

# Chapter VII

## Preparing Students for Ethical Use of Technology: A Case Study for Distance Education

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Are our students prepared to use technology ethically? This is a question of concern to this author and addressed in this chapter. Experience as the director of a distance education program with students who are ill-prepared for using technology and who use technology unethically had led to the research for this chapter. The chapter reviews studies where ethical behaviors are reviewed. The survey responses lead to discussion on how to instill ethical use of technology for institutional distance education programs, through the use of ethical policies and procedures. The chapter concludes with a look at future research directions.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Kidder (1995) addressed the question “why should we teach ethics in an electronic age?” by responding that we will not survive the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the ethics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is becoming more evident in our teaching practices. A U. S. Department of Justice report on the ethical use of information technology in education described what the authors term “psychological distance.”

When interacting with others face-to-face, the results of inappropriate and unethical behaviors are viewed immediately. When using information technology, inappropriate and unethical behavior while interacting with others can do harm. The act feels less personal because there is no immediate reaction in the exchange. The report goes on to note that traditionally moral values are learned at home and usually reinforced in school. That is not necessarily true today. Often values are

not learned at home and schools are restricted in their ability to teach social values. In addition, young people are very comfortable with technology such as computer chats, instant messaging, text messaging, and so forth, where face-to-face interaction is not necessary. Our young people are becoming *psychologically distant* in their interactions with others.

As students move from school to the workplace, ethical issues for computing and information technology in education are becoming societal issues, dealing with both moral and criminal issues. Institutions of higher education need to deal with ethical issues related to computer technology. How do we teach and practice technology ethics in higher education? Here are two recommendations to be addressed in this chapter: set policy that provides a model for students to follow, and incorporate technology ethics issues in the curriculum. This chapter defines ethics and looks at how higher education, and in particular distance education, can deal with ethical issues encountered by students in using computing technology for educational purposes.

## **BACKGROUND**

As early as 1990, informal polls showed that as many as three quarters of students on campuses today admit to some sort of academic fraud (Gearhart, 2000). Until recently research on ethics had been limited. There were two studies that demonstrated the need for a code of ethics in higher education. The first study was conducted in 1993 and a replicated study was conducted in 2001. In the first study 52.2% of education practitioners surveyed found a need for a code of ethics. When replicated in 2001, 72.8% of the education practitioners surveyed found a need for a code of ethics, demonstrating an increasing need for ethics in higher education (Brockett & Hiemstra, 2004, p. 10).

However, before dealing with educational ethics, a review of societal ethics is in order. In our society, quickly becoming a global society where information technology is concerned, the growing use of computers is becoming the norm in the workplace and in our daily lives. We are increasingly dependent on the computer.

Forester and Morrison (1994) looked at the social problems created by computers and have developed seven categories of computer-related ethical issues:

1. computer crimes and problems of computer security;
2. software theft and the question of intellectual property;
3. the problem of hacking and the creation of viruses;
4. computer unreliability and key questions on software quality;
5. data storage and invasion of privacy;
6. the social implications of artificial intelligence and expert systems; and
7. the many problems associated with workplace computerization.

All seven of these issues can be considered computer crime. Computer crime generally has been defined as a criminal act that has been committed using a computer as the principal tool. It takes the form of theft of money, theft of information, or theft of goods. These issues are not only moral and ethical issues, but can be very costly. Computer crime costs companies billions of dollars every year. Also, all seven of these issues can be found in higher education and have an effect on distance education.

## **DEFINING ETHICS**

For the purposes of this chapter, ethics is defined as a three-tier process. In the first tier, ethics is

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