Using drama to introduce ethics to technology students and practitioners

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INTRODUCTION

The poster describes the use of John Penhaligon’s play Landscape with Weapon as a resource to teach ethics to students and practitioners in technology. Landscape with Weapon is a play in three acts that revolve around issues confronting an engineer who works in the weapons industry. Ned, who is developed as a number of broad questions concerning intellectual property rights, duty and responsibility in professional practice. Crucially, although the play raises big questions concerning technological development, it also explores the realities of relationships between individual characters each with their own personal ethical stance, and in the development of these relationships through conversations and outbreaks that vital ethical questions arise.

INTRODUCING ETHICS IN ICS

Unit overview

Ethics is an established area of academic interest, but it is only fairly recently that the relevance of ethics to ICS started to emerge clearly outside philosophical studies. Professional bodies in Engineering and ICS have begun to realise, as a condition for accreditation, the study of ethics-related topics, and, partially in response to these requirements, new pedagogies for teaching and learning these topics are gradually emerging.

Introducing Ethics in Information and Computer Sciences explores the idea that drama and dialogue provide powerful tools to help students and professionals to identify, discuss and understand ethical issues in their professional practice. The core of the Unit is based upon the selection of plays and dialogues that raise ethical questions about reference to professional points. The examples also represent different styles of argumentation and, hence, illustrate the relevance of philosophy and drama to ICS questions. Although the Unit provides some ideas taken from academic texts in the area of ethics, it does so to provide frameworks, rather than to offer a vocabulary that can be used for practical analysis and discussion of real problems.

The Unit development has capitalised on the lessons and feedback gathered during a trial course run by the authors in 2008 with a small group of students. The Unit is based upon the videoconferencing tool available on OpenLearn. The Unit will be available in different formats and download for reuse in a Creative Commons License.

LANDSCAPE WITH WEAPON

An allegory

Landscape with Weapon centres on the development and exploitation of a weapon system. Ned, who can be viewed as a metaphor for technology, has the potential to cause harm. Any weapon system will inevitably cause fatalities if used whilst, in many cases, the likely potential harms of different weapon systems are not necessarily fatalities. But there can be simple things which might perhaps want.

Ethical stances

As a dentist, Dan meets his customers face-to-face while he performs his work, and his professional skills put him in control of the immediate outcomes of his work. On the other hand, Ned has no customers; he is a technologist and, as such, can be seen as having little or no control over his work. While Ned has technology at his disposal, it enters a world where he has little or no authority. This implies that the developer may merely provide gratification, see things and so bring about changes to the way we live our lives. In the context of technology, this is, nevertheless, a valuable object when used for all sorts of practical purposes.

Rights

Amongst the many ethical questions raised in Landscape with Weapon, rights figure prominently, in particular, in questions concerning Intellectual Property Rights (IPR). ‘Rights’ are a social convention but there really is no computation, no way to guarantee the convention is respected. In other words, people who do not respect the convention will disregard the rights. They will show no respect for the assigned rights, and they will not consider helping the accrual of the benefit to the right holders. The play, Ned has rights, that is, rights are attributed to him as a result of having an idea. His rights are respected by no others in the play. Ned’s assumption is that those that have the idea have IPR, the IPR has value and, therefore, any proceeds accrued should be due to the person who has the idea.

When it comes to patents, the person having the idea is acknowledged, but the only source of income is the expression of the ideas in a tangible form. Technological development and manufacture of a product and involve a wide range of skilled people. Howver, Ned persists in believing that his idea and any product should put in the intellectual effort.

SYNOPSIS

The play revolves around the issues faced by Ned, an engineer who has created a novel technology, originally envisaged for surveillance but eventually consumed as a weapon of mass destruction. The play begins with a powerful conversation between Ned and his brother Dan, a dentist, when Ned starts to confront not only the potential implications of his invention, but also his own motivations and feelings towards this technology. As the play unfolds and other characters appear, Ned is led towards a changed outlook on technology and the professions who create it.

ROLES: does mum know?

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 questions than his conceptions to be. He explains his innovations and, when he does, anything that he finds analagous 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 in another relationship and, accordingly, the potential of different ethical positions.

REFERENCES