

WCES 2012

Ethics principles in distance education

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Abstract

The field of open and distance education has witnessed much transformation since simple print based communication till the WEB era. With the increasing use of new communication technologies, discussion of the ethical issues becomes more important. Ethics in education in general and distance education in specific has its manifestations in various forms. This paper identifies ethical issues that is concerned with distance education. The article puts emphasis on Principles and codes of Ethics in various aspects in the realm of distance education such as those pertaining to student-teacher relationship, research ethics, subject matter experts, instructional designers, faculty, teaching assistants, but major emphasis is on ethical principles in four areas: Commitment to the Student, Commitment to the distance education System, Commitment to the Profession and Ethical Commitment of instructional designers in distance education system. Codes of ethics apply to all members of the distance education, including the regents, faculty and other academic personnel, staff, students, volunteers, contractors, agents and others associated with the distance education institution.

Keywords: Ethics, distance education, codes of ethics, student, teacher;

Introduction

Success without ethics can be a serious criticism. UNESCO has advocated ethics in its educational programs, and has initiated deep instilling the ethical values in the cultural, legal, philosophical and religious heritage of the various human communities. The need to review ethical issues is necessary in the light of recent developments namely the increasing use of e-learning for formulation of models to judge ethical issues in distance and open learning. Desmond Keegan (1986) identified six key elements of distance education: Separation of teacher and learner- Influence of an educational organization- Use of media to link teacher and learner- Two-way exchange of communication- Learners as individuals rather than group- Education as an industrialized form.

Moore has divided distance education into different types: High dialog and Low dialog. Although at first glance, it seems that high dialogue should observe more ethical issues, but this does not lessen the importance of the observing the more ethical issues about low dialog.

The term 'code of ethics or conduct' as used by a profession discusses or describes the behaviours of a group. Campbell (2001, 2008) support the ethical elements of a code while Chapman (2002) and Raiborn and Payne (1990) acknowledge that the 'conduct' aspect is direction required. Others (for instance, Vongalis-Macrow, 2007) accept facets of both styles. The code sets out principles of action and standards of behaviour, how the members of the group will operate or work. Raiborn and Payne (1990) note that for a code to be usable and viable, the qualitative

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characteristics of “clarity, comprehensiveness, and enforceability” are required. In order for individuals to make the right choices in the moral sense, ethical code must guide and inspire individuals to act in an ethical manner. (Campbell, 2001: 402).

The Code of Ethics stresses the public duties and moral commitment of teachers as public employees entrusted by society. There is a natural assumption that a code of conduct has a positive impact on the behaviour of the individuals in professions. An individual’s behaviour is significantly affected by the culture in which one works (Raiborn and Payne, 1990. Frankel (1989) proposes initiatives to ensure that a code of ethics becomes more useful to practitioners or others, thus having a greater impact.

Literature review

Dozens of articles and chapters have been written during the past 20 years on the ethics of practice in adult education, including debates about the desirability and feasibility of developing codes of ethics. Among those who have argued for the development of codes of ethics are Boulmetis and Russo (1991), Griffith (1991), Connelly and Light (1991), Siegel (2000). Arguments supporting the development of ethics codes have focused on the need to protect the public from harm inflicted on them by unscrupulous or incompetent practitioners, and the commitment to ethically responsible practice that adopting a code represents. The debates on codes of ethics have largely been between academics. Most of the literature that explicitly addresses the ethics of practice was published in the past 20 years. A good portion of this literature has focused on ethical issues that are likely to be encountered in specific areas of practice, such as program planning (Cervero & Wilson, 1994), teaching (Pratt, 1998), administration (Price, 1997), Counselling and advising (Day, 1988), and evaluation (Brookfield, 1988).

Review of research literature shows that little research about ethical issues in distance education has been done. Research in distance education was primarily around the following axes. In realm of distance education, ethical issues, has been paid less attention. Berge and Mrozowski ’s review (2001) identifies that researches focuses mostly on the impact of individual technologies rather than on the interaction of multiple technologies in e-learning.

In Perraton’s (2000) discussion of issues in research in open and distance learning from a European perspective, he observes that in a review of literature conducted before launching of the International Research Foundation for Open Learning. They found that most research fell under five headings: (1) description, (2) audience studies, (3) cost-effectiveness studies, (4) methodology (methodologies used to teach and support distance students), and (5) social context. He analyzes many of these studies for their lack of a theoretical base and for their lack of understanding about the distance education context.

Sharma (2004) have encircled various aspects in the realm of distance education.. The authors have identified eight spheres of concern for ethics in distance education namely Student Support Services (Administration, Admission Eligibility Criteria/Calibre, Academic counselling, Medium of Instruction); Collaboration (Learner Support Centre, How and why they are selected); Credibility (Employability versus Continuing Education); Duplication of Efforts (Material Production, Launch of Programmes, Course Writing); Provision of intersystem transfer (Lack for interface to aim transfer); Expertise (Academic activity, Administrative activity, Resources, Research, Who does, How it is done).

Why ethical standards are important for distance learning?

-In recent years, the ethics of practice and ethical standards have been a popular discussion topic in many professional fields, including distance education.

-Ethical standards are designed to articulate attitude and behaviours to distance education personnel.

-The ethical standards are expressed as expectations of conduct in distance education.

-The ethical standards focused on the responsibilities of distance education personnel.

-It provides a common understanding among those involved in distance learning.

-It provides the basis of professional growth among those involved.

-It represents the aspirations and expectations of e-learning.

-It enables distance education authorities to be accountable to self, religious, and community.

-In order for individuals to make the right choice in the moral sense ,the ethical standard or code must guide and inspire individuals to act in an ethical manner(Campbell,2001 :402).

Goals of the ethical codes

- To enhance morale among members of the profession by formulating a set of recognized ethical standards to which all members of the profession would adhere.
 - To provide self-disciplinary guidelines for members of the profession by formulating norms of professional conduct.
 - To obtain the community's confidence in and support for the profession by emphasizing the social responsibilities of the profession towards the community. (Council for Professional Conduct in Education, 1995: 2)
 - To guide ethical decisions and actions in the teaching profession.
 - To promote public trust and confidence in the teaching profession. (Ontario College of Teachers, 2006)
 - Re-awaken the sense of self-esteem, dignity, honour, selfless service and moral rectitude in the teacher.
 - Build a strong moral foundation for the actualization of an educational system that can compete favourably in the global community.
 - Help to guarantee the safety of the professionals and sustenance of the desired prestige of the teaching profession.
 - Spell out the type of relationship that should exist between the teachers and their colleagues, students and other persons who would interact with them from time to time. (Teachers' Registration Council of Nigeria, 2005)
- In general, a code affects the university community – students, parents, colleagues both teaching and non-teaching, and most importantly, the teacher. The intent of the code is to guide teacher behaviour reflecting the responsibilities of teachers to the stakeholders.

Universal moral principles:

Ethical principles should guide the behaviours of professionals in everyday practice. Principles are assumed to be constant and, therefore, provide consistent guidelines for decision-making.

These universal moral principles include: Respect, Non-malevolence, Benevolence, Integrity, Justice, and Utility , Responsibility and caring, Wisdom and peace

In distance education, in addition, following principal should also be considered.

Principle 1: Commitment to the Student.

- Respecting for the autonomy of student.
- Maintaining a safe and healthy environment, free from harassment (including sexual harassment), intimidation, abuse and violence, and discrimination
- Maintaining an appropriate relationship with distance education students in all settings; not encouraging, soliciting, or engaging in a sexual or romantic relationship with students, nor touching a student in an inappropriate way for personal gratification, with intent to harm, or out of anger.
- Evaluating students and assigning grades based upon the students' demonstrated competencies and performance.
- . Disciplines students justly and fairly and does not deliberately embarrass or humiliate them.
- Holding in confidence information learned in professional practice except for professional reasons or in compliance with pertinent regulations or statutes.
- Refusing to accept significant gifts, favors, or additional compensation that might influence or appear to influence professional decisions or actions.
- The educator shall work to stimulate the spirit of inquiry, the acquisition of knowledge and understanding, and the thoughtful formulation of worthy goals.
- The educator shall conduct professional educational activities in accordance with sound educational practices that are in the best interest of the student.
- The educator shall keep in confidence personally identifiable information that has been obtained in the course of professional service, unless disclosure serves professional purposes, or is required by law.

Principle 2: Commitment to the distance education System

- Utilizing available resources (Email- teleconference-mobile-web) to promote learning to the maximum possible extent.
- Acknowledging the diverse views of students, parents and legal guardians, and colleagues as they work collaboratively to shape educational goals, policies, and decisions; not proselytizing for personal viewpoints that are outside the scope of professional practice.
- Signs a contract in good faith and not abandon contracted professional duties without a substantive reason.
- Participating actively in professional decision-making processes and supporting the expression of professional opinions and judgments by colleagues in decision-making processes or due process proceedings.
- When acting in an administrative capacity. Act fairly, consistently, and prudently in the exercise of authority with colleagues, subordinates, students, and parents and legal guardians. Evaluates the work of other educators using appropriate procedures and established statutes and regulations. Protects the rights of others in the educational setting, and not retaliate, coerce, or intentionally intimidate others in the exercise of rights protected by law. Recommend persons for employment, promotion, or transfer according to their professional qualifications, the needs and policies of the LEA, and according to the law.

Principle 3: Commitment to the Profession and Commitment as a Professional Educator

In the belief that the quality of the services to the education profession directly influences the nation and its citizens, the educator shall exert every effort to raise professional standards, to improve service, to promote a climate in which the exercise of professional judgment is encouraged t he educator shall believe that sound professional relationships with colleagues are built upon personal integrity, dignity, and mutual respect .In fulfilment of the obligation to the profession:

- The educator shall practice the profession only with proper certification, and shall actively oppose the practice of the profession by persons known to be unqualified.
- She/he should pursue growth and development in the practice of the profession and uses that knowledge in improving the educational opportunities, experiences, and performance of students and colleagues.
- The educator shall not interfere with the exercise of political and citizenship rights and responsibilities of students, colleagues, parents.
- The educator shall not discriminate on the basis of race, colour, creed, sex, marital status, age, national origin, ethnic background, or handicapping condition
- The educator Shall not use coercive means, or promise or provide special treatment to students, colleagues, , or distance educational board members in order to influence professional decisions.
- The educator shall not exploit professional relationships with students, colleagues, parents, university patrons, or university board members for personal gain or private advantage
- She/he shall not sexually harass students, parents or university patrons, employees, or board members.
- The educator shall not use institutional privileges for private gain or to promote political candidates, political issues, or partisan political activities

Principle 4: Ethical Commitment Of Instructional Designers in Distance Education system

- Provide efficient, effective, workable, and cost-effective solutions to client Problems.
- Systematically improve human performance to accomplish valid and appropriate individual and organizational goals.
- Facilitate individual accomplishment.
- Help clients make informed decisions.
- Inform others of potential ethical violations and conflicts of interest.
- Educate clients in matters of instructional design and performance improvement.
- Support humane, socially responsible goals and activities for individuals and organizations.
- Make professional decisions based upon moral and ethical positions regarding societal issues.

- Consider the impact of planned interventions upon students, distance education organizations.

Conclusion

The ethical or moral values must be inculcated since infancy so that it becomes a part of the behaviour of an individual and when re-introduced at the higher education (Waston,2006 ,p.2)and distance education system. Ethics deserves to be made a component of each and every activity of every individual in dealing with others or dealing with oneself .After the four decades of experimentation and utilization of the distance education system in the world, ethical principles are more highlighted in globalization. A code of conduct exists to support teachers in their activities in classes working with learner and supports learner as they work with their teachers. A code affects on students, parents, colleagues both teaching and non-teaching, and most importantly, the teacher. For a code to be considered effective, it must be framed for the distance education users to influence positive behaviours. If the code is understandable, detailed, and executable, it can be applied in a more straightforward manner. For developing a moral atmosphere and filling the gap in distance education, creating an ethical relationship between the learner ,instructor, and institution in distance learning is necessary.

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