

2008

# Teaching Ethics in the MIS Strategy/Capstone Course

"Mary Brabston

*I.H. Asper School of Business, The University of Manitoba*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://aisel.aisnet.org/siged2008>

---

## Recommended Citation

Brabston, "Mary," "Teaching Ethics in the MIS Strategy/Capstone Course" (2008). *2008 Proceedings*. 6.  
<http://aisel.aisnet.org/siged2008/6>

This material is brought to you by the SIGED: IAIM Conference at AIS Electronic Library (AISeL). It has been accepted for inclusion in 2008 Proceedings by an authorized administrator of AIS Electronic Library (AISeL). For more information, please contact [elibrary@aisnet.org](mailto:elibrary@aisnet.org).

## TEACHING ETHICS IN THE MIS STRATEGY/CAPSTONE COURSE

Mary Brabston

I.H. Asper School of Business, The University of Manitoba

**Abstract:** An increasing number of articles in the popular press point to an increasing number of lapses in ethical judgment in terms of computer and information development and use; many of these lapses are caused by managers who were business or even management information system majors. One way to address this increase in ethical lapses is to ensure that majors in management information systems understand these ethical issues and the rewards that can come from being ethical in their business practices. This paper details several assignments and in-class discussions that have been used in the MIS Strategy class at a large, research-oriented university in an attempt to address these issues.

**Keywords:** ethics, teaching ethics, computer ethics, information ethics

# TEACHING ETHICS IN THE MIS STRATEGY/CAPSTONE COURSE

## I. INTRODUCTION

One only has to open the newspaper or national business publication these days to see articles detailing the unethical use of computers. Many of these stories highlight businesses that are not managing the ethical use of their computers and information systems very well. And, even worse, from the point of view of a teacher of management information systems (MIS) in a business school, many of those involved are graduates of our programs or those who claim to do what we teach. In an effort to see that our business school's MIS graduates understand a myriad of ethical issues regarding computers and information systems and their use, the author set out to try different assignments, projects, and in-class discussions to educate graduating MIS majors on these critical ethical issues. This paper details these efforts.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Many authors have written about computer and information ethics. They have sought to define the areas of computer and information ethics (and to determine if there is a difference in the two) and to categorize the issues involved in computer and information ethics and mechanisms to enforce computer and information ethics (see, for example, Floridi, 1999, 2005; Mathieson, 2004; Himma, 2004; Mason, 1986; Moore, 2005; Tavani, 2004; Brabston and Dahl, 2005). But prescriptions for "fixing" the problem of a growing incidence of computer and information ethical abuse are few and far between. Textbooks discuss these issues but leave implementation to the student, assuming that the student has learned more than just enough to make their grade, before then forgetting it as quickly as it was learned.

Textbooks take a variety of ways to inform students of ethical issues regarding computer usage and the use of information. Many textbooks resort to the philosophical approach, citing Kant, Descartes, and others whose theories – while applying to these ethical issues – appear abstract and non-applicable to many students. Other textbooks prescribe a series of steps to be taken in evaluating whether an issue is an ethical issue or not. Still others prescribe a series of steps to deal with ethical issues once they are identified. Still other textbooks categorize these issues, typically using either their own topology or that of Mason's PAPA model (1986). Finally, some textbooks use a combination of these approaches to present a more well-rounded approach for how to identify and deal with these issues.

Almost every introductory management information systems textbook contains a chapter on information ethics. It is considered a required topic. Yet many instructors teaching the introductory MIS course find that the majority of the school term is spent on technical and managerial issues rather than ethics. Typically, ethics gets only a perfunctory review in the introductory MIS course. As an instructor (and textbook author) for the introductory MIS course, the author knows too well how easy it is to pay only lip-service to information ethics in a course where students suffer from information overload.

### **III. THE MIS STRATEGY COURSE**

There is typically a capstone course in the MIS major. This course may involve a project, a research paper, or a review of the practical literature with presentations by local guest speakers. At the author's university, the capstone course in the MIS major is MIS Strategy, a course that is one-third information resource management (IRM), one-third MIS strategy, and one-third current topics. The MIS Strategy course presents the opportunity to ensure that MIS majors not only understand information ethics but are also

prepared to practice good information ethics and to ensure that others do as well.

The MIS Strategy course is presented in order of sections: first, IRM; second, MIS strategy, and finally, current topics. The last third of the course includes multiple guest speakers, speaking on topics ranging from finding the right job in MIS to MIS strategic approaches at their businesses, to current initiatives and leading-edge technologies they employ.

Students in MIS Strategy must complete three projects: a research paper on a topic chosen from an instructor-created list; a review of IRM at a local business, including a critique of the company's IRM practices; and a proposal to management of a local company for a new strategic information system (SIS). There is an ethical component to each of these projects. In each section of the course, ethics is discussed and included in each project as a critical-thinking task. Various projects and discussion topics have been used to try to instill in students an understanding of when something is or becomes an ethical issue and what makes it an ethical issue. Each term, the topics and the portion of the projects that involve ethics change, depending on current events and technologies. The following details the assignments, projects, and in-class discussions that have been used in the past, the students' reaction to these components, and the students' apparent learning (see Table 1).

<b>Table 1: MIS Strategy Tools for Teaching Ethics</b>			
<b>Course Section</b>	<b>Project</b>	<b>Discussion Area</b>	<b>Focus</b>
IRM	A: Research paper	HR Systems development Communication Technological impacts	PAPA model Ethical principles
	B: IRM review	Organizational practices and	Stakeholder

	paper	ethical training	analysis Model of steps to take
MIS	SIS proposal	Organizational impacts, change management, and external impacts	Stakeholder analysis PAPA model
Current topics	A: Independent research on specific topics B: Guest speakers	Assigned topics, speakers' companies, and their companies' news	PAPA model Ethical principles
Class Discussion	Participation	Wide ranging; some topics assigned while others arise out of discussion; some role- playing	Wide ranging

#### IV. ETHICAL COURSE COMPONENTS

##### IRM Section of the Course

In the IRM section of the course, each student must write and present a research paper discussing a topic from a list the instructor has created. Students may also propose different topics, but the topics must be approved by the instructor. As part of the research paper, students must write a section detailing any ethical issues that may be involved in that topic. For example, in discussing data warehousing, students must discuss ethical issues such as security, privacy, ownership of data, opt-in/opt-out, and so on. They must also include these issues in their class presentations.

The first week of class, I have students reread the ethics chapter from the textbook we use in our introductory MIS class. This provides students with the

foundation they need to consider and think critically about the ethical issues we will discuss in class during the semester.

During the IRM section of the course, class discussions include how to know when employees you supervise are acting unethically and what to do about this situation. The broad range of student discussion, from who is actually responsible, to personal loyalty to a colleague, to slippery slope, and so on, is remarkable. For example, students are quick to see that the slippery slope applies not only to the perpetrator of the unethical act but also to the employee who sees what is happening and does nothing. Students then point out the risks of speaking up to management about what is happening that is unethical. Putting the discussion in the context of a real-world situation, either created for class discussion or “hot from the headlines”, forces the students to actually think about ethics and the “what-ifs” of what could have been done to redeem or resolve the situation.

As each chapter in the MIS Strategy textbook is discussed, students are aware that, while they are responsible for the content of each chapter, they have an additional responsibility: to think critically about additional issues that should be included in the chapter, and in particular to think about potential ethical issues regarding the chapter’s topic. As discussions move from databases and data warehousing to networking and e-commerce, to choosing and developing technology and systems, to managing the information systems department, in-class discussions also include a focus on potential ethical issues that might arise for each of these topics.

Because participation is twenty percent of the semester grade, most students participate almost every day. Since class “rules” prevent students from merely repeating or agreeing with what another student said, many students do outside research for the class, to have material to bring forward in class. Many students choose to have their research on the day’s topic focus on the

ethical issues associated with the topic being discussed. They bring articles or blog printouts or printouts from Wikipedia and so forth with them to class. Students also bring up the material from the introductory MIS textbook, typically involving philosophical approaches, how to analyze an ethical problem, how to identify stakeholders who may be affected, etc. Students also categorize the issues we discuss, using Mason's (1986) PAPA model (property, accuracy, privacy, and access). Students seem to truly engage with the ethical portion of the discussion. We discuss how the different approaches result in the same – or different – actions.

Out-of-class discussions also show that the students are engaged with the ethical material; students frequently come to my office to continue discussions about information ethics and to challenge some of the assumptions that most faculty make about what is ethical and what is not. Again, for example, many students feel that sharing music and video files is not unethical.

We spend considerable time over the semester discussing the ethical foundations that relate to piracy, copyright, and other ownership issues. Discussing the “no-free-lunch” rule, legal issues, the so-called slippery slope – all serve to motivate students to think about issues of pirating music and videos in a different light.

In discussing these ethical foundations and approaches, I also try to get students to think about how these concepts apply to other areas of both professional and personal life. Those discussions in particular become quite lively.

The second project associated with the IRM section of the class is a review and critique of the IRM practices in a local organization. As part of this project, student teams (typically three or four students) must discuss information ethics with a minimum of three IS department personnel they



interview at a company. Among many other issues reported in their paper, they are trying to determine how much focus is placed on ethics in the IS department and if there are any ethical issues that are not being addressed at the organization but should be. In addition to the review and critique, students must make recommendations on how to improve the organization's IRM practices, including improving ethical practices. Again, this reinforces the need for ethical practice in the "real world."

### **MIS Strategy Section of the Course**

In the MIS strategy section of the course, the ethical discussions continue, focusing on the impacts of implementing MIS strategy in an organization. These potential impacts include how layoffs are handled, how monitoring of employees is handled as a strategic information system is implemented, and so forth. In addition, this is the section of the course that deals with international and globalization content, leading to further discussions and debates about the differences in ethics in various parts of the world. Typically, our international students contribute in large measure to our understanding of the practice of ethics in their home countries. Additional readings are also provided to help students to see how the implementation of MIS strategy can impact employees, customers, and competition, as well as suppliers.

The project associated with the MIS strategy section of the course involves the student teams proposing a new strategic information system for an organization (typically, the same organization they used for their IRM review). As part of the proposal, students must include a wide variety of impacts of implementing their strategic information systems, including ethical impacts. The teams present their proposals to the class and must include a discussion of the ethical impacts in their presentations.

### **Final Section of the Course**

In the final section of the course, students discuss the current local IS job market, using local and national media, job banks, and our own career development centre for their research. A local IS headhunter speaks to our class. I ask the headhunter to discuss ethical issues involved in job hunting and career development, such as the accuracy of the resume and accepting a job on good faith and not continuing to search for another one.

One or two local CIOs discuss their latest initiatives, planning methodologies, and/or strategic planning processes (not actual strategy as that is typically confidential). I also ask these guest speakers to discuss ethical issues that they have had to deal with, how they dealt with them, and their results.

In addition, I choose between two and five newer technologies and have the students do their own background research on these technologies for class discussions. As part of the discussion, we discuss the ethical implications of each technology and its interaction with other technologies and potential societal impacts. Recently, the discussion on blogs and the potential for others to plagiarize from a blog or to use plagiarized material when adding to a blog was very interesting.

Students are also encouraged to read articles in business journals and the popular press about the effects of practicing good ethics. Recent research has pointed to the long-term positive value of practicing good ethics, even when not doing so might pay off in the short run.

## **V. WHAT HAPPENS THEN?**

As the course is winding down, I have students fill out a survey on what they thought of the emphasis on ethics. I ask them if their knowledge of all ethical issues has increased and if their knowledge of information ethics has

increased. I also ask them if their commitment to practice good ethics has changed over the course of the semester.

Almost universally, students approve of the emphasis on ethics in the course. Students typically comment on the fact that the ethics courses (typically offered by the department of philosophy) we require of all business students do not address current business ethics issues in a multi-pronged fashion. Students feel they learned more about ethics in general in the MIS Strategy course than they learned from the required ethics courses. They also feel their commitment as future IS managers to practice good information ethics has increased significantly (4 out of 5 on a Likert scale).

In addition, marks for class projects and in-class discussions involve an ethical component. For students to achieve high marks on their projects, they must focus at least a portion of each project on the required ethical components of the project. Since a significant portion of in-class discussion focuses on ethical issues, to earn a high mark for participation, students must also participate intelligently in discussions on ethical issues..

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

Our field of the management of information systems and technology is a rapidly expanding, rapidly changing discipline. The MIS major, the educational component of our field, frequently pays only cursory attention to information ethics and the practice thereof. This paper has shown how a capstone course in the MIS major can be used to embed ethical principles and practices about the use of computers and information in MIS majors about to graduate and enter the work force. It is hoped that those who have taken the course in this format will practice good information ethics and promote the practice of good information ethics among their colleagues.

Perhaps this will help to reduce the number of ethical violations that occur on an almost daily basis, even in such a small population as our MIS graduates.

**REFERENCES**

- Brabston, M.E. and Dahl, J. (2004) "The Limitations of Having Diversity in Codes of Information Ethics: A Professional and Corporate Perspective," in *Information Ethics: Privacy and Intellectual Property*, edited by Lee A. Freeman and A. Graham Peace (pp. 239-255), Idea Group Publishing.
- Floridi, L. (1999) "Information Ethics: On the Philosophical Foundation of Computer Ethics," *Ethics and Information Technology* (1,1), pp. 33-52.
- Floridi, L. (2005) "Information Ethics, its nature and scope," *ACM SIGCAS Computers and Society* (35,2).
- Himma, K.E. (2004) "There's Something about Mary: The Moral Value of Things Qua Information Objects," *Ethics and Information Technology* (6,3), pp. 15-159.
- Mason, R. O. (1986) "Four Ethical Issues of the Information Age," *MIS Quarterly* (10,1), pp. 5-12.
- Mathiesen, K. (2004) "What is Information Ethics?" *ACM SIGCAS Computers and Society* (34,1).
- Moore, G. (2005) "Corporate Character: Modern Virtue Ethics and the Virtuous Corporation," *Business Ethics Quarterly* 15(4), pp. 659-685.
- Tavani, H.T. (2004) "Cyberethics as an Interdisciplinary Field of Applied Ethics: Key Concepts, Perspectives, and Methodological Frameworks," *Journal of Information Ethics*, (15,2), pp. 18-36.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Mary Elizabeth Brabston, B.A., M.B.A., Ph.D.**, is Associate Professor of Management Information Systems at the University of Manitoba's I.H. Asper School of Business. Her teaching and research interests involve strategic planning and applications of information systems and information resource management, as well as electronic commerce, including ethical and legal issues associated with advancing information technology. Dr. Brabston is also faculty advisor to the Asper School's Co-operative Education Program and the school's chapter of Beta Gamma Sigma, the business school honorary.