

# On Computer Ethics

*by Dr. Richard van de Lagemaat*

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Twenty years ago the first user friendly personal computers hit the market; now almost all international schools have their own computer facilities. Ten years ago the internet was almost unheard of; now it is the research tool of choice for the majority of our students. Given the rapid pace of technological change, it is not surprising that there is much talk among teachers of the need to make students “computer literate”, but there is as yet little agreement on exactly what this means. While it is, of course, important for students to be familiar with the basics of word-processing and using the internet, I take the view that computer literacy is not so much a matter of technical competence as of having the critical thinking skills to respond intelligently to information, and the moral responsibility to use information technology in a way that does not harm other people. In this article, I focus on computer ethics.

As well as seeking to develop the intellectual abilities of their students, all schools are, explicitly or implicitly, in the business of values education. Minimally, we would like students to treat one another with respect and behave in a thoughtful and responsible way. The difficult task of trying to bring this about is, I suggest, made more difficult by the computer revolution.

I think that there are four significant ways in which this revolution has transformed the context within which we make ethical decisions. First, since many people feel that cyberspace is less real than the “real world”, they tend to assume that the values and moral principles that operate in the latter are somehow not relevant to the former. This can give on-line behaviour a kind of moral weightlessness which is, no doubt, exacerbated by the fact that in the virtual world we are often divorced from the consequences of our actions. Second, since computer technology is both powerful and accessible, a determined individual can cause an immense amount of damage with relative ease. One only has to think of the millions of dollars worth of damage caused by computer viruses every year to appreciate the dangers of power without any corresponding sense of responsibility. Third, computers present us with new and easily accessible temptations which are often difficult to resist. For example, music can be illegally downloaded from the internet for nothing, and copyright infringement is now so widespread that it is difficult to convince many students that there is anything wrong with it. Finally, the social and legal sanctions that deter unethical behaviour in the real world do not have the same force in cyberspace. The relative anonymity of much on-line activity may make us to feel less answerable for our actions than we do in the “real” world. And since computer abuses generally leave less evidence, we may feel that there is a smaller risk of getting caught.

The perceived unreality, power, accessibility and anonymity of cyberspace can aggravate various kinds of anti-social behaviour that are of direct concern to schools. These include such things as vandalism, theft, obscenity, gossip, infringing privacy, and plagiarism.

How, then, can we teach our students to behave responsibly in the information age? My background assumption is that the great majority of human beings - our students included - are basically decent individuals. However, they are sometimes tempted to do what they know they should not do, and they all too often act without thinking things through properly.

Establishing an external framework of rules and security measures can reduce the temptation to behave unethically, and it is an important element in any computer ethics policy. So far, so easy. But we are also interested in “changing hearts and minds” in order to encourage genuinely considerate behaviour - and this is an altogether more challenging task. From time to time students certainly need to be told what’s what; but since they find endless preaching something of a turn-off, I think that the only effective long-term strategy is to get them to discuss problem cases in detail, and try to draw the appropriate moral intuitions out of them. Conclusions that they have come to by thinking things through for themselves usually have a more powerful effect on their behaviour than our simply telling them what to do.

A good way of initiating such discussions is to give students a short computer ethics quiz in which they are asked whether they agree or disagree with various statements. For example: “Software programs are too expensive to buy and since companies are making so much money on each program they sell, there is nothing wrong with copying this software”; or, “Since everyone believes in freedom of speech, people should be allowed to publish anything they like on the internet.”

Consider the second statement. Students who agree with it might say that we all have a right to say what we like; while those who disagree might point out that you do not have a right to say things which harm other people. This might lead to a discussion of what constitutes harm. Perhaps we can come to a consensus that incitement to violence harms other people. But what about insults and malicious gossip? Pursuing a discussion such as this may encourage students to think about the way in which “hate web-sites” can harm those against whom they are directed. And it might make them think twice before making a website of their own which ridicules and denigrates a fellow student.

My own experience is that when students are encouraged to think through the implications of computer ethics problems, and appropriate parallels are drawn between the virtual world and the real world, then real progress can be made. When I have asked students to make their own 5 to 10 point list of computer do’s and don’ts, they have usually come up with a list that I am willing to endorse and they are willing to sign

off on.

We can, of course, never completely eliminate computer abuses, and each new generation of students will need to relearn the lessons of their predecessors. But with a consistently pursued policy we can at least contribute to making future inhabitants of cyberspace more responsible citizens.

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