Concerns about increasing antisocial behavior and declining civility have heightened discussions about ethics, including cheating in school and business, ethical dilemmas in teaching, and the ethics of technology and Internet use. This Alert investigates the trends and issues involved in teaching social responsibility in adult and vocational education.

Ethics and social responsibility are the subject of both curriculum materials and research. State academic standards and curriculum frameworks address citizenship (Oklahoma Department of Vocational and Technical Education 1996) and personal and social responsibility (Orange County Public Schools 1999). Ethical and legal issues for specific occupations are addressed in curricula issued by states, professional associations, and educational institutions (Loock and Schmitt 2000; Lusky et al. 1993; Massachusetts Career Development Institute 1997). Legal and ethical issues also figure in training materials for current workers (Westinghouse Electric Corporation 1996). Research studies examine the ethical inclinations and decision making of secondary and postsecondary students (Lee 1995), particularly in business education (Brown 1996; Cole and Smith 1995), as well as the effects of ethics instruction (Griffin and Anderson 1997).

A variety of methods and resources are used in ethics instruction, including case studies (McAllister-Kizzie 1999), heroes as a model for ethical behavior (Apostolou and Apostolou 1997), and a combination of critical thinking and ethics instruction (Veugelers 1996). Service learning projects (Paulins 1999) are also recommended for developing social responsibility. Websites offer various resources for ethics instruction, primarily in business: popular and professional literature related to ethics, case studies, working papers, and hyperlinks to other websites (Center for Accounting Ethics, Centre for Applied Ethics, Wharton Ethics Program).

The adult and vocational education literature also reflects ethical issues for educators. A long list of ethical issues arises in the use of technology and the Internet: power, access, control, intellectual property rights, privacy, equity, free speech, and access for minors (Boshier and Wilson 1998; Holt 1998; Ziegahn 1998). Adult educators are aware of the ethical dilemma involved in ongoing debate over the mission of adult education (Baptiste 1999; Kincheloe 1999): Should adult education serve the individual or society? Social change or status quo? How can teachers, planners, and administrators reconcile the ethic of increasing access and empowerment with other interests they must serve (Lawler 1996; Wilson and Cervero 1996)—the institutions that employ them, the corporate clients who purchase their services, the faculty peers who provide training services?

Lifelong learning and learning society discourses distract attention from more significant ethical issues in adult education, such as educating for responsible change and forging a civic agenda. Adult education should emphasize access to information, self-improvement, critical theory and pedagogy, and critical consciousness.


Brown, P. “A Comparison Study of Ethical Standards of Potential Business Teachers and Potential Businesspersons on Selected Business Practices.” Delta Pi Epsilon Journal 38, no. 1 (Winter 1996): 1-13. Ethical dilemmas in 5 areas were rated by 75 business education and 153 business administration students. All showed greater disapproval of fraud, coercive power, and deceit in business practices. Administration students were more tolerant of influence dealing and self-interest in business than business education students were.


Griffin, M. A., and Anderson, P. L. “Ethics: Does Knowing Right from Wrong Make a Difference in What Students Do?” In Partnership for Workforce Development in Business and Marketing Education: Annual Atlantic Coast Business & Marketing Education Conference Proceedings, edited by I. Wallace, p. 19. Greenville, NC: East Carolina University, 1997. (ED 406 525) Surveyed high school and university seniors were more likely to recognize unethical situations than freshmen; students exposed to ethics instruction identified unethical situations more easily and reported they were less likely to engage in unethical behavior than students not exposed.

Holt, M. E. “Ethical Considerations in Internet-Based Adult Education.” New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education no. 78 (Summer 1998): 63-69. Power, access, control, privacy, and equity are some of the ethical concerns involved in teaching and learning on the Internet. The potential for harm cannot be ignored or underestimated.

Kincheloe, J. L. How Do We Tell the Workers? The Socioeconomic Foundations of Work and Vocational Education. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999. (ED 438 414) Argues that the power of business and management in the modernist economy heightens the need for citizenship education and renewed attention to ethical principles differentiating “good work” and “bad work.”

Resources


Study suggested that ethics instruction may increase students’ ethical awareness and inclinations toward various academic behaviors and that case studies were an effective teaching method.


State academic standards and accompanying materials address practicing a code of ethics for information systems, responding to unethical behavior, defining ethics, and discussing social and ethical standards.

The first in a series of three modules covers legal and ethical issues (beneficence, autonomy, confidentiality, fidelity), written records as legal documents, and consent forms.


Contains a code of ethics and unit on ethical and legal issues and patients’ bill of rights; enumerates patient rights, ethical standards for safe, high-quality patient care, and legal ramifications of unethical actions.


Chapter 3 contains 74 case studies representing 12 business subject areas, including ethics; 10 case studies address ethical issues. A detailed index classifies cases by subject areas, learning competency, industry type, and grade level.


Materials for a six-unit course on responsible citizenship for secondary vocational education students.


Guide to citizenship instruction for immigrants, including Florida’s curriculum framework for citizenship education.


Students in a course on the consumer in U.S. society participated in service-learning projects; pre- and posttest data showed improvement in student awareness of community needs, expectations of continued participation in job-related service, emotional satisfaction, and understanding of course concepts, issues, and themes.