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Unethical Behavior, Academic Misconduct, & Incivility:
Does it occur in Adult Education Classrooms?

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Abstract: The purpose of this research was to survey members of the CPAE listserv regarding personal experiences with ethical issues and dilemmas in the adult education classroom and to also obtain their perceptions of the most critical ethical issues adult educators encounter in the classroom.

Incidents of cheating, corruption, dishonesty, fraud, and ethical violations both in the workplace and in higher and professional education are pervasive and being increasingly reported in the mainstream media and via the internet. To some people, it may seem like everyone is cheating to get ahead in today's world. Callahan (2004, p.9) states, "Although it is well known that academic cheating by students has reached an all-time high, it's also true that parents and tutors and other adults are increasingly helping students do whatever it takes to get an edge in their high-stakes education careers." If adults are helping their children or other students to cheat, what does that say about the behavior of adults who enroll in our educational courses? Adult education much like higher and professional education would therefore seem to have its share of students and faculty who may be prone to dishonesty and commit acts of unethical behavior, academic misconduct or promote a climate of incivility. Callahan (2004) asserts that much of the cheating increase in America is related to issues of anxiety and insecurity in America. He declared that American values have changed since the 1970's; noting that we have become more selfish, more focused on money and being cutthroat. Callahan suggests colleges and universities should establish stronger honor codes with faculty making a commitment to teaching integrity.

Informally, many colleagues in the field of adult education discuss the problems of a market-driven, consumerist approach to adult education, and problems with issues of academic integrity and classroom behavior and expectations of students. Yet, there have been few empirical studies in adult education that have focused on hoe these important issues impact adult educators and the teaching and learning environment. As Brockett & Hiemstra (2004, p.4) assert "it is important to put ethical issues in adult education on the 'front burner' of discussions related to professional development for educators of adults." As adult educators we often must wrestle with ethical dilemmas and perhaps wonder if we are taking the most ethical or the easiest approach. How do we as adult educators maintain the highest ethical standards in and out of the classroom?

Theoretical Framework and Review of Relevant Literature

The theoretical framework for this study is rooted in the literature of ethics and education with a specific focus on the role of ethics as related to adult education. A review of the literature reveals that discussions of ethics in adult education have largely focused on two primary areas of concern: (1) establishment of a code of ethics for the profession (Gordon & Sork 2001; Hatcher & Storberg-Walker 2004; Sork & Welock 1992; Cunningham 1992; Connelly & Light 1991; Griffith 1991; Lawler 1996) and (2) the ethics of teaching and practice Caffarella 1988; Price 1997; Cervero & Wilson 1994; Wilson & Cervero 1996; Rose 1996; Sork 1988; Pratt 1998).

In order to truly understand the complexities of ethics and ethical dilemmas in adult education, a definition of ethics is warranted. Singarella & Sork (1983, p. 244.) noted, "ethics is the branch of philosophy which investigates that which is good, bad, right, wrong, morally

approved or disapproved within groups or cultures." Similarly, Brockett (1988, p.2) defines ethics as "a branch of philosophical inquiry that focuses upon moral questions…ethics refers to a set of beliefs that serve as guides to action." Many individuals rely on their personal sense of morals to guide their actions, while others may rely on their religious beliefs or professional experiences in their approach to ethical dilemmas and making ethical decisions (Rowland, 2008). Other professional groups such as health professions, business schools, and elementary and secondary education schools have codes of ethics that are designed to insure appropriate behavior and boundaries as a professional, yet what are the ethical tenants of adult education? Although the field of adult education may not have a professional code of ethics, we must also be mindful of the rules of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA).

Ethics and ethical dilemmas has been the subject of two studies in adult education that helped inform the current study on ethical dilemmas. McDonald and Wood (1993) surveyed 3 different groups of adult education practitioners in Indiana about ethical dilemmas they encountered in the classroom and perceptions and need for a codes of ethics for the field. McDonald and Wood found issues regarding confidentiality, specifically discussing student information with colleagues, other students and outside agencies was the most cited ethical dilemma facing the 3 groups. Following confidentiality the most cited ethical dilemmas were (in decreasing order of importance): 2) ownership of instructional materials, 3) employment practices, 4) conflicts of interests, 5) financial issues, 6) evaluating student performance, 7) enrollment and attendance issues, 8) professionalism and competence issues and 9) unsound program design.

Another important study related to ethical dilemmas in adult education was partially based on the McDonald and Wood (1993) study and was conducted by Gordon & Sork (2001) in British Columbia who also examined the need for a code of ethics but also the ethical issues and dilemmas adult educators experienced in their practice. Gordon & Sork found that the most cited ethical issue was also confidentiality and problems of giving out student information to others. The other most cited ethical dilemmas were (in decreasing order of importance): 2) student-faculty relationships, 3) financial issues, 4) professionalism issues, 5) conflicts of interests, 6) evaluating student performance, 7) ownership of instructional materials, 8) inter-organizational concerns, 9) credentials and 10) unsound training designs.

Academic Misconduct

An additional classroom issue that often creates ethical dilemmas for educators involves concerns related to academic integrity of students and faculty colleagues. Academic integrity and misconduct are widely discussed in the literature of higher education yet, it is almost non-existent in the adult education literature. It would appear this is not an issue of concern in adult education classrooms. It is understandable that there may be some reluctance to discuss these types of issues for fear of being perceived as weak or unable to manage these important issues. This reluctance could explain the paucity of literature on the subject in adult education.

Jocoy and DiBase (2006) investigated the prevalence of plagiarism, its detection and remediation among adult learners in an online certificate program in geographic information systems. Specifically, they looked for acts of copy & paste plagiarism, using detection devices as Turnitin.com and EVE (Essay Verification Engine). By using Turnitin.com, it was revealed 13 percent plagiarism while manually checking citations caught only 3 percent. They note instructors must be alert and check for plagiarism even among adult students. Another study examining concerns of academic integrity is by Gambescia (2007) who explored best practices in the handling of academic dishonesty issues with adult students. His study focused primarily on adult

students enrolled in continuing professional education. Gambescia found that there were significant gaps in students' knowledge, attitudes and experiences with issues of academic honesty. He contends that dealing with issues of academic honesty, is not about making more rules, but finding ways to "best articulate, educate and implement the spirit, and meaning of these policies to adult student groups" (p.54).

Incivility

Another area that raises ethical concerns involves issues working with difficult students and colleagues. The term "incivility or uncivil behavior has been defined by Feldman (2001, p.137) as "any action that interferes with a harmonious and cooperative learning atmosphere in the classroom." For example, making loud, sarcastic remarks, having emotional outbursts, or answering cell phones while in class may be indicative of uncivil behavior by students; yet, fast-paced instruction, indifferent remarks, and surprise tests are actions by instructors that students consider uncivil. Galbraith (2008) suggests three important ways for adult educators to respond to acts of incivility in the classroom. He suggest educators should, (1) stay calm, (2) do not sink to the level of the person who committed the uncivil act, and (3) respond immediately to the problem.

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to assess adult educator's personal experiences and concerns regarding ethical dilemmas encountered in the adult education classroom. The primary method of data collection was through a web-based survey to obtain information and perceptions from members of the Adult Education CPA-E listserv regarding ethical dilemmas facing today's adult educators in the classroom. A corresponding link to the survey web site was sent via email to the CPA-E listserv. Participants were asked to share one or two examples of ethical dilemmas they encountered. The types of issues and frequency of the issues are provided in the results section.

Findings and Discussion

A total of seventy-two adult educators responded to the online web survey. The participants included 44 females (62 percent) and 27(38 percent) male participants. The majority of the participants (61percent) had sixteen plus years of experience, while only (8 percent) had five years or less of experience. Of the total number of respondents, 28 percent had taken a formal ethics course as part of their adult education program.

A sample of respondent's comments to open-ended questions is presented below and where necessary were edited to protect confidentiality. Respondents were asked about important current ethical dilemmas graduate students and professors of adult education encounter. The most frequently cited ethical issue of importance among forty percent of respondents related to plagiarism and cheating issues of primarily students but also of faculty.

Most Important Ethical Issue
 Respond #   Comments:
  2   Plagiarism among students and faculty and stealing ideas and research from each other
        in the field is rampant
  12   Candidacy exams at the doctoral level seems to growing sites of plagiarism
  13   My biggest concern is Plagiarism
  19   Most students have NO CLUE as to the fact that their cheating behavior warrants
        expulsion or course failure
  26   Academic misconduct by students – plagiarism and equity in terms of admissions

standards and support

27   I feel that students do not have the time to do a good job and so they are looking for shortcuts… such as quoting someone and then not attributing that to a source

34   Cheating with technology is a problem. There is so much out there it is impossible to gage the work at times to determine if it is the student's original work or not

44   Plagiarism is a problem. Students are under a lot of pressure to fulfill roles of full time workers, head of household and student. Our electronic age makes it easy to borrow without recognition

56   There are problems with the ethics and honesty in research among faculty

66   I believe a student had someone else write most of her dissertation because the writing style was so uncharacteristic of her. How do I prove that?

However, one respondent did not view plagiarism or cheating as a significant problem and noted, "Cheating is the least of my concerns, although it does happen. To me, the most important problem is student confidentiality. It is so easy to talk with my colleagues and forget to delete [student's] names." Another respondent asked, "How do I discern unethical behavior and what are reasonable variations in ethical standards." Yet, one participant stated, "I'm not sure we spend time on ethics and codes of conduct-we assume students at the graduate level are aware of appropriate behavior." Other important ethical concerns of respondents included, 1) offering programs and courses for which the job market is uncertain, 2) influencing students to take courses they do not need, 3) the market-mentality of students and university administrators, 4) power relationships among students and faculty, 5) lack of commitment by adult educators to redress social injustices, 6) inappropriate classroom conduct and classroom management issues and 7) fair evaluation of students.

In addition, respondents were asked to share one or two examples of situations they have encountered in the past 12 months that created an ethical dilemma for them as an adult educator. One respondent noted, "I [a junior faculty member] was involved in a dispute among two senior colleagues over a power struggle. I did not handle it well."

Ethical Dilemmas

Respond #   Comments:

1   Students abuse deadline dates for assignment completion, in order to work the system

3   Handling student requests for letters of recommendation when you have doubts about their ability or suitability of the student for the program or position they are seeking

20   Students compare teaching skills of new and more seasoned faculty. Students show little tolerance for new faculty and want to remove new faculty from teaching. Should I support the new faculty or do I as the students' request, and report the faculty to upper administration?

32   Giving a student a grade he/she didn't deserve. Rampant grade inflation in dept

38   Pressured by a committee to pass a very deficient dissertation defense

47   Faculty starting a research project without completing an IRB. There are no rules on how to address this with faculty-only of a student

48   Knowing that a colleague did not follow university guidelines for doctoral exams

51   Supporting a faculty member for tenure who was not qualified

| 62 | Administrators overstepping their authority and avoiding due academic process
Constantly dealing with a faculty member who will do anything to get whatever he/she wants |
| 68 | Witnessing unprofessional treatment of students by professors |

There were a number of comments from respondents related to issues of race and gender. For example, there was talk of excluding one group from participation in discussions (a form of reverse discrimination); still others noted special challenges and concerns in working with students and faculty of diverse backgrounds. One respondent shared, "how do I talk about race and social justice issues in the classroom?" Another respondent shared a similar concern, "I think discussion of all social justice issues can lead to an ethical dilemma. Should I share my views on such issues as poverty, racism, power imbalances, or the war in Iraq?" Still, others expressed concerns regarding gender bias, power imbalances and issues of sexual harassment of students in adult education.

Incivility

Finally, participants were asked to discuss any other concerns of ethical dilemmas in adult education. Several comments were related to inappropriate classroom behavior. For example, one respondent noted, "I have had more than one example of students treating me with disrespect in the classroom; seems minor but pointing fingers, giving me dirty looks, speaking rudely." Another respondent shared a similar concern, "I have experienced non verbal hostile behavior by students, text messaging in class, rude commentary, and lack of response to questions asked in class."

Respond #   Comments:

2	Students will tell you, instructor 'A' told us this or that, not what you are telling us now. The instructor has no idea whether the student has misunderstood the previous instructor or whether this is an attempt by students to sow the "Seeds of Discontent" among Instructors.
5	Students asking questions in an angry tone in class
8	Chairs of committees who bully their grad students into a certain research direction, or other dissertation-related decisions. A my way, you don't graduate mentality
12	Students are lacking qualities such as integrity, respect and trust
15	I think there is often a lack of civility and/or tolerance displayed between students, also breaking confidentiality information on other faculty members
22	There is a considerable amount of power plays by faculty members in my department. I'm afraid to stand up to senior faculty members who have power over tenure. This makes it difficult to stand up to them about their inequitable practices
27	The way some colleagues communicate with students. It doesn't reflect our commitments as adult educators
30	Students who demand compensation because of receiving low grades
33	There have been several cases where I have felt students were basically trying to buy a degree. The work they produced was mediocre, just enough to get by. There was no personal commitment to excellence or to the field.
37	Lack of professional behavior and interpersonal respect among my colleagues
38	Faculty dating their students
49	Students who demand an incomplete in a course where there are no grounds for an incomplete in the course

67   Student commenting on the back of an Exam Paper about an essay question, stating "This is the stupidest question I have ever heard of"

Implications for Adult Education

The issues presented here demonstrate only a portion of the ethical issues of concern to adult educators. Many times an ethical dilemma may escalate into a legal issue. We are obligated to be professional at all times, especially in our communication with students and colleagues. In order to better understand how to manage and handle these issues, there must be an ongoing dialogue among faculty, administrators and graduate students interested in pursuing a career in academia, taking place regularly on what the important ethical issues. As revealed in this study, there is a need to educate and encourage junior and/or novice faculty as colleagues. Adult educators may want to consider holding an ethics summit or ethics pre-conference to better understand and manage the ongoing ethical issues in order to maintain the highest ethical standards.

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