Ethical Codes of Practice: Expanding Educators’ Perspectives

Ken Switzer, Ph.D.
Pearson eCollege
Centennial, CO, USA
kenneths@ecollege.com

Abstract: The field of education has various codes of ethics that pertain to nonmaleficence and beneficence as educators interact with students, colleagues and the wider public. Codes have been developed for various levels of education by such professional groups as the National Education Association and the American Association of University Professors. Though infrequently discussed, the broad sweep of the codes’ content is generally known among educational professionals. In order to expand the discussion of pertinent codes of conduct it is suggested that a code of conduct from a similar professional field, the field of training, be explored for additional insight into ethical imperatives.

Introduction

The instruction of students and related activities in the area of education are, or it can be argued that they should be, based on a code of ethics for the educational professional as members of that profession carry out a wide variety of instructional duties whether in the blended classroom or online courseroom.

Education is intimately connected with ethics, because holistically speaking education is more than simply passing examination and acquiring degrees. . . the . . . educator makes a positive, ethical and interventionist role by helping students to learn beyond the stereotypical classroom situation. . . (Demiray & Sharma, 2009)

Often, educators’ discussion of ethical behavior focuses on “the principle of nonmaleficence that can best be summarized in the moral injunction: Above all, do no harm.” (Spinello, 2011) Frequently, in this line of discussion, educators emphasize student behavior. For example, we admonish students concerning plagiarism of other’s work which harms the student and, theoretically, the readers of the student’s material.

For educators it may be profitable to focus on educational ethics as behaviors that emphasize positive outcomes in the learning environment, or beneficence. To that end, are there codes of ethics that can be explored outside the traditional educational area, codes that might serve as a point for further discussion of ethical imperatives in the educational environment? Following an overview of educational codes a related code for trainers will be discussed.
Codes of Ethics in Education

Educators should be aware of and, in theory, bound by various professional codes of ethics. These codes may be clearly stated as institutional policy, a professional organization’s formally recognized code of ethics, or codes provided in less formal ways such as a training program or conference presentation on expected ethical behaviors. Whether clearly articulated as a code of ethics or presented as ethical guidelines for carrying out professional duties it behooves instructors to consider how such ethical codes can be applied to themselves and their conduct in carrying out their professional duties with regard to the student, the institution and the profession. Similarly, it can also be argued that there is a professional duty with regard to parents, the community and the funding sources for educational programs.

Professional associations such as the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) provide codes of ethics for their members. The NEA’s code places an emphasis on the two areas of commitment to the student and commitment to the profession. In the area of student commitment the focus is primarily on providing access to varying points of view in an atmosphere that “shall not unreasonably restrain the student from. . . the pursuit of learning” (NEA, 2011). In the area of professional commitment the focus is primarily on maintaining professional standards and qualifications in the field. For example, one standard admonishes educators to “not. . . make a false statement or fail to disclose a material fact related to competency and qualifications” (NEA, 2011). The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) has a similar Statement on Professional Ethics (AAUP, 2011). The AAUP notes that these are guidelines for the profession with no enforcement action other than that taken at the institutional level.

Educational institutions and professional associations also provide examples derived from codes of ethics and practices through workshops and conferences. Often, such venues focus on the tactical means to implement the strategic codes of ethics stated more formally elsewhere. For example, how does the instructor facilitate the student’s interaction with the instructor, other learners, course content and the technology when in the online environment? Online the ethical approach requires the instructor to establish a robust instructor presence through posting a biographical statement and photo, facilitating “introductions” discussions, facilitating weekly discussions, communicating regularly, providing a means to respond to student questions and providing timely and constructive feedback on student work. When the topic is student to student interaction the instructor should facilitate a robust learning community. In the online environment this can include setting up an “introductions” discussion area, facilitating weekly or unit discussions, fostering peer review of work, fostering group collaboration such as study groups, and including team assignments where appropriate to course content and objectives. (Redden & Switzer, 2010).

This brief overview of ethical codes has summarized codes and standards that we as educators are often familiar with due to our professional environment, professional association memberships, and participation in relevant workshops and conferences.
Discussion: An Expanded View Concerning Codes of Ethics

With a view toward the exploration of related approaches it might be profitable for educators to expand their horizons and ask if there are relevant codes of ethics found outside the traditional educational arena, codes that might serve as a point for further discussion of ethical imperatives pertinent to the educational environment. To this end, it can be posited that there is a parallel between the field of education and the field of training in that practitioners in both areas follow common instructional design methods to deliver content to participants desiring an enhancement of their knowledge and skill bases. There are also similar requirements for professional behavior in relation to colleagues and stakeholders in the training field, just as there are in the field of education.

The International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI) is an association whose members are, in many instances, involved in the design and delivery of training. The ISPI Code of Ethics is intended to promote ethical practices in the profession based on six principles (ISPI, 2011). These ethical principles, as summarized below, can direct an expanded discussion of ethical standards and their application to the education profession.

ISPI Code of Ethics: Principle One: Add Value Principle
This principle mandates that a professional conduct oneself and manage courses and research, in a way that adds value for students, the institution and other stakeholders in the educational process.

Most educators engage in sporadic, if not frequent, discussion concerning a beneficent approach to instruction for students. The common objective here is to add value to the educational process that occurs in the blended classroom or online courseroom. While the results of research may have implications for instruction, it is a more common objective for research to add value for the individual professor and for the institution. In general, there is less discussion of how ethical requirements of the profession relate to stakeholders, such as a legislative funding source for traditional institutions or shareholders for for-profit institutions. How might the traditional codes of ethics in the field of education be expanded to include adding value to stakeholders beyond students and the specific institution? What is the appropriate forum for such discussion to take place?

ISPI Code of Ethics: Principle Two: Validated Practice Principle
This principle mandates that a professional make use of validated approaches, practices and technology to deliver a consistent quality of content and establish a viable learning environment.

With the expansion of online courses and the rapid development of Web 2.0 tools there is an exponential increase in the approaches, practices and technology that can be employed to deliver content, both in online courses and in blended classrooms. Similarly, new web-based tools impact how we might develop a viable learning community among students. How might the traditional codes of ethics in the field of education be expanded to address
the ever changing technology we confront? For example, while there is a growing trend among professionals to use social networks such as LinkedIn to network among themselves, what are the ethical considerations if educators employ online social networks in their courses and encourage, or require, students to participate in them in order to expand the learning community? The use of any Web 2.0 tool that is accessed outside the online courseroom, and is beyond the instructor’s direct control, has ethical implications that should be explored. What is the appropriate forum for such discussion to take place?

This principle mandates that a professional work collaboratively with other professionals in the field.

This principle is relatively straightforward and is met primarily through serving on committees and boards at an institution. Naturally, there is some collaboration among professionals working on joint journal articles or joint conference presentations though such collaboration is not a dominant aspect of academic life. How might the traditional codes of ethics in the field of education be expanded to address greater collaboration, especially in course design and presentation, among educators within a field of study or department and across fields and departments? What is the appropriate forum for such discussion to take place?

ISPI Code of Ethics: Principle Four: Continuous Improvement Principle
This principle mandates that a professional continuously improve proficiency and knowledge in the field.

This principle too is relatively straightforward. Core faculty in tenure track positions are commonly given the time and resources to expand their expertise in their field, and to publish based on their research. However, with growing institutional dependence on adjunct faculty, often teaching at multiple institutions, there is concern that it is increasingly difficult for many faculty members to improve their proficiency and knowledge in the field? It could also be argued that “the field” is actually two fields: the field in which one instructs, such as biology or international relations, and the field of educational design and delivery. How might the traditional codes of ethics in the field of education be expanded to address the seeming inequities faced by adjunct faculty attempting to maintain proficiency in their field? Similarly, how might our traditional codes of ethics in the field of education be expanded to address the need to improve proficiency and knowledge in the design and delivery of course content in the online environment or blended classroom? What is the appropriate forum for such discussion to take place?

ISPI Code of Ethics: Principle Five: Integrity Principle
This principle mandates that a professional be honest and trustworthy in representations to others in the field.
Traditionally in the field of education this principle has pertained to publications and conference or institutional presentations. It could also be argued that the principle pertains to participation on committees at an institution or for a professional association. Finally, many instructors would argue that the principle pertains to course content and course assessments presented to students as potential members of the field of study. Do the traditional codes of ethics in the field of education need to be expanded to address this principle or do current codes, such as those of the NEA and AAUP, adequately address the principle? What is the appropriate forum for such discussion to take place?

ISPI Code of Ethics: Principle Six: Confidentiality Principle
This principle mandates that a professional maintain confidentiality while not allowing for a conflict of interest.

Traditionally in the field of education this principle has pertained to maintaining confidentiality with respect to student information, departmental information and institutional information. Institutional standards are generally clear and the Department of Education (DOE) has published guidelines and policies that specifically address confidentiality with regard to student information. Do the traditional codes of ethics in the field of education need to be expanded to address this principle or do current codes, such as those of the NEA and AAUP, as well as DOE policies and rules adequately address the principle? What is the appropriate forum for such discussion to take place?

Conclusion

Following ethical codes and standards is a shared responsibility among all educators at all levels. In some instances the codes of ethics pertain to administrators and course designers as well as instructors though this paper has emphasized the role of the instructor. While codes of ethics are provided by professional organizations the issue of ethical behavior in the field of education is infrequently discussed at the institutional level or at conferences. Additional effort among all interested parties may be required to assure that ethical standards are met. As part of this effort it is useful to look at codes of ethics in related fields of endeavor, such as the field of training, for additional insight.

There are multiple forums where a discussion of ethical codes may take place. Given the growth of online education, the discussion should help ensure that codes are relevant to the online environment. Conference presentations may serve to raise questions for further exploration and discussion in other venues. Code enforcement takes place at the institutional level and is based on institutional codes of conduct. To that end, a discussion of an expanded code of ethics, or a clarified code of ethics, could begin at the departmental level and be expanded to the faculty senate at educational institutions. While there is no enforcement mechanism, codes such as those set forth by AAUP do set standards for the profession. To that end, a discussion of the possible need to expand and clarify current codes to meet the needs of the online environment should be undertaken by AAUP through its process of periodic review of its codes.
References


