

Contemporary ethical challenges

Many of the ethical problems identified in the 2000 paper remain relevant. However, developments in technology have introduced new situations and made some familiar problems more difficult to manage.

The following examples illustrate ethical challenges that students may encounter. They are not intended to provide an exhaustive list.

5.1 Artificial intelligence and schoolwork

AI systems can assist students with research, explanations, writing, programming and problem-solving.

These tools may improve learning, but they also raise questions about what constitutes a student's own work.

For example, a student uses AI to produce an essay, checks the facts and rewrites several sections before submitting it.

Has the student acted dishonestly? Does the answer depend on the school's instructions, how much assistance was provided or what the student actually learned?

A related question is whether students who do not have access to the same AI tools are disadvantaged.

5.2 Privacy and personal information

Students regularly share photographs, messages and personal information through digital services.

Information intended for a small group may be forwarded to others without permission.

For example, a student shares a private photograph with a friend, who subsequently distributes it through a class messaging group.

Who is responsible for the consequences? Does receiving information give someone the right to share it?

Similar questions arise when schools collect and store student information.

5.3 Deepfakes and digital identity

AI can now produce realistic images, voices and videos depicting people saying or doing things that never occurred.

For example, a student creates a convincing video of a teacher making offensive comments and shares it as a joke.

Even if the creator believes the video is harmless, the consequences for the teacher may be serious.

The situation raises questions about honesty, consent, reputation, responsibility and possible harm.

5.4 Misinformation and the reliability of information

The Internet provides access to an enormous range of information, but not all of it is accurate or reliable.

AI systems can also produce convincing explanations containing incorrect information.

For example, a student shares a dramatic news report without checking whether it is genuine. Other students believe the report and distribute it further.

What responsibility does the original student have? What steps should people take before passing information to others?

5.5 Cyberbullying and online behaviour

Bullying is not new, but digital communication can allow harmful material to spread rapidly and remain accessible for long periods.

A student may participate directly, encourage others or simply forward material without considering the consequences.

For example, an embarrassing video of a student is circulated through a messaging group. Some students share it because they find it amusing, while others are concerned about the harm being caused.

What responsibilities do the different students have? Should someone intervene, and if so, how?

5.6 Monitoring and surveillance

Schools have responsibilities for student safety and the appropriate use of technology.

Monitoring software may assist schools in identifying security problems, misuse of resources or potentially harmful activity.

However, monitoring also raises questions about privacy and trust.

For example, a school introduces software that records students' online activity when they use school-issued computers, including outside school hours.

Is this reasonable? Should students and parents be informed? What information should be collected, who should have access to it and how long should it be retained?

5.7 Fairness and access to technology

Not all students have equal access to computers, reliable Internet connections, AI tools or suitable places to study.

For example, a school introduces an assessment that requires students to use a paid AI service.

Some families can afford the service while others cannot.

Is the assessment fair? What responsibilities does the school have to ensure that students are not disadvantaged?

5.8 Ownership and intellectual property

Digital technology makes it easy to copy, alter and distribute the work of others.

AI systems introduce additional questions about the use of existing material to generate new content.

For example, a student uses an AI image generator to create artwork closely resembling the work of a living artist and enters it in a school competition.

Should this be permitted? Does it matter how the image was created or whether the student acknowledges the use of AI?

5.9 Digital wellbeing and social media

Social media provides opportunities for communication, learning, entertainment and social participation.

At the same time, concerns have been raised about excessive use, exposure to harmful content, cyberbullying and possible effects on wellbeing.

It is important to distinguish between demonstrated harms, possible risks and assumptions about young people's behaviour.

For example, a student spends several hours each evening communicating with friends through an online community.

Is this necessarily harmful? Would the answer change if the activity interfered with sleep, schoolwork or other relationships?

Such questions encourage students to consider the circumstances and consequences rather than assuming that all extensive technology use is either good or bad.

5.10 Ethical issues involving the design of digital systems

Digital systems may influence the choices people make.

For example, a social media platform recommends increasingly sensational material because it is likely to keep users engaged.

Students could consider whether the responsibility for sharing harmful material lies entirely with the individual or whether the design of the system also plays a role.

The detailed operation of social media business models is beyond the scope of this paper. However, these situations can provide useful opportunities to examine ethical responsibility.

5.11 Selecting problems for classroom discussion

The examples above vary in complexity.

Some involve behaviour that is clearly unacceptable, while others involve competing interests and different possible outcomes.

For classroom use, situations should be selected that are appropriate to the age and experience of the students.

Ideally, students should be encouraged to consider a problem before being told what the appropriate response might be.

The six-step methodology can then provide a structure for individual reflection, group discussion and the justification of decisions.

5.12 Perceived risks, actual harm and ethical responsibility

Not all concerns about digital technology are supported by the same level of evidence. Some harms are well established, others are possible risks, while some claims may be exaggerated or based on assumptions.

Students should be encouraged to question these claims and consider the evidence before reaching conclusions.

The following examples illustrate questions that might be explored.

Issue	Questions worth investigating
Social media use	What distinguishes frequent use from use that causes harm?
Cyberbullying	How much responsibility lies with the individual, the platform and the school?
Mental health	Does social media cause harm, contribute to existing difficulties or sometimes provide valuable support?
Algorithms	Is it ethical to design systems to maximise engagement if this may encourage harmful behaviour?
Privacy	Can young people meaningfully consent to the commercial collection and use of their personal information?
Age restrictions	Do restrictions protect young people, or might they also remove valuable social connections and opportunities?
Misinformation	Who is responsible when digital systems amplify misleading information?

These questions do not necessarily have simple answers. They may involve conflicting evidence, competing interests and different ethical responsibilities.

It is also important to distinguish between identifying a possible harm and establishing that harm has occurred.

For example, spending several hours online does not, by itself, demonstrate that a student has been harmed. The nature of the activity, the circumstances and its consequences need to be considered.

Similarly, recognising that a digital system provides benefits does not mean that its possible harms should be ignored.

The purpose is to encourage students to examine the available evidence, recognise uncertainty and consider the ethical responsibilities of those involved.

This approach is consistent with the updated six-step methodology, particularly the emphasis on distinguishing facts from assumptions and considering different viewpoints.