

## Book review

### Ethical Practices and Implications in Distance Learning

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Demiray, U., & Sharma, R. (Eds.). (2009). *Ethical practices and implications in distance learning*. Hershey, PA: Information Science Reference (pp. xxv, 391).

More and more institutions are offering some form of open, flexible, or distance learning. It follows that many of these institutions are new to distance delivery and have little experience dealing with the complexities presented by distance delivery. Alongside the increase in institutions offering some form of distance delivery, we must place the growth in the use of networked communications technologies. That combination brings new people, new technologies, and new institutions into distance education at a time when a raft of new ethical issues is appearing. Experienced or not, all distance educators need to consider ethical issues and their response to them.

All distance and online teachers are faced with ethical dilemmas. How often do we, as teachers, stop to consider these dilemmas or even identify them? This book may cause you to take that action. If so, it will achieve a major aim set by the editors and the contributors. Ethics, and ethical practices and implications, are an important and often overlooked aspect of our work as distance educators. It is important that we stand back from our practice and reflect on the ethical framework that we and our institutions work from. In doing that we will have to reconsider what we value and why we think distance education is important. I think it is likely that some uncomfortable questions and tensions could arise.

The book is a compilation of 21 chapters divided into three themed sections. The first section focuses on context, the second on technology, and the third provides a series of case studies. Overall, the book attempts to provide a philosophical base for considering ethical issues and a collective source of wisdom for practitioners to draw on. It is more successful in meeting the second rather than the first of those aims. While I found many individual chapters to be clear and thought-provoking, I found the final chapter—where the editors state they highlight major outcomes of the book—to be muddled.

The chapters in section one provide a picture of the current distance-education context that ethical practice sits within. I particularly liked the chapter by Beaudoin. His contention that the ethical integrity of any distance education course is 50 percent individual responsibility and 50 percent institutional responsibility highlights, yet again, the need for the design, delivery, and teaching processes of distance education to align, and the need to take time to consider context, values and relationships. It's an old message, but one that is constantly overlooked.

Another overlooked issue is also highlighted in the first section of the book. The need for ethical standards has long been identified at international, national, and institutional levels, and yet there is no recognised body to oversee ethical practice in distance delivery.

In section two the chapters focus on technology and the ethical issues that technology use brings to the fore. This is a strong section of the book. Technology has often been adopted uncritically and we have embraced the use of online learning communities enthusiastically. The ethical guidelines that we do have were usually developed in traditional distance education contexts and often sit uneasily with current technologies. This section of the book will help readers to pause

and think about techno-ethics. The need for discussion and debate to help us develop acceptable practice is highlighted in this section.

The third section presents a range of case studies. Issues such as academic dishonesty, which we would immediately identify as presenting ethical challenges, are presented alongside ethical issues that are not so commonly recognised—such as ethical online research practices, globalisation, and the resultant multicultural issues. Readers will find the case studies illuminating. Some cases move the focus from teachers and institutions to students and questions about the effects of online learning on students' rights and consideration of their view of issues. There are practical suggestions that teachers and institutions may consider worth adopting.

This book's target audience is teachers, administrators, and researchers in distance education. With issues such as the changing nature of the teacher/student communicative relationship, plagiarism, and how best to use and when to introduce new technologies, the broad target audience is understandable but challenging. However, ethical practices and implications have to be thought about and engaged with by all parties involved in distance education delivery. The responsibility for identifying and engaging with ethical issues does not rest with any one group alone.

*Ethical Practices and Implications in Distance Learning* is published as part of IGI Global's Information Science Reference Library. It is a valuable, but somewhat flawed addition to the reference library. For me the major flaw is common in books of this type – it tries to do too much. However, because we have little academically sound material that presents and debates ethical issues, the book does make a good contribution. It's a pity the editors didn't establish a better framework for the book. A common view of what ethics is and what constitutes an ethical issue would have helped to link the chapters and sections. I was distracted by editing oversights and that irritation extends to a need for better editing support for writers working in a second language.

A useful feature of the chapters is that each has a section identifying research that could be undertaken and concludes with an additional reading list. Both could be put to good use: one as a starter for a research project, and the other as a starting point for professional reading.

The retail cost of this book is approximately \$300. That is expensive and means it is unlikely to be on your bookshelf. It should be in your institution's library and it should be used. *Ethical Practices and Implications in Distance Learning* contains material and raises issues that will be new to many people. Dip in and out of it and reflect on your ethical practice and that of your institution.