Chapter X
The Ethics of Designing for Multimodality:
Empowering Nontraditional Learners

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ABSTRACT

The changing nature of distance education in the higher education context is investigated in this chapter, particularly in relation to "massification" and the ethics involved in delivering technology enhanced courses to an increasingly diverse student body. Institutions may have developed policies in response to this, but it would seem that few academics have a coherent way of adhering to them. In addition, there is significant research suggesting that reliance on text-based instruction may disadvantage some students. This chapter draws on four case studies, emanating from recent research, demonstrating that higher levels of student engagement are possible when course materials are designed to cater for students with different approaches to learning. This chapter also suggests a more ethical approach to developing courses is a two-phased approach: (1) integrating a range of multimodal learning and teaching strategies; and (2) giving students the opportunity to discover their preferred approach to learning.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter investigates issues relating to the changing nature of providing higher educational course materials via **distance education**, particularly in the context of the ethics involved in delivering these courses via technology-enhanced environments. Over recent years, there has been

an increasing tendency, due to the advances in learning management system (LMS) technology, to shift the delivery of course materials from printed to electronic form. However, at the same time there has also been a significant increase in the percentage of **nontraditional learners** entering universities, particularly over the last decade, many of whom are choosing to study by **distance education** (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). These technological and societal changes affecting higher education at a global level led Professor Jim Taylor in his keynote address at the ICDE World Conference on Open and Distance Learning in February 2004 to state, "traditional approaches to learning and teaching are not capable of meeting the escalating demands of higher education" (Taylor, 2004, p. 11).

In addition to this, sociologists and pragmatic educators are increasingly noticing that people are learning to learn in different or in nontraditional ways (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). This realisation parallels the "**massification**" of higher education, the process whereby higher education is transformed from an elite to a mass system with a much larger proportion of the population participating (Scott, 1995). As a greater **diversity** of people enter higher education it has become clear there are different cognitive, generational, cultural and demographic needs that all need to be considered when designing instruction, particularly for those studying at a distance. For example, in any given course of study there may be students ranging in age from 17 to 70+ (Traditionalists to Millennials, Figure 1), those who only study part-time, those who have dependants or be single parents, or they could be employed part- or full-time while also studying, or they may only have English as their second language (in a western context), or come from a disadvantaged background. In many cases, this has meant students are coming to university unprepared to face the rigors of study, and with little way of knowing how to make the appropriate adjustments.

Massification of higher education has created significant ethical challenges. Indeed there is now a literature on the professionalisation of teaching in higher education (Davis, 1999; Macfarlane, 2004). It is argued that the traditional view of a university academic as a discipline expert with a strong focus on research is no longer adequate. Although academics might be professional in the sense that they are members of a professional body (e.g., in accounting, engineering, law or medicine) or are discipline experts, they must also be professional in the sense that they are cognisant of obligations to students. Students are clients and professionalism incorporates both mastery of an area of knowledge and skill (the traditional view of the university academic) *and* service from which the client derives benefit (Jarvis, 1983).

The new **diversity** *in the student body, in, inter alia, ability, social background, culture, motivation and economic status, presents significant ethical challenges for teachers. In teaching, assessing and managing students this* **diversity** *has an impact. It is no longer good enough to treat students as an immature, homogeneous group with identical educational backgrounds.* (Macfarlane, 2004, p. 11)

The need to cater for such **diversity** has never been greater; demanding new approaches to learning and teaching for the new millennium (Cameron, Shaw, & Arnott, 2002).

Many universities have equity and ethics policies designed to address some of these issues, but it would seem few academic staff at these institutions have a coherent way of adhering to these policies, due either to a lack of time, or simply not being aware of the enormity of the issues (Birch & Gardiner, 2005). At least in the Australian context adoption of technology enhanced learning has been *ad hoc* and limited and does not appear to be a coherent response to the ethical implications of **massification** (Smith, Ling, & Hill, 2006). In

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