

## USING AN ELECTRONIC BULLETIN BOARD IN TEACHING BUSINESS ETHICS IN PALESTINE

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**خلاصة:** إن خبرات تدريس إدارة الأعمال باستعمال لوحة نشرات إلكترونية في إنكلترا قد تم وصفها ومناقشتها بقصد تطوير دليل نافع واعتبارات لأفضل تطبيقات ممكنة في الجامعات الفلسطينية . يكون التمرکز في المقام الأول على ورشة عمل لوحة نشرات إلكترونية في موضوع من مساق الأخلاق والقانون في التجارة الإلكترونية من المقرر التعليمي للامتخرجين من الدرجة الجامعية. لقد تم مناقشة قضايا اتصال توسيط- الكومبيوتر في سياق مساق علم أخلاق إدارة الأعمال. تتضمن معايير المتطلبات الأساسية في نجاح استعمال اتصال توسيط-الكومبيوتر على قدرة استعمال التقنية ، والمشاركة الفعالة في استعمال لوحة الإعلانات في أغراض علوم التدريس. استنتج على أن استعمال لوحة الإعلانات الإلكترونية يمكنها ، تلائم وسائل أخرى من تعلم وتدريس المقرر التعليمي في علم أخلاق إدارة الأعمال التي يتطلب من كليات إدارة الأعمال في فلسطين تقريرها من أجل خلق الإحساس بمكانة السوق التقديري ، شأن الأغورا الإغريقية .

**ABSTRACT:** The experiences of teaching business using electronic bulletin board in England are described and discussed with a view to developing useful guidelines and consideration of a best practice possible at universities in Palestine. The focus is primarily on an electronic bulletin board workshop for a module of ‘Legal and Ethical Context’ in an eCommerce undergraduate degree course in England. The issues of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in the context of Business Ethics course are also discussed. The pre-requisite criteria for a successful use of CMC would include the ability to use the technology, active participation in the use of the board, and the efficient application of the board for pedagogic purposes. I conclude that the use of electronic bulletin boards could well be suitable for other learning and teaching media on business ethics courses that business colleges in Palestine have to adopt in order to create a sense of virtual market place, a Greek agora.

### INTRODUCTION

The contemporary nature of the degree course of eCommerce in England has initiated original and imaginative approaches to learning and teaching. The inclusion of an electronic mechanism in all aspects of the course is an innovative feature of the degree course. The traditional means of communication such as a physical notice board, pigeonholes and comparatively recent addition of email that are a commonly used in Palestine, are still operative plus an electronic notice board for eCommerce general messages. Furthermore, every module that students take has a dedicated electronic bulletin board that complements traditional lecture, seminar, tutorial and workshop delivery methods (Bennett, 1998; Robbins and DeCenzo, 2005).

The course delivery has appropriately a predisposition to computer-mediated communication (Loudon and Loudon, 206). The students are required to be information technology (IT) literate on joining the course and computer experts by the end. The level of compute skills in each cohort of 50 varied from sophisticated programming ability to active computer literate. This article is primarily concerned with ‘eCommerce in Legal and

Ethical Context' taught module in England, and in doing this I add to the body of knowledge on using CMC in teaching in general. Also, key intended and unintended consequences of introducing a bulletin board into a taught business ethics course (Herschel and Andrews, 1997; Alessi and Trollip, 2001).

The "information revolution", modern IT has pervaded most aspects of human life, though it has yet to find a place into an existing education system whereby IT removes the 'walls' of a typical classroom, bridging the gap between theory and practice, inducing active learning, and extending collaborative experiences (Albirini, 2007). CMCs have been rising in the higher education institutions in the United Kingdom context as a result of pressure on lecturers to increase numbers of students, to provide higher standards of teaching, and the freedom of mobility (Edwards and Clear, 2001). The developments of using CMSs in the last five to ten years are still generating the first batch of research and assessment of their use in education. Indeed, this uncertainty in their real use in teaching and learning exchange is also coupled in part to the rapidity of development and hype to all things remotely related to 'information superhighway'. Merrier and Dirks (1997) interestingly found that students opted for email rather than oral or other written communication, though only 56% of that survey sample had used email at the time and 44% were reporting preference for some thing they never used. It is a curious position to take, but it was possibly influenced by the desire to be modern, up-to-date, and contemporary. A more recent work has found that students who have actual email experience are reluctant to use email as a communication medium in their institution (Spence, 2002).

Merrier and Dirks (1997) categorized CMC into three main types: chat rooms, bulletin board, and email or electronic messaging. Technology helps therefore to define the kinds of communications that can take place. In the case of bulletin boards, it is very relevant to the synchronicity of the message, textual nature, and anonymity and possibly of archiving communication (Giva, 2000). The electronic bulletin boards are particularly enabled by synchronicity, in contrast to chat rooms. Edwards and Clear (2001) define asynchronous technology as normally text-based and there is time lapse between sending and receiving messages, so people can not communicate each other at the same time. As a result of that there is a great flexibility and opportunity for wider participation in discussions that can be conducted concurrently. This means that conversations started in the classroom can be continued on a bulletin board (Berryman, 1993). The bulletin boards can hence accommodate the often-nocturnal lifestyles of students trying to fit their academic, social and work-lives into a 24-hour day. In essence, the focus is on the medium of the message rather than face-to-face communication by virtue of the text-based nature of the discussion (Clarke, 1994). The 'personality' could though come through text messages of universally accepted symbols through an acceptable *modus operandi* that should be established from the beginning (Giva, 2000). The input data that can only be altered by the technical controller of the bulletin board are a permanent record. This may hinder some contributors whom others see as wrong or foolish, but "anonymity" makes lying very easy and difficult to detect (Hamelink, 2000). It is a bonus that earlier recorded data can be reviewed for those who are struggling to understand a 'conversation' on the board, and to catch up with other debates. The bulletin boards offer automatically a usual resource in terms of reflection on teaching, because it is unlikely that other forms like lectures, seminars, tutorial and verbal discussions are recorded in such detail at any chosen point in time

(Earle, 2002).

I present in this paper anonymous text from the bulleting board, and the entries have not been cleaned up in terms of grammar to sustain validity of the data (Gärdenfors, 2005).

The research was done as an opportunistic response to the ‘success’ of the bulletin board as part of the ‘eCommerce in Legal and Ethical Context’ (Barnes, Dworkin and Richards, 1994). Methodologically speaking, my approach was participant observation. It is worth noting that the presence of the technology and the information was automatically archived, was an enabler for this study. The bulletin board content was not manipulated in any form or shape.

### BULLETIN BOARD INTEGRATION

The bulletin board was part of the teaching and learning strategy for the module, and a host of issues were preconceived to go on the board. Therefore, in order the integration of the bulletin board to be a success, the teaching staff had to be enabled to use the technology effectively (Paul and Ward, 1996). The intention was to raise student’s consciousness of the topics discussed in the course, and to instigate e-debate mutual self-help learning (Jonassen et al, 2003). The eCommerce students were not inconsequential, but the bulletin board was for the students’ community at large to see many of the ethical and legal topics of CMCs, in action (Striebel, 1986). An exam question for the ethics component of the course where by ethical theories such as utilitarianism, Kantianism, discourse theory, virtue theory and ethics of care were referred to in the pedagogical aspect of the inclusion of the bulletin board (de George, 2006). I as a lecturer would not have been satisfied if any of my students had felt that s/he could not come to me to ask about any thing one-to-one, if they were having personal difficulties. There are obvious limits to this, but the bulletin board allowed the group to discuss and benefit from the answer that a face-to-face question in a lecturer’s office or via email would not have done (Bennett, 1999). This mechanism alleviated students’ challenge to move between campuses, and an added advantage to the lecturer who does not need to answer repeatedly same question. The bulletin board moderator has to be disciplined in responding regularly to the points raised. Otherwise, students will not come forward if their concerns are not taken up seriously. A response from the lecturer was thought of to be probably as the ‘last word’ on the matter, it failed to stop further debate. There was unusual disregard to the lecturer’s opinion, and this is unlike student’s behavior in the classroom. A student did not even realize that his acclaimed input was his lecture’s opinion!

In a classroom, the lecturer’s ‘voice’ is always clear - if only because it is the one at the front-, whereas the authority of the lecturer is lost in the electronic bulletin board that aimed primarily to prompt student-student discussion. For example,

#### **Message**

Title: Milton Friedman

Author: Student X

Date: 1/04 14:32

I would just like to ask what Milton Friedman thinks about charity organizations, as he believes that business are profit making organizations and that only governments should concern themselves with the well being of society. :-)

**Message**

Title: What does anyone else think?

Author: Lecturer X

Date: 5/04 17:28

Please write your answer on the bulletin board.

Lecturer's acknowledgement reassured the students that they are not talking to themselves in cyberspace. Also, it is necessary that lecturer intervenes to correct inaccuracy that may gain some status of validity by its remaining unchallenged.

The bulletin board was monitored, and there were on average ten posted emails per week over a thirteen-week semester. Although most students made at least one contribution, some were far more regular than contributors than others. A few never posted anything on the board at all and no enforced sanctions were taken against them, as there are no sanctions for non-attendance at lectures or seminars. The fact that the data is archived automatically on bulletin board, it is unfair to use that against students. The special features of CMC should not be abused without at least full students' awareness prior to being invited to use the medium (Alessi and Trollip, 2001). It is a moot point to question whether raising awareness for sanctions would improve or stifle it. Also, an active user of bulletin board in intellectual terms may in fact ever posted a message though read all the message and chatted orally about the contents with their peers, whereas a passive user maybe posted the odd superficial comment. It is more likely a reflection on the physically present but mentally absent student in the lecture hall, and the physically absent but intellectually engaged student who reads through independent learning. The moderator though has to be active participant in the bulleting board to steer pedagogical discussions forward in order of achieving a set of learning outcomes.

**Message**

Title: 'The Last Chicken'

Author: Lecturer X

Date: 1/04 14:32

It is nearly time for the butcher shop to close, and meat supplies at the counter are running low. A lady customer, who is frail and unable to see what she has come to the shop for, addresses the butcher: 'Do you have any free-range chicken left?' 'Yes madam' the butcher replies. He brings out his last chicken from beneath the counter. 'Will this one do?' The butcher say asks; 'it is not big enough, the lady replies'. The butcher returns the chicken out of sight again beneath the counter. He brings the same chicken out in a moment of inspiration, and says: 'what is about this one, madam?' 'Oh that is much better', replies, 'I'll take it'. Did the butcher act ethically?

**Message**

Title: Ethics

Author: Student X

Date: 5/04 16:01

I think the butcher acted unethically in his approach to selling the free-range chicken. He took advantage of the fact that the lady did not see the chicken in question. In my view, ethical egoism theory does not hold strong, because it classifies 'selfish act' as ethically right. I have been brought up to be honest, and I think the butcher could be still efficient by being honest and he would still sold the chicken because its size must not have been considerably different, since she was easily lied to. My religion is Islam and it regards fair trade as honorable and says that one should not deceive any one for self gain. So, I adopt this view in saying that the butcher was unethical in his ways.

Since religion had not part of the course, he students felt more able to reveal themselves via CMCs than face-to-face.

**Message**

Title: Ethics

Author: Student y

Date: 5/04 17:46

I find it intriguing that we are going as far as to say that the butcher was dishonest, I think that is a bit harsh. Unethical by some standards maybe dishonest I think not. My reasons are these, whether we like it or not the butcher is in the business of selling chickens, the best free-range chicken if he can, the right chickens to the right customers when possible, but when this is not possible all he can do is selling chickens to people who want them. If the lady had said is this the best chicken around and the butcher new that Ahmad up the road has the best chickens would it have been unethical for him to claim premium ownership and have said yes, or ethical for him to have said "to be honest Ahmad up the road has got better free-range chickens than me, but this is the best chicken I can afford". After the lady had left the butcher shop on her way to Ahmad with half of his customers in tow, would we be applauding the butcher' commendable integrity or laughing at his downright stupidity. I am not an egoist far from it, and I was brought up in the roman catholic religion, but I don't believe these have influenced my views, I prefer to think of myself as a realist, and I think the reality is, in business sometimes you will have to compromise your ethics in order to keep your business afloat. I mean come on, it's not like the chicken been rotten or any thing and he did not tell a lie.

A vociferous comment like that is the kind of discussion that often gets repressed in business ethics debate where students are keen to give a highly ethical stance that conforms with an expected socially desirable response (Clark, 1994). These students will be working in business where the most legitimate arguments are debated and commonly accepted as being ones such as of those students above. These views need airing somewhere in a business ethics course in a less staged debate, and the bulletin board seems to be an enabling medium. Also, the bulletin board gives students who have tendency to be quiet reserved in the classroom an outlet that they would otherwise not have until the point of written assessments (Earle, 2002).

The issue of legality of the butcher's actions is raised irrespective of whether they were ethical or not, because the linking of 'ethics' vignette and the legal component of the course is student real issue within relevant consumer right. It should be noted though that the bulletin board is an entity in the cyber space that can be hijacked from any where in the world (Schermerhorn Jr, 2002). Hence, publishing untrue material is not tight as such, because there is no way of verifying any identification that is claimed to be (Bainbridge, 2000). Defamation is a false statement that tends to damage someone's character or reputation (Atkin in *Sim V Stretch* [1936]; *Byrne v Deane* [1937]). The potential defamation for harm is vast on the Internet because its publication is worldwide compared to a particular newspaper (Bainbridge, 2000). Yet, the Internet Providers (IPs) would argues that they are a mere conduit and have no control over what is written in a website compared with a newspaper publisher; so that therefore they should have no responsibility. Hamelink (2000) argues that the Internet is seen as the ultimate bastion of freedom of expression, whereas Johnson (2000) argues fiercely against any liability in defamation because any control of free of expression on the Internet will interfere with democracy offline. Therefore, the possible implication of a higher education institute for bulleting board material could be vicariously liable for defamation. Also, issues such as breaches of copyright and trademark in the intellectual property rights area might arise (Bainbridge, 2006,p.14). The access of non-course members would give rise to potential risks. Not only

could a contributor to the bulleting board do so anonymously, there is the possibility of impression and plagiarism. The electronic tracing to an email does not prove indisputably that the address holder actually sent the message (Gotterbarn, 1999).

## DISCUSSION

The use of bulleting boards in teaching business ethics is recommended with some reservations. Hamelink (2000) notes that IT innovations do not create the functions of institution arrangements. For a successful inclusion of CMCs bulletin boards in particular, 'institutional arrangements' have to be in place such as a code of conduct guidelines, group size and makeup, and non-use of the bulleting board (Wigand, 1997). Many of the points made here are not specifically pertinent to business ethics courses, though bulletin boards are of particular use to discursive course such as business ethics where personal opinions matter (Acar, Apprele and Lowy, Jan 2001). It is the virtual (electronic) *agora* for free discussion and experience exchange which is very desirable in teaching business ethics and other similar subjects. It allows the exposing of ideas in the same way that a produce may be laid on a stole in a market place.

This is an approach that focuses on raising awareness of legitimacy of ethical consideration in business decision-making. I try not to advocate particular theories, or faith perspectives over others. I wanted though to concentrate on exposing ethical perspectives in business, because moral philosophy is a technique to clarify issues but not to solve problems (Raphael, 1994). This does not preclude that discussions are inappropriate in other business areas such as management and cost accounting or sales and marketing to reveal what could be very much personal beliefs (Clarke, 1994). It is merely an acknowledgment of a process of a holistic perspective challenge for personal and business lives, though students need to be comfortable with the asynchronous delivery technology (Edwards and Clear, 2001). Teaching staff should emphasize the bulletin board at every available contact time with students to keep reinforcing the message of how it can be used.

The bulletin board has much to offer students as an informal forum for non-hierarchical exchange, and I think it is a pity if it would be dampened down. It is not to stifle contribution, but to ensure mature, thoughtful, and fair participation (Robins and DeCenzo, 2005).

## CONCLUSION

I believe that business ethics should be about encouraging the drawing out of personal moral and faith perspectives. An electronic bulleting board is the medium for freedom of expression that may entice potentially offensive or bigoted comments too. If we are at Palestinian education institutions are not prepared to bring these things to the surface for discussion in business ethics, where else will our future business and management managers have the chance to debate the ethics of their peers?

Students are often overloaded with lectures, seminars, and leisure learning, assignments and examination revisions. But, bulleting boards should improve the learning experience for our students due to asynchronous nature of CMCs. It is not though a cheaper substitution for face-to-face contact teaching time. The need for offering flexible methods of teaching at high education institutions is of high priority order in Palestine to enhance

guided ethics learning and high teaching standards.

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