

Professional Ethics A Case Study Gone Awry

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Scenario

After a year of data collection and analysis, Sandy was pleased to have finished a good draft of a case study on how the presidents of major non-profit organizations use technology to facilitate leadership. On approaching the office of Carl, one of the three participants, Sandy mused happily that the article's publication would be received as both revealing and helpful.

Sandy shared an insightful finding with Carl but was taken aback when he abruptly declared, "That's not true! I never said that."

Sandy had just gone over how one of the presidents used a software program to elicit feedback on issues relating to the functioning of the organization. The president said he "had trouble picking up on what people really mean when they talk about communication issues and other things." Further, he "really didn't understand all those social cues."

Sandy's jaw dropped, "You did say exactly those words Carl. The interviews we recorded were transcribed and I personally checked all quotations word for word against the original recordings."

Carl then told Sandy, "Fine. There are only two or three organizations doing what we do. If you're going to include that in your report, then I want out of your study."

Sandy thought privately, "This is going to cancel out all of my efforts. That was his top use of technology. On the other hand, I do have his signed consent form."

(Apply the principle to the scenario for yourself before going on to read the analysis.)

Analysis

Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) were created in response to

many grievous affronts to the welfare of research participants. The primary function of IRBs is to protect research participants. Researchers must adhere to IRB requirements for protocol review and informed consent from participants. However, ethical duties do not end once a form has been signed. Throughout a study, researchers must respect the wishes of research participants and provide for beneficence toward research participants (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979/2000).

Sandy has a duty to Carl and the other participants. There is also a duty to the readers of the article. One option is to delete the reference to the particular use of technology to which Carl objects, thus satisfying Carl and keeping in the information about some of his other uses of technology.

Nevertheless, when it was published, the readers of the article would believe that Carl's use of technology was something other than what had been found. Another option would be to totally drop Carl from the case study. That would leave Sandy with only two subjects and the findings related to them are not nearly as interesting.

What is the professionally ethical action that Sandy should take?

Notes

The Professional Ethics section of *TechTrends* is edited by Dr. Andrew Yeaman on behalf of the AECT Professional Ethics Committee. Professional ethics scenarios published in *TechTrends* are fictitious (see *TechTrends* March/April, 2006, pp. 10-11). There is never any intended resemblance to specific individuals or specific institutions. The instructional purpose is to raise consciousness about AECT's professional ethics.

Members with questions regarding AECT's professional ethics may address them to Dr. Vicki Napper, the current Chair of the AECT Professional Ethics Committee: vnapper@weber.edu. Association members are expected to adhere to the Code of Ethics (see the Bylaws, Section 16). A code of professional ethics: A guide to

professional conduct in the field of educational communications and technology, edited by Dr. Paul Welliver of The Pennsylvania State University, is free online to AECT members at www.aect.org (select Publications).

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Reference

National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research. (2000). The Belmont report: Ethical principles and guidelines for the protection of human subjects of research. In B. D. Sales & S. Folkman (Eds.), *Ethics in research with human participants* (pp. 195-205). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. (Reprinted from *Federal Register*) (Original work published 1979) [Also available online: Retrieved July 12, 2007 from <http://ohsr.od.nih.gov/guidelines/belmont.html>]

Principle: AECT Code of Professional Ethics, Section 3 – Commitment to the Profession, Principle 10

In fulfilling obligations to the profession, the member shall conduct research and practice using professionally accepted and Institutional Review Board guidelines and procedures, especially as they apply to protecting human participants and other animals from harm. Humans and other animals shall not be used in any procedure that is physically invasive to them.