

Policy Statement 89

This We Believe About Ethics in a Virtual Environment

A virtual environment is defined as a setting where users interact electronically for business, education, research, personal, and social purposes. Emerging technologies enable us to communicate globally with ever-increasing speed. Technology has profoundly affected all facets of life without a concurrent evolution of society's awareness of the moral and legal ramifications of unethical behavior in the virtual environment.

The Policies Commission for Business and Economic Education Policy Statement No. 51 (1992) stated that personal integrity, honesty, fairness, and respect for the rights of others are measures of ethical behavior. Ethics may be defined as a code of societal behavior—the principles of conduct governing an individual or a group and the specific methods for applying the principles.

We believe the ubiquitous nature of electronic and wireless communication necessitates the development and dissemination of a code of ethics for the virtual environment. This code should include personal/professional conduct and ethical issues for virtual and digital communities that arise from the use and misuse of the Internet and its resources.

We believe educators, students, administrators, and other stakeholders must share responsibility for ethical behavior in the virtual environment.

Educators

We believe educators must establish a climate or culture of ethical behavior by defining and explaining various ways in which unethical practices can occur. Educators should facilitate student involvement in virtual learning communities both within and beyond specific educational settings. Ethical challenges presented by the virtual environment require that educators give students the opportunities to think critically and engage in ethical reasoning and decision making.

We believe educators should incorporate opportunities throughout the curricula for learning about ethical issues in the virtual environment. These ethical issues may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- cheating
- copyright violation
- cyber bullying
- ghostwriting
- hacking
- hate speech
- inflammatory messages
- pharming
- phishing
- plagiarism
- self-misrepresentation
- sexting
- spamming

We believe an ethical virtual environment requires respect for all intellectual property. For example, digital writing is no different than academic writing; plagiarism and respect for copyright rules are equally significant in the virtual environment. Students often fail to make the connection between writing in academic and social environments. The ethical approach to writing in the virtual environment must parallel that in the academic setting.

We believe educators must establish a protocol for appropriate student behavior in the virtual environment. Best practice requires continuous educator engagement with students to develop ethical online practices.

We believe business teacher educators must ensure that teacher candidates possess the knowledge, skills, and attitudes or dispositions to promote ethical practices in the virtual environment.

Students

We believe students must be aware of acceptable-use standards and act responsibly when using the Internet. Students should be accountable for online ethical behaviors with regard to electronic communication, social networking, academic honesty, and civility. The perception of anonymity in the virtual environment may lead students to participate in cyber bullying, posting inflammatory messages, or using hate speech. This false perception may ultimately hurt others and lead to personal, financial, and/or legal difficulties.

We believe students should adhere to standards of academic honesty by respecting the intellectual property of all contributors and by applying copyright rules to the work they produce. Communication and interaction via the Internet provide opportunities for students to engage in privacy violation, ghostwriting, and self-misrepresentation. Cheating in any form is unacceptable regardless of the environment.

Administrators

We believe administrators must establish and maintain an institutional culture that demands appropriate ethical behavior by educators, students, and other stakeholders. The privacy and safety of virtual environment users requires the development and implementation of best practices and acceptable use policies. Appropriate monitoring of digital access is a necessity for fostering ethical citizenship in the virtual environment.

We believe administrators must stay abreast of current laws and regulations designed to safeguard the privacy of students, educators, and other stakeholders. Administrator support should include due process for ethics violations with appropriate corrective measures. Furthermore, administrators must systematically review and update policies and procedures governing digital communication.

Other Stakeholders

We believe parents, technology coordinators, librarians, and other community members have a responsibility to know and embrace acceptable-use policies that promote ethical behavior in the virtual environment. All stakeholders must be accountable for enforcing ethical behavior.

Conclusion

We believe ethics in the virtual environment requires

- learning about and practicing professional ethical behaviors
- implementing strategies to encourage all forms of academic honesty and ethical behavior
- monitoring, reporting, and correcting unethical conduct
- developing appropriate student behaviors
- developing student awareness of and responsibility for use of personal and institutional electronic assets
- updating policies and procedures in response to the dynamic nature of the virtual environment

Thus, **we believe** all educators, students, administrators, and other stakeholders must understand, maintain, and enforce ethical behavior in the virtual environment. To do otherwise is to shirk responsibility to current and future generations.