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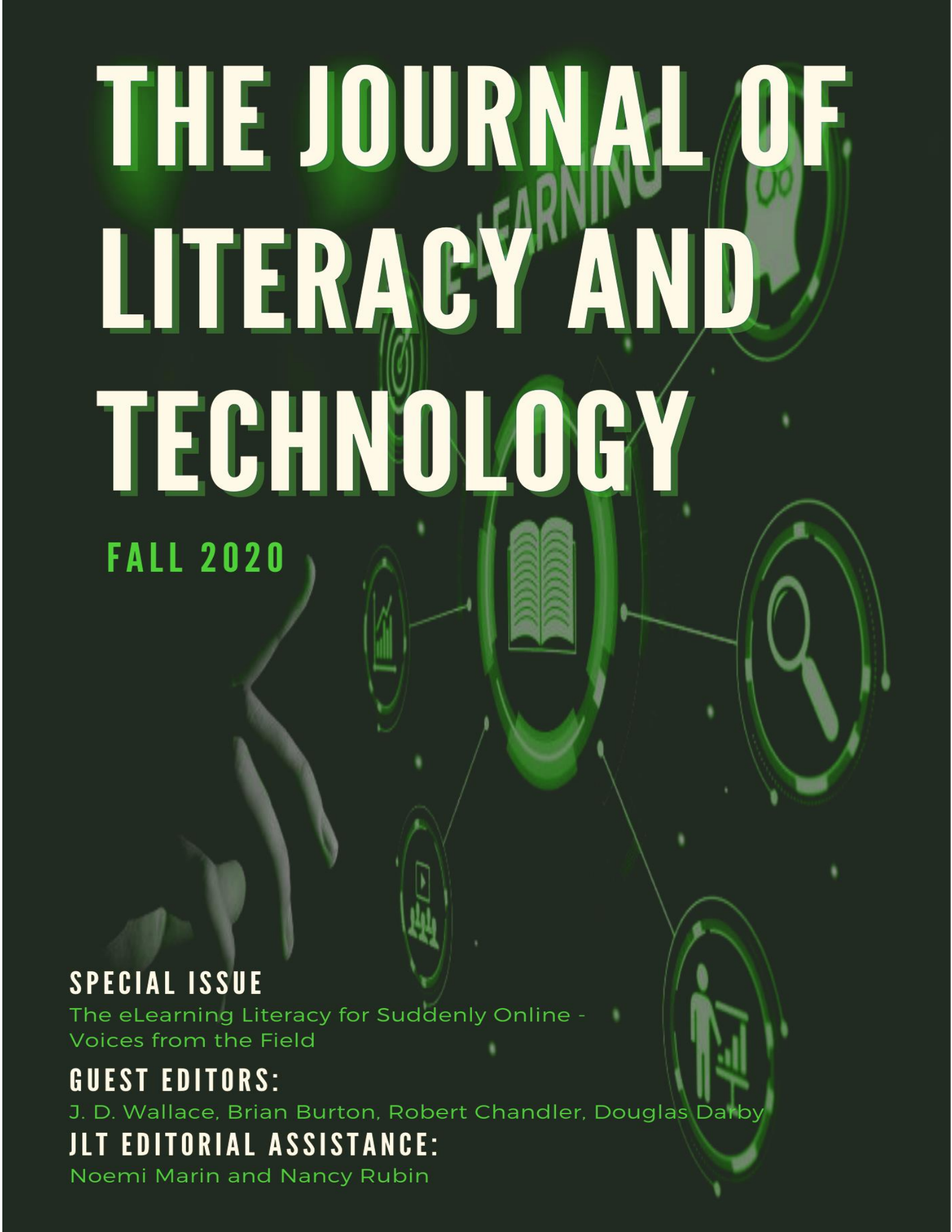

SPECIAL ISSUE

The eLearning Literacy for Suddenly Online - Voices from the Field

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Credo for Ethical Distance Learning

Article Info

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Abstract

This qualitative study provides a student & faculty driven ethical credo that can be used to promote a successful learning community within the digital classroom. The first phase of the research focuses on students' experience as online learners. Through surveys and discussion boards, a thematic analysis is used to create core ethical principles and associated behaviors found to promote virtual community and learning. The results are experience-based insights encapsulated in the Credo for Ethical Distance Learning. The credo includes a preamble and five core principles with practical, supporting student behaviors for each principle. The second phase of this research extends the Credo for Ethical Distance Learning to the instructors' experiences in teaching online. Using focus groups and surveys, faculty perspectives were used to create the Credo for Ethical Distance Learning: Faculty Implications. The results of both research phases serve a dual purpose. The first purpose is to provide strategies that will help develop interactive online learning environments. The second is that the credo will promote awareness about communication ethics and its impact on virtual learning.

Charron, L. J. N. and Fuss-Reineck, M. (2020). Credo for ethical distance learning. *Journal of Literacy and Technology*, *21* (3), 14-28.

"In an increasingly technological world, the primary purpose of higher education has to be helping humans get better at being human…" (Bass, 2018)

When 1.2 billion students across the world were moved out of face-to-face classrooms due to the COVID-19 crisis (Li & Lalani, 2020), most faculty had to meet the new challenges of online teaching. Educators encountered the responsibility of engaging learners in an online format while continuing to build the learning community that began developing face-to-face. When doing so, instructors were met with behaviors that would not have been common in the traditional classroom. These class behaviors (i.e. Zoom meetings) may have included students' passive stares that resembled television viewing, a student playing a video game while pretending to listen, minimal discussion board responses, and/or sliding slowly off a chair to get out of camera view. Of course, these are the mildly annoying or amusing behaviors, but they do hint at a mitigating factor to student online learning - student passivity. Let's face it, these behaviors don't happen as frequently in the traditional, face-to-face classroom. If they do occur, instructors can more rapidly intervene.

The student-switch from being a *contributing* member of a class in the face-to-face classroom to being an *observing* member of an online class is a concern for educators (Peled et al., 2020). In research that focuses on students' and instructors' perceptions, Gomez-Rey, Barberaa and Fernández-Navarrob (2016) report that faculty and students focus on different course components when evaluating their satisfaction with the course. The instructors focused on the importance of collaborative learning, whereas the students were more concerned "with their own learning benefits," which included course aspects such as knowledge acquisition, transference of information, and learner content (p. 146). This subtle yet significant differentiation is important when trying to encourage students to develop an active and cooperative learning community.

This research seeks to address the need for purposeful engagement within the virtual classroom. It does so by articulating effective classroom behaviors and their ethical underpinnings. Faculty and students are thereby better able to understand how their behaviors impact the learning environment and why those behaviors matter. This paper will first review the literature regarding the importance of student interaction in online learning, followed by the importance of acknowledging ethics within distance education. Next, the study's research methods will be discussed, followed by the resulting Credo for Ethical Distance Learning and the Credo for Ethical Distance Learning: Faculty Implications.

Importance of Student-to-Student Interaction in Distance learning

The seminal works of online pedagogy are saturated with research regarding the importance of creating cooperative learning[1] environments to student learning. Using the American Association for Higher Education's "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education" (Chickering & Gamson, 1999), online education was evaluated for its support of undergraduate education. Of the seven principles, the most perplexing to online

[1] It should be noted that "collaborative" and "cooperative" learning was often used interchangeably in earlier research. For more insights, read McInnerney & Roberts (2009).

instructors are principles two and three, which promote the importance of creating a cooperative learning environment. Principle 2 states, "Good practice develops reciprocity and cooperation among students." Principle 3 states, "Good practice uses active learning techniques." In addition, Hiltz (1994) suggests that the most important characteristic for online education is to create a collaborative learning environment. Hiltz writes, "Learning outcomes in the [virtual classroom] depend on whether or not teachers and students take advantage of its potential to support an active learning process that incorporates extensive interaction among students, and between instructor and students" (p. 194). Hiltz also states,

> CMC [computer mediated communication] is particularly suited to the implementation of collaborative learning strategies or approaches. Collaborative learning means that knowledge is not something that is 'delivered' to students, but rather something that emerges from active dialogue among those who seek to understand and apply concepts and techniques (p. 23)...In the traditional classroom, it is unusual to find emphasized student-student interaction. Ironically it is student-student interaction that may be the more important determinant of education success' (Harasim & Johnson, 1986) as opposed to 'teacher-student' interaction (Hiltz, 1992, p. 194).

More recent research expands the importance of cooperative learning in building a healthy learning climate and learning retention (Flock, 2020; Gray & DiLoreto, 2016; Abel, 2005). Research regarding "best practices" for online courses also indicates the importance of student interaction. Grant and Thornton (2007) list "interactivity or interconnectivity" as one of their three themes within best practices for online instruction. Keengwe and Kidd (2010) suggest that online instruction should include a "social role" which is "creating a friendly social environment necessary for online learning" (p. 536). Research by Evans, Ward and Reeves (2017) found that the most commonly used indicators used to describe best practices' online instructor behaviors were "encouraging, acknowledging or reinforcing student contributions" which was part of the "affect" component of the three instructional categories (p. 776). Kumar, Martin, Budhrani, and Ritzhaup (2019) indicate that exemplar instructors go beyond knowing the content and feeling stifled by the online format to feeling comfortable and freed by it. Borup, West, and Graham (2012) pointed out that excellent online teachers increase student engagement and a social presence.

Research on "social presence" also indicates the importance of student-to-student interaction. Cobb (2009) defines social presence as "the degree to which a person is perceived as 'real' in mediated communication (p. 241). Social presence increases student satisfaction (Joo, Lim & Kim, 2011; Richardson & Swan, 2003), the development of an online learning community (McInnerney & Roberts, 2009), and student achievement (Russo & Benson, 2005). Additionally, Sung and Mayer (2012) submit that social presence fosters the development of social respect, social sharing, intimacy (e.g., sharing personal experiences), open mindedness, and social identity (In Gomez et. al, 2016, p. 155).

To summarize, the research is clear; creating online courses that encourage students to engage with one another through

cooperative learning, or any type of "social presence," is paramount to student learning.

Importance of Student Awareness of Ethics in Distance Learning

The communication ethics inherent to classroom behaviors are not always articulated in the online classroom platform (or the traditional classroom, for that matter.) In Kenneth Andersen's (2000) article, "Developments in Communication Ethics: The Ethics Commission, Code of Professional Responsibilities, Credo for Ethical Communication," he points out,

> Typically, ethical concerns [in the communication classroom] dealt with violations of prevailing ethical norms related to plagiarism, appropriateness of content, and the impact of the perceived ethical violations on communication effectiveness. Students taking courses in these departments often did not become fully aware of the significant role that ethical issues play in the communication process. They were not exposed to or required to know a code of ethical communication behavior (p. 131).

Andersen's comments of the "typical ethical concerns" are exemplified in Coleman's (2011) article entitled, "Ethics, Online Learning and Stakeholder Responsibility for a Code of Conduct in Higher Education" in which the author discusses plagiarism, cheating, and other violations. These are important issues to be addressed but they do not get to the *heart* of student interaction. Students need the "why" behind the behaviors they are asked to engage in with one another. It is essential that they understand the ethical implications of their actions. Zembylas and Vrasidas (2005) discuss this ethical "why" by applying the philosophy of Levinas. They state,

> Levinas's concern with *relationality* as an event that cannot be subsumed under the nature of existence — that is, knowing who we are does not necessarily assume that we know how to relate to others in an ethical manner, nor vice versa — is a useful starting point for problematizing pedagogical relations over the Internet… An ethical orientation in online education requires that we take seriously the unknowable and irreducible Other (p. 62).

The Credo for Ethical Distance Learning reminds students of not only the ethical considerations of the *content* of their communication, but also the ethical considerations of the *process* of their educational experience.

Giorgini, Mecca, Gibson, and other authors (2015) summarize the reasons for creating professional codes of ethics: To create consistent normative standards, avoid legal issues, promote public image, maintain a high standard of conduct, address prevalent ethical issues, assure outside parties of ethical behavior, mediating disputes, and asking individuals to question their present values (p. 124). Using a code of ethics, or the less formulaic term "credo of ethics", has advantages and disadvantages. According to Jensen (2013) the process of creating a code of ethics can be helpful in solidifying a group or organization's beliefs and *in making their goals more explicit* [emphasis added]. A code of ethic can help to guide behavior and foster ethical decision-making. Jensen states that, "Codes may encourage members of a group not only to do or to avoid doing certain things, but also to be living examples of highly ethical people, contributing positively to the organization and to the general public" (p. 25).

The shortcomings of codes of ethics are often directed toward their lack of

effectiveness in changing behavior or toward the vague construction, rendering it meaningless. Codes may also be easily forgotten, can be difficult to enforce, and can sometimes be used to cover up or confuse ethical issues arising from "outsiders" (Jensen, 2013; Johannesen, 2008). To help reduce these problems, experts (Giorgini et.al, 2015; Johannesen, 2008; and Kultgen, 1983) suggest that the following guidelines be used when developing a code of ethics:

- Use clear, short language.
- Speak to specific concerns of a particular profession or business.
- Make it appropriate and applicable for "real" people to use during "normal" times.
- Indicate the moral principles on which the code is founded.
- Use guidelines and explanations when needed.

The Credo for Ethical Distance Learning was written with the above guidelines in mind. The credo intersects communication ethics (mass media and interpersonal) and effective educational practices in its application. To be effectively used, the credo should not be rigidly enforced by instructors. Research suggests that punitive, law governed codes of ethics, create dissension and resistance (Andersen, 2000). The suggested use is that professors clarify expectations and reasons for ethical online behavior by sharing the credo and opening it up to discussion and personalized revisions.

Method

Phase 1: Student Perspective

The data were gathered from students enrolled in an online degree completion program at a mid-western university. The program uses a cohort model and begins with a one-week face-to-face residency on campus. After the residency, the cohort meets online once per week in a virtual classroom. The rest of the week, the students interact with one another and their instructors through discussion boards.

For this research, students (Cohorts B002 – B006) were asked specific questions within their discussion board assignments regarding the ethical nature of communication within the distance learning community. First, the questions asked for an application of the National Communication Association's Credo for Ethical Communication to online learning. Subsequent discussion board prompts focused on their own ethical values related to virtual learning.

The researchers then analyzed the students' discussion board responses for themes, discussed their analysis, and constructed "working" categories for the ethical credo. Students (B002 – B006) were asked to respond to the categories. After analyzing those responses and re-analyzing discussion board data, five principles emerged from students' statements that created the Credo for Ethical Distance Learning. The construction of the credo and its behaviors continued to be edited and discussed by researchers and students until consensus was reached. Students in subsequent cohorts (B007 & B009) were asked to respond to the Credo for Ethical Distance Learning using discussion boards; focus groups and interviews (M021, M023 & B015).

The sample consist of 86 students enrolled in 7 distance education cohorts: B002 (n=9) started the credo, B003 – B006 (total n = 38) added to B002's previous collected ideas, and B007 (n =10) & B009 (n = 8) responded to directly to the Ethical Credo for Online Classes. In addition, there were three focus group interviews: two M.A. online cohorts, M021 (n = 11) & M023 (n = 8); and a B.A. online cohort, B015 (n = 10).

Phase 2: Instructor Perspective

The "Implication for Instructors" was created using survey and focus group data gathered from instructors currently teaching online classes at a mid-western university. The survey and interview questions focused on two research inquiries: 1. Faculty feedback regarding The Credo for Ethical Distance Learning, and 2. Faculty behaviors that facilitate the credo's principles. Based on their feedback, researchers created additions to and deletions from the credo and its instructor implications. The result is the "faculty actions" of the Credo for Ethical Distance Learning: Implications for Instructors.

The sample consisted of ten instructor survey respondents and six faculty who participated in an online focus group interview (total n = 16).

Results

The research resulted in five ethical principles that undergird effective online learning behaviors:

Principle 1: Members of online classes strive for clear communication and understanding.

Principle 2: Members of online classes demonstrate integrity, showing respect for themselves.

Principle 3: Members of online classes practice respect for others.

Principle 4: Members of online classes foster honesty and trust in their communication.

Principle 5: Members of online classes participate responsibly as a community of learners.

These five principles provide an ethical context for behaviors that promote distance learning. Principle 1, "members of online classes strive for clear communication and understanding," lays a foundation of clarity. Without this foundation, the other principles would be difficult to enact. Principles 2 & 3 build on that foundation by establishing a culture of respect. Principle 2, "members of online classes demonstrate integrity, showing respect for themselves," focuses on speaking up for oneself and taking responsibility for one's own actions. Principle 3, "members of online classes practice respect for others," shifts the focus to respectful behaviors toward classmates and the instructor. Principle 4 builds on that respect and addresses specific, relational communication. It states, "Members of online classes foster honesty and trust in their communication." When members are striving for understanding and have fostered a respectful classroom (Principles 1 - 3), students are more likely to engage in honest dialogue and are more apt to trust one another - which will foster learning. Principle 5 is the culmination of the other principles in that it acknowledges the "whole" - the learning environment. It states, "members of online classes participate responsibly as a community of learners." This principle promotes the "big picture" perspective of learning as a community.

The following are the five principles and their supporting behaviors of the Credo for Ethical Distance Learning.

Phase 1 Results: Credo for Ethical Distance Learning

Principle 1: Members of online classes strive for clear communication and understanding.

Individual Actions:

- I ask if I don't understand.
- I attempt to clarify if I think someone doesn't understand.
- I listen to others so that I understand their viewpoints.
- I participate in and facilitate effective communication in the cohort, recognizing that all have a right to equal access to information and to give information.
- I adjust my communication to address online challenges for clarity and understanding.
- I frequently re-read the learning goals for each course.

Principle 2: Members of online classes demonstrate integrity, showing respect for themselves.

Individual Actions:

- I express myself so that my voice is heard.
- I accept responsibility for my own choices and ideas.
- I motivate myself to stay focused on my educational goals.
- I truthfully present my own "voice," citing sources when the words I use are not my own.
- I refrain from negative self-talk.

Principle 3: Members of online classes practice respect for others.

Individual Actions:

- I demonstrate respect for other voices and support their self-expression.
- I communicate respect for individual differences.
- I treat others fairly, avoiding manipulation or degradation.
- I acknowledge the fact that each cohort member has different relational needs.
- I respect my cohort members' privacy.
- I choose words that facilitate learning and that will not distract my classmates
- I respect the boundaries of the learning group and keep my personal issues separate from the group's issues.

Principle 4: Members of online classes foster honesty and trust in their communication.

Individual Actions:

- I am straightforward with others and avoid hidden agendas.
- I state my ideas and feelings honestly and openly within the group when appropriate and encourage others to do the same.
- I communicate concerns directly to the person involved (peers and instructors) when I have a problem or conflict.
- I uphold confidentiality.

Principle 5: Members of online classes participate responsibly as a community of learners.

Individual Actions:

- I contribute to the effective functioning of my learning group, recognizing the group's contribution to learning.
- I support effective conflict resolution among group members.
- I uphold my commitments to the community of learners (responding promptly, completing assignments, and contributing to group work).
- I strive for excellence because others depend on me.
- I recognize my responsibility to give input and let others learn from me.
- I learn from others and acknowledge value in their experience.
- I expect dialogue and feedback in processing my ideas and respond openly to it.
- I respond appropriately to my colleagues, engaging in professional, empowering dialogue.
- I recognize that the instructor is a part of the "community of learners."

Phase 2 Results:

Phase 1 of this research identified key ethical aspects of the online course as identified by distance education students and faculty. Phase 2 provides specific instructional suggestions for each of the principles presented in the Credo for Ethical Distance Learning.

Credo for Ethical Distance Learning: Faculty Implications

The Credo for Ethical Distance Learning provides a framework for faculty to explicitly enact the credo's principles, indeed the "Credo for Ethical Distance Learning: Faculty Implications was created for this purpose. The following "Faculty Actions" are designed to operationalize the inherent ethical values that promote student learning and faculty intent within the distant learning classroom. To do so, specific faculty behaviors are provided to support each of the credo's five principles.

Principle 1: Members of online classes strive for clear communication and understanding.

Principle 1 prompts faculty to promote clarity of information and processes. In doing so, student uncertainty will be reduced, and retention facilitated.

Faculty Actions:

- Address the challenges of the online communication directly with students.
- Create instructor videos every week to keep a visual connection with students.
- Remind the class that humor, and sarcasm can be easily misunderstood online.
- Create a culture where stopping for clarification is ok – have a shared "short cut" or emoji to show you are confused.
- Write your syllabus, assignments, and directions with extreme clarity and specificity.
- Be sure everyone is ready for the next question or discussion with a "short cut" (i.e. thumbs-up emoji).
- Paraphrase students' comments, using their names in the conversation – encourage students to do the same.
- Be sure to have accurate and up-to-date email addresses, phone numbers, and fax numbers.
- Review recorded class sessions to discover quieter voices or discussions that got ignored and send class feedback

about your observations (without embarrassing use of names.)

- If students do not understand the material, follow up with one-on-one phone call or virtual meeting.
- Provide detailed reminders or checklists that specify the exact time and date of each assignment deadline.
- In the syllabus, explain the role of each of the instructional tools used in the class (i.e. bulletin board, group meetings, learning apps, etc.)

Principle 2: Members of online classes demonstrate integrity, showing respect for themselves.

Principle 2 prompts faculty to encourage students' academic honesty and personal empowerment. Sometimes, the online venue is just what some students need to discover their own voice.

Faculty Actions:

- Draw out introverts or students who have high communication apprehension – especially if they seem to be struggling to enter the conversation.
- Allow for contemplation with the use of silence during synchronous class time.
- Periodically ask students what they are each doing to help motivate themselves to stay connected with the course.
- At the beginning of a synchronous meeting, ask a question that will create the opportunity for each person to answer.
- Provide opportunities for students to set and meet their own goals.
- If a student gets ignored or interrupted, bring the conversation back to that person.
- Allow students to experience the consequences of their own choices.

Principle 3: Members of online classes practice respect for others.

Principle 3 prompts faculty to facilitate civil dialogue in a manner that seeks understanding and promotes diversity of thought. In doing so, the classroom becomes a playground of brilliant ideas, new discoveries, and courageous convictions.

Faculty Actions:

- Create various ways in which students can voice their ideas and reactions to other's ideas.
- (Bulletin boards or video apps are excellent for this activity.)
- Greet students by name as they come into class.
- When asking students to critique their classmates, be clear as to what criteria they are to use for that assessment.
- Deactivate private messages between students when appropriate during synchronous meetings.
- Model respect for individual opinions while encouraging that those opinions be supported by sound reasoning.
- Help students monitor their own participation so that they do not block or monopolize others.
- Privately message students in synchronous classes if their discussion of personal issues is disrupting the education of the others.
- Make grading criteria clear and fair, taking heed to incorporate a number of different learning styles in assessment.

- Shut down derogatory comments or any other communication that degrades you or class members.
- Be cognizant that each student has different relational needs and of those individuals who seem to be socially isolated from the class. Those students may be more of a retention risk.
- If students participate in a residency, recognize and plan that some members may not want to develop close relationships with their peers.
- Do not disclose any personal information without the permission of the student and encourage others to respect privacy as well.
- If your university does not password-protect meetings, periodically remind students that their discussion is widely accessible and to use discretion regarding personal information.

Principle 4: Members of online classes foster honesty and trust in their communication.

Principle 4 prompts faculty to develop student-to-student and student-to-faculty communication that is forthright and authentic. In doing so, deeper learning that touches both heart and mind may result for students and instructor.

Faculty Actions:

These actions by faculty can support and highlight enhance importance of honesty and trust.

- In your syllabus, be very clear as to what you define as plagiarism, unethical use of another's ideas, honesty, as well as the consequences for any non-compliance to those standards.
- Speak honestly to your students.
- Allow students to work within their personal boundaries, as long as it does not impede their learning progress.
- Help students monitor the effect of their own participation on the group climate (i.e. coming unprepared for a group discussion.)
- Ask permission before forwarding another's email.

Principle 5: Members of online classes participate responsibly as a community of learners.

Principle 5 prompts faculty to create a collaborative learning environment that fosters a positive communication climate. By doing so, students feel included and valued as an important member of their learning community. This is the antidote to the isolation many feel from distance learning.

Faculty Actions:

- Create a course in which cooperative learning is at the heart of the curriculum.
- Give students ample opportunity to learn from one another by using a variety of online platforms.
- Allow a social time before synchronous classes. Clearly articulate when the socializing period ends and the academic discussion begins.
- Grading should encourage participation and not competition, fostering a cooperative climate.
- Require students to respond to each other's posts.
- Encourage students to practice effective conflict management, guiding them to find the most appropriate medium (i.e. phone, Skype, e-mail etc.) for that management.

- Respond promptly to student correspondence and encourage students to do the same. Let students know when you have received a message or assignment even if it is to say,
- "Thanks for the assignment, I will grade it by ___."
- Curriculum management should closely monitor and restrict the number of students allowed into an online class. Online classes require more individualized attention than face-to-face courses.
- If students experience technical difficulties during a synchronous class, follow-up with them after the class.

Limitations

This research is limited in its generalizability due to its small sample size and the fact that those involved in the research represent one university. To compensate for this limitation, the authors suggest that those who use this credo encourage their own students' feedback and discussion of it. The credo, then, can be used not as a standard, but rather a stimulus for discussion. To broaden the credo's utility, students can compare it to the National Communication Association's Credo for Ethical Communication. By doing so, students can see the connection between ethical communication and their lived experience of distance education. Applying and comparing the Credo for Ethical Distance Learning could result in insights beyond the scope of this research – and beyond the online learning context.

Conclusion

At the onset of the world pivoting to online classes, a senior writer at *The Chronicle of Higher Education* wrote, "Coronavirus could be the 'black swan' moment for higher education as we know it. …the reverberations from coronavirus will be to all of American higher education: a reset moment that prompts colleges to rethink how they operate at every level" (Blumenstyk, March 2020). With the use of the Ethical Credo of Distance Learning, this research can contribute to this "reset moment." First, this credo can provide tools for instructors to increase meaningful student-to-student interaction in a distance learning environment. Second, it can be used to promote student awareness of the ethical implications of online course pedagogy and student choices. By acknowledging and enacting the ethical principles inherent to online courses, distance education will emerge from quarantine more equipped and intentional in "helping humans become better humans."

New Insights

Time has elapsed since we all disappeared into our gopher holes and tried to survive (and for some, thrive) online education and quarantine. We are grateful to the communication discipline's outreach and support in helping us grow during a difficult time. With hindsight and experiences since that time, we have come to two conclusions. First, as we returned back to blended or face-to-face classes, it is clear that the Credo for Ethical Distance Learning is just as relevant to the face-to-face classroom. Perhaps the two formats are not as different as once thought. Second, we see now more than ever, the importance of teaching ethical communication. We have an opportunity

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and responsibility to help our students understand the importance and the process of respectful dialogue - as well as their contribution to it. This is particularly relevant in the context of the divisive speech exhibited in our society and the witnessing of a heartbreaking need to be understood. Our hope is that, in some small way, this research contributes to helping this next generation become better…well, just better.

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