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Teaching Ethics in I/S courses: Two Complementary Approaches

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Foreword

Increasingly, the I/S field is being prodded to consider the ethical ramifications of its process and products. Codes of conduct for I/S professionals distributed by various organizations (e.g., ACM, DPMA) reinforce the need for a strong level of ethical awareness throughout the I/S community. Since college I/S courses provide the foundations of understanding for future I/S professionals, it is quite appropriate for I/S curricula to make a sizeable investment in the ethical training of these students. It is indeed heartening to note the growing level of interest in such training at various colleges and universities. Furthermore, such classroom ethics coverage is encouraged and/or required by business and computer accrediting associations.

Ironically, though, it has been our experience that few I/S instructors feel very comfortable in confronting and teaching the subject of I/S ethics. In this workshop, we propose to introduce two complementary approaches to teaching I/S ethics, to offer guidelines from the two perspectives, and to share our collective experience in this domain.

One of the presenters has extensive experience in I/S ethics education and is coauthor of a major I/S ethics textbook. The other presenter is the author of a number of major I/S ethics cases which have been published by Harvard Business School Press. He has extensive experience with large case exercises at both the graduate and undergraduate levels.

At the university of one of the presenters, ethics instruction is required in both graduate and undergraduate introductory and MIS courses as well as in a number of major courses. Ultimately all I/S courses are expected to have an ethics module. At the other presenter's university, ethics cases are routinely included in graduate and undergraduate I/S courses. As one of the business school's major theme areas, ethical decisionmaking is addressed in all subject areas at the second presenter's school.

INTRODUCTION

Instructors in I/S and CS programs come from varied backgrounds including math, engineering, business and the liberal arts. This is still true even with the number of CS and I/S degrees now being granted. But few teachers in these technical disciplines, if any, have a strong background in philosophy or ethics. I/S and CS instructors naturally feel uncomfortable tackling computer ethics in the classroom. They hesitate because they mistrust their ability to teach what they perceive as a "soft" topic, compared to the clearcut, objective, technical area of computers.

The first classroom discussion is indeed the hardest. However, teaching computer ethics can be a truly rewarding experience. One doesn't have to be a philosopher. One definitely doesn't have to have all the answers. The major skill is in leading a discussion and eliciting students' participation. The place to start is with an understanding of basic ethical principles and a few good cases.

THE PURPOSE OF THE WORKSHOP

The workshop is primarily for faculty members (both CS and I/S), although students, information systems professionals, and computer users will find it useful. It is meant for those who (1) want to know more about ethics, (2) want to gain some experience dealing with ethical dilemmas, and most of all, (3) may be called upon to teach computer ethics. The workshop is constructed with the inexperienced computer ethics teacher in mind. Sufficient background will be provided in ethical decision making and its underlying principles. The connection between information technology and ethics is also explained. Real world cases are used to illustrate the steps for analyzing a specific situation and making defensible ethical decisions.

WORKSHOP OVERVIEW

The workshop is divided into four modules of approximately the same length.

Module 1: Ethics is Not a Four Letter Word

- What's the problem?
- Why an ethics component in I/S courses
- Required course components
- Ethical decision making:
- Recognition factors
- Ethical principles

Module 2: Overview of the Large Case Techniques

- What "large cases" are about
- How to choose the cases
- How to use the cases:
- Student/Instructor preparation
- Providing sufficient background

Separating wheat from chaff

Guiding the discussion

Closure in the process

Exercise:

The case "Agrico, Inc." (dealing with software copying) is synthesized for participants. A miniclass is then taught to illustrate one possible teaching approach.

Module 3: Overview of the Short Case Techniques

What "small cases" are about

How to choose the cases

How to use the cases:

Instructor preparation

Student preparation

Assign readings from the text

Discuss principles

Day before assignments

Managing the classroom

Using small groups:

Group composition

Pro and con groups

Role playing

Encouraging notetaking

Managing the discussion:

International students and cultural diversity

Varying case complexity

Blackboard or overhead use

Move to principles

Losing control

Finding the shushers

Coming to closure and achieving consensus

Initiating discussion and reporting solutions

Pivot point analysis

Written case analyses

Exercise:

A short case is solved as it would be in a computer course. Audience prepares individual and group solutions. Instructor demonstrates classroom techniques.

Module 4: Putting it All Together

Where to find the time

How to evaluate student learning

Complementary assignments

Suggested readings and references

Other sources for currency and growth

