

Ethics in eLearning

Ted Brown, PhD
President
Martin Methodist College
Pulaski, Tennessee

Abstract

We tend to think of net business in terms of commercial companies—the production and exchange of goods, but education is also a growing net enterprise. In the United States, for instance, online education or distance learning is the fastest growing sector of the higher education industry. All of the ethical dilemmas that net businesses must face are also faced by online educational programs with one major addition—the quality of the learning outcomes. There is currently a dearth of research on the quality of learning outcomes in web-based education and this represents a significant challenge for educational institutions.

Introduction

We tend to think of net business in terms of commercial companies—the production and exchange of goods over the Internet, but education is also a growing net enterprise. In the United States, for instance, online education or eLearning is the fastest growing sector of the higher education industry. All of the ethical dilemmas that net businesses must face are also faced by online educational programs with at least two major additions: First, the eLearning provider is faced with a host of moral challenges related to the quality of the learning outcomes; and second, the eLearning consumer faces a variety of moral challenges related to engaging in the learning process.

Two examples will help to frame these two constellations of ethical issues that are relatively unique to the eLearning enterprise: The first example comes from an e-mail message received some months ago from one of the larger for-profit organizations offering on-line degree programs. The e-mail was dynamic, colorful and carried this banner headline: “You may already have a degree and not know it.” Without belaboring the point, the obvious question that arises from this message is, “How much genuine learning takes place in the process of earning a degree that you did not know you have?” This example highlights a broad variety of moral issues related to the quality of eLearning offerings and the effectiveness of eLearning outcomes.

Another example focuses on moral issues for the eLearning consumer: The most recent National Survey of Student Engagement indicates that as high as 59% of U.S. students involved in eLearning programs admit to some sort of academic fraud either “very often (27%) or “often” (32%) (NSSE, 2007). This is the primary concern of faculty teaching at a distance—that the eLearning student doing the work is indeed the student enrolled and that the student is not misrepresenting his or her work. Admittedly, today’s college students have been raised in an era of decline in public

morality, involving scandal and corruption by public servants, major corporations, and private citizens. These events must surely affect student's attitudes about ethical behavior. Further, the eLearning process is quite different from campus-based learning and provides greater opportunity for academic misrepresentation. This example highlights another constellation of moral issues that must be addressed in the context of the eLearning enterprise.

In an effort to keep this overview simple, this paper names these two constellations of moral issues according to the one who is facing the ethical dilemma: the teacher and the learner. While there is some overlap of subject matter around the edges, at the center the most significant ethical issues in eLearning can be easily divided in this way. Following is a survey of the most salient eLearning moral concerns following this division:

Ethical Issues for the eLearner

According to a U. S. National Institute of Justice report on the ethical challenges inherent in the use of information technology in education, there is a new phenomenon described as "psychological distance" (Savin, 1992). In interacting with others face-to-face we get immediate feedback on inappropriate and unethical behaviors, even if it is as subtle as body language. In using information technology in a way that could harm to others, the act feels less personal because we can't see or hear the other person in the exchange. The report goes on to note that traditionally moral values were learned at home and usually reinforced in school. We cannot count on that today. Values are not being learned at home and schools are often restricted in their roles teaching social values. Our young people are becoming psychologically distant in their interactions with others.

This psychological distance has enabled a prevalence of academic fraud both in the way eLearning resources are applied to the traditional learning setting and in the eLearning process itself. R. A. Fass, in a study for the American Council on Education, described early patterns of inappropriate behavior in eLearning (pages 173-175). Fass identified the following categories of academic fraud in the eLearning environment:

- Inappropriate assistance on examinations
- Misuse of sources on papers and projects
- Writing assistance and other inappropriate tutoring
- Misrepresentation in the collection and reporting of data
- Improper use of academic resources
- Disrespecting the work of others
- Lack of protection for human subjects in research
- Breaches of computer ethics
- Lack of adherence to copyright and copy-protection

- Providing inappropriate assistance to others
- Lack of adherence to academic regulations

This categorization of academic fraud in the eLearning setting is quite similar to cheating that has taken place in the academy for generations. What leads to academic fraud in eLearning is also similar to the motivation for cheating in the on-campus setting: pressure for grades, anxiety in the testing environment, lack of knowledge related to academic regulations, personality characteristics and lack of development of moral reasoning. Some of these dynamics are accentuated in the eLearning environment by the phenomenon of psychological distance. In addition, the potential for lack of knowledge of curricular regulations and the academic code of behavior is also heightened for the eLearner.

Some have argued that many colleges and universities do not adequately spell out information on academic fraud in their handbooks and catalogs, especially those provided to the eLearner. Students coming from secondary education often do not understand the issues of collegiate ethics and academic integrity, especially in the eLearning environment. Also, many eLearners are coming back to the academic environment after long absences and must be reacquainted with the academic moral code. It seems imperative that our eLearning institutions do three specific things to address ethics in eLearning: First, develop and publish a clear statement of definition regarding academic fraud in the eLearning environment; second, set policy that provides a specific academic moral code for students to follow; and third, incorporate ethical issues of technology and eLearning into the curriculum.

Ethical Issues for the eTeacher

In addressing the constellation of issues on the other side of the eLearning equation, it is important to remember that the reference to “eTeacher” here is used in the broadest sense—its true meaning is the eLearning provider. While there are certainly ethical issues that are addressed by the actual teacher in an eLearning environment, there are far more faced by the institution that is offering the eLearning opportunity. Using the term eTeacher highlights the fact that even eLearning is fundamentally based on a human relationship, albeit a new kind of teacher-learner connection with different patterns of interaction and association.

Certainly the most important moral challenge for the eTeacher is maintaining the quality of the educational process. As our primary example (above) indicates, there is nothing that legally prevents the offering of illegitimate degree programs that have no inherent educational value. In the end this is a moral issue. It is true that accreditation processes are aimed at assisting both the provider and the consumer is sorting through these complex issues related to the minimum quality of educational offerings. But even accreditation becomes a highly complicated issue for the eLearner as offerings cross accreditation and even international boundaries. In the end it is up to the eLearning

provider to institute evaluation and assessment efforts to assure that eLearning outcomes are fully effective.

A related but distinct ethical issue for the eTeacher is full disclosure of academic regulations and standards for eLearners. With a completely different platform of interaction between eLearner and eTeacher, the provider must be attentive to new ways of transmitting information and assuring genuine communication. Simply publishing the academic catalog on a website may not be enough. In the process of all communication, the eTeacher must assure that it is the actual eLearner who is in communication and that no academic fraud is being committed. This is no different from the traditional teacher-learner relationship; it is just much more complex when the relationship is at a distance.

Education providers have always been faced with the challenge of providing appropriate learning resources, but for the eTeacher a whole new layer of educational infrastructure must be addressed if the eLearning environment is to be fully effective. Not only are books and learning equipment important, but providing a reliable network infrastructure with effective learning software becomes absolutely critical. With that come network security and safety issues, which have genuine ethical implications. Further, a range of duplication and copyright policies must be in place to protect against “softlifting” and illegal use of electronic resources. Miller, Kupsh, and Jones (1994) discussed the need to incorporate computer software ethics in the curriculum of each and every course about or utilizing computers. The computer software instruction should discuss software licensing and limited warranty agreements and should include terminology of computer software ethics.

This brings us to a broad range of ethical issues related to research. Certainly one of the most significant new opportunities for academic fraud stems from undocumented or poorly documented use of on-line sources. eTeachers must be attentive to educating eLearners regarding the ethical use of Internet resources. There are also a host of ethical implications regarding the use of human subjects in Internet-based research. Frankel and Siang (1999) have provided a basic protocol related to the ethical and legal implications of human subject research on the Internet. They provide two basic principles for conducting research of human subjects on the Internet: 1.) autonomy—all subjects are to be treated with respect as autonomous agents; and 2.) beneficence—researchers are obligated to maximize the benefits of the research and minimize the harms and risks to the subjects, including informed consent and protection of privacy and confidentiality.

Research

A search of the literature reveals scant explicit concern about the issue of ethics in online education and eLearning. The resources that are available are primarily institutionally-based regulations directed at policing or workshop resources focused on very pragmatic objectives. Virtually nothing is

available that applies the established principles of ethical inquiry to this important new area of moral exposure for educational institutions. Further, there is little research specifically focused on the quality of learning outcomes in online and distance education. Both of these areas represent imposing challenges for modern educational institutions and topics of significant opportunity for ethics and education scholars.

Conclusion

It should be acknowledged that the basic intent of eLearning is a moral good. Attempting to provide “the greatest good to the greatest number of people” is inherently an ethical task. No one could argue that it is not a moral good to make education available to those who have been deprived of it because of location or expense or other circumstance. As with other moral goods, however, there are ethical risks and vulnerabilities that must be acknowledged and addressed in the process. As eLearning becomes more widespread, so the investigation and discussion of its ethical implications must become more systematic and pervasive.

References

- Bennett, J. B. (1998). *Collegial Professionalism the Academy, Individualism, and the Common Good*. Phoenix: American Council on Education & Oryx Press.
- Fass, R. A. (1990) *Cheating and plagiarism. Ethics and Higher Education*. May, W. W. editor. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company and American Council on Education.
- Frankel, M. S. & Siang, S. (1999) *Ethical and Legal Aspects of Human Subjects Research on the Internet*. <http://www.aaas.org/spp/dspp/sfml/projects/interes/main.htm>.
- Gearhart, Deborah (2000) *Ethics in Distance Education: Developing Ethical Policies*, Madison, South Dakota: Dakota State University
- Hallam, S. (1998). *Misconduct on the information highway: abuse and misuse of the internet*. *Ethics, information and Technology Readings*. Stichler, R. N. and Hauptman, R. editors. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., Publishers.
- Kuh, George. *National Survey of Student Engagement (2007)* The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.
- Miller, R. H., Kupsh, J. and Jones, C. L. (1994) “Software Ethics: Teaching by Example”. In *Changing College Classrooms New Teaching and Learning Strategies for an Increasingly Complex World*. Kerschner, L. R. and Kegley, J. A. K. editors. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Sivin, Jay P.; Bialo, Ellen R. (1992) *The Ethical Use of Information Technology in Education*, U. S. National Institute of Justice.

***Ted Brown** is in his tenth year of service as president of Martin Methodist College, having led the 138 year-old institution through a time of redevelopment and expansion. He serves as a member of the Board of Directors of the International Association of Methodist Schools, Colleges and Universities (IAMSCU), former board member and currently chair of the International Education Committee of the National Association of Schools and Colleges of the United Methodist Church (NASCUMC). Brown earned the B.A. degree at West Virginia Wesleyan College, M. Div. and Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University and did post-doctoral study at Harvard University.*