Going Online:

A Pedagogical Assessment of Bioethics Distance Education Courses for Health Sciences Professionals

Shawneequa L. Callier, George Washington University, Washington, D.C., USA

Attila Hertelendy, Florida International University, USA

Joan Butler, George Washington University, Washington, D.C., USA

Thomas D. Harter, Gundersen Health System, La Crosse, WI and George Washington University, Washington, D.C., USA

Marcia Firmani, George Washington University, Washington, D.C., USA

Melissa M. Goldstein, George Washington University, Washington, D.C., USA

ABSTRACT

Health sciences professionals work on diverse health care teams and often face ethical dilemmas. Bioethics education in a distance-learning environment is one way that such individuals can obtain relevant, easily accessible, and academically rigorous instruction on ethical decision-making and behavior. Drawing on our expertise as distance educators in George Washington University's Health Sciences Programs, we discuss our experiences teaching bioethics online for health sciences professionals, assess the existing evidence of best practices in online bioethics education, and provide recommendations for future pedagogical research relevant to diverse health care professionals.

KEYWORDS:

Adult Learners, Bioethics Pedagogy, Distance Education Best Practices, Health Sciences, Online Bioethics Education

INTRODUCTION

Bioethics is a field of study that addresses complex moral issues at the intersections of health care, medical research, technological advancement, and environmental studies. Access to bioethics training is important for all future and practicing health professionals regardless of their roles. The high demand for non-physician healthcare providers and research professionals in the United States to deliver medical care continues to grow (MacKinnon III, 2013; National Conference of State Legislators, 2013). Accordingly, nurses and health sciences professionals (HSPs) should be as versed in the ethical implications of their choices and actions as physicians (Purtilo & Doherty, 2011). Paramedics, sonographers, physical therapists, clinical research associates, and medical laboratory scientists are just a few examples of the broad categories of professionals in health sciences fields who can benefit from bioethics training.

In considering the need to develop bioethics competencies relevant to HSPs, it is also critically important to assess the status and availability of pedagogical tools for bioethics education in blended and online environments. Distance Education (DE) courses are academic offerings where the instructor and students are separated physically and the coursework is offered fully online through an internet-

based platform. This model is different from blended course formats that may involve some face-to-face (F2F) interactions as part of the course in addition to online learning. DE course offerings can include a single session or a series of sessions throughout a semester or year.

Despite the lower overall enrollment trends in higher education, there has been an increase in the number of students who have enrolled in DE courses (Allen, Seaman, Poulin, & Straut, 2016). Several studies report enrollment growth among DE students compared to traditional, on-campus students (Allen et al., 2016; Bichsel, 2013), possibly due to the economic downturn over the last 10 years (Kimmel, Gaylor, Gruggs, & Hayes, 2012). Further, over 70% of postsecondary institutions are currently offering courses online (Bichsel, 2013).

As others have written, health care ethics is part of the standard curriculum in health sciences courses (Wong, Greenhalgh, & Pawson, 2010). DE and blended courses may be attractive to future and currently practicing HSPs seeking a flexible course schedule (Bichsel, 2013). Individuals may opt for DE opportunities to master a specific subject area, such as bioethics or research ethics, or for other personal reasons, such as health status or the affordability of DE courses (Newell & Debenham, 2009; Oswal & Meloncon, 2014). To gain a better understanding of the merits and drawbacks of distance bioethics education for HSPs, we conducted a literature review to assess the available empirical research evidence on such courses. The discussion below provides background on the challenges that may discourage bioethics educators from teaching online or in blended formats, describes empirical research on online interventions and outcomes in DE and blended bioethics courses, and evaluates our own experiences teaching bioethics in the health sciences programs offered at the George Washington University (GW).

Bioethics Education Challenges in F2F and Online Programs

All bioethics instructors are tasked with training students to go beyond a legally compliant response to ethical dilemmas to a caring one that incorporates recognized ethics principles (Purtilo & Doherty, 2011). Instructors must provide students with the knowledge and skills relevant to their chosen professions while also enriching their moral reasoning skills and sensibilities (Dudzinski, Rhodes & Fiester, 2013). Students should have the opportunity to apply moral theories and reasoning with one another as they share ideas, argue points, and engage in problem solving activities. Ideally, their scholastic interaction includes an ethics course that allows students to develop many important qualities, including compassion and empathy. Thus, bioethics education should encourage mutual respect and tolerance for diverse viewpoints, as well as the ability to implement and follow practices geared toward convincing others of the legitimacy of a particular decision (Purtilo & Doherty, 2011).

Second, bioethics education must prepare students to address ethics challenges that arise from different perspectives on morality effectively (Purtilo & Doherty, 2011). Religious, family, and cultural practices can impact the healthcare worker-family-patient relationship negatively if the provider lacks ethical decision-making tools to help families arrive at morally justifiable decisions that take into account patients' cultural beliefs (Leever, 2011). A potential impediment to learning these skills in the classroom is that students may rely too heavily on feelings, religion, absolutism, or cultural relativity as arguments to support their positions. Course content that explores the ethical implications of abortion policies, the use of embryos in research, and euthanasia, for instance, can understandably stir passionate feelings. Conversations lacking critical analysis can occur at length if they continue without interruption (NIH, 2009) and possibly cause strong emotional reactions. Successfully overcoming these challenges to bioethics learning in any environment requires active engagement by the professor, but presents additional challenges in the DE environment where discussion boards may occur overnight or other times when the professor may not be online. DE tools coupled with keen awareness to the sensitive nature of some bioethics discussions are critical to successful learning in an online bioethics course.

Third, ethics and moral theory are complex subjects that may involve difficult reading assignments and case study analyses (Stoddard & Schonfeld, 2011). Teaching theory involves the navigation

12 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage: www.igi-global.com/article/going-online/164974

Related Content

Course Design and Project Evaluation of a Network Management Course Implemented in On-Campus and Online Classes
Te-Shun Chou (2018). *International Journal of Online Pedagogy and Course Design (pp. 44-56).*
www.irma-international.org/article/course-design-and-project-evaluation-of-a-network-management-course-implemented-in-on-campus-and-online-classes/201115

Students' Responses to Learning Management Systems in a Blended Learning Context
Samuel NiiBoi Attuquayefio (2022). *International Journal of Online Pedagogy and Course Design (pp. 1-17).*
www.irma-international.org/article/students-responses-learning-management-systems/293208

Revolutionizing Education
Nadira Raghunandan-Jack (2018). *Equity, Equality, and Reform in Contemporary Public Education (pp. 31-52).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/revolutionizing-education/201410

Videogame Performance (Not Always) Requires Intelligence
M. Ángeles Quiroga, Francisco J. Román, Ana Catalán, Herman Rodríguez, Javier Ruiz, María Herranz, Marta Gómez-Abadand Roberto Colom (2011). *International Journal of Online Pedagogy and Course Design (pp. 18-32).*
www.irma-international.org/article/videogame-performance-not-always-requires/55545

In-Service Teachers' Perceptions of K-12 Online Learning Curriculum in a Graduate Course: An Action Research Project
M. Elizabeth Azukasand Michael K. Barbour (2021). *International Journal of Online Pedagogy and Course Design (pp. 61-81).*
www.irma-international.org/article/in-service-teachers-perceptions-of-k-12-online-learning-curriculum-in-a-graduate-course/287537