Honorable Technology

By Sylvia Tomasz and Joseph Ugoretz

"It’s not honors English. It’s honorable English," said Mr. McCann of La Jolla High School in 1979. Three thousand miles away and 30 years later, this principle is still true. So true that Mr. McCann’s wisdom has become something of a motto for Macaulay Honors College. Beyond just honors classes or programs, the concept of honorable behavior is one that is essential for all students -- but too often relegated to a page in the student handbook or a mandated paragraph on a syllabus forbidding plagiarism.

What is missing from such notifications is a comprehensive, ethical, and honorable approach to teaching and learning, especially when technology is involved and is as crucial to a program as it is to ours. This is something we learned the hard way.

All Macaulay students are provided with laptops and digital cameras as part of their honors scholarships. But we don’t just give out tech gifts and run. Our core belief is that, like scholars and explorers throughout history, students should make use of the latest, most innovative, productive tools of their age and understand that tools by themselves are not value-free. Although a student's laptop is not a tool on the order of magnitude of an atomic bomb, the principle is the same: With power, greater or lesser, comes responsibility. So we work with students from the moment they are handed their laptops to train them and to challenge them to understand the power they hold.

Of course, in the digital age, "tool" is an increasingly amorphous concept. Wikis, blogs, and social networking -- these days it’s the rare student who is not connected in these ways, ways unheard- and unthought-of just a few years ago. Perhaps precisely because students take it all for granted, our responsibility is to help them become thoughtful and self-critical. For while they're learning and researching and presenting their academic work through these tools, they're also doing a great deal more – with real potential for harm.

Recently, we had two instances where things went wrong, which gave us a chance to consider how to make them go right. The first incident involved a student collaborative Web site project. In one of our four New York City-focused seminars, students create neighborhood Web sites with audio, video, photographs, text, survey data, interview transcripts, and all the products of their research into historical immigration and present-day communities. In order to make these Web sites a truly collaborative product, students use wikis to gather the material, arrange it, and present it online. Unfortunately, because the wiki is open to editing, malicious vandalism is always a potential problem. Last year, one group of students found to their dismay that their hard work had been erased and replaced with the random rantings of pranksters from another campus.
There were immediate and practical remedies and responses. Because it’s the nature of a wiki that all changes can be rolled back and the previous state restored, no student work was ultimately lost. Still, we realized the need to lock down the wikis more securely so that while they can be as public as the students or instructors desire, only registered users can make changes. Even more importantly, we realized that student training needs to address the ethical "why" as well as the pragmatic "how." So our doctoral student instructional technology fellows, who work directly with our undergraduates in class, in the honors lounges, and via e-mail, came up with strategies to bring ethics to the students’ attention: an attempt to head off problems before they arise.

The second incident from last year, involving a different group of students, brought up even more directly the need for attention to ethics. A student who was unimpressed with the work of students from different campuses posted a negative review on his Facebook page. When one of the critiqued students responded, also on Facebook, the original poster escalated his comments into an attack on the students and their college phrased in racial and sexual terms. Things he probably would never have said in person were said electronically and disseminated widely. Because all of this happened on Facebook, it was outside the traditional channels of college communication and interaction and thus outside of our institutional control. However, because Facebook is a world also open to all, we were able to see the offense when the students who were attacked called on us to address it.

A number of consequences resulted, for the offender, his victims, and for the rest of the community. First, over the course of a series of conversations, a skilled student affairs professional led the offending student to understand that his Facebook interactions, far from being innocuous or private, had real effects, real impact, on real people – his classmates and peers. Second, when he accepted his responsibility and demonstrated empathy towards his victims, they in turn chose not to push for a public apology or formal sanctions. They were satisfied with knowing that the perpetrator had achieved an emotional connection to those he had hurt. In other words, all parties, including those not directly involved, learned from this incident, in ways important and somewhat unexpected. We all now recognize that while Facebook or other such sites may seem like the internet Wild West, without law, regulation, or consequences, in fact, there are people out there, people to whom responsibility and respect are owed.

Most importantly, students learned that honors takes place within a community. And that they could rely on the support of their friendly neighborhood sheriff: the college administration. So another consequence: we didn’t just ride into town to save the day, then ride out again in an e-version of Shane, but rather we insisted that everyone be part of our community, respect the standards of that community, and participate in enacting and enforcing them.

As part of this process of developing community awareness, we decided to develop a digital ethics code parallel to our existing honors code (see page 4 of this link). All members of the community, from students to instructional technology fellows to faculty to staff, are working together to develop this code. Importantly, it will go beyond a mere bulleted list of rules to include case studies, discussion questions, and practical exercises, as well as links to university policies, legal and copyright resources, and current news. Because the code will include open-ended and unresolved questions, it will naturally continue to evolve and serve as a place for
further interaction and true inquiry. (The draft version of the new code, along with the open-ended case studies, is online here.) Beyond Macaulay, we hope this code will serve as a springboard for discussion in the wider honors and academic communities.

The academic and the e-community have this in common: both necessarily go beyond the classroom and beyond direct, physical interactions. So Facebook, for instance, is necessarily part of our honors community. It's not just "out there," it’s also "in here" – whether we invite it in or not. If we truly believe in technology as integral to teaching and learning (as we do), we must remain open to these tools – even when they’re misused. We don't, we won't, forbid their use (as if we could); rather, we promote their use – but in ethical ways.

It's ironic that the violation of feelings and ethical standards led to a new awareness of responsibility, human contact, principles of behavior: of the common decency that a civil society runs on but often takes for granted. Because the new tools gave students the opportunity to do harm, they also gave them the opportunity to see that harm and develop new standards which they could follow and reinforce in thoughtful and intentional ways.

As we teach students to use these new tools, it’s incumbent upon us to teach them how to use them not just in the practical sense but also in the ethical sense: not just how can they be used, but also when and where and why they should be used. While there are no guarantees against bad behavior, we want students to think before they post, before they e-mail, before they edit a wiki, before they blog, and so forth. As always, it's the thinking, not the tool, on which all education, including honorable education, rests.

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