“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less.”
“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”
“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.”

How is a quotation from Through the Looking Glass appropriate to a discussion of ethics in flexible education? We think Lewis Carroll’s humorous dialogue reflects two prominent characteristics of flexible-education discourse: ambiguity and power. Both factors exert considerable influence on the process of ethical decision making, and that process is the focus of this chapter.

Flexible learning has been a part of adult-education discourse and practice for decades; however, the meanings associated with it have varied considerably over time. Such ambiguity creates challenges in communicating about flexible education; it can also create barriers to practicing it responsibly. Without a shared understanding of this concept, there is no firm basis for deciding “whether to support or resist the changes that parade under the banner of flexibility” (Nunan 2000, 50).

One factor behind this constantly shifting discourse is the many forces and conflicting agendas shaping flexible education. Each suggests a different “master” of both the rhetoric and practice. Trying to negotiate these forces and agendas may cause us to conclude that politics or impersonal forces such as the economy or globalization—rather than personal values—are more in control of our own practice than we are ourselves. We may even feel that we have no choice but to compromise those values...
when they conflict with others’ goals or decisions, especially when they are determined by those at higher levels of power. How can we negotiate the competing demands of multiple would-be masters in a way that keeps our personal and professional integrity intact?

We discuss this question as reflecting the moral-ethical dimensions of flexible-education practice. We do not suggest how you should act in particular situations, but we do encourage you to consider the importance of personal analysis and decision making as the basis for ethical day-to-day practice. These processes are a necessary foundation for flexible education that is not merely sustainable, but also sustaining: that is, that supports and strengthens the learning projects of individuals, groups, and communities.

**FLEXIBLE EDUCATION: POLITICAL OR MORAL UNDERTAKING?**

We began with the metaphor of “mastery” because it suggests power and control, two concepts so prevalent in contemporary educational discourse. In the scholarly literature, it’s assumed that all education, including flexible education, is “political,” meaning that it reflects differing, sometimes inequitable, distributions of power (e.g., Jakupec 2000; Cervero and Wilson 2000; Sissel 2001). Various examinations of the concept of flexible education emphasize benefits to those at different places in the social and educational power hierarchy (as you read in other chapters). Is the flexibility manifested in the production of flexible employees, thus benefiting employers? Is it the hope of institutions looking for flexible alternatives to brick-and-mortar expansion? Is it access to an education no longer in-flexibly bound by age norms, standardized levels, and traditional formats, thus benefiting learners who missed out “the first time around”? Does flexibility consist in allowing instructors to teach in ways that express their own goals and needs as professionals? Flexible education can be all of these things, but it cannot serve all stakeholders equally in each context.

We agree with Nunan (2000, 50) that “as educators, we must be clear about the social values that we trade in when we embrace discourses, methodologies, and ideologies that employ the term flexible.”
But education is not just social and political; it is also an individual moral undertaking (Newman 1999). Political analyses don’t provide final answers; they “open on to normative perspectives, to questions about our fundamental values” as individual practitioners (Herman and Mandell 1999, 17).

Recognizing the moral dimension of flexible education helps us to express effectively—rather than to compromise—our values in practice. Answers to our most basic questions—who should be served by flexible education? what should flexible education entail? and who should decide?—depend on personal judgments. Some of these judgments depend on our personal beliefs of right versus wrong; others reflect our attempts to decide between good and better approaches or between possible and seemingly impossible courses of action (Weston 2009). These are moral judgments, based in personal world views and values. However, since none of us live or practice outside of a social context, such personal moral judgments are shaped and mediated by our culture and society and then further influenced by the organizational contexts within which we practice flexible education. Learning how to balance and negotiate these many factors is an ongoing process.

Compromise is inevitable in any kind of social context. Although we may strive to be “true” to our values and goals as individuals and educators, negotiation and compromise are abiding characteristics of our practice. But how do we decide when deliberative compromise is appropriate and when, regardless of personal costs, we should stand firm and refuse to compromise? No single answer, appropriate for everyone, exists. But we do have strategies and resources that we may use to clarify contextual ambiguities, formulate our own answers, and stay grounded in our own values.

One of us teaches a course as part of an online master’s program in adult education that uses many such strategies and resources. We’ll discuss how they help us to understand the ethical dimensions of a situation and decide on a course of action that integrates our integrity as individuals and professionals with our commitment to collaborative and collegial action. In this way, the focus changes from “taking sides” to determining “what each side is right about” (Weston 2009, 13).

We’ll first give some general background on the process and approach we’re advocating. Then we’ll offer some examples of ethically charged
choices that many flexible educators must make on a day-to-day basis. We finish with some focused questions intended to further your own “ethical fitness” (Burge 2007, 107).

The course, entitled “Teaching Adults Responsibly,” helps students to understand and negotiate the social, organizational, and personal (identity) factors that influence their ability to practice their own ideas of responsible teaching.

Most of the students are educational practitioners, but initially, they exhibit a lack of experience in focused ethical reflection. While they show “plain moral competence” (Walker 2003, 8)—the recognition that values and principles should guide their actions—they are generally not able to clearly articulate those values and principles or what ethical practice means to them. Thus, they fit Burge’s description of professionals who are “unable to distinguish all the competing rights in an ethical dilemma or . . . unwilling to reason their own way to a decision” (2007, 108).

Although the students have little or no experience in focused reflection on ethical issues in their practice, they bring many examples of personal practice experiences that they recognize as having ethical dimensions. Their examples include mandated curricula or teaching methods that they believe are inappropriate for their students; a requirement to use assessment instruments that they suspect have little relevance beyond providing data to sponsor agencies; institutional implementation of teaching-learning technology without staff training, or that limits access for many potential students; and pressure from administrators to cover up poor performance by another member of the teaching staff. From the starting point of their experiences and stories, the students quickly become engaged in exploring different theories, concepts, and resources as the basis for developing their personal approaches to responsible, or ethical, teaching of adults.

The first resource we discuss here is the one that the students initially welcome as an apparent source of definitive answers: abstract systems of ethics that have been developed and taught over millennia. Burge (2007) reviews some classic ethical decision-making frameworks as she encourages distance-education and online-learning practitioners to accept “the real challenge in being one’s own applied ethicist” (110). Each ethical framework emphasizes a different idea of what is deemed to be right: “the
greatest good for the greatest number,” “justice or fairness,” or a “virtuous character,” among others. Each approach seeks an appropriate balance between rights and responsibilities, based on a unified system of uniform core values, social goals, and actions that express these (see, for example, the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, www.scu.edu/ethics/, and the W. Maurice Young Centre for Applied Ethics, www.ethics.ubc.ca. Reflecting on such differing values and goals may help practitioners to identify which ones are most important to them.

However, the students, themselves practicing educators, soon notice some limitations to such formal ethical frameworks. First, these formal frameworks ignore or minimize the importance of the students’ particular contexts, contexts that not only suggest, but sometimes demand, negotiation and compromise. Second, such systems emphasize a single core value, offering little help in prioritizing the multiple values, goals, and responsibilities that apply in people’s personal and professional lives. And third, ethical systems are often presented through the device of “ethical dilemmas”: short, overly simplified scenarios to which readers or students are asked to apply these universal ethical principles as a way to “judge” the rightness or wrongness of actions that have already occurred. Weston (2009) offers the example of educators who ask students to apply the principles of these systems to fixed ethical dilemmas as a way to “develop” a framework for moral-ethical decision making, particularly in traditional-aged college students. However, flexible-education practitioners are more likely to need guidance in bringing the analytical process to consciousness, reflecting on it, and refining it than in developing it from the bottom up. And practitioners don’t need guidance in judging others’ behaviour as ethical or unethical; rather, they need help in forming their own judgments about how they themselves should act in practice environments that are complex and in which the forces operating on them—as well as their own goals and responsibilities—are often conflicting and difficult to negotiate.

Although a knowledge of formal ethical frameworks doesn’t provide the practical guidance necessary for day-to-day ethical decision making, it is a good resource and starting place for thinking about ethical practice. Introducing students to these frameworks also helps them to clarify what exactly they do need to guide their professional decisions. And although
it is initially surprising to these practical-minded students, one thing they need, and will soon begin to apply to their own situations, is good theory.

Kurt Lewin, often referred to as the father of social psychology, once wrote that “nothing is more practical than a good theory” (1951, 169). The students soon find that some of the most practical theories they need to know for ethical decision making are those that deal with organizational structure. Our own experience in moving back and forth between the administrative side and the teaching side of a large university has revealed how little understanding each group has of the others’ needs, goals, or even value to the organization. Even a brief introduction to tools that allow them to analyze the roles, processes, structures, and conflicts that characterize their specific organizations helps these practitioner-students to begin understanding the multiple factors that influence their ability to practice ethically. Once they understand these factors, they can consider how best to negotiate between organizational forces and their own values and beliefs about ethical practice. The students also examine three educational theories—functionalist, conflict (Marxist), and interpretivist (Feinberg and Soltis 2004)—that entail different beliefs about society, the relationship between individuals and society, the role of education in society, the “proper” relationship between students and teachers, and so on. The students begin to see how the organizations within which they teach overtly or more subtly reflect particular goals and values, which may or may not reflect their own.

It is equally important to understand ourselves and our relationship to our context. As Margaret Urban Walker (2003) notes, each of us operates within a web of influences and responsibilities that determine the things that are most important to us and suggest how we should act in a specific situation. Yes, there is a universal aspect to our moral judgments: they reflect the shared nature of human concerns, those structures and interests about which we care deeply and in which we find meaning. However, these elements are not arranged and emphasized uniformly across everyone’s lives. The particular nature of real life is reflected in the way individuals develop, prioritize, and live out their own values (Walker 2003), a particularity not reflected in universal ethical frameworks.

What practitioners need is not a universal framework that we can apply personally but rather a coherent and stable personal framework
that reflects the particular nature of our lives, our values, and our practice contexts. Therefore, students get readings and activities to help them clarify both their personal and professional values and identities (e.g., Appiah 2005).

Through analyzing social, organizational, and personal dynamics and conflicts, each student comes to see that in an ethically reflective person, private life and professional practice are not separate spheres. On the one hand, personal ideals and values have a role in “giving meaning to work [and] interpreting professional responsibilities” (Martin 2000, vii). On the other hand, although a person’s “moral persona” (Walker 2003, 9) is the core of his or her ethical context, it is neither static not completely private. Finally, the course discussion emphasizes the importance of community in helping practitioners to overcome one of the biggest challenges to ethical decision making and action: incomplete information. We live and work in situations in which all the information needed to make an ideal decision is seldom available (Walker 2003). Nash (1994) exhorts us that “every resolution to an ethical dilemma . . . must consider the act, the intention, the narrative, the community, and the political structures” (quoted in Burge 2007, 111). However, his comment disregards the partial nature of the evidence available to us as limited, fallible human beings. Yet because we live and work in community, we have communication possibilities that can take us beyond our personal limits. Rather than thinking for others, we can (and should) think with those who are affected by our decisions, including our students, our peers, and others within our organizations (Walker 2003).

Finally, just as information gathering should not be a solitary activity, neither should our analysis of this information. Certainly, solitary reflection has an important place in moral-ethical decision making. However, unless we expand our analysis beyond solitary reflection, we may attain only a narrow and unnecessarily partial view by excluding perspectives that challenge our interpretation (Walker 2003). In the course “Teaching Adults Responsibly,” students practice this collaborative process through group projects and peer reviews of each other’s analyses of their teaching experiences. In this way, each person gets multiple perspectives on how he or she might best balance and negotiate all relevant factors to allow ethical action. As a result, often what had seemed to be a relatively simple
decision, suggesting an “obvious” ethical response, is revealed through collaborative examination to have been “in flow and open to change through ongoing engagement” (Weston 2009, 9).

We now leave the context of this course to offer you key questions focused on building “ethical fitness.”

BUILDING “ETHICAL FITNESS”

A big part of ethical engagement is asking questions. We agree with David Naugle’s insight that “human life is largely carried out in the interrogative mood” (2002, 83). Coming to understand what we do and why we do it is very much a process of asking ourselves challenging questions and searching for answers. In this spirit, we don’t propose to analyze or judge others’ specific decisions. Instead, let’s question some common teaching practices and their ethical dimensions as a way of developing greater capacity for ethical thinking.

Teaching staff have to analyze their context and their curricula, and make many decisions, few of which are neutral in their impact. Our focus below is on decisions about objectives, course materials, technology, instruction, and assessment. In thinking about each of these practice-related issues, take a few moments to ask yourself three personal questions related to ethical decision making: (1) What do I think would be right and wrong behaviour for me in regard to this activity? (2) Are my current practices in accordance with my perceptions of right behaviour? (3) Would I be willing to tell others what I am doing and be able to explain why I believe it to be right? (Carter 1996). Your answers are likely to give you some good insights into your own values and beliefs about what it means to practice ethically.

Objectives
Objectives are generally set in response to someone’s (including, but certainly not limited to, the learner’s) perception of general or specific “learner needs.” For example, employers see the need for workers who are skilled and can think critically in a globalized economy, content experts see the need for students to gain discipline-specific knowledge, and
learners may express a need for a credential that leads to advancement or for knowledge and experiences that promote personal development. Each of these stakeholder groups has more or less influence on objectives.

Questions: How are our learning objectives determined? Which stakeholder groups benefit from the chosen objectives? Which stakeholder groups have input into the decision and which do not?

Course Materials
The course materials from which teaching staff may choose come from a multitude of sources, in a wide variety of forms, and with many characteristics that make them more or less appropriate in different contexts. Some are free and readily available to those with online access. Others come from for-profit sources and may be costly. Some are inaccessible to students with various disabilities. Others are culturally specific and reflect the experiences of a relatively narrow range of students. Almost all include at least some content that overtly or unconsciously reflects the political nature of education. Finally, many materials have complex restrictions on their distribution and use intended to protect the rights of authors and publishers.

Questions: On what basis are course materials chosen? Whose interests are served by the content of the materials? How is educational access limited or enhanced for certain populations of learners by the specific materials chosen or produced? To what extent are diverse learner needs and characteristics represented in choice of materials? To what extent are teaching staff aware of the legal restrictions on the use and distribution of materials? To what extent do they feel bound by such restrictions?

Technology Choice
Here we use the word technology in its broadest sense, meaning not only physical tools such as information and communication technologies but also systematic methods of organization designed to structure human activity. Technology choices might range from PowerPoint presentations in a classroom, to Web-based courses offered to distant students, to “weekend colleges” offered off site. Classic course-design principles specify that technology choice should be determined by learning objectives and mediated by related factors. However, decisions are often influenced
by other factors such as cost, availability, convenience (for the institution, instructor, or students), and instructor willingness (or unwillingness).

Questions: Are educational benefits the primary factor in technology choice? Does the choice of technology limit access by particular student populations? Whose needs (institution, instructor, learner) are given priority, and why?

**Technology Use**
Educational technologies support traditional teaching-learning activities. However, two additional affordances in Web-based courses are preservation of participants’ text-based interactions and surveillance of students (Anderson and Simpson 2007) at a level well beyond what is possible in traditional courses. Most course-management systems (CMSs) allow instructors to monitor and record students’ activity in a course, often without the students’ awareness. Even when the records aspect of the CMS is transparent to students, the instructor can add a non-detectable layer of surveillance by creating a fictitious or “virtual” student, who appears to others in the class as a legitimate participant (“Who is Bill Reed?” 2005; Nagel, Blignaut, and Cronjé 2007).

Questions: What weight is given to student privacy and/or confidentiality in decisions about how technology is used? Are students notified as to the type and extent of data gathered and how it will be used? How are the benefits and drawbacks of unconventional technology use evaluated?

**Instruction**
Traditional responsibilities of instructors include meeting classes regularly, being accessible to students, providing feedback on assignments, and facilitating activities in support of learning objectives. However, familiar activities can suddenly seem unfamiliar in flexible education environments. The delivery medium may be different. Student populations may be non-traditional in age or goals. Some may be located in other countries, have difficulties with the language of instruction, and have different cultural expectations for the teaching-learning experience (Shattuck 2005; Al-Harthi 2005).

Questions: How well do instructors understand the characteristics of their students? Should instructors modify their teaching approach for
different populations of students? Are students from other cultures marginalized by dominant cultural assumptions? Do instructors feel different levels of commitment to traditional and online students?

**Assessment**

Designing assessment systems requires skill in creating approaches that effectively measure learning outcomes. As Rowan (2000, 164) notes, the “natural and normal” approach in university education is most often the written examination. However, differences between flexible and traditional post-secondary education may suggest the need for alternative assessments such as group projects or student portfolios. A new factor in assessment is reliance on technological means for detecting plagiarism (e.g., Turnitin; see turnitin.com/static/).

Questions: On what basis are assessment choices made? What weight is given to matching the goals of flexible education with assessment methods? Is students’ potential unfamiliarity with the formal academic environment recognized and addressed in communicating expectations? Are students’ intellectual property rights considered, particularly in decisions to submit papers to an external entity’s database?

**Conclusion**

Each question above represents a single decision but connects to the others in the web of activities, values, decisions, and relationships that defines an educator’s context. “Mastery,” as we used the word at the beginning of this chapter, can mean control and power, but it can also mean having great skill. To practice ethically amidst complexity, we need to be skilful in recognizing the ethical dimensions of our practice and in prioritizing our own values when confronted with competing goals and choices. We need to come up with our own answers to the questions: What does flexible education mean to me? What guides my decisions about who to teach, what to teach, how to teach… even why to teach?

Yet even when we’re clear on our own values, we may often choose to compromise, since teaching is a social practice involving relationships with organizations and other individuals with their own ethical standards.
As Weston argues (2009, 17), “It’s not so much a matter of ‘choosing sides’ as of just doing the work before us as well as we can . . . meantime resolutely and visibly expecting everyone else to approach it in the same way.”

REFERENCES


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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Melody Thompson spent years protesting, “I’m not a distance educator; I’m an adult educator.” She finally saw the writing on the wall and decided that if distance education was going to be an integral part of adult higher education, she wanted to be among those making it the best it could be. She first worked as publications editor of the American Center for the Study of Distance Education, and then spent nine years as an administrator assisting the birth and early growth of Penn State’s World Campus. In her current position teaching and advising in the Adult Education Program at Penn State, she tries daily to implement the philosophy Docendo discimus (We learn by teaching) in her work with resident and online graduate students. www.ed.psu.edu/educ/adult-education/faculty/melody-m-thompson

Lorna Kearns came to distance education through the information-systems door. After several years working in computing services at the University of Pittsburgh, she began teaching information-systems courses at Carnegie Mellon University, participating in one of its early distance-education initiatives. As instructor, advisor, and program director of Carnegie Mellon’s Master of Science in Information Technology program, she developed a profound appreciation for the intellectual curiosity, professional commitment, and personal potential of mid-career distance students. Inspired, she entered Penn State’s Adult Education PhD program in 2006. Like many an adult student, she juggles school work, family, and career. She’s now back at the University of Pittsburgh as an instructional designer with the Center for Instructional Development and Distance Education.