

Netiquette and Ethics Regarding Digital Education Across Institutions: A Narrative Review

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ABSTRACT

Information Technology (IT) has made rapid advancement since the turn of this century. Ergo the scope and extent of IT has also grown, resulting in increase in the number of internet users, who have differing reasons for using the IT resources. The users of this IT revolution include students worldwide; who interact with technology based on their needs, with relative ease and have found the whole experience enriching. Progress in IT has not only changed the way humans interact with technology but has also influenced the way of interaction between the people. The interaction online is mostly informal and comes without set guidelines and compounded with the relative anonymity provided by internet, also it has complicated an individual's ability to interact in a respectful and responsible way. The problems relating to internet safety arise from such interactions. Flame wars and cyberbullying are some of the other risky behavioural interactions displayed online and can lead to severe consequences. The unethical use of IT resources in the form of plagiarism, piracy, identity theft etc also questions the moral of an individual. Whilst there may be some idea, multitude of issues regarding Netiquette and ethical use of IT resources are often poorly understood and the knowledge imparted is also fragmented. Moreover, contemporary educators are much in need of such information. Thus, there is a need to include and summarise current priority areas that relate to etiquette and ethics in digital education.

Keywords: Bullying, Citizenship, Information technology, Plagiarism

INTRODUCTION

The IT is everywhere and there is no denying that it will continue to expand further in the future. The world as we know will become more interconnected as IT continues to evolve. The role that IT and computers in general, play in people's lives is of immense importance. There is a widespread use in the contemporary world and their ease of use makes them necessary tools to educate as well as a mode of self-learning for students. However, this sudden change and the growing evolution in the "speed and complexity of IT seem to lead to a dilution of ethical and social consciousness and a sweeping away of accountability and responsibility for personal behaviour" [1].

The Oxford Learner's Dictionary defines "etiquette" as the formal rules of correct or polite behaviour in society. A person with good etiquette is an individual who behaves responsibly and acceptably around others. The social construct of etiquette thus is more concerned with making people around feel comfortable by following a set of principles that may be imbued in the cultural and societal factors of the time [2]. According to the author Shea V, a similar set of rules for behaving properly online refers to "Netiquette" or more generically network etiquette [2]. A further simplification by Miller S states "Netiquette as a blend of common sense, common courtesy, and dictates of the computer technology and culture established by internet users" [3]. It is a dynamic concept that is being continuously interpreted and redefined in the light of changes in technology and from how people perceive these changes [4].

Ethics is concerned with moral rules while morality is the individual's perception of what he considers good or bad [5]. The origin of morality is more philosophical and more informal. It comes from the inner self and is then moulded into ethics based on collective wisdom. It governs how one acts based on certain guiding principles [5]. More or less, ethics is a code of conduct for the morally upstanding [6]. Similar to any discipline, ethics in IT is necessary for ensuring its fair use. Ethical use of IT and its resources implies that there is no misuse of technology for one's benefit or to harm others [6].

Opinions may differ on the notion that etiquette and ethics while using IT systems are separate entities [2]. Whether this is true maybe a subjective assessment of the subject matter but upon scrutiny of both, there seems to be considerable overlap [6]. One cannot have good etiquette and bad ethics or the other way round and it would not be an exaggeration if one says for instance, that these may be synonymous for many purposes and intent. Moreover, a person following netiquette rules seldom strays beyond the proscribed ethical line [2]. Such individual acts diligently and responsibly while engaging with others; respects personal data and gives credence to the person using the technology; and also identifies misuse of technology and thus refrains from harming others [2].

Why are Netiquette and Ethical use of IT Resources Important?

The IT including computers and the internet is integral to present society. Today's internet is not a standalone project for some government agencies as was the case in its incipient stage but a more sociable entity with vibrant cyber-communities and a treasure trove of information for self-use and sharing. Though even today IT largely can be considered a neutral medium of communication, it "gives users with greater control over both temporal and spatial coordinates of communication" [4]. It is a place for virtual mixing of culture and individualities with varied expectations. These communities and individuals are also composed of students and teachers on campuses exploring and seeking new knowledge, meeting new people, sharing ideas [7]. Moreover, this has been greatly facilitated because campuses are now equipped with sophisticated digital technology which has eased as well as enhanced the reach of communication and information exchange [7].

But as with any other form of technology, IT can also be misused and in some cases abused. Sometimes the interaction between groups may bring forth some awkwardness or misunderstanding [8] and lead to not so much of a good experience, especially for

a new user [2]. Even well-meaning individuals forget that they are interacting with other real people behind that screen [2]. Another point to note is the level of secrecy provided by this medium which may lead to a degree of indifference on the part of some users [2] and this may lead to consequences for others. Impersonation is one such act mainly done for financial gains. However, one needs to understand that there is nothing as an absolute secret even on the internet [2].

Inappropriate and unethical use of digital technology has been documented among students [9-11]. Indeed, there have been instances of technology misuse among students with Young KS et al., reporting internet abuse ranging from 13-18.4% among university students which were significantly higher than that reported among adolescents (4.6-4.7%) [9]. It has become of increasing concern for faculties and with more advancement in IT; it will be difficult to supervise, much more complex, and daunting in scale [10,11]. So, this may be an opportune moment for educators and faculties across institutions to familiarise their wards with Netiquette including ethics, so they can behave responsibly while using IT resources.

The Troubles with Netiquette and the Ethical use of IT

To understand how to bring about and thus sustain changes in etiquette among students as well as to strengthen the ethical use of IT resources across campuses, first one must understand what challenges them.

Netiquette or a lack thereof: Students on campuses need to learn about etiquette while using IT. Thorough knowledge of basic etiquette makes them responsible for their actions and consequences. However, the knowledge of netiquette amongst the IT users is sporadic at best and among non-English speakers, it may be even lower [12], as the sense of necessity and usefulness for the netiquette rules has been found to be lower among the non-English speakers using IT resources [12]. Netiquette demands that one remains respectful to others while online but core rules that govern netiquette are seldom known to everybody. Even experienced individuals may lack awareness about all the standards of netiquette [2]. Formal written rules are rarely available.

Online communities interact with each other across different parts of the globe. In real life, they have a different set of norms based on their culture and ethos. These norms are translated to online behaviour which is then transformed into etiquettes. What may seem innocent in one culture may be misunderstood by others. This creates an issue while formalising netiquette rules. Moreover, there also may be a lack of universality in the application of netiquette rules. However, the basic thread for netiquette remains the same everywhere and that is to "Respect the Human" [2].

The rapid advance in IT and issues related to etiquette: IT has been growing by leaps and bounds over the years. There was a time when sending an email was the most important action one would carry out on the internet. Bandwidth was limited and one's immediate social circle on the internet was their friends. Nobody knew what e-commerce was and internet banking was still a myth. As rapid strides were made in Artificial Intelligence (AI) algorithms, a new and better user-friendly interface was developed. Social media connected everyone's lives such that it was possible to make friends in other parts of the world. Many people in urban areas are buying every possible item of interest including clothes, groceries, books, etc. from the internet [2]. For educators, it has become possible to teach their students online using real-time video conferencing applications and thus bring some sort of face-to-face interaction which was earlier not possible. This rapid advance however has compounded the problem of IT etiquette as newer and updated rules need to

be framed and followed. Earlier etiquette norms were provided for Electronic mail (e-mail), chat rooms, File Transfer Protocol (FTP), World Wide Web (www) apart from mobile or cell phone etiquettes [2]. But students now need to evolve their etiquettes based on the current technological scenario that is most appropriate for such advancement. However, this progress is not only rapid but also more complex. As such etiquette norms need to be reframed and refined because of current situations and this will take time and will vary according to the cultural and contextual milieu of the users of the said technology. Educators at campuses therefore now have to act as facilitators between the students and technology.

Cyberbullying: One of the epitaphs of etiquette demands that one needs to treat others as one himself expects to be treated. This is seldom the case with many users who have faced abuse, insults, and oftentimes plain obscenity at them. Cyberbullying is bullying with the use of digital or electronic technologies. It generally takes place over the internet and social media platforms are one of the commonest places for cyberbullying [13]. Cyberbullying may take different forms (adapted from Willard Nancy's Educator's Guide to Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats) [14]: Denigration (Sending or posting gossip or rumours about a person to damage his or her reputation or friendships), Exclusion (Intentionally and cruelly excluding someone from an online group), Flaming (Online fights using electronic messages with angry and vulgar language), Harassment (Repeatedly sending nasty, mean, and insulting messages), Impersonation (Pretending to be someone else and sending or posting material to get that person in trouble or danger or to damage that person's reputation or friendships), Outing (Sharing someone's secrets or embarrassing information or images online), Trickery (Talking someone into revealing secrets or embarrassing information, then sharing it online), Cyberstalking (Repeated, intense harassment and denigration that includes threats or creates significant fear).

Any form of cyberbullying can lead to victimisation of the person being bullied which can, in turn, lead to worsening grades, dropping out, of course, physical violence, depression, and other mental health issues including suicide. It has also been highlighted that the person perpetrating the act of bullying often has the same level of distress as the victim [15]. So, educators need to tread a fine line when dealing with cyberbullying.

The phenomenon of cyberbullying is not limited to schools but has also pervaded the campus space. A study done by Zalaquett CP and Chatters SJ indicated that cyberbullying continues from high school to college and that college victims still reported significant psychological effects [16].

Cyberbullying in any form is not just a crime but against the very morals of etiquette and ethics. Numerous resources both regulatory and legislative are available to the victims of cyberbullying [17]. On- and off-campus support should be provided to the victims as well.

Plagiarism: Plagiarism in writing has been a bane for academics. It has been defined by the World Association of Medical Editors as "... the use of others' published and unpublished ideas or words (or other intellectual property) without attribution or permission and presenting them as new and original rather than derived from an existing source" [18]. In fact copying, another's an idea and masquerading it as one's own.

There can be many types of plagiarism that are common among students on college campuses. For example, Turnitin, a software provider found the 10 most common types of plagiarism by college students, the so-called "The Plagiarism Spectrum" [19]. Plagiarism can also be distinguished based on whether somebody's work

is verbatim or mosaic or paraphrasing of original work of others. Plagiarism breeds academic dishonesty among students [20]. Other times the copyright of the plagiarised material can be infringed [21]. It also affects the learning of students. Moreover, it is a serious breach of ethics as well as etiquette.

Experts conclude that “informing students that instructors look for plagiarism in assignments and that there are consequences if it is discovered can help to deter students from plagiarising and create an environment where it is clear that ethical behaviour is valued” [22].

Lack of knowledge of user responsibilities: Many campuses around the world issue statement and policies for user responsibilities of IT. These may range from privileged access, use that is limited to the specific purposes that align with learning, prohibition to post any content that is deemed offensive or abusive while also deterring the user from impersonation to gain access [23]. Users are also required to report any security risk to the IT resources and respect the intellectual property rights and privacy of others. Physically harming the IT resources also comes under the preview of user responsibilities at campuses [23].

However, knowledge about user responsibilities is inadequate amongst the students at campuses. Worse still many of the faculties’ may also lack proficiency in these responsibilities, making it an uphill task to impart such knowledge and training to their wards. Institutions should therefore frame policy statements about user responsibilities and disseminate the same to educate all concerned. These statements besides promoting responsible behaviour and safeguarding both the user and the IT resources have also been observed to shape norms of netiquette. However, it is also true that netiquette and the ethical principle of IT have also influenced the method in which communities create and interpret these statements [23].

Software piracy: Software piracy and piracy of other copyrighted material including music, games, etc. among students on campuses are common. A wide variety of social correlates including older age, male gender, more experience with the use of computers, personal computer ownership, and a positive attitude towards piracy was found to be important for software piracy in colleges [24]. A study by Chiang E and Assane D concluded that software piracy among college students can be attributed to the need for such software during their course, low level of income of students, higher than average technical skills, and peer-to-peer facilitation of such activity [25].

Whatever the reasons may be, piracy in any form cannot be condoned as it infringes upon the copyright of the owner, breaking of which may result in fines or jail time. Moreover, this pirated software may pose a security risk to the user as that version may be outdated or may be infected with malware. Pirated software also reduces the sales of legitimate software resulting in losses to the original manufacturer [24].

Students, need to be educated about software piracy with a focus on IT etiquettes and ethics which would raise their perceived moral intensity against it [24]. There should also be provisions of punishment for anyone who participates in such activity.

Privacy: In the narrowest sense, privacy or in the context of IT “restricted access” is the ability of the individual to choose what information they don’t want to share and what they want to, with others [26]. It is fair to say that right to privacy should not be compromised. However, with the growing reach of the internet, there are concerns that as consumers of such services people are prone to breaches in privacy [26].

In this digital world, where people have shared their personal information to connect with others, it seems impossible that all

of data is private. The information that one may have shared for friends or families is readily available to others for whom one’s information was not intended. Moreover, data is being collected by third parties including governments and corporations and this should be a cause of alarm [26]. In an article on privacy by Alexander J, he argues that personal data could be used for purposes that they were not originally intended to be collected for or that the data handlers could have biases and opinions with regards the personal data [26]. There are moral reasons as well for protecting personal data [27]. Personal data can also be misused by individuals who may have malicious intent, most commonly for financial gains.

In college campuses, breach of privacy of an individual can be done by the college wherein the college or the staff may knowingly or unknowingly disseminate information about their students. Moreover, students can also misuse privacy if they intend to use someone’s information without their prior consent or when this information is being used for bullying others. Data misuse or violation of personal data is not only criminal but also against the basic tenets of ethics and etiquette [27].

Internet safety: Internet is used for a wide variety of purposes. These may differ based on an individual’s need but what’s common is a certain level of risk associated with it. Internet safety deals with the welfare of the individual while using the internet [28]. It helps avoid any mishap while online. An individual’s personal information is their domain but its unsanctioned use for malicious purposes can lead to consequences as fraud, identity theft, and loss of possessions [2]. The most common methods used for gathering personal information may include phishing, scams, or sending malware or spam. Another reason for concern, while being online is for one’s safety as well as the safety of people around us, especially young children for they may become victims of crime that may or may not be linked to financial purposes only [28]. Students across campuses are also vulnerable to internet crime. Knowledge of etiquette allows them to understand those risks. Etiquette allows students to practice good online habits [2].

Digital citizenship and the making of a digital citizen: This is truly a digital era and information technology has pervaded every aspect of life. It’s a common thought that these technological innovations have made lives easier and less mundane. IT has also facilitated the way students acquire knowledge. Today information gathering is not only limited to structured classroom learning but has been supplemented by more inclusive, individualistic, and simpler methods [29]. The role of IT in teaching has never been as important as having been seen during the pandemic [29]. Even educators are now keen on learning the ropes of this digital revolution. However, this blowing-up of digital technology has created its fair share of problems. Internet addiction in students as well as the distracting usage of technology during the class is noteworthy while technology has also made students less focused on research [30].

But despite these concerns and as educators, one cannot keep students from participating in this digital revolution. The solution lies in inculcating a sense of responsibility towards these technologies. This can be brought about by framing policies and programs that make the user considerate about these responsibilities; that appeal to their reason and help them in practical situations. A step in the right direction is the evolution of the concept of digital citizenship. According to experts “Digital citizenship is a set of skills for thinking critically, behaving safely, and participating responsibly in the digital world. It includes appropriate, responsible behaviours in areas such as internet safety, privacy, reputation, identity, communication, collaboration, copyright, creativity, and skills around finding and

evaluating trustworthy information online. In addition, digital citizenship includes the deliberate, age-appropriate use of digital tools to have a positive impact on personal, family, school, social, and community life.” [31].

In essence, it is the etiquette and ethics for using IT wherein its sound knowledge prepares the individual to use IT diligently and responsibly. Additionally, digital citizenship imparts skills, which help an individual in making informed choices that in turn protect them from any harm while using IT services. The idea and framework of digital citizenship when adopted have made the internet safer, engaging, and more empathetic [31].

The importance of digital citizenship for students on campuses cannot be amply stressed; for they are the generation that both are the consumer as well as the victim of this IT burst. They represent the future generation and the educator’s aspiration of an ideal digital citizen, and thus the first step should be to provide them with tools and knowhow on the importance of being a digital citizen. Ribble M and Bailey G have extensively worked on the issue of digital citizenship and have identified nine themes that are crucial to this concept [32]. They are Digital Access (full electronic participation in society), Digital Commerce (the electronic buying and selling of goods), Digital Communication (the electronic exchange of information), Digital Literacy (the process of teaching and learning about technology and the use of technology), Digital Etiquette (the electronic standards of conduct or procedure), Digital Law (the electronic responsibility for actions and deeds), Digital Rights and Responsibilities (those requirements and freedoms extended to everyone in a digital world), Digital Health and Wellness (physical and psychological well-being in a digital technology world) and Digital Security (the electronic precautions to guarantee security) [32].

Being a digital citizen encompasses all traits and skills that make the individual understand human, cultural, and societal issues related to technology and practice legal and ethical behaviour [33]. How should one teach values of digital citizenship on campuses then? Well one thing is certain; an upstanding digital citizen needs to be engaged rather than have him burdened with barriers. It also needs to be stressed that any program or curriculum on digital citizenship should be student-centered rather than authoritative and should include their experiences and feedback. The idea is to empower them to make informed decisions. Moreover, digital citizenship goes beyond “responsible use” and now has expanded to “technology use aligned to values and ethics” [34].

CONCLUSION(S)

The boom in IT has led to problems that educators did not foresee. Sense of perceived anonymity provided by the IT resources has brought about some unfortunate consequences. Netiquette and internet ethics may help in resolving some of these issues. It is thus recommended that institutions should frame policy measures that inculcate responsible use of IT resources that are tailor made for students and are made after taking into confidence the views of students, without burdening them with arbitrary norms. Students should be guided to make informed choices. The teacher of today should not only teach but also act as a role model in digital citizenship.

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