BUSINESS ETHICS & OTHER MANAGEMENT CLASSES

The traditional teaching approach puts the professor into the center of the classroom. The professor is a channel of delivery of the information and knowledge while students are passive receivers of it.² But there is another approach which centers students and the role of professors is facilitation and creation of an open learning environment. This transforms students into active learners as they are engaged and empowered. This method is considered to be more productive, active and engaging.³

Many scholars and educators argue that a business ethics course involves not only the study of various theories, but also the application and experience of different situations – along with their personal interpretation and application – which will be unique for each student due to factors such as education, age, cultural differences, traditions, and so on. Since topics of ethics are controversial and usually there is no uniform answer for them, one of the main roles of the educator is effective and efficient class facilitation. There are different approaches and methodologies on business ethics teaching; however, there is a common agreement that the learning process is enhanced when professors apply experiential learning and student-centered methods and foster open, trustful environments in class.⁴

Sims and Felton (2006) in their article “Designing and Delivering Business Ethics Teaching and Learning” emphasize that writing plays a central role in business ethics education because it enables students to connect ideas, experiences, and ethical dilemmas in ways that foster reflection and dialogue. They note that writing tasks not only deepen students’ self-awareness but also integrate theoretical knowledge with real-world practice, thereby strengthening ethical reasoning. Among the specific exercises they recommend are reflective journals, in which students record their reactions to class sessions, readings, and personal experiences; short written assignments that focus on personal, interpersonal, group, or organizational ethical issues; and writing tasks used as springboards for in-class discussions. These activities help students explore their values, confront ethical dilemmas, and develop the ability to articulate their perspectives clearly and crit-

ically, while also providing instructors with valuable insights to guide classroom dynamics and discussions.

Sims (2002) highlights that reflective writing, whether through journals, reports, or structured debriefings, is essential in business ethics courses because it transforms experiential activities into deeper ethical learning. Writing provides students with the means to articulate their values, analyze dilemmas, and connect theory with real-world practice, thereby reinforcing ethics education as an active, student-centered process.

Zhu (2004) conducted a systematic analysis of writing assignments in business programs and found that, alongside traditional academic genres, students are required to perform business-specific genres such as case analyses, reports, and proposals. These assignments not only develop analytical and rhetorical skills but also function as a means of professional socialization, requiring students to address authentic audiences and adopt practitioner roles. This study underscores the gap between generic EAP (English for Academic Purposes) writing instruction and the complex, problem-solving-oriented writing required in business education, highlighting the need to integrate professional genres into academic writing pedagogy.

Reflective writing has been shown to play a critical role in fostering deep learning and knowledge transfer in business education. Ono and Ichii (2019), in their study of undergraduate business students, demonstrate that scaffolded reflective writing assessments enable students to move beyond surface-level understanding towards “making meaning” and applying insights to personal and professional contexts. Using Moon’s (1999) map of learning and the DIEP (Describe, Interpret, Evaluate, Plan) structure, they found that incremental reflective assignments helped students develop critical thinking, logical reasoning, and academic writing skills while also enhancing their confidence in applying course concepts to real-world business practice. However, they also note that reflective writing remains underutilized in business curricula, often confined to isolated courses rather than integrated across programs, which limits its potential impact. Their findings underscore the value of writing not only as an assessment tool but also as a pedagogical practice that cultivates transferable skills and bridges theory with professional application.

However, most studies concentrate on established genres (case analyses, reports, proposals) or on reflective journals connected to experiential activities. There is still limited research on how alternative forms of writing exercises such as low-stakes writing (LSW), collaborative writing tasks, or other innovative approaches might further contribute to business ethics pedagogy. This gap points to the need for more systematic inquiry into how varied writing practices can foster critical thinking, ethical sensitivity, and student engagement in business ethics education.

3.2 WHY LOW-STAKES WRITING (LSW)?

Peter Elbow distinguishes between two kinds of writing: high-stakes and low-stakes writing. The aim of the highstakes writing is to produce meaningful, well-structured, beautifully written pieces of writing. Low-stakes writing on the other hand is not about production of high-quality texts, but it is meant “to get students to think, learn, and understand more of the course material”. LSW such as Freewrites, Process Writing, journals, or informal reflections encourage students to explore ideas in their own language without fear of evaluation. Research shows that such writing helps students connect more deeply with course concepts.⁵ Low-stakes writing also provides instructors with valuable insights into how students understand and relate course material to their own experiences, while at the same time motivating students to stay current with readings and class discussions. Numerous researches on writing-to-learn pedagogies revealed that writing improves the learning process. The mental activities involved in writing can support better understanding and discovery of new ideas within a discipline, and help students move beyond surface-level memorization toward meaningful learning and application in different disciplines.⁶ Thus, frequent informal writing is not only a tool for individual reflection but also a practical strategy to sustain participation and learning across the course. Writing is not merely a vehicle for displaying knowledge but a process through which students actively construct and deepen their understanding.

Recent research also highlights the role of LSW in business education. Leon (2020), in a study of MBA courses, shows that LSW assignments can foster student engagement, knowledge transfer, and deep comprehension typically associated with high-stakes assignments. Importantly, students in upper-level, non-writing majors responded positively. For instructors, well-designed low-stakes prompts proved accessible and sustainable, offering a way to integrate writing without creating perceptions of “busy work” for students or excessive grading burdens for faculty.⁷

As it is believed that LSW low-stakes writing is one of the powerful tools which can be used in business ethics and other management classes to improve the learning journey of students, this research project will explore how these practices transformed pedagogy at my classes and lead to better performance and motivation of students.

4 CAPSTONE PROJECT: INTEGRATION OF IWT WRITING-BASED TEACHING PRACTICES

The specificity of teaching business ethics lies in the fact that in real life, people – including corporate leaders – often make decisions guided by ethical and moral norms, which cannot always be classified simply as right or wrong. Accordingly, the main goal of teaching this subject is not the memorization of rules and theories, but rather the development of ethical, analytical, and critical thinking. The role of the instructor is therefore to support students in this process, rather than imposing personal norms and values.

At the very beginning of my teaching experience I was using a mainly conventional teacher-centered approach, where the aim was transfer of knowledge from me to my students. It is a highly adaptable approach that can be effectively applied across many subjects. Being a traditional instructor, I was using mainly PowerPoint presentations to lecture students on ethical theories, approaches, emerging issues, different scandals in the corporate world, etc. Lectures were followed by some activities, which were mainly quizzes and a limited number of case studies. Students also were assigned to do group presentations on famous corporations; to analyze and present ethical issues that companies were facing. However, I was understanding that this approach did not produce a lot of effect. I was dissatisfied with my teaching methods and with how engaged students were during class. Students felt themselves bored and I personally was seeking different teaching approaches to improve class involvement, make students feel engaged, and motivate them to study and, at the same time, help them in developing their critical thinking and analytical skills. That's why creating an active, open and engaging environment was a priority for me as a professor. After learning more about student-centered and experiential learning approaches thanks to professional development programs designed by IWT, I realized how teaching could be diverse and multifaceted. Gradually I started changing my pedagogy and class structures to create a student-centered environment in the classroom.

Some of the powerful methods which helped me redesign my course were writing exercises and practices such as Private Freewriting, Loop Writing, Process Writing, Writing in the Zones, Dialectical Notebooks, etc., which I learned during my journey in the CLASP Fellows Program.

Writing assignments in my course are not intended to instill a fixed pattern of thinking, but to create conditions in which students can reflect, analyze, evaluate, and learn to make independent decisions. One key criterion for such learning is a trusting, open, and participatory environment that allows students to engage in self-reflection, share personal experiences, and critically challenge their own values.

Below I provide analysis on how my teaching approach evolved over four years of teaching business ethics class. I present the structure of several classes from my first year of teaching and show how they changed after I introduced experiential and IWT writing exercises into the coursework.

4.1 TOPIC 1: STAKEHOLDERS, CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY (CSR), AND CORPORATE GOVERNANCE.

Class structure and activities before introduction of active learning and IWT practices.

Duration of class is 75 minutes.

Lecture on definitions of stakeholders, CSR and corporate governance. Presentation of definitions, and why effective CSR is important for a company. Class exercises including short videos and short case considerations with class, when students are asked to read the case and, together with the professor, analyze it.

Class content and activities after introduction of active learning and IWT practices.

Two classes with a duration of 75 minutes each.

Loop Writing

Prompt 1 When you hear the phrase “Corporate Social Responsibility,” what comes to mind? Write down any words, images, or examples.

Prompt 2 Think back to the articles you read. What did the authors emphasize about CSR? List key responsibilities, principles, or examples that stayed with you.

Prompt 3 Now, combine your personal ideas and the article insights into your own clear definition of CSR. Aim for one to two sentences, as if your definition appeared in a textbook.

Group Work Students are asked to share their definition with classmates, using flipcharts to write down/draw common definitions of CSR with examples. Students present the collaborative group work during the class.

Real case analysis and presentation

Students are divided into four to five groups (depending on the class size), and assigned cases on real company CSR activities. Cases represent notable (?) failed CSR campaigns. In groups, students are invited to read cases, analyze them and present CSR activities of assigned companies, identify pros and cons and explain why the company decided to concentrate on that CSR strategy.

After presentation/discussion of different types of CSR activities, roots of their failures or effectiveness are discussed with students. The aim of the discussion is

to identify how the CSR campaign of the company should be tailored to be successful and beneficial.

The topic ends with Process Writing, as follows.

Process Writing

Prompt Describe how your understanding of Corporate Social Responsibility evolved during today's activities. Start with what you thought CSR meant before class, and then explain how the loop writing, group work, and case analysis shaped or challenged your thinking. End with how you would now define CSR and why.

4.2 TOPIC 2: FINANCIAL CRISIS OF 2008

Class structure and activities before introduction of active learning and IWT practices.

Homework assigned before the topic consideration: Scientific article assigned to read about the financial crisis of 2008. Video from YouTube on the financial crisis. In addition, groups of students are assigned a presentation of the financial crisis of 2008 where they need to explain what happened in 2008, the roots of the crisis, and its consequences.

Group presentation is followed by in-class oral discussion of the crisis.

Class content and activities after introduction of active learning and IWT practices.

Two classes with a duration of 75 minutes each.

Before the class, students are asked to watch *Margin Call* (2011) directed by J.C. Chandor and *Big Short* (2015) directed by Adam McKay. During watching the movies students are asked to take notes of dialogues that stand out for them. The writing exercise is to write down the exact quote or scene and its timestamp if possible.

Also, students are invited to read an article written by J. Stiglitz on the financial crisis 2008, which will be presented by an assigned group of students during the class.

Class starts with explanation and discussion of the financial crisis of 2008 and followed by the class activities such as the Dialectical Notebook shown on the following page.

Dialectical Notebook

Prompt for Writer (Initial)

Write down a quote/scene that puzzles or disturbs you. What questions does the scene/quote raise about responsibility, leadership, or morality? Explore why it feels puzzling to you.

Prompt for Responder 1

Read what your peer wrote and complicate the thinking of the writer OR push written ideas further with follow-up questions.

Prompt for Responder 2

Read what Writer and Responder 1 have written. Add a short response that does two things:

- 1 Acknowledge their main point(s): summarize what you see as the key insight or question.
- 2 Extend the conversation by adding a new perspective, example, or question that hasn't been raised yet.

Prompt for Writer (Process)

Return to your own page and read the conversation that unfolded. Write in the Process column:

- 1 What surprised you about your peers' responses?
- 2 What new ideas did you gain about ethical leadership and the financial crisis of 2008 from this dialogue?
- 3 What questions do you still have about the film or the crisis?

Students are invited to share their Process Writing in groups.

After the discussion of the Stiglitz article and its link to the movies watched, students are asked to do Writing in the Zones. This exercise is assigned as homework for the next class.

Writing in the Zones is one of the powerful exercises which helps students to analyze the text. By dividing a text into several zones (up to 8 zones) zones, which in general help to describe, analyze, and reflect on the text, students learn to systematically deconstruct written material. In my particular course, it helps to understand another point of view on the crisis and consider pros and cons of how it was resolved.

5 REFLECTION ON PROJECT OUTCOMES

As a result of revising my teaching pedagogy and incorporating new approaches, including individual and collaborative writing exercises, group presentations, and discussions, my business ethics course has evolved significantly. Looking back, I realize that shifting from traditional pedagogy to student-centered and experiential learning was initially a major challenge. It required considerable time and effort to rethink my class plans, structures, and activities. For this reason, I began with only a few topics that I believed would be most engaging for students. The transformation of the course did not occur in a single semester but unfolded gradually over four semesters. The current version is still a work in progress, and I continue to revise and improve it.

At the same time, end of semester evaluations that I receive at the end of every semester also were improving over these four semesters. My overall rating as professor at the first semester of teaching was 4.2, in the most recent semester it was 4.48, while the average rating of my department is 4.28 (including my rating). In total, my department has full-time 13 professors. In the last evaluations, I received such feedback as:

- “Begimai Abdraeva conducts classes in a cheerful and intriguing way, it’s fun to come there.”
- “Everything is great the way it is supposed to be.”
- “Great teacher and great method of teaching.”

Revisions of the business ethics courses were followed by such benefits as:

- 1 Increased student involvement. Before, students were not fully involved in class discussion. I have observed that low-stakes writing encouraged them to voice personal views, connect ethical theories with real-world cases, and engage more deeply in group discussions. Most of the students are engaged in collaborative writing exercises where they have their own opinions, learn to listen to classmates and produce collaborative projects.
- 2 The integration of informal writing created a trusting and participatory classroom climate. Students felt safer expressing uncertainty or exploring complex ethical questions in writing before sharing aloud.
- 3 A changed environment helps students to learn better, which is reflected in their final grades and grades for exams. Four semesters before, the average midterm grade was 12 out of 20 (60%); during the last semester it was 17 out of 20 (85%).

This suggests that increased performance and engagement leads to better grades and in general understanding of the topics discussed.

I believe that IWT writing practices helped me a lot in the development of my personal pedagogical skills and contributed to the learning process of my students. Based on my transformation, I know that these practices can be successfully integrated into other Business disciplines. I developed a short guide based on my own experience for professors who also want to use IWT writing practices in their own classes. The guide is presented in Appendix 1.

6 CONCLUSION

The transformation of my business ethics course demonstrates that integrating IWT practices into management education can create meaningful change for both students and instructors. Moving from a traditional lecture-based model to one that emphasizes experiential learning and writing-to-learn activities has not been an easy or immediate process. It required gradual adjustments, sustained reflection, and a willingness to experiment with new methods. Yet, the results show clear benefits: students engage more actively with complex ethical issues, connect theory to their personal and professional experiences, and develop stronger critical and analytical skills.

Low-stakes IWT writing exercises, in particular, proved to be powerful tools for fostering reflection, encouraging dialogue, and lowering the barriers often associated with high-stakes writing. It helped students to improve their class performance, enhance group work and presentation skills. After every class conducted, looking at how students are interested and engaged, I see the power of student-centered education and its importance especially for such classes as business ethics, the teaching of which is questioned by some experts.

Ultimately, this project suggests that writing-to-learn practices, when integrated alongside experiential and student-centered methods, can significantly enhance the teaching of business ethics and other management courses. They help shift learning from the passive reception of information toward active exploration, dialogue, and meaning-making. The course remains a work in progress, but the experience confirms that business schools can indeed teach ethics more effectively when they embrace reflective, participatory, and writing-based pedagogies.

NOTES

- 1 Gimenez, 2017
- 2 Tang, 2023
- 3 Tang, 2023
- 4 Lampe, 1997, Caldwell-O'Keefe & Recla, 2020
- 5 Elbow, 1997
- 6 Van Dijk, van Gelderen, & Kuiken, 2022
- 7 Leon, 2020

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APPENDICES

- 1 Guidance on how to integrate IWT Pedagogical practices into business classes

1 SHORT GUIDANCE ON HOW TO INTEGRATE IWT PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES INTO BUSINESS CLASSES

Start with the most interesting and intriguing topics of the course. Revise your class structure, decrease the volume of lecturing and think about questions that you would like to discuss with students. Find scientific articles on your questions or class topic. At the beginning try to use short articles up to 10 pages.

Introduction of writing exercises is better to start with Private Freewriting. Explain to students why writing will be used during the classes and ask them to bring a notebook and pens to every class.

Integrate writing exercises into several topics first. Do not try to revise all your classes in one semester, since it requires a lot of analytical work and self-reflection. Starting with several topics will give you time and space to evaluate how your exercises worked and how they can be improved in the future. I would also advise to keep a small journal where you can write your reflections on new class activities, notes on what was successful, and ideas on what to change to make them better and more efficient.

Use short, low-stakes writing to activate prior knowledge. At the beginning of the class, use loop writing or Focused Freewriting prompts that invite students to connect their personal ideas with the assigned readings or cases. This helps them bring their own experiences into the discussion and prepares them for deeper analysis.

Include collaborative writing for concept building. Instead of presenting ready definitions and concepts, ask students to develop them on their own, first individually and then in groups. After Freewriting, let them share their definitions, insights, or examples in small groups and write a collective version (for example, a group definition of CSR). Such activities build ownership of ideas and highlight multiple perspectives.

Connect writing to experiential activities. Combine case studies, films, or simulations with structured writing tasks such as Dialectical Notebooks or Writing in the Zones. These techniques give students an opportunity to record personal reactions, raise questions, and follow how their thinking develops through dialogue with peers.

Make reflection a regular part of the learning cycle. At the end of each topic, ask students to do Process Writing where they explain how their understanding has

changed. This activity helps them consolidate learning and also gives the instructor valuable insights into students' reasoning and possible misconceptions.

Think about feedback. Students value instructor comments on journals and short writing tasks, but it can be very time-consuming. To make it manageable, you can give detailed feedback only to some entries each week, or use peer feedback as an additional tool.