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Connecting Ethics to Action: An Introduction to Ethical Decision Making

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Connecting Ethics to Action:

An Introduction to Ethical Decision Making

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It is important to get representatives of each view to present their perspective so one can lessen one's own biases and so those making the decision have a more fully developed picture of the totality of the situation.

Introduction

A patron calls the Circulation Desk late in the evening and gets a student worker. The patron wants to know what their roommate checked out so they can be sure to return all of the materials. The student gives the information, trying to be helpful to the patron. The patron comes in the next morning very upset because his privacy has been violated and threatening a lawsuit. The student worker defends his actions, saying he was trying to give excellent customer service, just as he learned in the orientation manual. How does one calm the patron, educate the student worker, and otherwise deal with this, and other, ethical dilemmas? This article proposes the use of, and training in, Ethical Decision Making to assist in alleviating ethical dilemmas.

This article will describe Ethical Decision Making, or EDM, and will offer a brief background on the field of EDM. The article will also be of practical use by providing ways libraries and librarians can use EDM, presenting a model of EDM, and suggesting ways to implement and train in EDM.

What is EDM? Ethical Decision Making is difficult to define because it has several divergent avenues in its research. This paper uses the following definition of EDM: the process of making decisions in "'ethical situations' which have 'ethical dimensions'" (Wittmer, 2001, p. 482). To be more simplistic, it is using ethics as a guide for making non-minor decisions, since many of these decisions have ethical dimensions.

Ethics and Codes of Ethics are foundational to EDM. Ethics, the guidelines a society or institution creates to direct actions of its members, are synonymous with morals but different from virtues, the ideals towards which one aims one's life. A society expects its members to uphold its ethics, and punishes for failure; while its virtues are the goals they aim for. An institution codifies its ethical expectations into a Code of Ethics or core virtues, so its members can inculcate, spread, and utilize those ethics. As the American Library Associations' (ALA) 1995 Code of Ethics states, "The principles of this Code are expressed in broad statements to guide ethical decision making. These statements provide a framework; they cannot and do not dictate conduct to cover particular situations" (American Library Association, 1995).

As the opening paragraph alluded, there are many reasons why libraries should use EDM. Present society is increasingly litigious and EDM can lessen a library's liability by providing a framework and common basis for making ethical decisions. America's increasingly relativistic and multicultural society requires a stable basis for making ethical decisions that all members of a library know and can access. EDM can also assist in alleviating cognitive dissonance by providing a common code of ethics to follow and a predetermined model to deciding moral questions. Finally, EDM can facilitate a library's meeting its responsibilities to a world beyond its bubble.

EDM has many benefits to libraries and librarians, but there has not been much research on EDM in librarianship. Rosemary Du Mont (1991) wrote an article on using ethics in library management. She provided questions to ask, but did not address EDM specifically. Michael Vocino and Gerry Tyler (1996) wrote a chapter discussing making ethical decisions under pressure. Vocino and Tyler built a case for EDM in libraries, and pointed out several changes that would assist librarians in EDM, but went no further. Several other authors have written around EDM in libraries (Alfino & Pierce, 1997; Carbo & Almagno, 2001; W. C. Koehler, Hurych, Dole, & Wall, 2000; W. C. Koehler &

Pemberton, 2000; Smith, 2002; Vaagan, 2002; Weissinger, 2003) but not addressed it specifically. The disciplines of psychology, social work, medicine, and business have written much on EDM, so this paper will rely on research done in those fields, and seek to apply it to librarianship.

Background

EDM research has broken into four categories. Meta-ethics is the part of EDM that searches for ..."the meaning of ethical terms or language and the derivations of ethical principles and guidelines" (Reamer, 2001, p. 74). Meta-ethics is the big picture part of EDM research, defining terms and origins of ethics and EDM, and searching for where they come from.

Normative ethics is another branch of EDM research. Normative ethics ..."attempts to apply ethical theories and principles to actual ethical dilemmas" (Reamer, 2001, p. 77). This is smaller of the two categories of practical EDM research.

Descriptive ethics seeks to describe what the ethics of groups are and how the groups rank and use those ethics (McDonald, 1999, p. 143). Business literature has many surveys and studies in this area of EDM research. There are studies of students (Knotts, Lopez, & Mesak, 2000), of salespeople (Verbeke, Ouwerkerk, & Peelen, 1996), of multiple cultures (Jung, 2002a; Jung, 2002b), and of many other areas (Loe, Ferrell, & Mansfield, 2000). These studies have showed that cultures have similar ethics or values, but that they rank them differently.

An example of this similarity of ethics is Niles' 1999 article "Toward a cross-cultural understanding of work-related beliefs." Niles examines the Protestant Work Ethic (otherwise known as the Judeo-Christian ethic) in Australia and Sri Lanka to determine if its characteristics (asceticism, hard work, frugality, postponement of gratification, etc.) were truly Christian or not. The results of Niles' survey were "that most religions and most cultures seem to have a common concept of a work ethic when it is defined as a commitment to hard work and excellence"

but there are different emphases on those values (Niles, 1999, p. 6-7).

The final category is Prescriptive, which encourages the use of and instruction in EDM (McDonald, 1999, p. 144). Prescriptive EDM literature, such as this article, is the larger category of practical EDM research. It has a wide range of models of EDM to aid in applying EDM (Alfino & Pierce, 1997; Burke, 1999; Du Mont, Rosemary Ruhig, 1991; Forester-Miller & Davis, 1996; Gardiner, 2002; Greenwood, 2000; Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, 2004; McNamara, 1999; Osmo & Landau, 2001; University of Washington College of Engineering, 2001).

EDM in Libraries

Librarians can inculcate EDM into several specific places in their libraries. This paper will address the following areas with examples: student workers, new librarians, new support staff, and gray areas. Statements in the following examples regarding training in librarianship are intended to be introductions to the goals and ethics of libraries and librarians, not in depth courses on what it means to be a librarian.

Undergraduate student workers in academic libraries have no training in librarianship. Informal discussions with the student workers at the author's library have demonstrated the student workers usually have no library work experience either. As libraries hire international students and have more diverse student workers, they need ways to initiate the student workers to the ethics of librarianship and of their specific library. The training of student workers, therefore, needs to be quite broad so the students can learn their roles and learn how those roles fit into the library as a whole. Since student workers serve in many front line library service positions, sometimes without supervision, the training they receive needs to be strong in the ethical component.

Janice Burrows recommends using both manuals, or handbooks, and letters from university (Vice Chancellor) and library (University Librarian) leadership to inform

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student workers of their important part in library service (1995, p. 81). This is an excellent time to introduce the students to the library's Code of Ethics and model(s) of EDM. To use the example at the beginning of this article, students need to realize the importance libraries – and the law – place on privacy, even between family members. Listing the library's Code of Ethics – in the letters and manual – and some cases or examples – in the manual – help to introduce the students to the importance of ethics, especially the library's, to making decisions at work.

When a library hires a new librarian, one assumes the new hire is aware of library ethics and the ALA Code of Ethics. What they might not be aware of is their new library's order of precedence for ethics and any cultural characteristics that affect how they should make ethical decisions there. An example of this is government libraries. Librarians strive for open access for all. Government libraries, however, sometimes handle classified information. Although government libraries are usually open to the public as well as their target constituency, the secrecy of some documents limits their access by even the primary patron base of the library. Thus, newly hired librarians need to learn what the ethics are for their library and what the EDM model(s) are for handling ethical conflicts so they can fulfill the seventh point on the ALA Code of Ethics: not placing their personal interests above the aims of their institution (American Library Association, 1995).

Newly hired support staff need training at a level similar to that of student workers. They probably need an introduction to their library and to librarianship. They also need to see the big picture since staff usually work in – and know – only one area of a library. Since librarians are to recruit others into librarianship – and because the staff supervise student workers too – a more detailed knowledge of librarianship would be appropriate.

Training for support staff could be similar to that for student workers. The letters from administration would assist in emphasizing the

One selects a course of action based on predetermined criteria; either by selecting the choice that creates the least evil or by selecting the one that creates the most good.

importance of the Code of Ethics and making ethical decisions, especially in their area. For example, how the public service staff should be concerned primarily with patron privacy, then with other ethical considerations.

All librarians and staff could use assistance when dealing with cognitive dissonance, or ethically gray areas, and when commencing an EDM program. This training helps provide coherence with EDM and with the EDM models(s) used by a library. It is important to have library and school administration actively supporting the EDM program. Dodd, et al., demonstrated that in institutions where the staff believed that ethical choices were made, the staff was more assertive in making ethical decisions and advocated EDM more (2004).

Training current library employees in EDM for gray areas can assist them in adapting to changes in laws, such as the Patriot Act, and to changes in the institution, such as leadership turnover, so they can be prepared for the ethical issues that arise with changes. Once a library has determined whom to train in EDM, it needs to determine in which EDM model or models to train them.

EDM Model

There are many models or thought points for making ethical decisions. Other disciplines that have researched EDM – business, psychology, medicine, and social work – have several EDM models each. Librarianship, with its paucity of research on EDM, does not have a model. This paper, therefore, will work with a composite model, which the author will develop in future articles, consisting of the following elements: factors, agents, actions, affects and effects, implementation, and evaluation.

The first element of the model, factors, is a time of thought and research. During this stage, one tries to determine what the factors, or issues, of the problem are. One should ask questions such as "What ethics are in conflict?" and "What issue(s) are involved?" The goal is to find all the problems, especially ethical ones, so one can be sure to address them all later. It is helpful to have others

involved to be certain one is not missing something obvious due to personal biases.

One is normally blind to one's own personal biases, so one must actively address them through out the EDM process to mitigate or alleviate their influence. Mahzarin Banaji, Max Bazerman, and Dolly Chugh wrote in "How unethical are you?" (2003) about sources of unintentional biases and steps to take to ameliorate their effects. They listed four sources of "unintentional unethical decision making: implicit forms of prejudice, bias that favors one's own group, conflict of interest, and a tendency to overclaim credit" (p. 56). Some of the compensations they suggest are shaping ones environment with outside perspectives, broadening ones decision making and vigilance (p. 62 - 64).

To illustrate this element, consider an example of librarians considering allowing drinks into their library. The library ethic of access comes into conflict with itself here. Allowing water bottles into the library encourages and facilitates more access to the library and its materials. Allowing water bottles into the library also decreases access to materials ruined by spills. To get beyond the library biases, one could also consult business service and archives research for the increasing access and protection of access views respectively. One should also consider others views for their ethical perspectives, which leads to the next element of this EDM model.

Agents are those involved in the issue(s). Here one asks questions such as "Who should be involved in the decision?" and "Who can be involved to speak to their issues or ethical viewpoints?" The objective is to get as many different perspectives as possible. It is important to get representatives of each view to present their perspective so one can lessen one's own biases and so those making the decision have a more fully developed picture of the totality of the situation.

To return to the example of drinks in the library, the librarians should try to speak to representatives or samples of all parties involved. This would include students, custodians or house keeping, public services librarians and staff, cataloging or repair librarians and staff, and student services. After one has a wide perspective on the views of factors and agents involved, it is time to suggest actions.

The actions stage is where one seeks to determine all the possible solutions to the ethical situation while considering all the ethical issues and agents involved. One needs to be creative and think of as many solutions as one can to help overcome one's biases towards one's own group. The drinks scenario would include the following solutions. Patrons may not bring drinks in the library. Patrons may bring only approved containers into the library. Patrons may use only spill-proof or defined containers. Finally, patrons may bring any containers into the library. One also has the option of defining the contents of the containers – patrons may bring only water, or they may bring any liquids – and defining specific areas of the library – such as the vending area – in which drinks are permissible.

Once one has a list of possible solutions, one considers the affects and effects of each course of action. This step is not as certain as the previous ones because one cannot know all the possible consequences of each proposed action. This uncertainty should not keep one from attempting to list all the consequences, and should encourage one to consult those representatives from the agents element.

The proposed solutions to the drinks illustration have consequences; this section considers the proposal of any liquids in specified or approved container used anywhere in the library. The library would probably reduce its spills if its containers were spill proof ones. The library could receive income from selling the approved bottles, or if it chose to give away the bottles, have a source of advertising. The library would probably have less harried staff as informal research has indicated more compliance to using specified containers rather than no drinks. A negative is the library could anger the bookstore and student groups who sell non-approved containers, as this policy could negatively affect their business.

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After affects and effects of each course of action, one selects a proposal and implements it. One selects a course of action based on predetermined criteria; either by selecting the choice that creates the least evil or by selecting the one that creates the most good. Using the previous example, the library would design its approved bottle and distribute them along with an announcement of the new policy.

After implementing the chosen course of action, one needs to do the final element, evaluate the choice to determine if the affects and effects were desirable and to learn for future decisions. Here one could again get input from the agents involved to gain perspective on what the consequences were. Returning to the example of drinks in the library, one should determine it the change really did result in more and happier students in the library, if it increased compliance, and if it strengthened relations with the agents so the library could interact with them in the future.

The elements of this model – factors, agents, actions, affects and effects, implementation, and evaluation – are not necessarily sequential. Some, such as implementation and evaluation, do have a specific order. Agents, for example, do not come in just one level, and may be referred to repeatedly. Once one has a model, one should educate the library staff in its use.

EDM Training

This article has demonstrated the need for and uses of EDM in libraries. It has also presented an EDM model and places in the library it can be employed. Use of EDM and an EDM model does not happen without training and certain elements. To start with, one needs a Code of Ethics, which is foundational to EDM.

One need not create one's own Code of Ethics. The American Library Association has its Code of Ethics, which they designed for libraries and librarians. Several of the divisions of ALA have specialized Codes of Ethics, as well as state library associations Code of Ethics. One can also use lists of core values, such as the Association of Christian

Beyond training, libraries and librarians need to pursue times to discuss in groups or departments what ethical issues have arisen and how they solved them.

Librarians'. If one decides to write a Code of Ethics for one's library, Michael Davis (2003) provides two requirements of a Code of Ethics, and five supporting conditions. First, the code must state – codify – the morally permissible standards the group will uphold. The standards must be written in such a way as they morally oblige those following it (p. 9).

Davis' five supporting conditions go beyond the creation of a code and are applicable to any ethical training. The standards are as follows. The standards must be realistic. The organization using the code must screen its members for character. The organization must have ethics training to transmit the code and its requirements to all those under it. There must be an ethics board to provide authoritative interpretations of the code both before an action and after acting. Finally, there must be compliance procedures to ensure compliance with the code (p. 10 – 12). Most of Davis' suggestions are not appropriate in a small library doing their own Code of Ethics, so they might desire to use a pre-existing code.

Once one has the basics for EDM, one can use it. Using EDM for oneself requires practicing it with case studies. Using it in a library requires a committee to create consensus and training to facilitate usage by new workers and to provide current staff an introduction to and practice with EDM. Several writers have outlined ways to create an EDM program for institutions. They include Bartels, Harrick, Martell, & Strickland (1998); Ferrell & Fraedrich (1997); Fischer (2000); McCarty & Stike (1999); McDonald (1999); McNamara (1999); Patterson (2000); and Wittmer (2001). Ferrell, for example, provides charts, based on others research, for implementing a Code of Ethics, for roles of ethics officers and boards, and the key parts to ethics training (1997). This article will discuss ethics committees more later.

This article has previously outlined four areas for training in libraries. The training program's sessions should introduce student workers, new faculty, and new staff to the Code of Ethics, EDM, and EDM model and their uses,

as well as remind older faculty and staff of their importance. There are many different ways to teach and practice EDM. Marilyn Fisher recommends the use of stories to communicate the ethics training and to provide as setting for practicing EDM (2000). David L. Martinson recommends using advertisements to compare what is implied or portrayed versus what is said or is real (2001). Michelle Greenwood recommends using Dr. Seuss stories, because they are familiar to many people (2000).

Beyond training, libraries and librarians need to pursue times to discuss in groups or departments what ethical issues have arisen and how they solved them. This allows the group to confirm which ethical principles are priorities in their area, to encourage the use of ethics by creating a positive ethical atmosphere, and to provide other views.

This article recommends larger libraries create an ethics committee. Gael McDonald (1999) and Marilyn Fisher (2000) provide good descriptions of what an ethics committee should do. Fisher suggests they decide upon or create a Code of Ethics for the institution. With the Code of Ethics, the committee can select an EDM model and create a selection of case studies to use when practicing EDM and the EDM model. The committee leads discussion in articles on ethics in their discipline. They also reflect on the larger issues in the discipline, to help others see the big picture they are all working for (p. 230 – 233). The ethics committee can also provide assistance or guidance in making ethical decisions, and help enforce the Code of Ethics (Davis, 2003).

EDM training and practice can be done on many levels. This article has provided several suggestions and other resources for them, with the desire that the reader will use them to practice EDM personally and institutionally.

Conclusion

This paper examined the field of Ethical Decision Making, especially as it relates to librarianship. It provided an overview of the field of EDM in general and placed itself it the prescriptive section of EDM. The paper reviewed several places that libraries can use EDM – student workers, new hires, and gray areas – to limit liability and to assist in more consistent and ethical decisions. It has presented a model for making ethical decisions to assist in EDM. The paper also demonstrated several methods libraries can use to train their staff in EDM and using EDM models.

This paper demonstrated the limited research of EDM in libraries. Due to this lack of research in this area, the author proposes the following areas for further research in EDM for libraries. A prescriptive review of EDM models from other disciplines and the creation of an EDM model for libraries that takes into account the ALA Code of Ethics. Meta-ethical and normative literature review of EDM in other disciplines, with a crosswalk to create a basis for how libraries can use EDM. Descriptive research in how librarians apply EDM and ethics.

EDM has many practical applications in librarianship. This paper has attempted to encourage the use of and further research in EDM in libraries. If it has done so, please write out ways to apply it in the short and long terms. Application is the true test of learning.

Appendix A
American Library Association
Code of Ethics

As members of the American Library Association, we recognize the importance of codifying and making known to the profession and to the general public the ethical principles that guide the work of librarians, other professionals providing information services, library trustees and library staffs.

Ethical dilemmas occur when values are in conflict. The American Library Association Code of Ethics states the values to which we are committed, and embodies the ethical responsibilities of the profession in this changing information environment.

We significantly influence or control the selection, organization, preservation, and

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dissemination of information. In a political system grounded in an informed citizenry, we are members of a profession explicitly committed to intellectual freedom and the freedom of access to information. We have a special obligation to ensure the free flow of information and ideas to present and future generations.

The principles of this Code are expressed in broad statements to guide ethical decision making. These statements provide a framework; they cannot and do not dictate conduct to cover particular situations.

I. We provide the highest level of service to all library users through appropriate and usefully organized resources; equitable service policies; equitable access; and accurate, unbiased, and courteous responses to all requests.

II. We uphold the principles of intellectual freedom and resist all efforts to censor library resources.

III. We protect each library user's right to privacy and confidentiality with respect to information sought or received and resources consulted, borrowed, acquired or transmitted.

IV. We recognize and respect intellectual property rights.

V. We treat co-workers and other colleagues with respect, fairness and good faith, and advocate conditions of employment that safeguard the rights and welfare of all employees of our institutions.

VI. We do not advance private interests at the expense of library users, colleagues, or our employing institutions.

VII. We distinguish between our personal convictions and professional duties and do not allow our personal beliefs to interfere with fair representation of the aims of our institutions or the provision of access to their information resources.

VIII. We strive for excellence in the profession by maintaining and enhancing our own knowledge and skills, by encouraging the professional development of co-workers, and by fostering the aspirations of potential members of the profession. ✛

Adopted by the ALA Council June 28, 1995

From http://www.ala.org/ala/oif/statementspols/codeofethics/codeethics.htm PDF version is at http://www.ala.org/ala/oif/statementspols/codeofethics/codeofethics.pdf

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