Talking Ethics

Online Education, Part 2:
Ethical Responsibilities of Students

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Student

Online Class

Instructor

Ethical Responsibility

ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY

Ethics are the principles that govern good behaviour; that is, what is right or wrong. The student in the online classroom is responsible for operating at a high ethical standard. The dental hygiene student adheres to the same guiding ethical principles and responsibilities stated in the *Dental Hygienists' Code of Ethics*[1] as do their instructors and their respective educational institutions.[2]

PARTICIPATION

Lack of a physical classroom does not mean that a student's absence or presence is not noticed. A virtual classroom is still a classroom. Students differ in levels of participation; some are more prolific in their discussion posts than others, and that is acceptable. A student's perceptions and skills (i.e., self-efficacy) in using and communicating via computers, and in using the Internet differ. Those with higher self-efficacy have higher online engagement.[3] The instructor will state the minimum participation requirement and throughout the course will help students raise their self-efficacy through online pedagogy.

In my experience, online students take participation seriously, but the research finds some do not.[3] Students are required to post their work in various discussion forums. There are individual posts to the class forums and there are group contributions. These latter collaborative activities enhance online student learning and offer opportunities for peer learning as well.[3] At times, online students rationalize that, since their weekly activities are not graded, they are not worth the effort to post a substantial response or even one at all. Thankfully this type of excuse is not common. It is the ethical responsibility of the online student to gauge their participation according to the course objectives and according to their peers' discussion posts.

What about reading other students' posts, emails, and wiki pages? Online listening, also known as lurking,[3] can arguably be part of a learner's participation in discussion forums. This is a legitimate form of active learning because the student is engaging with the course content by reading, applying critical thought, and reflection. It is the student's

INTRODUCTION

Part 2 is a complement to Part 1: Ethical Responsibilities of Online Instructors, which was published in the Summer 2018 issue (pages 45–46). It must be emphasized that ethical responsibilities are intertwined and each affects the other in an online learning environment: the classroom, the educational institution, the instructor, and the student. For example, in Part 1 various aspects of privacy breaches, confidentiality, access, and cultural sensitivity were discussed. All parties are affected and all parties are part of the solution.

The objective of this contribution is to further raise awareness of ethical issues for online students and to encourage reflection, debate, and decision making regarding learning behaviours. It is by no means a comprehensive analysis of possible ethical issues.

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ethical responsibility to respect the time and efforts of their peers and read their work. New learning management systems (LMS), such as Canvas at the University of British Columbia (lthub.ubc.ca/guides/canvas/) track a student's views.

INTEGRITY AND HONESTY
Honesty is central to integrity. Integrity means being truthful at all times using moral and ethical principles. This is one facet of the ethical self that surfaces in all code of conduct documents including the *Dental Hygienists' Code of Ethics*.[1] Cheating by students in a face-to-face classroom exists, and many students have admitted they have cheated at some point in their education.[4] Online tests and exams prompt the same concerns of cheating from teachers. Geographic distance may not diminish the possibility of dishonesty in the online classroom. Students pass messages via their private email accounts while simultaneously writing their exam or they may take photos of the assessment questions and share them. Discussion posts can be viewed and reworded to appear as the student's own. Instructors cannot intercept everything. LMS have effective means to prevent and police cheating for online exams through special log in systems designed to change user names and passwords frequently and randomly allocate questions thereby making each student's assessment slightly different. Can anything else be done? My online instructor philosophy is to develop students who do not want to cheat, by using the Virtues Approach.[4] It is a proactive approach in which an instructor trusts students and expects honesty in return. Assessments under this philosophy encourage students to develop innovative, creative, and high-level assignments unique to their talents and interests. Group assignments are also used, requiring coordination and cooperation towards an end product that is unique to the group.

PLAGIARISM AND GHOSTWRITING
Plagiarism is defined as the use of other people's work (i.e., ideas, research, and words) without proper attribution.[5] This can be an honest mistake, and guidelines stating how many words may be used without quoting the source vary.[5] Internet software programs are available to check for plagiarism (e.g., https://www.turnitin.com). These programs can be used by the student preventively to ensure an absence of plagiarism or by the instructor as a policing method. Students may unintentionally forget a citation or inadvertently state the author's exact words without using quotation marks. Academic reprimanding can range from a grade of zero on the paper to expulsion from the university (e.g., www.calendar.ubc.ca/vancouver/index.cfm?tree=3,54,111,0). It is the student's ethical responsibility to read and understand institutional policies on academic misconduct. Check with your instructor before you hand in your paper if you are unsure.

Ghostwriting is having someone else write your paper.[5] Maybe the student's friend or family member offers to help write the paper because they sympathize with the student's struggles to tackle the subject matter or deal with stressful deadlines.[5] Internet ghostwriting services are available for a fee. Both of these options can be tempting. It is the student's ethical responsibility not to use a ghostwriter; it cannot be argued that a decision to use a ghostwriter was accidental or inadvertent.

SUMMARY
In my experience, online students are honest and ethically responsible, but one day a student may come along who is not. To avoid ethical breaches, dental hygiene students can prepare themselves for online learning by reading and understanding the Canadian Dental Hygienists Association's professional code of ethics[1] along with their educational institution's academic policies and adhering to them.•

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