Chapter VI
Ethical Concerns with Open and Distance Learning

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ABSTRACT

Some of the more important ethical concerns associated with open and distance learning are not those that may be faced by learners. Instead, the challenges faced by those that design ODL or use it in their teaching can be seen as increasingly important. These challenges include globalization, which has emphasized instrumental rather than social aims of education, and the use of cognitive rather than affective pedagogies. For ODL designers and teachers, this has resulted in a concentration on cognitive tasks and market-driven aspects of open and distance learning at the expense of the social harmony that might otherwise be achieved. The overarching ethical concern for ODL practitioners should be to implement an appropriate pedagogy that will satisfy both instrumental and social aims. While this can be achieved, in part, through the use of the pedagogies outlined in this chapter, the problem is seen as being associated with deeply interwoven social and cultural contexts. Consequently, there is a greater responsibility for all ODL practitioners to ensure that the choices that they make are ethical at all times, irrespective of the demands of any employer, institution or authority.

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Meanwhile, so long as we draw breath, so long as we live among men, let us cherish humanity. Seneca, Roman Philosopher, CA 4BC-AD65 (Seneca, 2007)

PROLOGUE: ETHICAL DILEMMAS AND ODL

Increasingly, the enthusiastic adoption of Open and Distance Learning Systems (ODLS) in higher education has resulted in the increased availability of tertiary courses for students and benefits for the organizations that provide it. The concurrent emergence of theory and practice related to open and distance education (ODL) has highlighted emotional and psychological issues, and it has raised questions related to the role of virtual learning environments and pedagogies in promoting human and social needs. The future development of ODL as a mature discipline requires mutual trust between students, teachers, developers and researchers. This development is at a critical stage, because rather than anticipate ethical problems, and plan appropriate procedures to meet the challenge, it has too often been the practice for those associated with ODL to take the easiest and most pragmatic path, without adequate consideration of the long-term effects of their work on individuals and society. As Russell (2005) suggests, "It is…possible for educators to become overly preoccupied with online technologies, financial considerations, and utility at the expense of ethical and community considerations."

It is likely that the statement in the code of ethics from the Australian College of Educators that "Teachers are responsible for what they teach and for the way that they relate to students" (Haynes 1998, p. 176) probably has counterparts in similar ethical codes from other countries. It suggests that there is a continued ethical responsibility that must be faced by every individual working with ODL which cannot be excused by any characteristics of the technology itself, or by institutional constraints. One of the problems associated with ODL has been that the long-term consequences of choices between alternatives are often unclear. Russell (2004) suggests that examples of irresponsible behaviour, including the actions of surgeons, motor vehicle manufacturers and operators of radiation equipment, are more easily identified when there is an empirically verifiable cause and effect.

In this respect, a comparison between the work of scientists and practitioners involved in ODL is instructive, in that disinterested observers can identify moral dilemmas more easily with the work of scientists. This is because the potential of a technology to result in harm is clearer when death or a physical injury is likely to result from its use. In the case of ODL designers and teachers, alleged disadvantages such as psychological effects, or long-term changes to the nature of society, are likely to be disputed.

Two examples related to scientists' approaches to moral dilemmas illustrate this point. Jungk (1958) describes the attitude of scientists who worked on the first atomic bombs. He gives the example of a brilliant mathematician at Los Alomos, whose work had contributed to the first nuclear explosions. However, his interest was in science rather than in the effects of his work on people. He did not watch the trial explosions of the bombs, and refused to look at pictures of destruction that they had caused. A second example can be found in the work of Louis Feiser (1964), whose work contributed to the development of napalm. Feiser's book describing his experiments is a well-written explanation of the scientific method used to develop napalm. However, despite discussion of incidents in his personal life (and unlike Oppenheimer, 1948), there is little evidence that he was preoccupied with the moral consequences of the technology that he was developing. Indeed, in an interview with the New York Times ("Napalm inventor discounts guilt", 1967), Feiser stated that he felt no guilt about his work, and that it was not his business

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