

Chapter XIX

Ethical Practice and Online Learning — A Contradiction? A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to investigate ethical issues such as individual integrity and rights affecting online students who are Early Years Managers, leading a range of child care and education settings. This study has as its focus the student experience and explores student attitude from the perspective of participants who are transferring knowledge and skills on a day-to-day basis in an ethically and socially responsible Early Years sector via online learning. This type of learning has been characterised by distance and perceived reduced empathy. The research adopts a case study approach and proposes that Pelz's (2004) "three principles of effective online pedagogy" perspective could be used to explore the tension and ethical issues experienced by online and distance learners. Questionnaires were used and semi structured interviews conducted to collect data. Analysis of the data found no significant ethical concerns in terms of individual integrity and rights perceived by the students. The contributions of an effective pedagogical approach and the students' professional context to the positive findings are highlighted.

INTRODUCTION

Much of the discussion and research around ethics and on online learning has been restricted to

the following key areas: learning and teaching strategies, plagiarism, intellectual property and copyright issues. Luck and Norton (2002) pointed to the long standing argument that, as the distance

between people increases, the possibility for genuine empathy decreases. This study analyses ethical dimensions of relationships online. It is acknowledged that the nature of human dignity forms the basis of our consideration of individual rights. Human beings are considered worthy of respect and should always be treated with dignity and respect. This research poses the question:

How are the students' integrity and rights affected by online learning?

As the ethical dimension and the distance factor is a much unexplored area, this chapter then addresses a further question:

What ethical issues are identified by online students themselves?

This study has as its focus the student experience. These students are managers in the ethically and socially responsible Early Years sector. Yet their vehicle for learning has been characterised by its distance and perceived reduced empathy.

Therefore, this chapter sets out the background to the study, providing the theoretical and the professional contexts in which students are engaged, and gives some information about the online course studied. An outline of the methodology is followed by presentation and discussion of results arising from the study. Finally, conclusions are drawn and implications of the findings suggested.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Theoretical Context

In the Early Years sector, those who work with young children face many daily decisions that have moral and ethical implications. Child carers acknowledge responsibility to provide the best

possible programmes of care and education for children and to conduct themselves with honesty and integrity. They have a specialized expertise in early childhood development and education. As professionals they acknowledge a collective obligation to advocate the best interests of children within early childhood programs and, in the larger community serve as a voice for young children everywhere. This ethics of care can be seen as fundamentally relational, not individual-agent-based in the way of virtue ethics, and the ethics of care is more indirect than character education. This posits the image of a "relational self," a moral agent who is embedded in concrete relationships with others and who acquires a moral identity through interactive patterns of behaviour, perceptions and interpretations (Addelson, 1991). In this way, work in the Early Years Sector can be identified as a "high-touch" ethical environment.

Child care practitioners work with one of society's most vulnerable groups: young children. The quality of the relations among young children and their caregivers has a substantial, long-term influence on children's lives. The nature of the relationship and the potential that exists to do harm require the child care practitioners to abide by the highest standards of ethical practice.

These ethical parameters influence the professional identity of this sample studied. Given this heightened ethical awareness of the student sample, it would appear even more pertinent to investigate the relationships (tutor-student and student-student) online. Hence, this study explores the experiences by students from Northern Ireland and England on Early Years Management programmes, examining the potential tension between learning in a sector which professionally promotes an ethical and socially responsive approach in behaviour while undertaking an online study programme, which can be characterised by distance and reduced empathy.

Lawhead et al. (1997) suggest that a majority of the ethical issues surrounding Web-based distance

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