Chapter VIII
Conversation Ethics for Online Learning Communities

Rocci Luppicini
University of Ottawa, Canada

ABSTRACT

There is growing recognition of the important role of conversation ethics in open and distance learning systems, particularly within online learning communities. Fostering ethical conversational practices in online learning poses a serious challenge within education. This chapter introduces key concepts and strategies to help guide online learning communities. The aim of the chapter is threefold: (1) to provide an overview of key concepts and strategies underlying conversation ethics, (2) to identify key elements of conversation ethics for online learning communities, and (3) to offer practical suggestions for leveraging online learning communities through increased attention to conversation ethics. This chapter is based on the assumption that an understanding of conversation ethics can offer instructors and learners a tool for advancing learning within online learning communities.

INTRODUCTION

Conversations are the foundation on which social interactions are built. Within this age of rapid technological change, there is growing interest in strategies for fostering meaningful conversation in online learning systems. This is particularly important in online learning systems where social interaction is fundamental, as is the case in learn-

ing communities. Framed within technoethics and studies in conversation, this article applies well-established principles of conversation ethics to online learning communities. To this end, it focuses on key strategies for guiding ethical conversations in online learning communities. Under this framework, guidelines for ethical conversation are assumed to be at the base of meaningful online collaboration and learning.

The chapter provides key insights for improving the quality of conversational exchange within online learning communities.

BACKGROUND

Challenges

The advancement of the Internet and supporting information and communication technologies (ICT) has created a number of unintended problems and challenges that deter many users from communicating online. First, the Internet has served as a conduit for criminal activity with a strong social impact (Wall, 2005). For instance*,* Holt and Graves (2007) conducted a qualitative analysis of advance fee fraud e-mail schemes and found a variety of writing techniques used to generate responses and information from victims. In another area, Finch (2007) explored the problem of stolen identity using the Internet. The newly created *International Journal of Cyber* Criminology is focused entirely on emerging areas of cyber-crime research, including cyber-terrorism, cyber-stalking, and online gambling. Second, the use of Internet within educational contexts has created additional challenges for online instructors and administrators such as online cheating, cyber-harassment, and cyber-bullying. Shariff and Hoff (2007) addressed the problem of cyber-bullying in schools highlighting the legal boundaries for school supervision online. Beran and Li (2005) focused on cyber-harassment issues that can arise within online educational environments. In another area, Underwood (2003) examined serious academic offenses connected to e-learning including online cheating and Internet plagiarism that can lead to student expulsion. Moreover, online learners and instructors must contend with evolving intellectual property and fair use policies governing information communication and ownership (DeGeorge, 2006). There are also communication privacy and confidentiality issues that affect online communication and information exchange (Rotenberg, 1998). This body of work raises public attention to the risks and challenges involved in communicating online. It also suggests that a framework is needed to help reduce online risk and guide communications within online learning environments.

Technoethics and Educational Technoethics

Technoethics is an interdisciplinary field concerned with all ethical aspects of technology within a society shaped by technology. It deals with human processes and practices connected to technology which are becoming embedded within social, political, and moral spheres of life. It also examines social policies and interventions occurring in response to issues generated by technology development and use. The seminal description of the field of technoethics was contributed by Mario Bunge (1977) in speaking to the field of engineering. Bunge addressed how technologists and engineers have social responsibilities dues to the immense influence their work has on society: Bunge (1979) stated "You cannot manipulate the world as if it were a chunk of clay and at the same time disclaim all responsibility for what you do or refuse to do, particularly since your skills are needed to repair whatever damages you may have done or at least to forestall future such damages" (p. 23). The field of technoethics provides theoretical grounding for dealing with ethical considerations with technology in all areas of human activity as indicated in the *Handbook of Research on Technoethics* (Luppicini & Adell, forthcoming).

Technoethics provides core grounding to work in education and educational technology. Educational technology is a goal-oriented problem-solving systems approach utilizing tools, techniques, theories, and methods from multiple knowledge domains, to: (1) design, develop, and evaluate, human and mechanical resources efficiently and

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