

# Chapter XIX

## Ethical Practice and Online Learning — A Contradiction? A Case Study

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### ABSTRACT

*The aim of this chapter is to investigate ethical issues such as individual integrity and rights affecting online students who are Early Years Managers, leading a range of child care and education settings. This study has as its focus the student experience and explores student attitude from the perspective of participants who are transferring knowledge and skills on a day-to-day basis in an ethically and socially responsible Early Years sector via online learning. This type of learning has been characterised by distance and perceived reduced empathy. The research adopts a case study approach and proposes that Pelz's (2004) "three principles of effective online pedagogy" perspective could be used to explore the tension and ethical issues experienced by online and distance learners. Questionnaires were used and semi structured interviews conducted to collect data. Analysis of the data found no significant ethical concerns in terms of individual integrity and rights perceived by the students. The contributions of an effective pedagogical approach and the students' professional context to the positive findings are highlighted.*

### INTRODUCTION

Much of the discussion and research around ethics and on online learning has been restricted to

the following key areas: learning and teaching strategies, plagiarism, intellectual property and copyright issues. Luck and Norton (2002) pointed to the long standing argument that, as the distance

between people increases, the possibility for genuine empathy decreases. This study analyses ethical dimensions of relationships online. It is acknowledged that the nature of human dignity forms the basis of our consideration of individual rights. Human beings are considered worthy of respect and should always be treated with dignity and respect. This research poses the question:

*How are the students' integrity and rights affected by online learning?*

As the ethical dimension and the distance factor is a much unexplored area, this chapter then addresses a further question:

*What ethical issues are identified by online students themselves?*

This study has as its focus the student experience. These students are managers in the ethically and socially responsible Early Years sector. Yet their vehicle for learning has been characterised by its distance and perceived reduced empathy.

Therefore, this chapter sets out the background to the study, providing the theoretical and the professional contexts in which students are engaged, and gives some information about the online course studied. An outline of the methodology is followed by presentation and discussion of results arising from the study. Finally, conclusions are drawn and implications of the findings suggested.

## **BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

### **Theoretical Context**

In the Early Years sector, those who work with young children face many daily decisions that have moral and ethical implications. Child carers acknowledge responsibility to provide the best

possible programmes of care and education for children and to conduct themselves with honesty and integrity. They have a specialized expertise in early childhood development and education. As professionals they acknowledge a collective obligation to advocate the best interests of children within early childhood programs and, in the larger community serve as a voice for young children everywhere. This ethics of care can be seen as fundamentally relational, not individual-agent-based in the way of virtue ethics, and the ethics of care is more indirect than character education. This posits the image of a "relational self," a moral agent who is embedded in concrete relationships with others and who acquires a moral identity through interactive patterns of behaviour, perceptions and interpretations (Addelson, 1991). In this way, work in the Early Years Sector can be identified as a "high-touch" ethical environment.

Child care practitioners work with one of society's most vulnerable groups: young children. The quality of the relations among young children and their caregivers has a substantial, long-term influence on children's lives. The nature of the relationship and the potential that exists to do harm require the child care practitioners to abide by the highest standards of ethical practice.

These ethical parameters influence the professional identity of this sample studied. Given this heightened ethical awareness of the student sample, it would appear even more pertinent to investigate the relationships (tutor-student and student-student) online. Hence, this study explores the experiences by students from Northern Ireland and England on Early Years Management programmes, examining the potential tension between learning in a sector which professionally promotes an ethical and socially responsive approach in behaviour while undertaking an online study programme, which can be characterised by distance and reduced empathy.

Lawhead et al. (1997) suggest that a majority of the ethical issues surrounding Web-based distance

learning have existed in some guise in traditional learning and also in non e-based distance learning. Student integrity has been a concern of the teaching profession since the inception of formal education.

Lawhead et al. (1997) grouped ethical issues into Web-based distance learning into five sections:

1. Institutional, societal and global  
Issues are raised such as changes in recruitment and enrolment practices to questions around the volume of resources dedicated to it and amount of regulation it is subjected to. The degree of competition and lack of traditional territorial borders give rise to consideration of issues such as community vs. remote institutions for learning.
2. Equivalence of product (or quality)  
*.... a distance learner who is granted a degree should be as broadly educated and should have the same level of mastery in a field of specialization as a student who earned a degree in a traditional setting. To promote distance learning and to provide anything less is unethical.* (Lawhead et al., 1997, p. 30)
3. Student integrity, confidentiality, and security  
Issues due to a lack of physical contact such as the decrease in the ability for the teacher to gauge student integrity using interpersonal cues are raised. The concerns over the ability to provide security and confidentiality of student work stored in the institutions' Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) are made. The World Wide Web and opportunities to commit plagiarism are raised by Lawhead et al. (1997).
4. Intellectual property, copyright, and ownership  
Academic integrity of copyright and intellectual property, an issue for both teachers

(appropriation of a student's work without their permission/recognition is unethical) and students, are pointed out by Lawhead et al. (1997).

5. Effect on the teaching profession  
Lawhead et al. (1997, p. 30) highlight the ethical concern of the "*status of the college professor*" and ask what professional qualifications are required to design and deliver such distance courses.

The above five points are valuable and contribute to the discussion of ethical issues and online distance learning. However, as there exists a plethora of literature with regard to learning and teaching strategies online, plagiarism and copyright issues, the focus of this study centres on point (3) of Lawhead et al.'s (1997) main ethical concerns, that of student integrity, confidentiality, and security, and then expands upon this to include rights. The study is framed from the point of view of the student online distance learning experience in terms of integrity and rights.

Crane and Matten (2007, p. 100) define natural rights as "*certain basic important, unalienable entitlements that should be respected and protected in every single action.*" If it is accepted that a person is entitled to rights, this means then that another person has a duty to respect these rights. It is now acknowledged that the term "human rights" has generally replaced the term "natural rights." These human rights are based on generally agreed principles about the nature of human dignity, which are manifested globally in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (1948). These underpin an accepted agreement on how human beings should be treated. In the context of this study, we are looking at the student experience of distance online learning and the student right to privacy, not to be discriminated against and the right to respect. Therefore, to investigate the ethical dimensions of the "tutor-student" and "student-student" online relationships seem par-

ticularly pertinent, given the ethical nature of the work undertaken by students in this sector.

De George (2006) points to privacy as a relative term which can mean different things to different societies. In relation to computers, De George suggests that there are two types of privacy, which he terms information privacy and electronic privacy. Information privacy is a term which refers to individuals' right to keep information about themselves private. Another concern that De George (2006) raises is the Big Brother syndrome, where computers are known to assemble and store large amounts of information about us all, and we are never too sure who has access to this. In addition to these concerns, in an online distance learning environment, could a tutor's monitoring role of a student, tracing their every move (or lack of it) electronically, be construed as "Big Brother" by the student?

The issue of student work and data is linked to information privacy. De George (2006, p. 495) suggests that "*computer access is much easier to compromise and more difficult to control than physical access.*" De George (2006) discusses electronic privacy in terms of use of e-mails and Internet use. In the context of this study, although electronic privacy can also refer to e-mail privacy issues, it appertains to the nature of information available on the VLE. What do students feel about security offered by the institution, about the privacy of their personal information and the academic integrity of their work in online distance learning? Further to this question, do students feel there is an invasion of their privacy due to the openness and recorded transcripts on the virtual learning environment (VLE)?

Bullying is normally understood to mean the abuse or humiliation of a person. Fisher and Lovell (2006) ask the question at what point does assertion in negotiation become aggression and therefore bullying? Bullying can be seen as morally wrong (doing harm). The student's right to respect and dignity would preclude another student's right to bully them. In the context of this study and the

high level of group work, could the distance factor of the tutor contribute to an online environment where student bullying could occur?

In essence, this study explores ethical issues experienced by Early Years Managers online with its focus on the student experience in terms of rights and integrity.

Underpinning these issues above are the relationships of tutor-student and student-student. Therefore, to explore the ethical dimensions of these online relationships seems particularly pertinent given the questions posed in the research.

## **PROFESSIONAL CONTEXT**

Early Years education and care is an employment sector characterised by "low tech/high touch" (Donohue, 2002). Practitioners tend to have little involvement with high tech equipment in the workplace as much of their practice is "high touch" concerned with managing relationships with children, parents and colleagues (Luck & Norton, 2005). Yet, the Centre for Early Years Management and Leadership at a University in the Northwest of England has been offering online degree programmes since 2002. Furthermore, a European Union funded European Enhancement of Early Years Management Skills (EEEYMS) project proposed to educate education and care managers through online delivery methods.

The practitioners, who comprise the learning community in the case study explored in this chapter, are in positions of management in the Early Years sector and are undertaking one of the following programmes: The Foundation Degree Management of Childcare Provision, the BA Early Years Management or the Certificate in European Early Years Management, which are all delivered online. The latter is a programme that is part of the above mentioned EEEYMS project. These programmes aim to give students the opportunity to share best management practice through collaboration with other colleagues from other European

countries, gaining a knowledge and understanding of current theories, models and research relating to key aspects of their practice.

In the UK, the market for these programmes has grown as a result of government initiatives since the 1997 introduction of a National Childcare Strategy. For example, the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) in the UK recognises the need to increase levels of training and development across the whole of the children's workforce, recruit and retain highly qualified staff and provide opportunities for more people to receive on-the-job training to equip them for their role and offer career progression opportunities seeking "graduate level managers (Level 6) and leaders" (CWDC, 2006).

Early Years care and education in the UK has continued to expand: The 2002 Comprehensive Spending Review announced a doubling of funding in a range of resources for child care, rising to £1.5 billion by 2005-2006 to fund the development of children's centres which will support the creation of 250,000 new child care places (Daycare Trust, 2003). The UK economy depends on working parents; in the UK in 2002 almost 90% of men with dependent children were in employment and 65% of women in employment had dependent children (Daycare Trust, 2003). Furthermore, the government is encouraging Early Years education and care providers to offer extended day care and a total of £24m is being made available to enable the conversion of playgroups to full day care for the period 2003-2006.

In the European context, there has also been a rapid increase of Child Care and Early Years educational provision, due to the increasing participation of women, particularly mothers of children below compulsory school age, in the workforce. This is documented in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development report (OECD, 2001) on Early Years care and education provision in 13 OECD countries. In Finland, 12% of 1-3 year olds now attend family day care centres with another 12% in child care

centres. 54% of the 3-6-age range attends centres on a full time basis and a further 12% on a part time basis. It is similar in France, Norway, Netherlands and Belgium, and is higher in Italy. Significant child carer recruitment targets have been set in all European countries and this will require a considerable amount of training provision, much of which will need to be distance leaning-orientated. Due to the nature of this employment sector it is evident from OECD research that the current provision for training and development of child care staff is only of a pedagogic or vocational nature, with no specific training and development opportunities in child care management. They are, however, expected to perform these management roles, "In countries with complex funding streams, staff are expected to be social entrepreneurs to juggle various funding sources, compete for scarce resources and grants" (OECD, 2001, p. 91). The EEEYMS project has undertaken an assessment of management education for senior practitioners and managers in the Early Years sector and identified a need for such training in a number of countries.

In setting up online Early Years Management programmes, staff at the university have argued that the use of e-learning or online learning can support teaching and learning strategies which will encourage a deep approach to learning provided that the teacher utilises the technology to support the pedagogy rather than vice versa. Ramsey (2003) warns that some teachers link the use of VLEs with a distancing effect between teachers and students but suggests that the reverse is in fact the case; "that a use of VLEs can mean resource enriched, although significantly re-formed, learning relations."

According to Russell (2005), when students use online communication, distancing is likely to occur and argues that "*distancing has yet unexplored consequences in on-line learning.*" Face-to-face communication, the standard of the traditional classroom, is the "paradigmatic social context and medium" and it is critical for interpersonal

processes (Palmer, 1995, p. 282). In contrast, online technologies have a reduced capacity to support affective relationships. Following these arguments, collaborative online learning should be beset by problems.

However, the learning and teaching activities on the degree programmes are designed to provide flexible ways of working with a view to encouraging high levels of engagement with the programme, thereby promoting high retention and achievement rates.

A valuable feature of the e-learning strategy is that it seeks to increase flexibility of learning for the student in so far as it removes the need for travel, and students will be able to access the programme via the Internet, from home or their workplace. The asynchronous nature of computer-mediated communication means that students can participate in activities at convenient times for themselves, to fit in with work commitments and aspects of family life.

Innovative methods in teaching and learning such as Problem Based Learning (PBL) are used that are particularly suited to the work-based nature of the programmes as well as online learning. Considerable attention is given to ensure that students feel part of a community of learning.

PBL has been chosen as it serves to satisfy all these factors; it promotes self-directed, independent learning, assists in the development of transferable skills and requires students to work in small groups which enhance peer support. The role of the tutor is a facilitator, a role often adopted in online programmes, which entirely supports the mode of problem-based learning.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The ethical issues arising from students' online learning experiences are examined. This experience is underpinned by the pedagogical approach of the subject/institution. It seems logical then to explore ethical issues experienced by the student

by using a pedagogical framework. Pelz's (2004) framework, which attempts to identify best practice in online learning, is used to examine the ethical issues as perceived by students.

This study proposes that Pelz's (2004) "three principles of effective on-line pedagogy" perspective could be used to explore the tension and ethical issues experienced by online learning with its characteristic "distance factor" and the managers from the Early Years sector characterised by "high touch/low tech." The purpose of this chapter is not to enter the theoretical debate with regard to effective pedagogy, but to explain the use of the theoretical framework adopted for this study, Pelz's (2004) "three principles of effective on-line pedagogy."

Pelz established the following three principles for effective online pedagogy:

1. Let the students do most of the work
  - In moving from "sage on the stage" to "guide on the side," strategies are suggested for putting students in charge of their own work
2. Interactivity is the heart and soul of effective asynchronous learning
  - It is suggested that online interaction requires reading and writing, but goes beyond discussion. Students can interact in a variety of ways: student-student, student-tutor, student-text, student-Internet, students-assessments (PBL).
3. Strive for presence
  - Pelz (2004, p. 41) points to recent research (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000) which suggests that "discussion responses that add value to a discussion" are found in one or more of the following three categories:
    - Social Presence
    - Cognitive Presence
    - Teaching Presence

As Pelz's framework has a strong emphasis on relational elements in online learning, it lends itself as a model and location for the exploration of the ethical issues in this study. Pelz's model thus provides a framework for analysis that constructs a holistic view of the students experience, by exploring experiences of online methods used (principles i and ii) and the more deeper issues of students experience as a "person" within this process (principle iii).

Within current literature with regards to ethics and online learning, there is limited research which examines the tension between learning in a sector which fosters ethical and socially responsive behaviour such as the Early Years and online study. Consequently, it is necessary to undertake an exploratory empirical study to gain information which will provide some insight into this situation.

A case study approach is adopted for this study, as Yin (2003) acknowledges that the case study approach can be used in organizational and management studies to help appreciate the complexity of the organizational phenomena, which in this study is in the field of organisational learning by the Early Years managers using online delivery of the study programme.

A sample of 60 students from Northern Ireland and England was used to explore the effects of online learning.

The findings are discussed in relation to Pelz's (2004) framework, and ethical issues are identified and examined. Furthermore, this study questions whether the findings might apply to education and training in other professional sectors that have a strong value base as a core to their professional identity.

In framing the questionnaires and semi structured interviews for the case study, the rights and integrity of individuals and their relationships were considered in terms of privacy, group pressure, tutor related issues, empathy and the extent of tutor control.

Questionnaires, consisting of 11 closed- and 1 open-ended question, and semi structured interviews were devised using the concept of Pelz's three principles underpinned by a focus on the ethical issues identified. This questionnaire was piloted using colleagues with particular research and sector expertise.

The semi structured interviews were designed with open-ended questions and used as a method to obtain richer data concerning students' experiences and allowed respondents to relate freely their thoughts and feelings. These semi structured interviews were conducted via e-mail and followed up by phone interviews.

## **RESULTS**

The e-mailed questionnaires to 60 participants were completed by 39 respondents; this constitutes a return rate of 65%. Of the 39 returned questionnaires, 35 respondents answered all 12 questions.

The analysis suggests that there were no major concerns around the areas questioned, with the smallest minority identifying privacy or not forming strong relationships with their group members as concerns. In fact, in terms of privacy, only 15% of respondents felt that there is less privacy online than in a classroom and a further 15% stated that they felt under pressure to give private details to group members online.

Only 13% of respondents were concerned that their progress and contributions online were visible to all and 21% agreed that they had regretted online disclosures later on. 24% of respondents felt that an online tutor is not as caring as a face to face tutor, whereas only 20% felt under constant scrutiny by tutors online.

65% of respondents stated that they had developed close relationships with group members online, while only 16% disagreed.

These responses suggest that there are no major concerns in the areas of privacy, group relations and tutor-related issues and relationships.

The analysis does suggest, however, that there was a significant minority expressing concerns about the process of group work, as Figure 1 shows.

Figure 1.38. respondents answered this question, of which: 53% disagree to strongly disagree; 22% neither disagree nor agree; 25% agree to strongly agree

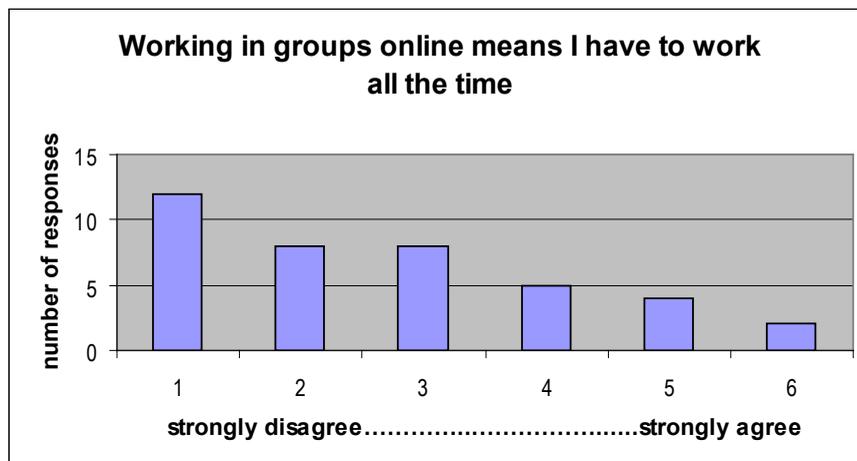
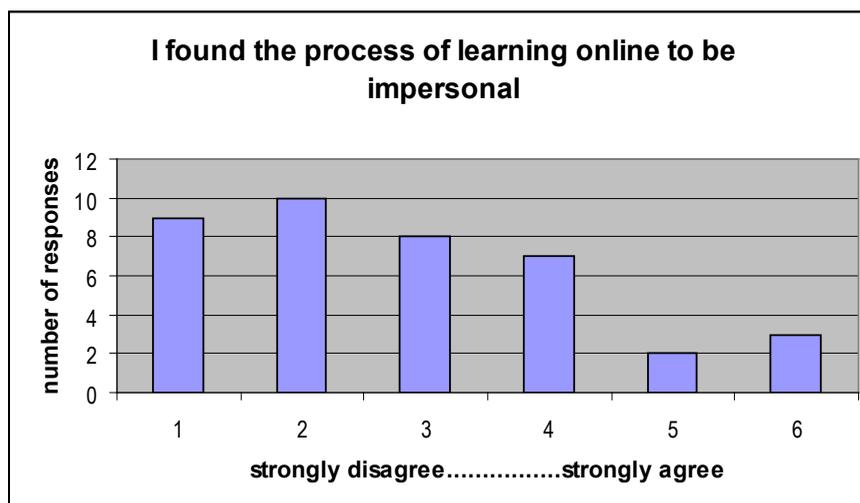


Figure 2.36. respondents answered this question, of which: 53% disagree to strongly disagree; 22% neither disagree nor agree; 25% agree to strongly agree



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A minority of students expressed concerns about the process of learning online to be impersonal. This is illustrated in Figure 2.

A further significant minority agreed that it is difficult studying Early Years Management

online, while working in a people-centred and high touch profession (Figure 3).

A number of respondents also found theoretical concepts difficult to grasp online (Figure 4).

Figure 3. 37. respondents answered this question, of which: 54% disagree to strongly disagree; 19% neither disagree nor agree; 27% agree to strongly agree

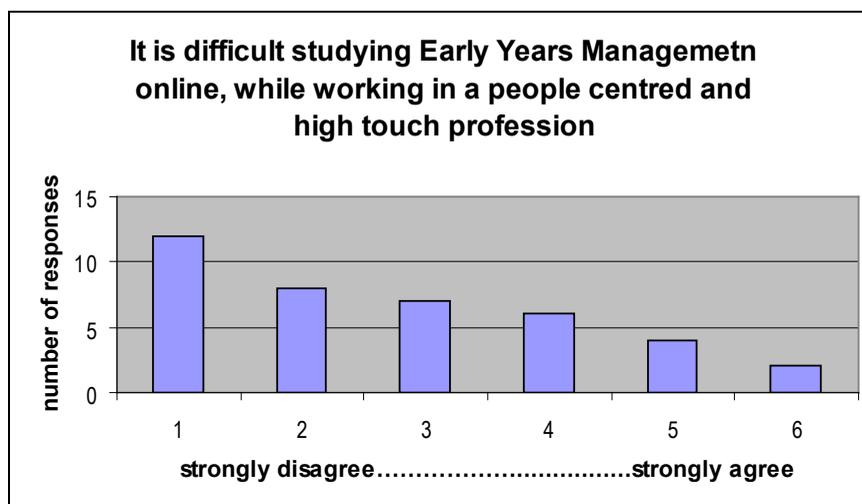
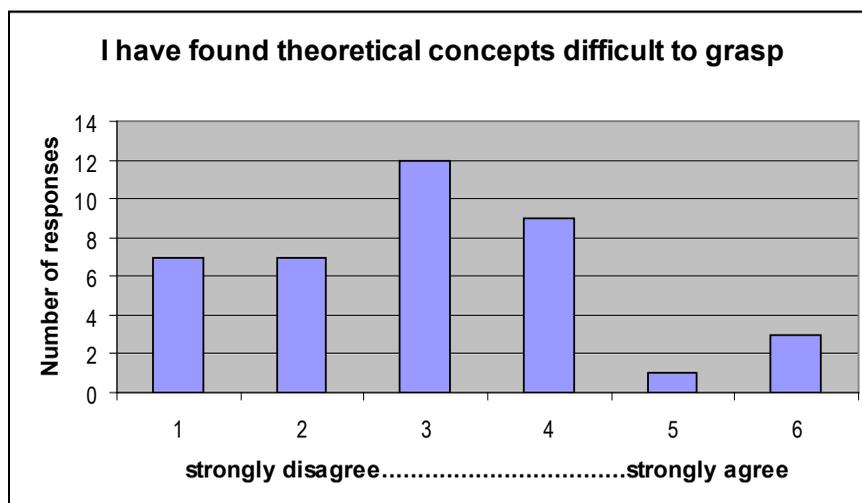


Figure 4. 36. respondents answered, of which: 38% disagree to strongly disagree; 34% neither disagree nor agree; 28% agree to strongly agree



To allow for further exploration of the four areas where a significant minority of respondents expressed some concerns, semi structured e-mailed interviews were conducted involving two students randomly chosen. Responses to the e-mailed semi structured interview questions were used to trigger more illuminating questions and probes in the follow-up telephone interviews. In this manner, the mixed method approach was used to triangulate findings.

The following case studies illustrate the experiences of the respondents. In both case studies the respondents expressed very little concern over the issues of privacy, group pressures, distancing factors, tutor issues and relationships. Both respondents, however, acknowledged their positive experience of a blended approach used in their online delivery, such as *“the usefulness of initial study days”* where you could put a *“face to an identity number”* and an occasional *“warm phone conversation”* with tutors or peers can prevent any feelings of isolation. Furthermore, both respondents highly valued their group experience in the learning process, pointing out that *“group work was of great value,”* with support and feedback obtained *“from fellow professionals,”* not just students, and that working in a group *“has been essential to combat any feelings of isolation.”*

### **CASE STUDY - X**

X is an existing third year online student in the North West of England studying for a BA in Early Years Management. X qualified for a National Nursery Examination Board UK (NNEB) in 1988, and then undertook an Advanced Diploma in Childcare and Education. X wanted to progress in the field, to improve management skills, obtain more qualifications and meet other professionals. Hence, the decision was made to undertake a BA degree. X works part time (3 days a week) as part of the Senior Management team in a private

nursery, which is a registered charity. X opted to study online because of the flexibility of the mode of study and as a mechanism of improving IT skills. X studies and uses the PC mainly at home or in the local university library, rather than at work. X has no concerns with regard to privacy, but points out that use of identity numbers and passwords *“enables me to keep my work safe”* and feels that the *“university is a safe and secure website.”* X feels that far from being impersonal, online learning has enabled X to *“acquire some fantastic friends and build up relationships with some great professionals.”* X does acknowledge that learning online is a skill, but once learned had *“proven to be enjoyable.”* X does point to the usefulness of initial study days, where you could put a *“face to an identity number.”* X feels that supportive tutors come across as more caring online *“If you have their support and guidance it makes you feel like they care and have your best interest at heart.”* X found the experience with group work of great value, with support and feedback obtained *“from fellow professionals,”* not just students. Rather than feel that theoretical concepts were difficult to grasp online, X finds that the flexible nature of learning and clarity of the written word actually assists in the learning process.

X sees no contradiction in working in a “high touch/low tech” profession and learning online: In fact, the opposite was found, as *“this way of learning has developed my skills of using my IT. In my workplace I am now able to apply my new skills. Nowadays, it is an important aspect of any role to use IT and progress with the times.”*

### **CASE STUDY - Y**

Y is a Nursery Manager and owner from the South of England. She has been an online student on a Foundation degree programme for Early Years managers for the last 2 years. Y decided to enrol

as an online student as it allowed her to combine work and family commitments with study. Learning online reduces travel time and allows her to study from the “*comfort of my own home.*” She uses both her PC in work and at home, making the most of short breaks at work to contribute to online discussions or e-mail, but tends to research and produce assignments at home in the evenings. While Y acknowledges that privacy can be an issue in online learning, the use of passwords and encryption in a secure VLE allays such worries. Y has not experienced any concerns about online learning being too impersonal, but advocates a blended approach where an occasional “*warm phone conversation*” with tutors or peers can prevent any feelings of isolation. She particularly values the online group work and feels that learning from others is vital to meeting her objectives. Rather than feeling pressured by her group, she thinks that her peers are all mature students who have realistic expectations of each other and sometimes don’t make enough demands. Y feels that working in a group has been essential to combat any feelings of isolation.

In terms of a possible contradiction between working in a high touch/ low tech sector and studying in a high tech/low touch mode, Y states that “*I don’t think so, because one has to go with the times and make efforts to learn new things and be knowledgeable on-line or offline, because if you are not willing to learn new things how can we in childcare progress and teach children new things?*”

## **DISCUSSION**

In relation to Pelz’s first principle:

1. Let students do most the work:

In line with this principle, Problem Based Learning (PBL) is used as a vehicle for student

centred learning, with students in charge of their own work.

With regard to lack of privacy and academic integrity with this mode of delivery, only a small minority expressed concern over their work being visible and being a member of a group.

It is even more positive that so many (65%) felt that they had formed close relationships with members in their groups. This perception of being a member of a close-knit community of learners also relates to Pelz’s second principle of effective online pedagogy:

2. Interactivity is the heart and soul of effective asynchronous learning.

Students comment both on the variety of interactions and the warmth of some of these such as acquiring “*some fantastic friends and build up relationships with some great professionals.*” This supports Pelz’s notion that successful online interaction goes beyond discussion.

However, the research undertaken has been most fruitful with regard to Pelz’s third principle. It is in this principle that this research attempts to draw out the ethical student concerns, in terms of integrity and rights. However, far from expressing infringements of these rights, students overwhelmingly feel valued and respected. This can be demonstrated through the research findings for all three aspects of principle three, where positive relationships between “tutor-student” and “student-student” engendered feeling valued and respected.

3. Strive for presence
  - i. social presence

For example, in the case study, Y suggests that working in a group has been “*essential to combat any feelings of isolation*” and X “*valued feedback from fellow professionals.*” The majority of students (65%) indicated that they “*formed*

close relationships with group members” and a further 66% “had not regretted any disclosures on-line,” demonstrating the students’ view of each other as real people with whom they can form bonds and also points to the students feeling comfortable with one another.

These findings contradict Russell (2005), that distancing is likely to occur in online learning and supports Ramsey’s assertion (2003) that online learning can resource enriched learning relations.

ii. cognitive presence

The cognitive presence as advocated by Pelz as an enabler to construct and confirm meaning between tutors and students was recognised in different ways throughout from the questionnaire and case study results.

While there was a significant minority (28%) that pointed to having difficulties constructing theoretical meaning online, it is worth noting that the remaining respondents (72%) had no major concern. In addition, in the case study, X highlights “*the flexible nature of learning and the clarity of the written word*” as assisting in this learning process and thereby demonstrates positive construction of meaning online.

iii. teaching presence

According to Pelz, the tutor’s role is the facilitation and direction of the above two principles, and this in turn aids the achievement of worthwhile learning outcomes. Although a significant minority (25%) found the learning process to be impersonal, the remaining (75%) disagreed, and statements in the case study such as “*supportive tutors come across more supportive on-line*” and “*it makes you feel like they care*” vindicate the crucial role of the tutor as facilitator in the PBL process. The tutors within this PBL process referred to by the respondents are most likely to possess a “*humanistic view of people ...tend to be*

*more student directed in their teaching, and think of themselves as catalysts in the learning process*” (Caffarella, 1988, cited in Imel, 1991).

In relation to the issue of rights in terms of privacy and academic integrity and security (Lawhead et al., 1997), the responses received in this research appear to indicate that students perceive those two rights have been met in their online learning experiences.

- privacy

With regard to the first of these rights, in terms of privacy, only 15% of respondents felt there was less privacy online than in a class room and only 13% were concerned about the visibility of their online contributions. On the contrary, respondents perceive that a strong social presence allowed them to be real people (see Pelz’s social presence above).

- academic integrity and security

Only 15% of respondents felt under pressure to give their private details, and 20% felt under scrutiny from their online tutor (Big brother effect). Supporting this general lack of concern in the case study, X suggests that “*using identity numbers and passwords enables me to keep my work safe*” and her experiences of working with tutors who “*have your best interests at heart.*”

## CONCLUSIONS

In relation to the question posed in this study, regarding students’ individual integrity and rights, no major ethical concerns emerged. It is interesting to note that the findings suggest there was no contradiction between working in their professional context (an ethical environment) and studying online.

Students, far from worrying about their privacy being invaded, welcomed the opportunity to share

and learn from their colleagues, facilitated by a strong social presence. Furthermore, students perceived the online learning environment as being safe and fair.

What did emerge from the research was the importance of the role of the student context with its focus on relationships. It could be argued that this particular pedagogical approach experienced by the research respondents, helped foster positive relationships online. Flexibility of online learning and opportunity of networking across groups allowed learners to bridge that distance factor, enhanced possibly by the shared professional context of the respondents. The research suggests that PBL online, embracing a facilitative approach which is student centred, provides an environment where positive relationships can flourish.

Following the discussion of the research undertaken in this chapter, the questions remain. Could this mode of learning be successfully replicated for education and training of other professional groups? While the study looked at the experiences of professional, mature students, might online learning for other student groups pose ethical dilemmas, and if so in what way?

## **FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

This chapter addressed two research questions: How are students' individual integrity and rights affected by online learning and what ethical issues are identified by online students themselves? The students participating in this research worked in Early Years Care and Education and completed online management programmes in the UK. This research found no major ethical concerns in online study to the questions posed, and furthermore, participants expressed no contradiction between working in their professional context (an ethical environment) and studying online.

Further research, however, should investigate the differing professional contexts of other em-

ployment groups, such as health and social care staff and their involvement in online learning. These are employment groups that have strong vocational and ethical dimensions to their practice. While PBL is already prevalent in UK medical schools, there is scope for research to investigate the suitability of online delivery to this target group rather than the traditional face to face mode.

The arrival of Web 2.0 brings an emphasis on users creating and uploading content. This may pose new ethical challenges for higher education. There is a generation of new students entering higher education who have functioned in a digital environment all their lives, and with increasing knowledge transfer on the Internet, this will likely pose new ethical challenges.

While the research in this chapter has involved professional working mature students, there is scope to investigate the emerging experiences of this new net generation, which constitutes the majority of fulltime students in higher education.

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