
ETHICS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

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Ethics for Learners

The conduct of individuals involved in the formal learning process has been modeled and learned in the western tradition over five hundred years. Growing up in and being a part of a classroom culture is deeply ingrained. Students have a rather clear expectation of how they are to behave based upon the traditions of classroom learning. Compulsory education has ensured that a very high percentage of the population knows what to expect and what is acceptable or not acceptable within the walls of the brick-and-mortar school.

The phenomenon of distance education is still in its comparative infancy, made possible and practical by the omnipresent internet, affordable hardware, and the connection provided by eager internet service providers. While high-speed connections up the ante somewhat, the hardware demands are modest and within the reach of millions of learners. Public access points and assistance programs make it possible for many learners living in poverty to avail themselves of on-line learning opportunities.

There is significant disagreement about what is ethical or unethical and how ethical consensus is reached. John Fletcher Moulton asserts that there is a “large and important domain in which there rules neither positive law nor absolute freedom... It is the domain of obedience to the unenforceable. That obedience is the obedience of a man to that which he cannot be forced to obey. He is the enforcer of the law upon himself.”[1]. When a society or government observes that people are not conducting themselves the way they ought to – that they cannot be trusted to do the right or good thing – then laws, rules, or regulations are developed, moving things from unenforceable to enforceable.

The source of Ethics

Ethicists and philosophers spend a good deal of energy attempting to discover the sources for the values held by people. Sources most commonly recognized include parents, family, sacred writings, clergy, teachers, and leaders in government, commerce, sports, and the arts. Many of these relationships have involved thousands of observations and transactions which have been interwoven into a moral fabric that, while having many common features with others, is unique and helpful to an individual. As large as our law library and volumes of statutes and ordinances are, they do not come close to containing all the guidance and parameters for making decisions on a daily basis which impact the lives of others.

How does an on-line learner come to know the rules? The teacher (or other institutional authority) can define the rules, which most often identify conducts which will be sanctioned. These rules may be in the form of a contract or a user agreement which must be signed before the learner/user gains access to the learning resources. When carefully drafted, these agreements protect the educator, the hosting institution, and even other learners. One might expect, however, that the more the contract or agreement contains, the less likely it is to be read, understood, or complied with. Learners vary greatly in their reading and comprehension skills, in their level of sophistication, and even in their willingness to violate agreements if they find it expedient to do so. Integrity and faithfulness are increasingly rare virtues at the beginning of the 21st century.

Much more powerful than one-sided agreements in defining moral or ethical conduct are the dominant trends so evident in the non-educational world. The on-line native-speakers (a term used by Marc Prensky to describe individuals who have grown up using computers) look out upon the expanding wealth of digitized words, graphics, and sound as being *theirs*. They argue: “It comes up on my screen. I’ve done nothing illegal to access it.” This is not far-fetched. They argue that those who want

to protect their property keep it secure and out of sight. Someone who doesn't care about maintaining exclusive rights to something puts it in plain view of others who have a swift and easy way of capturing and storing the digitized property.

Education in ethics

Educational theory holds that what is learned early in life and reinforced throughout life has the best chance of being internalized and retained. It would be ideal if students in first grade were taught that the work of others must be respected and acknowledged before it can be copied or integrated into an assignment. Students are learning at a tender age how to cut and paste intellectual property into a new source without any concern for the author, composer, or owner. Just as having an attractive car is in not an open invitation to steal it, so making digitized data available is not an invitation to violate the rights of its owner.

In long-established cultures, it is the elders who pass on values and mores to the young. By virtue of their experience and accumulated wisdom, they transmit both the barriers and the reasons for the barriers to the young. This is not the case with the digital natives. The realm is expanding so quickly that there is no well-settled body of right and wrong digital conduct to be transmitted from one generation to another. One computer user follows the lead of other computer users. If millions are sharing music files, a norm is established. Justifications for the behavior are familiar: we're "aiding" in the distribution; we're providing new readership; we're doing what we are told; everybody's doing it. The teachers of the new ethical standard are peers, not necessarily older or wiser. The consequences of the various conducts are not yet known or understood. Many want to look for laws or court cases as a curb, restraining illegal conduct, but that does not settle the ethical or moral issues. Even if it is legal, it may not be ethical.

It can be argued that the law of intellectual property did not anticipate the internet or the ease with which entire shelves of books contained on a single CD can be copied. We are immersed in goods and services which were not envisioned when our property laws were passed, and we have interpreted the laws (or re-written them) to fit what is new.

The ethical starting point

The key to ethical conduct in the use of digitized data is to seek or give credit to the owner or originator. It is the essence of scholarship not to devise something new, but to know what others have taken the time to write about and to acknowledge their effort. This fundamental virtue is quite un-American – to say that this idea, or these words, or this musical phrase or work -- is not mine, but must be credited to another. It is the honest act of a person with integrity. It takes practice and effort, and it is the right thing to do. Since it takes practice, it must be taught early and reinforced often.

While graduate-level research methodology students are taught how to format references and citations for theses, that is too little too late. What was once available only to university students in world-class research libraries is now available to anyone with a telephone line and a \$300 computer. Age-appropriate training on giving credit or acknowledging ownership should become a component of curricula at every level. Students must be led to understand that there is a fundamental difference between writing words or music and making copies of the work of others. When a student originates a sentence or a song, there is no need to attribute it to another. When a student incorporates a thought, a phrase, a sentence, a paragraph, a page, or an entire novel done authored by another person, the originator must be credited. Even if the source is not copyright protected, it remains the right thing to do.

When one submits work as one's own when it is not, there are usually no laws broken. What has transpired is misrepresentation, fraud, deceit, or lying. While there are many motivations for violating

principles of academic integrity, there is ample evidence that it takes place frequently in North America [2].¹

Ethical common denominators

In one sense, there are not different ethical standards for distance education students when compared to classroom students. All have the obligation to demonstrate virtues such as honesty, integrity, respectfulness, accountability, etc. In both classroom and distance environments, teachers have found it useful to communicate clearly how these features are understood within the context of a particular course or program. For example, an instructor may want to communicate clearly that only papers written specifically by the student for this particular class are acceptable. In doing so, there is reinforcement for the message that only the student's original work is to be submitted.

It is also critical that the teacher model the ethical principles by which he or she expects students to live. A teacher who violates copyright provisions or incorporates the work of others beyond fair use provisions both confuses students and misses out on opportunities to model the desired behavior and development sought in the students.

A foundational ethical principle that reaches far beyond the realm of education is "do no harm." On one level, this forbids striking the teacher or a classmate. It means that students in a laboratory must follow safety procedures. Those engaged in distance education have different variations on the same theme. Both teachers and learners have a moral obligation to take reasonable, age-appropriate steps to prevent the distribution of computer viruses. Teachers and learners must respect each others' privacy and refrain from sharing personal information about the participants outside the learning enterprise. This becomes increasingly important in cohort-based programs in which the learners come to know a great deal about each other over an extended period of time.

Many academic disciplines have developed codes or credos for instructors and students to guide inform the conduct of those engaged in study. The National Communication Association, for example, "advocates truthfulness, accuracy, honesty, and reason as essential to the integrity of communication...We condemn communication that degrades individuals and humanity through distortion, intimidation, coercion, and violence and the expression of intolerance and hatred." [3]

Participant integrity

One of the most frequently-asked questions asked of distance educators is: How does the instructor know for certain that it is the registered student who submits the work or posts to the bulletin board or contributes to the chat? Some teachers ask students to use a variation of the honor code statement "I have neither given nor received unauthorized assistance, nor do I know of others who have" whenever work is submitted. Many distance educators would have to admit that some work has undoubtedly been submitted fraudulently, but the same thing could be said of face-to-face classes as well. Distance educators need to be aware of tools which assist in identifying plagiarized text. Many traditional schools now forbid electronic devices of any kind in the classroom, because picture phones can transmit test or textbook images and MP3 files can be heard from a player the size of a student's thumb.

While a few distance educators work in isolation without the assistance of IT/IS support, most distance education takes place within an enterprise system requiring establishing an account and using a password. If maintaining system security is not covered by an agreement or code of conduct, users must come to know that it is wrong and unacceptable to share access information which enables access to systems for which the user is not authorized. Users who repeatedly use academic system bandwidth for non-academic purposes are using system resources in a way which causes harm to other users.

¹ Fifty percent of Americans of college age (18-25) admit to telling serious lies that either hurt people, violate a trust, have legal consequences, or are totally self-serving. While the research did not focus on academic behavior, it is reasonable to conclude that academic behavior is included in the aforementioned categories.

Respecting the learning participants

The internet has come to be known as the great leveler of the playing field (every user “looks” alike; what is published on the web is not as dependent on power and prestige when compared to previous publishing patterns). Consumerism in higher education has resulted in lowered respect for professors. Much of distance education is still dependent on text, a two-dimensional aspect that reveals only a thin slice of a teacher’s skills. Showing respect and maintaining civility is an ethical consideration that should be a part of the distance education “wallpaper” – the backdrop -- in front of which the learning and changing take place.

Doug Johnson also emphasizes the importance of articulating values. He urges that teachers “clearly display lists and create handouts of conduct codes. Reinforce ethical behaviors and react to non-ethical behaviors. Stress the consideration of principles rather than relying on a detailed set of rules. By applying guidelines rather than following rules, students engage in higher level thinking processes and learn behaviors that will continue into their next classroom, their homes, and their adult lives.[4]

Ethics is always controversial because those who discuss ethical issues hold different values and prefer different systems for analysis. Issues arise so rapidly in fields linked to technology that we can only speculate where the new ethical dilemmas will lie.

References

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