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STATEMENT:

Preamble

The purpose of this document is to provide a set of basic ethical principles that define the professional responsibilities of teachers.

Ethical principles are conceptualized here as general guidelines, ideals, or expectations that need to be taken into account, along with other relevant conditions and circumstances, in the design and analysis of University teaching in all disciplines and courses offered at Vancouver Island University (VIU).

The intent of this document is not to provide a list of ironclad rules, or a systematic code of conduct, along with prescribed penalties for infractions, that will automatically apply in all situations and govern all eventualities. Departments are expected to discuss these ethical principles and to develop interpretations and examples relevant to their specific discipline or program.

Similarly, the intent is not to contradict the concept of academic freedom, but rather to describe ways in which academic freedom can be exercised in a responsible manner.

Principle 1:

Content Competence

A teacher maintains a high level of subject matter knowledge and ensures that course content is current, accurate, representative, and appropriate to the position of the course within the student's program of studies.

This principle means that a teacher is responsible for maintaining (or acquiring) subject matter competence not only in areas of personal interest but in all areas relevant to course goals or objectives. Appropriateness of course content implies that what is actually taught in the course is consistent with stated course objectives and prepares students adequately for subsequent courses for which the present course is a prerequisite. Representative ~~ness of~~ course content implies that for topics involving difference of opinion or interpretation, representative points of view are acknowledged and placed in perspective. Achievement of content competence requires that the teacher take active steps to be up-to-date in content areas relevant to his or

her courses; to be informed of the content of prerequisite courses and of courses for which the teacher's course is prerequisite; and to provide adequate representation of important topic areas and points of view.

Specific examples of failure to fulfill the principle of content competence occur when a teacher teaches subjects for which she or he has an insufficient practical experience and skills, when a teacher misinterprets research evidence to support a theory or social policy favored by the teacher, or when a teacher responsible for a prerequisite survey course teaches only those topics in which the teacher has a personal interest.

Principle 2:

Pedagogical Competence

A pedagogically competent teacher communicates the objectives of the course to students, is aware of alternative instructional methods or strategies, and selects methods of instruction that, according to research evidence (including personal or self-reflective research), are effective in helping students to achieve the course objectives.

This principle means that, in addition to knowing the subject matter, a teacher has adequate pedagogical knowledge and skills, including communication of objectives, selection of effective instructional methods, providing opportunity for practice and feedback, and dealing with student diversity. If mastery of a certain skill (e.g., critical analysis, design of experiments, arc welding) is part of the course objectives and will be considered in evaluation and grading of students, the teacher provides students with adequate opportunity to practice and receive feedback on that skill during the course. Teachers will be aware of the existence of learning styles differences and vary teaching styles accordingly as appropriate and possible.

To maintain pedagogical competence, a teacher takes active steps to stay current regarding teaching strategies that will help students learn relevant knowledge and skills and will provide equal educational opportunity for diverse groups. This might involve reading general or discipline-specific educational literature, attending workshops and conferences, or experimentation with alternative methods of teaching a given course or a specific group of students, or soliciting and considering student feedback.

Specific examples of failure to fulfill the principle of pedagogical competence include using an instructional method or assessment method that is incongruent with the stated course objectives (e.g., using exams consisting solely of fact-memorization questions when the main objective of the course is to teach problem-solving skills); and failing to give students adequate opportunity to practice or learn skills that are included in the course objectives and will be tested or demonstrated.

Principle 3:

Dealing With Sensitive Topics

Topics that students are likely to find sensitive or discomforting are dealt with in an open, honest, and respectful way.

This principle means that the teacher acknowledges from the outset that a particular topic is sensitive, and explains why it is necessary to include it in the course syllabus. Also, the teacher identifies different perspectives on the issue and provides students with an understanding of the complexity of the issue and the difficulty of achieving a single “objective” conclusion. Finally, in order to provide a safe and open environment for class discussion, the teacher invites students’ perspectives on the issue, sets ground rules for discussion, is respectful of students even when it is necessary to disagree, and encourages students to be respectful of one another.

As one example of a sensitive topic, an analysis of a literary text can cause distress among students who perceive it to contain racial slurs. A reasonable way to deal with this distress would be to explore these interpretations openly and fully, acknowledging the emotions they bring up. Then, the class might consider other possible interpretations of the text, as well as the relevance of context, and explore the process of checking the validity of each different interpretation to ensure that it is not based on a misreading of the text.

Another example might come up in a criminology class, in which there is a discussion of the over-representation of specific racial groups in the prison system. An analysis of the complex reasons for such over-representation, followed by an open discussion of the issue may be one way to ensure that students do not perceive the presentation of such facts to be judgmental or prejudiced.

An additional example of a sensitive topic occurs when a film depicting scenes of child abuse is shown, without forewarning, in a developmental psychology class. Assuming that such a film has a valid pedagogical role, student distress and discomfort can be minimized by warning students in advance of the content of the film, explaining why it is included in the curriculum, and providing opportunities for students to discuss their reactions to the film.

Principle 4:
Student Development

The overriding responsibility of the teacher is to contribute to the intellectual development of the student, at least in the context of the teacher’s own area of expertise, and to avoid actions such as exploitation and discrimination that detract from student development.

This principle means that the teacher’s most basic responsibility is to design instruction that facilitates learning and encourages autonomy and independent thinking in students, to manage the learning environment in order that everyone is treated with respect and dignity, and to avoid actions that detract from student development. Failure to take responsibility for student development occurs when a teacher comes to class under-prepared, fails to design effective instruction, coerces students to adopt a particular value or point of view, or fails to discuss alternative theoretical interpretations (see also Principles 1, 2, and 3).

Less obvious examples of failure to contribute to student development can arise when teachers ignore the power differential between themselves and students and behave in ways that exploit or denigrate students. Such behaviors include sexual or racial discrimination; derogatory comments toward students; taking primary or sole authorship of a publication reporting research conceptualized, designed, and conducted by a student collaborator; failure to acknowledge academic or intellectual debts to students; and assigning research work to

students that serves the ends of the teacher but is unrelated to the educational goals of the course.

Besides being unethical, some of the behaviours described above may constitute violations of human rights statutes and related University policies. (See Vancouver Island University policies on [Human Rights](#), and [Conflict of Interest Related to Employees and Students](#).)

Principle 5:

Dual Relationships With Students

To avoid conflict of interest, a teacher does not enter into dual-role relationships with students that are likely to detract from student development or lead to actual or perceived favouritism on the part of the teacher.

While there are definite pedagogical benefits to establishing good rapport with students it is the responsibility of the teacher to keep relationships with students focused on pedagogical goals and academic requirements. .

Some forms of dual relationships can be addressed satisfactorily by the teacher notifying his or her supervisor of the nature of the relationship and making alternative arrangements for supervision or evaluation of the student. Examples of potentially problematic relationships that may be handled in this manner include accepting a teaching or grading role with respect to a member of one's own family, or an individual with whom one has a close personal relationship or is a client, patient or business partner. Even if the teacher believes that she or he can maintain objectivity in situations such as these, the perception of favoritism on the part of other students is as educationally problematic as actual favouritism or unfairness. (See Vancouver Island University Policy on Conflicts of Interest related to employees and students.)

Certain forms of dual relationships are inherently improper. Examples include any form of sexual or intimate relationship with a current student; lending or borrowing money from students; giving or accepting from students gifts of significant value. It is the responsibility of the teacher to avoid entering into dual relationships of this nature. (See Vancouver Island University Policies on Human Rights and Personal Harassment.)

Principle 6:

Confidentiality

Student grades, other academic records, and private communications are treated as confidential materials, and should be released only if the student has consented, in writing, to disclosure and if the disclosure is necessary for the performance of the teacher's duties. An exception to this is if you have reasonable grounds to believe there is a risk of significant harm to the health or safety of the student or others.

This principle means that teachers are responsible for treating student grades, academic records and private communications as strictly confidential. Rules or policies regarding confidentiality are clearly outlined in the Academic calendar and are available from the Registrar's office, and should be disclosed in full to students.

In the absence of student consent, any of the following could be construed as a violation of confidentiality: providing student academic records to a potential employer, researcher, or private investigator; discussing a student's grades or academic record with another faculty member not directly involved in the student's instructional program; and using privately communicated student experiences as teaching or research materials.

Similarly, leaving graded student papers or exams in a pile outside one's office makes it possible for any student to determine any other student's grade and thus fails to protect the confidentiality of individual student grades. This problem can be avoided by having students pick up their papers individually during office hours, or by returning papers with no grade or identifying information or grade visible on the cover page.

It is recognized that there are circumstances where teachers may need to share information about a student with other University employees in order to properly fulfill their responsibilities. Meetings to review student progress, to respond to student complaints and appeals, or to initiate action on student misconduct are all examples of situations where teachers may need to discuss personal or behavioural difficulties the student is exhibiting. This information, however, is usually not information that the student has shared with an instructor in a confidential context, but based on a teacher's direct observation and/or experience of the student in the educational context.

Principle 7:

Respect For Colleagues

A teacher respects the dignity of colleagues and works cooperatively with colleagues in the interest of fostering student development.

This principle means that in interactions among colleagues with respect to teaching, the overriding concern is the development of students. Disagreements between colleagues are settled privately, if possible, with no harm to student development. If a teacher becomes aware of possible ethical misconduct by a colleague, the teacher should take responsibility for consulting privately with the colleague before taking further action. It is recognized, however, that there are circumstances where this may be unduly difficult or impossible and a teacher may need to report the concerns directly to the Dean or Regional Campus Principal.

A specific example of failure to show respect for colleagues occurs when a teacher makes unwarranted derogatory comments in the classroom about the competence of another teacher. Another example is a teacher, for personal reasons, advising a student to not take a course from another teacher.

Principle 8:

Valid Assessment of Students

Given the importance of assessment of student performance in University teaching and in students' lives and careers, teachers are responsible for taking adequate steps to ensure that assessment of students is valid, open, fair, and congruent with course objectives.

This principle means that the teacher is aware of research (including personal or self-reflective research) on the advantages and disadvantages of alternative methods of assessment, and based on this knowledge, the teacher selects assessment techniques that are consistent with the objectives of the course and at the same time are as reliable and valid as possible. Furthermore, assessment procedures and grading standards are communicated clearly to students at the beginning of the course, and except in rare circumstances, there is no deviation from the announced procedures. Student exams, papers, and assignments are graded carefully and fairly through the use of a rational marking system that can be communicated to students. By means appropriate for the size of the class, students are provided with prompt and accurate feedback on their performance at regular intervals throughout the course, an explanation as to how their work was graded, and constructive suggestions as to how to improve their standing in the course. In a similar vein, teachers are fair and objective in writing letters of reference for students.

One example of an ethically questionable assessment practice is to grade students on skills that were not part of the announced course objectives, or were not included in the course content. If students are expected to demonstrate critical inquiry skills on the final exam, they should have been given the opportunity to develop critical inquiry skills during the course. Another violation of valid assessment occurs when teachers teaching two different sections of the same course use drastically different assessment procedures or grading standards, such that the same level of student performance earns significantly different final grades in the two sections.

Principle 9:
Respect for Institution

In the interests of student development, a teacher is aware and respectful of the educational goals, policies, and standards of the institution in which he or she teaches.

This principle means that a teacher shares a collective responsibility to uphold the mission, education goals and standards of the University as a whole, to uphold the educational goals and standards of the University, and to abide by University policies and regulations pertaining to the education of students. This principle is not intended to abridge the institution's commitment to academic freedom.

It is recommended that a teacher who has criticisms of the institution attempt to resolve issues internally prior to raising them in a public venue. Specific examples of failure to uphold the principle of respect for institution include engaging in excessive work activity outside the University that conflicts with University teaching responsibilities; and being unaware of or ignoring valid University regulations on provision of course outlines, scheduling of exams, or academic misconduct.

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