

Ethical principles

The original paper proposed that schools develop ethical guidelines with the involvement of staff and students. The guidelines were intended to support the school's rules for using information technology, while encouraging students to understand the ethical principles behind those rules.

This remains a useful approach.

The Australian Computer Society (ACS) Code of Professional Ethics provides a contemporary reference. Its central values are honesty, trustworthiness and respect.

For school use, these values can be expressed through a number of familiar ethical principles.

Honesty and truthfulness

Students should be honest about their work, the information they share and their use of technology. This includes acknowledging assistance from AI and avoiding deliberate misinformation.

Teachers have similar responsibilities when preparing teaching materials, assessing students and communicating with parents.

Respect for others

Digital communication should be approached with the same concern for others that would be expected in face-to-face situations.

This includes avoiding harassment, humiliation, discrimination and the deliberate spreading of harmful material.

Privacy and confidentiality

Personal information should be treated with care. Having access to information does not necessarily mean that it is appropriate to use or share it.

For example, a student may receive a private photograph from a friend. Does that give the student the right to distribute it to others?

Schools must also consider their responsibilities when collecting, storing and sharing student information.

Fairness and avoiding harm

Decisions should take account of how others may be affected.

For example, the use of AI in assessment may provide advantages to some students while disadvantaging others. A school may also need to consider whether an automated system produces unfair outcomes.

Responsibility and accountability

People should be prepared to accept responsibility for their actions, including unintended consequences.

The use of AI or another automated system does not necessarily remove responsibility from the person using it.

Respect for ownership and the work of others

Students and staff should recognise the rights of people who create information, software, images, music and other materials.

AI-generated content introduces questions about authorship, acknowledgement and the appropriate use of existing work.

Considering the wider consequences

An action may be legal and permitted by school rules but still raise ethical concerns.

For example, a school might be legally entitled to monitor student activity, but questions remain about how much monitoring is appropriate and how the information should be used.

4.1 Applying the principles throughout the school

Although students remain the focus of this paper, ethical responsibilities are not confined to them.

Teachers make decisions about student privacy, assessment, the use of AI and the selection of learning technologies.

School administrators make decisions about monitoring, security, access to information and the purchase of digital services.

Technology providers also make decisions that may affect students, including how personal information is collected, how systems operate and what safeguards are provided.

These responsibilities may provide useful examples for classroom discussion. However, detailed examination of the business practices of technology companies is beyond the scope of this paper.

4.2 Ethical principles are guides, not automatic answers

Ethical principles do not always lead to one obvious decision.

For example, a student may discover that another student is being bullied through a private messaging group.

Respecting privacy is important, but so is preventing harm.

Should the student report the messages to a teacher? Would doing so breach the privacy of others? What if the student being bullied does not want the matter reported?

Such situations illustrate why ethical principles need to be considered together.

The purpose of the methodology is to help students work through these competing considerations and explain the reasons for their decisions.

4.3 Ethical problems and dilemmas

Some ethical situations are relatively straightforward. Deliberately stealing another person's work, for example, is generally recognised as unacceptable.

Other situations involve competing ethical principles. A student may have to choose between loyalty to a friend and honesty towards others, or between respecting privacy and preventing harm.

These are ethical dilemmas. A decision may support one ethical principle while compromising another.

There are also situations where the facts are uncertain or incomplete. In these cases, students may need to establish what is known before deciding what action is appropriate.

Recognising these differences is important. Ethical education should not simply involve identifying unacceptable behaviour. Students also need opportunities to consider difficult choices, conflicting responsibilities and uncertain consequences.