Chapter 4

Dysfunctional Digital Demeanors:
Tales from (and Policy Implications of) eLearning’s Dark Side

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ABSTRACT

eLearning has been associated with a number of behaviors that are considered dysfunctional. Among these behaviors that form part of the Dark Web are cyber-bullying, plagiarism, hacking and other forms of cheating. This chapter describes, illustrates and typologizes these behaviors with cases observed by the authors among their online students or culled from student disciplinary boards in the past ten years. The elaboration of tales from eLearning’s dark side is followed by an exploration of policy implications. Employing the problematique method, the authors attempt to trace the root causes (psychological, sociological and technological) and offer policy options to address these roots.

INTRODUCTION

Background: The Elephant in the Online Classroom

Figure 1, an image of smiling multi-racial faces and “Like” handsigns is the stuff that nightmares of eLearning champions are made of.

It is the frontpage screenshot of We Take Your Class, a site that would allow anyone, anywhere in the world, to complete a formal eLearning course without even visiting the course site. It is a paid, indiscreet classwork-by-proxy service. For a “reasonable” fee, this globally available Web service offers to perform all tests, homework, discussions and projects. On top of that, it promises the client, who may very well be your past, present or future student, a grade of A.

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Dysfunctional Digital Demeanors

In almost every forum where eLearning is discussed, questions on the means of validating student identities have been raised. Answers range from employing fraud-detecting software to conducting identity authentication measures such as Web on-camera examinations. Some of us have resorted to skirting the issue by replying that students who cheat online actually cheat themselves, not the system.

We Take Your Class confirms the doubts raised by eLearning detractors and jolts us from our state of denial. More alarming is the fact that fraud is not the only dysfunctional behavior encountered in online classes. Throughout its short and rapidly paced history, eLearning has been associated with learner behaviors considered dysfunctional not only in the higher educational arena. At times, these behaviors - including cyberbullying, plagiarism, hacking and the active search for shortcuts - are not explicitly manifested but assume the nature of a reality, an accepted conduct, or a matter-of-course attitude. It is a bearing that one assumes consciously or unconsciously upon logging into the course site, which could be more appropriately referred to as a *demeanor*, one that allows Web services such as the above to thrive. Sadly, many of us too familiar with these demeanors have been sweeping them under the rug for too long. Whenever these cases pop out in discussions among eLearning advocates they tend to be summarily dismissed as insignificant. Collective cognitive dissonance that result in selective exposure, perception and retention prevail.

There is an elephant in the eLearning classroom. It cheats, it bullies, and it loves to cut corners. But we act as if it is not there. This animal needs to be dissected, its anatomy examined and its invisibility explained.