A Practical Framework for Resolving Ethical Dilemmas in E-Learning

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ABSTRACT

E-learning encourages ideas to be exchanged, knowledge transferred and intellectual ideals pursued. On the other hand, e-learning also poses new challenges to traditional notions of education. Almost inevitably, moral dilemmas arise out of the activities of all e-learning participants. These dilemmas range from issues in learning assessment to the ethical implications of using technology for education. The present paper first enumerates and explains a number of ethical principles distilled from an extensive research of literature in philosophy, law, history, sociology, and political science. Examples of how these ethical principles may be applied in resolving real-life moral dilemmas in e-learning will be illustrated. The paper will eventually propose an ethical framework based on insights from recent research by the author for effective resolution of ethical dilemmas in e-learning.

Keywords

Ethical Framework, Moral Dilemmas, E-Learning

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In developing countries like Malaysia, education is especially important, since the availability of a work force well-heeled in the latest skills is indispensable for the development of the country. Education is also indispensable in helping student to be more easily employed after graduation, as they would have a more applicable set of skills to sell to employers. Nevertheless, critics of modern education are also not short in coming. Some argued that modern education focuses too much on the "format" aspects of education, such as the medium and technology of education (e.g., education over the Internet or e-learning) and may have neglected the "content" aspects of education which are actually crucial to the formation of the character and skills of a student. The educational administrator, then, is often faced with the dilemma of planning for quality education versus education in new media, such as e-learning that has enable new opportunities for learning. In short, success in modern education, particularly with respect to e-learning, is often accompanied by a series of dilemmas.

In view of the above, an ethical framework should be developed for the resolution of dilemmas that may be encountered in e-learning activities. The present paper first enumerates and explains eleven ethical principles distilled from an extensive research of literature in philosophy, law, history, sociology, and political science. Examples of how these ethical principles may be applied in resolving real-life dilemmas in e-learning activities will be illustrated. The paper will eventually propose an ethical framework based on insights from recent research by the author for effective resolution of dilemmas in e-learning activities, with an eventual aim of using the ethical framework to help enhance sustainable growth of modern education.

2.0 DEVELOPING A SET OF ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

Since the early 1980s, business managers and students have been surveyed about their ethical preferences in business decision-makings, and two positive ethical paradigms most preferred by the surveyees have been identified. (Das, 1985; Carroll, 1990) On the basis of these previous

works, and using ethical principles distilled from various philosophical and sociological literature, a survey on the attitude of the of Internet community was design. (Oh et al., 1998) The survey requested participants to rank these ethical principles in the order of their preference in utilizing the principles in resolving the dilemmas that the participants may encounter in the course of their Internet usage or service provision. Table 1 summarises and adapts the results of the survey in descending order of their preference by the survey participants.

Table 1. Ethical principles and their descriptions (Oh et al., 1998)

Ethical Principle	Description
Means-Ends Ethic	If the end justifies the means, then you should act.
Might-Equals-Right Ethic	You should take whatever advantage you are strong enough and powerful enough to take without respect for ordinary social conventions and laws.
Intuition Ethic	You do what your "gut feeling" tells you to do.
Professional Ethics	You should do only that which can be explained before a committee of your professional peers.
Conventionalist Ethics	Individuals should act to further their self-interests so long as they do not violate the law.
Organization Ethics	This is an age of large-scale organizations – be loyal to the organization.
Hedonistic Rule	If it feels good, do it.
Disclosure Rule	If you are comfortable with an action or decision after asking yourself whether you would mind if all your associates, friends, and family were aware of it, then you should act or decide.
Golden Rule	Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.
Utilitarian Principle	You should follow the principle of "the greatest good for the greatest number."
Categorical Imperative	You should not adopt principles of action unless they can, without inconsistency, be adopted by everyone else.

It could be noted that the top two preferences in ethical principles of Internet users and producers, assuming the survey results as representative of the attitude of the Internet community, for utilization in resolving on-line dilemmas are Means-Ends Ethics and Might-Equals-Right Ethics which are not so positive. It was pointed out that similar top preferences were also found in surveys of business school students and business managers. (Oh et al., 1998) In other words, while the Internet community may be viewed (based on the survey by Oh et al., 1998) as ruthless and aggressive, their attitude is no worse or better than the rest of the "real life" business community. Human selfishness and combativeness are just features of human characters that any regulatory framework has to work with.

Moreover, if those ethical principles in Table 1 which may be deemed more or less "anti-social" (Means-Ends Ethics and Might-Equals-Right Ethics), "compulsive" (Intuition Ethic and Hedonistic Principle) or generally "problematic" (Conventionalist Ethics and Organizational Ethics) are removed, we are left with the ethical principles in Table 2 (again in descending order of their preferences). The ethical principles in Table 2 may thus be utilised as ethical rules of thumb for resolving dilemmas.

Table 2. "Preferred" ethical principles based on Oh et al. (1998)

Ethical Principle	Description
Professional Ethics	You should do only that which can be explained before a committee of your professional peers.
Disclosure Rule	If you are comfortable with an action or decision after asking yourself whether you would mind if all your associates, friends, and family were aware of it, then you should act or decide.
Golden Rule	Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.
Utilitarian Principle	You should follow the principle of "the greatest good for the greatest number."
Categorical Imperative	You should not adopt principles of action unless they can, without inconsistency, be adopted by everyone else.

3.0 APPLICATIONS OF PREFERRED ETHICAL PRINCIPLES FOR RESOLUTION OF DILEMMAS IN E-LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Participants in e-learning activities have a lot in common with the general Internet users. Both groups usually pay attention to the use of modern technology, including information and communication technology, for educational and other purposes. In fact, it could be argued that participants in e-learning activities are actually a subset of Internet users. Therefore, it could be argued that the "cleansed" set of preferred ethical principles by Internet users for resolution of dilemmas in the course of Internet usage or service provision (Table 2) could equally be utilised by participants in e-learning activities for resolving dilemmas arising out of educational activities. The e-learning participants here include all those who take part in e-learning activities, ranging from educational administrators and teachers to students and parents. The following four scenarios seek to illustrate the applications of the "preferred" set of preferred ethical principles for resolution of dilemmas in e-learning activities. In each of these scenarios, the ethical principles in Table 2 that could be used to resolve the dilemma will be briefly discussed. It should be noted that except for the last scenario, no specific solution are being offered for a specific scenario, just the ethical principles which could be of assistance.

3.1 Scenario 1

A science teacher is at a dilemma as to whether to introduce her group of students to controversial but intellectually stimulating material online.

Professional Ethics and Categorical Imperative could all be used in assisting to resolve this dilemma. The teacher would ask herself if she does bring the students in contact with the materials, whether she would be able to explain his actions in front of a committee of her professional peers. Or the teacher can ask herself whether the same kind of exposure and testing can invariable be done for all groups of students. The Utilitarian Principle may be a bad choice here since the students may define their utility (excitement over new material online) differently from the teacher (new knowledge).

3.2 Scenario 2

A government educational administrator is faced with the choice of making available a large amount of fund to develop e-learning activities vs. general educational contents.

If Professional Ethics is used to try to resolve this dilemma, the administrator will be able to choose between making the fund available for e-learning activities or general educational contents development if he is comfortable in explaining either choice in front of a committee of his professional peers. It appears that the Utilitarian Principle could also be of assistance that, as the administrator can ask himself which choice would do the greatest good for the greatest number of people. The Disclosure Rule may not be applicable here, since the government official would be equally comfortable in disclosing either of her choices to his friends and family. The Golden Rule also does not apply here, since the choice here does not involve interaction between the administrator and the students or the parents.

3.3 Scenario 3

A teacher is at a dilemma as to whether to appraise her group of students using an innovative and previously untested e-teaching method.

Professional Ethics, Golden Rule and Categorical Imperative could all be used in assisting to resolve this dilemma. The teacher would ask herself if she does teach her students using the new e-teaching method, whether she would be able to explain her actions in front of a committee of his professional peers. Or she may step into the shoes of the students and ponder what would she feel if she is educated with the new e-teaching method. Or the teacher can ask herself whether the same kind of e-teaching method can invariably be done on all groups of students without exception, as is required under Categorical Imperative. The Utilitarian Principle may be a bad choice here since it is unclear whether or not the new e-teaching method will bring the greatest utility to the greatest number of people (students).

3.4 Scenario 4

A student discovered that his best friend has plagiarised in a recent on-line written assignments. The student pondered whether he should report the matter to the university authorities.

It appears that Professional Ethics, Disclosure Rule and Utilitarian Principle can all be applied here. The student should report to the authorities, since only then would he be comfortable in explaining his actions to a committee of his professional peers or disclosing them to his friends and family, as are required by Professional Ethics and Disclosure Rule, respectively. He should also report under the Utilitarian Principle, since this will create the greatest good for the greatest number of people, since to do otherwise would jeopardise the interests of other students. The Golden Rule, on the other hand, may lead to a negative action on the student's part, since human self-preservation would inform him that he most probably would not like others to report on his malfeasance.

4.0 CONCLUSIONS

Successful education requires a careful balance between an educational emphasis on applications and the cultivation of a moral character. The new educational medium of e-learning, in particular, gives rise to frequent dilemmas. This paper proposes several ethical principles that may assist in resolving these dilemmas. When participants in e-learning activities are faced with dilemmas, they could go through the "cleansed" ethical principles in helping them resolve these dilemmas. It is hoped that these ethical principles and the ethical framework it evolves into can enhance sustainable e-learning.

5.0 REFERENCES

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