

# Ethics and Perceptions in Online Learning Environments

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## INTRODUCTION

Recent incidents of unethical behaviors reported in the media have led scholars to initiate a debate on the subject of ethics. In particular, professional and personal ethics appear to be relevant issues to explore, as literature suggests that they impact behavior. In higher education, a substantial increase in the use of online learning systems (OLSs) for the delivery of higher educational courses has been observed in the past decade (Hiltz & Turoff, 2005). However, little attention has been given in information systems (IS) literature to exploring the construct of ethics and its impact on perceptions relevant to the use (i.e., user behavior) of ISs. Thus, this article attempts to raise the awareness of scholars about such important constructs by providing an overview of the literature related to ethics and highlighting some related key definitions. Specifically, this article will review literature about personal ethics, professional ethics, and ethical challenges in higher education, and will assess personal ethics utilizing Forsyth's Personal Ethics Taxonomy instrument. Moreover, an argument is put forth for the connection between faculty members' personal ethics and their perceptions as constructs that impact the use of online learning systems to safeguard against and curb incidents of academic misconduct.

## BACKGROUND

Throughout this article numerous pertinent definitions of personal and professional ethics will be introduced. A synthesized discussion about ethics in the information age will be offered as well as a description of some of the challenges that users face as a result of the use of information systems.

Ethics notions affect individuals' decision making and behaviors in everyday life. Yet, the IS literature offers very little about this topic or about how ethics impact humans' perceptions related to ISs usage. This

article will highlight a particular ethical challenge in higher education related to academic misconduct and information system usage. The suggestion will be put forward that ethics play a significant role in faculty members' perceptions about the severity of this phenomenon. In turn, such perceptions may influence the way in which they employ ISs, or OLSs in the case of online learning, to reduce opportunities for academic misconduct.

## ETHICAL CHALLENGES IN THE TECHNOLOGY AGE

Ethics is defined in Webster's dictionary as "the philosophical analysis of human morality and conduct [that are established] by society" (Webster, 2005). Philosophical ethics reflects a wide range of issues related to social policies and individual behavior. Scholars contend that the use of various ISs and the Internet in particular have brought about ethical challenges (Johnson, 2001; Tavani, 2004) which include, but are not limited to, accountability, government regulation, intellectual property rights, privacy, and security. Essentially, these ethical challenges affect all members of society (Johnson, 2001).

Tavani (2004) elaborates on the role of ethics with regards to individuals and society. He notes that society and individuals are guided by moral rules and principles. The rules are codes of conduct that guide ethical decisions and behaviors. Directives and social policies are examples of codes of conduct. Principles are universal standards that guide rules of conduct (i.e., social utility). Principles are founded upon religion, law, and philosophical ethics (Moore, 1999). There is a consensus among scholars that ethics help to guide ethical behaviors that are relevant in business, and in professional and daily life (Gbadamosi, 2004; Johnson, 2001; Tavani, 2004). Some researchers have pointed out that the Internet and various types of information systems have given rise to opportunities for unethical

behavior (Harrington, 1996; Nitterhouse, 2003). Such misuses result in substantial economic losses (Straub, Nance, & Carlson, 1990). Therefore, researchers indicate the need to further understand what motivates unethical behaviors and what role information systems play in instances of unethical behaviors (Gbadamosi, 2004; Harrington, 1996). Furthermore, some scholars suggest that education about ethical issues can reduce unethical behavior in the workplace as well as in daily life (Banerjee, Cronan, & Jones, 1998; Gbadamosi, 2004). Thus, additional studies about the impact of ethical education are needed.

### **Professional Ethics**

A number of scholars have attempted to explore professional ethics. For example, Bommer, Gratto, Gravander, and Tuttle (1987) defined professional ethics by separating the two words. Professional is defined as either belonging to a professional association or adhering to a licensing procedure. Professional in this case does not mean a person who aspires to make highly ethical decisions by upholding personal values. Instead, members of the profession hold a special license or membership that separates them from other individuals in society. As such, the loss of a license or membership serves to discourage unethical behavior (Bommer et al., 1987; Harrington, 1996). Aside from the licensing issues, professional associations regulate the profession by requiring all members to graduate from an accredited program. Accredited programs require graduates to take courses related to various ethical topics. Therefore, by ensuring that graduates become exposed to ethics education, professional associations ensure that professionals become aware of crucial ethical issues. For example, the AACSB (Association of Advanced Collegiate Schools of Business) mandates that business schools require their business graduates to complete substantial ethics courses. Thus, ethics is deemed so crucial that professional associations ensure that professionals receive ethics education.

Another aspect of professional associations is compliance with a code of conduct (Bommer et al., 1987). Professional associations have formal and published standards of professional conduct that members must adhere to. In some cases, where professional associations do not prevail, the professionals still tend to uphold a distinct self-image and social standing as members of the profession. Therefore, a code of conduct is an

instrument that guides professionals on ethical behavior. Professionals appear to comply with such codes of conduct (Bommer et al., 1987). Ethical issues as well as codes of conduct are formally discussed in professional association meetings and professional journals. In this respect, professionals remain aware of current ethical issues and fortify compliance with ethics codes in their daily decision making.

In some cases professionals face conflicting directions among personal ethics, professional code of conduct, and corporate policies in the workplace (Bommer et al., 1987). Analysis of case studies in the literature points out that the ethics direction applied depends on the context of the case. However, scholars agree that personal ethics, professional ethics, and corporate policies are all important in guiding ethical behavior (Bommer et al., 1987; Johnson, 2001; Tavani, 2004). In contrast, Casey (1990) argued that ethical behavior is independent of context and that a person with good ethical values will behave ethically in all situations. Scholars argue that with the increase in global trade, professionals face business situations that pose ethical dilemmas (Bommer et al., 1987).

The effect of code of conduct on professional behavior in the workplace has received some attention in the literature. The literature suggests that code of conduct alone does not deter unethical behavior (Crown & Spiller, 1998). However, the code of conduct becomes effective when it is accompanied by additional factors such as the severity of the unethical behavior, existence of severe sanctions, corporate ethical climate, and extent of communication of such codes (Banerjee et al., 1998; Crown & Spiller, 1998). Thus, each of these factors in and of itself provided little effect in curbing unethical behavior, but when joined together, made a significant impact on individuals. Another perspective about codes of conduct is offered by Harrington (1996), who investigated its effect on unethical behaviors and intentions in IS organizations. Harrington defined codes of ethics as explicit statements of laws, policies, and standards that reflect the organizations' values. Codes of ethics are created for the purpose of establishing responsibility and reducing unethical behavior. Few empirical studies have been conducted about the effect of codes (Harrington, 1996). Codes of ethics can make a significant contribution to organizations as they induce awareness about ethics. Explicit codes have been found to yield a significant influence on the intention to act (Salter, Guffey, & McMillan, 2001). However, general

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