



**Howard Harris**

## ***Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in the Business Ethics Classroom**



[1] *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* has been an integral part of the international management ethics and values course taught in the management degree at the University of South Australia since 2003. It has had a direct pedagogical value, illustrating points in the discussion of various approaches to ethics, a broader value as a demonstration that ethics is relevant in popular culture as well as in the classroom, and has been used to show that ethical questions are often complex, develop over time and cannot always be resolved in the course of a single episode or real-life exchange.

[2] Students come to a business ethics class with many of the preconceptions commonly found in the wider community. For some, ethics is unrealistic moralizing by people who are out of touch with the values of modern Western society or who do not understand the realities of the commercial world. For others, perhaps prompted by recent scandals, ethics ought to be a key element in business.

[3] Far from being theoretical moralizing, ethics is a practical activity, necessary to apply one's values in the real world. And this is no trivial task. "We constantly choose on some ground what we would reject on some other ground, or conversely. This is precisely what choice means: our numerous and in part changing concerns clash mutually in various ways, and we cannot pursue them except by restricting and postponing them, by choosing to favour one and renounce another temporarily or perhaps definitely" (Kolnai 9). *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* has proved effective in helping students appreciate this important point, and in making the corporate ethics class something more than a platform for those who want to take cheap shots at those who have acted badly.

### **The use of narrative**

[4] Although the use of literature, film and video in teaching business ethics is relatively new (Shepard, Goldsby & Gerde 1995), it has been an important component of the international management ethics and values course since its inception. Extended narrative allows students to consider more complex situations, follow the developments of character and thinking over time, and perhaps grasp the personal nature of ethics in a way that the standard business case does not allow. Narrative can also affirm the notion that ethics is a first-person activity (Elliott 2007), not something which affects only those in positions of authority, remote from the experience of many undergraduate students.

Narrative can also stimulate the moral imagination of students (and instructors) and encourage ethical reflection (Williams 1997) as it has the capacity to "work its way well

into one's thinking life" (Coles 1989, 204). One effect of this is to help in the provision of a vocabulary of ethics. Shepard and his colleagues (1995) report that American students come to business ethics classes without any vocabulary that permits them to discuss business and management decisions and dilemma in moral terms. It is little if any different in Australia.

### **Why *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*?**

[5] Each community has its own collection of narratives which provide "a common stock of moral descriptions" (Hauerwas 1981, 82; see also MacIntyre 1985), and for the contemporary undergraduate student in business, management or engineering this is more likely to be film and television than literature. For a course taught in Singapore and Hong Kong as well as Australia, and where one third of the students in the Australian classes come from outside Australia, film and television is likely to be the only common experience for participants and teaching staff.

[6] I believed that a television series would be more effective than a film because its multiple showings would increase the probability that students and faculty would have some exposure to it. Within a series there was also the chance (but by no means the certainty) that character and issues developed through time. The selection of a program which was at the time currently being broadcast also provided a desirable link to popular culture, reinforcing the view that ethics is something that one does, and does today as much as Confucius and Aristotle did over two thousand years ago.

[7] *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was chosen because a certain consistency of values was apparent throughout the series. In addition there was a body of analysis, it provided clear and concise examples of the key concepts in the course, it showed how people put values into practice, and there was evidence of the growth and development of character over the course of the series.

[8] As the series created by Joss Whedon and first shown on television in 1997 has run through seven seasons, there is ample opportunity for character development. Within the "Buffyverse", the world in which the action takes place, there is a recognizable moral structure (Greene & Yuen 2003), although it is not obvious or explicit (Forster 2003). There is an ongoing respect for the lives of humans, as distinct from vampires, those who are no longer alive, without souls but not yet dead. Buffy has a role or duty as the slayer, a role she cannot simply abandon for, so the story goes, there is one person chosen in every age called to the task of slaying vampires, and for the present she, Buffy Summers, a high school student in Sunnydale, California, where the school has been built over the entrance to the demonic world, is that chosen person. She overcomes her personal doubts to do "the work I have to do" ("The Gift", 5022).

[9] The choice of the series for the class was strengthened by the existence of a body of scholarly analysis of the program, not only as film or popular culture but also as applied philosophy. Students and instructors would have access to the refereed journal, *Slayage: The international online journal of Buffy studies*, websites dedicated to philosophical analysis of the series and its companion *Angel* (see Websites in reference list), and even at the time two collections of papers (Wilcox & Lavery 2002; South 2003). The literature has grown over the years as the course has been delivered (Riess 2004; Wilcox 2005; Levine & Parks 2007).

[10] Within the course, the early topics focused on the main ethical concepts—deontology, consequentialism, virtue ethics, relativism, psychological egoism and rights—and if *Buffy* was to be useful in the course it was essential that the series provided clear

examples of each of the key concepts for use in the initial lectures. Individual scenes were identified which provided examples of consequentialism (‘Bad Girls’, 3014), virtue ethics (‘The Freshman’, 4001) and a rule-based approach to ethical decision making (‘Ted’, 2011).

[11] The context of the series is one in which action is the dominant mode of activity, rather than discussion or entertainment—vampires are slain, martial arts abound, people get hurt. Using *Buffy* in the course would therefore be consistent with the view that ethics was related to action and not solely an impractical, intellectual activity.

Finally, *Buffy* demonstrated a level of complexity in the issues dealt with and in the development of character which could be used to show the importance of context in ethical decision making and provide both a model and some evidence that moral development is possible. As this was an important aim of the course, it was preferable to use a narrative in which the change in characters could not only be seen, but also could be attributed to events, reflection and interaction.

[12] Television programs exhibit different levels of complexity, and Richard Greene and Wayne Yuen (2003, p. 277) have developed a scheme in which the ‘varying degrees of reflexivity and allowances for shades of moral ambiguity’ which are used in moral argument can be classified. They place at one end of the spectrum those shows which present a ‘relatively clear-cut instance of right and wrong where it only remains for the characters to find their way to the patently correct answer’ (pp. 277-8). More sophisticated are those which employ a ‘clown’ who adopts positions which are ultimately rejected; Greene and Yuen include *Married with Children* and *The Jeffersons* in this category. Then come ‘faux reality’ shows such as *ER* and *NYPD Blue*, where apparently complex moral dilemmas are presented. Whilst these programs provide an insight into the range of tough ethical choices which face people in the real world, they give neither guidance as to the means of resolution nor any evaluation of the outcome.

[13] *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Greene and Yuen argue, goes one step further in that it does not take on moral issues as a way of raising tension as *NYPD Blue* or *ER* might, but often explores moral issues for their own sake (‘Who Are You?’ 4016], and it ‘supports the stand it takes by clever use of analogy and by appeal to general moral principles’ (Greene & Yuen 2003, 281). This alone gives it sufficient credentials for use in the course, especially as it was an explicit aim of the series. Joss Whedon ‘wanted viewers to have to work to get the show: to dedicate themselves to consistent watching and to get past the outward appearance that this was *Dawson’s Creek* with demons’ (Hertz 2004, 26).

[14] In addition to these content-related reasons for choosing *Buffy*, there is also the appeal which it has in popular culture. Not only has it achieved high audience shares among those in the late-teen/early-twenties demographic but its appeal has extended beyond that, as its ‘savvy cultural critique has spawned a vocal cadre of older, highly educated viewers’ (Anderson 2003, 43). Its passing was noted in the editorial columns of the *New York Times* (Collins 2003). It is easily acquired in video stores and is often found on cable or satellite television. The appeal of the series was further increased by the fact that Buffy Summers is a feminist, fighting intriguing and challenging battles which in earlier television decades had been left to the men (Collins 2003; Frey 2003).

[15] One last reason for the selection of *Buffy* was that it raised important ethical issues without the need to invoke issues of great controversy or division. In a tutorial which is designed to discuss ethical issues in human resource management, say, it can be distracting for students if the matter at the heart of the HRM issue is divorce or AIDS in Africa or abortion. Debate on these wider issues can overtake the discussion on the

element which is more closely linked to the course. The university offers other courses to students who wish to explore these topics.

[16] Thus the philosophy in *Buffy* was compatible with the goals of the course, it contained useful examples, was supported by an existing body of scholarship and was relevant and accessible to a wide range of students.

#### The International Management Ethics & Values course

[17] The Bachelor of Management degree is one of the University of South Australia's largest programs, with an enrolment of some 850 and an annual intake of over 300. International Management Ethics and Values is a final year course in the three-year degree program, first taught in 1999. By 2001 the enrolment had risen to 231 students and has remained over 200, including 80 international students mostly from Southeast Asian countries and 60 students in the online or external mode. It has also been taught regularly in Singapore and Hong Kong as part of the University of South Australia's overseas activity.

[18] The aim of the course is to acquaint students with significant examples of issues and dilemmas in business ethics and values, together with their theoretical context, their international dimensions and possible ways of dealing with them. By the end of the course students should be able to demonstrate how values influence a wide range of decisions in business, government and international commerce, show understanding of the major theoretical approaches to ethical decision making, and show an ability to reflect on and discuss ethical issues (Harris & Bretag 2003) .

[19] The course is international, not just in dealing with cross-border transactions and international codes, but also in providing sources outside the Western canon and in examining the impact of different national value systems and religious traditions on business practices. The course places less emphasis on dilemma resolution and more on ethical awareness and overcoming the difficulties of compliance that are significant for practising managers (Harris 1999) .

[20] The course consists of 13 topics, each including a case study, a lecture in which the topic is linked to the overall course, and an activity. The topics include an introduction to the main approaches to ethical decision making—virtue ethics, rule-based or deontological, results-based or consequential; tools and techniques for moral development at the individual, organization, and international levels; analysis of ethics in a number of relevant contexts; and the development of skills in argument and reflection (Harris 2008) .

[21] Ethics is portrayed as a practical activity, something that everyone *does*, putting values into practice in daily life and work, and the management context in which this happens is one where decision-makers are frequently called upon to describe, explain and justify decisions which have moral content (Langtry 2000) .

[22] The course was rewritten to include *Buffy* during a sabbatical at the University of Montana in Missoula in 2003, and I owe a debt to my fellow students in the Teaching Ethics in the First Person course which I attended there. To help clarify the reasons and educational purpose for including *Buffy*, and to explore further opportunities for engagement between the series, course content and students papers were prepared and delivered at two conferences—the *Staking a claim: Global Buffy and local identities* conference held in Adelaide, South Australia, in July 2003, and the annual meeting of the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics in Cincinnati in February 2004.

## How *Buffy* is used in the course

[23] The course retained its integrity and focus as a course in international management ethics and values; it did not become a course in the ethics of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Each topic included a segment in which *Buffy* provided an example of a key point. In some years one of the options for the major written assignment required students to show how they would use an episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (or a film) in an ethics training program. In the year when the final episodes of season 7 were being shown in Australia as the course began, students were invited to use this as an input to their reflections in the journal which provides a significant learning opportunity in the course (Harris & Bretag 2003) .

[24] As an example of the way in which the material was used throughout the program, in the section of the course dealing with virtue ethics, the *Buffy* segment referred to the scene in 'The Freshman' (4001) where Xander, as a colleague in the fight against vampires, says

Let me tell you something—when it's dark and I'm all alone and I'm scared or freaked out or whatever, I always think 'What would Buffy do?'

[25] For students this provides evidence that individuals do look to respected role models or exemplars in situations where there are no rules for guidance. This leads to a discussion of what it is that qualifies Buffy as an exemplar – it is not her heroism but that she lives according to 'different, more demanding standards' (Kawal 2003) . Jason Kawal's article which analyses the appropriateness of Buffy as a model of a virtuous agent is mentioned to remind students that they can test their own analysis against the extensive *Buffy* literature and to reinforce the credibility of the link between the popular television series and the academic course work.

[26] But Buffy has become an example of a virtuous agent well beyond the series itself. This is shown by reference to the feminist literature on Buffy and to the repeated comment on this aspect of the series in the *New York Times* editorial mentioned above and in many other articles which appeared in the popular media at the conclusion of the series (Levine & Parks 2007) . *Buffy* thus provides confirmation of the use of virtue ethics in real life.

[27] A more general point is then made about the consistency of character shown by Buffy and her colleagues in the fight against vampires. The sophistication of the series is apparent here as it is possible to observe development in the characters as they move from high school to college and work, and grapple with the impact of their adventures. As an objective of the course is to show that moral development is possible, this example from *Buffy* provides a potent demonstration which supports the theoretical and empirical material presented in a later topic.

[28] In practical terms within the class, all this is done by the use of a single slide in the PowerPoint presentation in the lecture, and a section of about half a page in the printed study guide provided to students. This is placed after the summary at the end of the topic so that *BtVS* it does not intrude into the course unnecessarily. A scene might be shown, either at the conclusion of the lecture or at an appropriate point during the presentation when it illustrated an important concept. The most frequently used have been from the two episodes in series 3 – 'Bad Girls' (3014) and 'Consequences' (3015) – concerned with the accidental killing of a human by Faith.

[29] For instance, the roadside confrontation between Buffy and Faith on the day

after the killing (‘Consequences’, 3015) provides a base for discussion at a number of levels. That Faith is using a consequentialist approach to ethical decision making is clearly seen in her setting the thousands they have saved against the ‘random bystander who got caught in the crossfire’ to come to the conclusion that this puts her and Buffy ‘in the plus column’. Buffy’s approach, with its references to feeling dirty and somehow sick inside, is taken as an example of virtue ethics, with Buffy recognizing that her virtue has been tarnished by the event. The scene offers other opportunities for discussion. Buffy and Faith have different views about the role of a slayer, with Faith asserting that slayers are ‘better’ than humans while Buffy places emphasis on the contribution which slayers make to society. This can be taken on to discussion of the nature of professions in contemporary society. The kerbside exchange itself can also be used as an example of engagement in ethical debate. Buffy does not let the matter fester but initiates the discussion with Faith. This is seen as commendable behavior, in line with the approach taken in the class that indifference and failure to respond are an abnegation of our ethical responsibilities. The exchange also shows that ethical dialogue is not easy; Buffy struggles for words, she and Faith are at cross-purposes, arguing from different positions, and alternatives emerge which complicate the analysis. The exchange is used to demonstrate the importance of developing the capacity to describe, explain and justify ethical decision, one of the core aims of the course. Thus a single scene can be used to initiate discussion on a range of topics within the course and can be recalled at different times as the semester progresses. Related scenes can be used to develop the concepts of professional development including the role of a community of practice and of mentors. That these are topics developed in *What would Buffy do?* (Riess 2004) and in other Buffy literature enhances the value for students.

[31] Language workshops are conducted in the third and fourth weeks of the course to assist students with the writing of case study answers and the reflective journal. Although these sessions respond to needs expressed by the many non-English speaking background (NESB) students in the class, they are open to all. A third workshop was added, conducted by an academic staff member from the school of communications who has written on *Buffy* and popular culture. In this session longer excerpts from the series were shown and the way this could be used in the essay and the journal were explained. Further opportunities to use *Buffy* as part of the development of students’ capabilities in argument are being explored.

[32] The formal evaluation of the course has included questions to assess the effectiveness of the *Buffy* material in assisting students to understand the concepts in the course and to apply them in life and work situations. Some students have seen the linkage as very helpful, while others have seen it as either irrelevant, an indulgence or a failed attempt by an aging lecturer to connect with a younger generation. As might be expected from a show with a cult-like following rather than mass appeal, there has been support from Singapore and Hong Kong students as well as from those studying in Australia. Some students have suggested other shows or individual films which provide examples of course material. Following discussion among teaching staff in the end-of-term reflection and review of the course (Harris & Bretag 2003) the use of *Buffy* has been retained. The topic-by-topic segments are included in the study guide, and at least one scene is shown in the plenary lectures. In the anonymous student assessment of the most recent (2008) offering the inclusion of *Buffy* was the most commented upon aspect of the course, with positive comments outnumbering negative by 3 to 1.

## Conclusion

[33] The television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* provides a wealth of material

which can be used to support the teaching of business ethics. The consistency of character, the extensive appeal and recognition of the series, the sophistication with which ethical issues are handled and the existence of a body of scholarship devoted to the series all contribute to its usefulness.

[34] In the international management ethics and values course taught in the University of South Australia's undergraduate management degrees in Adelaide, Singapore and Hong Kong *Buffy* has been used to support the existing curriculum and teaching program, without diverting the course into a study of the series itself.

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