

Commitment To The, Ahem, Learner

By Andrew R. J. Yeaman

Over the years the *AECT Code of Professional Ethics* has been excellent for its ceremonial purposes but not so good as an instructional text. Its composition by committee is shown by principles written in overstuffed sentences, lists running on and on, and a few excessively similar principles. At this time, the Professional Ethics Committee continues to move forward by bearing in mind these limitations and considering the potential for revising the *Code*.

In particular, understanding the first section of the *Code* has been hampered by it speaking of Commitment to the Individual. Unfortunately, “individual” is a word with connotations and they can be misleading. For obvious reasons, it is preferable when giving instructions to use words that are precise in holding long-lasting and unique meaning. A better word than individual is learner, because “the learner” encompasses all those who change through acquiring skills and knowledge.

The choice of the word individual is historic and dates back to the development of the *Code* from the code of the National Education Association (Yeaman, Eastmond, & Napper, 2008). In 1929, the NEA ancestor had addressed the teacher’s professional relationship with pupils and the community (Yeaman, 2004). Commitment to the Student came in later (National Education Association, 1975) but “the student” was inappropriate for the emerging AECT because members are predominantly not teachers.

Beyond students, we also work with learners who are trainees, operators, consumers, and so on. However, “individual” was adopted in the early 1970s as a substitute for student and became part of the new *Code*. Some of us also directly serve faculty, parents, bureaucrats, and legislators, among others, which indicates “individual” is a catch-all: something becoming even more confusing when put into operation. This complex situation may also deserve the Committee’s attention.

Focusing on the individual creates a muddle because the other two sections are about society and the profession. This suggests a context whereby the *Code* is based on three political science categories: the individual, society, and professions. In the 35 years or so that have passed since the construction of the *Code*, memory of the NEA original has faded and far fewer members belong to both organizations. Thus, you might hear discussions around the doctrine of individualism and the need to foster its acceptance as an ideal.

There is nothing much wrong with advocating tolerance, the central idea of individualism, but it does little for the people directly served by the profession: the primary stakeholders. As if we were acting out a science fiction television drama or *The Tempest*, which continues to inspire them, we are in danger of forgetting our heritage and losing ourselves in a brave new world. This is due to the inadequacy in the *Code* described here.

At present, it is necessary to read *Section 1: Commitment to the Individual* carefully and with knowledge of why “student” was replaced with “individual.” Today, as in the first version of the *AECT Code*, fulfilling obligations to the individual refers to caring for the learner. From an instructional point of view, a more accurate replacement word than “individual” is needed. It is not “student.” “Learner” will do the job.

Including and Respecting Varying Points of View

The contribution invited for this issue comes from Dr. Betty Morris and it is on a principle showing our commitment to the learner. Her article draws on a life of practical experience in our profession. It reflects thoughtfully on the dilemma of holding personal values in conflict with our professional ethic for including and respecting varying points of view. The corresponding NEA professional ethic is: “In fulfillment of the obligation to the student, the educator shall not unreasonably deny the student’s access to varying points of view” (National Education Association, 1975).

I have greatly enjoyed Dr. Morris’s collegial friendship since the years when we both lived in Denver, CO. She is a well-known and highly respected leader in school library media and technology. Her textbook on administration is widely influential (Morris, 2004) and a new edition is underway and eagerly awaited.

References

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- Yeaman, A. R. J. (2004). The origins of educational technology’s professional ethics: Part one. *TechTrends* 48(6), 13-14.
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“It’s not about you, Ms. McInney”

By Betty J. Morris

Scenario

Janis Simpson, an AP English teacher at Johnson High School, thought it would be motivating for her students to do a study of controversial books. The class had already encountered several controversial novels.

The media specialist, Susan McInney, was reluctant to include such books in the collection because many of them were against her religious beliefs. “I can’t put those trashy books in my collection because I’d look like a hypocrite,” she said when confronted with the fact that students could not find what they wanted in the media center.

Chris, one of the students in Ms. Simpson’s English class, was adamant about a Harry Potter book, “I have been to four different libraries, and so far I can’t find anything for my report. I guess I will just have to buy a copy. That seems to be the only way I can get one.”

The media specialist remained obstinate: she would not purchase any books about witchcraft and sorcery.

Other students in the class were having problems locating titles like *Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger, which has been condemned and defended since the 1950s, so Ms. Simpson decided that they would do a banned book display in the entrance of the foyer of the school.

The media specialist went to her principal to complain: “When Ms. Simpson’s class puts that controversial books display in the hallway, every-

body will think I selected them and they are part of the library collection. The people at my church will certainly call me and ask me why I would select books mentioning all kinds of controversial subjects such as supporting abortion, evolution, teenage pregnancy, explicit sexual behavior, and vulgar language, to mention a few. I may have to resign my position as media specialist so I won’t be so embarrassed.”

Principle

AECT Code of Professional Ethics Section 1 - Commitment to the Individual: Principle 2

“In fulfilling obligations to the individual, the member shall protect the individual rights of access to materials of varying points of view.”

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

Analysis

Media specialists are obligated by a code of ethics to provide varying viewpoints of controversial subjects when selecting materials for the media center. Just as doctors taking the Hippocratic Oath must follow treatment that benefits the patient, so must the media specialist provide materials for their patrons on varying points of view. They have an obligation to protect the rights of students to access varying kinds of materials, and may not censor materials because of personal beliefs. It is their professional,

ethical obligation to be an intellectual freedom advocate who allows patrons to make decisions based on knowing the full picture.

Media specialists sometimes feel that they need to protect themselves from religious groups, political advocates, and other special interest groups that only want to present their own biased viewpoint. Having a selection policy that firmly states the collection will include varying viewpoints on controversial subjects is crucial. A schoolboard-approved selection policy must be in place before any problems arise. A detailed plan for handling complaints and reconsideration of controversial materials is crucial. An advisory committee should be established to handle such complaints should the occasion arise.

Recommended Reading

Whelan, D. L. (2009, February 1). A dirty little secret: Self-censorship. *School Library Journal*. Retrieved February 13, 2009, from: <http://www.schoollibraryjournal.com/article/CA6632974.html>

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Editorial Notes

The Professional Ethics section of *TechTrends* is edited by Dr. Andrew R. J. Yeaman on behalf of the AECT Professional Ethics Committee. Professional ethics scenarios published in *TechTrends* are fictitious (see *TechTrends*, March–April 2006, 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.