Chapter III
Ethics in Interactions in Distance Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents the desirable interactions involved in teaching and learning at a distance. In these interactions, there are considerable ethical issues–notably that one's own learner autonomy should be reduced at times in order to help others learn, to achieve the learning task, and at the same time help oneself to learn. Accordingly, learner autonomy is not an overarching goal of education. This is controversial, and this chapter deals with this issue in detail to explain that learner autonomy at best is a rough guideline, and ethically based on reasoning that autonomy should be interpreted as flexibly applied. The maxim that learner autonomy must be flexibly applied is particularly true in both cooperative group learning and in collaborative group learning in distance education where student interactions with other students constitute a major part of the education process. The ethics in interaction in distance education are extended to cover all possible interactions, especially the important interaction by the teacher to each student followed by the interactions by the student with the learning process, that can initiate the aesthetic social intrinsic motivation to lifelong learning and thus to one's own emancipation. Accordingly, ethics are defined here as those pro-active interactions that induce the motivation to lifelong learning in all the students. Such ethics should override individualist autonomy as a goal in education.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims to define what is meant by ethics in interactions in distance education and presents the 2007 current state of the art with respect to such ethics. At first it is best to define and frame what is meant by ethics. Here, ethics covers what human conduct is right or wrong based on reasoning, whereas morals can be interpreted as that conduct based on social custom. This chapter will focus on only that human conduct that is good practice, and not on that which is bad. Therefore,

bad practices such as copyright infringement, plagiarism, and intellectual property theft are not discussed, mainly because they are generally covered by relevant local law.

It is also important to explain what is covered by interactions in distance education. There are at least five types of interaction reported in the literature: student-teacher, student-student, student-content, student-technology, and vicarious interaction. The fifth one of vicarious interaction was suggested by Sutton (2001) to occur when a student observes interactions between or among others, but in a carefully controlled study, Kawachi (2003a) found that no educational advantage was attributable to such vicarious interaction, likely due to those active participants who were interacting also deploying similar attention so no significant difference was found. Because some poorer quality of learning was seen in those not participating, then vicarious interaction was concluded to be disadvantageous and that active participation was to be emphasized for learning. The fourth, student-technology interaction, was suggested by Hillman, Willis and Gunawardena (1994) mainly in terms of there being a human-computer interface barrier to learning for some students with weak computer and technological literacy. Both these are not discussed any further here. This chapter will focus on the other three interactions.

Distance education may need clarification, and here the definition is drawn from the transactional distance theory of Moore (1993). Transactional distance may be interpreted as the psychological gap between what the student already knows and the content about to be learned. In particular, this theory describes transactional distance in terms of the three dimensions of structure, dialogue, and autonomy. Based on this theory, a four-stage model of learning has been proposed and validated by Kawachi (2003b, 2005), notably in open and distance education in 15 regions throughout Asia. How to interact optimally and therefore ethically through applying this model will be one of the two

key points presented in this chapter. The other key point will be that autonomy must be moderated by some affective motivations in the student in order to interact optimally to learn.

METHODS

Transactional distance theory postulates four categories of distance education according to the amount of structure (S+) imposed by the institution, and the amount of educative dialogue (D+) between the student and other persons. The most distant category has no dialogue and no structure (D- S-), the next closer has added structure (D- S+), the third has then added dialogue (D+ S+), and the fourth category of minimal transactional distance has dialogue and freedom (no imposed structure) (D+ S-). It should be kept in mind here that dialogue (D+) means being with educative intent. Accordingly, it should be mentioned somewhere here that young distant students often want student-teacher interaction such as face-to-face tutorial time to get their money's worth, and at the other end of the scale, older distant students want student-student interaction for socialization purposes, but because other students may be much younger, then they choose student-teacher interaction. Both these can be moved aside as not being ideally educative in purpose or intent.

Based on these categories, a model of learning in distance education has been designed and tested out as effective by Kawachi (2004) with four stages that constitute the learning process, bringing the student from furthest transactional distance to closest; in other words, bridging the gap between not knowing and knowing. The first Stage 1 (D- S-) is characterized by cooperative brainstorming and eliciting the student's prior knowledge and ideas; the second Stage 2 (D- S+) is characterized by vertical thinking to discern collaboratively the theory underlying the student's knowledge; Stage 3 (D+ S+) is characterized by collaborative hypotheses testing, problem solv-

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