

pEthical Conduct of E-Learners and E-Teachers in Online Learning Community

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Abstract

Effective teaching-learning participation in an online learning community necessitates both students and instructors to strike a balance of respect and tolerance with one another. In this perspective, participation in an online learning community does not differ much from participation in a conventional face-to-face classroom. In fact, the former requires a broader set of rules and policies to establish proper ethical conduct to avoid, if not resolve, actions that may be deemed inappropriate in an online learning community. In light of this awareness, the paper explores the actions of ethical conduct of e-Learners and e-Teachers in WawasanLearn, an online learning community in Wawasan Open University. Discussion is further explored with some thoughts on current and future challenges facing ethical online education.

Keywords: Ethical conduct, Ethics, Online learning community, LMS

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Introduction

Education, as with any human activity, is an evolving enterprise. With the advent and rapid progress of information and communication technology (ICT), traditional classroom education has in many ways been replaced by its virtual, space-transcending counterpart in the form of Open Distance Learning (ODL). ODL allows the conventional learning in the classroom to be extended virtually with sufficient monitoring and interactions (Trindade, Carmo & Bidarra, 2000) With this, a teacher and his/her students no longer need physical proximity in order to undertake the educational enterprise. Instead, they form an online community of e-Learners and e-Teachers who capitalise on e-Learning technologies to achieve the same end. Malaysia's Wawasan Open University (WOU) is a case in point. Established in 2006, Wawasan Open University offers learners just about as many courses as are offered by regular tertiary institutions. The difference is that students benefit from the flexibility of time and accessibility to vast academic resources that online education offers. Through its virtual learning management system (LMS) known as WawasanLearn, online communities of e-Learners are formed, connecting students to their tutors and course coordinators.

For such a virtual community to function effectively and achieve the ultimate objective of effective learning, certain norms and code of conduct must be in place and adhered to by all. Using WawasanLearn as its point of reference, this paper discusses the concept of ethics and its relevance to e-Learning. Thereafter, the paper explores the ethical conduct of e-Learners and e-Teachers in an online learning community before concluding with some thoughts on current and future challenges facing ethical online education.

Ethics in e-Learning

Ethics, in general, is defined as a code of behaviour, usually that of a particular group, profession or individual (Collins Essential English Dictionary, 2003). In the field of education, ethics is significantly rooted in the concern with equal access to education by anyone regardless of gender, nationality, ideological differences and physical or mental disabilities (Toprak et al., 2010). At the same time, ethics inform the code of behaviour that guides the conduct of the members of an educational institution. Mutual respect, justice, tolerance and goodwill lay the foundations of this code of conduct. Concretely, it implies that in any classroom situation, no less the virtual classroom, both learners and teachers are expected to know and follow the acceptable ethical norms thereby creating an educational atmosphere that is conducive to optimal teaching and learning; everyone knows his/her role and has the obligation to exercise it.

What justifies the need for ethics in e-Learning? Besides the obvious fact that every human endeavour requires the observation of some basic norms to succeed, the fundamental rationale for ethics in e-Learning lies in the fact that the online community of e-Learners come from various backgrounds, both local as well as international. Individual learning factors such as differences in age, cultural, academic, political and religious backgrounds, coupled with differing attitudes towards e-learning necessitate that some ground rules be laid down to ensure that all are on the same page of thought. To this end, the creation of “a satisfactory interpersonal relationship and cooperative attitude among learners” is critical (Kabilan, 2014, p. 11). Based on a U.S. Department of Justice report on the ethical management of information technology in the field of education, Gearhart (2001) opined that the need for ethics is born of the “psychological distance” that arises from the absence of face-to-face interaction within an online community of e-Learners. Gearhart (2001) makes this observation:

When we interact with others face-to-face, we see the results immediately of inappropriate and unethical behaviors. When we use information technology in a way that does harm to others, the act feels less personal because we can't see or hear the other person in the exchange (p. 2)

Given this, what is therefore considered as acceptable behaviour in the traditional classroom is just as valid and needed in the virtual classroom, if not even more. Anderson and Simpson (2007) explored the ethical issue in online environment and have highlighted the complexity of dealing with it due to online discourses that could go across physical and cultural boundaries. Besides, the use of technology within the online environment could amplify the difficulty in monitoring the issue. Thus, the teacher's concerns in the traditional classroom about students' academic integrity are carried over to the virtual classroom. If teachers are concerned that students show academic honesty in the traditional classroom, then that concern should be elevated in the virtual classroom where the abovementioned "psychological distance" increases the possibility of academic dishonesty. For example, in a face-to-face classroom, the teacher can ensure, to some extent, that the works students submit are their own especially when hand-written assignments are called for. This, however, becomes a challenge in an e-learning environment as there is no way the e-Teacher can positively validate if the assignment submitted online is truly the work of the students or that of someone else. As such, there is an urgent need to enforce conformity of ethics in e-Learning.

This is because in the final outcome of learning engagement, online education is "fundamentally based on human relationship, albeit a new kind of teacher-learner connection with difference patterns of interaction and association" (Brown, 2008, p. 3). Since human relationship is conditioned by culture and context, what is considered as "ethical conduct" or "acceptable behaviour" for an online community of e-Learners varies to some degrees between institutions that host these communities, and it behoves the institution concerned to make this known to all members of the learning community. This can be easily addressed by drawing up policies for students to comply with, and incorporating online ethics as part of the institution's curriculum (Gearhart, 2001).

In Wawasan Open University, such policies are clearly stipulated under the "Rules and Regulations for the Information Technology and Facilities" section of the University's Student Handbook. This handbook acts as a guide for students during their studies in the university. In addition to highlighting the importance of conforming to ethics, the Student Handbook also emphasizes the severity of academic dishonesty in which submission and collusion of plagiarized work may result in disciplinary action. This Student Handbook is easily accessible from the student portal and WawasanLearn. Figure 1 illustrates an abridged section of the Student Handbook as viewed in the electronic form in the student portal.

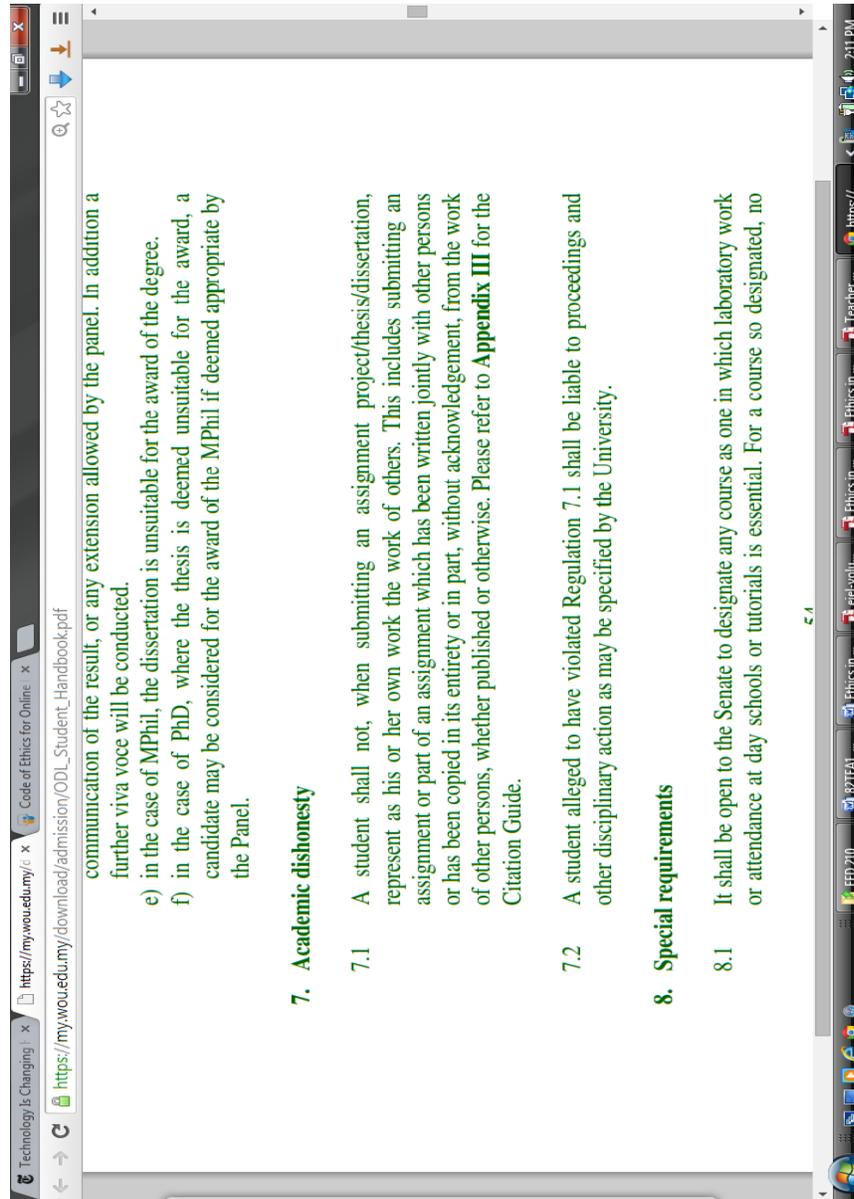


Figure 1: An abridged section of the Student Handbook highlighting 'Academic Dishonesty'

Toprak (2010) noted that ethical conduct in e-learning stems from communication ethics and instructional ethics. In an online community of e-Learners, the former (communication ethics) demands that the established communication protocol between all parties is adhered to, while the latter (instructional ethics) places the onus on the e-Teacher to comply accordingly. Since ethics in e-Learning falls within the interests of Internet ethics (also referred to as cyber ethics and netiquette), Toprak (2001) further suggested the moral imperatives of the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) as a general framework for online ethical conduct. The ACM Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct (1992) is available for reference at <http://www.acm.org/about/code-of-ethics>.

These imperatives highlight key ethical concerns applicable to all online users namely, (i) contributing to society and human well-being, (ii) avoiding harm to others, (iii) being honest and trustworthy, (iv) being fair and take action not to discriminate, (v) honouring property rights including copyrights and patent, (vi) giving proper credit for intellectual property, (vii) respecting the privacy of others, and (viii) honouring confidentiality. A shorter list on the code of ethics is suggested by Gearhart (2001): (i) honesty, (ii) keeping your word, (iii) respect for others, and (iv) fairness. Both lists reiterate the need for mutual respect, justice and goodwill in one's conduct when engaging others online.

In Wawasan Open University, students are also exposed to the basics of netiquette when participating in the activities conducted via WawasanLearn. The WawasanLearn Forum Netiquette is posted in the learning management system as a resource where students can download and study. Following are some of the netiquette most commonly required during engagement in any online forum discussion:

1. Avoid off-topic messages that may disturb or annoy other participants.
2. Be careful of the tone of language that you use when writing a message.
3. Do not send insulting messages (e.g., comments about spelling mistakes) or launch personal attacks on other participants in the forum. If you have problems with any participant, please sort it out with him/her privately. Do not send hate messages to provoke other participants,
4. The following types of messages are not allowed to be posted in WawasanLearn's forums:
 - advertisements and commercial messages (spam)
 - political and religious messages
 - hoaxes

- messages that may constitute invasions of privacy (e.g., posting another person's telephone number without their permission)
- messages that are misleading or in any way defamatory
- offensive, obscene, and abusive messages
- racist messages
- messages promoting discrimination, violence or hatred

In a wider spectrum of practice, ethical conduct also constitutes giving proper acknowledgement to learning resources (such as open education resources with Creative Commons license) posted online, especially in an online learning community like WawasanLearn (Author, 2014). This is a measure that requires serious consideration on part of the e-learners as well as e-teachers since such awareness is an integral aspect of digital literacy, let alone ethical conduct.

Ethical Conduct of E-Learners and E-Teachers

Having noted what constitute ethics in e-Learning and its necessity, the discussion now turns to the ethical conduct of members of the online community of e-Learners starting with the e-Teachers. Recognising that e-Teachers function as the “enablers of learning and not solely transmitters of knowledge” (Kabilan, 2014, p.26), the stakes are higher for e-Teachers who do not have the benefits of face-to-face engagement with their students. Tasked to facilitate synchronous discussions online while keeping tabs on who is and who is not participating amongst the e-Learners, are added challenges. Whether they like it or not, teachers represent the institution. As such, they are obliged to convey and exemplify the institution's code of ethical conduct to the e-Learners.

Using Howard Gardner's 5 Minds for the Future, Camuse (2010) suggested how each of these minds (disciplinary, synthesizing, creating, respectful and ethical) existing amongst members of an online learning community (both teacher and student) may be ethically guided to produce the desirable behaviours expected. For example, the desirable behaviour for an e-Teacher with an ethical mind should include providing accurate information and description of oneself, modelling and teaching ethical behaviours, and implementing an assessment system that measures student achievement fairly (Camuse, 2010).

Being the face of the institution mandates the e-Teachers to defend to the best of his/her ability, the institution's good name especially when it comes under attack from disgruntled e-Learners. It goes without saying

that e-Teachers must refrain from maligning the institution and its practices even if even expressing a personal opinion. Given the importance of online interaction (as a substitute for face-to-face), the e-Teacher must do his/her best to encourage participation from all. Motivational messages from the e-Teacher go a long way in encouraging and assuring E-Learners that within the boundaries of online ethics, no comment or question posted in the discussion forum is ever deemed superfluous or irrelevant. This also allows healthy exchanges of ideas to flourish and openness to inquiry, of which requires mutual respect of students and teachers towards one another (Burgh & Yorshansky, 2011) Connected to this is the ethical practice on the part of both e-Learner and e-Teacher to acknowledge a comment or question posted. A simple, “Thank you”, “Noted”, “Will check and revert” goes a long way in creating a virtual but healthy ambiance of mutual respect born of common courtesy.

In this respect, WawasanLearn’s discussion forums - public as well as tutorial forums - offer platforms for e-Learners and e-Teachers to exchange information, opinions and ideas. A user-friendly tool, it displays in a single screen, the ongoing discussion topics, the person who started each topic, the number of replies as well as the number of unread posts that the user has. At the same time, a sidebar menu allows for easy access to other pertinent pages while a search engine is conveniently located at the top of the page. Figure 2 illustrates the WawasanLearn’s tutorial forum web page for the course EED210/05 Teacher for E-Learning.

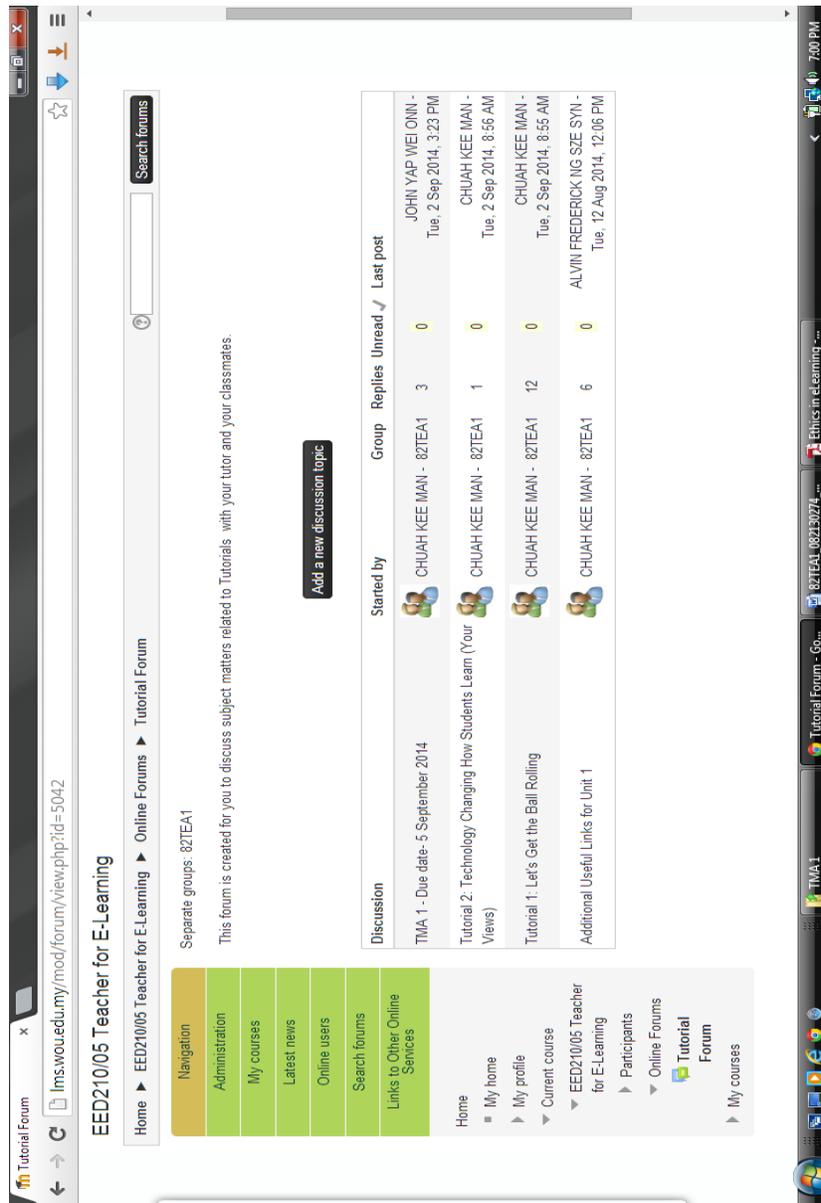


Figure 2: WawasanLearn’s tutorial forum web page for the course EED210/05 Teacher for E-Learning

Brown (2008) opined that the greatest moral challenge facing the e-Teacher is maintaining the quality of the educational process. This means not only following the protocol of instructional ethics but also striving to teach online as if one were in the traditional classroom. This poses a great challenge when one conducts, for example, a video conferencing class wherein the e-Teacher is talking to the camera and e-Learners are literally talking to (television mounted on) the wall.

Unlike students in the traditional classroom, e-Learners are expected to be independent, self-paced and self-directed (Kabilan, 2014). Personal motivation, self-discipline and commitment are the basic traits of a good student and they apply no less to the one who studies online. The absence of face-to-face interaction deems it necessary that e-Learners are “not hindered by the absence of visual cues in the communication process” (Kabilan, 2014, p. 18). Furthermore, they must be comfortable enough to disclose personal details online and share experiences when these are called for. Most of all, e-Learners must cultivate the ability to synthesize information and reflect upon them since the bulk, if not all of the learning materials are procured online.

Ethical conduct-wise, the call for the e-Learner is to maintain self-integrity and academic honesty in a learning environment that leaves room for academic fraud despite in-built deterrence (such as the requirement for an originality report for all assignments). It is the e-Learner’s responsibility to find out the institution’s rule and regulations and to abide by it. Ignorance does not equate exculpation. Ethical conduct in an online community however goes beyond observing the deterrents to infractions of rules.

In view of the heavy reliance on online interaction, the ethical e-Learner is one who participates actively in the discussion forum. When engaging in online discussions, he/she avoids using derogatory, dismissive or overly critical comments and supports fellow e-Learners with information, feedback and suggestions for locating resources online (Camuse, 2010). The ethically-conscious e-Learner promotes a sense of camaraderie through positive online exchanges that draw others into the discussion. There is openness to new ideas and one does not feel threatened when one’s ideas are called into question. Indirectly, a good community of practice is formed and e-Learners are motivated to be participative voluntarily towards enriching the online learning experience (Wenger, 1998). Humility coupled with a desire to share information are further characteristics of the ethical conduct of the online community.

In such an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect, the e-Teacher has only to play a facilitating role, ensuring that the discussion remains on track and posing relevant questions only to spur further dialogue. Ideally, he/she only mediates healthy arguments that are bound to arise in a genuine online academic discussion. Ultimately, the e-Teacher must also realise that he/she is also a learner who has as much to gain as the students from the entire exchange. When the entire community of learners are enjoying the process of education carried out in this manner, what results is a picture of e-learning at its intended best.

Conclusion

In the face of rapid technological advancement and cyber bullying, ensuring integrity in online education remains a challenge, for all relevant stakeholders of an online learning community. This justifies the need for a code of ethics to be set in place. However, as online education is a continuously evolving enterprise and therefore subjected to constant change, one may assume that new challenges to online academic integrity will also arise. As such, code of ethics are not etched in stone but are subjected to change as well. Institutions offering online education such as Wawasan Open University must therefore update their guidelines to keep abreast of changes and the online community of learners must accordingly adapt to these changes.

The ethical conduct of an online community is guided by both institutional policies and communal agreement. When all members cooperate and agree to ethically conduct themselves in their respective roles as e-Learners and e-Teachers, effective learning occurs and the objective of education is attained. This is what WawasanLearn hopes to achieve amongst its communities of learners.

In conclusion, this paper conforms to the conviction that the basic intention of e-Learning is respectable and in any such good endeavours, it is crucial that a sound code of ethics is not only put in place but also unreservedly adhered to. This is not a one-off process but a continuous endeavour. If 21st century education is about adapting to constant changes in a globalizing world through acquiring the skills and knowledge necessary to make one relevant and useful for society, then online education is one means to acquiring these skills. Yet, the race to equip oneself must not compromise the ethical conduct so necessary for the communal good. Only if there is a balance of both can the society be said to be truly progressive.

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