Chapter XX

Ethical Issues in Web-Based Learning

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Introduction

If you were to survey course syllabi on your campus, you would probably find the standard syllabi to include:

- Course title and number
- Instructor’s name and contact information
- Course objectives
- A list of required and recommended readings/materials
- A detailed outline of the topics for consideration
- Detailed descriptions of assignments and due dates
- Percentage of final grade
- A schedule of topics by date

You would also find a campus curriculum or departmental committee that initially approves such courses. Once the course is approved, it is not usually subject to review or scrutiny by the campus, unless the department requests a course change.
Meanwhile, faculty who teach the course change the syllabus at will based on new material in their discipline, changes in textbooks, and so forth. This is encouraged so that the students get the most up-to-date information in the discipline.

If faculty switch courses, retire, or resign, then their syllabus is passed on to the successor to revise, again at will. There seems to be little or no systematic accounting of the legitimacy of the course originally approved to the course now taught. Department chairs are supposed to do this. Many take their responsibility for quality control seriously; many others delegate this to their capable administrative assistant who may not know enough about the subtleties of the curriculum to have recognized that an inconsistency exists.

**What is the Overall Ethical Problem?**

The problem is that course information is now being posted to the Web, thus creating problems with values, rights, and professional responsibilities specifically in curricular quality control, advising, intellectual property rights, and succession planning (University of Washington, 1996).

What is the harm in not having quality control in developing and posting courses on the Web? This is best addressed through a series of questions about rights and values, and is illustrated in Figure 1.

1. Has the delivery mode of the Web changed the approved course’s integrity? How does faculty pedagogical style affect course integrity? Has the course changed from the campus’s officially approved version? What is the professional responsibility of the faculty and the department in keeping courses current and still protecting curriculum integrity? How does one handle and value course updates without changing the course? This is a *departmental* problem.

*Figure 1. Curricular quality control*