

Chapter 7.15

Implications of Anonymity in Cyber Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the pros and cons of anonymity in cyber education and discusses possible ethical and social implications for online learning. It evaluates both sides of the anonymity issue and presents strategies that may help cyber educators and instructional designers safeguard academic integrity. The educational implications include concern for authenticity and academic integrity, and the dynamics found in social presence. This chapter discusses pertinent policy while analyzing anonymity's potential for limiting and monitoring academic freedom and the social benefits it brings. Strategies are suggested to enhance social presence by planning for interaction through the instructional design process. The far-reaching

effects of anonymity within online educational settings and group dynamics have immediate and long term implications for instruction and learning.

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

The reader will be able to:

- Understand the educational implications of anonymity in cyber education
- Understand how the enactment of policies attempt to protect individuals as well as institutions
- Identify the main two ways in which academic integrity breaches may occur in on-line courses.
- Evaluate different strategies that may be used to safeguard academic integrity.

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INTRODUCTION

The topic of anonymity in cyber education presents ethical concerns as well as benefits. The privacy offered by the anonymity of cyberspace can influence a person's level of isolation. This is a risk that online learners take and which instructional designers must minimize by planning for interactions that increase social presence. Anonymity also brings about the added concerns of academic integrity and authenticity. This chapter will explore ethical and social implications of anonymity in cyber education.

Anonymity affects class discussions, emerging online identities, and interpretations. This brings a new freedom for learners or instructors who do not want to feel categorized, such as those with a physical disability who could be perceived negatively (Lance, 2002). The benefits of anonymity also create challenges. Constructivist learning theories support online instructional modeling strategies that may help enhance social presence and thus reduce the feelings of remoteness.

While some individuals may actually prefer seclusion, most online learners either choose or are required to actively participate in the course. New social norms are developed within the course room as students get to know each other through interactions. These norms require that individuals use new communication skills (Kerka, 1996). Monitoring within the online environment is also a necessary task for instructors and administrators alike. E-learning platforms, such as WebCT, not only let instructors monitor how learners are using the course room, but also offer features for administrators to go behind the scenes and assess the effectiveness of the instructor.

There is a dichotomy in a technological society: on one hand, anonymity is one of the characteristics of technology; on the other hand, evolving technologies are making anonymity increasingly less evident. Misconduct and improper use of the Internet have prompted governments around the globe to seek regulation and control over the

anonymity inherent in Web-based communications. The online community, including distance learners, is affected by these policies and/or lack of them.

Anonymity is the capability to act in private. Privacy means the ability to act without being known or isolated from the invasion of others. In years past, choosing not to reveal one's name or writing with a pseudonym enabled anonymity. Through anonymity, individuals have the freedom to think and express their ideals, even if these ideals may not be in favor politically or socially. It also offers protection from ridicule and retribution. Being unreachable though, has other consequences (Nissenbaum, 1999). Some of these consequences include identity theft, lack of authenticity, and lack of personalization. Anonymity may also exaggerate fear and isolation.

Cyber culture may present a false sense of online security. While the learners hold that their interactions are private and secure, the reality is that everything is traceable. The ability to track, profile, trace, and categorize are inherent in the media. It is inescapable that in order for data to travel to a designation around the world it must know where to go. "Most of society is not equipped to understand what is going on underneath the shiny, glossy surface of the World Wide Web. While it appears that most of the Internet makes it possible for us to lose contact with our bodies and assume some ethereal cyber presence, the amount of surveillance also possible is surprising" (Herman & Swiss, 2000, p.148).

Improvements in telecommunications and mobile learning, as well as the continuing development of alternative technologies to deliver education, are creating a climate of digital access that has more user entry points daily. The kinds of issues surrounding anonymity and the way these issues influence cyber education are difficult to pin down. According to the National Research Council, the observations we make today will not only be different from observations in the past, but will be changed by the events in the future

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