

Acting with integrity online: Some questions for educators

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Online sites support complex discourses and multiple relationships; they cross physical, cultural and linguistic boundaries. In a discussion of the practices and welfare of staff and students we highlight ethical issues related to matters of equity and diversity, surveillance and consent, identity and confidentiality. Rather than attempt to resolve issues raised in this discussion, we pose questions to encourage exploration of those issue.

Keywords: ethics, online education, equity

Introduction

The internet allows education to cross boundaries and distances - geographical, social, linguistic and cultural - on quite a new scale, creating new challenges for educators wherever they are located. Brey (2006) suggests there are four major areas of social and ethical concerns regarding online learning and teaching. He depicts these areas as questions. 'Can social, cultural and academic values be successfully transmitted in computer-mediated education?...Are computer-mediated educational settings conducive to academic freedom or do they threaten to undermine it?...Does a reliance on computer networks in higher education foster equality and equity for students and does it promote diversity, or does it disadvantage certain social classes and force conformity?...What kinds of unethical behaviour by students and staff are made possible in computer-mediated education, and what can be done against it?' (Brey, 2006, p.91) The third and fourth of Brey's questions are of interest here. We see them as immediately related to the practices and welfare of students and staff in the teaching and learning context. Does a reliance on computer networks in higher education foster equality and equity for students and does it promote diversity, or does it disadvantage certain social classes and force conformity? and, What kinds of unethical behaviour by students and staff are made possible in computer-mediated education, and what can be done against it?

Equity and diversity

The third of Brey's questions asks "Does a reliance on computer networks in higher education foster equality and equity for students and does it promote diversity, or does it disadvantage certain social classes and force conformity?" Three aspects are briefly discussed: access to online services and online learning, cultural impacts, and power relations in sites of online learning.

Access

Online education, relying as it does on access to online services, is a form of education to which access is limited. For example, Simpson (2005, p.93) argues that "that there is as yet very little evidence to support the contention that e-learning will help overcome social exclusion or widen participation" in education while Anderson (2005, p.177) concludes that "those who are traditionally disadvantaged in our system of education face the same disadvantage when confronted with the online world"

In New Zealand Crump and McIlroy (2003) completed a study concerning the use of a free-of-charge community computing facility in a lower socio-economic area in Wellington. The authors concluded that the digital divide would not be addressed through universal physical access to computer technology, writing that "interest in accessing computing, even when situated in a convenient social space, and offered at no charge, is unlikely to be seen as a priority for daily living". The 2006 New Zealand Census reports that of the 35% of households that do not have access to the Internet, 56% say it is because they are not interested in having access. A similar tale is told in the Final Report of the Wired Up Communities (WUC) project that occurred in the United Kingdom from 2000 to 2002 (Devins, Darlow, Petrie & Burden, 2003). One aim of WUC was 'to provide ICT to enable home access to the Internet and

to overcome barriers to use of the Internet' (p.ii). The WUC project was only partially successful. A final survey found that in homes where technology was provided free of charge, 25% of participants did not bother to use it citing lack of interest or lack of time.

Intent to learn might take users beyond the "lack of interest", "not a priority" rationale for non-use. A project entitled "Overcoming social exclusion through online learning" (Arkate, Clarke, Englebright, Essom, & Knightley, 2006) suggests that while access to online services continues to limit the potential of online learning for learners who are socially and economically disadvantaged, "online learning can provide innovative and powerful bridges between the educational disadvantage and social inclusion" (p.102). However it notes that building such bridges is not straightforward. Tertiary education serves adults from a huge variety of contexts. Even now, a requirement for online access may prove to be a barrier for some segments of the community.

Cultural impacts

Cultural issues can be summarised as related to two major themes: the development of inequities arising from 'dominant' cultural values embodied in teaching materials and methods and the potential for miscommunication amongst participants in online discussions, arising from cultural difference (Goodfellow & Hewling, 2005). Ethical practice for online educators would demand scrupulous consideration of the issues that arise from these broad themes.

These themes have been quite well explored. However Goodfellow & Hewling's (2005) work suggests the themes of cultural inequities and miscommunication arise from an 'essentialist' view of culture, a view that, in relation to online environments, has limitations. Culture, they suggest, is "something that is produced out of interactions in ... [online environments] ... rather than being brought to them by individual participants" (p.356). Viewing culture as dispositions brought to the online class is "too simplistic a view to adequately account for the perceptions and behaviour of individuals in online classrooms" (p.364). While not denying the impact of the essentialist view of culture, they draw attention to the pedagogical culture of online participation and the impacts of that culture, even outside the virtual classroom.

This negotiated view of online culture raises additional complex issues for distance educators, including the question 'To what extent should discussion about the merits of online interaction also take into account the impact of that interaction beyond the course?' Al-Saggaf (2004) highlighted this issue in a study that investigated how online communities in Saudi Arabia are affecting people's offline behaviour. Through online discussions, online education can bring a greater range of perspectives and ideas to dispersed students, and opportunities to engage with the people who hold them. Education brings change, and educators know this. How do educators weigh their responsibilities in this regard?

Power

Comparatively recent portrayals of the CMC environment in education depict discussion as open and democratic. Online education does afford such possibilities. However there is increasing evidence that power relations such as those formed in face-to-face classes are also enacted as part of the online environment (see, for example, Anderson, 2006).

For teachers, a primary concern is that when power relations between students develop or are re-enacted in (online or offline) classrooms, access to educational opportunity is unequally distributed amongst class members. The effects of hierarchical power relations can be reduced by appropriate social organisation of a CMC system and teachers can work online to minimise the effect of power relations in courses. The question is, to what extent do educators recognise the impact of power in online courses and how much are they prepared or able to work through an ethical responsibility to maximise learning opportunities for all students in the class?

Another aspect of online education, linked to the power of institutions in relation to students, concerns the requirement of participation in online discussion. A participatory requirement is an international phenomenon, as any review of courses on the Web illustrates. Our own extensive experience shows there is certainly value in online discussion, but is there value in requiring it? (How) do we respect the right of students to study independently and engage in discussion when they want to? Is it right to demand that all students post (a certain number of) messages in order to gain marks for the course? How do we allow for differences in students while acknowledging that, as individuals, they may (or may not) choose to participate?

Students and staff

Brey's fourth question relates to the affordances, particularly those associated to the permanence of text, which online education provides for unethical behaviours by students and staff. Central to this section of our discussion is consideration of rights students have to privacy, to informed consent and issues of anonymity and confidentiality.

Surveillance

Surveillance of students is an issue in all online courses. We are able to track our students' participation, what they read, when they read it, and the number of responses they post. And we have a permanent record that we can return to. Students' postings are there for us to peruse and to print off. Such records are often used to give us information about a student's performance. Additionally, contracts that students enter into when using some free Internet services during coursework give rise to serious issues. Two metaphors dominate discussion of surveillance – the idea of Big Brother and Bentham's vision of the Panopticon where ongoing surveillance becomes accepted and almost invisible. The first is untenable in education – apart from any other factor, no teacher has the time to assume full and total control over the actions of learners. Bentham's metaphor is more potent however. Surveillance is hidden, and concern and action on the part of those being watched is driven by uncertainty.

How can we assess the kind of surveillance that occurs in online courses and make ethical judgements about the use of such data? For used it will be. For these circumstances Marx (1998) went beyond concerns with privacy and data protection in developing four principles for guidance derived from the dignity of the person and the "value of trust and its implications for community" (p. 183). Those four principles – not causing harm, fairness of treatment, meaningful choices for data subjects, and the avoidance of coercion and manipulation – must be clearly borne in mind as instructors consider potential uses for the data collected.

Consent

Informed consent and being able to control the use of personal information is certainly an individual's right. When students enrol at an institution, permission is sought to gather and use personal data to provide the institution with quantitative information about the nature of the student group. This information gathering process is open and informed. However, information is also gathered in other ways as we have noted previously. We build up more personal and specific knowledge about our students as we interact as instructors with students. At what point does an instructor's interest in knowing more about a student in order to make meaningful links to learning intrude on the student's right to privacy? Do we need to ask for permission to watch students' online interactions, to review and reassess their online contributions and to 'eavesdrop' on their 'conversations'?

Identity, anonymity and confidentiality

In online classes students gradually establish a presence and identity through interaction, becoming known in some way to other members of the class. In fact, Joinson (2001, p. 188) has shown 'people disclose more information about themselves during CMC [computer mediated communication] compared to FtF [face to face]'. Over time, often reflecting practices set by the instructor and beliefs about the nature of teaching and learning, students come to know each other's online persona, beliefs and ideals. At times students reveal other contact information to enable ongoing interaction. The trust that underpins the free exchange of ideas and the flourishing of debate ensures this.

Personal details are inevitably recorded – in reasonably permanent text. Instructors and students value the permanent text created. Both comment on how textual permanence allows them to return to postings and to reflect on material. This process of reflection is valued and seen as important in learning (Anderson & Simpson, 2004). Textual permanence also threatens. A precise record of discussion can provoke intense responses as students manufacture and magnify slights. Textual permanence also affords the opportunity to easily break the confidentiality of the online classroom, to distribute easily and widely exact copies of messages.

Anonymity potentially offers protection from breaches of confidentiality, and most web-based learning management systems allow for anonymous postings – usually as an instructor-controlled setting. Posting anonymously can have value. However, allowing anonymous posts also affords the possibility of direct

and potentially unidentifiable attacks on other students – rare in our experience but something we have witnessed. Such actions raise serious issues for instructors.

Discussion of identity, confidentiality, anonymity suggests many ethical issues for consideration. Is it an instructor's responsibility to ensure that information provided within a teaching environment is protected? Do we need to provide students with skills, strategies and information specific to online environments? The text-based nature of online learning environments raises other questions as well. How long are text-based records of course discussions kept? Do institutions provide any guidelines on this? Who should have access to it?

Conclusion

Zembylas and Vrasidas (2005) suggest that it is time for the development of 'ethically responsive online pedagogy' (p.68). We agree, and commend attention to that development, but also suggest the need for a broader view that looks beyond the pedagogical issues to those linked to instructor and student behaviour, and institutional practice. Our discussion of aspects of online learning and teaching – equality and diversity online; staff-student relationships and interaction – related to the practices and welfare of students and staff has raised many questions and engender a range of ethical issues with which we must all engage.

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