Privacy Issues in Online Learning Environment

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to explore privacy issues in online learning. This study shows that there are direct legal-related privacy issues, such as students' personal data and grades protected by the FERPA, and students' right to protect their privacy in the context of a public website. There are also some privacy issues which occurred in much nuanced ways in the online learning process, such as open access to each other's work, transparent reflections, public comments, critical analysis of the assignments, critical comments, and collaborative evaluations of students' work.

Key words: Privacy in online learning, resistance to knowledge sharing, students' rights and comfort, blogs in learning

When the world is becoming globally connected, we no longer isolate ourselves in our own world. We extend our learning boundaries to the outside world and gain new knowledge from those we are not familiar with; we reach out to others' networks to gain information we need; we share our inside worlds with each other to understand the subjective aspects of our worlds at a deep level. "Sharing" becomes a popular word that is highly advocated in many fields. However, in practice, we also encounter resistance to sharing from some learners due to their privacy concerns. Learners' privacy issues need to be addressed while we are advocating for sharing knowledge publicly in an online learning environment. The purpose of this paper is to explore the issues which contribute to students' resistance to sharing knowledge with others publicly in an online learning environment due to their privacy concerns. There are two research questions that will be addressed in this study: (a) What kind of privacy issues are presented in various online learning scenarios? (b) How can these privacy issues be addressed? This paper is based on work that is under review for publication in *Distance Education* (Chang, in press).

Literature Review

Online privacy issues are reflected in various activities, such as peer reviewing, group collaborative work, and learners' evaluations. In doing peer reviewing and assessment, learners access online portfolios which contains sensitive information such as scores, project-related assignments, and self-reflections. The main issue regarding privacy in collaboration is about learners' desire to control how they are perceived by other people (Patil & Kobsa, 2005).

When learners don't feel comfortable about sharing knowledge in social media websites or in online environment, or if they don't recognize the value of knowledge gained through sharing in an online environment, they become resistant to such learning platform. A safe learning environment is protected by guaranteeing learners' privacy (Anwar & Greer, 2012). When instructors encourage students to share their information as part of a community, they need to know that some information shared at school or workplace are FERPA and HIPAA protected.

Booth (2012) stated that in class or in online discussions, students reveal lots of personal and private information that might be questionable or even threatening to our boundaries and ethical responsibilities, which raises a question about how much students should share their personal information with the instructor. Booth (2012) suggested that instructors can integrate the privacy criteria and learning expectations into the rubrics and focus on assessing students' learning outcomes to avoid being influenced by students' self-disclosed information.

In collaborative work, it is important that the members trust and respect each other's privacy and the instructors create a trust and privacy guarded environment. We should develop norms about what information is to be shared and the steps taken to process and anonymize that information. We should also know that privacy issues are context based, and information in one context might not be transferred to another without being associated it to its original context (Nissenbaum, 2011). In learner assessment and evaluation, bias can occur due to differences in gender, ethnic and other factors.

Social media websites such as Facebook, Twitter, and blogs provided flexible digital environments for learners to learn anywhere, anytime, at various online platforms. More and more instructors are starting to integrate such non-institutional learning platforms into their teaching. However, such environment also raises challenges for learners, which causes resistance from learners. The challenges include learners' skillfulness and comfort in using new technology and their comfort level with digital identity, time that might be wasted on new technology, and concerns about the boundaries between social and professional identities (Salmon et al., 2015).

Methodology

Vignettes will be employed in this study to present the data. Vignettes "are generally described as short stories, scenarios, depictions of situations, accounts using imagery, and recollection of actions" (Hunter, 2012, p. 92). In other word, a vignette is a short description of a scene that captures a moment, an idea, or a specific part of a larger story. In this study, data was collected and analyzed based on the information provided in several vignettes. These vignettes were created based on the data collected from instructor's stories and experience in grading, analyzing and sharing the course-related assignments, instructor's thoughts, reactions and actions to the anonymous course reflections, final anonymous course evaluations, and the process of how instructor address both students' privacy and to promote collaborative work.

The context of this study was in the online courses operated through BlackBoard in higher education institution at the Eastern part of America. The common thread in all the courses selected for this study is that students were required to do group projects, and they were asked to post their group related assignments in their group blogs. Students in these courses were required to access each group's work, read, and make comments on each other's work.

I analyzed each assignment after I graded it and used some students' examples to show the whole class how to improve their assignments. I also commented on students' group work with constructive feedback. To provide students opportunities to openly share and exchange knowledge with each other, all these comments were posted in students' group blog and were accessible to the whole class. To avoid the free-rider effect and promote collaborative work, the

instructor integrated the peer and self-evaluations (two points for each group assignment) into the rubrics. To promote knowledge sharing, commenting on each other's work was also integrated into rubrics (one point for each assignment). Please see Table 1 for privacy issues in assignments.

Table 1. *Privacy Issues in Assignments*

Privacy issues in assignments	Using anonymous names	Open to the class	Open to the public (optional)
Assignments posted in blogs	√	√	√
Students' comments in blogs	√	√	√
Instructors' comments in blogs (later stopped this practice)	x	√	√
Mid-term course evaluation	√	√	x
Peer evaluation	√	x	x
Instructors' evaluation comments and evacuation points to the group members	x	x	x
Examples from students' assignments	x	√	x

Findings

This study found scenarios and responses to such scenarios (see Table 2).

Table 2. *Findings*

Scenarios	Responses to scenarios
Analyzing students' examples (strengths and weaknesses) were viewed as violation of students' right.	Analyzing students' examples is part of instructor's teaching practice. It does not violate students' Right (FERPA).
Sharing good examples was viewed as giving privilege to some students and discriminating others.	Addressing privacy and power, privilege, and discrimination by highlighting the assignments, not the names of the students.
Public comments from instructor and students and open course reflections were viewed as violation of privacy.	Instructor changed to private comment and private course reflection by using anonymous survey.
Sharing the grades with the group members (peer/self-evaluations) was viewed as violation of privacy.	FERPA does not prohibit the discussion of group or individual grades on classroom group projects, so long as those individual grades have not yet been recorded by the teacher; Instructor made adjustment to make students feel more comfortable.

Conclusions

This study shows that there are direct legal related privacy issues, such as students' personal data and grades protected by the FERPA, and students' right to protect their privacy in the context of public website. Such policy should be transparent, and students, practitioners, and professionals should be informed about such policy to avoid misunderstandings. Moreover, in online learning environment, it is not enough to only follow the general policies on privacy since privacy issues in online learning are complicated and are not all covered by policy. When students feel uncomfortable about certain practice, instructors can make some adjustment to benefit majority students' learning and at the same time to satisfy some students' individual needs without violating the policy. There are also some privacy issues which occured in much nuanced ways in online learning process, such as open access to each other's work, transparent reflections, public comments, critical analysis of the assignments, critical comments, and collaborative evaluations of students' work.

Sharing knowledge publicly is becoming more and more important. However, it is equally important to respect and protect learners' privacy, especially in an online learning environment when privacy issues are more complex and nuanced compare with the privacy issues in a physical learning environment. Some instructors may stop some good practice such as openly sharing the knowledge among peers when such practice makes students feel that their privacy has been violated. It is a balance between respecting students' privacy and convincing students to step outside of their private zone to share knowledge openly with their peers.

Privacy is contextual, it is difficult to have a universal privacy policy that can be applied everywhere. Privacy concerns are context based and may change over times within different groups of community. New privacy issues need to be identified and some privacy contracts may need to be revised and tailored to a new group of the community or a new context (Martin, 2016). When the group of students changed, they may have different levels of sensibility on privacy.

Privacy concerns are also nuanced, and it is not just about FERPA related policies, it is also about identifying the reasons which prevent students from sharing their knowledge publicly and find out the motivations which encourage students to step outside of their private zone to embrace the diverse perspectives and enlarge their knowledge boundaries by sharing knowledge publicly. To balance the needs for privacy and the benefits of sharing knowledge publicly, students can be informed about the ways they can conveniently modify and control their privacy identification information (Biehl et al., 2013; Patil & Kobsa, 2005).

This study also shows that privacy issues in some areas are not addressed comprehensively and clearly, nor are they informed to the practitioners. Higher education institutions need to train instructors and practitioners about the privacy issues relevant to FERPA policies, particularly in an online learning environment. There should be "an urgent move to educate online behaviors in all school levels, and professional training" (Schomakers et al., 2019, p.744).

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