Developing an Online "Code of Conduct"

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There are an increasing number of classes being offered by way of the World Wide Web (WWW or Web). Although much of the information that we review regarding online learning appears positive, difficulties can arise. In particular, the anonymity that a web course can provide can be a blessing and a curse. In this article, the author suggests developing an online code of conduct detailing proper and improper conduct for the course. The author details prescriptions for the design and development of such a policy and how to manage potential problems before they begin.

Online classes have become a reality of our worldwide culture. CLO NewsCenter reports that Capella University, an online learning provider, predicts online enrollment in the United States is to increase by 900%. Additionally, it is expected to involve three quarters of a million students in fully online instruction by the year 2005 (*Demand for E-Learning*, 2003).

Today, all one has to do is perform an Internet search using the terms "Online Education" to discover what is available to students and faculty members alike in the way of courses and resources. A person can literally find everything from a web course in statistics, to textbooks, to articles touting the virtues of the online classroom. Much of the information that we review regarding online learning appears positive.

However, we may not hear of the "horror stories." We may not realize that at a distance, students can find a certain degree of anonymity, which has

both advantages and disadvantages. These stories have almost become "urban legends" of a sort to those of us who teach from a distance. "Did you hear about the student who cursed at a professor in a chatroom?" Or possibly "Oh! I heard about a student who was so rude to other students on a discussion board that no one wanted to post messages!"

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Unfortunately, stories such as these are often only told at conferences, meetings and informal gatherings of online educators. Although they may be more the exception than the rule, nothing can be more damaging to a class that requires interaction than a belligerent student. A barbed tongue can literally shut down threaded discussion board and chatroom conversations. Unfortunately, if group interaction is a part of student's grades, improper student behavior is something that can have a tremendous impact on course satisfaction, willingness to take/teach another course and even on individual student course grades.

Student handbooks are often written to describe behavior that is acceptable on campuses. However, the virtual university is often times campus-free. Many students are unaware of how to act or behave in this new Cyberworld. Students may use the "ignorance" excuse for why they acted inappropriately or even why they neglected to ask questions. Things would be "different" if they were in a "real" classroom.

After one such incident involving this author and an online student in 1998, this author decided to develop an online code of conduct so that the danger of class discussion deterioration would be minimized. The purpose of this article is to help other professionals and/or institutions develop similar policies for their own online classrooms.

PRESCRIPTIONS

To begin, an online educator should first consider the nature of his or her own classroom. If, for example, interaction is not a major component of the online class then perhaps only a "cheating policy" is necessary. On the other

hand, if interaction is necessary and a requirement, it may be important to detail the consequences of destroying that interaction.

It is this author's experience that students are very appreciative when they know their rights and what is expected of them at the beginning of any class. Since the implementation of this author's own policy, there have been many instances where students have sent "thank-you" messages regarding the code of conduct. They appear to appreciate knowing both communication etiquette specifics and that their own rights as online learners are being protected.

The next step is to find out if a code of conduct is already in place at the educator's institution. Often there are university or college policies describing actions which constitute unethical behavior. This becomes a simple base on which to develop a policy. It is important for this institutional policy to be made available online for convenient referral.

As an example, the College of Education at this author's previous university has a code of conduct detailing appropriate and inappropriate student behavior. In particular, academic dishonesty (plagiarism and cheating) and disruptive behavior are cited as being a serious breach of ethics and professional behavior. This document was used as the foundation for the code of conduct developed for this author's online classes. A copy of this document can be found in Appendix A.

Further, consequences of such behavior must be made clear to the students. It is unrealistic to expect students to follow a weak policy. If a policy is developed that states that unethical/unprofessional behavior will not be tolerated but consequences of such actions are not detailed, then the implementation of consequences will be difficult, if not impossible. A copy of this author's code of conduct can be found in Appendix B.

For example, in this author's class, if you disrupt the class by being belligerent or abusive to other classmates, students, colleagues, or teachers you will be removed from the class immediately. This is clearly stated, in writing, and becomes a part of the syllabus—a contract with the students.

There have been occasions where this author has had to warn students about their behavior and has only had to remove a student on one occasion. Usually, these students do not violate the policy again but generally do test

the limits of proper behavior. This policy has been in place in all online courses that this author has taught since 1998. It is a "working document"; being updated as class needs change. In that time, messages have been removed and students have been warned but only one student has had to be removed due to unethical behavior.

The students should also be told that it is improper to discuss personal issues regarding course content, amount of work, grades, and so forth, by way of open class communication. They should be directed to send such comments to the instructor instead of the class discussion forum. In one instance, a student complained about the number of postings in a class resulting in 16 follow-up messages essentially saying the same thing. Once attention was called to this issue, many students apologized, others found it rather humorous and, fortunately, the behavior ceased to continue.

It is suggested by this author that students refrain from using words such as "offends, insults, or angers" to get their point across. Students should be reminded that everyone is entitled to his or her opinion, not matter how "wrong" that opinion might be. This author's students have commented that they feel "safe" and part of a community with certain rules to follow. They believe they can express an opinion without fear of being chastised if they voice an opinion.

It is important to note that a student who has a propensity to violate the policy may still send the instructor offensive e-mail messages. As an instructor, you may receive e-mail that is difficult to read and is highly unprofessional. However, the goal of an online code of conduct is to create a safe and healthy learning environment for students in the class. You may choose to include personal e-mail under the umbrella of an online code of conduct. In this case, this inclusion needs to be detailed within the policy itself.

The final component is a disclaimer of sorts. It is imperative that the student realizes that he or she cannot use the code of conduct as an excuse for not participating in discussions. Students must be aware that they are responsible for their own learning. It is this author's experience that on occasion, students have said that they were "afraid" to post because they might violate the /code of conduct. The times that this has occurred, this "fear" has been an excuse.

Even when the policy has been explained to these "fearful" individuals, they have continued to not participate in class discussions. It is important to note that students who are unwilling to participate might not simply be poor students. They may be fearful of an online learning experience itself. Again, this is where a detailed policy can help reduce these fears.

CONCLUSION

All of the information detailed provides a rationale for using a code of conduct. The policy can help you as an educator keep order and peace in an online, discussion-based class format. A code of conduct can help classmates understand what is expected of them and that they are able to voice opinions without fear of peer insults. Finally, the policy can help foster a positive learning environment for each member of the class community and give that class a positive reputation for students of the future.

References

Demand for E-Learning Continues as World Wide Learn Expands E-Learning Resource Directory (n.d.). Retrieved March 5, 2005, from http://www.clomedia.com/common/newscenter/newsdisplay.cfm?id=1765

APPENDIX A

[COLLEGE OF EDUCATION] POLICY ON ETHICS AND PROFESSIONALISM

Since it is a responsibility of the University and the [College of Education] to instill and develop professional and ethical attitudes and practices in its candidates for certification as educational professionals, the [Department of Instructional Technology] states the following position on matters of student behavior that is academically dishonest, belligerent, disruptive of order in the learning environment, or abusive of classmates, students, colleagues, or teachers. Such behavior will be considered to be unethical and/or unprofessional in the developing candidate for certification.

- Academic dishonesty shall be interpreted to include all cases in which a student tries to pass of as his/her own the work of others (fellow classmates, authors [published or unpublished], visual or graphic representations, computer or media application, etc.) without giving appropriate credit to the originator of the idea. Cheating and plagiarism are considered to be very serious breaches of ethics.

- Behavior and/or use of language which is belligerent, disruptive of the learning environment, or abusive of classmates, students, colleagues, or teachers is considered to be inappropriate and a serious breach of professional behavior.

In keeping with the university policy stated in the Faculty Handbook #5C.09, the faculty members (1) may take such disposition of the case as they deem appropriate and (2) shall make available to the chair of the division and to the office of the vice president of student affairs a record of the dishonest or disruptive behavior and the action taken by the faculty member, and (3) a copy of the report shall be sent to the student's advisor together with a copy of this policy on ethics and professionalism.

Further, the chair(s) of the students teaching field(s) shall cause a file to be maintained of such offenses and if a student exhibits one or more instances of such inappropriate behaviors before admission to Phase I, it is possible

that said student may not be admitted to Phase I of the teacher preparation program (elementary or secondary). An offense during or after Phase I shall be deemed sufficient cause to warrant a hearing before the Admissions Committee. The Committee may take a variety of actions including refusing admission or postponing the admission to Phase II and /or the assignment to student teaching for one semester.

Adopted 11/3/94
Council on Teacher Education

APPENDIX B

SAMPLE ONLINE CODE OF CONDUCT

Since this is a discussion based class, it is important to define what is proper and what is improper when communicating with other classmates and the professor via the discussion board. Some of these policies are obvious and many of you would never consider such behavior because you believe it is unprofessional. Nevertheless, unprofessional behavior can stifle class discussion—essential to this class. Therefore, it is important to have this policy stated in writing.

- The [College of Education] Policy on Ethics and Professionalism stands in this class.

- In addition, if you choose to violate this policy in any way, you will be immediately removed from the class. Of particular importance is item #2 [of the College of Education Policy on Ethics and Professionalism] which describes behavior not tolerated in a traditional classroom. If you disrupt the class by being belligerent or abusive to other classmates, students, colleagues, or teachers you will be removed from the class immediately. I have a "zero tolerance" policy on this issue. Please be very careful of what you say in writing.

- You will not discuss private issues about the class via the class discussion board forums. If you have issues with the class content, amount of work, grades given, etc., you must send them directly to the professor. If you choose to voice frustrations via the public forum, I will consider that a breach of ethics and professionalism and I will ask you to

withdraw from the class immediately. Again, I have a "zero tolerance" policy on this issue.

- Please do not post "I spent five hours reading this text" or "I spent four hours reading the postings." All this does is invite others to join in and complain—not a professional use of class discussions. In a recent class, I had to inform students that 2-3 messages a day were in regard to the amount of work. That translated into 10-15 messages per week, thus only adding to the amount of work. This does NOT include usual questions about assignments—please post these to the discussion board.

- Please try not to use words like "offends," "insults," "implies," "out-raged," "angered"—you get the idea. Choose your wording carefully—you may have misread something a fellow classmate or your professor may have said. Additionally, the written word is far more permanent than spoken word.

- Use emoticons when you are joking. Humor is often lost in this medium so if you are kidding about something, do this :) Now, this is not an open invitation for rudeness followed by a "Just kidding" :)

- Please remember that all class members are entitled to their opinions—even if they are wrong. Even if statements made are the most narrow-minded, insulting, ridiculous comments you've ever heard in your entire life, be careful with how you respond. Believe it or not, I read recent research where the authors suggest that if you respond in a negative manner, others (in this case, class members) may view YOU, not the other person, in a negative manner.

- You may not use this policy as an excuse for not participating in class discussions.

- You are responsible for your own learning. If you realize that you are unable to log on to the website or are not receiving responses to e-mail when you should be receiving them, don't wait for days expecting that it will be "worked out." Make sure that you keep alternative contact information on-hand (and not just online).

- You may not use the following excuse "I can't read off the screen." I am not a big fan of reading off of the computer screen myself. So, I print the messages—no excuses.

- In this online class, caps are used for emphasis ONLY. I only yell at my dogs :) If you want to yell at someone in class, "take it outside." My course is a safe, friendly circle for academic discussion, not a place to vent your frustrations. I use caps fairly frequently because I am an emphatic speaker in real life.

- Since this is an online discussion-based class, regular participation in class discussion is essential. If for some reason you are unable to participate in a discussion, you must contact me via WebCT private email to schedule an alternative. You may, of course, call the university and leave a message.

- This is a new policy—please do not try to treat this course as a "week-end intensive." There is so much to do in this class and I really do not want to see you fail. My goal is challenged learning—not panic. If you try to do it all on Saturdays and Sundays, you will be panicked.

- I am not a big fan of "excuses." I have heard every possibly excuse for why students can't post discussions or get projects done and I'd prefer not to hear another story. If you have a deal, tell me. In this case, it is not better to not complete an assignment and ask for forgiveness later. I appreciate honesty far more than the fact that your great aunt Matilda died twice and took your hard drive with her while your dog ate your homework.

- If you do not finish the final chapters or cases in the class, I will give you an incomplete. This portion of the class is critical. Just because you have enough points to pass the class doesn't mean that you can just stop "coming" to class. If you don't finish the class, that warrants an incomplete. Incompletes turn to failing grades if left idle.

- Make certain that you ask questions if you have them. I don't know many instructors who are also professional mind readers!

- Recently, I have had students not reply to e-mail messages I have sent to them regarding assignments, particularly in the case of non-participation. If I take the time to write and care enough to ask you about what is going on, I expect you to take the time to reply. To quote one of our graduate students: "That's like walking out of the room when you ask to see someone after class." And she's right—it's the virtual equivalent. I will consider non-response to be a breach of ethics.

- WARNING: It is REALLY easy to get behind in a distance education class. Really, really easy. Too easy and it happens frequently. You get the idea. My advice is to treat this class as though it were a regular class that meets a minimum of three days a week (except weekends). I check daily, Monday-Friday, multiple times a day (but then again, that is my job.) I recommend that you check more often than you think is necessary, especially at first—daily is my suggestion. If you do not check in frequently enough, you may miss critical correspondence in group work and may not be evaluated favorably by your group member(s).You can always cut back if you find you are checking too frequently.