
Ethics in Distance Education: Developing Ethical Policies

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Introduction

This paper takes a look at the changing world of education through distance education. There is a need to deal ethically with faculty and learners experiencing this educational revolution. I discuss how to look at your distance education policies in an ethical manner.

Changing World of Education

The impact of technology on teaching is enormous, both teaching in the traditional classroom and at a distance. Bennett (1998) developed three possible scenarios for the future:

1. One possibility is that the number and size of institutions of higher education will rapidly shrink as global electronic educational opportunities grow. He notes that many campuses will become service stations through which multiple learning modules are made available to students at a distance. Price will become a greater factor in student choice.
2. A second possibility is that the telecommunications revolution will prove to have minimal impact on educational institutions. It is a fad and it will go away but the telecommunications revolution has already advanced to far too be reversed.
3. In the third scenario, most institutions will remain, but will find themselves playing altered roles. Most campuses now pay insufficient collegial attention to pedagogy. The telecommunications revolution will spark renewed and revived attention to pedagogy and creative collaboration using innovative classrooms and laboratories will come about. Significant distance learning will occur, but the role will remain for the traditional residential institution. Assessment criteria will be considerably improved. The Internet provides an extension of the Library and laboratory, a vehicle for rapid dissemination and critique of findings, and a forum for endlessly varied discussion groups. For faculty who have been isolated by geography or campus politics, telecommunications will rejuvenate interaction with scholars elsewhere.

I don't believe the first two will come to fruition. Number three is the most realistic in the world of education today. Bennett's statement that campuses now pay insufficient collegial attention to pedagogy is happening even more with the telecommunications revolution. In a rush to compete in distance education many institutions are doing distance courses that neither take into consideration the pedagogy nor the proper use of technology.

The situation is not all bleak though. The telecommunications revolution is providing educational opportunities to those who would never be able to come to a traditional campus. The telecommunications revolution has already improved assessment, access to libraries, laboratories, classrooms and campuses. Information is at your fingertips. Discussion with colleagues has become easier and so has collaboration with colleagues. No doubt that there are both advantages and disadvantages to the telecommunications revolution but as educators we must handle the

changes ethically and provide quality educational experiences.

Need for Ethics in Distance Education

A U. S. Department of Justice report on the ethical use of information technology in education describes what the authors term "psychological distance". When we interact with others face-to-face we see the results immediately of inappropriate and unethical behaviors. When we use information technology in a way that does 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. The report makes two recommendations on what educational institutions can do to address technology ethics: set policy that provides a model for students to follow, and incorporate technology ethics issues in the curriculum.

Fass (1990) discusses how today's college students have been raised in an era of decline of 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. Informal polls show that as many as three quarters of students on campuses today admit to some sort of academic fraud (page 171). This is an increased concern of faculty teaching at a distance - that the distance student doing the work is indeed the student enrolled and that the student is not cheating.

It is also important to understand what leads to cheating, such as, pressure for grades, the testing environment, lack of understanding of academic regulations, personality characteristics, and development of moral reasoning. Fass comments that many colleges and universities do not adequately spell out information on cheating in their handbooks and catalogs. Students coming from high schools do not understand the issues of collegiate ethics and academic honesty. He recommends the following statement of definition should be provided in handbooks and equally should be provided in distance program handbooks and information.

- Ethics of examinations
- Use of sources on papers and projects
- Writing assistance and other tutoring
- Collecting and reporting data
- Use of academic resources
- Respecting the work of others
- Computer ethics
- Giving assistance to others
- Adherence to academic regulations (pages 173-173).

How to Ethically Develop Policy for Distance Education

Hallam (1998) discusses Internet ethics and how there is misuse and abuse of the Internet. There are many breaches of ethics with the Internet, such as harassment, defamation, and infringement of intellectual property rights. Breaches of ethics may occur unintentionally, and often because users are unaware of policies that may be in place. Hallam recommends that users review the guidelines or policies established by: your own organization, your Internet service provider, other

member networks that you connect to, and services and resources you connect to or make use of. Examples of what may be listed in an institution's policy might include:

- Attempting to hack into another computer
- Using the institution's resources for personal gain
- Sending threatening, obscene or harassing messages
- Posting confidential material outside the institution
- Repost messages without permission
- Disruption or interference of network activities, including the distribution of unsolicited advertising, propagation of computer viruses or worms (pages 251-252).

There are four norms to follow in your day-to-day ethical practices: honesty, keeping your word, respect for others and fairness. These are practices for both instructors and learners in the distance education. They are part of the "golden rule" for both classroom and distance course behaviors.

In your distance program first develop a "good practices" guideline. You can find on the web, many used by universities and accrediting agencies alike. The good practices will serve as your ethical guidelines for working with faculty and learners.

Review your institution's policies, both for applicability to your distance program and to determine if they are ethically sound. Develop your own set of policies that represent the campus policy with the adaptation, if necessary, for the distance student. Create new policies when there are no current policies. Keep in mind the diverse populations you work with in distance education. Then, make these accessible to your distance students. We put our policies on the web but our program did not regularly notify our students that there were policies and where to find them. Make sure you provide all campus services to your distance students and again make sure they know about them.

Work with your faculty to explain how they can assist in developing an ethically sound distance learning atmosphere. Providing information to the learners, over and over again, is critical. Everything must be spelled out in the syllabi and course web sites, assignments, examinations and projects their deadlines, how to use your discussion boards, including "netiquette" used, how the instructor deals with plagiarism and cheating, how the instructor is to be contacted and when, how assignments are to be submitted, how to make contact for support with technical issues, and so on. Once is not enough, especially when web courses are "living" entities, always changing. Instructors must keep their learners informed of changes made during the course.

Work with your faculty on developing and improving policies. They work first hand with the learners and see what works and what doesn't. Our online faculty members meet regularly throughout the semester and we have worked as a group to implement new policy relevant to our distance education program.

Finally, never think you are finished. Keeping policy ethical and current is a never ending process. Use your assessment procedure as your guide and as you implement changes to your program from you assessment process, review your policies at the same time.

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