

Chapter 11

Ethics for eLearning: Two Sides of the Ethical Coin

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ABSTRACT

Among the top concerns an eLearning program administrator faces are ethical concerns for eLearning, which develop both internally and externally. This chapter is a review of some ethical concerns facing eLearning administrators and looks at two sides of the ethical coin. The first side of the coin looks at internal ethical issues, which have brought about quality concerns for eLearning programs and which partially led to five new federal regulations facing Institutions of Higher Education (IHE). The flip side of the coin looks at ethical concerns coming from outside the program by way of unethical behaviors from students and how eLearning program administrators can deal with these unethical practices.

INTRODUCTION

Before discussing the ethical dilemmas facing eLearning administrators, it is important to understand the basis for ethical concerns related to technology, known as technoethics. Technoethics is defined as the study of moral, legal, and social issues involving technology. Technoethics examines the impact of technology on our social, legal and moral systems, and evaluates the social policies and laws that have been framed in response to issues generated by its development and use (Tavani, 2004).

An early look at ethics in eLearning demonstrated a lack of a national code of ethics for higher education (Gearhart, 2000). Early research

on young adults entering higher education found students are not prepared to be self-directed nor able to understand the complications of moral solutions facing students during their post-secondary educational experiences (Burgan, 1996). Gearhart (2005) discussed the “psychological distant” student who, through the use of technology for distance delivery, when not facing others face to face, saw no problems with unethical behaviors, not comprehending that actions were hurting others; “out of sight, out of mind” so to speak. As early as 1990, informal polls showed that as many as three quarters of students on campuses admit to some sort of academic fraud (Gearhart, 2000), which is increasing through eLearning. Such academic fraud and unethical behaviors

include harassment, defamation, infringing on intellectual property rights, hacking, plagiarism, and cheating.

According to Strike and Ternasky (1993) ethics can be applied to education in three principal ways: assisting in educational policy making, assessing the institutions' roles as moral educators, and informing standards to govern the conduct of educators. Many institutions of higher education have chosen to develop and enforce policy dealing with the unethical behaviors that have caused concerns for eLearning. However, some egregious unethical practices by institutions, particularly in the area of eLearning; have led to the Department of Education taking action to correct these practices.

When looking at what approach to take with the issues of ethics related to eLearning, two different aspects of the issues were most evident. Two areas need to be addressed – a discussion of the new federal regulations which have come about from institutional unethical behavior or a discussion of the unethical behaviors demonstrated by students in relation to use of technology used in eLearning courses. Both are extremely important to eLearning program administrators; this chapter will deal with both sides of the ethical coin.

THE ETHICAL THEORY BASIS FOR THE FIRST SIDE OF THE COIN: MASON'S FOUR ETHICAL ISSUES FOR THE INFORMATION AGE: THEN AND NOW

Mason's paper in 1986 addressed four ethical issues for the information age – privacy, accuracy, property, and accessibility (PAPA) and are just as true, if not more true as issues today. Society has accepted some forms of privacy invasion through the use of social media, like FaceBook. Many people put themselves on the Internet in a very public way. However, since 9/11 an individual's privacy has been invaded more than any other time in the information age with enhanced

capabilities for surveillance of the members of our society. Accuracy of information has changed with Wikipedia and openness to information with the ability of individuals to easily change it. Property, who owns it? Individuals putting information, research, on the Internet have an expectation of owning their works. However, as with accuracy, when information can be publically maintained on websites, ownership is a joint effort. Accessibility - there is still a digital divide and issues for those you need accommodations for disabilities. As long as our societies have those who do not have the resources for the technology or need accommodations to the technology accessibility will continue to drive a wedge into each society. Freeman and Peace (2005) reexamined Mason's four ethical issues ethics years later and found they hold true today as a basis for reviewing concerns today such as hacking, identity theft, software piracy, viruses and worms among others.

Crowell, Narvaez, and Gomberg (2005) developed the Four Component Model, based on Mason's ethical concerns, to review moral psychology and information ethics. Their model represents the internal processes necessary for a moral act to ensue and the model is comprised of:

- **Ethical sensitivity:** Perceiving the relevant elements in the situation and constructing an interpretation of those elements. In this component one looks at what actions are possible, who and what might be affected by the action and how the involved parties might be affected by the action.
- **Ethical judgment:** Relates to reasoning about the possible actions and deciding which is most moral or ethical.
- **Ethical motivation:** Involves prioritizing what is considered to be the most moral or ethical action over all others and being intent upon following that course.
- **Ethical action:** Combines the strength of will with the social and psychological skills necessary to carry out the intended

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