Essay

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Sport and Recreation Cooperative Education Projects: A Medium for Teaching and Learning Ethical Principles

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Educators working with cooperative education programs have a responsibility to assist learners in making best choices within an ethical practice context and to teach learners how to deal with the complex issues encountered in their workplace. In this paper we describe strategies to assist students develop, through their own experience, an understanding of the principles necessary to undertake projects in an ethical manner in the sport and recreation industry. These strategies also may be appropriate for cooperative students undertaking projects in other areas such as nursing, teaching or the social sciences where relationships with people are an important part of the learning experience. (*Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education, 2004, 5(1),45 - 49)*.

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Educators working with cooperative education programs have a responsibility to assist learners in making the best choices within an ethical practice context, and to teach learners how to deal with the complex issues encountered in their workplace. In many disciplines, including sport and recreation, human participants are an integral part of teaching strategies, and student learning. While ethics in relation to human participation in research is frequently discussed, less consideration has been given to the ethical issues related to student experiential learning opportunities. In this paper we explore the ethical dimensions of the sport and recreation projects conducted as part of the cooperative education program in our university. We describe the strategies used to assist the students learn key ethical principles and maintain ethical standards during their experience within the industry.

The cooperative education experience can provide a range of teaching opportunities which help students learn how to handle ethical dilemmas and practice issues. Ethical dilemmas are described by McFarlane, Ricks and Field (1999) as situations where there are two or more choices in which there are embedded conflicting values. The choices may be based on a conflict between defined rules/standards and personal values, or a conflict between two personal values. Sometimes practitioners feel they are in an ethical dilemma, but are in fact experiencing a practice issue. Practice issues can be solved by knowledge (e.g., professional guidelines) whereas an ethical dilemma is a situation where guidelines to cover the situation do not and cannot exist (McFarlane, Ricks & Field, 1999).

Most professional undergraduate programs incorporate ethics teaching into the curriculum. The focus of many of these courses is generally on moral responsibility and decision-making (Tad, 1994). The courses may provide students with an opportunity to anticipate the moral dilemmas they could confront in practice, to hear ethical views of other people and develop a framework of moral understanding (Munro, 1996). Students may be introduced to the major ethical theories, taught either as a separate subject, or integrated within other papers. It has been suggested that moral development, linked to how individuals approach and resolve ethical issues, continues throughout formal education (Bebeau, 1991; Bird, 1996).

While a traditional teaching approach is valuable in terms of theoretical understanding, many students may feel the material has little relevance to their professional lives. In a study of first-year medical, dental and nursing students the majority considered that teaching ethics was important, but

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wanted a course that was practically-based that will help them cope with the situations they are likely to encounter in their professional practice, rather than a course centring on intellectual debate about definitions and concepts of morality (Nolan & Smith, 1995).

Case studies are a common teaching strategy in many applied ethics courses. This method allows students the opportunity to work through dilemmas and provide a sense of reality to what can be a highly abstract subject. Students frequently comment that they find the case study approach effective as they are able to focus on the issues and develop their own ideas and analytical skills (Tad, 1994).

The challenge of teaching students about ethical conduct in project work has been addressed only briefly in the literature. A literature search in the area of sport and recreation suggested that in these disciplines ethics is usually discussed in relation to practical conduct of teachers or students (Spencer, 1996), rather than in relation to education or research. In other areas of education acknowledgement is made of the advantages of experiential learning in relation to ethical conduct, especially in relation to research training (Fischer & Zigmond, 2001; Nolan & Markert, 2002).

However, in the scientific community educators traditionally believe that their responsibility is to teach scientific concepts and principles and to train students in laboratory techniques. It is expected that professional values and ethical standards are learned through observing good examples (Bird, 1996). More recently it has been acknowledged that there is a need to address responsible and ethical conduct explicitly as ethical issues arise at various points in the research process and there are a wide range of ethical concerns associated with the application of science. These critical aspects of the profession are not readily learned from observation alone and must be addressed consciously by the educators in this discipline. Reid (2002) suggests that tertiary educators not only in science but also in engineering have a social responsibility to include content within courses to assist students understand their ethical responsibilities.

In any practice-based discipline research will largely be practice-based. As a result any discussion about ethical conduct in the field will have implications for student project work and research. Useful discussions have been put forward by several authors about the ethics of the recreation and leisure industry and the need to teach students about ethical comportment, (e.g., Havens, 1985; Henderson & Bedini, 1989; Laney, 1986). For example, it is recognized that physical and sport education students must be made aware of the opportunities they will later have as coaches and physical educators to promote sportsmanship, ethical decision making skills and moral character development. The importance of experiential learning as a means of integrating ethical concepts in the field has also been recognized (Olivier, 1998).

The focus of students in sport and recreation is largely action-oriented. Therefore our strategy is to focus the teaching of ethical principles around a relevant practical topic. This approach involves students learning about ethics in relation to a real-life applied project undertaken as part of their cooperative education experience.

Cooperative Education in the Bachelor of Sport & Recreation at Auckland University of Technology

The Bachelor of Sport & Recreation (BSR) at Auckland University of Technology (AUT) is a three-year program designed to prepare students for careers in the areas of sports science, sports management, recreation, fitness, physical education or outdoor tourism. During their final year the BSR students complete 600 hours of 'cooperative education' where work and learning are integrated through the development of partnerships between the university, the student, and a sport and recreation organization.

Placements, called 'cooperative education' papers, are structured so that the student spends two days a week during the academic year within one sport and recreation organization. During this time they must complete a minimum of 350 hours of work activities. The remaining 250 hours allows time for the students to critically analyze and reflect on their experiences as well as to design and carry out a project, which is of interest to the student and is beneficial to their organization. Industry placements include national or regional sports organizations (e.g., New Zealand Soccer, Auckland Rugby Football Union), community recreation and fitness centres, outdoor tourism operators, schools (physical education departments or sports coordinators), regional sports trusts and sport performance centres. The students are supported in their learning experience by an industry supervisor, and an academic supervisor from the university.

The sport and recreation industry is very diverse and this is reflected in the wide range of projects that are carried out. The topic for the project is generally initiated by the organization and carried out by the student under supervision. Due to the nature of the industry a large number of these projects involve human participants. Students may design and implement physical activity or training programs within a school or the community. Some projects may include market research, customer satisfaction surveys or program evaluations. The most common methods of data collection for these types of projects include focus groups, questionnaires and observations. Other projects include reliability and validity studies for equipment or fitness testing protocols with athletes or members of the community.

The projects in which the students are engaged are useful both for their learning and for the organizations where they are working. Research has highlighted the influence of the project work in developing communication skills, time management, research skills, problem-solving skills and a range of technical skills (Fleming & Eames, 2004). A recent survey within the sports industry has pointed to the benefit of these projects and found that they are considered as "value added" work for the organization (Ferkins, 2002, p. 32). The projects undertaken all involve some systematic data collection, but, like student projects in many other areas of tertiary education, the work is not a comprehensive

research study. As such they fall into a 'grey area' in terms of ethical review by the university.

University Ethical Review

New Zealand human ethics committees in the institutional setting (universities) for sport studies programs have been set up to meet the guidelines of the Health Research Council of New Zealand (most recently, Guidelines on Ethics in Health Research, October 2002) and the Operational Standard for Ethics Committees published by the Ministry of Health (2002). The background to such documents is situated in the history of ethics committee developments in New Zealand following an ethics scandal at Auckland's National Women's Hospital (Coney, 1988).

While the national standards and guidelines call for institutional review of research, most universities in New Zealand and Australia also recognize the need for teaching projects involving human participants to be subject to ethical review. Thus the human research committee at AUT specifies both research and teaching projects as within its umbrella for ethical review. The cooperative projects that form the subject of this paper were among the first to be put forward for such scrutiny by the ethics committee. Our roles as authors reflect our respective roles as lecturer (and overall supervisor for the projects) and ethics committee member nominated to oversee the projects over a two year period.

The purpose of ethical committee review is to ensure the safety of participants and researchers (and in this case also students and organizations) involved in the projects. Given the educative nature of the projects it is also important that the students learn about ethics, and that standards are maintained during the design and implementation of the projects.

Teaching and Learning Ethical Principles

Students learn through observing good practice so it is important that cooperative educators model responsible and ethical conduct. Therefore a system was devised in conjunction with the university ethics committee to enable approval for class projects involving human participation, with an application made by the course coordinator. The process in respect of the cooperative education projects is outlined below.

Phase 1- Paper Approval

To enable the approval of the large number of projects (68 in 2003, 60 in 2004) a generic application was made to the AUT Ethics Committee (AUTEC). As a result delegated authority was given to liaise directly with a nominated representative regarding the approval of individual projects, progress and any problematic issues.

Phase 2- Student Learning

Regardless of the approach to be used in undertaking their projects students need to be aware that ethical decision making exists. Students must be able to recognize the potential ethical problems that may arise throughout the entire process from the conception of the initial project idea through to presentation of the final report.

To assist the students gain an understanding of the key ethical principles that are related to human subject participation, students are introduced, during workshops, to the following principles which are considered appropriate for most cooperative projects, (AUTEC, 2002).

- Informed and Voluntary Consent

Participation must be voluntary. Enough relevant information should be provided in an understandable way to enable the participant to make a reasoned decision. The information should be in written format, with the participant given time to make a decision without pressure or coercion. The right of individuals to decline to participate or to withdraw at any time without having to provide reasons must be respected. Consent (preferably in writing) must be gained before beginning data collection.

- Right of Privacy and Confidentiality

The identity of participants is to be protected at all stages of a project. All information collected must be kept confidential and secure and only used for the purpose by which it was collected. Provision must be made for participants to access their personal information and the completed results.

- Provision for Dealing with Adverse Consequences or Risk

It is not acceptable to expose individuals to unnecessary risk. Risks could include such things as pain, stress, fatigue, or embarrassment. Unavoidable risk must be balanced against the possible benefits. Appropriately qualified people must be readily available for any projects involving physical or psychological risk.

- Social and Cultural Sensitivity

The procedures should respect the social and cultural sensitivity of participants. Meeting the language preferences in the provision of information is particularly important. Consultation with Māori (indigenous New Zealanders[1]) is a vital step during the development of a project that involves either Māori or a topic of particularly relevant to Māori.

- Research Adequacy

Projects must meet minimum standards of adequacy and must have clear goals. The design must make it possible to achieve these goals. The project must not be trivial, but

[1] Māori are indigenous New Zealanders who have certain rights, such as consultation about matters affecting them, specified under New Zealand's founding treaty document signed with the British colonists.

contribute to the advancement of knowledge to an extent that warrants cost to the participants. The contribution to the student's education is considered.

- Accuracy and Ownership of Research Results

Projects must clearly acknowledge the contributors. For quantitative studies, results must be able to be reproduced within specified limits of error.

The knowledge that the students have gained from the workshop sessions can then be applied in a practical context in the design and implementation of their projects. This strategy enables the students to directly relate theory to practice therefore enhancing student learning of these key ethical principles.

Phase 3 – Project Design and Approval Process

The initial project idea is conceived through discussion between the three partners in the cooperative experience, which is the student, the organization and the academic supervisor. The student is first exposed to ethical decision making when deciding whether the topic is appropriate. The student may decide not to pursue a topic if the project may invade the privacy of participants or require a large time commitment of the participants that is not justified by the benefits. The student must also consider whether the project is feasible within the time frame available, they have or can develop the necessary skills to undertake the project and whether the project makes a contribution to the organization.

To reinforce student learning of the key principles and to ensure that students have considered how to minimize any ethical issues that may arise, the student has to complete an ethical approval form designed specifically for the BSR cooperative education projects. The approval form includes the following information:

1. The aims and objectives
2. Relevant background to place the project in perspective and to allow the significance to the industry to be assessed
3. The strategies that will be used to meet the project objectives
4. Participant information – who they are, how many and how they will be recruited
5. Any risks and how they will be minimized, and
6. How privacy & confidentiality will be maintained.

The students are also required to submit a participant information sheet and a written consent form for all projects involving human participants, except for anonymous questionnaires. If an anonymous questionnaire is being used then this must also be approved to ensure sufficient relevant information has been provided to the participant. In addition, the students complete a checklist confirming that they have considered the key ethical principles, as outlined earlier, in relation to their projects.

In most cases the nominated ethics representative then grants ethical approval and the student can then proceed with the project. The project is also assessed to ensure that it is appropriate for the time frame and academic level of the paper. The approval process, which was negotiated with the university ethics committee, has enabled the review of a wide range of projects within the time constraints of the cooperative education experience. However, any projects that have significant risk to the participants or involve tissue or body fluids are still referred to the university ethics committee for final approval.

Teaching and Learning Outcomes

The aim of the cooperative modules is to provide students with the opportunity to apply knowledge and gain industry experience. The project allows the student to explore the relationship between academic studies and practice as well as developing the capabilities of teamwork and problem solving. It also assists the students to gain an understanding of the research process within the industry context. The opportunity for a student to carry out projects is a major incentive for organizations to take on cooperative education students and is a 'win–win' situation for all parties concerned.

Not only have the students learned about the ethical dimensions of project work in the industry, but they have modeled this learning back to their industry partners. In turn, a number of useful projects have been completed with full recognition of the rights of participants being adhered to. It is hoped that the students will have gained a number of transferable skills in terms of ethical behavior and ethical reasoning, while developing their competence to design and carry out a practical and relevant project within their interest area. Another outcome has been the growing awareness amongst teaching staff of the ethical dimensions of many teaching and assessment tasks, and modeling of a process of ethical review for projects that are 'not quite research', which is now being followed by lecturers in other areas of the Faculty of Health at AUT.

Conclusion

As students do not learn ethical conduct from observation alone, the strategies described in this paper have been developed to enable students to gain an understanding of the principles necessary to design and implement projects in an ethical manner in the sport and recreation industry. Cooperative educators not only in sport and recreation, but in many other discipline areas such as science, engineering, teaching and the health professions, have a responsibility to assist learners by addressing ethical conduct explicitly within their courses. It is suggested that workshops be included within cooperative education programs to introduce students to the ethical principles related to project work. In addition students should be required to complete an ethical approval process for cooperative projects involving people. Students are then able to apply their understanding of ethical principles directly within the industry context and to gain transferable skills in terms of ethical behavior. These strategies for teaching and learning ethical principles may be appropriate for any programs where relationships with people are an important part of the learning experience.

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