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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to discuss issues related to the code of ethics in online learning, and responsibilities of students, faculty, and administrators. Students must recognize the ethical imperatives of online learning, and faculty and administrators should enforce the code of ethics requirements consistently, and effectively. How does a professor know that the student who enrolled in the course is the same as the one doing the work online from a distant location? Does the administration explain the mechanisms for dealing with infringements such as plagiarism, and the consequences? Should Professors teach about ethical behavior regardless of the discipline? Do professors teaching online classes use state of the art software to detect ethical misdemeanors in students' work? Should professors who suspect student dishonesty confront and report those students. The questions are simple, and the reader would assume that institutions of higher education have addressed them all. However, have these institutions addressed these issues as effectively as they should? Students cheat in assignments and examinations, and faculty and administrators are too busy to enforce consequences in codes of ethics. There is a need to discuss these issues from time to time to safeguard the integrity of online teaching and learning. The discussion is organized in the following order – introduction, student responsibilities for ethical behavior in online learning, assessing student work, student discussions, responsibilities of faculty and administrators, disciplinary action committees, and conclusion.

Keywords: ethics, online learning, code of conduct, higher education

Introduction

Students are more technologically wired today than ever before (Tracey, 2006). They are interconnected through relationships, discipline cohorts, fraternities and sororities, other student clubs (Hutton, 2006), and social networking (Brady, Holcomb, & Smith, 2010). These relationships are enhanced with devices that permit real-time verbal and written communications. Technological connections can influence student behavior. For example, students who use multiple electronic devices no longer expect to register or pay for classes using traditional methods of standing in long lines and filling out forms in triplicate. In addition, they expect online advising (Tracey, 2006). "Students' everyday lives revolve around technology, so they expect their institution to be technologically advanced. State-of-the-art technology has become the rule rather than the exception" (Tracey, 2006, p. 59). In these days of cell phones, iPods, Facebook and YouTube, one may assume that current higher education students are more technologically advanced today than their predecessors.

However, many students in educational settings use this advanced technology in a dishonorable manner. Students can use their cell phones to send text messages containing answers to examination questions and more in real time; the professor's lecture can be recorded on iPods and played back, with the assistance of Bluetooth, during examination time. Facebook and YouTube facilitate copying examinations, lectures, and other documents in a near real-time format (Foster & Reed, 2006; Strom & Strom, 2007).

Richardson (2002) posited that students would find a more advanced technological method to cheat on an examination, homework or other

assignments. He cautioned professors to watch for clicking iPods, thumbing cell phones and other distractions during an examination, because such activities could indicate that cheating is occurring.

Copying and pasting have taken on a new meaning since the inception of the Internet. In March 1996, two students at Ohio State University were found guilty of copying and pasting the intellectual material of others into their own dissertations by the school's plagiarism committee. This committee called for the dismissal of the department chair after it was discovered that other acts of plagiarism took place for over twenty years (Wasley, 2006).

Some ethical dilemmas can be identified and avoided, by creating and implementing a code of conduct. Buff and Yonkers (2005) highlighted the importance of the code of conduct in the classroom by having students write their own codes of conduct. By doing this, students take ownership of the codes, and the consequences of infringement (Anakwe & Thomas-Haysbert, 2009). Students can become more sensitive to the need for ethics in learning through research, assessment, and discussions.

Student Responsibilities for Ethical Behavior in Research

Schrag (2005) argued that there are four main objectives to research ethics: "1) teaching researchers to recognize moral issues in their research, 2) teaching researchers to solve practical moral problems from the *perspective* of the moral agent, 3) teaching researchers to make moral judgments about actions and 4) learning how to engage in preventive ethics" (p. 351).

Students do not always recognize ethical dilemmas in their research because they are inundated with a vast amount of information and could become desensitized to using such information in an ethical way. The use of online databases, have overwhelming replaced the hours that students used to visit a library (Botero, Carrico, & Tennant, 2008). What used to take hours, days, and even weeks to research now takes a few seconds when an Internet *search engine* is used. They can use the resulting information to write journal articles, newspapers, books, or dissertations. Sometimes the volume of information accessed can be so overwhelming that students miss some valuable material. Most research do not call for a judgment but rather problem-solving (Schrag, 2005). Schrag advised students engaged in research to try to solve a problem first, and if appropriate, engage with their moral judgments.

Issues on Assessing Students Work

Educators must establish good rapport with students *before* assessing their work. This relationship could be developed using chat rooms, discussion forums, and other pseudo-community endeavors (Schaupp & Lane, 1992; Sharma & Maleyeff, 2003). Faculty should emphasize to students that distance education demands more self-directed learning (Houle, 1988). Self-directed learning motivates students to learn autonomously. For many students this is good, while for others this may be very threatening. In addition, educators should engage students in online technology evaluation workshops and self-organizing groups/teams (Sharma & Maleyeff, 2003).

Zelna (2002) found that online students face "ethical issues when using e-mail, instant messaging, web materials, foreign language translations, and computer directories" (p. 81). For example, they can brazenly e-mail or use instant messages to send answers to others taking the same or a similar test. They have used material from paper mills to satisfy written requirements

and have submitted pre-written papers as their own. However, this form of cheating is easy to detect by using *Eve* and *Turn-it-in.* Bloodgood, Turnley, & Mudrack (2010) have suggested that the incidence of written plagiarism might be high because some students may not "think" they are cheating. Owunwanne, Rustagi, & Dada (2010) found that different students perceived cheating, specifically plagiarism, differently. For example many believe that they could use large chunks of material from other authors, as long as they cite the author at the bottom of their work. Hutton (2006) indicated that as many as 50% of online or traditional classroom students have admitted to feeling no remorse after cheating. In a 2004 study on cheating in higher education, the researcher noted that the majority of students caught cheating said that cheating was socially accepted and not ethically wrong (Grimes, 2004). The study also found that students viewed dishonesty in business settings more harshly than in academic settings. However, if they are habitually dishonest in the classroom and do not suffer the consequences, they could take these habits to their future workplaces. Many students could be helped to resist ethical misconduct through discussions with their peers.

Student Discussions

Student discussions could offer opportunities for resolving ethical dilemmas by focusing on the student's past experiences, present situations, project work, and future what-if scenarios. This concept is not new: Schaupp and Lane (1992) have suggested that real-life occurrences and local stories introduce authenticity to teaching and learning. In addition, they implied that using this method could help teach ethics and engage the student in other relevant issues. Sharma and Maleyeff (2003) researched similar issues related to *moral distancing*, which refers to how online students ignore consequences of being "found out" by their peers.

Responsibilities of Faculty and Administrators

Faculty and administrators need reliable methodology to facilitate effective policy regarding ethical behavior in online learning (Couger, 1989). Pedagogical approaches that teach ethics in the traditional classroom might include an introduction to ethics and examples of *good* and *bad* ethical decisions, followed by exercises that require students to make decisions using *what-if* scenarios. Faculty deal with more heterogeneous populations in the classroom, and this has affected their decisions to hold students accountable for ethical infringements (Van Valey, 2001). However, they should routinely teach about ethical conduct in all disciplines.

Lessons in moral judgment and principles are sometimes taught but never learned. They are sometimes ignored or never ingrained. Students can be overwhelmed with too much information and this could help to reduce the perceived significance of lessons in ethics. Faculty and administrators should guide students toward ethical behavior in online learning because it is the right thing to do. Students need to be made aware of applicable ethical standards of behavior (Van Valey, 2001).

Faculty and administrators can determine changes in student behavior by observing their actions. Students should become accountable for their own education and their own learning (Knowles, 1975). For instance, students should change from passive receptacles of knowledge to builders of their own knowledge; they will transition from memorizers to problem-solvers. They should work toward proficiency with the same tools used by professionals in their

field (Sieber, 2005). They will not attain any of these attributes by cheating.

Disciplinary Action Committee

Many businesses incorporate a "code of conduct" into their operations to guide employees in daily operations (Rezaee, Elmore & Szendi, 2001, p. 171). These codes are documented and published for everyone to read. Colleges and universities need to do the same (McCabe & Pavela, 2004). Some faculty members may become complacent in enforcing the code of ethics because they do not want to take responsibility as change agents for student ethical behavior. In addition, some may justify this complacence because of their heavy workloads. Anakwe & Thomas-Haysbert (2009) posited that a code of conduct will not carry much weight unless students are involved in creating it, and faculty commit to enforcing it fairly. Notar, Riley, Thornburg, Owens, & Harper (2009) found that a disciplinary action committee may add teeth to enforcing a code of conduct.

Conclusion

This paper has raised some issues related to ethics in online learning. However, the list is not exhaustive. Online learning is becoming increasingly popular among students today. This raises issues on ethical conduct and a need to regulate and enforce it in higher education. Some studies indicate that students enrolled in online class believe that cheating is socially acceptable, and do not show remorse for engaging in such practice (Grimes, 2004). The integrity of online teaching and learning would be enhanced by articulating and enforcing codes of ethical conduct. However, all stakeholders, students, faculty, and administrators should be active participants in writing and enforcing these codes. Students should adhere to the requirements of the codes, administrators should articulate and communicate standards and consequences of infringements, and faculty should commit to enforcing the codes fairly and consistently. Ethics should be incorporated into all discipline areas and not just specific courses (Gandz & Hayes, 1988). This will require faculty, and students, to hone their analytical and ethical skills and then incorporate them into content. When this occurs, the students have an ethical consciousness that will permeate their coursework, their employment, and their lives. The author recommends future inquiry into the requirements of college and university accreditation agencies with regard to standard codes of conduct for online teaching and learning.

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