Chapter 3

Examining Ethical Decision Making Behavior in E-Learning Systems:
A Socio-Technical Analysis

Richelle L. Oakley
Savannah State University, USA

Rahul Singh
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, USA

ABSTRACT

E-Learning has proliferated throughout the education sector in recent years. Unfortunately, an unintended and undesirable aspect of e-Learning is centered on unethical behavior exhibited by students engaged in technology-facilitated cheating. Interestingly, cheating in e-Learning systems occurs in the social context of the class. Using results from a qualitative field study, the authors investigate the socio-technical dimensions of ethical decision-making in e-Learning systems focusing on individual and situational factors. They developed propositions and provide an in-depth discussion of identified factors. Their findings provide the basis for researchers to develop testable propositions for further empirical investigations and provide insight for educators dealing with the unique challenges of the socio-technical dimensions of ethical behavior in e-Learning systems.

INTRODUCTION

E-Learning is prevalent in higher education. A 2011 Pew Research Center report found that 89% of four-year public colleges offer online education, and over half of the college presidents surveyed expect that most of their students will take courses on line in the coming years (Taylor, Parker, Lenhart, & Patten, 2011). It is not limited to any particular academic disciplines. Indeed, e-Learning has emerged as a critical part of the pedagogy in universities that specialize in educating doctors, nurses, lawyers, and educators themselves (Ruiz, Mintzer, & Leipzig, 2006). The prevalence and pervasiveness of e-Learning makes

it critical for institutions of higher education to maintain and foster the integrity of their online degree offerings as credible alternatives to their traditional face-to-face degree programs. Universities recognize students who complete educational curricula and award degrees to attest that the student possesses the skills, knowledge and abilities commensurate with the requirements of the degree. In principle, there is no demarcation between students who receive their degrees online, face-to-face or in a hybrid mode that combines the two. However, much of the research and educational practice recognizes the significant similarities and differences between traditional and online forms of e-Learning.

As e-Learning continues to grow in American degree-granting universities (Simonson, 2003), educators and researchers cannot ignore the occurrence and implications of unethical behavior in e-Learning systems. While technology has shown promise in expanding opportunities for distance learning and for creating less expensive and more interactive learning materials, it may also facilitate certain negative behaviors including plagiarism and cheating. When asked about plagiarism in papers among college students, the majority of college presidents (55%) say that it has increased in the past decade (Taylor et al., 2011). In addition to traditional forms of cheating, many universities currently deal with students in traditional classrooms engaging in technology-facilitated cheating, with the aid of cell phones, PDAs and internet-connected laptops (Curran, Middleton, & Doherty, 2011; Read, 2004). A recent New York Times article (Eisenberg, 2013) reported on the increasing concern regarding unethical behaviors in online education environments. The Chronicle on Higher Education reported recently (Young, 2012) that tech-savvy students are finding inventive and technologically sophisticated ways of cheating in online and hybrid course environments. These include shared online documents and a variety of online collaboration and communication tools, used in unintended ways. The prevalence of practitioner reports and anecdotal evidence suggests the growing concern about technology-facilitated cheating, particularly in online classes. Yet, little research examines cheating in e-Learning systems. In light of the expected increase in enrollment in online courses and the prevalence of technology-aided cheating in education environments (Read, 2004; Simonson, 2003), it is essential that researchers examine user ethical decision-making behavior to better understand this phenomenon.

The propensity to cheat or behave unethically may be significantly greater in e-Learning systems. E-Learning student behaviors are not affected by the proximal physical presence of teachers or other authority figures to deter unethical behavior. Other than the university honor code and academic policies, determining whether a student will behave ethically in e-Learning often relies on the individual. Educators assume, or believe, that students typically behave in an ethical manner; that "cheating and other forms of unethical behavior are not the norm" (Sternberg, 2011). The very nature of education is built upon a foundational trusting relationship between students and teachers. However, pragmatically, cheating with traditional methods, and more recently using technology (Curran et al., 2011), is prevalent in classrooms, even wtih the presence of the teacher as an authority figure. E-Learning tests the boundary of this trusting relationship even further.

Research shows that when placed in a moral situation, an individual's behavior can be influenced by their own individual factors as well as by situational factors determined by the environment around them (Ford & Richardson, 1994). Researchers are interested in understanding the ethical implications of computer mediated learning (Beycioglu, 2009). Though some research has examined the impact of ethics and morals when technology is introduced into a primarily physical education environment (Baum, 2005; Beycioglu, 2009), few have examined it within the e-Learning system. Currently, there is a gap in research on e-Learning systems with regards to the user's tendency to behave unethically by engaging in various methods of traditional or technology-facilitated cheating. Understanding the complex combination

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