

Panel for IRMA 2000 - Ethical Issues in Cyber Teaching

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In the last few years, it has become increasingly common for academics in Universities and other institutions to offer their learning materials, either wholly or in part on the Internet. The extent of web-enablement varies from selected courses or course materials through to entire campuses or universities. Materials (slides, documents, video and audio files, quizzes and tests, hyperlinks to external sites, etc.) may either be publicly accessible, or be restricted to password holders. Whatever the case, the web dissemination of teaching/learning materials raises concerns about certain ethical standards and practices with respect to the overall web-enabled learning environment.

Two key components of our concern are accountability and Intellectual Property Rights (IPR). These two issues are closely linked, since different people are involved in creating material (instructors, guest speakers and perhaps students) with consequent duties of accountability for their work, and the same or other people could claim ownership rights of the material (creators, administrators, the institution itself). In our own experience, relatively little attention is paid to either IPR or accountability in the cyber teaching community, nor indeed is there much public debate or concern about this issue.

In this panel, we propose to explore the ethical issues, but principally accountability and IPR, from a number of different cultural viewpoints. The five panel members come from and have worked in countries from around the world, viz.: Brazil, Egypt, France, Hong Kong, India, Jordan, Norway, UK, USA. The very fact that there is little agreement on whether ethical standards should be universal or relative suggests that a panel discussion with members who have lived and worked in a variety of cultures should be a lively affair. The panelists will use a variety of techniques to introduce their views and experiences, including case studies, examples of local practice and culturally dis/approved behaviour and future trends given likely developments. This information should then be enhanced with participation from audience members from equally disparate backgrounds and origins. The key

objective of the panel is to encourage debate and discussion, thereby promoting understanding of the differences in ethical values that may exist.

By way of an example of the ethical dilemmas that instructors who web-enable their class materials may face, consider the issue of how materials should be controlled (if at all). Instructors, as regular University staff, might in some contexts be expected to cede IPR to the University, but should this apply to guest instructors or to students? If a dean, for example, decided to make a sample set of such materials available to an external entity, should he consult any of the involved creators? If he did not, would any of the affected stakeholders have any recourse to take action to protect their IPR? If web pages are, in the interests of convenience, not protected by a password, what would the situation be if an external entity repackaged and sold material without requesting permission? Indeed, who has authority to give permission? Who in a University would be authorised to take action in defence of copyright? Alternatively, if a complaint was made about the allegedly libellous content of materials posted on a web site, would accountability lie with the University (for staff), a guest instructor's employer or students themselves?

A number of challenges emerge from this example. How does one separate ethical or unethical activity from legal or illegal? What is legal in one jurisdiction may be illegal in another, while what is considered ethical in one culture may be considered unethical elsewhere. Notwithstanding this dilemma, in a more practical sense how does one provide for convenience of access while also protecting and controlling the ownership of materials? Furthermore, while creators of material have the right to protection of their copyright, they also have the duty to be responsible for their work. In this context, educational institutions need to consider their codes of ethics and practice with respect to web-based materials, while also acquainting themselves with local and international copyright laws.