Times of Change, Times of Turbulence: Seeking an Ethical Framework for Curriculum Development During Critical Transition in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Rapid changes in academic work environments raise ethical dilemmas in supporting students, implementing policies, and developing professional practice. New teaching technologies require academics to consider community aspects of learning and teaching and impacts on student learning in networked environments. This paper critically reflects on recent experience at a small Australian regional university adapting teaching—notably through on-line environments—to respond to student learning need diversity. Applying Shapiro’s use of the ethics of care, critique, justice and the profession to examine ethical dilemmas associated with increasingly networked and on-line learning, the authors propose that an ethics of community will assist finding practical solutions to ethical dilemmas in curriculum development and delivery. This approach shifts from the individual as moral agent to ethical practice as communal processes. Considering community practices and processes can frame and critique learning and teaching approaches, policies and administration to assist students and staff develop ethical scholarship and professionalism.

Keywords: Academic Integrity, Ethical Critique, Ethical Dilemmas, Ethical Scholarship, Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

“The increased use of virtual learning environments (...) in Higher Education is inextricably associated with the pressures of globalization. The pressures of international competition, supported by the widespread availability of online courses in which the traditional physical face-to-face contact between lecturers and students is not the predominant learning mode creates a dilemma for administrators. The distancing effect (...) creates an ethical problem in that the financial needs of corporations and institutions can be valorized at the expense of humanistic concerns such as interpersonal relationships and the contribution (...) to a harmonious society” (Russell, 2008, p. 29).

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This paper applies Shapiro’s (2006) model of four ethics and the use of ethical dilemmas, to provide practical responses to the ethical demands of developing curriculum for university education at a time of growing networked delivery. University networked learning is frequently supported by flexible learning policies that reflect student focused-learner centred learning goals (Biggs, 2003). The question we are interested in is how to encourage best practice in design and delivery of good quality curriculum using networked learning environments. This can be addressed in many ways; here we are especially interested in an ethical framework to support this goal. To examine this question, we will use recent developments at our university—Southern Cross University— as a case study. In particular, this paper is contextualized in a period of significant academic culture change: a shift from face-to-face to online and blended learning approaches and a blurring of off-campus and on-campus student participation. We draw on issues concerning institution-wide approaches to support networked learning (such as flexible learning, and use of Turnitin®), and increased use of online communication, collaboration and content creation (Web 2.0) tools. We also acknowledge the increasing academic interest in ethical curriculum and education (Boyd et al., 2008), although note that most curriculum development discussion takes a pragmatic rather than ethical approach. It is important, however, to ask how an individual academic can deal with these changes ethically, and move out of his or her known theory and practice into the emerging globally networked educational environment.

Our Local Experience in a Global Context

The university is a global institution at a critical time of change, responding to global forces of international social and commercial connectivity, computing technology development, social changes in authority and cultural ownership of knowledge, democratization of social organization and management, and shifting government and accountability values and practices. These global scale processes take practical effect locally. Key effects in our institution include: changing student demographics, with a shift from all students having just finished high school to more than 80 percent mature age (over 21 years old, often with many years between high school education and entering higher education); increasing proportions of off-campus and off-shore students; all students using courses with an online presence; growth of fee-paying rather than publically-funded students; and emerging alignment between academic curriculum and industry demands. Institutional policy environment becomes, therefore, increasingly fluid as instruments designed to guide educational practice are continually challenged by changing practices and new technologies, thus presenting practical ethical dilemmas.

In our experience, these forces place demands on pedagogical practice. The practical responses demand attention to issues of ethical practice, pitting ethics of principle against those of consequence. Academics rarely give this tension much consideration, being consumed by the pragmatics of course design, technology mastery, administration and pedagogical delivery. Furthermore, it seems that universities adopt hybrids of principle and the pragmatism of consequence—the balancing of entry standards, for example, reflecting the need to maintain academic standards while insuring against income loss due to under-enrollment—often tempered by organizational need rather than the greater good.

As academics, we are involved in redesigning face-to-face courses at a young, small, regional university. Adopting online delivery has largely comprised adapting hard copy content to digital and attempting to reproduce face-to-face pedagogy to external delivery rather than adopting explicit online pedagogy. Educational literature tells us this is inadequate, and we now seek new ways to tackle the redesign. In reviewing one course, for example, one of us (WB) discovered a mismatch between the curriculum aim and assessment principles, the effect of historical pedagogical creep, and
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