

## **Business in the News: Ethical Quandaries (BIN) Challenges Faced By Students**

It's important to note that the model used in this assignment is not limited to the Enbridge oil pipeline scenario. It can be applied to any topical issue and updated as needed. The model to be followed is the two-part memo: part A offers an overview to let the student understand the issue. Part B is the challenging part when the student must develop an argument and reach conclusions that serve the audience's needs.

Students enjoy this assignment because it allows them to connect their studies to a real-world, current affairs issue. Conventionally, business schools do this through case studies and a whole industry has been built around teaching students the case study method. This assignment is different because it features a case study in real time. It has all the complexities of a traditional case but with two key distinctions:

1. **The case has not been neatly summarized by a professional writer.** Packaging complex business crises into neat packages can give the impression that even the most disastrous situations can be sanitized and neatly folded into something that has a quantifiable outcome. Life is much messier than this. In this assignment, students must search for relevant information to understand the background before they can figure out possible ways to move forward. This search process largely involves looking for online sources, mainly in the news media. This is an advantage for most students because it removes 'paper research' – finding printed source material. Additionally, online research is flexible because it can be done anywhere and anytime. This expands the amount of time a student can spend informing his or herself. It also removes the physical dependence on a library and eliminates restrictions posed by library opening times. Students can simply browse the Net at their own leisure, gathering background information. For many, this will be the first time they have closely read stories in the mainstream news media.
2. **There is no predefined outcome because the case is still playing itself out.** This is exciting for students because there are no wrong answers. Business students in particular can become fixated on the need to find 'the answer' – a confirmed outcome. The actual outcome of many standard case studies can be found through a simple online search because they refer to events from the recent past – not so with Business in the News. This is what captures students' attention. They get to analyze real-world situations and wrestle with ethical issues in real time, the same way the key actors in the chosen scenario are doing it.

### **High School Essays vs. Building an Argument**

In the position statement, the biggest problem students have is knowing the difference between a simple statement of fact and how to convert the factual information they have found into elements of an argument on behalf of the stakeholder group he or she has chosen. Many students are discovering ethics and CSR issues for the first time and, because the information is new to them, write a high school-type essay on this topic: 'What I've Learned About CSR'. The students who excel at this assignment take a different approach. They think concretely about the

needs of the audience. They research the case, understand the basics of CSR and ethical decision making (i.e. knowing the difference between right and wrong and choosing the legally, socially and ethically correct path), and then place themselves in the shoes of their stakeholder and use the information they've discovered to explore the topic through the eyes of their client. They must assume the persona of their audience. There is a large jump of cognitive understanding between those students who write an essay-type response and those who take this other approach, because the latter is the beginning of knowing how to create a persuasive argument. The challenge for the instructor is to use classroom discussions encouraging students to think about the concept of audience and what this means in reality. Ask questions such as, 'Who are you writing for? What is your stakeholder really asking you to do?'

### **Understanding the Audience**

In a previous iteration of this assignment, students were not given the distinction between an overview section (descriptive writing) and a position statement (forming an argument from your stakeholder's perspective). They were simply told to provide a memo that contained some brief background, a list of stakeholders, a quick description of each stakeholder's position on the controversy and then to analyze the scenario in a way that would advance his or her stakeholder's argument, be it for or against the pipeline. The goal was for students to figure out they had two audiences (primary: their chosen stakeholder and secondary: the SRP) and to pitch the information accordingly. Students had to realize that they could only reach their real audience (the stakeholder) through the filter of the SRP, so both readers had to be taken into account. This distinction proved too fine for most students however, so the instructions now have two parts. One asks for an overview (for the SRP) and the other a position statement for the stakeholder. This separates the needs of the audiences into two unique sections of the same memo and creates a distinctive gap between the two.

### **Defining the Scope**

Students can become overwhelmed by the amount of information they find. They struggle to see the big picture because there are so many details and published opinions about the chosen dilemma. Many stakeholders, pundits and media commentators have strong opinions. Classroom time should be spent learning how to plan complex documents. It's important that students know how to spot common themes in the research information they've found so that they can cluster source information together in a meaningful way. They should also practice distinguishing opinion from neutral presentations of fact.

### **Points vs. Facts**

Students need to know the difference between points and facts. High school-type essays tend to be formulaic and reward the simple listing of relevant information. Business audiences are different. They want student writers to tell them why the information they are presenting is relevant – randomly stating useful information is not enough. The best way to do this is if students are taught the difference between a point and a fact. Paragraphs don't start with evidence, they must start with a point – a broadly-expressed opinion or a general truth (a topic sentence). Evidence is then introduced to support the point and, so, paragraph by paragraph, the student builds an argument on behalf of his or her stakeholder.

Instead of summing up in broad terms what CSR means (the three P's: profit, plant People, etc.), students should be encouraged to reach higher and to apply CSR concepts to their understanding of the pipeline. For example, Enbridge devotes a lot of resources to its claim that it is an ethically and socially responsible corporation. Students should be encouraged to ask themselves however, whether Enbridge is walking the walk, because there are many recent instances that show Enbridge has a bad record when it comes to dealing with spills from its pipelines.