

Chapter VIII

Conversation Ethics for Online Learning Communities

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ABSTRACT

There is growing recognition of the important role of conversation ethics in open and distance learning systems, particularly within online learning communities. Fostering ethical conversational practices in online learning poses a serious challenge within education. This chapter introduces key concepts and strategies to help guide online learning communities. The aim of the chapter is threefold: (1) to provide an overview of key concepts and strategies underlying conversation ethics, (2) to identify key elements of conversation ethics for online learning communities, and (3) to offer practical suggestions for leveraging online learning communities through increased attention to conversation ethics. This chapter is based on the assumption that an understanding of conversation ethics can offer instructors and learners a tool for advancing learning within online learning communities.

INTRODUCTION

Conversations are the foundation on which social interactions are built. Within this age of rapid technological change, there is growing interest in strategies for fostering meaningful conversation in online learning systems. This is particularly important in online learning systems where social interaction is fundamental, as is the case in learn-

ing communities. Framed within technoethics and studies in conversation, this article applies well-established principles of conversation ethics to online learning communities. To this end, it focuses on key strategies for guiding ethical conversations in online learning communities. Under this framework, guidelines for ethical conversation are assumed to be at the base of meaningful online collaboration and learning.

The chapter provides key insights for improving the quality of conversational exchange within online learning communities.

BACKGROUND

Challenges

The advancement of the Internet and supporting information and communication technologies (ICT) has created a number of unintended problems and challenges that deter many users from communicating online. First, the Internet has served as a conduit for criminal activity with a strong social impact (Wall, 2005). For instance, Holt and Graves (2007) conducted a qualitative analysis of advance fee fraud e-mail schemes and found a variety of writing techniques used to generate responses and information from victims. In another area, Finch (2007) explored the problem of stolen identity using the Internet. The newly created *International Journal of Cyber Criminology* is focused entirely on emerging areas of cyber-crime research, including cyber-terrorism, cyber-stalking, and online gambling. Second, the use of Internet within educational contexts has created additional challenges for online instructors and administrators such as online cheating, cyber-harassment, and cyber-bullying. Shariff and Hoff (2007) addressed the problem of cyber-bullying in schools highlighting the legal boundaries for school supervision online. Beran and Li (2005) focused on cyber-harassment issues that can arise within online educational environments. In another area, Underwood (2003) examined serious academic offenses connected to e-learning including online cheating and Internet plagiarism that can lead to student expulsion. Moreover, online learners and instructors must contend with evolving intellectual property and fair use policies governing information communication and ownership (DeGeorge, 2006). There are also communication privacy and confidentiality issues

that affect online communication and information exchange (Rotenberg, 1998). This body of work raises public attention to the risks and challenges involved in communicating online. It also suggests that a framework is needed to help reduce online risk and guide communications within online learning environments.

Technoethics and Educational Technoethics

Technoethics is an interdisciplinary field concerned with all ethical aspects of technology within a society shaped by technology. It deals with human processes and practices connected to technology which are becoming embedded within social, political, and moral spheres of life. It also examines social policies and interventions occurring in response to issues generated by technology development and use. The seminal description of the field of technoethics was contributed by Mario Bunge (1977) in speaking to the field of engineering. Bunge addressed how technologists and engineers have social responsibilities due to the immense influence their work has on society: Bunge (1979) stated “You cannot manipulate the world as if it were a chunk of clay and at the same time disclaim all responsibility for what you do or refuse to do, particularly since your skills are needed to repair whatever damages you may have done or at least to forestall future such damages” (p. 23). The field of technoethics provides theoretical grounding for dealing with ethical considerations with technology in all areas of human activity as indicated in the *Handbook of Research on Technoethics* (Luppincini & Adell, forthcoming).

Technoethics provides core grounding to work in education and educational technology. Educational technology is a goal-oriented problem-solving systems approach utilizing tools, techniques, theories, and methods from multiple knowledge domains, to: (1) design, develop, and evaluate, human and mechanical resources efficiently and

effectively in order to facilitate and leverage all aspects of learning, and (2) guide change agency and transformation of educational systems and practices in order to contribute to influencing change in society (Luppardini, 2005). Technoethics challenges people working with technology to develop strategies which promote the use of technology to serve human beings in positive ways. A number of scholars within educational technology (including this author) consider ethical considerations to be central to teaching and learning. Cortés (2005) asserts that education requires an ethical framework within which to guide learning and instruction in technologically sophisticated environments. Other scholars in this area share the belief that technology and the means of communication require an ethical analysis so that they can be used suitably (Hawkrige, 1991; Nichols, 1994).

In this chapter, educational technoethics is defined as a specialized area of technoethics focused on ethical issues connected to the use of technology within education contexts. A basic framework for educational technoethics includes technical, vocational, pedagogical, and social elements.

1. Vocational element: Education guides students on how to cultivate technology related skills that are useful in school and the work force.
2. Pedagogical element: Education helps students to cultivate technology-related skills in areas where learning is leveraged through technology.
3. Social element: Education guides students on how to cultivate technology-related skills that contribute to learning community success and the co-construction of meaning.
4. Technical element: Education prepares students to deal with the use of computer technology to advance society goals.

This basic framework for educational technoethics provides useful grounding to help situate core elements of various approaches and applications in educational technology within an ethical framework. Because of growing ethical concerns over online communication discussed in a previous section, online learning communities represent one application in educational technology that aligns itself particularly well with technoethics.

CONVERSATION ETHICS IN ONLINE LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Online Learning Communities

Online learning communities (or virtual learning communities) are educational contexts where communication and technology are fundamental components. Learning communities are computer-mediated by interconnected computers. Communication characteristics of virtual learning communities include: asynchronous and synchronous communication, high interactivity, and multiway communication. Luppardini (2007) elaborated on six types of virtual learning communities.

1. Knowledge Building Communities: Allows members to focus on topics of interest and construct communal data bases of information
2. Inquiry-goal-based Communities: Orientation among participants that requires active involvement from community members
3. Practice-based Communities: Learning through lived practices of the community
4. Culture-based Communities: Have a shared history, common sense of ideology, or ritualistic traditions
5. Socialization Communities: Based on connecting individuals with common interests

or a common background for social exchange

6. **Counseling and Development Communities:** Provides support services to individuals and nurturing individual growth

A major challenge within online learning communities revolves around the cultivation and sustainability of successful online learning communications (Luppicini, 2006). The next section in this chapter focuses on how educational technologies and conversation ethics can offer instructors and learners a tool for guiding communications within online learning communities.

The Study of Conversation and Conversation Ethics

The study of conversation is actively pursued within the social sciences and deals with conversation use and how people construct and interpret language. One important area of conversation study is rooted in Speech Act Theory (Searle, 1969) and emphasizes how utterances are interpreted in conversation. The outcome of this work gave rise to a classification scheme for a variety of language acts. Searle's (1969) Theory of Speech Acts identified five fundamental things you can do with an utterance:

1. Commit the speaker to something being the case (assertive);
2. Attempt to get the hearer to do something, such as in questioning and commanding (directive);
3. Commit the speaker to some future course of action (commissive);
4. Bring about the correspondence between the content of the speech act and reality (declarative): and
5. Express a psychological state about a state of affairs (expressive).

Under the framework, speech acts are connected to larger conversation structures and principles governing the proper use of conversation in face-to-face and online conversation. From this perspective, successful online learning communities are viewed as learning conversation systems where meaning emerges from conversation flowing freely between participants.

The study of conversation ethics is an important area of conversation study. One leading approach is rooted in Habermas' (1990) theory of discourse ethics. Habermas' discourse ethics is based on rational principles of argumentation where participants adopt the perspectives of all others in an effort to reach agreement on conditions that valid norms have to satisfy. The validity of a norm is decided intersubjectively through argumentation and depends upon mutual understanding achieved by participants. According to Habermas (1990) "Only those norms can claim to be valid that meets (or could meet) with the approval of all affected in their capacity as participants in a practical discourse" (p. 66). Related approaches to discourse and conversation ethics are offered by Horn and Carr (2000) and Jenlink (2004).

Within the context of online learning communities, conversation ethics refers to the ethical responsibility of participants within a learning community to contribute to the co-construction of understanding and the advancement of learning conversations. This requires that participants possess fundamental conversational competencies underlying the co-construction of learning conversations, including cooperative conversation competencies (Grice, 1975) and rational argumentation competencies (Habermas, 1987, 1990). First, Grice's principle of cooperative conversation states, "make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (Grice, 1975, p. 26). Second, Habermas' system of validity claims conceptualizes conversational competence

in terms of the truth of statements made, the rightness of norms of action, the adequacy of standards of value, the sincerity of expressions (truthfulness), and comprehensibility (Habermas, 1987, p. 51).

The concept of validity claims connects speech acts to principles of conversation ethics. Taken together, these principles provide key elements of conversation ethics. This is summarized below along with a description.

1. Informativeness: Enough information is provided.
2. Truthfulness: The information is true to the best knowledge of the participant’s knowledge.
3. Relevancy: The information connects to the conversation.
4. Clarity: The information is presented clearly and orderly.
5. Standards and Values: The participant supports the ideas of the community of learning.

The abovementioned elements of conversation ethics depict essential conditions for creating successful learning conversations. Grice’s principle of cooperative conversation and Habermas’ work on discourse ethics provides a tool for gauging conversations to ensure that learners are no more or less informative in their online contributions than is necessary, that they speak the truth, and that they are orderly and unambiguous (comprehensible). Based on an understanding of educational technoethics and the study of conversation, suggestions for building online learning communities through conversation ethics can be given.

Suggestions for Leveraging Online Learning Communities

Technoethics and conversation ethics can be combined and used by instructional designers and learners as guiding questions for leveraging conversations in online learning communities. Selected elements are provided below in Table 1.

Table 1. A framework for leveraging conversations in online learning communities

Theoretical Framework	Elements	Guiding Questions
Educational Technoethics	Vocational element	How can instruction be designed so learners cultivate technology related skills that are useful in the work force?
	Pedagogical element	How can learners use technology to leverage learning?
	Social element	How can education help learners cultivate technology related skills that contribute to learning community success and the co-construction of meaning?
	Technical element	What strategies can be used to help prepare students use of computer technology to advance society goals?
Conversation Ethics	Informativeness	Is enough information provided?
	Truthfulness	Is the information true to the best knowledge of the participant’s knowledge?
	Relevancy	Does the information connect to the conversation?
	Clarity	Is the information presented clearly and orderly?

For instance, in a recent undergraduate course, this instructor created online group activities where communication students in journalism and media studies simulated the work of an editorial committee for publishing applied to an area of real world work (vocational element). Members of the online communities participated in double blind peer, editorial committee online decision meetings, and publishing meetings to create a high quality publication. Tracking functions and comments within word processing software was used in the review process to keep track of comments (pedagogical element). The results of the review were shared within an online learning community to help advance the co-construction of meaning (social element). In making selection decisions, the merits of each piece were discussed between reviewers in an effort to provide the necessary information required (informativeness) without bias (truthfulness) on the main points of interest (relevancy) in clear jargon free language that other online community members could easily understand (clarity). The abovementioned elements and guiding questions provide a point of entry for exploring conversation ethics within online learning communities.

CONCLUSION

This chapter sketched out key concepts in technoethics, educational technoethics, educational technology, and conversation ethics to help guide work in online learning communities. It discussed key elements and questions that should be addressed when involved in online learning communities. There are, however, a number of limitations with the use of conversation ethics within online learning communities. First, conversation ethics relies on formal notions of conversation that are not always followed in the real world. For instance, not all participants in a community of learning will be dedicated to the pursuit of common interests. This limit is addressed by the motivation and ef-

forts of instructors and participants to ensure that learning communities revolve around common interests. Second, promoting conversation ethics may be ineffective in situations where learning communities change membership regularly. This is a general limitation applicable to most areas of instruction and training where there are learning curves for some participants. It is partly addressed by efforts to retain learning community membership by providing high quality services and collecting regular feedback on participants' needs and interests.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Despite the breadth of work on online learning communities that exists, there is still a need to better focus attention on key areas of online learning communities. One important area of future research concerns cross-cultural communication in online learning. This is particularly salient as developing countries gradually improve their Internet capabilities and increase their use of online learning in education (See Luppicini, 2007). Building online learning communities within the global village increasingly relies on complex interactions of culture, communication, and technology. Global communication is worldwide communication across national, religious, and cultural boundaries. Sudweeks and Ess (2004) contributed an edited edition, *Cultural Attitudes Towards Technology and Communication*, which explored cross-cultural perspectives on online communication. This edited collection provided best practice on how to use ICT's within global communication system in ways which do not threaten local cultures. Future research in educational technoethics may advance the field by exploring ways to preserve local culture when implementing globally-based online learning environments. A number of useful research questions can be addressed in future work: How do instructors accommodate different cross-cultural

communicative styles that satisfy guidelines for ethical conversation within online learning communities? What additional guidelines (if any) should instructors abide by when dealing with cross-cultural online learning communities? How can guidelines for ethical communication help enhance cultural experiences and learning for learners within globally-based online learning communities? These questions and others could help build on work described in this chapter by providing online communities with guidelines for ethical communications that accommodate cross-cultural differences.

A more general area of future research revolves around the advancement of other areas of Technoethics. Now more than ever before, advances in technological growth are forcing society to re-examine how technology is viewed. This is especially salient in the pure and applied sciences where technological developments offer ways to surpass current human capacities. Breakthroughs in medicine, information and communication technology, transportation and industry are juxtaposed with growing needs to deal with moral and ethical dilemmas associated with new technological developments. Increased reliance on new technology creates fundamental challenges revolving around security and privacy issues, access issues to education and health care, legal issues in online fraud and theft, employer and government surveillance, policies issues in creating and implementing ethical guidelines and professional codes of conduct, along with ethical dilemmas in a number of vital areas of research and development. *The Handbook of Research on Technoethics* (Luppigini & Adell, forthcoming) provides a collection of core readings in technoethics in various areas including: Foundations, Environmental Technoethics, Educational Technoethics, Cyberethics, Computer Ethics, Health and Medical Technoethics, Engineering Ethics, and Biotech Ethics. In line with recommendations from Cortés (2005), the handbook provides a promising set of new research projects aimed

at optimizing a needed balance between ethical principles governing technology use and innovative technological practice. If successful, research in key areas of technoethics has the potential to revolutionize social practices and institutions (including distance education) relying on technology use for social benefit. Moreover, research in these areas could help ground ongoing conversations about the “wicked” problems and promises offered by technological advancement.

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KEY TERMS

Cyber-Bullying: Cyber-bullying describes bullying behaviour intended to humiliate or intimidate another in online interactions.

Cyber Identity Theft: Cyber identity theft is to steal identity tokens from an individual using information and communication technologies.

Educational Technoethics: Educational technoethics is a specialized area of technoethics focused on ethical issues connected to technology within education contexts. It is constituted by technical, vocational, pedagogical, and social elements.

Educational Technology: Educational technology is a goal-oriented problem-solving systems approach utilizing tools, techniques, theories, and methods from multiple knowledge domains to: (1) design, develop, and evaluate, human and mechanical resources efficiently and effectively in order to facilitate and leverage all aspects of learning, and (2) guide change agency and transformation of educational systems and practices in order to contribute to influencing change in society (Luppicini, 2005).

Global Communication: Global communication is defined as worldwide communication across national, religious, and cultural boundaries.

Netiquette: Netiquette (or Internet etiquette) refer to normative procedures for posting messages online and maintaining a level of civility in online interactions.

Plagiarize: To plagiarize is to steal the ideas or words of someone else and pass them off as your own without acknowledging the source.

Technoethics: Technoethics is an interdisciplinary field concerned with all ethical aspects of technology within a society shaped by technology. It deals with human processes and practices connected to technology which are becoming

embedded within social, political, and moral spheres of life. It also examines social policies and interventions occurring in response to issues generated by technology development and use.