Incorporating Social Issues of Computing in a Small, Liberal Arts College: A Case Study

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Why include social issues?

- Widespread support
  - LACS model curriculum
- It's the right thing to do.
Could do a separate course

• Great textbooks (e.g., Baase, Quinn)
• Lots of discussion & experience
  • SIGCSE workshops
  • ITiCSE 2010 working group

But…
Institutional context makes a dedicated course impractical.

• Faculties are small.
• Required courses must be offered regularly.
• Majors can require only a limited number of courses.
Our Approach

Infuse social & ethical issues throughout the computer science curriculum.
Examples

• Courses for CS majors
  – Artificial intelligence
  – Databases & Web applications
  – Theory
  – Networks

• CS Table

• Courses for non-majors
Example: Artificial Intelligence

- Techniques use statistics, heuristics
- Should an application fail safe?
- What if predictions are wrong?
  - procedures
  - legal responsibilities
  - social impacts
  - policy implications
Example: Databases & Web

• Why gather data?
• Who is affected and how?
• Who can access data?
• How to store data safely?
• What if data are accidentally released?
Example: Theory

• Some problems are unsolvable
• Some problems are infeasible to solve
• Consequences
  – Approximation algorithms
  – Government policies
  – Managerial decision making
  – Security implications (e.g., RSA)
Example: Networks

• Task: Forge email using telnet
  – Social implications?
  – Why was SMTP designed this way?

• Topic: Internet architecture
  – Design goals vs. actual uses?
  – Implications of that mismatch?

• Research motivated by social issues:
  – e.g., anonymity, access
CS Table

• Weekly, informal lunchtime discussion group
• Regular participants
  – 1\textsuperscript{st} - 4\textsuperscript{th} year students
  – Most/all faculty
• Read articles of faculty or student interest
  – May focus on social issues
  – Social issues may arise in discussion
CS Table as special topic

• Occasional special topics:
  – Women and Computing
  – Socio-Technical Issues in Computer Networks
  – Computing and Health Care

• Registered students lead discussion (1 credit)

• Non-registered students are welcome

• Experiment:
  independent study to plan special topic
Courses for Non-Majors

• Some common themes
  – Computer fluency
  – Problem solving, CS principles
  – Prepare future citizens

• Examples: Tutorial, The Digital Age
  – Highlight applications, technology basis
  – Consider consequences of technology
Assessment

• Challenging
• Generally holistic rather than targeted
• Non-majors: papers, talks, discussions
• Majors: exams typically focus on technical topics; social issues assessed informally, e.g., through exit interviews
• Examine issues raised in projects
Conclusions

• Many opportunities to connect technical topics with social/ethical issues
• Each discussion may be short, but
• Repeated discussion can cover many themes
• Assessing courses is challenging
• Exit interviews, alumni surveys suggest long-term impact
Questions (1)

• Models considered:
  – separate course
  – integration with existing courses
• Do others follow similar practices in other settings?
• Are there other models?
Questions (2)

• How to assess learning of social & ethical issues?
  – Need to recognize ethical issues
  – Need perspective, not just facts