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methodology

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# Voicing moral concerns: Yes, but how?

## The use of Socratic dialogue methodology

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### Abstract

After a selective review of relevant literature about teaching business ethics, this paper builds on a summary of Fred Bird's thoughts about the voicing of moral concerns provided in his book about moral muteness (1996). Socratic dialogue methodology (in the tradition of L. Nelson and G. Heckmann) is then presented and the use of this methodology is examined, for business ethics teaching in general, and for addressing our paper topic in particular. Three short form Socratic dialogues about the paper topic are summarized for illustration, together with preparation and debriefing suggestions for a Socratic dialogue unit as part of a business ethics course. In conclusion, Socratic dialogue design is related to the experiential learning approach, and characterized by a few basic traits, which imply both risks and opportunities for business ethics teaching.

## Introduction

There are two implicit claims in our paper. First, *moral concern* as a response to an event or to a situation, as an issue, is among the most productive points of departure for business ethics teaching. One could, for example, ask one's students to recall a self-experienced situation that triggered their moral concern, and then to share how they responded to it. Did they voice concerns (or not), how and why so? Second, *Socratic dialogue* (SD) is among the most productive designs for addressing the voicing of moral concerns, and at the same time for the "learning by doing" of moral conversations.

Such implicit claims translate into three interrelated objectives. This paper presents and recommends *moral concern* and voicing it as a productive *topic* for business ethics teaching. Second, *Socratic dialogue design* is presented and recommended as a productive *methodology* for business ethics teaching. Third, together with *suggesting a dialogue teaching unit* about the discovery and voicing of moral concerns the paper offers *instructions* for how one could prepare and debrief such a unit for deepening and broadening the students' learning.

## Business Ethics Teaching

Over the last two decades numerous papers have been written about different approaches to teaching business ethics. Arguments for adopting a case approach have been presented by various researchers (see e.g., Ardalan 2006; Falkenberg and Woiceshyn 2008; Laditka and Houck 2006; McWilliams and Vahavandi 2006; and Singer 2013). The organizational learning and change literature (Brown and Duguid 2000, 1991; Schor et al. 1996; Wenger 1998) is filled with confirmation of the substantial wealth of learning potential that can emerge in the wise use of sharing stories, especially in business ethics teaching (Sims and Felton 2006). Interactive approaches such as using classroom experiments (James and Cohen 2004), inviting ex-criminals as guest speakers (Farrell and O'Donnell 2005), using student-created honor codes (Kidwell 2001), spirituality (Pava 2007), practical wisdom (Roca 2007), conversational learning (Sims 2004), and using product support program decisions (Zych 1999) are but a few examples of what has been proposed for business ethics teaching. The title of a recent *Wall Street Journal* article asked: "Does an 'A' in Ethics Have Any Value?" (Korn 2013). Korn also highlights in this article several other issues that continue to be relevant to business ethics teaching: *Should* ethics be taught? *Can* ethics be taught? If the answer to those questions is 'yes,' should it be taught through a stand-alone ethics course, integrated throughout a business school's curriculum, or both?

Despite all the studies on business ethics teaching, one thing is clear, approaches to business ethics teaching vary widely across schools (Lee 2014), and there is no clear consensus in the literature on which is the most effective. Clearly, business ethics teachers (including the present authors) have struggled with the best way to teach their students the importance of doing business ethically.

The remainder of this paper offers our most recent effort to improve our own and our colleagues' efforts at teaching business ethics. More specifically, we first take a look at Fred Bird's thesis that moral concern is natural but often muted rather than voiced, stated

clearly in his book *"The Muted Consciousness"* (1996). We next offer a brief description and discussion of Socratic dialogue design based on the Nelson-Heckmann methodology (Nelson 1922; Heckmann 1981), and then provide examples of three Socratic dialogues, one with business students and two others with conference participants. All three of the Socratic Dialogues are about recognizing, sharing and voicing moral concerns. With this as a background, we then provide a discussion of Socratic dialogue as a model for learning by doing (in our case, learning productive moral conversation) which is in keeping with Kolb's (1984) views on experiential learning.

### **Voicing Moral Concerns: A Point of Departure**

As a point of departure for the focus of this article we believe it is useful to highlight several key points offered by Bird (1996) in his book *The Muted Conscience*:<sup>1</sup>

"Many people hold moral convictions yet fail to verbalize them. They remain silent out of deference to the judgments of others, out of fear that their comments will be ignored, or out of uncertainty that what they might have to say is really not that important... (...) People are morally mute when they fail to speak up about matters they know to be wrong... (...) People may be mute in other ways ... They may fail to raise questions about activities that seem to call for further inquiry. (...) People are morally mute when they fail to defend their ideals and when they cave in too easily and do not bargain vigorously for positions they judge to be right..." (Bird 1996, pp. 1-2) "Several forms of moral talk often exacerbate moral issues because they typically detract from organizational problem solving, ... they often ... give moral talk itself a bad reputation... [Such] expressions of moralistic talk probably reinforce the existing tendencies toward moral silence..." (Bird 1996, pp. 3-4).<sup>2</sup>

Other important points and illustrations are nicely summarized in advance in what serves as a main thesis of Bird's book:

*"Many people in business fail to speak up about their moral convictions. They fail to do so in a number of different ways. As a result many of the ethical issues and concerns facing business are not addressed as fully, as clearly, and as well as they would be if people voiced their concerns. Moral silence is occasioned and reinforced by the correlative phenomena of moral blindness and moral deafness (as well as the quite opposite and contrary practice of giving voice to moralistic concerns)..."* (Bird 1996, p. 4; our italics)

As is Fred Bird, we are mainly concerned with attitude-behavior *gaps*, or in his words, with the "inconsistencies" between moral sensitivity, observations and convictions on the one hand and not speaking up or not voicing them -- not acting in accordance with them--on the other. Bird identifies and elaborates on a large number of relevant dimensions and factors relating to understanding of moral concerns, of voicing such concerns, and for investigating the inconsistencies between one's existing concerns and not voicing them. He especially

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<sup>1</sup> See also Bird and Waters 1989, Bird 2005.

<sup>2</sup> The points quoted here are elaborated further in Bird 1996, ch. 2.

emphasizes barriers to voicing moral concerns.<sup>3</sup> We agree with Bird's suggested "therapy" for the diagnosed problem, that one needs to "cultivate" good moral conversations (see Bird, 1996, chapter 7; for his summary exhibit on p. 239 see our appendix #1 below), which he presents as the opposite of moral muteness and silence. When it comes to the *format* and to helping students *learn* how to undertake such moral conversations, however, we suggest using a specific design, Socratic dialogue (SD) design, to which we now turn our attention.

The SD design or methodology presented here has been used within and outside a community of developers and followers for about 90 years, both in academic and in non-academic, in non-business and in business settings. As we discuss further below, one of the defining aspects of such a design for business ethics teaching is its focus on having students, for example, go back and forth between self-experienced, well-chosen, practical, concrete examples on the one hand, and developing conceptual and theoretical abstractions on the other. In our view, SD design can be used both as a general model for moral conversations and moral consensus-seeking, and for training students in this specific bottom-up dialogue process. Inspired by SD design, students can learn how to develop a shared understanding of when and how to voice moral concerns in their own life circumstances, then transfer this learning to similar or other business-ethics related topics.

### **Socratic dialogue**

In this paper, Socratic dialogue does *not* denote Socrates' dialogues, written up and published by Plato, but refers to its reinvention and redesign by two German philosophers, Leonard Nelson (1922) and his student Gustav Heckmann (1981).<sup>4</sup> In their design, Socratic dialogue (SD) is a facilitated small group process (typically with 6-12 participants) which can last over several days(!),<sup>5</sup> where ethical, epistemological or other philosophical topics are examined jointly by the participants, aiming at a consensus. This specific form of a Socratic dialogue is described as follows (Kessels et al. 2009, p. 36):<sup>6</sup>

"The Socratic dialogue is an attempt to come to a common answer through systematic deliberation about a fundamental question. It is not about merely

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<sup>3</sup> See Brinkmann 2013 for a reconstruction of Bird's thoughts in 15 theses and for a visualization of their interdependencies.

<sup>4</sup> For a more thorough presentation see Brinkmann 2015.

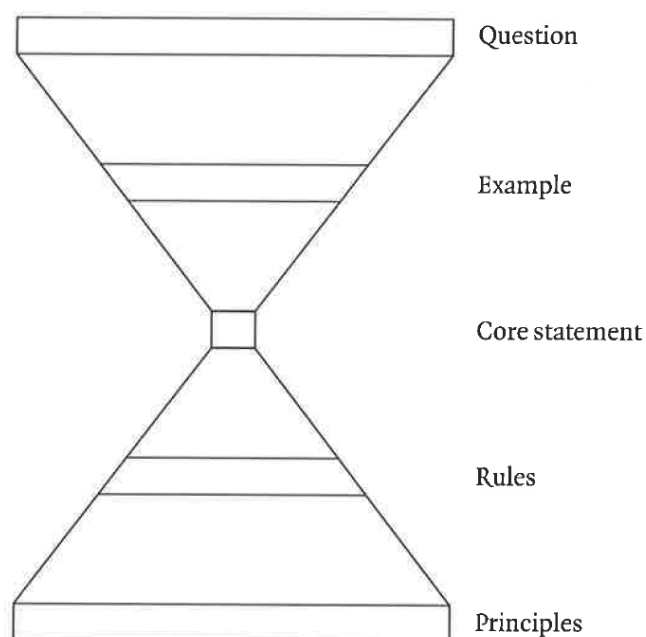
<sup>5</sup> L. Nelson and G. Heckmann as university teachers used typically weekly seminars of two or so hours over a whole semester. SD societies such as the German one spend typically a long weekend to a short week, i.e. 3-5 days (in practice, half days, see e.g. [http://www.philosophisch-politische-akademie.de/download/2014/Einladung\\_2014.pdf](http://www.philosophisch-politische-akademie.de/download/2014/Einladung_2014.pdf)). While idealistic supporters spend that much time, voluntarily, there is a discussion about how short SD one should offer for reaching important target groups, without sacrificing the integrity and identity of SD as an in-depth investigation without any time constraints (see e.g. Herstad 2002 or Boers' and Gronke's contributions in Brune & Krohn 2005, pp 15-23).

<sup>6</sup> See in addition presentations such as <http://www.sfc.org.uk/> [acc 28 May 2014], classic L. Nelson. <http://www.friesian.com/method.htm> [acc 28 May 2014], van Rossem [http://www.dialogism.org/socratic\\_dialogue\\_KvRossem.pdf](http://www.dialogism.org/socratic_dialogue_KvRossem.pdf) [acc 28 May 2014]. The classical texts are by Nelson (1922/1949) and by Heckmann (1981). For introductions to the SD methodology see e.g. Birnbacher 2010, Hansen 2000, Kessels 1996, Kessels et al. 2009, Krohn 1998.

theoretical questions. Rather it is about questions which derive from concrete experiences, accessible to all participants. The conversation in fact is a systematic reflection upon experiences. It derives its name from Socrates, Plato's teacher. He tried to bring people to a deeper understanding by asking questions, by inquiring about examples and analyzing experiences. His idea behind this was that one does not gain understanding by getting it 'dished up', but only by thinking for oneself..."

An easy way of presenting and understanding a SD is as a process of steps or stages, which can be visualized as an hour glass (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: The hour glass metaphor of a Socratic dialogue process**  
(source Kessels et al. 2009, p. 40).



Or in prose: The *dialogue question*,<sup>7</sup> what the dialogue is about and what participants (in our case students) find a shared answer to, is often given in the invitation (for example to the German language or English language SDs in Germany or in the UK, see <http://www.sfc.org.uk/> [acc 5 March 2015]). But the dialogue question could also be developed in a dialogue stage 0 (or prior to the actual dialogue where the participants (in our case the students) receive or have access to the question which allows them some time to begin to think about it), jointly by the participants (cf e.g. Gronke and Nitsch 2002).

A Socratic Dialogue is typically *introduced* by the facilitator (business ethics professor) with information about the dialogue rules<sup>8</sup> and principles, and the roles, rights and duties of

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Hansen 2000, p. 88, with 6 criteria for good questions: philosophical, non-empirical, simple wording, not potentially risky/ embarrassing to participants, motivating and relevant to all participants, personally exemplifiable for all participants.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. for example Krohn's four *indispensable features* of SD in the Nelson-Heckmann tradition (see <http://www.sfc.org.uk/socratic-dialogue-2/> [acc 28 May 2014]. For similar guides see esp Birnbacher's

the facilitator and participants. A few comments could be made about the dialogue topic, and the participants might be asked for their preliminary answer to the dialogue question. *Experience* is important, as an ever-present reference for the dialogue process. In practice, this means that, as a start, students would be invited to share their own personal experience or story,<sup>9</sup> as the best possible illustrations of the dialogue topic. A key sentence or two about each of these stories is then written down on posters, for example using a flip-chart. Among these stories, the participants then need to agree on *one story* as the best possible illustration of the dialogue theme.<sup>10</sup> Still in the experience stage, the owner of the selected story then shares additional information and answers questions, for reaching a better and more common understanding of his/her story, almost taking a step from individual towards shared ownership. During and at the end of this *story elaboration* stage the final version of the story is typically hand-written on posters. (The posters are then posted on the walls, where all the students can view them during the dialogue.)

What follows is a more in depth investigation of the story/topic, an exercise in philosophizing (being philosophers rather than talking about philosophers), a process of moving back and forth between the story and the development of carefully agreed-on abstractions. More broadly, these *abstraction stages* focus on one or more core sentence(s), arguments and principle(s), a procedure which in the Socratic dialogue tradition is referred to as “regressive abstraction” (see e.g. Nelson 1949, p. 10; Heckmann 1981, pp. 59 ff; Kopfwerk Berlin in Brune and Krohn 2005, pp. 88 ff, esp. pp 96-110; Kessels 1996, p. 61):<sup>11</sup>

“... Regressive abstraction... implies that, starting from a concrete example, (we investigate) ... the presuppositions that the example is based upon (regression). By making these explicit ... (it becomes) ... possible to examine them, sharpen or justify them, and hold them to scrutiny. Thus we may develop general insights (abstraction)...” (Kessels 1996, p. 12)

At the end of the dialogue, the participants (in our case business students) will typically have produced a few *agreed-on theses or principles*, perhaps an *agreed-on answer to the dialogue-question* (written down on posters, of course). In other words, the SD design results in more consensus, in a much more investigated consensus, and in an accompanying shared feeling that each of the dialogue participants could continue with further sharing of personal ethical or morally-focused stories, with further dialogue or good conversation.

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rules of procedure (2010, pp 223-230), summarized in Brinkmann 2015, table 12.1, or Hansen’s 24 (!) “good advices” for participation in a Socratic dialogue (2000, pp 116-119)

<sup>9</sup> The importance of experience-sharing and moral sharing can’t be overstated: cf Brinkmann and Sims 2001, p. 177, e.g. with a figure on p 175

<sup>10</sup> See for example Krohn in Brune and Krohn 2005, p. 10 or Hansen 2000, p. 91 with five criteria each for what can be considered good examples stories.

<sup>11</sup> Another way of understanding SD is to read SD process descriptions such as van Hooft 1999, Siebert 2001 (pp. 285-296. 297-299), Saran <http://www.sfcg.org.uk/an-example-socratic-dialogue/> [acc 28 May 2014], Kessels 1998 (*Dismissal ethics*),. For listings of topics see e.g. Krohn in Saran and Neisser 2004, pp. 17-18. See also Brinkmann 2015, referring to three self-experienced SD examples

### **Three short format Socratic dialogues with business students and with conference participants - about “voicing moral concern”**

We claim that it makes sense to try out a SD design rather than only reading about it. Furthermore, the argument is that there are clear synergies between our objective of marketing SD design as a productive element in business ethics teaching and our objective of putting the voicing of moral concern on the business ethics teaching agenda (following Bird’s (1996) suggestion of encouraging good conversations as a remedy against moral muteness).

In this section we share the impressions and results from three dialogues for illustration, with a similar design and the same topic, of when and how best to voice moral concern. All three dialogues also had an element of intercultural communication, with participants from different countries and with different native languages. First we present a dialogue which was conducted with business students. For broadening the illustration, we also report briefly two additional short dialogues that took place in the context of an International conference about Socratic Philosophy in Berlin in July 2013.<sup>12</sup>

The first dialogue took place at one of the authors’ business schools in October 2013, as an integrated part of an elective bachelor level course in business and professional ethics (offered in English). There was one facilitator, nine international business students<sup>13</sup> and one of the authors as an observer. After a brief presentation round and presentation of Socrates and the SD design, the facilitator asked the observer why he found the topic of “voicing moral concerns” interesting (his answer was: Because the topic refers to moral sensitivity and how it develops, and to the risk of becoming morally co-responsible as a silent bystander). The facilitator then turned the topic into a philosophical question, “What *is* voicing moral concerns”, or “What *does it mean*”, or in our case, “*When is it right to voice moral concerns?*” Then the students were given a few minutes to think about and recall their own example stories, and seven students identified *eight* stories:

- Latino discrimination at Disneyland
- The violent father
- Shop-lifting friends
- Wasting food
- Colleague cheating (on their wives), experienced and mentioned twice
- Offending opponents (football supporters)
- Gossiping behind other people’s backs.

After checking to see if any of the students wanted to withdraw their stories from consideration, the students were asked to talk with each other in pairs or with others in

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<sup>12</sup> Philosophizing through Dialogue / Dialogisches Philosophieren, 7th International Conference of PPA, GSP, SFCP and the Institute of Comparative Ethics at the Free University of Berlin

<sup>13</sup> 4 males, 5 females; 4 Germans, 2 French, 1 Icelander, 1 Swedish, 1 Mexican – no native speakers of English.



close proximity and agree on the most popular story (student M's "violent father" story). Student M's story was then told to all dialogue participants:

*"A year ago, my student roommate asked for an opinion and for advice regarding a story from a kindergarten internship, where a four year-old girl in a random conversation mentioned that her father sometimes was beating her, or her mother. I and my roommate problematized jointly what to do, pros and cons. We eventually concluded that it was right to inform the supervisor."*

As a next step, M was asked factual questions by the other students. Rather than writing the story on a poster (the usual SD procedure), the facilitator asked all the other students if they now had a clear enough picture or understanding of the story. The facilitator also asked a few additional factually-related questions in order to make the example as concrete as possible.

After these stages, the story had become "shared property" among the dialogue participants. As a further check another student was asked to tell the story once more. Student C did so, fairly well (and a few additional aspects were added). Then, the facilitator proposed a sub-question, about *when* in M's story M or V, his friend, had *made the right choices (or "decisions")*? The following answers were suggested:

- When V tells M, moral sharing
- Talking to someone you can trust, who takes your best interest into consideration
- Calming oneself down (by sharing the story)
- A third rational person can be helpful
- Right means that one feels a strong ease (when sharing the story).

For further elaboration, the following headlines seemed fruitful: It was good that...

- M did not push V, but left the decision to him
- That a space was opened for exploration
- That one avoided un-wanted responsibility
- M (was aware that he) perhaps did not know the whole story.

It was right to...

- Listen to the girl's story (this way he got more information and gave her a good experience)
- Talk with the supervisor

- Who had more experience, knew more, was responsible, could make a more informed decision, could collect more information.

In order to do the right thing, one should

1. Make sure that we have the whole story
  - a. Collect enough arguments
  - b. Collect background information
  - c. Cultural information
  - d. Take the time to think
2. Get another more neutral and rational opinion
3. Choose the right moment
4. Think about the consequences, be prepared (for yourself and for others involved)
5. Take care of yourself
6. Talk with the right people
7. Find the right way to express, to voice.

For the remaining time, the dialogue focused on answering the facilitator's question about how best one could generalize the reflections and recommendations about the investigated case. For this purpose, the last poster (with points 1-7 above) was checked against the other example stories:

- K's gossip situation
- T's wasting food situation
- The cheating colleagues I & II

The dialogue students agreed that at least some of the recommendations depended on the situation, so looking for and testing the best principles needed to take that into consideration.

As an additional illustration, we also include descriptions of two short format 90 minute SDs from a conference about Socratic philosophy in Berlin, which were included in the program, about "our" topic. The question was written down on a poster and explained a bit further: "What are the difficulties related to expressing moral concerns?" The first one of these two short format dialogues was done in German, the other one in English.<sup>14</sup> In both

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<sup>14</sup> The dialogue question in German was: "Was sind die Schwierigkeiten beim Äussern moralischer Bedenken?" In both dialogues there was one facilitator and two of the authors were observers. In the German language dialogue there were 7 female participants and one male; in the English language dialogue 5 females and 3 males.

dialogues there was one facilitator and two of the authors took on the role of observers, one taking notes and the other one writing on the posters, as dictated by the facilitator.

The *dialogue in German* had the following structure: After a brief participant presentation, first participant remarks were invited on the dialogue question (What are the difficulties related to expressing moral concerns?), based on each one's own experience. The intention was to help "jog" the participants' memory and to reduce stress and any possible barriers against sharing the story. Next, reasons for and against expressing moral concerns were collected, including criteria for voicing versus not voicing one's concern. Participants were then invited to share their stories and the following one was selected:

*"My neighbor had offensive racist attitudes and openly expressed them, but he is otherwise a nice and friendly person. I didn't voice my disagreement and concern."*

Given the limited time available, the final stage consisted of a collection of good reasons or recommendations for and against expressing concerns. The most explicit contributions were:

- Express your concerns but mitigate them at the same time... Try to be diplomatic, perhaps use humor, be respectful
- Don't spoil the atmosphere and ask yourself beforehand if the voicing will have an impact
- It depends on the situation, keep the dialogue possibilities open, don't be judgmental
- Success and risk evaluation are primary
- Is the conflict worth-while?

The other *dialogue in English* had a similar structure. After a brief participant presentation, short examples for the dialogue question were invited, with a focus on the *difficulties* with voicing moral concerns. During this preliminary examination the following arguments were shared and written down:

- Difficult to judge if the voicing will help
- Social pressure might be in the way
- The counterpart might feel bad and the relationship is put at risk
- The *moral* issue might be uncertain and the choice of the channel is difficult
- You don't want the counterpart to close down. Power might be an important aspect
- Do I accept my sacrifice, i.e. the risk of spoiling the relationship?
- Your judgment risks to challenge the self-image of the counterpart.

One example story was then chosen and examined further (there was not sufficient time to put notes on the poster):

*"As a foreigner without knowledge of German language nor German culture I witnessed a father who twisted his 7 year-or-so old daughter's ear (in a rather violent*

*way) for emphasizing an instruction, to behave carefully in traffic. I wondered if I should speak up, but I didn't."*

As noted earlier, the clearest common denominator of these three dialogues, beyond their topic, is their short format. While such a short format could be seen as an advantage in a business ethics class context and even more so in business practitioner contexts, the SD community would suspect that short format dialogues demonstrate what is right by doing it wrong. A primary risk in such short format SDs concerns the facilitator's primary function, that he/she meets expectations of furthering efficiency and the production of visible results, contrary to the "standard" expectation of siding with the slow thinkers and of slowing down the process, in order to give all participants the opportunity for reflection. Another risk is that the dialogue process becomes shortened from its outcome side: the true and patiently reached consensus about principles, answers to the dialogue question across stories, and other abstractions. Participants in short format dialogues are more often than not left with an open ending, we hope with a willingness but perhaps without the ability to spend sufficient time for clearing up and concluding. At best participants will identify good questions for future dialogues. Such sub-questions which arose either during or right after the three dialogues summarized above were: How can one *notice* a moral concern? How can one formulate, *express and share* a moral concern? What is a *good conversation* about one's moral concern? Are there any *barriers* related to the voicing of moral concerns (and if so, what kind)? Are there any *risks* related to the voicing of moral concerns? If so, then how can one *learn* to voice moral concerns? (As stated above and implicitly throughout this paper, we tend to answer the last question with a "yes", by Socratic dialogue).

### **Preparation possibilities**

If there is only limited time available for a SD as part of an ordinary business ethics class (for example, with 3 or 4 hour time slots only) an interesting question is if students should prepare their self-experienced incident stories *beforehand*, and then bring them to the dialogue. Given the focus of our paper, the business ethics teacher could consider asking the students to complete an exercise, "Voicing a Moral Concern," before the dialogue. In this preparation exercise, the challenge for the students is to increase their awareness of how they first noticed and then experienced a particular situation with some "moral intensity" (Jones 1991), where they felt they perhaps should or should not voice their concern. In such an exercise, the students should think through a number of questions for themselves, preferably writing them down, before and/or while writing up "their" self-experienced story (which then is brought to class). Students are asked to: *Think of a self-experienced story where you considered voicing versus not voicing your moral concern. Your assignment is to write up this story on a third to half a page, and to bring it to the scheduled Socratic dialogue. Consider the following seven questions when writing up your story:*

1. How would you describe the incident in simple terms – what happened? What was the moral or ethical ingredient in the situation?
2. Could you try to recall your first thoughts (e.g., surprise, confusion, anxiety)?

3. When did you first become aware that you were not sure whether or not you could or should voice your moral concern?
4. What made you decide that you had to do something (choose to voice or not to voice your concern)?
5. What did you do, what actions did you take (e.g., voice or not voice your moral concern)?
6. Was there any short term and/or long term impact of your decision or action?
7. If you could “rewind the tape”: could you have done and would you have done something different? And if so, what would you do differently and why?

When the dialogue begins, the dialogue facilitator as part of his or her introduction should mention that the purposes of the assignment area) to assist the students, for example, with reflecting on and recalling their self-experienced stories, b) to stress that the questions are meant to be a bridge or foundation which can be taken down once the story has been written up, and c) to reemphasize the point that there is a clear difference between a dialogue and a traditional academic discussion. For example, while a dialogue is a joint investigation oriented towards reaching a consensus, a shared standpoint, by careful listening and questioning, a discussion would be competitive, aiming at winning debates “against” other participants. If the facilitator / business ethics teacher wants to shorten the process even further, he/she can also consider dividing the students into groups of 2 or 3 to share their stories and try to select one of the two or three stories, noting the agreed-on criteria for the selection.

### **Debriefing possibilities**

For the participants of a Socratic dialogue, while it is in progress and right after it is concluded, the process of slow investigation and consensus-building is typically experienced as rewarding in itself, while any additional clear results perhaps should be welcomed as a bonus (rather than as a promised and expected outcome). The previously mentioned posters look at first sight like a visible outcome, taped on the walls, visible and re-readable to everyone (and one can take photos of them, but they are there at least as much for process documentation and--as a welcomed side-effect-- for slowing down the dialogue process, by spending the necessary time to capture and write down their words and thoughts). Still, in a paper about the educational use of SD design, it is tempting to draft and discuss follow-up and debriefing possibilities (Hunsaker 1978)<sup>15</sup> *after* a SD is over, aiming at additional student participant learning and reflection.

Similarly as preparation for a SD, the business ethics teacher could consider a follow-up *student assignment*, by asking the students to write no more than one page about what they learned from the specific dialogue experience, liked and disliked about it, as an input to a later class meeting, for example a week after the dialogue. Depending on what comes up, it has been the authors’ experience that there seem to be several debriefing possibilities as provided below. These debriefing possibilities can be used separately or in combinations

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<sup>15</sup> Cf with similar thoughts Pearson & Smith 1986, p. 156 or Thatcher 1986, p. 151.

depending on the preferences of the business ethics teacher. We have ordered the possibilities here by closeness to the example topic and its specific challenges, but in practice it is up to the business ethics teacher to balance considerations for what comes up in the follow-up assignment and what is the focus within a given context (e.g. a given course design with published objectives and topics which need to be covered).

### **Debriefing possibility 1:**

#### **Moral concerns: Feeling them, accepting them and then voicing or not voicing them**

In this instance, the debriefing represents more or less a continuation of the dialogue (with a given topic) after it is finished, for example continuing with the regressive abstraction stage which often is shortened or even sacrificed when SDs “only” have 3-5 hours at their disposal, and/or by going through any written assignments as described above. Given the focus of this paper, one could also, for example, talk about selected passages from Fred Bird’s (1996) book and any recommended further readings, about *barriers* to seeing, hearing or verbalizing moral concerns. In addition, one could also focus on Bird’s (1996) recommended therapy, learning and “cultivating moral conversations” (cf. appendix 1 below), or about similar suggestions of Laura Nash (1996, p. 25; cf also Sims 2004; Sims, 2011), and then focus on to what extent participating in a SD (or several) represents a learning by doing experience regarding “good conversations” (with or without a thematic focus on investigating “how best to voice moral concern” or a similar topic). It is important to note that here students can learn an ideal-typical method for moral conversation in a safe environment, where they can reflect on, share, test, expand, enrich, and deepen their understanding of business ethics, on a personal level and beyond. Finally, instead of referring to additional readings, one could also invite a further conceptual clarification of moral concerns and of voicing them, with or without referring to neighbor concepts such as moral sensitivity and moral intensity (e.g. as individual and situational triggers of moral concerns), or to voicing as communication (both as a more or less ideal sender – receiver relation, with a more or less well-coded message).

### **Debriefing possibility 2:**

#### **Do language and cultural barriers make the voicing of moral concerns even riskier?**

Now and then the dialogue participants have different national and/or cultural backgrounds (as in the three dialogue examples presented above).<sup>16</sup> In such a case, debriefing should also invite reflections on situations where voicing of moral concerns can be more difficult and risky, because the actors don’t belong to the same culture and have different language competencies (see Lindemann and Brinkmann 2014 for further elaboration). If such an intercultural communication dimension hasn’t been addressed during the SD already, one could now ask the students to share any self-experienced moral conflict situations as

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<sup>16</sup> All the three dialogues described above were among participants with different language backgrounds. In the dialogue in German, the participants had German as a native language or as a second (or third) language. In the two other dialogues, English was used. In the international exchange student dialogue the selected story was told in English by a German, in the second dialogue the story was shared in German by a Dutch participant, in the third one shared in English by a native speaker of English.

illustrations, and perhaps even invite some role play with non-native language students voicing their moral concern and native language students listening, and vice versa. As an outcome of such a debriefing the business ethics teacher should reemphasize what has been noted previously about the SD methodology in general and the three reported short format dialogues in particular. In our experience, as long as there is a willingness by students to “talk understandably, to listen well and to aim at a consensus”, as one would say in the SD community, differences in native language and cultural backgrounds increase rather than decrease the mutual learning potential of a SD. If such heterogeneity of student backgrounds and competencies slows down the SD process we believe this can be an advantage rather than a disadvantage.

### **Debriefing possibility 3:**

#### **Socratic dialogue as a model for learning normative business ethics by doing it**

As indicated earlier, a primary benefit of SD methodology is related to promoting *philosophical* conversations, its use for learning applied *normative ethics* such as business ethics, by doing it oneself and together with others, rather than by reading texts about Kantianism or utilitarianism for example, or about discourse ethics. If a business ethics teacher schedules a SD session as part of a business ethics course (as one of the authors has done), a session about moral philosophical approaches would typically come not before, but *after* a SD session. The debriefing after a SD could then promote and prepare the moral philosophy session which follows. More specifically and as a transition, a business ethics teacher could (with a simplification) present SD as an educational operationalization of discourse ethical criteria for ideal conversation situations. In SDs as in discourse ethics, students are expected to respect one another as equals, beginning with a firm idealistic belief that the best argument will convince and eventually produce a shared consensus, by legitimate procedure.<sup>17</sup> We believe it is also worth noting that the SD design presented in this paper was originally developed by a university philosopher (Leonard Nelson) who strongly disliked the fact that his students learned philosophy without learning to philosophize. Another possibility for a future session on moral philosophy could be to identify typical Kantian, utilitarian, virtue ethical and other types of arguments in the SD posters or in any post-SD reflection assignment texts. But more importantly, to repeat, a SD about an ethical topic offers an extended opportunity (e.g., half-day to whole-day or even longer) intense learning by doing experience on how challenging, important, and rewarding it can be to reach a truly shared consensus about a specified moral issue, based on a careful development and investigation of examples and good arguments, patience, and careful listening.

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<sup>17</sup> See e.g. Beschoner 2006 who compares Bird’s moral conversation approach with discourse business ethics approaches, and/or Gronke 1996 who examines Socratic dialogue methodology in its relation to discourse ethics. About the “counterfactual” (or idealistic, or counter-realistic) presuppositions made in discourse ethics see e.g. Gimmler’s presentation (Gimmler no year) or Bohman & Rehg 2014, who present a solid argument in their article about Habermas in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

#### **Debriefing possibility 4:**

#### **How could one best describe, understand, predict and improve the voicing of moral concerns, in practice?**

In the previous debriefing possibility, the primary focus is on constructively addressing *normative* questions in small groups, with the aim of reaching a justified and shared consensus. Learning normative philosophy by doing it represents a core strength of SDs. On the other hand, SDs are *not* about asking and answering *empirical* questions. This does not exclude, however, that SDs can be potentially helpful with the development of interesting, relevant, fruitful, and well-formulated research questions (which then could be investigated with more or less traditional empirical methodologies, such as surveys, experiments, case studies), in a similar way, for example, as in focus groups. This is especially the case if a SD is part of a business ethics course which also contains descriptive business ethics as a course topic.

In the situation above, the business ethics teacher could use a debriefing after a SD in a similar way for preparing a session about descriptive business ethics. The business ethics teacher could then ask the students to propose empirical research questions departing from the dialogue topic which, for example, relate to the voicing of moral concerns. For this debriefing possibility, the learning from the dialogues presented above suggest as a point of departure a pre-understanding of moral concern and voicing as a dialectic relationship. Moral concern and voicing seem to be interdependent, with moral concern as a trigger and voicing it (or not) as a possible response to it. In other words, moral concern and voicing can often explain one another – concern is something that deserves to or should be voiced, and voice is a focused, boundary-setting form of communication. In our view, all of these questions have interesting connotations in the interface between normative and descriptive ethics.<sup>18</sup> One might consider, for example, whether or not identifying and then improving the (empirical) conditions for the voicing of moral concerns can be at least as important as discussing them (normatively) only, or if the empirical likelihood of success versus failure of voicing a moral concern serves as a primary (utilitarian) argument for voicing (or not). Such considerations could then easily raise questions and perhaps inspire assumptions about the

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<sup>18</sup> The distinction between normative and descriptive approaches in business ethics is a standard topic in introductory business ethics courses and textbooks. Their (dialectic) relationship is also and not the least among the traditional grand identity issues within our business ethics community, with trained philosophers and trained social scientists as *prima facie* experts (see e.g. with several classical papers *Business Ethics Quarterly* vol 4#2, vol 18#4, and vol 10#1). See Alzola 2011 for a thorough review (84 titles), where clear “separation” versus “integration” theses are presented first, but then transcended by a pragmatic “reconciliation” position, in order to “...preserve the identity of the normative and the descriptive inquiries to business ethics while acknowledging the limitations they reciprocally place on each other...” (2011, p. 31). Or see, perhaps, still Byrne 2002 who in his more or less descriptive review of 141 (!) titles criticizes a widespread tradition of “pro forma” or “ceremonial” references to normative philosophy, and then drafts “future possibilities” for business ethics “beyond its hybrid stage”.



more or less complex (empirical) interdependencies of factors that determine if the voicing of concern is not only more or less justified, but also more or less successful.<sup>19</sup>

### **Socratic Dialogue Design as a form of Experiential Learning**

Socratic dialogue in our view is a form of experiential learning as suggested by Kolb (1984) and provides students with the opportunity of "learning by doing." The SD design engages students in a dialogue in which they play an active role by sharing their stories and experiences and then reflecting about them, for example regarding voicing or not voicing their moral concerns,.

Based on Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, "learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 38). The learners have to complete a four stage learning cycle in a sequence, but the learning can take place in any point (Healey and Jenkins 2000; Felton and Sims, 2005). Kolb (1984) states that in order to gain genuine knowledge from an experience, certain abilities are required (Sims 2011; Sims 2004):

- The learner must be willing to be actively involved in the experience (*sharing of one's story*);
- The learner must be able to reflect on the experience (*reflecting on the question at hand*);
- The learner must possess and use analytical skills to conceptualize the experience (*engaging in dialogue and good conversation or "philosophizing"*); and
- The learner must possess decision-making and problem solving skills in order to use the new ideas gained from the experience (*developing a better understanding of how to voice one's moral concerns or confront moral muteness*).

It is important to note that Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory focuses on individual processes while SD focuses on a combination of collective and individual learning. However, while this difference exists we are more concerned about the overlap between Kolb's experiential learning theory (e.g., the four stage learning cycle) and its overlap with the SD design, as highlighted in the parenthetical information at the end of each of the bulleted points above. The SD design proposed in this paper, like experiential learning, is effective as it involves students' reflecting on and sharing past and current experiences and making observations, in this case on voicing moral concerns. Thus, our premise that SD provides a way for experiential learning to be incorporated in the process of learning in business ethics teaching efforts or "learning by doing."

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<sup>19</sup> As preparation for a session on descriptive business ethics, one could ask the students to try to visualize and/or to verbalize in prose how (which?) assumed key elements influence one another, e.g. using a traditional *dependent variable format* (What increases and what decreases the likelihood of voicing a given moral concern?), or looking at the voicing of moral concern as a question of critical success factors for a *communication process*, in a more or less traditional format, where senders send messages to receivers who then react (or not), and where messages can be understood as a function of their semiotic contexts, i.e. as coded thoughts about referents.

### **Socratic Dialogue Design and Good (Moral) Conversation**

In addition to Fred Bird's (1996) views introduced earlier in this paper, SD design can also be positioned in relation to the ideals of the moral conversation as suggested by Nash (1996). More specifically, Nash suggests that students (and for purposes of this paper the business ethics instructor) can be genuinely respectful of each other's efforts to share stories and take conversational risks in constructing and voicing more cogent moral discourse in a safe environment. Additionally, the SD design also allows for those business ethics teachers, who are interested in doing so, to work through difficult ethical or moral readings, scenarios and exercises, to find common classroom language to express individual interpretations of the readings, scenarios and exercises (cf an implicit eight step procedure for furthering conversations see Sims 2011, p. 103, adapted from Nash 1996).<sup>20</sup>

### **Final remarks and cautionary reflections about limitations**

The point of departure for this paper has been that *moral muteness* (coined as a term in Bird 1996 and 2005) is a fruitful topic for business ethics teaching, raising the question of how one best can describe, understand, and transcend it (that is moral blindness, deafness, silence, one at a time or combined)? The follow-up question is then under what conditions *moral conversations* for sharing and voicing moral concerns are good alternatives to such moral muteness and good ways out of it?

In this paper we have argued that Socratic dialogues (in a specific design) can help with Fred Bird's (1996) project, both as a methodology and substantially, by inviting participants, in our case business students, to learn by doing, for productive moral conversations, and by putting the voicing of moral concern on the dialogue agenda.

Socratic dialogue design has its primary benefits when it comes to teaching and learning normative business ethics, more specifically within learning how to move back and forth between abstraction and concretization, of conceptual clarification and of consensus-building in small groups. But most importantly, the proof of the Socratic dialogue claim is less in talking about it than in practicing it, trying it out by oneself. Socratic dialogue can also have secondary benefits, by furthering a sensibility to conceptual development, not the least with a focus on interdependencies among concepts

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<sup>20</sup> These eight steps are: (1) An honest effort by students to come to class prepared;(2) an acute awareness that we all have moral biases, blind spots and comfort levels with voicing moral concerns; (3) an open-mindedness by the student to the possibility of learning something from the sharing of stories and working through the SD design process; (4) a willingness to improve current moral language and skills in voicing moral concern; (5) an inclination to listen intently in order to grasp the meaning of other people's languages for and comfort levels in expressing or voicing their moral concerns; (6) an agreement that sharing, active listening, questioning, clarifying, challenging, exemplifying, and applying ideas are activities to be done in a self- and other-respecting way; (7) a realization that we will frequently get off course in our conversations because a spirit of charity, intellectual curiosity, and even playfulness will characterize many of our discussions, or with David Bromwich's words (1992): "The good conversation is not truth, or right, or anything else that may come out at the end of it, but the activity itself in its constant relation to life" (pp. 131-132); (8) an appreciation of the reality that it will take time for us to get to know each other, and a realization that eventually we will find ways to engage in robust, candid, and challenging dialogue.

In concluding this paper several cautionary reflections are worth highlighting. First, *few participants*: Socratic dialogue design normally permits only up to 12 or so participants. This means that a small class of 25 students or so would need to conduct two dialogues (bigger classes would require even more), or making the participation voluntary, with a maximum of 12 or so participants (which then should report to the full class what happened during the dialogue). Second, *time needed*: In our experience, two half days of for example 4+4 hours have worked much better than the really short versions of 3-4 hours which only were chosen as an alternative to offering no dialogue at all. Third, *attention and patience is required*. Even in the shortest dialogue versions, many participants face challenges when asked to turn off their smartphones, tablets, and computers, and to get used to the really slow conversational communication style. Fourth, the *facilitator role* can be demanding and perhaps too demanding for many business ethics teachers – for this reason it is strongly recommended to participate in one or a few of the Socratic dialogues offered on a non-profit basis, for example by the German and British societies for Socratic philosophy (see links above; students are welcome to participate, too, and get even a reduced rate). Another alternative is to ask an experienced facilitator to help out and then to participate either as an observer or as an “ordinary” group member. Fifth, and not least, one can promise to most teacher colleagues and business students that a Socratic dialogue participation represents indeed an old-fashioned *contrast experience* to much of the high speed, often superficial learning experiences that increasingly dominate business schools.

Such a design might be too much of an alternative to some business students (even if one wonders as with business ethics in general that the lower the demand the higher the need for such exposure). In other words, if a Socratic dialogue is not offered on a voluntary basis, first, there is a risk that (for the above reasons) not all students might respond favorably to Socratic Dialogue design. Second, many students might not be prepared to personally share their stories, nor will they see this as an opportunity for trying out their boundaries in such a safe environment with their fellow classmates. Even if most of the business student participants in our own experience have been very positive and partly enthusiastic about their Socratic dialogue experience, one should make sure as a teacher to give the student participants good enough and relevant enough information *beforehand*, to appeal to student idealism, but at the same time to make sure the participants show up with realistic expectations. Socratic dialogue is worth trying out.

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### **Ways of Cultivating Good Conversations**

#### **Generally**

- Encourage people to speak up because it matters and makes a difference**
- De-professionalize moral discussions and decision making**
- Allow and encourage organizational dissent**
- Help people to develop their abilities to hear and be attentive**
- Allow conversations to develop: avoid premature closure**

#### **Organizationally**

- Define speaking up as part of every manager's job description, not just as trouble shooters but as quality managers**
- Transform auditing function from one-way policing to two-way interactive activities**
- Institute regular discussions of ethics in each organizational unit**
- Establish multiple media for employee voicing**
- Establish training programs in conflict resolution**