

Ethics for Online Educators

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Introduction

The ranks of online educators are growing and changing. (Online educators are defined here as teachers or librarians who conduct formal academic courses in database searching, excluding trainers employed by search services or point-of-use reference instruction by reference librarians.) Online searching instruction has been a part of the curricula of graduate schools of library and information science for well over a decade (Harter and Fenichel). For the last six or so years the searching, selection, and evaluation of CD-ROM sources has joined online instruction. Now, as found in a 1989 survey by Tenopir, virtually all library schools offer their students instruction in online and CD-ROM searching.

More recently, other academic departments have added formal courses in how to conduct database searches. Williams and Hu found that a majority of law and medical schools, and many schools of business, offer formal instruction in online searching. They discovered that 11 percent of law schools offer a dedicated course in online, while 79 percent teach it as part of another course. These figures are 14 percent and 67 percent respectively for medical schools. Nineteen percent of business schools offer online as part of another course. The Academic Programs Director at DIALOG Information Services Inc. reports classroom instruction programs "in law schools, schools of nursing, journalism, departments of chemistry, virtually

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any academic subject." Corporate training centers such as Apple University also regularly teach online searching.

In addition, many school and academic librarians now conduct regularly scheduled formal searching classes. This instruction is reaching students all the way from elementary through high school, community college, undergraduate, and graduate programs. Special instructional programs such as DIALOG's Classmate or BRS/Educator target school library and undergraduate instruction, while DIALOG's Classroom Instruction Plan (CIP) and BRS/Instructor focus on graduate students.

The most popular online system for instructional use, DIALOG, has a total of more than 6,500 institutional instructional accounts. These break down to approximately 3,000 Classroom Instruction Plan accounts in colleges or universities and companies with formal training programs; approximately 2,800 Classmate accounts, primarily in elementary and high schools and community colleges; and about 700 Business Connection accounts. Other online systems that offer instructional accounts include Mead Data Central's LEXIS/NEXIS, Westlaw, Maxwell Online's BRS and ORBIT, WILSONLINE, Data-Star, National Library of Medicine's MEDLARS, Vu/TEXT, and OCLC's EPIC.

Instructioning students in the methods and characteristics of using what are, after all, commercial services introduces several ethical concerns. The most important of these are 1) compliance with system contract provisions, 2) choice of which products or services to use, 3) competence of the instructor on the various systems, and 4) the obligation of the instructor to instill a clear sense of ethical practices in students.

Contract Provisions

Most of the major online systems have special instructional accounts for formal course instruction. When a school, department, or library decides to teach a specific online system, it enters into a formal contract agreement with the online vendor. These contracts are governed by terms and conditions that may vary from system to system, but they contain guidelines for ethical use of the special instructional account.

One of the strictest instructions contracts is DIALOG's. Published "Guidelines for Use of Dialog's Classroom Instruction Program (CIP)" have three parts, all of which "must be met in order to qualify for CIP use." Participants must be affiliated with an accredited public or private educational institution, online use must take place in a supervised setting, and all use must be part of formal curriculum.

Specifically excluded from CIP use are "any personal use (i.e., non-curriculum related) by students, faculty, or administrators," "any administrative

or management use by students, faculty or administrators," "any non-curriculum related use such as library collection development, professional research, or recreational use," and "any use intended for resale or profit."

Most people sign a contract agreement and forget about it, but potential violations of that contract can happen almost every day. What does a school librarian do when the principal asks her to go online and research the latest administration issues? What about the colleague who asks to use the school's instructional account for a class she is taking, or faculty members who want to search their own research questions? How about the online instructor's temptations of using the inexpensive account for personal information needs?

Each of these uses is clearly a violation under the strict set of conditions required by some online systems. No one else is likely ever to know of the breach—no online police will arrest the instructor, and infrequent extra usage is not even likely to arouse any suspicions. Online educators may ask themselves which is less ethical—violating the letter of the agreement or turning down a colleague's information need? Or they may devise clever ways to stay within the letter of the law: asking students to search for the principal's request, for example, or using their own preparation and practice time to do some personal searches or searches for friends.

Not all systems have such rigid terms. Mead Data Central (MDC) allows faculty or students to use the instructional LEXIS, NEXIS, and MEDIS accounts for their research as well as for course assignments. The MDC "Statement of Terms and Responsibility for Access to the Educational LEXIS/NEXIS/MEDIS Services" reads, in part,

A user may use the Services solely for research purposes directly connected with the educational activities of his or her school. . . . The Services may be used for class preparation, for research on papers and projects for the School, for general research in connection with School classes, clinics or independent study courses, or for any other educational exercise directly connected with the School.

The MDC educational accounts may not be used for outside purposes such as practicing law, for example, or doing research for a client. "Use of, or assisting another in the use of, the Services to perform research for any purpose which is outside the scope of the educational activities of the School, whether or not remuneration to any party is involved, is unauthorized use."

There are three BRS instructional programs: BRS/Instructor, primarily for formal teaching at the graduate level; BRS/Educator, for use by anyone in a K-12 institution; and BRS/Colleague, for teaching searching to undergraduates, primarily in medical fields. The Instructor and Colleague passwords must be used in an educational institution and only with an instructor teaching students how to search. Further, BRS requests a course syllabus describing how the account will be used before it will issue a password,

although a spokesperson for BRS says "we tend to be rather flexible." Use is billed at a rate of \$17.00 per hour. The other program, BRS/Educator, has more liberal terms—it can be used by teachers, administrators, librarians, or students in elementary or high schools for teaching or for research. Educator provides a discounted hourly rate on many databases.

More relaxed terms make it easier to stay within both the letter and the spirit of the contract, but some practices are clearly in violation of all instructional use agreements. Using instructional accounts to do online legal research for a working lawyer who is preparing a case for trial would take business away from the full priced accounts and is therefore forbidden. Offering online searches either for a fee or for free to library users who are not in online classes must be done with full priced, not instructional, accounts. Setting up a search service or offering any searches for resale clearly goes far beyond the terms of instructional accounts.

Which System?

Recently, online and CD-ROM services have become more competitive as they have learned of the advantages of getting students accustomed to using their systems. If a student uses LEXIS or Westlaw all the way through law school, he or she will want to continue to use it as a lawyer. Library school students accustomed to searching Orbit or BRS will tend to rely on those systems as practicing librarians. Medical students who learn to access MEDLINE on NLN may favor that system over the many other ways to access MEDLINE. If the common wisdom is true that the first system learned is the one forever favored, online educators have a lifetime responsibility.

This awareness is leading to increased competition among online services to offer the best deal for educators. The standard for online system instructional accounts (outside of law schools) for more than a decade has been a bargain connect fee of about \$15/hour. Databases that may cost up to several hundred dollars on a regular account can all be accessed for this much lower rate by the student. Even at only \$15/hour schools have to monitor student use closely and restrict access after their budget limits are reached. Recently, even the reduced connect time rate has been waived by a new large online system for some prime customers. In 1991, DIALOG announced that ALA-accredited schools of library and information science would receive up to 120 percent of last year's DIALOG online use free of charge for the 1991-1992 school year. In 1992-1993 they have decided to provide unlimited free online time for these customers for use by students in a supervised setting.

Another company, OCLC, offers selected databases on its EPIC service free to library schools. If using Internet as an online network, schools have

unlimited free use of the OCLC Online Union Catalog, ERIC, GPO Monthly Catalog, and other forthcoming databases. In addition, practice versions of all EPIC databases are available without charge.

Mead, in an attempt to attract library schools in addition to its traditional law school market, offered selected ALA-accredited library schools temporary free passwords. After a semester of free use, the schools could choose to pay for an educational account. Educational customers of MDC can choose an hourly rate of \$15 per connect hour or a monthly flat unlimited use rate of just over \$100/month per password.

In the CD-ROM world many vendors offer library schools free products. The H.W. Wilson Company was the first to offer all ALA-accredited library schools a CD-ROM workstation and selected CD databases to run on it. Information Access Company announced in 1992 that it will provide any of its CD-ROM databases to library schools that request them. And DIALOG now provides up to three full CD-ROM databases free of charge for a year to library schools in addition to up to ten copies of the Ondisc Discovery CD-ROM practice database.

Low cost and free use are powerful draws for online educators. They mean instruction can improve, students will become much better searchers through unlimited practice time, and budget worries do not have to get in the way of instructional concerns. Most educators do not feel it violates ethical principles to accept free products or services for educational use, especially when these products or services would be taught (less effectively) even with a charge attached. The ethical dilemma arises when an instructor chooses which online system to teach based solely on which system gives the school the best deal.

If important chemistry databases are available only on STN International, is it ethical for chemistry instructors to teach only DIALOG because it has a better online rate? If a library school gets free use of NEXIS, EPIC, and DIALOG, is it right to ignore other systems such as BRS and Orbit which are also used frequently in libraries? If a nursing school or medical reference class teaches only a local implementation of the MEDLINE database because it is available free via their online public access system, does that justify ignoring the many other valuable medical databases that can be accessed on NLM Medlars online or on BRS? If a vendor promises free CD-ROM products, workstations, posters, online documentation and other freebies it may be viewed as influencing the decision of which online system to teach. Not many instructors resist the lure of free materials for students, especially in times of tight budgets.

Accepting such gifts is not necessarily unethical. When gifts come from the vendors with no strings attached, when they are presented by instructors to students with explanations of how these products compare with the competition, and when their use enhances the learning process, most

instructors would agree that ethical principles are not violated. As long as decisions of which online systems to teach are balanced with what is best for the students and what materials are readily available, most educators feel comfortable accepting such gifts for their students. The decisions must be made independently, however, without undue influence from the commercial systems.

The line between economical and ethical practices is a fine one, but clearly, providing the highest quality education possible is the responsibility of any instructor. Perhaps the safest route is to offer instruction to a variety of systems. This may go beyond the issue of what systems are selected, to the competence of the instructor.

Instructor's Competence

Online instructors in any field may have little actual practical experience with the online systems they are teaching to students. By teaching we represent ourselves as experts and have an ethical obligation to substantiate that claim with competence. One vendor (who shall remain anonymous) told me that vendors sometimes get complaints from library students about instruction by professors who know little about the system they teach or who have not kept up with system changes. If library school faculty do not keep up, how can we expect faculty from subject disciplines where online is less integral to the curriculum to be aware of changes in information systems?

Online educators from any sector have an ethical obligation to keep up with the characteristics and developments of the systems they teach. This may be difficult to balance with the goal of offering exposure to a variety of online vendors. Systems that offer free training classes or instructional materials make it easier for instructors to maintain a level of competence. Refusing these offers on ethical grounds may be less ethical than accepting them and improving teaching skills. Even if the instruction is not free, educators have an obligation to seek continuing education opportunities to improve their searching skills.

Instilling a Sense of Ethical Behavior

The ultimate responsibility of the online educator is to instill a responsible sense of ethical behavior in each student. Many students of online searching are learning a skill that they will put into direct use in their careers. Most of these are taught in academic departments or disciplines with codes of ethics that guide professional practice. Often they are in

professional schools that are governed by codes specific to that profession. For example, there are codes of professional ethics for librarians, physicians, lawyers, accountants, journalists, nurses, etc. (Clapp). Professors in any subject discipline are guided by the American Association of University Professors' "Statement on Professional Ethics."

These all tend to be general ethical guidelines. Finks reported that John Bekker found that professional codes of ethics all included certain broad categories in common, providing guidelines on the essence of the profession (including function and purpose), maintaining confidential information, avoiding extraoccupational activities that impair practitioners' work, the necessity of continuing education, doing and sharing research, fostering occupational development, holding membership in occupational associations, requiring peer group control over conduct, and supporting any special issues that apply particularly to that profession.

The ALA "Statement on Professional Ethics, 1981," for example, includes several points that pertain to ethical delivery of any kind of information services, including online search services. A part of every online searching instruction in a school of library and information studies should include discussion on interpreting how librarians "have a special obligation to ensure the free flow of information and ideas" and how that can coexist with fee-based online search services. Instructors and future librarians alike should take to heart the admonition that "[librarians] have obligations for maintaining the highest level of . . . competence." Online searching provides many opportunities for violating the code's third point: "librarians must protect each user's right to privacy with respect to information sought or received." Free products or premiums from vendors, when offered to an individual rather than an institution, may violate point six: "Librarians must avoid situations in which personal interests might be served or financial benefits gained at the expense of library users, colleagues, or the employing institution."

A code of ethics for online practitioners has been proposed by Shaver, Hewison, and Wykoff to supplement the general ALA code of practice for searcher librarians, but also to serve intermediary online searchers who are not librarians. The proposed guidelines for ethical conduct of online searchers cover nine points. The online searcher

1. "has an obligation to his or her institution and to the user to maintain awareness of the range of information resources available in order to fairly and impartially advise the client,"
2. "must strive to maintain a reasonable skill level in the systems available for searching,"
3. "must eschew bias in the selection of appropriate databases and systems,"
4. "must make the client aware of the searcher's level of expertise in searching a given database or system if that may affect search results,"

5. "should be aware of the level of confidentiality required by both the setting and the request, and he or she should respect those boundaries,"
6. "must make clear the appropriateness of the online search in meeting the client's needs and the limitations of the search process for the client's intentions,"
7. "must guard against tendencies to fill the client's needs as the searcher sees them or as the client initially states them, but rather must utilize appropriate interview techniques to ascertain the client's needs,"
8. "must, if appropriate, apprise the client of major errors in previous searches, both in strategy formulation and database selection,"
9. "must resist attempts by the client to select inappropriate databases and/or systems" (244-245).

Although never officially adopted, this proposed code of ethics for intermediaries contains valuable guidelines for online educators and for educators to convey to future online intermediaries.

School and undergraduate librarians have a broader and even more difficult mission. Their students may not be immediately entering a profession with a specific code of ethics to guide their use of online sources. Many of them are unaware of or unconcerned about issues such as copyright or plagiarism, even with print sources. Reichel describes the importance of covering these issues in any kind of bibliographic instruction. Downloading of online search results makes it easier both to violate copyright laws and to commit plagiarism.

When students see an instructor doing widespread copying of copyrighted software, they get the message that it is all right because no one gets caught. When students are taught the mechanics of how to download search results (an easy procedure with most telecommunication software) without discussing when it is permissible, they erroneously believe it is always acceptable. Database and software copyright statements and system or database statements of "terms and conditions" should be examined and discussed in all online searching classes at any grade level.

The unique environment of online access via telecommunication networks introduces the possibility of illegal entry into other unauthorized systems (hacking) as well. Responsible use of online passwords, access only to authorized online hosts, and the responsibility of each individual online user are important parts of ethical online education. Online educators should be turning out a generation of skilled, information-literate online users, not a generation of savvy hackers.

Conclusions

It is not difficult to teach *how* to conduct online searches. The ins and outs of system commands, how to interact with telecommunication software,

database structure, and database content form the basis of most online searching classes. These are the easy things to teach. Online educators must teach the less clear-cut issues as well, focusing on the ethical use of electronic resources.

Ethics for the online educator may be even more difficult. No one monitors educators except their own internal sense of right and wrong. Following the agreed-to terms of system contracts, selecting the most appropriate systems for students, keeping up to date with system features, and instilling ethical behavior in students are at the core of ethics for online educators.

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