

Chapter III

Ethics in Interactions in Distance Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents the desirable interactions involved in teaching and learning at a distance. In these interactions, there are considerable ethical issues—notably that one’s own learner autonomy should be reduced at times in order to help others learn, to achieve the learning task, and at the same time help oneself to learn. Accordingly, learner autonomy is not an overarching goal of education. This is controversial, and this chapter deals with this issue in detail to explain that learner autonomy at best is a rough guideline, and ethically based on reasoning that autonomy should be interpreted as flexibly applied. The maxim that learner autonomy must be flexibly applied is particularly true in both cooperative group learning and in collaborative group learning in distance education where student interactions with other students constitute a major part of the education process. The ethics in interaction in distance education are extended to cover all possible interactions, especially the important interaction by the teacher to each student followed by the interactions by the student with the learning process, that can initiate the aesthetic social intrinsic motivation to lifelong learning and thus to one’s own emancipation. Accordingly, ethics are defined here as those pro-active interactions that induce the motivation to lifelong learning in all the students. Such ethics should override individualist autonomy as a goal in education.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims to define what is meant by ethics in interactions in distance education and presents the 2007 current state of the art with respect to such ethics. At first it is best to define and frame

what is meant by ethics. Here, ethics covers what human conduct is right or wrong based on reasoning, whereas morals can be interpreted as that conduct based on social custom. This chapter will focus on only that human conduct that is good practice, and not on that which is bad. Therefore,

bad practices such as copyright infringement, plagiarism, and intellectual property theft are not discussed, mainly because they are generally covered by relevant local law.

It is also important to explain what is covered by interactions in distance education. There are at least five types of interaction reported in the literature: student-teacher, student-student, student-content, student-technology, and vicarious interaction. The fifth one of vicarious interaction was suggested by Sutton (2001) to occur when a student observes interactions between or among others, but in a carefully controlled study, Kawachi (2003a) found that no educational advantage was attributable to such vicarious interaction, likely due to those active participants who were interacting also deploying similar attention so no significant difference was found. Because some poorer quality of learning was seen in those not participating, then vicarious interaction was concluded to be disadvantageous and that active participation was to be emphasized for learning. The fourth, student-technology interaction, was suggested by Hillman, Willis and Gunawardena (1994) mainly in terms of there being a human-computer interface barrier to learning for some students with weak computer and technological literacy. Both these are not discussed any further here. This chapter will focus on the other three interactions.

Distance education may need clarification, and here the definition is drawn from the transactional distance theory of Moore (1993). Transactional distance may be interpreted as the psychological gap between what the student already knows and the content about to be learned. In particular, this theory describes transactional distance in terms of the three dimensions of structure, dialogue, and autonomy. Based on this theory, a four-stage model of learning has been proposed and validated by Kawachi (2003b, 2005), notably in open and distance education in 15 regions throughout Asia. How to interact optimally and therefore ethically through applying this model will be one of the two

key points presented in this chapter. The other key point will be that autonomy must be moderated by some affective motivations in the student in order to interact optimally to learn.

METHODS

Transactional distance theory postulates four categories of distance education according to the amount of structure (S+) imposed by the institution, and the amount of educative dialogue (D+) between the student and other persons. The most distant category has no dialogue and no structure (D- S-), the next closer has added structure (D- S+), the third has then added dialogue (D+ S+), and the fourth category of minimal transactional distance has dialogue and freedom (no imposed structure) (D+ S-). It should be kept in mind here that dialogue (D+) means being with educative intent. Accordingly, it should be mentioned somewhere here that young distant students often want student-teacher interaction such as face-to-face tutorial time to get their money's worth, and at the other end of the scale, older distant students want student-student interaction for socialization purposes, but because other students may be much younger, then they choose student-teacher interaction. Both these can be moved aside as not being ideally educative in purpose or intent.

Based on these categories, a model of learning in distance education has been designed and tested out as effective by Kawachi (2004) with four stages that constitute the learning process, bringing the student from furthest transactional distance to closest; in other words, bridging the gap between not knowing and knowing. The first Stage 1 (D- S-) is characterized by cooperative brainstorming and eliciting the student's prior knowledge and ideas; the second Stage 2 (D- S+) is characterized by vertical thinking to discern collaboratively the theory underlying the student's knowledge; Stage 3 (D+ S+) is characterized by collaborative hypotheses testing, problem solv-

ing or disjunctive horizontal thinking to consider all other possible solutions and ideas, and find a potentially better way forward; and then Stage 4 (D+ S-) is characterized by experiential learning cooperatively to test out this potential new way to socially construct new personal meaning, as detailed in Kawachi (2003c). These four stages constitute one cycle, and new learning then proceeds iteratively.

Worldwide, validation has found that students have difficulty in the collaborative theorizing of Stage 2 and in collaboratively performing disjunctive reasoning in Stage 3. Generally, students successfully completed the four-stage cycle and achieved deep quality learning if they were in small groups of 4-8 students, if they had high prior knowledge, or if they received close tutor monitoring and guidance. When in large classes, with low or mixed prior knowledge, and when given normal tutor care, then students were unable to move into and through Stage 3. Similar findings have been reported by Perry (1970), who found college students in large classes could not acquire critical thinking skills. Piaget (1977) has also acknowledged that many people do not reach the Stage 3 level of formal operations involving hypotheses-generating and testing even in adulthood. Similarly, Renner (1976) has reported that only 81% of final-year law students, and McKinnon (1976) that only 50% of college students overall at seven different colleges, could acquire critical thinking skills, expressed here as the goals in Stages 3 and 4. In their analysis of computer-mediated conferencing, Gunawardena, Lowe and Anderson (1997) found that participants did not proceed beyond the discovery and sharing of ideas, concepts and statements of Stage 1, and did not reach any collaborative phase of negotiation and co-construction of new knowledge. The participants in their study were relative experts in the use of distance education being (likely) graduate students and university-level teachers participating in ICDE95-Online virtual preconference of the International Council on Distance

Education. In a following study, Gunawardena, Plass and Salisbury (2001, p. 39) found that the “intended collaboration and sharing of ideas and issues simply did not happen.”

In cooperative group learning in which one participant already knows the content to be learned by the others, the ethics of the cooperative interactions by the knower—either the teacher or an expert student—have been reported by Lewis (1995, p. 27) as being limited to the four following educative purposes: (1) summative to explain a grade, discuss and link the student’s work to the institutional criteria; (2) formative to further the student’s learning; (3) summarising what has been done; and (4) comment to help the student plan future learning. The ethics of all other cooperative interactions need to be weighed carefully according to whether the interaction is performed synchronously or asynchronously. In synchronous media, other participants may not have adequate time to read or listen to long utterances. Being overly verbose in synchronous mode may be deemed unethical by others in the group. In asynchronous mode, files can be transferred and read more easily. Cooperative lengthy exposition is unethical during the collaborative learning stages, Stage 2 and Stage 3, and should be put aside into a Virtual Coffee Shop or other chat forum for the explicit purpose of keeping the collaborative forum uncluttered. It is, however, in the collaborative stages that all the participants (the teacher here is equally as unknowing as the students) need to understand and follow some right conduct based on reasoning, in other words, abide by some ethics in the interactions they engage in, for learning together.

Scaffolding has been suggested (Kawachi, 2003b) to guide students through collaborative group learning, particularly the disjunctive reasoning and group interactions of Stage 3 (D+ S+) for hypotheses testing and co-construction of new nonfoundational knowledge. Scaffolding may be cooperative between a participant (such as the teacher) who knows the content and the

student who does not, where according to Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976, p. 89) “an adult or expert helps somebody who is less adult or less expert ... a situation in which one member knows the answer and the other does not,” while Vygotsky (1978, p. 86) indicates that cooperative scaffolding can be from a “more capable” student to a less capable student. The ethics of teacher to student interaction in Stage 1 involve the teacher making explicit to the student the aims and objectives of the task so the student can indeed comprehend these, noting that if the teacher fails here, then any later teacher feedback and error correction become merely vehicles for imitation and copying (which in turn may be described as student unethical conduct). The difficulty actually lies in scaffolding the collaborative interactions, and ethics here can pre-empt needless “flaming” and irrelevant argumentation in countering views from others.

Zimmer (1995) has proposed the collaborative scaffolding, involving three functional turn-taking steps ABA between two persons A and B, which when repeated as BAB give both participants the opportunities each to give opinions and receive counter-opinions empathically, as follows.

- (A) (Hello) Affirm + Elicitation
- (B) Opinion + Request understanding
- (A) Confirm + Counter-opinion
- (B) Affirm + Elicitation
- (A) Opinion + Request understanding
- (B) Confirm + Counter-opinion

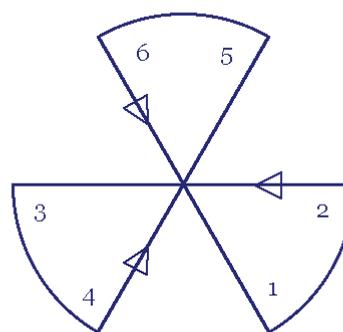
The scaffolding of the ethical interactions necessary is reproduced here from Zimmer (1995, p. 142) as a three-leaf pattern in Figure 1.

In Figure 1, the ethical expressions are as follows: (1) warm affirmation “you’re okay by me;” (2) inviting open disclosure in response “please tell me what you want to do here, so that I can see your point of view;” (3) open disclosure “here’s my own experience and what I want to do ...;” (4) inviting empathic comprehension in response “I’d

welcome knowing what you think I mean, to be sure my feelings are accepted” or “I’d like your sense of what I mean;” (5) empathic comprehension “what I think you mean in essence is ...;” and (6) “my own view differs ...” or “I’d like you to hear my own view” inviting warm affirmation in response.

The phrases in the above paragraph for use in the interactions are reproduced almost verbatim from Zimmer (1995, p. 142 and p. 144). Zimmer suggests that these interactions (p. 143) “dissolve competitive opposition, by inviting open disclosure, warm affirmation and empathic comprehension in direct response to perceived dogmatism, disparagement and invalidation.” It can be noticed for ethics that the interactions (3), (4) and (6) on the left side deal only with one’s own learning, and the interactions (1), (2) and (5) on the right side deal altruistically with the learning in the other student. Moreover, I suggest that any participant(s) may be behind either voice, so the scaffold could be effective for more than two persons at the same time. In the distance education virtual classroom in a collaborative group task, the author can confirm that prior awareness of this template by (at least) one participant can successfully scaffold the interactions to reach the task goal.

Figure 1. Ethical interactions in collaborative distance education



Now a literature search has found (only) one other scaffolding model, suggested by Probst (1987) as transactional theory for literature. From reading his work, I have drawn the ethical interactions for collaborative learning in literature and art, in which the interactions are not aimed at hypotheses-testing characterised by counter-opinion, but rather aimed at achieving a new insight built on critical reflection that while shared may be personalised in each individual. In literature, learning is not cooperative: There is no “knower,” the teacher or expert student does not guide the less able student to some preset conclusion of the meaning of the text. In literature, the teacher or any expert student (A) elicits opinion to initiate the three functional turn-taking steps BAB, and then followed by ABA, as follows.

(A) (Hello) Affirm + Elicitation

(B) Opinion/Analysis + Request understanding

(A) Affirm + Elicitation of Evidence

(B) Reflect + Elicit other opinions/Analyses

(A) Opinion/Analysis + Request understanding

(B) Affirm + Elicitation of Evidence

(A) Reflect + Elicit other opinions/Analyses

This scaffolding model involves reflective analysis followed by articulation, bringing in ideas from one’s own prior reading or ideas elicited from other students, then repeating the reflective analysis with accommodation to construct a new personal insight. As in Zimmer’s model, I suggest any participant may be behind each voice, so any number of participants can be collaboratively involved.

RESULTS

These two models each illustrate and scaffold the desirable ethical interactions which are essential for achieving one’s own collaborative learning and

ethically helping others to learn. The interactions can be performed either synchronously in a virtual classroom or asynchronously through e-mail or discussion board. In each model, the scaffolding clearly and explicitly indicates what content should optimally be included in an utterance (and therefore what should not be included), and specifies in what serial order to progress toward achieving discovery and co-construction of new understanding and new knowledge. It should also be noted that the use of a framework also implies some timeliness in replies. The system would not function if turn-taking were violated or not forthcoming. Participants need to take responsibility for the group succeeding by actively providing ethically what is required and when it is required. In this way, some pacing is inevitable if the group is to move toward achieving its goal. To some large extent, nonresponse in an asynchronous environment can be overcome by others offering up the required content in time. This is often the case in synchronous free discussions. However, group cohesiveness depends on the active participation of all members of the group. If a student does not participate, the group is fragmented and not functioning as a whole. Prior to the task, coping strategies should be acquired, agreed upon, and then used when required, such as pre-arranging the time interval allowed within which a student should contribute, pairing up students to provide back-up in case one is at a loss, or behind-the-scenes coaxing and elicitation by the moderator.

DISCUSSION

Ethics in interactions in distance education can be determined as those that are appropriate to achieving emancipation and learning for one’s self, and to helping altruistically learning in others. Such help may be at one’s own expense in money, time and effort, and are not just with kind intentions but constituting educationally effective

help. There is an old Indian proverb that is relevant here concerning these ethics: "Help your friend's boat cross the raging river, and lo you will find that you yourself have crossed the river."

Here then, the ethically good interactions are identified. And it is noted en passant that student-student interaction such as only commenting "Great work!" on another student's Web-log does not ethically qualify as fulfilling a course requirement for interaction.

The above discussion has looked at the two dimensions of structure (S+) and dialogue (D+) in distance education. There is the third dimension of autonomy to be discussed now. Autonomy was defined by Moore (1990, p. 13) as "the extent to which the learner determines objectives, implementation procedures, and resources and evaluation." Generally, definitions of autonomy in learning have in common an emphasis on the capacity to think rationally, reflect, analyse evidence, and make judgements; to know oneself and be free to form and express one's own opinions; and finally, to be able to act in the world, according to Tennant and Pogson (1995). These qualities characterise the collaborative thought processes of Stage 3, and also the experiential aspect of Stage 4. Stage 1 has maximal transactional distance, and for a student to succeed here in independent learning Moore (1993, p. 27) points out that the student would need maximum autonomy. Autonomy is thus seen as a highly powerful and desirable quality for independent learners. Not all students bring this high level of autonomy with them initially into their studies, and so the teacher must bring the student around to acquire this autonomy. The four-stage model of learning illustrates the cyclic iterative process through Stages 1 to 4 to equip and bring the student to go onto independent learning in a further new cycle starting at Stage 1 in a new learning venture. Autonomy has also been related to recognizing one's interdependence on others (Boud, 1988). Interdependence relates to understanding the need to learn together with others either in cooperative mode or at other

times in collaborative mode. Interdependence is a maturity characterising an adult student, and is acquired through awareness and prior experience of the critical thinking process. Toward the end of Stage 4, the student can have acquired this sense of interdependence. So in entering a new Stage 1 iteration, the student may be interdependent (post-Stage 4) and once more newly independent (starting a fresh Stage 1). These attributes of independence and interdependence have already been found to be separate, orthogonal, and coexisting in mature students at the end their course (Chen & Willits, 1999). While autonomy is defined as an attribute of the student, different distance education programmes and the different stages in the model relate to different levels of autonomy for the student to be a successful learner. In a programme at Stage 2, the deployed structure means that the student is charged with thinking rationally but vertically rather than horizontally, and is analysing already given evidence, rather than finding new evidence, so the quality of autonomy is somewhat measured to fit the limited freedom given to the student. At Stage 3, different qualities of autonomy for hypotheses testing are needed for success, including a mature openness to new ideas that might be in conflict with one's previous and present conceived view of the world. The student needs to exercise the freedom to formulate or reformulate one's own conceptions. While in Stage 4, the quality of autonomy should include the willingness and ability to act to test out these newly constructed ideas to see experientially how they operate in practice. The amount of autonomy in each stage or different programme varies according to the task and nature of the course. The ethics involved in the interactions then in distance education govern the conduct of autonomy at some times requiring certain qualities to be forthcoming and at other times different qualities in order to achieve learning. It is difficult therefore and moreover unhelpful to assign an integrated level of autonomy to each stage in the model of learning. The student should utilize measured amounts

of the various qualities that constitute autonomy during each stage to support learning.

Clearly, ethics are needed in interactions in distance education to achieve efficiently one's own learning, and also to help others to learn cooperatively and collaborative in a group, as detailed in the four-stage model of learning.

Finally, in this chapter it may be useful to consider the various lines of interaction between the student and content, student and teacher, and between the student and other students, and the affective motivations that drive these interactions and consequently moderate the level of autonomy. Here "modulating" the level of autonomy may be a more appropriate term, because autonomy must be varied and at times be consciously reduced, and such variation and occasional reduction is ethics in the interaction: One does not single-mindedly pursue ever-increasing autonomy; rather, some aspects are relaxed or reduced while other aspects are increased to achieve one's own learning goals and, more importantly for ethics, to help others learn. This chapter has so far considered aspects in three of the four known dimensions of learning: the cognitive, metacognitive, and the environment. The fourth dimension is the affective domain, involving the will and motivations that drive learning, detailed in Kawachi (2006). A comprehensive categorization of the motivations to learn was discovered and drawn by Taylor (1983) with the vocational, academic, personal, and social motivations, and later divided by Gibbs, Morgan and Taylor (1984, p. 170) into their subcategories of extrinsic and intrinsic. Of interest here is the social intrinsic motivation to learn, that acts along the lines of the interactions in distance education.

The three interactions involved here are the student-student, student-teacher, and student-content. The first two are already covered above in cooperative learning and in collaborative learning. The third interaction between the student and the content which is collaborative has been described as being aesthetic reading in transaction theory

by Rosenblatt (1994, p. 27). The process of motivation to learn is described in detail by Kawachi (2006). Briefly, the student is motivated to learn when the student compares his or her own perception of her current state with some reference goal value, when the observed gap (constituting a want or need) drives the student to act to reduce the discrepancy. The standard reference goals are generally preset socially and culturally, and the teacher should ethically make all efforts to know these in the distant students. The other factor here is that the student must also perceive there to be an opportunity to act and that there is a reasonable chance of success based on prior learning experience. The student-teacher interactions above have covered these points.

The student-content aesthetic interaction gives rise to the motivation for lifelong learning (Kawachi, 2005, 2006), which is generally recognized as being a central goal of education. The teacher or any other participant can initiate this motivation in the student. It occurs through experiencing pleasure or joy. There are only three positive affects in the affective domain. These are interest, pleasure, and joy, according to Tomkins (1984), and six negative affects (distress, fear, shame, contempt, disgust, and anger). It may be worthwhile reiterating here that ethics in interactions in distance education should carefully avoid causing these negative affects in others, and they are not discussed further here.

Barthes (1976) developed a theory of pleasure distinguishing between pleasure and joy, in which pleasure is the gratification usually previously experienced and therefore within the known world of the student. The student knows what brings pleasure and can look forward to experiencing it again by revisiting similar circumstances. Joy, on the other hand, occurs at the boundary of the student's world. When the boundary is momentarily and unexpected broken, then at that instant of ecstasy, the student experiences the joy of learning. The teacher or any other participant can bring the student to within reach of this by

moving the student toward his limit and then presenting surprising new information. “The penny drops” in the student’s mind, sometimes immediately, sometimes much later unexpectedly, and sometimes never. The aesthetic experience derives from this process or activity of group learning, and is addictive.

The interactions involved and the ethics involved here in the interactions to promote aesthetic motivation and lifelong learning in others are important. When carefully guiding others in this direction, one must suspend one’s own desire for increasing one’s own learning autonomy. Autonomy is accordingly ethically modulated by these affective factors for learning. Whether or not one is engaged in learning for oneself as a simple-minded student or is helping others to learn as a mature responsible student or teacher, nevertheless one must be careful ethically so as not to disturb others negatively, and ideally one should help others if at all possible.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Future research is warranted into optimal transactions for learning online. In particular, scaffolds should be constructed and provided to students to facilitate their cooperative learning in a group and for their collaborative learning in a group. For students new to online learning, these scaffolds can be detailed templates for them to use to support their learning, and at the same time will serve as metacognitive tools to guide their thinking and reflection. The templates will also comprise an e-learning portfolio for the students individually and as a group, and for the teachers and accrediting institution. At more advanced levels, the templates can be less detailed and more flexible.

Future research should not only focus on ways to promote ethically good practice, but should analyse online discourse to illustrate where and

how unreasoned practice leads to breakdown in communication and poorer quality learning outcomes. So, three-way control studies should be undertaken into online discourse analysis of learning. Three groups are needed to detect the influence of observations and any novelty or Hawthorne effects.

How students learn online independently of others is also a worthwhile avenue to explore in future research. It is generally accepted that in conventional face-to-face education studying in a group leads to better quality learning than studying alone independently, but while hundreds of studies have demonstrated this in face-to-face education, there are none so far to date that have compared these ways of learning in an online e-learning course. This maybe due to the transfer of what works best in the conventional mode into the online mode. However, the online mode now offers rich learning environments that likely support independent study. These rich environments include search engines that can pick out key phrases from blogs, wikis, stored powerpoint presentations, lecture notes, annotations by previous students, and so forth. Moreover, if learning-by-doing has validity in face-to-face conventional education, it may also have validity in online virtual reality and other technologies. Studying alone will raise many more questions of online ethics, which have hitherto not yet been considered.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has looked at what is distance education and at the three dimensions of structure, dialogue, and autonomy of transactional distance theory that can describe distance education. It has also looked at the interactions involved in distance education to achieve learning in one’s own mind and to help others to learn, both in the cooperative mode and in the collaborative mode, and it has looked at the desirable good conduct that is

based on reasoning which is known as ethics. All these points have defined ethics in interactions in distance education.

Some reports in the literature (for a typical example, see Conrad, 2002) have tried to uncover student thoughts and ways of learning online through teacher observations, but it is noted here that the author of this chapter has been a lifelong student within online interactivity, and this discussion draws from this long, wide and continuing learning experience. In particular, the author thanks my tutor Fred Lockwood at the British Open University, now Professor Emeritus at Manchester Metro University, and my teaching staff Stacey Rowland, Janet Gubbins and Melanie Clay at the University of West Georgia, from where the author graduated in Advanced Technologies for Distance Education in July 2007, and the fellow distance education students there, including Pam Miller, Bessie Nkonge, Diane Fulkerson, Sue Walters, Mauri Collins, and others.

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ADDITIONAL READING

This section offers a few selected literature references that offer different perspectives on the topic of online dialogue and interactivity based on reasoning for ethical practice.

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