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## Re-Conceptualizing Ethical Practices in Adult Education in Contemporary Society using an Ethics-Centered Practice

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### Abstract

This presentation will focus on re-conceptualizing and exploring ethical practices in adult education from the previous literature on ethics and developing an ethics-centered practice for modern adult education.

*Keywords:* ethics, adult learning, professionalism, graduate education

Ethics are essential elements for human beings to be able to coexist in society because a system of moral principles that determines right or wrong decisions drives our daily lives in numerous ways and eventually leads to societal moral principles. Ethics shape how we as human beings operate in various social contexts with the understanding of what we can and cannot do to sustain our civil society (Hatcher, 2002). In professional settings and workplaces, it is also important to maintain professionalism and an ability to evaluate appropriate and inappropriate conduct (Sam, 2021; Sekerka & Godwin, 2010). However, ethics and ethical decision-making processes often are very personal and subjective, and the individualist and capitalist society in the West does not often possess the same ethical codes of conduct in contemporary society because diverse perspectives are valued more than a monolithic perspective.

When addressing ethics and professionalism, there are two levels to consider, such as familial and educational perspectives, which can be contradictory and hold different values. Such contradictions cause people and society to undervalue ethics and moral education because individuals value their own perspectives more than outside perspectives. Similarly, when adult learners and professionals come to an educational setting, they bring not only their positionality but also their ethics and behaviors based on their values. Although educators of adults tend to create a safer and more inclusive learning environment for all their learners, they often encounter ethical issues with their students in that environment. However, ethics are necessities in democratic societies and globalization.

This paper will focus on educating adult professionals on ethics through formal education in post-baccalaureate settings. The purpose of this paper is to re-conceptualize ethical practices in adult education. The following questions will guide the development of the paper: 1) What are the ethical challenges of teaching ethics to professionals through formal education? and 2) How do adult educators develop ethics-centered learning environments for their adult learners? This paper will be based on the conventional and current literature on ethics in adult education, continuing education, continuing professional education, workplace education, human resource development, and organizational development to re-visit and re-conceptualize how ethics-centered learning can be fostered by adult educators.

Although there are many publications on ethics in formal and professional education including adult, higher, continuing, and professional education, this paper will focus on how to develop best practices on ethics through educating adults. Some of the implications for this ethics-centered practice in adult education include: 1) adult educators need to be able to address

ethics not only from their own perspectives but also from others' perspectives using relevant literature on ethics; 2) adult educators should be able to create a safer and more respectful environments so that they and their students are able to experience ethics and practice ethical decision-making skills 3) the ethics-centered practice would be an important part of professional standards and policies so that everyone in the profession can be on the same page as others; and 4) adult educators can be the leaders on ethics not only in the field of adult education but also in the other disciplines and ultimately in society. This paper will conclude with some strategies for adult educators who are interested in developing and creating ethics-centered environments for their adult learners.

### **Relevant Literature**

Adult learning practitioners are in a unique position to work closely with adult learners and have a real opportunity to impact their lives including educating and fostering professionalism and ethical behaviors (Alfred, 2002). However, there are no simple or static answers when discussing ethical decision making. The Ethical Decision Making (EDM) model by Brockett and Hiemstra (2004) connects the examination of personal values, obligations, and consequences in order to reach an ethical decision. In order to utilize the EDM model, an exploration of personal beliefs becomes necessary. From that exploration, individuals can make ethical or more sound decisions.

Kidder (2009) also recognizes that when adults make ethical decisions, they need to go through critical self-reflection processes. He emphasizes that reflective practices make adults scrutinize how they make their own decisions and how they do not make certain decisions. Ethical thinkers are those who agonize over decisions that non-ethical thinkers may overlook. When they realize their own ethical decision-making processes, they often encounter disorienting dilemmas. The decision-making process is grounded in considering what is consistent with personal value systems in diverse contexts; further, the intersection of personal value systems with professional, personal, or social contexts can create conflict in the decision-making process. To raise consciousness to matters of ethics is to also commit to practice ethics in daily life.

Kidder (2009) emphasizes the importance of ethical fitness, defined as the "capacity to recognize the nature of moral challenges and respond with a well-tuned conscience...and an ability to choose the right and live by it" (pp. 48). As adult learning educators engage with adult learners to facilitate learning about ethics and ethical practice, where does one begin? Do adult learners have a basic understanding of ethics from prior experiences or does this connection between ethics and practice remain unexplored?

Ethical thinkers are catalysts for change; however, the conversation surrounding ethical practice appears lacking or insufficient in adult learning literature (Brockett & Hiemstra, 2004; Kidder, 2009). Due to the social context of ethical practice, values may shift within the confines of individual value systems to consider varied cultural, political, or economic variables (Kidder, 2009). For instance, adult education practice among diverse or underrepresented populations must facilitate learning with consideration of the learners' cultural history and perspectives, power relationships, and social constructs that can impact a readiness for learning.

Liautaud (2021) brings the EDM model into a modern lens by discussing a four-question framework for ethical decision making. The first question in this framework requires individuals to identify their own guiding principles and ask a question like: "What are my guiding

principles?” (p. 24). According to Liautaud (2021), those guiding principles are a reflection of the individuals and how they are presented to others. This phase focuses on developing one’s ethical identities. Once an ethical identity is established, individuals are able to rely on their ethical identity to manage disorienting dilemmas.

The second question is, “Do I have the information I need to make this decision?” (Liautaud, 2021, p. 27). This question is related to assessing needs and resources to make ethical decisions. In this phase, individuals conduct a situation analysis to capture the overall picture in a particular context. The individuals seek to question if they are able to access information to be able to make ethical decisions. Also, individuals can identify overt and hidden barriers that impact their decision-making processes. The third question focuses on stakeholders who can be affected by the decisions. The question is, “Who or what stakeholders matter to my decision?” (Liautaud, 2021, p. 30). In this phase, individuals look for potential key players and gatekeepers who potentially impact the outcomes and decision-making processes.

The last question focuses on possible consequences caused by individuals’ own decisions and how the decisions impact others. The question is, “What are the potential consequences of my decision in the short, medium, and long term?” (Liautaud, 2021, p. 32). This phase also focuses on intended and unintended consequences from the decisions. Liautaud (2021) emphasizes that decision-makers need to be aware of potential positive or negative impacts from the decisions in various time frames.

Through this framework, a questioning of personal values and principles is the building block for the decision-making process, which is similar to Brockett and Hiemstra’s (2004) initial phase of decision-making. From that foundation, individuals can make more concise and ethical decisions. In ethical decision making, Liautaud (2021) also encourages individuals to analyze contexts and situations and consider if all of the information about the dilemma is available to make the most ethical decisions possible - causing the least harm and the most good.

### **Our Perspectives**

The authors of this paper (Mitsu and Patricia) have taught ethics and professional learning in graduate school for some time. From our teaching experiences, we found that it was often challenging to teach or educate about a code of ethics and professionalism since adult learners usually have their own professional experiences and develop their own ethics throughout their life experiences, that can become ingrained in a learner’s overall way of life and way of viewing the world. Here are our perspectives on teaching ethics and professionalism in adult classroom environments:

**Mitsu:** Understanding ethics is important for anyone who is working in professional settings because one’s professionalism comes from one’s ethical conduct and decision-making processes and is shaped by the organizational contexts including missions, visions, values, and goals. Also, one’s ethical behaviors are heavily influenced by their cultural and social contexts. So, when adult learners come to an educational context like graduate education where learners are gaining a deeper knowledge and a more complete understanding of theories and concepts based on research and applications, they bring their ethics into play as part of their positionality. Adult learners have their own systems of ethics that impact how they see and understand the world around them.

When discussing ethics and content that addresses diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in professional settings, learners often assume their own systems and codes of ethics are the only ones applicable and encounter disorienting dilemmas where their ubiquitous or prior understanding of DEI is no longer applicable because it challenges their own beliefs and presumptions. So, the role of adult educators can be as a facilitator who is empathic and respectful so that they can guide adult learners from liminal spaces to the next place or phase where they can have a better understanding of ethics and diverse ethical systems and can embrace those and their own conduct to be more inclusive so that they can make better and more ethical decisions.

**Patricia:** When discussing ethics and ethical practice with adult learners enrolled in a graduate course focused on ethical practice in adult learning environments, integrating the learners' life experiences into our discussions became a vital part of our learning process. I found that integrating the learners' experiences with ethical dilemmas facilitated a safe learning environment where critical reflection regarding personal value systems and what we think we know for certain could take place. The learning community began to consider what we thought we knew about ethics and what we were missing in our understanding of ethics and ethical practice.

There was a gap in understanding of a basic definition of ethics, along with a gap in understanding how to navigate ethical dilemmas in a professional environment when power relationships, positionality, and personal value systems intersect. When personal value systems clash with professional responsibilities, learners can struggle to navigate the ethical decision-making process. In this context, the adult educator can serve as a facilitator to establish an environment of mutual trust where learners can engage in open dialogue about real-life dilemmas and ethical decision-making.

### **Discussions and Implication: The Ethics-Centered Practice**

This paper has explored relevant literature on ethics and professionalism in adult education in addition to the authors' perspectives of and experiences teaching ethics and professionalism in adult education classrooms in graduate school. Teaching ethics is still challenging in contemporary society including higher education. One of the reasons why it is challenging to teach ethics to adults is because adults have their rich life experiences that have shaped how they think and how they behave from childhood to adulthood. When individuals accumulate experiences shaped by their cultural contexts, it is difficult to be critically reflective and deconstruct their conventional ethics and belief systems (Misawa, 2015). So, the role of adult educators and practitioners can be as facilitators or guides to foster critical self-reflective environments where learners are able to freely express their ideas, questions, and beliefs.

Adult educators and practitioners also need to understand that some of their learners can be in a liminal space where they are re-examining their conventional ethical and professional behaviors to reshape or re-build their behaviors to be more ethical and professional. Sometimes, they get lost in the liminal space because they get confused, frustrated, and emotional due to their transitional and transformative processes (Misawa, 2022). So, adult educators and practitioners can guide adult learners through the transformation and transition from liminal spaces to the next place or phase for a better understanding of ethics and professionalism. While adult educators and practitioners are creating such environments, they also need to consider how they can create and sustain safer and more respectful environments so that they and their learners are able to

experience mutually developed and understood ideas about ethics and professionalism and practice ethical decision-making skills. In such environments, adult educators and practitioners need to be empathic because they need to understand the vulnerability of their learners.

When addressing ethics and professionalism in education and training for adult learners, adult educators and practitioners can use an ethics-centered practice. The ethics-centered practice can be implemented in a mutually respectful and empathic learning environment to integrate critical self-reflection, learners' life experiences, and an understanding of contexts. When implementing the ethics-centered practice, adult educators and practitioners also need to be aware that they bring their own personal belief systems into the learning space and that they can display their own behaviors that were shaped by their personal life experiences into the learning environment (Halberstam, 1993; Misawa, 2017). So, it is important for adult educators and practitioners to have a clear definition of ethics through critical self-reflection and to gain awareness of how their value system could impact their teaching. By establishing and maintaining an awareness of personal ethics and how these may influence teaching and learning through the ethics-centered practice, adult educators and practitioners can better navigate discussions about ethics, ethical practice, and professionalism with adult learners without unconsciously influencing or infusing personal beliefs into the discussion.

The ethics-centered practice is also an important element of educating adults about ethics and professionalism at various levels including classrooms, institutions, and organizations. As stated above, it has increasingly become more difficult and challenging to teach ethics and ethical behaviors in professional settings due to putting value more on individual or micro level of diverse ideologies on ethics and ethical behaviors than institutional and organizational or meso and macro levels of understanding of ethics and ethical behaviors (Hansman, 2020; Misawa, 2022). Currently, there is not a lot of guidance available regarding clear ethical standards for practitioners of adult learning and some in the field are also resistant to having a policy or official code of ethics. While a policy or code of ethics may be unrealistic in terms of accommodating such a diverse field of practice, having a guide for ethics and professionalism in the field could facilitate growth and innovation. Ethical standards of practice within adult education could also serve as a foundation and facilitate the teaching of ethics and professionalism in the classroom to our adult learners.

### **Conclusion**

This paper explored ethics, professionalism, and ethical decision-making practices to re-conceptualize ethical practices in adult education. Based on the relevant literature, the authors argued that teaching ethics and professionalism increasingly became difficult and challenging in contemporary higher education and society at large. Ethics and professionalism can be viewed as a reflection of ourselves in terms of how we present ourselves to others and how we communicate with others. Ethics and professionalism are heavily influenced by sociocultural perspectives as to how we were raised and in what contexts we have been in as human beings. When addressing ethics and professionalism in adult learning environments, adult educators and practitioners should be able to implement the ethics-centered practice, which focuses on the intersectionality of critical self-reflection, life experiences of adults, and social contexts in a mutually respectful and empathic learning environment. In an increasingly globalized world, with new innovations in technology changing the way we live and work, using an ethics-centered approach to facilitation and practice in adult learning seems even more important to maintain the

integrity of the profession as well as to increase learners' understanding of the integral role of ethics within daily life, professionalism, and future opportunities.

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