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### **To Cheat or Not To Cheat -- Ethics in Distance Education**

*"Education is a companion which no future can depress, no crime can destroy, no enemy can alienate and no nepotism can enslave."* –Ropo Oguntimehin

#### **Summary:**

There are many ethical issues when it comes to distance education. Professors of online courses must rely on faith and trust that their pupils will be honorable and not cheat. There is no foolproof way to supervise students who take these classes. Also, the student, when choosing to take a class online instead of attending classes in person, decides to eliminate several aspects of the learning process. Thus they do not receive the full experience offered by a traditional class. However, there are many conveniences when taking a course online as opposed to being required to attend a class in one location every other day or so. People whose careers require them to travel might easily decide on an online course in lieu of a real class. There are two sides to this argument and they each have both good and bad points.

#### **Hot Quotes:**

*"Online learning now depends more on the ability of educators and trainers to tutor and support learners online than on the technology itself."* Dr. Ian Heywood, 2000 World Open Learning Conference and Exhibition, Birmingham, England.

*"Faculty are moving forward, technologies are improving, and student demand is increasing -- but few changes are taking place in the university structure as a whole to accommodate the special needs of the distance-learning student."* Richard Bothel, dean of continuing education and distance learning at Troy State University.  
(<http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/spring41/bothel41.html>)

*"Connect the disconnected."* Dr. Ray Ganey, Cochise College, AZ

*"If we can only teach ethics (and, by extrapolation, nearly any other subject) in the classroom, then why do we write books and articles? Is not the act of publishing a wider form of pedagogy?"* Ed McDermitt, UMUC faculty member, March 2002 in an article on whether or not it is ethical to teach ethics on the web.  
([http://www.umuc.edu/fyionline/mar\\_02/fyionline4.html](http://www.umuc.edu/fyionline/mar_02/fyionline4.html))

*"This new learning tool[, distance education], will give our children the extra help they may need to achieve more, to learn more and to excel in their studies."* Alabama Governor Bob Riley, July 27, 2005.

### **Educational Importance:**

Online courses and other online services are becoming increasingly popular as more of the world gains access to computers and the Internet. The Internet is a giant source of information that is not always accurate, but steadily increasing in availability. Being aware of the ethical decisions involved in distributing this information is necessary in order to have a complete understanding of the reasons behind today's technologically enhanced resources and to help potential students decide whether or not to enroll.

### **What is Distance Education?**

Distance education is teaching and learning that do not occur in the same location. Courses are, for the most part, divided into two basic categories: synchronous and asynchronous. A synchronous course demands that all students following the course work at the same time for the same deadlines, while an asynchronous course allows students to create their own deadlines. While the option to work at their own pace is appealing, it also sounds less like a real course and more like a course that says, "Just do this when you feel like it." In order for an asynchronous course to be educationally effective, the students must be dedicated and hard-working; procrastination will definitely hurt a student of this type (National Education Association, 2000).

Synchronous courses are more likely to depend upon video technology, while asynchronous courses rely more extensively on computer technology. In this aspect, asynchronous courses are similar to the 44% of distance learning courses that are Web-based. These depend heavily upon chat rooms and threaded discussion forums (National Education Association, 2005).

E-mail is a large factor in not only Web-based courses, but also non-Web-based courses as well as traditional, non-distance learning courses. Eighty-three percent (83%) of Web-based course faculty use e-mail to connect with their students at least once a week, as well as 42% of not-Web-based course faculty (National Education Association, 2005).

Many students who enroll in distance programs do so from a close proximity to where the course is actually being offered. There is, however, a significant number of students who take

distance courses because there are simply no schools near them. This is a common practice in Australia, where there are whole schools dedicated



**"I've always wanted an empire of Distance Learning Campuses."**

to distance learning that do not offer traditional courses. One such school is the Distance Education Centre Victoria, whose programs “are designed to meet the educational needs of students whose circumstances prevent them from accessing courses at regular schools. While many students are traveling, ill or find regular schooling difficult, many others use

the [Distance Education Centre Victoria]’s services to enroll in one or two subjects that they cannot access in their regular school” (Distance Education Centre Victoria, 2005).

Distance learning is a very popular option in Australia. The first Australian case of learning by correspondence is reported to have taken place in 1909. Apparently, one woman was having trouble delivering her children to their school during the winter, so she asked the minister for public instruction what to do. “Someone had the idea of producing notes for her to use to teach her children. Correspondence schooling was born!” (Deakin University, 2003). Since then, the quality of distance education has improved through the development of telephone courses all the way to where we are today, with almost instant access to information online.

### **What I Think:**

I believe that distance education, while a convenient method of learning, ultimately does not provide the same level of learning as participating in the traditional method of attending a class in a classroom. As a student, I wholly prefer the traditional system. I enjoy participating in class and being able to speak directly to the professor and other students. I am far more comfortable with learning through personal instruction than over the internet.

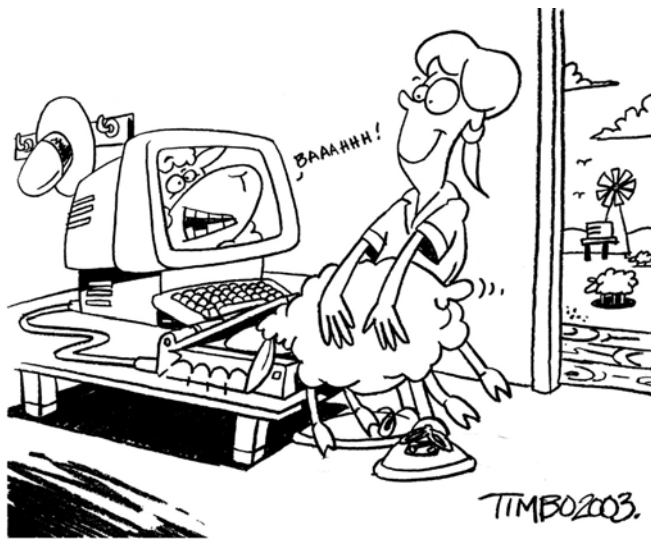
If I were a teacher conducting an online course, I would certainly endeavor to discover and prevent as many cases of cheating as possible; I would probably put more effort into making sure my online pupils were being honorable than into checking on my traditional students. I would be suspicious of tests and quizzes taken online, because it is impossible to know for sure that the student does not have another website, book, or

resource open in front of them with the answers. I would rather get to know my students personally and speak to them face-to-face in class than interface through a computer connected to the internet.

I think that the system of distance learning is indeed ethical, albeit complexly so. I agree with Ed McDermitt's statement that books and articles are indeed just another form of pedagogy, although I think that an actual course that one must pass is on a different level. One cannot cheat when reading a book; graded work, however, is a different story.

### **What Would Make You Do That?:**

Why would someone choose to take an online course? Some people make this decision under the impression that it will not take as much time as a traditional course



Jane prepared her show and tell for the Distance Education teacher

would. In fact, the workload seems to be about the same, whether time is spent in front of a computer reading files and viewing videos or in a classroom listening to a professor and taking notes. Another reason to take a distance course is that the students won't have to come to campus at all; this is true for the

most part, but there can be exceptions such as orientation sessions, group projects, or testing. People who consider online courses as possibilities should certainly research what they are getting themselves into before committing to something that is not at all what they thought it would be. Unethical actions, such as cheating or avoiding the work,

are less likely to occur if the students know from the beginning what the rules and regulations are.

The convenience of taking an online course encompasses many different aspects; an online student does not need to follow the traditional semester schedule of a regular class, nor the set class times. This is important for someone who wants to continue with their education without interrupting the rest of their life, which includes their job or career or even their families. It provides a way to take classes for those who cannot afford to enroll in a school; the cost of taking such a course is far cheaper than a traditional course, and housing and meal plans don't even come into the equation here. Also, there are very few travel

expenses. The nearest computer with Internet access *is* the classroom. However, some courses still require real traditional



*"Indeed, your class attendance does give new meaning to the term 'distance learning.'"*

classroom time, be it for testing, group projects, or orientation. Taking an online course can also be a better way for someone to learn the material; some people are naturally better learners through impersonal methods and books than others. Online students can set their own pace. Even some teachers rate their Web-based distance education courses higher in some aspects than traditional courses. These aspects include: better access to information, giving the students high quality course material, assisting mastery of the subject matter, taking into account the effectiveness educationally of the course, and

addressing the plethora of student learning styles. The notion that the teachers think their distance learning courses are superior to their traditional courses in some ways could be an important deciding factor in whether or not to take a distance course.

The idea of all this freedom is very attractive; there are so many pros to taking an online course that sometimes it is easy to forget the cons. These include eliminating any instructor face time that comes with taking a conventional course as well as any social interaction with the other students taking the course. This lack of interaction might sound appealing to a shy student but it can interfere with their ability to learn the material; some people just need class lectures to understand. There is little such support for the online student. For example, it is expected that students locate their own resources essential to completing their assignments. This demands that the student is independent;

procrastinators should steer clear of online courses. In order to be successful in an online endeavor, it is necessary to make time for studying, which is a difficult task for a procrastinator. Finally, the obvious presents itself. In order to be able to succeed in an online course, a basic knowledge of how to use the required technology is vital. Someone who has never before touched a computer should avoid courses whose fundamentals include being good with computers.



Teachers of distance courses give the same rating to their traditional and distance courses when it comes to improving quantitative skills and developing student interactivity, but

three things that traditional courses offer better are: strengthening group problem-solving skills among students, improving verbal skills, and improving oral presentation delivery (The National Education Association, 2000). Therefore, there are both good and bad aspects to choosing a distance course over a traditional course.

All in all, there is no right answer to the question of which is better, traditional or distance. One common belief is that it is a great deal more work to attend the classroom sessions of a course if only because there is stricter supervision there; many argue that it is not fair to give away information so freely. Others claim that if it is acceptable to teach only in the classroom, then books and articles are not acceptable, because such methods are only a different form of teaching. Both sides make points worth considering before passing judgment on the ethical position of distance education.

Is it really ethical to make credit so easily available to everyone as well? Some would argue that a student who works hard to scrape up the money to afford housing and travel expenses in order to acquire an education deserves access to more than a student who sits at home in front of a computer to enroll in the same class. Others say that it is not fair to bring financial issues into this discussion; some people simply cannot afford a conventional education and must resort to other measures.

### **What Distance Learning Faculty Think:**

Distance learning is well-liked, for the most part, among those who teach it. Seventy two percent of distance learning faculty support it, in contrast to the meager 14% who dislike it. Among the faculty that teach only traditional courses, distance learning is less popular; only 51% support it, compared to 22% who hold negative feelings. The rest of the traditional faculty, the remaining 27%, have elected to remain undecided until they



can see the repercussions for students, their institution, and themselves. There are two negative outcomes that faculty are concerned about:

- Faculty will be paid less for more work;
- Faculty will not be fairly remunerated for their intellectual property;

Their main financial concern is that the faculty will end up being underpaid for all the work that they do. Fortunately for distance learning students, the faculty are swayed by

the “prospect of being able to offer an education to students who could not otherwise enroll in a course” (The National Education Association, 2000).

However, most faculty are not worried that the quality of education will decrease.



“There aren’t any icons to click. It’s a chalk board.”

### **How Do Distance Education Students Learn?:**

The materials needed for each distance education class vary with the subject, which parallels conventional methods of teaching as well. For example, for a math class a student is usually required to have a calculator or ruler; distance education requirements are similar in that if a student is taking a distance chemistry class, he or she is required to have chemicals. Some schools offer a kit that students may purchase; “to meet the needs of his students taking distance education courses, Dr. Jeschofnig developed a kit that enabled them to do valid experiments in their homes” (Chemistry Kits, 2005). Other distance education providers simply require a computer with a connection to the Internet.

As mentioned before, 44% of distance learning faculty claim that their course is primarily Web-based, using chat rooms and threaded discussion forums online. Other

forms of media used in distance education are textbooks and videos, from which one may infer that a device to play said video is necessary (National Education Association, 2000).

These materials are either sent via Internet or through the postal service.

### **Keywords:**

#### *Distance education:*

- Teaching and learning in which learning normally occurs in a different place from teaching. (<http://www.1.worldbank.org/disted/glossary.html>)
- Off campus study completed via correspondence. (<http://www.services/unimelb.edu.au/transition/intransition/reallylike/glossarya.html>)

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