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INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL SECTION ON *ETHICS IN LEARNING DESIGN*

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The International Journal of Designs for Learning (IJDL) is pleased to publish this Special Section on Ethics in Learning Design. This Special Section includes six design cases that highlight different aspects of ethical considerations that learning designers make as they go about their everyday work. These design cases include instances where ethical tensions were amplified or made central by the author for critical discussion as well as cases where ethical considerations, principles, or frameworks played a key role in enabling design work to occur in a more ethical manner.

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INTRODUCTION

Definitions of instructional design and technology have featured ethics for many decades. The 1977 definition of the field developed by the Association of Educational Communication and Technology (AECT) described the field as a "concerned profession" and argued that, as the field is situated in society, it must concern itself with the uses of technologies and techniques such that professional work supports intellectual freedom, affirmative action, and the use of technologies in support of "humane and life-fulfilling ends" (Ely & Plomp, 1996, p.13). The most recent definition, revised in 2023, maintains an emphasis on ethics, defining instructional design and technology as "the ethical study and application of theory, research, and practices to advance knowledge, improve learning and performance …" and so on (AECT, 2023). Despite its centrality in the very definition of the field, ethics have long been neglected in the scholarly work and productions of the field (Gray & Boling, 2016; Moore, 2005; Moore & Ellsworth, 2014; Kimmons, 2020; Moore, 2021).

Recent interest in and attention to ethics appears to be increasing in response to issues with equity, access, and diversity raised during the pandemic and ethical concerns related to generative AI such as agency, authorship, consent, bias and discrimination, and environmental impacts (e.g., Berthelot et al., 2024; Gallent-Torres et al., 2023; Ivanov, 2023; Lachheb et al., 2023; Ligozat et al., 2013; Moore et al., 2024; Pierres et al. 2024; Okengwu et al., 2023). However, the vast majority of prior scholarship has focused either on normative ethics, which seek to distill codes for governing

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individual behavior, or—in the case of much of the literature on generative AI and ethics—critiquing the technology and generating lists of issues.

Missing from these approaches is a more applied and practical approach to ethics that has characterized the work on ethics in other disciplines for several decades already (Gray & Chivukula, 2019; Shilton, 2013; Verbeek, 2006; Whitbeck, 1996). In contrast to normative ethics, applied ethics focuses on the authentic and situated nature of ethics in real-world problems and contexts. Other fields—such as medicine, business, law, and engineering—have extensive ethics scholarship, even dedicated journals, as compared to instructional design and technology, which reflect a more applied, practical approach to ethics. For example, bioethics explores best approaches to moral issues that arise in healthcare practices and contexts. Engineering ethics scholarship often explores societal and environmental impacts and has driven revisions to engineering design and development processes and practices.

In this special issue, we sought to prompt a more applied approach to ethics in the context of learning design. A growing body of design scholars in other disciplines have reframed ethics as a form of design, where ethics are applied in and through design processes and designerly approaches, methods and techniques. For example, Whitbeck (1996) introduced the concept of "ethics as design" in engineering in her attempts to describe a more applied approach to ethics. She noted that, while standard treatments of ethics are confined to an evaluative or judgement process of determining right or wrong, practice in the real world cannot stop at the point of making a judgmental determination. Practitioners have to actively and creatively devise solutions to the ethical, legal, and moral problems they encounter—an active act of "wrangling," as Chivukula et al. (2023) have described. In short, ethical problems in practice require design, and thinking of ethics as akin to design problems helps to illuminate the imperfect and iterative nature of attempts to devise solutions.

ETHICS IN LEARNING DESIGN

Every design situation contains ethical dimensions that are more or less explicit. In some design contexts these ethical considerations rise to the foreground and play a critical role in the interactions among design team members, directly and tangibly impacting the outcomes of design work. In some instances, ethical considerations are largely implicit, but reflection could reveal how ethics functioned as a distinctive feature of that design engagement. In this special issue, we are interested in publishing design cases that identify and interrogate these hidden or explicit ethical considerations.

Ethics function both as considerations and constraints that influence design decisions and designed artifacts and as a form of reflective practice in design (Moore & Tillberg-Webb, 2023), whereby designers do "ethics by other means" (Verbeek, 2006). In this special issue, we seek to take an approach representative of Whitbeck's (1996) idea of "ethics as design." Whitbeck argued that there is rarely one unique solution or one perfect solution; rather, there are often a range of different solutions which are better or weaker fits to the design requirements or constraints. Solutions for both ethical problems and design problems often must balance trade-offs, and designers often balance and frame these issues differently, therefore devising different solutions (Gray, 2023; Svihla, 2020). Additionally, these matters of ethical concern are navigated not just by a single designer, but frequently by teams in organizations where there are important differences in how ethics are considered and operationalized (Shilton, 2013; Wong, 2021).

Learning designers confront and navigate ethical considerations every day in their work. Accessibility, data rights and privacy, dignity, power imbalances, equity, and many other ethical issues arise in practice. The work of designers involves not simply differentiating right from wrong but also in devising possible solutions while considering potential near- and long-term impacts of these solutions. The act and process of design itself becomes a way to address ethical and moral problems, representing a form of agency on the designer's part, or even a means of creating shared agency through the design process.

Often, ethical considerations or a designer's perspective can present tensions in the design process, as Gallup et al. (2018) captured well in their design case on empowerment in the design of a homecare worker training program. Other times, a seemingly simple commitment to a value or principle, such as accessibility, is not so simple to apply in practice, and the conscientious designer can experience projects where trying to devise a solution kicks up conflicting needs between different user groups, as Steele et al. (2018) describe in their design case on accessible maker spaces.

THEMES ACROSS THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

In this special section, we can see multiple examples of how designers navigate or even actively situate ethical dimensions of their work in and through design processes and decisions. For some authors, the ethical problems were the central problem they were trying to address in their design work, such as representation of indigenous cultures or devising a better advising process that is more inclusive and equitable. In other cases, the ethical problems or tensions are inherent in the nature of the work and arose naturally in and around the project, such as in the case of designing a robotics education program. Across multiple cases, we can also see instances of designers using a range of approaches,

methods and techniques to embed ethical considerations into their work.

For example, several authors reference their use of speculative design, critical design, inclusive design and/or human-centered design approaches. They also re-envisioned traditional design methods such as stakeholder involvement, reflection-in-action, and needs or root cause analyses to center ethics into their practices through stakeholder involvement that emphasized multiple perspectives and ethical framings, reflective questions, and problem definition as part of the front-end analysis and problem framing activities. Across these cases, designers also unpack how they re-envisioned their design processes and team-based approaches to more intentionally fold ethical considerations into their work. In short, we can see across these cases how designers translated ethics from abstractions into applied practice.

PAPER SUMMARIES

Cai et al.: Navigating Ethical Challenges in a Robotics Education Program: Design Solutions at Multiple Levels

This design case focuses on navigating ethical tensions when implementing a robotics education program for learners coming from underserved communities. What is particularly interesting about this case is the designers' candid acknowledgement of ethical tensions and their design solutions to them, such as pre-existing knowledge disparities in computer science, power dynamics among program participants, unequal access to devices during robotics classes, and the lack of representation of prominent figures (such as scholars and scientists) from underserved communities. This design case stresses the significance of making fields like computer science inclusive and accessible to learners from diverse backgrounds, particularly those with minimal access or exposure to computer science.

Lowe et al.: Bringing Social Justice to Instructional Design Practice: A New Approach to Team Development

This design case tackles the critical issue of creating employee educational programming related to health and financial benefits accessible and understandable to diverse groups of staff members. The process description foregrounds the designer's active role in shifting from a passive adherence to generic instructional design models to employing reflective and innovative strategies for more inclusive learning environments, guided by design justice principles and critical reflection. This design case candidly acknowledges the limitations of existing frameworks like Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and the importance of reflective practice for designers in addressing ethical issues.

Gilbertson et al.: The Unexpected Ethical Concerns of Developing Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice Review Tools: A Design Case

This design case details the creation of tools aimed at fostering diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ) in online course design at a predominantly white institution. The authors describe their process of designing a "Community and Belonging" toolset, which began as a DEIJ checklist and evolved into a more comprehensive rubric. The case highlights the ethical challenges they encountered, such as navigating political opposition to DEIJ efforts and ensuring the tools were accessible and non-punitive for faculty. The rebranding of the tools reflects a strategic shift to foster adoption within a politically contentious environment, while underscoring the importance of adaptability, contextual awareness, and ethical reflection in promoting inclusive teaching practices.

Litts et al.: The Design Ethics of Culturally Sustaining & Revitalizing (Re)Presentation

In this case, the design team describes their design of a game intended to center indigenous ways of knowing and relating. They describe how they used reflective practice, leveraged their knowledge of game design to devise solutions to challenges posed by traditional game mechanics, and centered indigenous values in their design process and their team's relationship building. The authors detail design approaches and methods such as critical design, stakeholder involvement, problem framing, and creative problem solving while also reflecting on the nature of traditional instructional design and proposing alternative ways of engaging in the design process.

Warren et al.: Ethics Of Care and Soft Systems Methodology Employed To Guide A Doctoral Program Redesign

This design case covers a crucial topic of how to best support doctoral students both academically and emotionally. The designers describe how they drew on an Ethics of Care approach, grounding key decisions in this framework and motivating both the need for design changes and the redesign of the doctoral program that could be envisioned through the lens of care. This design case specifically addresses the ethical issues of the lack of inclusion and equity, which can hinder doctoral students' success in their programs.

Cook-Snell: Ethically Informed Design

This design case explores the creation and delivery of a course focused on culturally inclusive instructional design, detailing the instructor's experiences in navigating implicit and explicit biases in design practices. The course addressed systemic societal "-isms" such as racism, ableism, and sexism, while adopting an andragogical approach that encouraged

co-creation and reflection among participants. The case includes detailed descriptions of a number of ethical considerations that guided design decisions, from incorporating diverse materials and negotiated grading to fostering inclusive dialogue.This design case underscores the importance of intentional, ethically grounded instructional design practices that address biases while promoting inclusivity and engagement.

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