

A Radical Shift in Education Practice and the Question of Ethical Reflection in Pandemic Era

Joseph Munyoki Mwinzi

University of Nairobi, Nairobi, Kenya
Email: joemwinzi@live.com

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Abstract

The contemporary society is at a crucial point in the evolution of digital technology. An extensive usage of digital technology in education theory, policy, and practice poses the challenge of digital ethics. It is apt to be conversant with digital ethics, which is 'doing the right thing at the intersection of technological innovation and accepted societal values'. On the contrary, these dazzling digital technologies capture the attention and inspire imagination of human beings in the framework of teaching and learning in the current era. The speed of digital technology change and the relativity of social values cannot ignore the indispensable questions about ethics in educational theory, policy, and practice. Therefore, this treatise draws attention to the indispensable necessity of averting the reality of relativity, contingency, and subjectivity as perceived in digital technology and affirming the relevance of authenticity as the hallmark of ethical deliberations in the realm of educational theory, policy, and practice.

Keywords: Authenticity, Categorical Imperative, Contingency, Education, Ethics, Subjectivity, Relativity, Digital Technology

Introduction

A conspicuous assessment is that education has been characterized by an uninterrupted shift meant to support the rationale underlying the use of technologies in theories, policies and practices of education. The purpose all through focused on the emphasis on efficiency and engagement with minimal concern for ethical or moral responsibility in the process of engaging with technology. However, philosophical theories about the nature of morality generally divide into assertions that morality may express itself from subjective conditions and assertions that morality may be expressed in objective realities. This is simply a cause for descriptive and normative morality as it may occur when there is any choice between alternatives. Ethical questions in relation to technology and education encompass a wide range of themes, including neutrality, the digital divide, plagiarism, and transparency (Olcott, Farran, Echenique, & Martínez, 2015, p.61).

An introduction of virtual reality technology in online academic enterprise has

been perceived as an innovative cause of panacea during the phase of pandemics, but on the contrary, it is encircled by a myriad of ethical issues. This is why the focus of this treatise revolves on authenticity and integrity as crucial aspects of moral consideration and assessment in relation to the usage of technology in online teaching and learning based on interplay of existing ethical issues. This explains why pandemic induced disruptions of digital technology in the education sector (Babbar & Gupta, 2021, p.23). However, scholars have focused attention on different concerns associated with e-learning including accessibility, affordability, flexibility, learning pedagogy, life-long learning, and policy with minimal assessment of ethics (Dhawan, 2020, p.6). Thus, the moral issues occur partly because digital platforms that ratify new categories of actions or behaviors tend to necessitate new ethical rubrics. As virtual reality online education is contingent to the internet that is wrought with potential risks as technology is adopted in online courses.

The purpose of this paper is not to furnish responses to some ethical issues related to online courses using virtual reality, but to raise further inquiries for shaping solutions to the ethical issues based on Kantian categorical imperative to resolve ethical concerns through energetic self-reflection during the pandemic era. There are three formulations of Kant's categorical imperative; a rational being should act according to a maxim that is not a cause of contradiction to the universal law, act to ensure that the end does not justify the means, but vice-versa, while the means remain an end in itself, and act as legislating potency of maxims in the universal domain of ends. Therefore, relying on an inductive qualitative content analysis of archival data and observations related to the ethical issues identified during the phase of pandemic, the usage of virtual reality of technology in online courses exuded diverse ethical issues.

Objectives

- to assess relativity/contingency in education
- to examine the magnitude of subjectivism in education
- to justify authenticity as hallmark in education

Education and Digital Technology

In the era of pandemics, digital technology has penetrated into the realm of academic reserve in form of automated assistive devices and strategies to support teaching and learning. It is palpable that procedures in digital technology varies, but generally involves an engagement with programs or applications designed for problem solving or open-ended teaching and learning in the era of pandemics. It is factual that advances in digital technology have opened up many possibilities for teaching and learning such that information is more accessible and equally transmittable. However, awareness of ethics

when using an e-learning system for the teaching and learning activity and process remains alien to many learners (Almseidein & Mahasneh, 2020, p.128). Accordingly, the idea of ethical thinking and virtual reality of technology has been dominated by a vision centered on the conviction that digital technology should be a panacea to solve the question of educational delivery during the era crisis. Analogously, digital technology has retracted ethics from education yet, education itself is an ethical enterprise.

In the context of education theory, policy, and practice, the question of ethics and virtual digital technology alludes to the nature of technological connectivity defined by scalability, persistence, replicability, searchability, and interactivity whose ethical implications are immense (Malgorzata & Blommaert, 2020, p.253). The concept of scalability refers to an exposure to large and unintended ends, which is a cause for ethical concern. Similarly, persistence means that it is hard to remove from the access of learners even the most of trivial content available in the internet. Finally, terms such as replicability, searchability and interactivity implies that the internet content can emerge to be uncontrollable even by those who created it meaning that the content can be replicated, found, and altered. These features raise the stakes of online activity and contribute to the moral and ethical dimension (Olcott, Farran, Echenique, & Martínez, 2015, p.61). In dealing with ethical dilemmas in digital technology and education, the voices and perspectives of expertise in the relevant subject areas is fundamental. Thus, emerging ethical complexity in technological delivery of education can be debated and enhanced by ethical understanding, even though the issues of capacity to facilitate morality in education remain at the periphery. Thus, the question of morality protrudes in terms of technology and relativity and contingency of values in digital platforms, the magnitude of subjectivism in education, and the significance of authenticity as hallmark in education as well as pedagogical activities and processes.

Relativity and Contingency in Education

In the demesne of digital platforms and relativity of moral values, the concepts of academic integrity and ethical ramification pose glaring situations where moral practices tend to differ. It is evident that diversity in morality occurs even on academic substances where concurrence is inevitable. Paradoxically, relativity is the claim that standards of truth, rationality, and ethical morality do not exist and subsequently, there are no philosophical absolutes and intellectual universalism (Baghramian & Carter, 2022, p. 15). A synonymous view is that relativity endorses that all moral standards are relational either to the culture or an individual. This theory tends to ratify perspectival experience as the basis of moral causality, and thus the contingency of this strain has been escalated by the influx of pandemic/s and digital platforms as used in education. Thus, it is clear that the relativity ensuing from technology is not a cornucopia comprising of endless streams of standards, but a cause for great harm (Swierstra, 2015, p. 6). In the case of using digital

platforms in education, relativity claims tend to override ethical morality in favor of individual perspectival view in experience (Mwinzi, 2020, p. 123). However, this paper ratifies that there is a necessity for integrating morality in digital technology as reflected in the first formulation of Kantian categorical imperative that an action ought to align to the maxim which translates to a universal law without contradiction. It follows necessarily that there is nothing which is at liberty from moral standards and therefore, digital platforms cannot subsist by being regulated by moral relativity.

The implication is that ethics extend far beyond any single context or enterprise and this is why Kant states that a true moral proposition must not be tied to any particular conditions, including the identity of the person making the decision. A moral maxim must be disconnected from the particular physical details surrounding its proposition and should be applicable to any rational being. According to Kant, this first formulation leads to having a perfect duty not to act by maxims that result in logical contradictions. However, in the current digital platforms, relativity is associated with imperfect duties, and consequently can translate to educational dystopia because of subjective preferences.

On the contrary, failure to complete imperfect duties does not attract blame but there is possibility of praiseworthy once such duty is accomplished because it is done beyond basic duty and responsibility is taken. Imperfect duties are circumstantial, meaning that one cannot reasonably exist in a constant state of performing that duty. What differentiates perfect and imperfect duties is that deficient duties are never truly completed. Therefore, the first formulation of the categorical imperative appears similar to the moral principle or universal ethical tenet which upholds that someone should not impose on others what is unacceptable to oneself. According to Kant, the first categorical imperative parallels the universal ethical tenet (Bauer, 2017, p.571). However, this moral principle is neither purely formal nor universally binding, and therefore, is empirical in the sense that applying it requires context, which is paraphrase of relativity. Similarly, the universal ethical tenet is also a hypothetical imperative in the sense that it can be formulated, and its 'if-then' relationship is open for dispute, which is a cause for relativity.

Subjectivism in Education

In the phase of pandemics, there is an upsurge of the prospect of crisis facing ethics under the influence of technological innovations. As a result, technological innovations are at autonomous and consequently, moral subjectivism ensues. In ethics, subjectivism is the view that objective moral properties do not exist and therefore, ethical statements are simply arbitrary because they are devoid of immutable truths (Olejárová, 2017, p. 276). On the contrary, the morality of moral statements depends on the perceptions as well as the conventions of an individual. At this point, any ethical sentence is purely an individual's discernments, estimations, and inclinations as defined by identifiable subjectivity. Subsequently, the impacts of pandemics tend to transmute and enlarge the mentorship

space of learner-educator ecosystem, while there is no concern for ethics (Babbar & Gupta, 2021, p.4). In this case, subject content outweighs the value of mentoring the end-user into a state of self-mentorship which may turn out to be true, false, or misleading. Hence, in order to cope with the perils of the pandemic, education theory, policy and practice emphasized only on ensuring that the content on its grid accumulated dots without moral reference.

It is glaring that in the realm of researchers, scholars, authors, editors, and distributors are separate entities and ethical deficiency reveals splinters of debatable academic accountability (Peters, 2019, p.6). It is blatantly probable that retracted ethical standards across the system, translates to collective fiasco in the end. According to Kant, the second formulation of the imperative ensues that humanity should be treated not merely as a means to an end but always at the same time as an end. A divergent assessment is that technology during the pandemic era has transformed education into a reality whose recipients have the mandate to operate in a world of self-defining ethics – where the end is alleged to justify the means! In it is accentuated that pandemics have forced technological systems to rapidly restructure and ethical dilemmas have become more common in education theory, policy, and practice.

During the era of pandemics, the ubiquity (universality) of the internet has become an obvious reality that from software bugs (error, flaw or fault), new applications, programs, etc. have coincidentally circumvented the ethical precincts that underpin society. In order to understand the imminent ethical crisis and why current circumstances are so different, it is necessary to understand why education using digital technology during the pandemics may overlook ethical obligations. In this case, the Theory of Interdependence and Modularity is applicable which holds that when new technologies emerge, there is a tendency to be tightly integrated in the design because dependence among components exists across the entire system. This is the theory explaining the reason why morality is compromised to embrace digital technology to facilitate teaching and learning during the pandemic era (Gülcan, 2015, p. 2622). In order to combat this fragility, one entity must take tight control of the system's overall design to ensure performance in terms of safeguarding ethical standards. However, as digital technology continues to evolve and impose its impact on education practice, 'regulation' is an essential attribute that educators and scholars tend to violate and flout (Rogers & Sizer, 2010, p.244). It is rational to petition for regulation because there has to be interplay between ethical principle and digital technology in education. This is why there is relevance of Kantian moral imperative that every rational action must be considered not only a principle, but also an end.

Apparently, most ends are subjective in nature because they need only be pursued if they are in line with a hypothetical imperative (hypothetical imperative demands conditional reason i.e. insists on how to act to achieve a specific objective). Thus, for an end to be objective, it should be pursued categorically. In this case, second formulation of

categorical imperative is pursued because in itself, it forbids using a human being as means to a certain end, but as an end. In Kantian ethics, one cannot be treated as a means to an end. Therefore, the second formulation of the categorical imperative maintains that it is a moral duty to pursue an end that augments equity and equality. In the contrary, the equipment used for digital technological is open to rampant malware and viruses and thus, what is to be downloaded, clicked and shared to facilitate education is an element of ethical concern. Furthermore, there are many websites containing inaccurate or false information. It is the position of this paper that ethics require adequate appraisal and estimation of the content to be used for teaching and learning. The question of patent, fairness and creative commons matter contribute to ethical issues (Bauer, 2017, p.578). In the era of pandemics, it is equally glaring that there are myriads of copying and pasting with minimal understanding of potential ramifications.

Authenticity as Hallmark in Education

In a philosophical stadium, the concept of authenticity is an ethical feature classified as a value sustained by its intrinsic worth. Nonetheless, what is the meaning of being 'authentic' in education? An educational perspective underscore that authenticity is a complex of unique and certain traits with ethical and metaphysical reference. This is where moral responsibility has an absolute weight. During the era of pandemics, there is a candid resolve to initiate digital technology as an educational initiative, but authenticity remains a powerful ideal defined by conceptions of truth, individual identity and self-appraisal as generated by pervasive dedication to authentic learning, authentic pedagogies, authentic curriculum, and authentic assessment as central elements of education practice (Aldosemani, 2020, p.79). This is where truth is the conformity between what is in the mind and the concrete reality, while identity is the metaphysical state of being or existence, and consequently, self-appraisal is an individual introspection. As a hallmark of ethical consideration, authenticity in education attracts the third formulation of the imperative (of Immanuel Kant) which accentuates that every rational being ought to act as an author and legislator of the maxims in the universal demesne of ends.

The essence of authenticity is characterized by positive moral and ethical interaction whereby the learner and educator have an obligation to recognize the ideas of other scholars and consequently facilitating in drawing more clarification (McDougall, 2015, p.99). Here, the responsibility of human beings who are involved in education is to act according to the maxims that harmonize with a possible domain of ends, whereby an end refers to ethical absolutes. An autonomous commitment is not subjugated to the subject of moral protocols emanating from the one-self just as others, such that authenticity breeds intrapersonal and interpersonal benefits (Chen, 2019, p.61). Hence, such legislatives are binding with universal submission n relative to the conduct at all levels, and by all modes of academic delivery (Jongman-Sereno & Leary, 2019, p.134). It is at this moment that

authenticity is perceived as a track against falsity in education theory, policy and practice as gauged around definite external reality of moral norms. It constitutes an ontological claim about diverse levels of reality, within an epistemological slant in learning and also in the process of constructing knowledge. A meaningful and incisive education translates into the learning outcomes that are more real-life significance (McDougall, 2015, p.95). In this locus, authenticity intersects debates about universality and relativity with important implications for educational ethics and liberal values.

In a meaningful education, human beings have a perfect duty not to act by maxims that create incoherent or impossible states of natural affairs in the name of rationalization or universalization. In the contrary it is equally true that human beings have an imperfect duty not to act by maxims that lead to unstable or greatly undesirable states of affairs for all parties involved. Therefore, if integrating technology in education theory, policy and practice is detrimental to ethical standards, then an action is irrefutable. This treatise attracts the view of reasoned judgment as inevitable and morally permissible under deontological ethics or the fundamental principles as reflected in the Kantian deontology: epistemic rationalism, motivational rationalism and deliberational rationalism (Spahn, 2020, p.3). Consequently, using the formula of the universal edict (categorical imperative), there are some irrationalities and contradictions in terms of its adoption whereby during the time of pandemics contravening authenticity as hallmark of ethical considerations in teaching and learning resolves to use technology contradicts the original motive of functional education. In this case, technology becomes a negative cause irrespective of there being some morally admirable consequences. This explains why this discourse emphasizes that though digital technology appears to be a panacea to facilitate education during the pandemic era, it is assessed by ethical reflections where authenticity is undercut. In this context, authenticity emerge as spontaneous, deliberate and incessant appeal which converses in various stances to the indelible world of values by means of deeper essence of obligations for an individual, objective, and subjective perspectives of individuals' experiences (Bauer, 2017, p.571).

Accordingly, ethical understanding is categorized into three types including the self-focused understanding which explores the implication for specific action such as the consequences of acquiring information through plagiarism, data construction, image manipulation, etc. using digital technology since pandemics have minimized the possibility of physical education practice. This is deontological in nature because it is directed towards consequence-based thinking. It draws attention to the magnitude of destruction emanating from the act. This is an area where ethics in education is under constraints. In an equal measure is the second category that thinking about other identified realities is essential in a moral yardstick. This moral thinking is defined by the three formulations of categorical imperatives.

In the preliminary level, inclusion of ethics to control digital technology in

education ought to emanate from the thinking that a rational being should act according to a maxim that is not a cause of contradiction to the universal law, act to ensure that the end does not justify the means, but vice-versa, while the means remain an end in itself, and act as legislating potency of maxims in the universal domain of ends (Timmermann, 2013, p.60). Similarly, the third type of thinking is ethical thinking, which is thinking about other unknown realities which consists of interplay of other factors in education. This is a wide or macro realm of morality and consists of ethical thinking on the effects of the actions of an individual on multiple and distant perspectives. This type of thinking is a composite of complex perspectives defined by diversity of understanding of roles and responsibilities in online interactions. While these ways of thinking are not mutually exclusive, it is obvious that learners are predominantly guided by self-satisfaction when making ethical decisions about online learning and virtual reality of interacting with technology.

In the context of exploring authenticity as hallmark of ethical considerations in education, this treatise articulates that during the era of pandemics and the influx of digital technology, the processes and activities of teaching and learning tend to remain at the self-focused level. The implication is that dependency of education on digital technologies exposes it [education] to ethical aberration, where online intervention measures are highly required, such that the existence of a token obligation depends on the possibility of a moral action (Timmermann, 2013, p. 57). Accordingly, moral sensitivity is inevitable to counteract the potential peril of abusing digital technology as perceived in online actions. It is at this point that this treatise draws attention to the pandemic era and an automatic compromise of moral standards as reflected in the formulations of the categorical imperatives. Therefore, in the context of ethical stadium, moral choices have got consequences; good or bad, negative or positive and the end effects may pose infinite implications in education. Therefore, relying on an inductive qualitative content analysis of archival data and observation related to the ethical issues noted during the phase of pandemic, the usage of digital technology in online education exudes critical ethical eccentricities.

The Framework for Ethical Thinking in Pandemic Epoch

This paper outlines that thinking about ethics in consensus with academic engagement during the period of pandemic crisis is a moral issue. However, a definite impasse is that an increase on educational reforms to parallel digital technology and to overcome the perils of pandemics upsurges the influx of ethical dilemmas in education (Buchanan, 2019, p.2). Similarly, there are conspicuous ethical dilemmas at the level of theories, policies, and practices of education. There are various ways of thinking through the identified ethical obstructions including relativity, contingency, subjectivism and authenticity. At the level of individual learner or an educator, there occurs interplay about self, moral, and ethical parameters that deter the processes and activities in an academic

stadium. An apt integration or evaluation of relativity, contingency, subjectivity and authenticity in education forms the hegemony of meaningful education (Sevilla, 2018, p.24). It follows necessarily that morality as the basis of ethical implication is pertinent behind every academic engagement irrespective of digital or virtual reality of digital technology. In order to resolve such dilemmas emanating from digital technologies, the ethical principles which underpin education should identify the long-term effects and consequences of the ubiquity of digital technologies and retain control within every part of the academic curricula. In this case, initial education about the potential harm of digital technologies of the devices and applications connected to the internet has to be explored based on the principle of causality – the cause-effect relationship. This is where ethical principles are required to evaluate digital technologies. It is at this point where ethical thinking is needed to examine the extent of activities and impacts of digital that lead to ethical complexities in education.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this expose underscores that virtual reality of digital technology is fundamental in the processes and activities of education in the epoch of pandemics. However, there are ethical or moral issues that ensue once digital technology is used to facilitate educational programs. In this case, application of ethical thinking to the practical concerns of digital technology in education emanates as new technologies (platforms, applications, programs, etc.) continue emerging and being used during the pandemics, new choices befall in an equal measure (Gülcan, 2015, p.2624). One of the fundamental choices is how to deal with ethical dilemmas that transpire in education theory, policy, and practice. It follows necessarily that digital impasses and ethical dilemmas caused by new technologies are inevitable in education. As new technologies are taken up, it is the initial use that leads to discovery of the ethical complexities that precede the technology. Thus, in education, the consequences of unethical decisions regarding virtual digital technologies have the potential to be extensive due to the nature of the internet in terms of digital platforms and relativity, contingency, and subjectivity in education. On the other hand, the significance of authenticity as the hallmark of ethical deliberations in educational theory, policy, and practice plays the role of appraising relativity, contingency, and subjectivity in education. The relevance of ethical assessment ratified by this treatise is the Kantian categorical (not hypothetical i.e. moral commands are conditioned by individual desire or motive) imperative where moral commands transcend individual desires and motives.

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