Chapter XLVII
Ethical Issues in Web–Based Learning

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INTRODUCTION

If you were to survey course syllabi on your campus, you would probably find the standard syllabi to include:

- Course title and number
- Instructor's name and contact information
- Course objectives
- A list of required and recommended readings/materials
- A detailed outline of the topics for consideration
- Detailed descriptions of assignments and due dates
- Percentage of final grade
- A schedule of topics by date

You would also find a campus curriculum or departmental committee that initially approves such courses. Once the course is approved, it is not usually subject to review or scrutiny by the campus, unless the department requests a course change.

Meanwhile, faculty who teach the course change the syllabus at will based on new material in their discipline, changes in textbooks, and so forth. This is encouraged so that the students get the most up-to-date information in the discipline.

If faculty switch courses, retire, or resign, then their syllabus is passed on to the successor to revise, again at will. There seems to be little or no systematic accounting of the legitimacy of the course originally approved to the course now taught. Department chairs are supposed to do this. Many take their responsibility for quality control seriously; many others delegate this to their capable administrative assistant who may not know enough about the subtleties of the curriculum to have recognized that an inconsistency exists.

WHAT IS THE OVERALL ETHICAL PROBLEM?

The problem is that course information is now being posted to the Web, thus creating problems with

values, rights, and professional responsibilities specifically in curricular quality control, advising, intellectual property rights, and succession planning (University of Washington, 1996).

What is the harm in not having quality control in developing and posting courses on the Web? This is best addressed through a series of questions about rights and values, and is illustrated in Figure 1.

1. Has the delivery mode of the Web changed the approved course's integrity? How does faculty pedagogical style affect course integrity? Has the course changed from the campus's officially approved version? What is the professional responsibility of the faculty and the department in keeping courses current and still protecting curriculum integrity? How does one handle and value course updates without changing the course? This is a *departmental* problem.

2. Do students have the right to get what they "pay" for? From an advising perspective, does the course reflect what is "advertised" in the campus catalog so that those seeking credit for the course elsewhere are assured that the course description in the official catalog is the same course taught or desired? This is an *institutional* problem.

3. How are the intellectual property rights of the faculty valued and protected by posting course material on the Web? This is an *institutional* problem.

4. How will successive faculty comply with the course integrity whether they put their material on the Web or not? This is a *departmental* problem.

There need to be policies or procedures in place that allow faculty to upgrade their syllabi routinely within the accuracy of an approved course process to address the ethics of advising, course and curriculum integrity, intellectual property, and succession planning. With the advent of courses being developed online and faculty now able to easily state to the world that "I have my syllabus on the Web," this plethora of ethical issues arises.

The Course Integrity Problem

The course integrity problem stems from the overall issue of quality control. Faculty are encouraged to keep up to date in their discipline and pass this on to their students. Currency of intellectual thought is valued. Yet the bureaucratic process of reapplying for course "approval" whenever a course/syllabus is revised, or each time it is taught

Figure 1. Curricular quality control
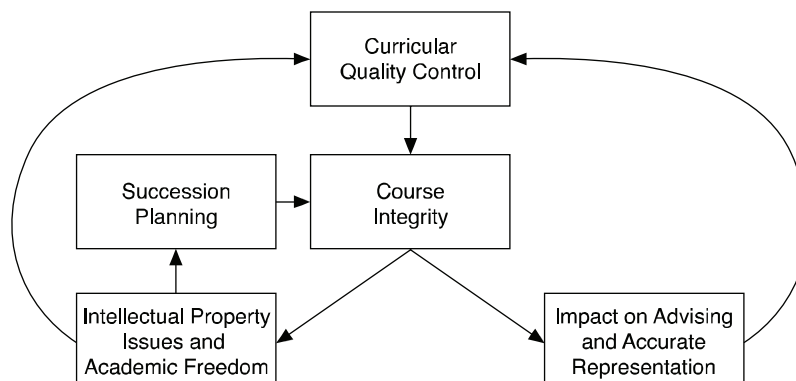
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