Online Lives, Offline Consequences: Professionalism, Information Ethics and Professional Students

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By Issac Gilman, Pacific University Oregon, Library.

Introduction

The growth of the Internet over the past decade has made many tasks and personal interactions easier and faster. Students who have never experienced higher education without Google take for granted their ability to access information and entertainment at the click of a mouse and to live online lives unimpeded by anything except modern speed. For students enrolled in professional graduate programs (e.g. medicine, law, education), it is inevitable that their online experiences will shape their understanding of what is appropriate and what is ethical—which could have unanticipated professional consequences. To ensure that students' behaviors do not jeopardize their future careers, educators must understand the online activities that present ethical and professional issues and make every effort to educate students about appropriate behavior and interactions in an online environment [1, 2].

Academic Honesty and Information Ethics

For educators, perhaps the most familiar ethical issue facing students is that of academic honesty. For today’s Internet-savvy students, who have become accustomed to cutting and pasting information on the fly with little attention to citations, the opportunity to use “free” online information is often too tempting to refuse. Studies over the past 10-15 years have confirmed that the ease of the Internet has exacerbated the misuse of others’ intellectual property [3, 4]. In an “open” online environment, there is no accountability for those who may inappropriately provide/use others’ work. Thanks to the speed of cut-and-paste, there is also little time for students to even consider whether or not their use is ethical [5]. Even for students who do stop to consider their actions, one study found that the majority of students “would give in to Internet plagiarism under the right combination of situational and personal factors” [6].
As familiar (and frustrated) as educators are with the unethical use of intellectual property, students are even more familiar with faculty lectures condemning the same. Honor codes, lectures on paper mills and the evils of plagiarism—even the use of plagiarism detection services like Turnitin.com—have largely failed to make a lasting impression on students who do not recognize the seriousness of the issue [7]. For many students, like 380 undergraduates surveyed about downloading copyrighted content, the use/misuse of others’ intellectual property is still seen as a “victimless crime” [8]. Indeed, for undergraduate students who believe that anything accessible is free, who do not anticipate publishing a journal article and who may never depend on a scholarly or professional reputation, it can be difficult to convey the significance of academic honesty.

However, for graduate students who may one day contribute to the professional literature, creating ethical habits for the use of others’ intellectual property is of the utmost significance. Whether these students go on to become academics or practitioners, their scholarly record and actions will likely contribute to their reputation and career prospects, for better or worse. Works created as students may also persist for years if posted online (as is the case with many theses, dissertations and other culminating projects), and it is vital that students understand from the beginning of their programs not only how to avoid plagiarism but also how to ethically—and legally—use copyrighted materials.

Social Networking and Professionalism

Though both educators and students are largely familiar with the issues of plagiarism and academic honesty, it is an entirely new issue that poses the greatest threat to students’ professionalism—and one which has, on its face, nothing to do with students’ academic performance or professional aspirations.

Over the past decade, the social/communication possibilities on the World Wide Web have grown exponentially, with one of the most notable developments being the creation of social networking sites—MySpace, Facebook, et al. As with many technologies, students were early (and fervent) adopters, with Facebook the popular choice of nearly 80-90 percent of United States college students [9]. Profiles on social networking sites like Facebook allow students to communicate with friends, share photos and videos and connect with people with similar interests. For students, their online profiles and communities are as personal as their offline friendships and interactions—and, often, are an extension of their offline activities, with Facebook used as a collaborative event planner and photo album.

While social networking sites and the Web connect students to one another, another connection is created that students may not anticipate (or enjoy). With student photos, blogs, comments and affiliations publicly available online (unless privacy settings are adjusted by the student), the digital world has removed the divide between “personal and professional identities” [10]. Students’ (and employees’) professionalism and fitness is no longer judged solely on their academic and on-the-job performance, but on their very public personal personas. Newspapers, blogs and academic reports from the past five years are filled with stories of schools and employers who
have begun accessing social networking profiles looking for any untoward information as a means of evaluation/investigation [11 - 18]. New online services are dedicated to digging up digital dirt on prospective employees, with the promising of “automat[ing] candidate research across 41 social networks” [19].

The blurring of the line between personal and professional identities is an important issue for any student or employee, but particularly so for those in professional fields wherein public perception of professional competence and appropriate separation from patients, clients or students are vital. Though there is nothing inherently unethical about the use of social networking sites, publicly sharing unprofessional content (e.g. explicit or inappropriate comments/photos) or excessive personal information may be compromising for professionals. Educators and researchers from medical, law, education and pharmacy schools have all expressed concern that professional students may not understand the consequences of their online activities, or the risk of their personal offline activities being made public online by others [20 - 23].

Research and anecdotal evidence suggest that professional students either do not share educators concerns or are not aware that their online lives could have any bearing on their professionalism. In a recent study at the University of Florida, only 37.5 percent (n=362) of medical students and residents had private (viewable only by designated friends) Facebook profiles [24]. The same study found that, in a small sample of students with public profiles (n=10), 70 percent of the students had photographs of themselves with alcohol and 30 percent had pictures or videos that showed “drunkenness, overt sexuality, foul language and patient privacy violations in non-US locations” [25]. Students in the study also belonged to Facebook groups with highly unprofessional names; e.g. “I don’t need sex cause grad school f**ks me every day,” “Party of Important Male Physicians (PIMP),” “Physicians look for trophy wives in training” [26].

There is also evidence to suggest that current undergraduates (and future professional students) share the same lack of concern and awareness. In a separate study by the same researchers at the University of Florida, researchers analyzed Facebook profiles of 300 elementary education majors. Of the students with public profiles, 75 percent listed their sexual orientation and 73 percent had personal photo albums available [27]. A 2005 study by researchers at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU), determined that less than 1 percent of CMU Facebook users (n=4,450; a mix of students and faculty) had changed their default privacy settings to limit the visibility of their profiles [28]. An informal online survey by the Pacific Index, the student newspaper at Pacific University (Oregon), found that 33 percent of respondents believed they would never get in trouble for photos posted on Facebook, while 17 percent were “not going to worry about what people think of my personal life” [29]. Comments made in a thread started by a prospective pharmacy student on an online message board confirm all of these findings:

mrsengle: “Pharmacists are in such high demand, employers put up with a LOT. As long as you have a license, don’t have a DUI or possessions charge, have a degree and a pulse, you shouldn’t worry about them checking an old myspace [sic] page” [30].
YouTube and Beyond

Unprofessional content posted on Facebook is not the only area of online concern for professional educators. Other venues for sharing personal (and/or unprofessional) material include blogs and video sharing sites such as YouTube. In one recent case, medical students posted a musical parody they had filmed on YouTube, which featured the students “dancing in the anatomy lab,” “drinking [...] “blood” (actually chocolate) from plastic skulls,” and “lying inside body bags” [31].

The medical students’ YouTube video illustrates an important reason for addressing online professionalism with professional students: there are notable differences between generations regarding what is/is not humorous, acceptable and appropriate. As one educator has observed, “[w]hat looks like plagiarism, slander, copyright infringement, and embarrassing public behavior is for many students just creative and social entertainment” [32]. While many students are beginning to understand that their personal behavior is reflective on their professional identities [33], some still have not made the connection, or even believe that what they are doing—and posting online—has the possibility of offending anyone.

Whether or not students believe that their online activities should have any relevance to their academic and professional lives, it is growing increasingly clear that students’ online personalities will be at issue for schools, employers and other professionals. There has been a call for lawyer’s bar applications to include the “cyber equivalent” of a background check [34], and in an unprecedented move, applicants who wished to work in President Barack Obama’s administration were required to complete a background check that included the following requests:

- “Please list [...] any posts or comments on blogs or other websites you have authored, individually or with others. Please list all aliases or “handles” you have used to communicate on the Internet.”
- “If you have ever sent an electronic communication, including but not limited to an email, text message or instant message, that could suggest a conflict of interest or be a possible source of embarrassment to you, your family, or the President-Elect if it were made public, please describe.”
- “Please provide the URL address of any websites that feature you in either a personal or professional capacity (e.g., Facebook, MySpace, etc.)” [35].

Conclusion

Professional students must understand the implications of their online activities and the importance of extending professionalism to their online lives. To convey this understanding, there should be comprehensive instruction provided for all professional students that addresses the issues of intellectual property, plagiarism, social networking, blogging, personal websites, e-mail
etiquette, etc. Individual workshops do already exist [36], but to be the most effective, this instruction should be either integrated into program curriculum or made a required elective, and must be closely tied to the relevant professional association’s code of ethics/conduct.

“E-literacy” (incorporating information ethics and online behavior standards) should be treated as a necessary competency for students to achieve, much like any other required knowledge/skills they receive in the course of their programs. Above all else, e-literacy instruction must help students realize that their online actions are not segregated from their professional lives, that their offline lives can easily end up online, and that anything posted on the Internet will persist long after it is removed. The guiding question for professional students should be, “Would it be appropriate for my mother/employer/patient/client to see what I am about to post?” [37] Because if they have a computer and an Internet connection, they probably will.

Notes


[25] Ibid., 956.


NOTE: Currently, the default Facebook setting allows any users in a student’s network (not just those designated as “Friends”) to view all information in that student’s profile. The default setting for posted photo albums is to be visible to all Facebook users.


[31] Farnan, et al., 518


[33] Young, Jeffrey R. 2008. “Educause Survey Shows Students Watch Their Privacy on


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6 THOUGHTS ON “ONLINE LIVES, OFFLINE CONSEQUENCES: PROFESSIONALISM, INFORMATION ETHICS AND PROFESSIONAL STUDENTS”

africa
on January 30, 2014 at 11:35 AM said:

It typically takes about 3 years to total that with.

headlines
on January 30, 2014 at 1:58 PM said:

Normally I do not learn article on blogs, nevertheless I would like to say that this write-up very pressured me to check out and do it! Your writing taste has been amazed me. Thank you, really very good article.
plotka on February 1, 2014 at 1:57 AM said:

I also, want a followup to this repair. It’s fascinating. I after had a repair produced over a cast iron exhaust manifold for just a 1932 Packard.

temat on February 1, 2014 at 3:41 AM said:

I like what you guys are up to. This sort of intelligent work and reporting! Retain up the superb works guys. I’ve incorporated you guys to my blogroll. I think it will increase the importance of my site.

naija on February 3, 2014 at 1:34 AM said:

moncler piumini

temat on February 3, 2014 at 1:56 AM said:

It is my belief that mesothelioma is most lethal cancer. It is got unusual features. The more I contemplate it the greater I am assured it doesn’t conduct itself as being a real solid tissues cancer. In the event mesothelioma is a rogue virus-like infection, then there is the prospects for developing a vaccine plus offering vaccination for asbestos uncovered those who are vulnerable to high risk connected with developing long term asbestos associated malignancies. Thanks for discussing your ideas about this significant ailment.