Chapter IX
Ethical Conflicts in Research on Networked Education Contexts

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ABSTRACT

The emergent world of network-based education creates challenges for researchers who wish to further our understanding of the opportunities and limitations while acting ethically in relation with learners, educators, and educational institutions. Existing ethical guidelines and practices were developed in place bound contexts in which privacy, safety, consent, ownership, and confidentiality were exposed and protected in many different ways than that found in networked contexts. This chapter addresses these and other ethical concerns that arise when doing educational search on the net. This chapter is designed to help researchers understand the evolving ethics of research in net-mediated educational contexts. It concludes that researchers need to be prepared to innovate beyond the dictates of often dated ethical guidelines and to act as intelligent and responsible professionals.

The net changes everything - Variously attributed, Dot Com Era

Our identities have no bodies, so, unlike you, we cannot obtain order by physical coercion. We believe that from ethics, enlightened self-interest, and to commonweal, our governance will emerge.

A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace - John Perry Barlow, 1996

INTRODUCTION

Ebullient claims like those above give rise to a sense that the global electronic network has

changed the ways in which we interact and that we need a new set of ethos and ethics to guide those activities, including research activities. The net has been instrumental in re-engineering large components of our lives, from commerce to education, and from entertainment to vocation. As both researchers and educators, we have felt these effects with resulting concern, misconception and uncertainty when our research stretches and flexes our current ethical understandings. There are many ethical dilemmas that educational researchers face when conducting studies that are based upon or make extensive use of the Internet resources, communities or conversations. These ethical dilemmas are not unique to our research in the field of education. Indeed, within the field of social sciences, clashes, conflicts and heated debates have been ongoing for over 2 decades among researchers because existing codes of practice are failing to provide appropriate and workable guidelines for Internet-based research. Upon examination of the literature on ethical issues relating to Internet-based research, we conclude that there are three main reasons for confusion and uncertainty among researchers in the field of education. These issues include participant consent, public vs. private ownership and confidentiality and anonymity. Our discussion in this chapter revolves around these issues.

The use of the Internet effects research in the field of education in two distinct ways. First, it provides a new educational context or learning environment, such as a completely virtual education institution (e.g., virtual school or university, or private training organization) or augmentation of classroom-based schooling (so called blended-learning) with network mediated activities. This new environment supports the traditional interactions between and among students, instructors and content (although they are, by definition, mediated) but it often extends these communications to span boundaries of space, time and relationship. The new environment also supports the creation

and operation of student, teacher and content agents (Anderson & Whitelock, 2004) that act autonomously on behalf of their owners while traversing the "semantic Web" (Berners-Lee, Hendler, & Lassila, 2001). The Internet is also used to create virtual learning environments (e.g., learning contexts build in SecondLife and Active Worlds) in which the physical laws of nature can be transcended.

In such novel environments, it is firstly no surprise that ethical laws and norms developed for face-to-face interaction may also be transcended or suspended. All of these contextual changes create very complicated sets of personal and impersonal interaction within an educational realm and the broader social domain. Secondly, the Internet is used to create research tools through which researchers can study, measure and observe both networked and real world activities. For example, WebCams, listening devices, Web mining tools and other forms of Web-enhanced monitoring tools and input devices, allow the researcher to continuously monitor and study real time (as well as asynchronous) activities happening anywhere on the globe. These data collecting devices may be visible and obtrusive, but they are as likely to be covertly hidden or hidden by a subject's sense of familiarity, challenging our sense of privacy and aloneness.

The application of both types of Web-enhanced research creates ethical issues and concerns, and provides opportunity for uninformed (or nefarious!) researchers to exploit or endanger unaware research subjects or participants. We write this chapter as a discussion focused on both the opportunities and the perils of Internet-based research within the field of education. We provide no simple solutions or recommendations. Rather, we write in hopes that those within the research community will benefit through an extended discussion and resulting understanding of the often hidden ethical constraints and dilemmas of Internet-based educational research. We hope

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