Ethically Responsive Online Education: Instructors and students’ Perceptions

Ethics are an integral part of the teaching profession. The advent of online education brought with it increasingly further demands for educators and students to maintain ethical principles in their profession and to act with integrity within these online environments. Anderson & Simpson (2007) stated that “Online teaching environments amplify the ethical issues faced by instructors and students. Online sites support complex discourses and multiple relationships; they cross physical, cultural, and linguistic boundaries” (p. 129). Reynolds (2007) defined the professional codes of ethics as “the principles and core values essential to the work of a particular occupational group” (p. 33). Although these principles and values are important to the work of groups, professional ethics and ethical challenges of online courses are not grounded in empirical research (Mabry & O’Driscoll, 2003, Schwier, 2005; Visscher-Voerman & Gustafson, 2004, cited in Lin, 2007). The issues of equality, diversity, privacy, and learners’ freedom were the most ethical concerns discussed in the literature. Lin (2007) discussed the ethical challenges in distance education from instructional designers’ perspective. He concluded that these challenges need further exploration from instructors’ perspective. These ethical issues are (1) The use of copyright protected materials in distance education, (2) protecting learners’ privacy and their individual rights, (3) helping individuals with disabilities in getting access to online learning opportunities, (4) providing equal access to diverse groups, (5) conflicts of interest of the learners’ needs and goals, and (6) professionalism. Simpson (2007) stated that online educational contexts create a range of ethical issues that need to be discussed through exploring both instructors and students perspectives.
Brey (2006) discussed the importance of identifying the unethical behaviors by students and staff and highlighted the importance of providing suitable coping strategies to solve these challenges. He also discussed important ethical issues such as, the capability of these online educational settings to stimulate or hinder learners’ academic freedom, to promote diversity, and foster equality and equity for students. Wang & Heffernan (2010) pointed out that “much of the existing literature that deals with ethical issues in the e-learning classroom overwhelmingly focuses on learners’ online privacy, and the observations are usually only from the viewpoint of a third party, that is, as a spectator or an external evaluator” (p. 798). Thus, there is no study in the literature that addressed the ethical challenges in online education from the instructors and students’ viewpoints. All previous studies discussed the ethical challenges conceptually or through empirical studies that explore the ethical challenges from the viewpoint of a third party.

In sum, in this study I strive to examine quantitatively the instructors and students’ perceptions of the ethical considerations mentioned frequently in the literature. The issues of power, copyrights and learners’ privacy, inequality and diversity, and freedom will be investigated through surveying online instructors’ dispositions and opinions to these constituents of ethical online environment and their proposed coping strategies to these ethical challenges. I will examine, compare, and contrast faculty members and students’ perceptions of ethics in online environment through surveying their opinions and attitudes of the most ethical challenges they encounter and what are the best coping strategies from their viewpoints. By including both instructors and students in this study, I strive to clarify the blurring lines of students-instructors’ rights in online environment to ultimately improve the quality of online education. The study is guided by these
important questions, what are the ethical issues experienced by instructors and students in the teaching and learning online environment? What are the best strategies instructors can employ to maintain ethical online environment and avoid any unethical practices?
References


