Chapter XIV
Ethics for the Graduating Class:
Issues, Needs, and Approaches

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ABSTRACT

Teaching ethics is not about teaching right versus wrong, but is about teaching informed discernment, conscientious decision making, and balanced living. So should teaching these behaviors be the domain of higher education? For many years and in many institutions—even today—the teaching of ethics has not been embraced as part of the charge of higher education. However, as society has had to assimilate technology and as it has had to face the repercussions of unethical and illegal behaviors, one questions the ethical training of the professionals making the decisions. Since these professionals are the products of higher education, many institutions and accreditation boards are requiring their students to have exposure to ethical philosophy.Students in the technical fields may not benefit from a purely philosophical presentation of ethics. In fact, introducing the ethical dilemmas associated with real-life decisions about technology can be very formative and revealing to the student. While institutions have always been teaching students how to debug technology problems, institutions also need to teach students how to debug ethical decisions—to become aware that ethical decisions are also technology problems to be analyzed, understood, and appropriately resolved.Challenges to the goal of presenting ethical decisions as technical dilemmas arise from a variety of factors, however. The students and professors may be from different generations, from different cultural backgrounds, and from different professional experiences—and simply are of different points in personal development. Teaching ethics needs to identify these differences and develop the common ground for a shared, ethical perspective enabling a healthy stance for the profession. The arena facing the teaching of ethics in the technical professions and approaches to utilize are identified and described. The on-going challenges limiting the effort are explained. Altogether, a composite of the ethical dimension of graduating college students in the information systems and information technology (IS&T) fields is developed.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching ethics at the university level to technology majors poses several challenges. Teaching ethics is not about teaching right versus wrong, but is about teaching informed discernment, conscientious decision making, and balanced living. The challenges to achieving these teaching goals range from delineating relevant and significant content to setting a classroom tone allowing debate and openness. Coupled with these challenges, which are typical for the structuring of any course, are the difficulties in promoting buy-in to the concept and objectives to teaching ethics.

The course dynamic can become confounded if students are not sympathetic to the goal of teaching ethics. The range of perspectives from students can be, "*I am paying for an education about technology—I do not want to pay for soft stuff like ethics*" to "*I was raised with ethical discernment and am ethical—I do not need this component from an outside source*" to "*I will not encounter situations requiring ethical resolution; I will be working with systems.*"

Along with the class structure challenges are the difficulties in identifying faculty to conduct the classes. Too often, faculty express the concern, "*I am not qualified to teach ethics,*" which may mean anything from, "*I am not comfortable with confrontation*" to "*I do not see why one bothers teaching ethics*" to "*I am a technology guru not a philosopher.*"

Regardless whether the faculty feel comfortable with the subject matter, and regardless of whether the students accept the concept of the course, the teaching of ethics in technology curriculums is becoming more prevalent. Accreditation boards and model curriculum designs prescribe ethics instruction. Industrial advisory boards to technical departments are expecting their hires to have exposure to ethics. The public questions the lack of ethical responses by professionals to episodes as revealed by the media. With such broad impetus for including the teaching of ethics in curriculums, the question becomes not whether to include the course, but rather how to address adequately the topic.

ISSUES SURROUNDING THE TEACHING OF ETHICS

The first students of the 21st century are from the demographic group termed, generation Y, born from 1980-2000. They are reaching higher education and the workforce during the span of years, 1998-2018. Generation Yers express the best of the past: confident attitudes like Veterans (1922-1942), teamwork and interpersonal skills like baby boomers (1946-1960), and technology know-how like generation Xers (1961-1979). They are a secure, competent, and educated population that once again embraces reading. (see Strauss & Howe, 1991, for the hallmark formulation of the generations relative to the population of the United States.)

A generation defines a shared cohort experience by tying a set of experiences to a time period, "*Because cohort experiences have such a profound impact on generational norms, it seems reasonable that learning styles and preferences as well as other perceptions and values, are affected*" (Coates, 2003, p. 13). Cohorts share a cultural consciousness that tempers their expectations and beliefs. Against this consciousness, other factors such as family patterns or individual temperaments are enmeshed. Without forced isolation and purposeful extraction, an individual shares a commonality of experience with strangers. The sharing bonds the strangers into a group, a cohort.

These multiple sets of the population do not necessarily share the same perspective on ethics—possibly not even seeing situations as being in the realm of ethical dilemmas. Disparity and disagreement about the recognition, recourses, and ramifications of decisions surrounding ethical points exists. Since the generations span the mem-

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