

A Systematic Review of Ethics and the Identification of Its Nature in Collaborative Learning from the Perspective of Postgraduate Students at the University of Tehran

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ABSTRACT

Simply emphasizing collaborative learning does not guarantee its realization in higher education. Therefore, ethics in students' collaborative learning – as a mediating link for realizing collaborative learning in higher education – becomes important because collaborative learning is based on ethical principles that also ensure the effectiveness of collaborative learning. We conducted a review of the research literature in two separate stages to more accurately identify the research gap. Therefore, the research was conducted with a mixed-methods approach and with an applied purpose. Corresponding to the two questions, in the first objective, we sought a general understanding of ethics in students' collaborative learning, and therefore, we identified components related to ethics in students' collaborative learning in documents. In the second objective, we sought to identify the nature of ethics in collaborative learning from the perspective of graduate students at the University of Tehran to know what definition students participating in the research have of ethics in collaborative learning. Therefore, we raised two specific questions, using a systematic review method for the first question and a focus group research method for the second question. The systematic review was conducted using Wright et al.'s seven-stage method. From screening 4017 articles, 29 articles were selected, the analysis of which was classified with open and exploratory coding (over 1000 initial codes) into 4 main themes and 15 sub-themes. In the focus group, we interviewed 12 master's and doctoral students from the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences at the University of Tehran. The answer to the second question was classified into 47 sub-themes and 15 main themes. In the review section, we had a more comprehensive look at the definition of ethics in collaborative learning, which included the definition, theoretical foundations, communication, challenges, and solutions of ethics in collaborative learning. In the focus group finding, we examined ethics in collaborative learning from the perspective of educational science students (because it had received less attention in the reviewed articles). The finding of the second question showed that students emphasized the sharing of knowledge and the absence of scientific stinginess.

Keywords: Learning strategies, Educational Policies, Ethical responsibility, Learning and social commitment.



Introduction

Problem statement: Collaborative learning is increasingly used in higher education systems (Qureshi et al., 2023; Nurdiana et al., 2023), thereby ensuring the quality of educational and learning processes in higher education (Yang, 2023; Lipponen, 2023; Holmes, 2012). Consequently, higher education leverages all available tools to facilitate collaborative learning pedagogy (Živojinović et al., 2023; Peramunugamage et al., 2023; Nurdiana et al., 2023). This underscores the priority of collaborative learning in higher education systems, highlighting the necessity of ethics in students' collaborative learning. Ethical collaborative learning among students ensures the effectiveness and sustainability of collaborative learning (Laal & Laal, 2012; Murray, 2017; Gillies, 2023), and its significant positive outcomes, such as enhanced critical thinking skills, problem-solving abilities, improved communication skills, team building, and a better understanding of diverse perspectives (Kanchana & Cherukuri, 2024; Alwahaishi, 2020; Tang, & Lee, 2020; Shorten et al., 2023), emphasize the importance and necessity of this topic. Ethics in collaborative learning are evident in: 1- Members' support for each other during the learning journey; 2- Moral and civic integrity; 3- Communication values; 4- Accountability and responsibility; 5- Ethical sensitivities and decision-making; 6- Collective reciprocal communications based on supportive learning.

Purpose: Our research consists of two specific Purpose. first, we seek a general understanding of ethics in students' collaborative learning and, therefore, identify the components related to ethics in students' collaborative learning in the documents. second, we aim to identify the nature of ethics in collaborative learning from the perspective of graduate students at the University of Tehran.

Questions: we posed two questions: 1. How do previous articles explain ethics in collaborative learning among students? 2. From the perspective of students participating in the research, what are ethics in collaborative learning?

Background: We examined the research background in two stages. First, before precisely defining the topic and with a holistic view, we searched for "collaborative learning" in English articles from the last ten years in the Scopus scientific database and used vos viewer software to observe the research gap related to this topic. The initial review of the background revealed that less attention has been paid to the topic of ethics in collaborative learning, and therefore, we pursued ethics in collaborative learning. In the second stage, we searched for more detailed backgrounds related to this topic.

Methodology

The research approach is multi-method qualitative and applied in terms of purpose. The first question was addressed using a qualitative approach and a systematic review method (Wright et al. model), and the second question was addressed using a qualitative approach and the focus group method. In the systematic review method, we seek a general understanding of ethics in students' collaborative learning and its related components. Therefore, in the systematic review, we examined documents. In the focus group method, we seek to identify what ethics in collaborative learning are from the perspective of students participating in the research in order to examine the conceptual scope of ethics in collaborative learning from the students' point of view. In fact, we used an exploratory qualitative design, and the reason for using the focus group method in the second part was that it allowed us to study people's opinions about a common phenomenon (Bazargan, 2010). For the question of how previous articles explain ethics in collaborative learning among students, articles from reputable scientific databases Scopus and SID (English articles 2015-2025 - Persian articles 1399-1404) were searched using the search string ("ethics" OR "moral" OR "principles" OR "values") AND ("collaborative" OR "group" OR "team") AND ("learning" OR "education" OR "instruction" OR "training" OR "study") AND ("university" OR "higher education" OR "college" OR "academic") AND ("students" OR "learners" OR "participants" OR "learner" OR "pupils") and "ethics in collaborative learning" or "ethics in students" or "students' perception of ethics" or "ethical collaborative learning". After screening 4017 initial sources, based on various criteria, 29 articles were finally selected. For qualitative evaluation, various criteria such as PRISMA and high, medium, and low quality and peer coding were considered. The research method for the second question was carried out with a qualitative approach using the focus group method. Twelve research participants were selected purposefully, based on criteria, and for convenience. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The data were analyzed in Collaizi's seven steps. Validation was performed through member checking. 4. Findings The answer to the first question was analyzed and classified into 4 main themes and 15 sub-themes.

Findings

Findings indicate that teaching ethical principles to students leads to strengthening their sense of responsibility and empathy. For example, Yeom et al (2017) showed that ethics education can increase the ethical sensitivity of nursing students. Tammeleht et al (2019) point to the use of case-based learning methods in which students face real-world cases and ethical challenges. This type of learning not only enhances students' analytical abilities but also prepares them to act in real-world situations. Azimpour et al (2024) addressed ethical changes in university students in the post-corona era, and their findings indicate that global events can affect students' ethical attitudes. Several studies, including Cimino et al (2022) and Sprague & Diaz-Sprague (2019), focus on examining and analyzing group training. These trainings allow students to actively participate in group discussions and decision-making, and to practice ethical values in practice. In fact, it emphasizes the education of groups of two or more people in collaborative learning. Articles continue to emphasize the importance of collaboration and positive interactions in learning. They point out that rich and supportive learning environments can help create and expand ethical relationships among students. Some articles also address the challenges and shortcomings in teaching ethical issues in universities and suggest that new and more effective methods need to be used to improve these teachings. The answer to the second question was classified into 15 main themes and 47 sub-themes. creating a platform for positive group interactions and respecting human dignity are other components that, if absent, will render collaborative learning unethical. Transparency, fairness, and accuracy in collaborative learning processes and activities, fair evaluation and decision-making, classroom management and project leadership, and teaching based on ethical and professional principles, participation in financial matters related to teamwork, creating an atmosphere free of fear and uncertainty, maintaining faithful intentions, and adhering to ethical principles in specific circumstances were among other issues that students pointed to in defining ethics in collaborative learning.

Conclusion

The discussion and conclusion can be addressed in several sections: 1. Our definition of ethics in collaborative learning affects students. 2. The definitions of ethics in collaborative learning provided by students can be categorized in several ways, including individual components, group or social components, cultural components, and technological components. 3. When ethics in collaborative learning are mentioned, its positive aspect, such as being committed to tasks, comes to mind sooner than its negative aspect. However, the negative aspect of ethics in collaborative learning also has an important effect on removing obstacles to collaborative learning. 4. In examining the concept of ethics in collaborative learning, a distinction must be made between the ethics and moral aspects of collaborative learning. Based on the aforementioned points, suggestions are presented in several categories: suggestions for policymakers and educational managers, suggestions for professors, group leaders, and educational leaders, and suggestions for learners.

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