

WHEN TECHNOLOGY, TEACHING AND EVALUATION INTERSECT ETHICAL DILEMMAS ARISE: STUDENT EVALUATION OF ONLINE TEACHING

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Abstract

Teaching online is part of the everyday practice of many academics and student evaluation of that teaching is an expected activity of both individuals and institutions in today's higher education context. Yet, conversations about the ethical questions raised when technology, teaching and evaluation intersect in the online learning context are rare. This paper employs an ethical framework composed of three interacting dimensions—people, principles and power—to raise ethical questions about privacy, consent, interpretation, authorship and ownership and accessibility in relation to student evaluation of teaching in a digital environment. The paper concludes with some examples of institutional and individual responses to these questions.

Keywords

ethics, evaluation of teaching, student feedback, online learning, digital environment

Introduction

With the move towards a 'market focus' higher education institutions increasingly face issues with ethical dimensions (Loveluck, 1995). "Assessing quality in higher education" for example, "makes important ethical assumptions" (Margetson, 1997, p.123). Nuhfer (2001) suggests ethics "informs all teaching practices and choices" (p.1 of 5). Yet, as we rush towards efficiency, effectiveness and evaluation, accountability, appraisal and quality assurance, conversations about the ethical dimensions of our practice, as institutional communities, groups or as individual, are rare. To explore the ethical issues that arise when teaching and student evaluation of that teaching go online we have undertaken an innovative six-stage process:

- *Online role-play conversation* between the three authors in which each adopted a different position: online student evaluation of teaching is not different from evaluation in other contexts, it is very different and not sure/can see both views (March 2002).
- Development of an *issues paper* (McCormack, Applebee & Donnan, 2002).
- *Online forum* hosted by the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA) Academic Development Special Interest Group (ADSIG) listserv (June 2002).
- *Workshop* at the HERDSA annual conference (July 2002).
- *Online discussion* with ASCILITE and HERDSA members (August 2002).
- *Discussion* at ASCILITE conference (December 2002).

This paper presents some of the outcomes of this work in progress. It begins with a case story to illustrate in context the ethical issues raised by participants in the conversations to date. It then suggests that when technology, teaching and evaluation intersect in the online learning environment resolving the ethical questions that arise requires ethical reasoning (rather than technological or pedagogical reasoning). The final section of the paper raises ethical questions about informed consent, privacy, interpretation, ownership and authorship and accessibility, in relation to online student evaluation of online teaching. Some ideas for individual and institutional ethical practice in the online teaching evaluation context conclude the paper.

The Case Story

Dr Sam Katrocious taught *E-Commerce* in the MBA course at the University of Australia Online (UAO) that was delivered fully online within Australia and overseas. Enrolments consisted of 57 Australian students and 72 off-shore students, principally from Singapore and Hong Kong. Knowing her academic career prospects would be enhanced by publication Sam decided to use her recent experience in *E-commerce* as a basis for a journal article. Combining the archived material from the Learning Management System used to deliver her subject (WebCT interactions in the bulletin board and email system and the Track Students and Page Tracking databases) with the student questionnaire data required by her institution, Sam compared various components of the performance of her Australian students and her offshore students. She did not obtain Human Ethics Approval as this was a professional teaching development activity rather than research. To protect the identities of the contributing students' private email and comments made in synchronous chat sessions were not analysed. Sam felt bulletin board postings, because they occurred in a public forum, were a valid source of data. After her article was published Sam was considerably alarmed to receive a copy of the following memo via the PVC (Academic).

I am a Singaporean student studying E-Commerce. I am writing to complain about ethical breaches. In 2001 I completed an online evaluation in this subject, supposedly to improve learning and teaching for the next offering of the subject. Coincidentally, my cousin in Australia was studying the same subject and it was he who drew my attention to a published article by Dr Sam Katrocious that reproduced our questionnaire responses, as well as the verbatim text of our bulletin board postings to other students. Although our names were removed, I feel I am identifiable from other information in the quoted postings. Also, because my postings are presented in a different context, without explanatory text, their meaning has changed. If I had known at the time, I would certainly have changed the wording or maybe not posted at all. I would like an apology from Dr Katrocious and request that my comments be removed from any future publication.

Ethical Dimensions

So, who is right, who is wrong, is there a right or wrong position? These are ethical questions. They are ethical because they call on our values through the use (both explicitly and implicitly) of dichotomous positions such as right/wrong, good/bad or should/shouldn't (Caulley, 2000; Edwards, 1996). And as such, we have to "discover the answers by ethical reasoning" (Andresen, 2002). An ethical framework to guide our reasoning could be composed of three interacting dimensions — people, principles and power. The people dimension involves individual, group and society/cultural perspectives. Personal ethics "refers to the beliefs that individuals hold about ethical issues, that is, the way people ought to act" (Caulley, 2000, p.4). Group ethics refers to the conduct of collections of people in groups or communities of practice such as groups of academics in courses or faculties or collections of faculties that constitute a university. Individuals and groups are in turn located in a wider social, cultural, economic and historical context.

Principles to guide ethical reasoning could be enacted as obligations: to act in ways that benefit others (*beneficence*), to do no harm to others (*nonmaleficence*), to treat others fairly and equally and to respect difference (*justice*), to respect the choices that others make concerning their lives and ensure information is freely given, without inducement, preference, prejudice or pressure (*autonomy*), to tell the truth and not deceive others (*veracity*), to respect individual or group space, words etc. through anonymity (*privacy*), to protect individuals, groups, information and not make any disclosures without consent (*confidentiality*) and to keep promises (*fidelity*). Implicit in these principles are questions of power (whose interests are

being served, whose are not?) and an obligation to empower individuals, to break down power differentials, and to include voices from the margins. And tied up with power is mutual trust. In situations of unequal power, mutual trust is lost. When ethical principles guide practice mutual trust exists.

Thinking ethically about the case story raises questions related to privacy, consent, interpretation, ownership and authorship and accessibility.

Privacy: Do the interactions between students, and between the teacher and the students, in bulletin boards or chat rooms or via email, occur in a private or a public space? Where does the boundary between private and public fall? What about the boundary between evaluation of teaching for professional/personal development and for research? Who defines these boundaries and when are they defined? How do they shift, between contexts, over time? And what happens (and who benefits/loses) when the boundary changes?

Consent: When a student posts to a subject bulletin board are they consenting to public exposure of that posting? What is 'informed' consent in the online context? When does it occur? What are students consenting to? Whose interests are served by consent? When can consent be withdrawn?

Interpretation: What happens when verbatim quotes from a bulletin board are analysed, interpreted and reported in contexts, and in relation to other comments, which are different from the context in which they were initially given? When do students cease being students and become research subjects whose texts are open to interpretation and scrutiny by others? Is it possible to re-present a student's meaning? What method is used for interpretation? Who does the interpretation? Do students see the interpretation? When does the interpretation occur, what about longitudinal studies?

Ownership/Authorship: Who owns the postings/questionnaire responses and for how long can they own them? Does verbatim quoting from an online survey or from a bulletin board (or its archived postings) infringe personal copyright?

Accessibility: What systems exist (institutional and personal) to manage information generated in online teaching evaluation contexts? Who archives survey responses or bulletin board/chat room/email postings and where are they held? Who has access? How long are they kept? How is access monitored? Who monitors it? Who knows what is stored and where it's stored? Does archiving enable identification by use of Internet search engines? Can we then guarantee anonymity?

On-going Research

The work yet to be done is to explore ways for ethical reasoning to become part of the evaluation practice of institutions and individuals. The discussion to date has suggested some possibilities. Loveluck (1995) suggests thinking about ethical codes appropriate to the missions of each institution. Such codes he suggests "are vital to the formulation and achievement of quality standards" (Loveluck, 1995, p.14). The New Zealand Association of University Staff (2001) and Loughborough University (1999) code of practice are examples of institutional and group approaches. For individuals using transcripts of students' conversations Fahy (2002) suggests informing students beforehand that their transcript will be the object of research, offering the option of an alternative activity if they do not wish to participate in the research, and until the end of the course, allowing students to withdraw or edit their postings. Zimitat and Crebert (2002) include in their online survey a consent page with details of the nature of the survey and the ways in which they will use and report the data. Students are required to click an 'I agree' button to access the survey. New learning and teaching technologies open up new opportunities to receive student feedback on our teaching. With new opportunities come new dilemmas and the need to look at some existing dilemmas in a different way. When technology, teaching and student evaluation of that teaching intersect, as they do in the online learning context, an ethical framework offers a powerful tool to guide us towards resolution of the difficult questions raised.

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