

Teaching Ethics to Management Students: A Reflective Inquiry into Character and Moral Development

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ABSTRACT

Ethics education in higher education is often delivered as theoretical content, limiting its impact on students' moral awareness and character development. This study investigates how reflective and experiential teaching strategies can enhance ethical awareness and character formation among management students. This research employed a qualitative reflective approach grounded in the author's teaching practice in an Ethics course involving approximately 90 third-semester management students at a private higher education institution in Indonesia. Data were derived from teaching journals, classroom observations, students' reflective writings, records of debates, and a case-based oral examination. The data were analyzed through thematic reflection, involving iterative review, coding of recurring patterns, and interpretation in light of relevant moral education frameworks. The findings revealed four major themes: (1) growth in moral reasoning, as students shifted from intuitive judgments to structured ethical deliberation; (2) increased empathy and perspective-taking through peer dialogue; (3) enhanced engagement and ethical awareness through experiential activities such as film analysis, debates, and role-play; and (4) the effectiveness of case-based oral examinations in revealing students' ethical reasoning and reflective depth. These findings suggest that ethics education becomes more meaningful when positioned as a reflective and dialogical process rather than a purely theoretical subject. Integrating experiential learning and authentic assessment can support the development of moral reasoning, empathy, and integrity, contributing to more transformative ethics education in management programs.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Ethics education has become an essential component of higher education, particularly in business and management programs. Universities are increasingly expected to function not only as sites of knowledge transmission but also as moral spaces where students' character and sense of responsibility are shaped (Arthur, 2016; Nucci & Narvaez, 2014). In the Indonesian higher education context, ethics and character education are similarly viewed as integral to preparing graduates who are socially

responsible and morally grounded (Nurpratiwi, 2021; Umar, Hamzah, & Rahmatullah, 2024). For management students, ethical competence is no longer optional; graduates are expected to make professional decisions grounded in integrity, accountability, and moral reasoning (Sims & Felton, 2006; Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006). This expectation, however, raises a persistent pedagogical question: how can ethics be taught in ways that meaningfully influence students' ethical awareness and character, rather than remaining at the level of abstract knowledge?

Existing literature on ethics education has extensively emphasized the importance of ethics in higher education. Nevertheless, much of this literature focuses on curricular goals, ethical frameworks, or moral theories, while offering limited insight into how students actually experience ethical learning in the classroom, particularly through reflective and experiential processes. Studies in the Indonesian context also underline the importance of character education at the tertiary level, yet they often emphasize policy directions, conceptual models, or learning outcomes rather than students' lived learning experiences (Hidayati & Sari, 2024; Nurpratiwi, 2021). Research on ethics instruction frequently relies on empirical measurement or cognitive outcomes, leaving a gap in understanding how classroom interactions, dialogue, and reflection reveal the development of ethical awareness and character over time. This gap suggests a need for reflective inquiry that foregrounds the experiences of both students and educators in ethics education.

My experience teaching the Ethics course to management students at STIE Wikara reflects this challenge. Traditional lecture-based approaches, while useful for introducing ethical concepts, often failed to engage students' affective and reflective dimensions of moral learning. Similar concerns have been raised by scholars who argue that moral development requires active engagement, reflection, and empathy rather than passive absorption of ethical principles (Kohlberg, 1981; Lickona, 1991; Narvaez, 2008). In the Indonesian higher education setting, reflective and participatory learning has likewise been recognized as an important approach for nurturing students' moral sensitivity and responsibility (Hidayat & Asyafah, 2023). These insights encouraged a reconsideration of how ethics might be taught in ways that invite students not only to understand ethical theories but also to question, interpret, and internalize ethical values in relation to their own experiences.

In response, the course was redesigned using reflective and experiential teaching strategies. Ethical theories were combined with learning activities such as film analysis, debates, role-play, guided reflection, and case-based oral assessment. Students were encouraged to examine how they reasoned through moral dilemmas, how they responded emotionally to ethical conflicts, and how their perspectives evolved through interaction with peers. Over time, classroom interactions gradually became a space for moral dialogue, where ethical understanding emerged through discussion, disagreement, and shared reflection rather than through instruction alone.

Guided by this pedagogical context, this reflective study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do reflective and experiential teaching strategies influence students' ethical awareness?
2. How can classroom interactions reveal character development in management students?

This article adopts a qualitative reflective approach, drawing on teaching experiences, classroom observations, and students' oral responses rather than empirical measurement. The discussion is informed by relevant literature on moral and character education and is organized as follows: the next section outlines the reflective methodological approach underlying this study; this is followed by a discussion of key themes emerging from classroom experiences, with a focus on ethical awareness, empathy, and responsibility; and the final section reflects on the implications of reflective and experiential ethics education for educators and higher education institutions, positioning ethics not merely as a course requirement but as a formative educational practice.

Despite the growing body of literature on ethics education in higher education, there remains a noticeable gap in studies that closely examine reflective and experiential approaches within management education, particularly in the Indonesian context. Many existing studies emphasize normative ethical theories or institutional policies, while the affective and experiential dimensions of

ethical learning receive comparatively less attention. In practice, students may demonstrate cognitive understanding of ethical concepts yet encounter difficulties in internalizing them as guiding values in real-life decision-making.

This study positions itself within this gap by offering a reflective account of ethics teaching that emphasizes lived classroom experiences, dialogue, and reflection. By focusing on how ethical understanding and character development emerge through experiential learning processes, this article contributes to ongoing discussions on ethics pedagogy in higher education, particularly within management education.

2. METHODS

This study employs a reflective qualitative research approach, which focuses on systematic reflection on teaching practice rather than empirical measurement or hypothesis testing. Reflective qualitative research is understood in this study as an approach that examines lived classroom experiences through continuous self-reflection, observation, and interpretation, to gain deeper insight into students' ethical awareness and character development. The emphasis is placed on meaning-making, interaction, and pedagogical processes as they unfold in real teaching contexts.

The study was conducted in the Ethics course for management students at STIE Wikara, involving three management classes with approximately 90 students. The reflective data were gathered during the third semester of the 2024 academic year, based on the author's continuous engagement with the course. Rather than relying on surveys or formal interviews, the data were drawn from naturally occurring classroom activities and reflective practices embedded in the teaching process.

Data sources included the lecturer's teaching journals, ongoing classroom observations, students' written reflective notes, records of classroom debates, and observations of students' participation during ethics-related discussions. Ethical awareness in this study refers to students' ability to recognize and articulate moral values in classroom situations, while character development is understood as observable changes in attitudes, empathy, responsibility, and engagement during ethical learning activities.

The analysis followed a thematic reflection process conducted in several stages. First, classroom notes and reflective journals were reviewed after each learning cycle to capture significant moments related to students' ethical reasoning and behaviour. Second, students' reflective writings and oral responses were read repeatedly to identify recurring ideas and patterns. Third, these patterns were grouped into broader themes, such as critical questioning of ethical dilemmas, empathy toward others' perspectives, and a sense of personal responsibility. Finally, the themes were interpreted in light of relevant literature on reflective teaching and moral education to deepen their conceptual meaning.

Ethical considerations were also taken into account. Students were informed that their reflective writings and classroom interactions might be used for academic reflection and publication purposes. Participation in reflective activities formed part of the course learning process, and all data were treated confidentially. Students' identities were anonymized, and no personal or identifiable information was disclosed in this study.

Throughout the research process, the author positioned herself as both a participant and an observer. This dual role was acknowledged as an integral part of reflective qualitative research, recognizing that the educator's presence, values, and pedagogical choices inevitably shaped the learning environment. This reflexive stance allowed the study to capture not only students' ethical learning processes but also the author's ongoing development as a moral educator.

To ensure the trustworthiness of this reflective qualitative study, several criteria were applied. Credibility was addressed through triangulation of data sources, including teaching journals, classroom observations, and students' written reflections. Reflexivity was maintained by continuously examining my role as a lecturer-researcher, acknowledging that my values, teaching decisions, and

interactions influenced the learning environment and the reflective outcomes. Dependability was supported through systematic documentation of teaching activities and reflections conducted throughout the semester.

Ethical considerations were also taken into account. Students were informed that their reflections might be used for academic purposes, and their consent was obtained. All student data were anonymized to protect privacy and ensure confidentiality. The data collection took place during Semester 3 of the 2024 academic year. The thematic analysis followed a reflective process that included familiarization with the data, initial coding, identification of recurring patterns, development of thematic categories, and interpretation of themes in relation to relevant literature on ethics education and character development.

This reflective study is grounded in the author's ongoing teaching experience in the Ethics courses for Management students over one academic semester. The reflections were developed through regular teaching notes, classroom observations, and students' responses gathered after learning activities. These reflective records were written consistently after instructional sessions to capture meaningful classroom experiences and recurring patterns related to students' ethical awareness and character development.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the findings of the reflective qualitative study conducted in the Ethics course for management students at STIE Wikara. Rather than presenting the findings as a narrative chronology, the results are organized thematically to highlight key patterns emerging from classroom interactions, reflective activities, and assessment practices. The discussion integrates empirical classroom evidence with established models of ethics education, including Rest's Four Component Model, Narvaez's Integrative Ethical Education framework, and Dewey's concept of reflective thinking.

3.1. Findings

Table 1 summarizes the main themes identified through thematic reflection, along with their pedagogical implications and supporting evidence drawn from student reflections and classroom observations.

Table 1. Summary of Reflective Findings on Ethics Teaching

Theme	Reflective Insight	Supporting Evidence (Anonymized)	Pedagogical Implications
Student Engagement	Engagement increased significantly during experiential and dialogical activities	"I became more active when we discussed real cases instead of listening to lectures." (Student R12)	Prioritize interactive learning to stimulate ethical reflection
Moral Reasoning	Students gradually shifted from intuitive judgments to reasoned ethical arguments	"At first I answered based on feeling, but later I tried to use ethical theories to justify my decision." (Student R27)	Integrate moral dilemma analysis linked to ethical frameworks
Empathy and Dialogue	Classroom dialogue fostered empathy and perspective-taking	"Hearing different opinions made me realize that ethical decisions are not simple." (Student R34)	Encourage peer discussion to develop moral sensitivity

Theme	Reflective Insight	Supporting Evidence (Anonymized)	Pedagogical Implications
Experiential Learning	Realistic simulations enhanced ethical awareness	“Role-play made me imagine myself in a real workplace situation.” (Student R19)	Use experiential tasks to bridge theory and practice
Reflective Assessment	Oral examination revealed ethical reasoning more clearly than written tests	“Explaining my answer verbally made me think more carefully about right and wrong.” (Student R41)	Apply authentic assessment to capture moral reasoning

3.1.1 Theme 1: Growth in Moral Reasoning through Reflective Inquiry

One of the most prominent themes was the development of students’ moral reasoning. Initially, many students approached ethical issues using personal beliefs or culturally inherited values without explicit reference to ethical frameworks. Through reflective discussion, case analysis, and guided questioning, students began to articulate their reasoning more systematically.

This progression aligns with Rest’s Four Component Model, particularly the components of moral judgment and moral reasoning (Rest, 1986). As students were repeatedly exposed to ethical dilemmas, they demonstrated an increasing ability to justify decisions using concepts such as fairness, responsibility, and consequences. For example, one student reflected:

“Before this class, I thought ethics was just about right or wrong. Now I try to think about the impact of my decision on others.” (Student R08)

Dewey’s (1933) notion of reflective thinking is evident here, as learning occurred through inquiry, doubt, and reconsideration rather than direct instruction. The findings suggest that reflective pedagogy encourages students to move beyond intuitive responses toward more deliberate ethical judgment.

3.1.2 Theme 2: Increased Empathy and Peer Dialogue in Ethical Learning

Another recurring theme was the growth of empathy through peer dialogue. Classroom discussions, debates, and group reflections created opportunities for students to encounter diverse perspectives. Many students reported that listening to peers helped them recognize the complexity of ethical decision-making.

This finding resonates with Narvaez’s Integrative Ethical Education (IEE) framework, which emphasizes the role of social interaction and emotional engagement in moral development (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2009). Students not only learned ethical concepts but also practiced moral sensitivity and perspective-taking, which are essential components of character education.

As one student noted:

“Sometimes I disagreed with my friends, but their arguments made me rethink my own position.” (Student R22)

Such dialogical engagement supports Freire’s (1998) view of ethics education as a process of critical moral consciousness rather than moral transmission.

3.1.3 Theme 3: Shifts in Engagement through Experiential Learning

Experiential learning activities—such as film analysis, role-play, and debates—significantly influenced students’ engagement and ethical awareness. The use of the film *Bad Genius*, for instance, enabled students to emotionally connect with ethical dilemmas related to dishonesty and integrity.

Students reported that these activities made ethical issues feel “real” rather than theoretical. One reflection stated:

“The film made me think about my own choices, not just the characters’ actions.” (Student R15)

These findings support Dewey’s (1933) argument that meaningful learning arises from experience and reflection. Experiential strategies also align with Narvaez’s emphasis on moral skill development through practice and contextual learning.

3.1.4 Theme 4: Oral Examination as Reflective Assessment

At the end of the semester, a case-based oral examination was conducted to evaluate students’ ethical reasoning and character development. Unlike written tests, which primarily measure memorization, the oral format allowed students to articulate their reasoning in real time, respond to unexpected questions, and demonstrate moral deliberation.

Evaluation criteria included:

1. Clarity of ethical reasoning – the student’s ability to explain decisions logically.
2. Application of ethical theories – linking responses to frameworks such as utilitarianism, deontology, or virtue ethics.
3. Consideration of consequences – awareness of impacts on others and society.
4. Moral consistency – alignment of reasoning with personal and societal ethical principles.
5. Reflective depth – ability to justify choices thoughtfully and acknowledge alternative perspectives.

This method enhanced character development in ways that written exams could not. Students were encouraged to reflect on moral dilemmas aloud, making their thought processes visible. This immediacy promoted honesty, self-awareness, and accountability, as students could not rely on pre-written answers. In contrast, written tests often fail to capture nuances in reasoning, empathy, or the willingness to confront ethical tensions. As one student reflected anonymously:

“Explaining my answer verbally made me realize whether I truly understood ethics or just memorized the theory.” (Student R39)

Furthermore, the oral examination facilitated authentic dialogue between the lecturer and students, reinforcing experiential learning. Students were able to negotiate moral conflicts, consider different perspectives, and make reasoned ethical decisions on the spot. These interactions promoted the internalization of ethical values, fostering both cognitive moral reasoning and affective character growth, in alignment with Rest’s Four Component Model and Dewey’s reflective thinking framework.

In short, the oral examination not only assessed knowledge but also became a transformative learning experience, allowing students to develop integrity, empathy, and responsible decision-making, core aspects of ethical character that extend beyond the classroom.

3.2. Discussion

The findings of this reflective qualitative inquiry indicate that ethics education becomes transformative when positioned as a dialogical and experiential process rather than a purely theoretical subject. The observed shift in students’ moral reasoning suggests that reflective pedagogy can facilitate movement from intuitive, unexamined judgments toward more structured ethical deliberation. In the early stages of the course, many students relied primarily on personal beliefs or culturally inherited norms when responding to moral dilemmas. However, through repeated engagement with case discussions, guided questioning, and ethical frameworks, students began to articulate their reasoning using more systematic justifications. This progression is consistent with Kohlberg’s (1981, 1984) theory

of moral development, which emphasizes the evolution from conventional reasoning to more principled forms of moral judgment. Similarly, Rest and Narvaez (1994) argue that moral judgment develops through opportunities to analyze dilemmas and justify decisions, reinforcing the importance of structured ethical reflection in higher education contexts.

Beyond cognitive development, the data reveal the significance of empathy and perspective-taking in shaping students' ethical awareness. Classroom debates and peer dialogue created spaces where students encountered conflicting viewpoints and were challenged to reconsider their own assumptions. This dialogical engagement aligns with Narvaez's (2008) integrative ethical education framework, which underscores the interplay between moral sensitivity, reasoning, motivation, and action. Exposure to diverse perspectives appeared to cultivate moral sensitivity, enabling students to recognize the complexity of ethical issues and the potential consequences of managerial decisions. These findings resonate with Noddings' (2013) relational approach to moral education, which emphasizes care, responsiveness, and attentiveness to others as foundational elements of ethical character. In the Indonesian context, such relational dimensions are particularly significant, as character education has been closely linked to communal responsibility and social harmony (Nurpratiwi, 2021; Umar et al., 2024).

The incorporation of experiential learning strategies—such as film analysis, role-play, and real-world case simulations—also contributed substantially to students' engagement and ethical internalization. Dewey (1933) contends that reflective thinking arises from meaningful experience, particularly when learners confront uncertainty or moral tension. In this study, experiential activities enabled students to connect abstract ethical theories to concrete managerial dilemmas, thereby bridging the gap between cognition and practice. Students reported that engaging emotionally with realistic scenarios deepened their understanding of integrity and accountability. This supports Lickona's (1991) assertion that effective character education must integrate moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. By situating ethical principles within lived experience, the course design encouraged students not merely to comprehend ethical concepts but to envision their application in professional contexts.

The use of a case-based oral examination further illuminated the depth of students' moral reasoning and reflective capacity. Unlike written assessments that may privilege memorization, oral examinations required spontaneous articulation, critical justification, and responsiveness to probing questions. This form of authentic assessment aligns with Sims and Felton's (2006) recommendation that business ethics education should evaluate students' capacity for ethical decision-making rather than theoretical recall alone. The oral format also made students' reasoning processes visible, allowing for the assessment of consistency, empathy, and awareness of consequences—key elements within Rest's moral development framework (Rest & Narvaez, 1994). Importantly, the assessment itself became a reflective learning moment, reinforcing ethical accountability and self-awareness.

Nevertheless, the findings must be interpreted with caution. As a reflective qualitative study situated within a single institution, the insights are context-bound and shaped by the lecturer's interpretive lens. While triangulation of journals, observations, and student reflections enhanced credibility, the subjective nature of reflective inquiry limits generalizability. Future research employing longitudinal or mixed-method designs could provide additional empirical validation of the transformative potential of reflective ethics pedagogy.

Overall, the discussion affirms that ethics education in management programs is most effective when it integrates cognitive analysis, emotional engagement, and dialogical interaction. By fostering reflective inquiry and experiential participation, educators can cultivate not only ethical literacy but also empathy, integrity, and responsible professional identity—core dimensions of character formation in higher education (Arthur, 2016; Nucci & Narvaez, 2014).

4. CONCLUSION

This reflective study examined how reflective and experiential teaching strategies influence management students' ethical awareness and character development at STIE Wikara, focusing on how such approaches shape moral reasoning and how classroom interactions reveal character formation. The findings demonstrate that positioning ethics education as a dialogical and experiential process fosters meaningful transformation: students progressed from intuitive or culturally inherited judgments to more structured ethical deliberation; peer dialogue and collaborative activities cultivated empathy and perspective-taking; experiential strategies such as film analysis, debates, and role-play enhanced engagement and deepened ethical reflection; and case-based oral examinations functioned as authentic assessments that revealed students' reasoning processes and reflective depth beyond what written tests could capture. These results suggest that ethics education becomes most effective when it integrates cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions of learning, encouraging students not only to understand ethical theories but also to internalize and apply them in professional contexts. Nevertheless, this study is limited by its reliance on reflective qualitative data, which is inherently subjective, its focus on a single institution that constrains broader generalization, and its short-term scope confined to one academic semester without longitudinal tracking of character development. Future research is therefore recommended to conduct comparative studies across diverse institutional and cultural contexts, employ mixed-method designs that combine reflective inquiry with empirical measurement, and explore the long-term impact of reflective ethics education on graduates' professional conduct and moral decision-making. Overall, the study affirms that sustained reflective inquiry, experiential engagement, and authentic assessment can transform ethics education into a formative practice that contributes to the development of morally grounded and socially responsible future professionals.

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