Using drama to introduce ethics to technology students and practitioners

Conference or Workshop Item

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INTRODUCTION

The poster describes the use of Joe Penhaligon’s play Landscape with Weapon to introduce ethics to technology students and practitioners.

The play is a three-act play that revolves around issues confronting an engineer who works in the weapons industry. Ned is led towards a changed outlook on technology and the professions who create it.

Learning Outcomes

- Discuss what ethics is and what constitutes an ethical issue
- Identify and discuss ethical issues that arise in the media, in routine conversations and, in particular, when discussing technology
- Discuss the role of emotions in ethical deliberations
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- Identify and discuss the ethical issues presented and rhetorical styles used in play andandscape literature, with an emphasis on explaining how language is used to address other people's ethical perceptions and convince them of specific points

Core resources

In addition to various excerpts from the 2008 trial video discussions, the following resources are available:


Relationships: does mum know?

The play revolves around the issues faced by Ned, an engineer who has created a novel technology, originally envisaged for surveillance but eventually construed as a weapon of mass destruction.

Synopsis

The beginning of the play presents a fairly naive Ned, who initially believes himself to be in control. He is clearly very proud of his intellectual achievements and less concerned with moral issues than he is with technical perfection. He finds analogies that highlight the aesthetics of what he is designing. At a crucial point in the conversation, his brother Dan asks: ‘does mum know?’ This is a really significant point in the play because it draws into another relationship and, accordingly, the potential of different ethical positions.

In the end

Ned makes a number of statements in the final act. He says, ‘The engineer’s prime task is to make a machine’ — or, perhaps, the technology — ‘as effective as possible.’ That is the duty of the engineer; that is the task. Perhaps, most developed engineers would agree that this is their job, that they need to make ‘systems’ or ‘devices’ effective, the ‘best’ technology they can.

However, Ned then introduces the artist’s imperative to discover something: a discovery that gratifies the artist directly and indirectly, if the audience believes its satisfaction with what the artist presents. But, of course, art also has the potential to transform the way we see things and so bring about changes to the way we live our lives. In the context of technology development, this implies that the developer may merely provide gratification, that there is a gap between the producer and the receiver of the new technology which may have the capability to make and distribute what has been developed. This raises big ethical issues.

Ned also talks about how technology can come into conflict with personal morality, which is one of the key themes in the play. When placed alongside one another, different ethical positions can lead to a clash when the technology in question may destroy something significant.

REFERENCES


