

# **Ethical Drivers of On-line Instruction**

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To limit an analysis of the politics of on-line instruction to a single article or presentation is an impossible task. The purpose of this article is a modest one: to depict a model of the ethical drivers that operate in the implementation of online instruction. The model is in no way meant to be comprehensive. There is no attempt within this article to provide a comprehensive definition of ethics. It is a starting point for discussion, research, program implementation and the implementation of on-line instruction in institutional settings. An abbreviated case description of a small Midwestern college is used to provide examples of “high” and “low” ethical behavior. Based on this description, a “taxonomy of the ethical drivers of online instruction” is derived. The taxonomy is the basis for the critical questions each institution should consider in implementing online instruction.

For the purposes of this paper, instructional technology is defined as the intentional use of hardware, software and/or netware to communicate and foster discourse related to the content of a discipline. Online instruction is defined here as any attempt to communicate about the content of a discipline over an electronic network or to convey information about a discipline. Online instruction encompasses distance learning and the use of instructional technology within traditional synchronous and asynchronous instructional formats.

For those who have been in the academy for more than a decade, memories of dusty and unused overhead projectors still linger. Early on, many in the academy simply ignored

instruction any question of the effect of instructional technology on learning or on the welfare of the institution, perhaps for good reason:

*Of course, the important question to be asked of any proposal for reform of existing instructional technology is whether student learning is facilitated more under the “new” than under the “old.” Concerning this question there is little research evidence to show superiority of the “new” over the “old.” This does not prove that the “old” is best , but it does require caution in extending innovative instructional technologies beyond the situation for which they were designed (p. 419).A History of American Education, Macmillan and Co., 1973, New York*

The ambivalence of the academy toward early forms of instructional technology continues to the present day. Instructional technology often becomes a political instrument under the best of ethical conditions and a political football under the worst of ethical conditions. The following case history serves as a basis for the taxonomy of ethical drivers of online instruction. Awareness of these drivers can provide a more “ethical” environment for the implementation of online instruction.

### **A Brief Case History of Entrepreneurial College**

Entrepreneurial College was founded in the 1800’s in a merger between two struggling institutions—a secretarial school and small local college. Throughout the first 100 years of its existence, the school struggled from year to year, nearly closing in the 1970’s. With new leadership in the early 1980’s, the institution began a period of expansion and sometimes unwarranted risk-taking that nearly brought about its demise. The ethical environment played a key role in the successes and failure of the institution during this period of time.

In the early 1980’s and into the 1990’s, Entrepreneurial College found itself in direct competition with a rapidly growing local community college branch. Presumably, the

community college enrollment grew because, previously, the local liberal arts college had not served that market. In some ways, the competition temporarily energized EC. In other ways, it nearly brought about its demise in a clash of competitive institutional and leadership egos.

In an attempt to collaborate on some programs, faculty at EC accepted community college students into their general education courses. In return, the community college agreed not to offer general education courses, at least temporarily. In reality, EC was quietly buying up all of the residences surrounding the community college so that it could not expand its physical plant. And the community college was quietly gearing up to offer general education and online courses to siphon off enrollment from EC and increase its profit margin. Much of the income from the local branch which was controlled by a mother campus some 40 miles away was funneled into marketing against EC. The competition and increasing enmity split the community and antagonized some factions of the local business community. Meanwhile, the EC information technology environment was starved for funding. EC rapidly fell behind its peer institutions in the implementation of instructional technology.

In what was supposed to be a crushing blow to the community college, EC heavily heavily discounted its tuition for regional students in order to compete against the state subsidized community college. Students often had the impression that they could complete four years at the discounted rate. In reality, students who attended EC were suddenly faced with expensive private tuition in their third and fourth years. EC temporarily increased its enrollment but dramatically reduced its “profit” margin. Direct and indirect costs rose dramatically coupled with dramatically increased debt load.

The nexus of the competition was evident when each institution instituted a community education and technology center. Resources for either were stretched thin. The state supported

center eventually drove the EC technology center out of business. Overshadowing the competition was the onrush of new developments in technology, largely ignored into the late 1990's by EC. Technology competed directly with athletics for funding and support from senior administration.

Information technology and by default, online instruction was problematic at EC. One example of faculty ambivalence seemed to signal faculty attitudes in the mid 19900's. A well regarded senior faculty member made it well known that the only time he removed the dust cover from his desktop computer was when the Dean was around. He remarked "No one will tell me how to conduct my courses. I believe in the personal touch and will fight to keep it!" Another faculty member, who would later become a senior administrator, actively campaigned against newer technologies.

Also, senior leadership avoided the use of the basic communication tools. Each espoused the need for the "personal" touch. In reality, senior leadership became increasingly inaccessible in an electronic world. It wasn't until late in the 1990's, when pressured by the existence of technology use all around them did they begin to personally use the technologies.

In another indication of problematic nature of instructional technology at EC during this time period, the institution received a large partnership grant after submitting a proposal along with a local school district to a regional funding source. The purpose was to install a joint teleconferencing link between the school and the EC. The project failed but not until over \$100,000 was expended for equipment that was never used. A great deal of publicity and fanfare accompanied the implementation of the project which failed in a matter of months because there was no logical content to be broadcast. Shortly after, the internet quickly supplanted video

conferencing. EC found itself falling farther behind competing institutions in the development of online instruction and tools.

The competition with the community college further depleted the resource base for information technology and diverted attention away from online instruction issues. What was supposed to be the crowning blow to the community college, was EC's purchase of a nearby retirement complex, mainly to keep it out of the hands of the community college. EC evidenced no pressing need for space given its ownership of some 80 mostly empty houses. In order to afford the cost, EC would have had to double its enrollment in five years, an impossible goal. History will record that it was the ethical environment that brought about the near financial ruin of EC. Senior leadership failed to consider the ethics of ignoring the impact of online instruction on its markets as well as other academic quality issues.

### **The Taxonomy of Ethical Drivers of Online Instruction**

The taxonomy is described in Chart 1. It comprises three levels: behavior at the first level is driven by motives to serve the individual "good;" behavior at the second level is based on a desire to serve the institutional welfare; and, behavior at the third level is based on desire to serve the universal "good." Nested within each of these levels are two or more dichotomies. Each of these dichotomies describes positive and negative parameters, one side which describes "high" ethical behavior and the other "low" ethical behavior. High ethical behavior is defined as behavior that is more likely to bring about the intended result within the major category.

*Level 1.00 Serving the individual good.* Serving the individual good requires an understanding and empathy for significant others within the institution. Working toward the **good** of all individuals stems from a selflessness resulting the advancement of the ideas of others, their **growth** and their ability to provide **service** others. On the other side of the

dichotomies, personal **agendas** can work against the individual good when **personal agendas** promote **personal images** with the aim of producing a **personal legacy**. Such dichotomies exist in all individuals and, by default, in all institutions.

For example, in the descriptions above, the faculty member who removed the dustcover to his computer only when the dean was around had a personal agenda which he promoted to others in order to protect his own view of the faculty role, hoping to leave a legacy of independence from the use of technology. Unfortunately, he did not consider how he could serve others (1.00) by improving his own knowledge of the technology. He did not consider the institutional good (2.00) and certainly not the universal good (3.00) had he committed himself to the effective use of information technology, modeling its uses to the graduates of his program-graduates who could carry such knowledge beyond the boundaries of the academy.

The negative side of the dichotomies was unleashed in the “low” ethical environment evident in the deployment and sustenance of online instruction at Entrepreneurial College. Two key macro-events indicate the power of “low” ethics. In the first, certain key senior administrators served only their **personal agendas** by failing to learn and model the appropriate uses of technology. By cultivating a false **personal image** of “personal touch,” they sought to create a questionable **personal legacy** to be viewed as concerned, approachable senior administrators. In reality, the almost nonuse of the most basic communication tools made them increasingly inaccessible.

During the same time period, Entrepreneurial College sank deeper into financial trouble. Its bonding rating dropped significantly and it was reported that the college was unable to keep up with its payments on empty houses and other loans. The “low” ethical environment brought

about financial decline. The closing of the community education and technology center was an unintended side effect of the financial decline of EC.

*Level 2.00 Serving the Institutional Good.* Working toward the institutional **good** is mission driven and the collective behaviors on the high side are based on actions that are collegial, openly debated and serve the mission. The actions are selfless with regard to individuals. Likewise, actions that are driven by institutional **growth**, in stature, quality or long term stability are on the high ethical side. Actions that improve the institution's ability to **serve** its constituency and/or community are considered the highest ethical behavior in this category.

An example of how Entrepreneurial College had drifted to the low ethical side can be seen its preoccupation with besting the branch of the local community college-in particular, its ability to provide online and technology support for the community. Throughout the conflict between the two institutions, Entrepreneurial College focused almost entirely on its **institutional agenda** which was the preservation of its prospective student base in the region. EC took actions to further its **institutional image** as the affordable service provider in the region against insurmountable odds-state subsidized low cost community college education. Preoccupation with its **institutional legacy** led EC to assume insurmountable debt in purchasing all surrounding properties in an attempt to drive the community college out and force it to sell out to EC, and, in the process, starving the support environment for online instruction.

The flashpoint of the destructive competition was the creation of two community education and technology centers. In particular, EC sought out a community grant to support a community education and technology center, a function which was outside of the mission of the institution which was to provide professional educational and academic programs with a strong liberal arts foundation. The community college utilized state subsidies to create duplicate

services including a computer laboratory and other facilities. Neither facility received heavy usage. Discontinuity in online instruction was the result. When businesses needed services, they were placed in an awkward position due to divided loyalties.

*3.0 Serving the Common Good.* Every college is host to a unique institutional culture. That culture results from the interplay of traditions and a collective institutional ethos. While that ethos can change, it is unlikely to change rapidly. Each institution comprises both high and low ethics as described in the taxonomy. To the degree that the inhabitants of the institution work toward the **universal good**, or the welfare of those beyond the institution is the degree to which the institution can serve the common good. In contrast, the degree to which the institution protects only its own prerogatives, is the degree to which the institution functions on the low ethical side (**political agenda/advantage**).

To the degree that the inhabitants of the institution consider the permanent **state of universal good** is the degree to which the institution functions on the high ethical side. In contrast, the degree to which the institution continually struggles to maintain its **political power (perpetual)**, is the degree to which the institution operates on the low ethical side of the dichotomy. In reality, no institution can survive without considering political agendas and wielding political power. But no institution can flourish if only its own political agendas and its own political power are the basis for actions and decisions.

In the above case description, both EC and the local community college attempted to convince various political entities of the purity of their respective motives in providing technology and online instruction. However, the action of each made it clear that political agendas and political power were the ethical drivers of the actions of both institutions. Substantial funding was squandered by both institutions in marketing, tuition discounting and

other competitive strategies-funding that should have gone into quality programs, into support for a common technology center, a common repository for online instruction.

### **Ethical Questions in the Implementation of Online Programs, Instruction**

The case description above and the taxonomy give rise to a small set of questions that should drive implementation of online instruction. The questions are presented here parallel to the taxonomy of the ethical drivers of online instruction presented in Chart 1:

#### **1.00 How does the implementation of the online instruction serve the individual good?**

**1.1 To what degree is the deployment of online instruction based on the consideration of individual welfare and to what degree is that implementation based on personal agendas, desires, and stereotyped views of online instruction?**

**1.2 To what degree is the implementation of online academic programs based on an understanding of how students learn and to what extent is the lack of online programming based on personal conceptions of instruction?**

**1.3 To what degree is the evaluation of online academic programming reflective of sound pedagogy?**

#### **2.00 How does the implementation of online instruction further the mission of the institution?**

**2.1 To what extent is the implementation of online instruction reflect a long term commitment to the improvement of the institution and to what extent is such implementation a temporary fix to some political problem?**

**2.2 To what extent is the creation of online academic programming a commitment to the improving the quality of offerings to the community and to what extent is its**

**implementation an attempt to improve the image of the institution (as a technology savvy institution)?**

**2.3 To what extent is the implementation of online instruction an attempt to better serve its students, the community and to what extent is such implementation designed create a personal or institutional legacy (garner personal recognition or credit)?**

**3.00 To what extent is online instruction seen within the institution as serving the common good beyond the institution vis a vis its regional, state, national or international impact and to what extent is online instruction a tool to gain a political or financial edge?**

## **Conclusions**

The purpose of this paper was to depict a model of the interrelationships of the ethical drivers of online instruction. An abbreviated case description of a small Midwestern college indicates that the implementation of online instruction does not occur in an ethical vacuum. Illustrations from the case descriptions illuminated a taxonomy of ethical drivers of online instruction. Three levels of ethical behavior were described, including **servicing the individual good, servicing the institutional good** and **servicing the common good**. Within those categories are described dichotomies, one side of the dichotomies describing high ethical behavior and the other describing low ethical behavior. A small set of questions based on the taxonomy was presented. It is suggested that these questions should be applied in the planning and implementation processes for online instruction. An institution that functions to a greater degree on the low ethical side may, in fact, become vulnerable, even financially.

Awareness of the ethical drivers of online instruction/information technology is critical within institutions. Max Weber once wrote “The task of the teacher is to serve the students with his knowledge and scientific experience and not imprint upon them his personal political views.” (Gerth and Mills, 1946). To paraphrase Weber, “The task of an institution is to serve the students with its knowledge and collective scientific experience and not impose upon them its personal and political agendas.” The taxonomy of ethical drivers may be one step toward that end with respect to the implementation of online instruction.

#### References

- Gerth, H.H. and C. Wright Mills (Translated and edited), from Max Weber: *Essays in Sociology*, pp. 129-156, New York: Oxford University Press, 1946.
- Good, Harry G. and James D. Teller, *A History of American Education*, Macmillan and Company, New York, 1973, p. 419.

## **Chart 1**

### **A Taxonomy of Ethical Drivers of Behavior and Online Instruction**

#### **1.0 Serving the individual good**

**1.1 Individual Good v. Personal Agenda**

**1.2 Individual Growth v. Personal Image**

**1.3 Individual Service v. Personal Legacy**

#### **2.0 Serving the institutional good**

**2.1 Institutional Good v. Institutional Agenda**

**2.2 Institutional Growth v. Institutional Image**

**2.3 Institutional Service v. Institutional Legacy**

#### **3.0 Serving the common good**

**3.1 Universal good v. Political agenda (advantage)**

**3.2 Universal state v. Political power (perpetual)**