

e-Learning and e-Ethics

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Abstract - E-ethics is a theory about balancing between different effects technology has on personal and communal learning. We assume an effective role to it for recovering social variables missing in some learning processes. This paper argues that the most challenging part of modern technologies used in distance or physical education is the conflict between limitless application of technologies and the rule-driven essence of ethics. E-ethics is a theory about how relative values of custom and wisdom modify educational contents and processes. According to this theory the philosophy of education in any form is to link between learners and society through critical thinking. E-ethics as a theory in education is based on three propositions: 1) a balanced implementation of technology in distance and physical education; 2) interaction of content and process managing system with psychological dimensions of learning behavior; and, 3) proposing sound definitions of the role of technology in communal-educational programs.

Keywords - E-ethics, E-learning, Education, Ethical Theories, Technology.

I. INTRODUCTION

Ethics are usually defined as some non-binding rules. Professionals tend to argue that ethics are applicable in their area of activity only in the cases they are compatible with legal rules or with social norms. This is because ethics concern with concepts related to religion, human, and philosophy. In this way, some consider ethics as conceptual tools used to evaluate situations and guide

decision making from a moral perspective. [1]

Nowadays facing with the various issues that arise from misuse and no-ethical managing of new technologies, scholars utter such terms as “internet ethics”, “computer ethics” and e-Business ethics” to pose the necessity of governing the rules of science conduct in these domains. Actually moral definitions have been theorized professionally for conceptualizing human’s relation with new technologies. These attempts brought about a new branch of practical ethics named “e-Ethics”. Ethics have been taught all the times. However it is now argued that ethical theories have largely ignored the instrumentation of human action, an unexplored area of ethics which was brought into focus by computer. [2]

Today the huge amount of communication technologies is decreasing the human relationships to an instrumental level in such important areas as education. Ethics can contribute to improve these relationships. Theorizing ethical concepts and norms along with a redefinition to be applicable in this area must be our priority in communication era.

II. ETHICS AND EDUCATION

As humans are now part of the cyber-culture it is imperative that internet instruction integrates e-ethics content. [3] Ethics in theoretical level try to explain what behavior is rational and what is not. It is generally related to human conduct and mind. Education in not traditionally accompanied by ethical trainings or instructions. However, many teachers, researchers or scientists may have ethical considerations in their professional works. Our expectation from ethics in educational

field is much similar to what behaviorist theory of ethics says. The key to this theory is the observable change in behavior, because what occurs on the inside of a learner, such as thought and conducts, are not observable action. [4] It is true that changes are expected to be seen in a learner's conduct are not observable. However, this is different with constructivist theory that suggests that as knowledge is built and mistakes are made, learning opportunities lead to new concepts or ideas. [4] Anyway, in both educational and professional environments the actual link between ethics and scientific work is missing. In theoretical level, the relations may be shown as appears in figure 1. Regarding ethical educations scholars look to different dilemmas in learning environments that should be addressed through moral considerations.



Fig.1 Relationships

As a matter of fact, such misconducts as fabrication of data, falsification and plagiarism that sometimes fall under the institutional investigations [5] are not the result of the lack of ethical rules or moral teachings in these environments.

The concerning fact about ethical educations is the modern trends in educational fields and the extensive use of new technologies which have led to:

- Instrumentalism in educational programs instead of the attention to human factor
- Fading moral recommendations or commandments
- The lack of legal supporting rules for ethical boundaries

- And, individualism and introversion in using new technologies.

Anyway, scholars feel the urgent need of e-ethics and argue that education and industrial training must incorporate the ingredients of proper ethical behavior when employing the use of computer-augmented communication. [3]

III. E-ETHICS

Noticing the issues in the technological fields of education and scientific researches, attempts to define and apply ethical norms go beyond mere talk. Really what we have in hand regarding the more public areas such as e-learning and e-business are theories rather than practice. At an official level many states have taken research approaches to address the impacts of technology on different parts of public interests such as legal profession [6], education, social relations and business through ethics opinions.

There are various ethical issues involved in information technology [2] some of which are obviously affecting the elements that are engaging in e-learning including learners, content and the environment. Examples of these issues which are claimed to be threats to education and to information system generally are

- Computer abuses
- Computer crimes
- Theft of data
- Equipment malfunctions
- Destruction from viruses
- Errors in handling and usage of data [2]

The Computer Ethics Institute in Washington DC has proposed Ten Commandments of computer ethics [2] to be the guideline for protecting virtual educational and technological environment against these threats. They are:

1. Thou shalt not use a computer to harm other people;
2. Thou shalt not interfere with other people's computer work;
3. Thou shalt not snoop around in other people's computer files;

4. Thou shalt not use a computer to steal;
5. Thou shalt not use a computer to bear false witness;
6. Thou shalt not copy or use proprietary software for which you have not paid;
7. Thou shalt not use other people's computer resources without authorization or proper compensation;
8. Thou shalt not appropriate other people's intellectual output;
9. Thou shalt think about the social consequences of the program you are writing or the system you are designing;
10. Thou shalt always use a computer in ways that ensure consideration and respect for your fellow humans.¹

These so-called Ten Commandments are general and seem as legal ruled rather than ethical norms, though having close relation with moral values.

In the new outline of e-ethics each of the different areas of technology receive a certain evaluation relevant to the implication of ethical norms. Such fields as IT, ISD (IS Development), Generic IT Resources, Information Science, Artificial Intelligence and IT and Society have ethical dimensions [7] to be addressed.

One idea, though it seems pure religious and somehow philosophical, posits that the ethics of IT is not our starting point, rather, we must recognize that IT fits into God's order of creation. [7] Viewing ethical issues of IT technologies from this perspective is only a theoretical attitude and does not imply in practical ethics.

IV. THE ROLE OF E-ETHICS IN E-LEARNING

Ethics are learnt through the process. They have traditionally taught as rules of conduct but they have never been the content of learning process in modern education. So are they in e-learning. The modern patterns

of acquiring knowledge are so flexible that they can easily be introduced in the processes managed by new technologies.

However, when proposing the implication of e-Ethics we talk about a system of thought by which the on-line learner is able to manage his own learning. So we need to take two steps. At first we must propose and organize a theory about e-ethics, something more than a set of rules like the so-called Ten Commandments. Secondly, this theory must be processed into the both physical and virtual learning environment.

Generally in modern environments, the use of technology in education has tended to be technology-led rather than theory-led. [8] Many scholars argue that focusing on a well-organized theory can serve learning better than thinking technically. We suggest such a theory about e-ethics to be proposed. Being conscious of theories and subjecting them to examination is essential because they are particularly important to change and learning. [9] Such a decisive role is to be defined for e-ethics in e-learning.

E-ethics theory contains some abstract or at best scientific promises to be practiced in education. Technology cannot help this end achieved. If technology could not be used innovatively in education [10], or, if new technologies could not play a role in truly stimulating, supporting and favoring innovative learning interactions that are linked to conceptual development and improvements in understanding [8] we have no true opportunities to transform moral ideas to e-ethics.

Many shortcomings are assumed to cyber environment which may weaken the role of conceptualized ethics in new technologies including distance education.

A. Individual Ethical Problems

Codes of ethics are not binding. They are rather voluntary standards a profession or industry adopts. [1] This makes ethics individual and less public. In this way, codes which are advised about how to use computers and internet are seeking standard

¹ Computer Ethics Institute, 1992

behaviors for individuals regardless how they might think and act personally.

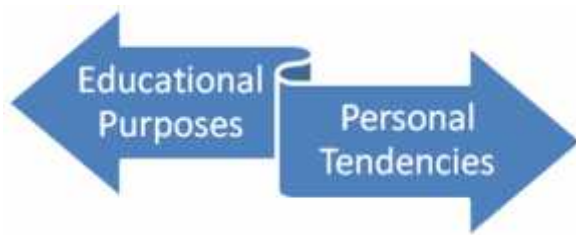


Fig.2 The Problem of Personal Behavior

The motives that urge people to search through the internet and computers even when engaging a learning task are so diverse in nature and origin that it takes a long time for psychologists to analyze all of them. Consequently, the concepts of e-ethics as rules for personal behavior can play role in understanding technologies and the situations in which they are used. These situations are not limited to traditional ways of practicing ethics. They perhaps need some modifications. For example, recently it has been recognized that educations in the basic conventions of the field and in the basic approaches to ethical decision making can no longer be left one-on-one mentoring alone. [5]

Baden has proposed that he discovered that a good way to approach the ethics of IT was not to worry away at individual ethical problems separately but first to seek a wider framework by which to understand IT in each of its areas and as a whole. [7]

In educational areas introducing morals as personal skills and ethical knowledge can be helpful in purifying the environment. It is believed that student practice is of central important in developing skill in moral analysis. [5] Admittedly one effective way to address the personal misconducts in e-learning and other fields of education is to make ethics a part of education. In other words, ethics must become a practical part of any education based on technology.

B. Education without Ethics

As technologies advance ethical theory is fading. Education interwoven with a new culture of diversity is undergoing two kinds of interaction with communication technologies. New ways of transferring and dissemination of knowledge are embedded in educational programs.

As humans are now part of the cyber-culture it is imperative that internet instruction integrates e-ethics content. [3]

To deal with this issue some traditional approaches are advised. These approaches which appear as instructional ethics may be applicable to different educational environments using technologies. Methods such as teaching ethics by lecture, imbuing students with a sense of ethical code of behavior by assigning readings in current periodicals and newspapers, and personalizing the topics of computer ethics by way of scenarios [11] are considered useful for moral training in education.

C. Technology as Instrument

Technology is a medium in education. In e-learning and other related areas computers and other devices and techniques are so central in education that the learner forget their role as mediums. As the possibilities of futuristic technology are immeasurable [1] their impact on educational factors such as methods, pedagogies, teachers and learners and on environment as a whole is considered a practical threat.

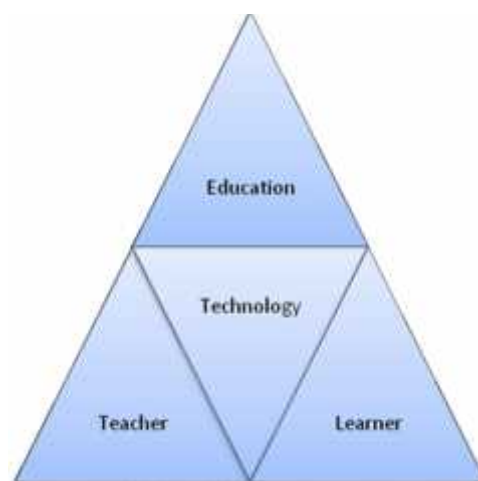


Fig.3 Replacement

The domination of technology in education programs or as decisive factor in learning process has weakened the role of human relationships and as a result the presence of practical ethics. The approach of engagement theory in learning explains the issue properly. It proposes that technology is used to facilitate the engagement of learners as a communication device rather than a medium to disseminate information. [4]

However, the medium and its uses are so imbedded in learning process that its main task has been forgotten has followed some indispensable consequences including:

- The learner is much more engaged in the device application than in the process of learning
- It is difficult to assume a practical role for e-ethics or computer ethics in this process

D. The Issue of Anonymity

Anonymity is said to be one of the main causes of the vacant place of practical ethics in IT and related fields. In some areas of using technology such as e-learning or distance education, as argued, the distancing itself has the potential to generate an inflated sense of empowerment through increased anonymity. [3]

Regarding this hypothesis that how anonymity may lead to the violation against ethical norms Saldarini and DeRobertis refer to the philosophical work of Emmanuel Levinas who argues that the cornerstone of ethical human conduct is face-to-face engagement. [3]

Some prominent critiques of the internet and cyber like Levinas name anonymity of the engaging personals as the most important cause for ethical issues to be broken. He believes that in-person communication possesses a certain ethical potency. [3] This potentiality generates a sense of moral observation in such activities as education and in-person task of knowledge transfer which is missing in a virtual environment.

V. CONCLUSION

A serious concern in our time about the human dignity has linked the three main factors of social life today including education, technology and ethics. Education and its related fields is the scene of the conflict between leading theories about learning and ethics. We have theories about learning process in virtual environment and also theories about how to imply ethical norms in this environment. But the main issue that is called a threat for this area by scholars is the misconducts and misuses of technology.

Advising code of computer ethics such as the Computer Ethics Institute of Washington DC's one [2], or seeking a framework for understanding the various disciplinary areas of IT and IS [7], or introducing ethics into the educational courses or scientific researches [5] can help achieve the purpose of ethical revolution. We suggest reorganizing and redefining existing theories through philosophical work. We have theories about e-learning, about e-ethics, about human conduct, about technologies and about communication. The main part of this critical task is how to make ethics practical and observable in the learning process which was called by Plato "purifying of the soul".

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