

Talking Ethics



Online Education, Part 1: Ethical Responsibilities of Instructors

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PURPOSE

The intent of this contribution is to discuss briefly, and by no means fully, the ethical responsibilities of instructors and students in the online education classroom context. Part 1 introduces the ethical obligations of instructors teaching online; Part 2 in the Fall/Winter issue will explore the same subject as it pertains to online students.

ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY

The well-being of the student is the prime concern of the instructor. Although teachers are relatively free to run the classroom, they also have a responsibility to convey the educational institution's mission and values. Not unlike the *Dental Hygienists' Code of Ethics*,¹ which outlines ethical principles and responsibilities for the dental hygiene profession, institutional policies articulate ethical responsibilities and values for their faculty and students.² The dental hygiene instructor, like a dental hygienist

practising clinically, has ethical responsibilities to uphold in the performance of their duty as an educator. When instruction is not face to face, but from a distance and online, the ethical issues encountered may be more complex.

THE ETHICALLY CONSTRUCTED CLASSROOM

Educational institutions are obligated to provide private, protected online classrooms using a Learning Management System (LMS), such as Moodle (<https://moodle.org/>) or University of British Columbia's Canvas (<http://lthub.ubc.ca/guides/canvas/>). The LMS includes a variety of internal communications tools for email, discussion forums, and wiki pages to be used only by those registered in the online class. Assignments, grades, and surveillance of participation are recorded and safely stored in the LMS. Educational institutions have policies to save online class information for a set period, after which the data are permanently erased. Educational institutions must have consent to use student data for research or for any other purpose.³ Consent forms from students are kept confidential.

Let us reflect on the possibility of how data leakage could occur. Over time, instructors and students who interact online become comfortable with each other.³ This trust may lead to the exchange of private emails, addresses, and phone number regardless of school policy discouraging this practice. The worst-case scenario is that an instructor or a student could be harassed at home or work. It is the responsibility of the instructor to explain this policy to students and to ensure that it is respected.

Online text has permanence. Online, a student's work in discussion forums is written, whereas in a face-to-face classroom, discussions are verbal. Postings can be copied to a home computer and shared with others outside the class. To prevent this from happening, educational institutions may ask students to sign an agreement at the start of courses to commit to professional and ethical behaviour. It is the responsibility of the online instructor to ensure this agreement is completed.

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Colleges and universities are continually updating their LMS and policies to ensure privacy in the online classroom. Online instructors are also obligated to keep up to date on their school's academic and ethical policies.

ONLINE INSTRUCTORS' ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY TO STUDENTS

Web-based education crosses geographic, social, linguistic, and cultural boundaries. The online instructor's ethical responsibility is to facilitate learning in this complex environment.

Internet access can be a concern. Students living in rural areas may have slower Internet connections or experience more frequent power outages causing delays in meeting deadlines. Instructors face the dilemma of whether to penalize these students for being late in accordance with the institution's policy. Should the instructor offer flexible deadlines?

English is predominantly the language used in Canadian online courses. For those who have English as their second language, it can be challenging to articulate their ideas in discussion forums and to collaborate in group work. At the same time, it can be difficult for students whose first language is English to comprehend the work of non-native English speakers and relate to their difficulty in group work.⁴ The online instructor should intercede using methods

to help the students express their ideas more clearly. It is the online instructor's ethical obligation to provide students with appropriate attention and learning support.

Cultures differ in their expectations of instructor–student relationships. Informal writing and discourse in an online learning environment is encouraged by online instructors, which for some cultures could be perceived as poor academic quality.⁴ Online instructors may not be aware of all possible cultural differences, but through continuing education, classroom observation, open and confidential communication with students they can minimize such differences.

Online courses are designed to give students the opportunity to work collaboratively, yet not everyone contributes equally. The instructor's ethical responsibility is to promote fairness and instill an ethic of respect by encouraging a sense of ownership over shared group work.⁵ Should everyone in the group receive the same grade? Instructors must work within the educational institution's academic policies to ensure fairness in the evaluation of student assignments. Additionally, it is the instructor's responsibility to encourage safe dialogue in the online classroom. Students must be able to express their ideas freely without fear of harsh criticism or ridicule.⁵ Posting ground rules on how to participate fully and respectfully in the online learning classroom is essential as a preventive measure at the start of the course. Swift action is necessary when these rules are broken. The online instructor must block any offending post from the other students' view and notify proper educational authorities for further action according to policy.

Online instructors should commit to lifelong learning, keeping up to date on the latest online pedagogy, and collaborate with their colleagues to ensure a safe, ethical learning environment for their students.

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