

Empathy and Interpersonal Mentalizing in Ethics Education: An Exercise with Graphic Novels

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Purpose of the Study. Our paper answers the call for business schools to alter ethics education in the classroom. Using graphic novels to teach ethical skills improves the students' ability to assess an ethical situation through empathy (EM) and interpersonal-mentalizing skills (IM) (i.e. reading the minds of their customers). Graphic novels are reemerging as a training tool that has the potential to reach a vast population. Corporations have begun to apply graphic-style training methods to gain the attention of their employees.

Method/Design and Sample. Using a repeated measure MANOVA, we collected data across universities and borders to assess the effectiveness of graphic novels in the classroom as a tool for training ethical effectiveness; some students received a traditional case study and others received the graphic novel case study.

Results. Results indicate that students increase their ability to empathize and build interpersonal mentalizing when applying graphic novel case studies in the classroom. Past research with sales professionals demonstrates that individuals early in their sales career are able to build ethical understanding (ethical efficacy) through graphic novel case studies. Students report that the graphic-novel method increases their ability to make an ethical decision while improving their ethics-education satisfaction.

Value to Marketing Educators. Three written case studies and graphic novels are provided for easy application in the classroom. They can be obtained through the New Mexico State University and Daniels Fund Resource Page: <http://business.nmsu.edu/research/programs/daniels-ethics/teaching/marketing-ethics/>; you may also contact the authors to have a PDF file sent. The course material could be incorporated at all levels of marketing instruction. Description of a classroom exercise is provided. In addition, we provide a unique contribution to marketing education by assessing the use of graphic novels through empathy and interpersonal-mentalizing effectiveness measures.

Keywords: graphic novels, personal selling, ethics, interactive classroom, pedagogy.

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Ethics continues to be an important topic of discussion in business schools worldwide due to increased cheating among business majors (Brown, Sautter, Littvay, Sautter, & Barnes, 2010), accreditation mandates, and ethical debacles in business. In response, business schools continue to adjust their ethics curriculum for an environment that requires employees to act ethically in a global, competitive marketplace (Black & Wingfield, 2008). The way ethics is taught in business schools needs to be altered (Cagle, Glasgo, & Holmes, 2008) since findings regarding effectiveness are somewhat contradictory. Some suggest that ethical decision-making and empathy (EM) are deeply rooted in personality and cannot be taught, while others demonstrate that pedagogical experiences such as case studies and exercises can nurture these traits into conductive ethical behavior (Brown et al., 2010). In this paper, we explore the use of graphic novels (GN) for teaching business ethics in sales education to

effectively improve EM and interpersonal-mentalizing (IM) abilities (i.e., reading the customers mind).

Graphic novels are nontraditional communication tools that use pictures and text in a particular sequence to tell the story of a character, setting, and plot with the intention of producing desired behavioral, cognitive, and affective responses in the viewer (McCloud, 1996). Research on language processing has revealed that perceptual stimulations, such as those arising from a story, can correspond with real-world experiences (Zwaan, Madden, Yaxley, & Aveyard, 2004). The GN helps develop mental pictures of people and situations (Graeff, 2008) that aid in interpreting information. They have been used to communicate information to adult audiences on diverse topics (Tabachnick, 2007) as in *Maus*, a GN written by Art Spiegelman about his father's experience as a Polish Jew during the Holocaust. Further, business professors at Texas Tech University have produced a GN higher-education textbook, *Atlas*

Black (Crook, Short, Bauer, Ketchen, & Simon, 2010), in which characters apply management skills over several chapters. It is proposed that in real-life situations, the reader will have an improved ability to utilize EM and IM based on his or her experiences with the fictional characters (Dietvorst et al., 2009) in the GN. The reader learns how to generalize from a story, taking what is familiar and known, and then applies it to what is new and novel (Graeff, 2008).

EM has recently been classified as having two distinct components: cognitive EM is mental perspective taking and emotional EM is the vicarious sharing of emotions (McBane, 1995). Having emotional EM implies that salespeople are able to sense, process, and respond to customers by picking up concepts that might be important but not stated (Comer & Drollinger, 1999). Conversely, having cognitive EM implies that salespeople can anticipate what their customers are likely to think and do. For an individual to have true EM, he or she must integrate both cognitive and emotional EM (Martz, 2001); both aspects of EM are analyzed in this study.

Theory of the mind is the ability to explain and predict the thoughts and actions of oneself and others in a situation (Carruthers & Smith, 1996). Having the ability to read the minds of those around you by observing behavior patterns and the environment (Carruthers & Smith, 1996) is not easily transferred into the traditional classroom. In sales, representatives use the office setting and nonverbal cues to understand the customer's state of mind. This ability has become known as interpersonal mentalizing (IM) (Frith & Frith, 2003).

Utilizing graphic novels to communicate ethical issues to students is driven by both theoretical and practical rationales. First, resolutions for ethical questions are often not black and white which can create critical discussions in the classroom. Second, graphic novels address emotionally charged topics in a unique, reality-separated environment (Gerde & Foster, 2007). Third, ethical dilemmas presented in GN form build ethical efficacy in sales representatives (Fischbach, 2014). Finally, experiential learning cannot always be implemented in a course. Utilizing the GN as a classroom-training tool allows students to practice ethical dilemmas in a similar manner and accomplishes the same goals through a positive learning experience.

We present an in-class exercise that encourages students to engage with ethical cases by reading multiple graphic-novel case studies, answering questions, and taking part in a classroom discussion on ethical understanding. Two primary benefits are gained from the exercise. First, students are able to participate in a creative form of learning through the GN. As a growing literature base, graphic novels continue to gain acceptance among the current generation of students (MacDonald, 2013). This type of communication also engages Generation Y, with their short attention spans and the need for constant stimulation (Wolf, 1996) more effectively than

traditional forms (Short, Randolph-Seng, & McKenny, 2013), while requiring them to use their imaginations to fill in blanks in the communication process (Short & Reeves, 2012). Second, the discussion lets students compare their ethical decisions with others, allowing them to explore the interpretations, thoughts, and feelings of the characters in the story. Research supports the importance of EM, observational, and interpretive skills in the success of salespersons and buyer-seller interactions (McBane, 1995). Using graphic novels as a learning tool gives students a chance to experience ethical scenarios in a form that improves their EM and IM ability.

CLASSROOM GRAPHIC NOVEL MATERIAL

Three GN cases were created based on bribery events that have occurred in industry. They include the following gift-giving scenarios: baseball tickets and bribery escalation (GN1) to address how a gift in the sales organization can get out of control; international pharmaceuticals and government bribes (GN2), based on a \$60 million settlement reached by the Pfizer Corporation (Miranda, 2012); and marketing research and bribery tactics (GN3) to discuss how providing free trips to exotic locations to gain information may become unethical. Based on the ethical dilemma, discussion questions are provided at the end of each GN allowing students to grasp the emotional situations in the GN and then build EM and IM by working together when comparing answers. It should be noted that the study focuses on assessing the effectiveness of communicating a sensitive topic through graphic novels and not the overall "right" or "wrong" decision. Allowing the students to gain ethical understanding through bribery scenarios improves their understanding of other ethical situations, creating a carryover effect.

CLASS EXERCISE INSTRUCTIONS

This exercise is designed to take one class period. Begin with a short introduction of graphic novels as a tool in higher education. Then, distribute the GN case study to each student. Next, students individually write responses to the discussion questions found at the end of the GN. See the link found under Figure 1 for access to all of the graphic novels and discussion questions. Figure 2 provides an excerpt from the pharmaceutical GN case. Alternatively, the instructor may have students read the graphic novels online and prepare their responses to the discussion questions prior to coming to class. Then, in class, students work in groups to establish the best ethical solutions based on the readings and their experience. For example, one discussion question defines bribery and then asks the student to put himself into Peter's shoes (based on his age, gender, and character opinion). Towards the middle of the class, have each group discuss their case and whether their scenario is ethical/unethical as well as legal/illegal. Finally, the instructor and students

discuss EM and IM, exposing the challenges of making an ethical decision.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Data was collected from 312 upper-level undergraduate students enrolled in various marketing and sales courses across three campuses in the United States (US) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). These students were purposefully chosen to compare the effects across American (AM) and Arab (AR) cultures since research has shown there are differences between the two (Rohm, 2010). These cultural differences affect decision-making, relations with others, loyalty, negotiations, as well as other aspects of life.

Students were given a survey to assess their level of EM (McBane, 1995) and IM (Dietvorst et al., 2009) then, several weeks later, were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: the GN or traditional, written case study. After reading the material, they completed a survey utilizing the same measures of EM and IM. Scale questions for the student survey are found under Figure 3. Overall, students demonstrated a greater increase in EM and IM when the GN ethics training was employed compared to the traditional case study. The most significant results are shown in the repeated measure MANOVA. The cell mean differences and standard deviations are shown in Table 1; there are higher cell-mean differences for all levels of empathy and interpersonal mentalizing with the graphic novel case study.

Table 1: Results of Repeated Measure MANOVA (n=312)

F values (p-value)		Mean & SD (Sub-Scales)			
Interpersonal Mentalizing (IM)		Rapport	NonVerb	BirdEye	Shape
Pre-Post Interaction	2.78 (.04)				
Graphic Novel		2.3(.01)	1.4(.58)	1.2(.11)	1.0(.37)
Text Case		1.1(.44)	0.6(.34)	0.6(.08)	0.9(.68)
Pre-Post Interaction	3.75 (.01)				
American (AM)		1.9(.51)	0.4(.54)	1.4(.91)	1.6(.13)
Arab (AR)		1.7(.15)	0.4(.15)	1.8(.42)	1.5(1.5)
Mean & SD (Sub-Scales)					
Empathy (EM)		FS	EC	PT	PD
Pre-Post Interaction	2.14(.01)				
Graphic Novel		5.2(.33)	5.11(.14)	3.2(.94)	1.3(.26)
Text Case		3.2(.53)	3.11(.58)	1.83(.84)	.30(.25)
Pre-Post Interaction	2.19(.05)				
American (AM)		5.3(.04)	2.04(.04)	2.38(.46)	1.5(.61)
Arab (AR)		3.4(.6)	5.00(.51)	1.74(.57)	1.31(.43)

Notes: MANOVA. *The graphic novel cases are higher on all cell mean differences for the empathy sub-scales and interpersonal mentalizing sub-scales.* IM=Interpersonal Mentalizing; Subscales for Interpersonal Mentalizing: Rapport=Building Rapport; NonVerb=NonVerbal Skills; BirdEye=Assessment at a Birds Eye View; Shape=Shaping the Interaction; Subscales for Empathy: FS=Fantasy Scale; EC=Emotional Concern; PT=Perspective Taking; PD=Personal Distress.

The results demonstrate an interaction between the survey pre-post results, training method, and school of origin. Significant results were found for the graphic novel cases for both IM ($p < .04$) and EM ($p < .01$). The IM scale includes four subscales that all increased with the use of graphic novels (*Rapport*: assessing a student's ability to build rapport with the customers, *Non-Verb*: ability to read non-verbal skills, *Bird-Eye*: assessing the birds-eye view of a situation, and *Shape*: shaping the customer interaction). Students had the greatest increase in EM and IM when encountering the GN exercise. The analysis between the visual cues in the GN and the written text in the GN provides an opportunity for students to assess the situation in the story and read between the lines. The gutter of the GN, the white space between the scenes, gives students the opportunity to assess the situation, shaping their interaction with the characters. Understanding customers' needs and dealing with

ethical situations are important parts of the sales position (Spillan, Totten, & Ziemnowicz, 2007).

EM scores followed the same trend as IM with the GN case studies improving at a higher cell-mean rate than the traditional case study method for each of the EM subscale items (Fantasy Scale, Emotional Concern, Perspective Taking, and Personal Distress). Providing experiential cases such as the GN, gives students the opportunity to see the emotion in the characters' faces, the sweat running off the brow of the nervous salesperson, and the dollar-sign eyes when realizing the customer may bring in a big sale. Therefore, students who had the GN exercise were able to more successfully observe the emotional relationship between characters in the story and their ethical situation. The results were similar for students in the US and the UAE. Therefore, in the classroom, the GN exercise is effective for training students in the classroom on building ethical skills needed for EM and IM.

CONCLUSION

There are many advances associated with the GN exercise. First, applying a story, such as the GN, can be an effective pedagogical tool for teaching important business concepts (Graeff, 2008) and, as an ethics training method, improves EM and IM skills in students. In addition, it fosters an individual's ability to change how they react to a situation, creating a more effective sales representative. Second, this study demonstrates that EM, an important trait in sales, can be developed with proper training. Further, due to topics such as prospecting and presentation that demand more time in sales courses, the priority of ethical training often wanes. Using graphic novels, faculty can efficiently provide ethics training that successfully enhances student EM and IM by holding participants' attention in a unique way.

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Figure 1: GRAPHIC NOVEL CASE STUDY LINKS

<http://business.nmsu.edu/research/programs/daniels-ethics/teaching/marketing-ethics/>

Figure 2: EXCERPT FROM GRAPHIC NOVEL CASE STUDY

CASE 2: PHARMACEUTICAL GRAPHIC NOVEL EXCERPT

On this page, the sales representatives are being trained on a new drug and it is discussed how important training new sales representatives is for Prescott Pharmaceuticals.



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Illustrations by Candace Barnett - www.candacebarnett.com

Figure 3: Scale Items Interpersonal Mentalizing (IM) and Empathy (EM)

IM Scale, Dietvorst, Verbecke, Bagozzi, Smits, Van der Lugt (2009)

Factor 1: Rapport Building (1) When I am with a customer (i.e. in the elevator before a sales meeting) I can easily kindle a small conversation; (2) I find it difficult to talk to a customer about topics that are not business-related; (3) When at a business meeting or a reception, I can easily start off a conversation on a general topic such as the weather.

Factor 2: Detecting Nonverbal Cues (1) I find it difficult to discern the nonverbal cues of customers during a conversation; (2) At times I realize that I do not pick up the hints in sales conversations, (3) After the meeting colleagues explain to me what happened during the conversations; only then do I realize what happened during the conversation; (4) During a sales conversation, if customers hint of something, I do take that into consideration as we are speaking together.

Factor 3: Taking a Bird's-Eye View (1) When I realize that someone does not possess the right amount of knowledge in or during a sales conversation, I can easily add some information to bring focus to the conversation, thus making it easier for people to understand what I want to say; (2) When I realize that people do not understand what I'm saying, I put what I want to say in a broader perspective in order to explain what I mean; (3) I always try to understand the industry context in which a customer operates, and by using examples from that context, I add any missing information; (4) Sometimes I summarize for customers what has been said up to that point in the meeting; this makes for a smoother conversation!

Factor 4: Shaping the Interaction (1) I make sure that I positively influence the atmosphere in a sales conversation; (2) I can easily act in ways that give a sales conversation a positive twist; (3) I can easily make people feel more comfortable during a sales conversation.

***7-point scale rating (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree)*

EM Scale, McBane (1995)

Emotional Empathy [Emotional Concern (EC) & Personal Distress (PD)]

Emotional Concern [EC] (1) I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me; (2) Sometimes I don't feel very sorry for other people when they are having problems; (3) I am often quite touched by things that I see happen; (4) I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person; (5) When I see someone being treated unfairly, I sometimes don't feel very much pity for them; (6) When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective towards them; (7) Other people's misfortunes do not usually disturb me a great deal.

Personal Distress [PD] (1) When I see someone get hurt, I tend to remain calm; (2) Being in a tense emotional situation scares me; (3) I am usually pretty effective in dealing with emergencies; (4) I tend to lose control during emergencies; (5) I sometimes feel helpless when I am in the middle of a very emotional situation.

Cognitive Empathy [Fantasy Scale (FS) & Perspective Taking (PT)]

Cognitive Empathy [FS] (1) I daydream and fantasize, with some regularity, about things that might happen to me; (2) I really get involved with the feelings of the characters in a novel; (3) When I watch a good movie, I can very easily put myself in the place of a leading character; (4) After seeing a play or movie, I have felt as though I were one of the characters; (5) Becoming extremely involved in a good book or movie is somewhat rare for me.

Perspective Taking [PT] (1) I believe that there are two sides to every question and try to look at them both; (2) If I'm sure I'm right about something, I don't waste much time listening to other people's arguments; (3) I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective; (4) I sometimes find it difficult to see things from the "other guy's" point of view; (5) When I am reading an interesting story or novel, I imagine how I would feel if I were in their place; (6) When I'm upset at someone, I usually try to "put myself in his shoes" for a while; (7) I try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement before I make a decision.

***7-point scale rating (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree)*