

Chapter I

Ethical Practices and Implications in Distance Education: An Introduction

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ABSTRACT

Education is intimately connected with ethics, because holistically speaking education is more than simply passing examinations and acquiring degrees. Education is character building and life long learning. Savants and philosophers throughout the history of humankind have borne testimony to this aspect of education. Today there is a great deal of emphasis on continuous and life long learning which implies that education is a continual learning process and not merely relegated to certification. Our experience in the field of distance education indicates that the profile of distance learners varies, cutting across barriers of gender, class and caste. The distance learner may be suffering from a sense of isolation as he/she makes a return to study after a gap of time or while working. It is there that the distance educator makes a positive, ethical and interventionist role by helping the student to learn beyond the stereotypical classroom situation and can act effectively as the friend, philosopher and guide of the learner. Thus practicing what you preach is the moto of ethics in distance. This chapter deals with ethics in general, its role in distance education and its significance to educational agencies.

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge is growing exponentially. The subjects or disciplines of knowledge are being specialized. Nowadays, it is not necessary to go to schools or colleges or universities to be literate in the traditional sense to become acquainted with information, adding to the knowledge we already possess. Modern means of information and communication technology are serving as information providers. But there is a dark side to this glowing picture, in that there can be such a huge inflow of information, blinding people's consciousness that they may sometimes fail to discriminate between what is right or wrong. The phenomenon of globalization and liberalization has added problems of their own to the social, economical or spiritual lives of people. In the modern world, if we carefully delve into the struggles most human beings make to achieve worldly success in wealth, power or fame, one can easily spot that human beings have become selfish and self-centered. They wish to achieve what they want to and at any cost. This greed on the part of either individuals or groups (business firms, politicians, sports persons or whoever) takes them to a level where the thirst for more and more is not satisfied. As a result, the atmosphere of unhealthy competition, raising unethical, illegal and even criminal behaviors, is created. The field of education is not insulated from this darkness. Due to lack of wisdom, the students, teachers or administrators cannot make right decisions. Accordingly, we should strive to enrich our education with principles and values that contribute to the development of personality and creates such an environment in educational institutions that they become ideal places for learning about the diversity and wealth of cultural identities and respect of others. The education plans and policies should be a tool to promote understanding, knowledge, values and attitudes among all. There is an urgent need to establish a synergy between formal educational systems and different sectors, or nonformal education, includ-

ing open and distance education, in conformity with the aims of "Education for All."

Over the last few decades, the world of open and distance education has changed dramatically. It has come a long way, starting from simple print-based instructional delivery to media-based to satellites to Web-based and mobile learning and Web 2.0 technologies. As with any other new phenomenon, Web-based instruction and communication systems for education have brought a new set of emotional, physical and psychological issues. The teaching and learning through this new medium exposed the learning community to such experiences where the teacher and students normally do not see face to face. The electronic communication occurs through synchronous and asynchronous means like e-mail, discussion forums, list-serves, electronic chat, bulletin board systems, Web-based, Internet-based, and so forth. Thus, the virtual classroom faces issues like humanizing, roles, norms, ethics, privacy and socio-psychological. The ethical issues become significant, and we keep reading in magazines and newspapers about misuse of Internet and e-mail. The university administrators, teachers and students are often faced with such issues where the commercial use of institutional resources, illegal use of Internet facilities and invasion of privacy are reported. Sexual issues are perhaps the most common breaches of this medium.

ETHICS

The most striking feature of IT in education is to open the doors of global education to the student at his desktop. What is critical to the success of this mode of education is to have ethics in place; this is a world which is based on mutual trust and respect. These ethical concerns have been carried on from the traditional education to the online education, and thus form a very significant base for the future of online education. Ethics has become a buzz word as each discipline of

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