Students Lived Experience in the Ethical Challenges of E-Learning: An Interpretive Phenomenological Study

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A R T I C L E I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Professional ethics is the most important issue nowadays and should be considered in e-learning more than in face-to-face education. This study was conducted by the hermeneutic phenomenology of the lived experience of e-learning graduate students who had registered virtually. Seven students were selected by Purposeful sampling. The selection of participants was done voluntarily. The interviews were conducted I September 2020 to July 2021. The data collection method was a virtual semi-structured interview and the interview analysis method was Diekelmann, Allen Tanner. Lincoln and Guba's criteria were used to ensure the Credibility, Transferability, and Dependability of the data. The main theme was "ethics of emphasis on words and neglected in action", which was obtained from three sub-themes: "intentional and unintentional plagiarism", "student exploitation" and "disregard for human dignity". The present study showed that academic dishonesty had been experienced by students and this event affects the opinions about the quality of e-learning courses and even the reputation of the institutions offering these courses. It is suggested that more research be done in this field to identify the influential layers of faculties 'behavior on students' attitudes and performance.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of technology and its influence in the field of teaching and learning has led to the expansion of e-learning in higher education (Lopez-Catalan & Bañuls, 2017; Manian, 2020; Mulhanga & Lima, 2017). Developing countries are moving in the same direction, however at a slower pace. In Iran, this growth has been evident, especially with the expansion of Covid-19, this growth has accelerated (Negahban, 2021; Salimi, Namvar, Rastgoo, & Soleimani, 2022).

According to Seaman et al. During the fall semester of 2016, the number of students enrolled in one or more online courses was more than 6.3 million, or almost a third (31.6%) of the total number of students. Of these, almost half (14.9%) enrolled exclusively in distance learning courses. The rest (16.7%) participated in distance and face-to-face (combined) course methods. That is, 52.8% of all students have completed at least one distance course (Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018). These

data show that online courses are now part of the mainstream of higher education. In addition, online education is no longer solely dominated by for-profit institutions. Rather, the vast majority (69.1%) of public university administrators consider online courses important for the future of their institutions (Brown & Green, 2021).

The hidden curriculum is a set of ethical, value-based teachings that are often taught implicitly. It is the foundation for communication and influences future interactions (Uleanya, 2022). A hidden curriculum can be a program of inability to have negative empathy, and it can affect students against the goals of the curriculum, which are explicitly stated in the curriculum (Gurbutt, Duckworth, Partington, & Gurbutt, 2020).

Furthermore, there are many debates and ambiguities about whether online teaching and learning methods affect the professionalization process of students. To what extent is the virtual learning environment effective in developing

students' professional ethics? In this context, it becomes more critical to conduct a phenomenological study of students' lived experiences of online learning. These findings can help educate policymakers and institutions' perceptions of student experiences and potentially improve online teaching practices. This manuscript focuses on students in Iran, but the lessons learned can guide them beyond the country's borders, especially in developing countries.

The present study used hermeneutic phenomenology to explore a complex phenomenon that is worth a thorough and detailed investigation. Phenomenology is a unique approach with its own theoretical and philosophical approach, which is different from other approaches. It is the systematic study of lived experience and its inner meanings. Hermeneutic phenomenology was used as a research method to discover the differentiation of people's experiences and the meaning of those experiences for students. We could not find the hermeneutic phenomenological study about students' experience of ethical challenges, and e-learning, especially among Iranian students. The situational aspects of the interviewees were relevant to the research because the understanding of a phenomenon must be related to the specific context in which the phenomenon was experienced. Therefore, this study provides important findings and results that contribute to the field and contribute to the expansion of knowledge in this area. This study is aimed: to explore the students' experience of ethical challenges during online learning.

METHODS

This qualitative study was performed with the approach of hermeneutic phenomenology. In qualitative research, especially in hermeneutic phenomenology, the researcher is considered as a research tool (Korstjens & Moser, 2017) and the researcher's preconceptions and experience about the studied phenomenon should be considered (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2021). In this study, the main researcher was someone who has two years of experience having a master's degree in e-learning, he first wrote down his experiences and then went to the first participant for an interview. All interviews were conducted by the lead researcher who has ten years of experience in qualitative research focusing on interpretive phenomenology.

Participants

Using the purposeful sampling method, seven participants were selected from the master's students of e-learning in Tehran-Iran. They were students who had experienced this phenomenon. The criteria for entering the study was to complete at least one semester in the e-learning master's course. The fact that the participants were from different backgrounds enabled us to see the phenomenon from a "broader perspective". Participants' names and identities were not revealed and pseudonyms were given, as they were informed before the interview, to protect their privacy and encourage them to express confidence and openly. Participants were given nicknames PP1, PP2, PP3, etc. Before data collection, participants were briefed on the nature of the study. They were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point or stage without any explanation.

Collecting Data

After obtaining permission from the ethics committee with the ethics ID IR. SBMU. SME. REC.1399.052 and permission to start sampling, a summary of the goals of the project in the virtual group in which all e-learning students are members. The interviews started on Skype and with a general question, express your experience of participating in this course, and continued with the following questions. An example of the interview questions was as follows. What changes in your attitude/values/ethics after passing this course created in you? Share your experience of attending a professional ethics class. Interviews ranged from 53 minutes to 210 minutes.

The interviews were recorded with the permission and information of the participants, and they were assured that the recordings would only be heard by the principal investigator and that the transcript would be anonymously included in the report. All the names mentioned by the interviewees in the interview were removed from the text.

Data Analysis

Diekelmann et al. (1989) follow a step-by-step approach and it is relatively easy to follow, and most studies in the field of education have used this approach (N. Diekelmann, 2001). The process of analyzing the data obtained from the interviews were used. This approach is known as a specific framework recommended for analyzing Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenological data. In the present

study, after conducting the first analysis, the analysis of Diekelmann et al. (1989) was performed as follows.

1. All interviews were read to gain a general understanding.
2. Interpretive summaries of each interview were written.
3. The research team analyzed the selected texts.
4. Any disagreement over the interpretation was resolved by returning to the text.
5. Common meanings were identified by comparing and contrasting the text.
6. Relationships between themes were extracted
7. Draft topics were presented to the team along with examples of texts. Answers or suggestions were applied in the final draft (N. L. Diekelmann, Allen, & Tanner, 1989)

The hermeneutic cycle and the discourse between the text researcher and the participant were repeated repeatedly, and the daring discourse continued to the fusion of horizons of the team members. Simultaneous interviews and analysis began in September 2020 to July 2021. Because no new data was obtained after the seventh interview and after interpretation, the research team reached a consensus on achieving data richness.

Rigour

To ensure the accuracy and validity of the data, Lincoln and Guba's criteria were considered. The implementation of each of these criteria in the present study is as follows:

Credibility: Stable attendance, lengthy interviews, or long-term interaction with participants. Spending enough time familiarizing myself with the environment, testing negative data, building trust, and recognizing data to obtain rich data was one of the steps taken to ensure the validity of the data. Given that the method of analysis in this study was based on the approach of Diekelmann et al. 1989 as a team. Therefore, researcher triangulation was another validation method that was performed in the present study.

Transferability: Providing detailed explanations about the participants, describing not only the behavior and experiences but also their context, so that the behavior and experiences are meaningful to an outsider is one of the measures taken to ensure the data transfer capability in the present study.

Dependability and confirmability: A clear description of the research process from the start of a research project to the development and reporting of findings can be approved by auditors (observers) outside the research team.

Reflexivity: Examining the researcher's conceptual lens, explicit and implicit assumptions, assumptions and values, and how they affect research decisions at all stages of the study were among the measures taken.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The participants' experience showed the distance between what was taught theoretically in ethics and what was observed in behavior and speech. The central theme was "ethics of emphasis on words and neglected in action", which was obtained from three sub-themes: "intentional and unintentional plagiarism", "student exploitation" and "disregard for human dignity". The following is an example of the students' experiences that emerged from these themes. Considering that the ethics course is also taught in the curriculum of this program, the students were asked about the effectiveness of this course.

Intentional and Unintentional Plagiarism

What the students all acknowledged during the course was the issue of copying content on the Internet and uploading it as an assignment in the e-learning system, which only one student stated was reprimanded by the professor but had no effect on his subsequent performance this has been observed in the production of educational content by some professors. "As for the storylines, if they had not prepared themselves, it was nice that order someone to provide them with this storyline following the educational content. I think I do not know most of the professors who are there because of the troubles and many jobs. "Most professors have no role in creating content. I think it is a copy and paste".

The term copy-paste was frequently used in the speeches of all participants, who both acknowledged that they were doing their homework and that they felt that their teachers had no problem with it and were doing it themselves. "I realized how much a teacher's behavior can affect his students. For example, I did not like my teacher's behavior". "Observe it in all its stages. Because if it does not comply, it will have a very bad effect on professional ethical behavior, so that several other things that must be observed in professional ethics,

such as the master himself not copying and pasting".

Lack of reference is another issue that was not considered by professors and students in the student experience. "Or that the professor himself should be the content producer if this is his job. If it is not himself, at least give the complete reference, and one thing that was not ethical at all and was in most of our content was that we did not see the reference of the content. In the first semester, I used to refer to everyone's assignments, but from the first semester, I didn't give anymore and no one gave me any problems. This was not ethical in my opinion. Well, I finally got these from somewhere". Another student explained: "In content discussion, you are allowed to use other people's content in a way. If you used the same, it should be the person's name, but you can add other things to this content. Add things to PowerPoint, but I think a lot of these videos and "The clips were just copied and pasted".

Student Exploitation

Another case in which participants' statements were repeated was the subject of assignments that give students the feeling that the professor's benefit is more important than the student in creating this assignment, for example, the following are significant: "I'm so sorry, but unfortunately there were assignments that I felt were not practice. The teacher wants to publish these student translations later for his own promotion. I think this behavior is not suitable for academics and this colonialism is not suitable in all its forms. This discourse was also reflected in other interviews: "Some professors think more about their own interests. They want to use me to serve their interests, it is a form of apartheid in the relationship between professor and student".

When asked to describe the behavior that made her feel this way, she continued: "For example, a teacher wanted to have content for herself, then she came and saw I know how to use software and create content. This teacher puts so much work on my shoulders and demands so much work from me that he took away sleep and food from me. These are all outside of my coursework, so much so that if I want to think about my other subjects, I have to be busy all day and night. While it has been seen that if the professor herself does not produce high-quality content with this method, that is, as much as the student expects, his work is not of quality. She has a

power that can be coercive. "Until we fulfill his requests, he will not send the final grade of the semester to the education office. So that you have to do whatever you can for him to give a grade. I had to give up my thesis work to be able to fulfill their requests.

Another participant shared her experience: "Do you believe they gave us the textbook of professional ethics to translate? I worked very hard. I got help from two of my university colleagues. I also told the professor. She said that they would put their name as a translator in the book. But she called me for a few months that you did not translate well. I will not give you your name either. I was so embarrassed in front of my colleague".

Ignorance of Human Dignity

Regarding the treatment of students by professors, cases of violation of human dignity were mentioned, which was evident in the speech of two people entitled "disregard for respect for human dignity". "It often happened to me that I saw insulting behavior from some professors. I thought that because my age difference from them is so big, maybe they think they can treat me like that until I saw the same with adult students. They behave disrespectfully, I was upset when I saw my teacher misbehaving with someone who has the same social status as him. It was very bad for me, not once, twice, or thrice". Some professors were very polite and their materials were referenced and their timings were appropriate and they spoke respectfully, which means they understood that their audience is human beings. But unfortunately, some people behaved inhumanely. You may think I am exaggerating, but it was true".

Analysis of the interviews showed that simply passing the formal course entitled Professional Ethics cannot significantly change the attitude, insight, and performance of students, and the hidden curriculum plays the most important role in the moral development of learners. It is noteworthy that the learner acquires moral quality through informal curriculum and observation of the behavior of teachers and peers. Therefore, policymakers need to know that the solution is not only possible through the formal curriculum, and it is also important to pay attention to the hidden curriculum. It should be noted that the formal curriculum and the hidden curriculum are interrelated. A hidden curriculum cannot be developed without the development of a

formal curriculum. Curriculum trustees should emphasize the formal curriculum as well as the hidden curriculum. Where the learner acquires the theoretical aspect of moral development through the formal curriculum should be emphasized by observing the moral behavior of others and the moral sensitivity of professors and peers (Ghanta; Nahardani, Rastgou Salami, Mirmoghtadaie, & Keshavarzi, 2021).

Academic dishonesty refers to committing or contributing to dishonest acts by those engaged in teaching, learning, research, and related academic activities, and it applies not just to students, but to everyone in the academic environment can take many forms, including deception, use of unauthorized resources, collusion, and plagiarism (Krou, Fong, & Hoff, 2021; Surahman & Wang, 2022).

A complex set of factors can influence students to engage in academic dishonesty (Amigud & Lancaster, 2019; Lee, Kuncel, & Gau, 2020). In a basic model, McCabe et al. (2002) identified several direct causes. These include a lack of interest and/or unpreparedness, pressure to do work, and misconceptions about what constitutes academic dishonesty. Lack of transparency in lessons and policy/exam expectations, belief that others are behaving similarly, and the notion that if someone is caught cheating, there are no serious consequences (McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2002).

Intentional and Unintentional Plagiarism

In the present study, all of the above was mentioned in some way in the participants' statements. Which of these factors is involved depends on the type of academic dishonesty in question, especially whether it happens spontaneously (panic cheating) or as a result of deliberate preparation and preparation (Planned cheating) (Golden & Kohlbeck, 2020) in the present study, both cases were experienced by participants.

The phenomenon of academic fraud/e-fraud is not new, but given the widespread growth of higher education and the development of information and communication technology in recent years, this problem remains for the higher education system. Zerkina et al. 2021 state in this regard: In the field of distance education, during the epidemic, academic fraud/electronic fraud among students has increased significantly, and the scope of this

problem has expanded with the advancement of information technology. The potential for widespread use of fraud/e-fraud by students during their studies raises doubts about students' academic performance, the quality of education for professional activities, the devaluation of students and their families' capital in education, and the undermining of e-learning (Zerkina, Chusavitina, & Kostina, 2021).

Anjankar et al. (2021) critically assess the ethical dilemmas of e-learning: plagiarism and copyright infringement "Literary theft and copyright infringement are traditional problems associated with e-learning. Students enrolling in an e-learning program can easily collect fake information and use it for their assignments, projects, and research papers (AJ & PM, 2021).

Herdian et al. 2021 explained in their article: "There is always a way to cheat", Our research shows that academic misconduct in the form of 'online learning collaboration' is common. In this process, student learning has strategies for committing academic fraud in a variety of ways, including downloading a friend response file in the online system by logging in using a standard username and password that does not change by the student. In addition, Yan students preferred to behave dishonestly by changing their names by imitating their friend's work rather than trying to answer the question. And used WhatsApp Group's program to cooperate in fraud (Herdian, Mildaeni, & Wahidah, 2021). In the present study, the statements of two participants who referred to their classmates who did not provide their homework file as negative behavior and group homework as a part of learning that the results of research from other countries show that this problem also has a global dimension (Fatin, Grafiyana, & Wahidah, 2021; Peterson, 2019; Tolman, 2017).

Among the examples of non-academic behavior that the participants in the research both acknowledged and stated in some of the professors employed was plagiarism in various ways or neglect of plagiarism by students, which could have led to repeat the behavior in the student. In this regard, previous studies have pointed out the importance of the role of professors in students' non-academic behavior. Chirikov et al. conducted a longitudinal study in 2019 to determine the effect of faculty behavior on reducing the non-academic behavior of

students in 33 Russian universities. The results showed the importance of the faculty role in reducing non-academic behavior in engineering students in Russia (Chirikov, Shmeleva, & Loyalka, 2020).

Ignorance of Human Dignity

Immoral behavior has become an increasingly controversial issue in higher education institutions. There has been debate about the reasons for the rise of immoral behavior. But many of these arguments have problems. A key problem is the lack of empirical results on faculty members 'perceptions of their role in the phenomenon, how cultural contexts affect university lecturers' perceptions of their role in academic integration, and whether there should be a contradiction between what they believe their role should be. It has been no. And the types of roles they play. Gottardello & Karabag (2020), using a qualitative research design to facilitate comprehensive access to faculty members' beliefs and practices, demonstrated that faculty believe that the role of teaching goes beyond encouraging them to learn the subject matter and includes providing education and information to students. It is about the importance of avoiding academic abuse such as fraud and plagiarism (Gottardello & Karabag, 2020).

Similar studies were found on the incidence of academic dishonesty among professors in the experience of e-learning students, including a cross-sectional study conducted by Rokni et al. (2020). The prevalence of plagiarism in the scientific community of the country was significant (Rokni et al., 2020). Kamali et al. Science was presented as a national problem among university professors. "Based on the results, plagiarism should be considered not only as a student-related issue but also for faculty members", the researchers said (Kamali, Abadi, & Rahimi, 2020).

Student Exploitation

Exploitation was one of the sub-themes that was reflected in the statements of the participants in the study. A review of past literature has shown that terms such as exploitation, and academic apartheid have been reported in other studies, but have been expressed in the case of assistant professors and freelance professors, with one author describing this exploitation as neoliberal (Brennan & Magness, 2018).

Cohen & Baruch presented a conceptual model of doctoral student exploitation by supervisors and its consequences. Finally, this model suggests that student abuse and exploitation may hinder student achievement or even End them (Cohen & Baruch, 2021). A similar experience was mentioned in the statements of the participants of the present study as a consequence of student exploitation. The present study can also be considered in line with the results of Cheng & Leung. The researchers also interviewed 13 doctoral students in Hong Kong and found that they all had experienced exploitation by supervisors (Cheng & Leung, 2021).

CONCLUSION

Currently, formal online education is growing at an incredible rate. However, many fear that online courses will not be as strict as in-university courses. This is largely due to the perception that students are more likely to cheat in online programs. The present study showed that this academic dishonesty had been experienced by students and this event affects the opinions about the quality of e-learning courses and even the reputation of the institutions offering these programs. Therefore, according to the obtained results, it is suggested that future studies focus on the consequences of scientific dishonesty in e-learning courses and methods to reduce academic dishonesty in these courses.

The limitations of this study are in data collection techniques. The best type of data collection in the phenomenology of face-to-face interviews, but due to Covid conditions, the interviewees preferred to interview virtually, so understanding the feelings and emotions of participants was based solely on tone of voice and laughter or crying. Which can be one of the limitations of the present study. The authors of the article would like to thank the participants in the research who shared their experiences with the research team.

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