

Demonstration: Ethical edgescases – a middle space bringing system builders into contact with ethicists

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Abstract

This demonstration will run in a workshop mode that explores the issues that arise in relying purely upon ethical frameworks and checklists to influence the behaviour of LA practitioners. It will introduce a newly proposed conception of “practical LA ethics” which places the burden of ethical behaviour upon practitioners. An enabling ethical edge cases database will be used by participants to bring system builders into dialogue with legal and ethics experts, so adding to the sophistication of discussions of this important topic in the Australian context.

Keywords

Learning Analytics, ethics, edge cases, scaling adoption

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1. Introduction and Focus

Learning Analytics (LA) has, since its inception, had a strong emphasis upon ethics, with numerous checklists and frameworks proposed to ensure that student privacy is respected and potential harms avoided. However, they often contain contradictory instructions, and few practitioners appear to be following them when building LA solutions. Indeed, McNamara, Smith, and Murphy-Hill (2018) recently demonstrated that the ACM code of ethics (<https://www.acm.org/code-of-ethics>) had no discernible impact upon the decisions made by 63 software engineering students and 105 professional software developers in responding to a set of 11 ethical vignettes. It is likely that similar results would be found for the many checklists and best practice approaches that have been proposed in LA, although this is an area where well-grounded research is desperately required. This does not imply that practitioners do not want to be ethical. Indeed, Johanes and Thille (2019) recently demonstrated that practitioners often have a strong desire to “do the right thing” when building LA solutions.

It seems that an approach to ethics that is grounded in frameworks and checklists alone is not sufficient. One possibility is to provide a “middle space” (Knight, Buckingham Shum and Littleton, 2014), where LA practitioners can work with ethicists, legal experts, and other stakeholders to deliver solutions that meet the needs of society. A new approach (Kitto and Knight, 2019) argues that we should adopt approaches grounded in practical ethics, and presents a database of “ethical edge cases” which holds potential to provide this middle space.

This workshop will introduce the ethical edge case database, and provide participants with a forum to provide feedback on its format, enhance and extend it. The publicly served database can be accessed at www.ethicalEdges.com, and an open source instance is available for modification (at <https://github.com/uts-cic/EdgeCaseDB>). All input is welcome!

2. Workshop description

This demonstration will take the format of a short (1.5 hours) workshop which interactively brings participants together to work on the ethical edge case database, by adding edge cases and extending existing ones. Participants will be introduced to a number of key ethical and legal frameworks that could impact upon LA, and asked to

consider their influence on LA practitioners to date. They will then be introduced to the conception of an edge case and shown how these can drive the development of LA tools, before being guided through the construction of new edge cases and their entry into the LA edge case database.

2.1. Planned workshop schedule (1.5 hours)

Time allocated	Focus
15min	Introduction
15min	Ethical frameworks and checklists – an introduction
45min	Building ethical edge cases
15min	Discussion and wrap up

2.2. Upon completing this workshop participants will be

- Familiar with some of the major ethics frameworks that have been developed in LA
- Aware of some of the tensions that exist in these frameworks when applied by practitioners
- Familiar with the ethical edge case database and how it can be used to bring LA practitioners into contact with those who are working on the ethical and legal aspects of LA solutions.

2.3. You will need to bring

- An interest in building LA solutions, the ethical/legal aspects of those solutions, or both!
- A desire to participate in formulating ethical edge cases that can be used to seed the next generation of LA ethical practice.

3. Credentials of team

Dr Kirsty Kitto is a Senior Lecturer of Data Science at UTS’s Connected Intelligence Centre (CIC). She is working with the postgraduate.futures team at UTS to extract Canvas data using the Live API and then pull it into student and staff facing LA dashboards.

Dr Simon Knight is a lecturer in the Faculty of Transdisciplinary Innovation. His research interests include learning design and educational technology, educator use of evidence in their practice and learning analytics (particularly writing analytics)

Associate Professor Linda Corrin is Academic Director, Transforming Learning at Swinburne University of Technology. Her interests in learning analytics range from how students and teachers interpret learning analytics data/visualisations to the ethical implications of the use of data in higher education. She is a co-ordinator of the ASCILITE Learning Analytics Special Interest Group and co-founder of the Victorian/Tasmanian Learning Analytics Network.

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