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## Resources for an experimental course in ethics

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## Introduction

Technology and ethics was the topic of a recent experimental distance taught course using synchronous and asynchronous e-media. This pilot was offered to a restricted number of IT-literate practitioners without formal background in ethics

Offering the course across disparate time zones meant synchronised sessions were limited thus a question posed in planning was “What resources should the students study between the synchronous sessions to ensure a lively and economical debate?”. In this account we describe some of the resources that were deployed and what they offered.

## Style

The style of the course was prompted by work on dialogue as a medium for learning. As Göranson and Florin [1] wrote,

“Dialogue is one of the keystones in the development of . . . ethical thinking”.

In another article with Sällström they explained that dialogue clarifies issues and they also indicated it is worthwhile attempting “to elaborate on the phenomenon of dialogue”. They turned to the theatre to illustrate dialogue as a medium of transformation and suggest

“Dialogue occurs where roles meet; it sets them in motion, leading to unexpected shifts” [2]

Engdahl [3] explores different interpretations of this shift. In the context of ethics, this can result in the development of knowledge about ethical arguments or discoveries about how situations can evolve in unanticipated directions. Pfister [4] also hints at the utility of dialogue in exploring challenging ethical issues when he refers to “[d]ialogue’s tendency to centre on the questionable and the insoluble”.

## Video material

An early session aimed to open up a dialogue amongst participants. To provide common ground for discussion a video was made available via a video sharing site [5].

The video posed questions about the visual intrusiveness and the radiation hazards from radio masts set at regular intervals for communication with trains. The video was produced in-house thus skirted rights issues and required minimal production or viewing effort since it lasted only thirty seconds, nevertheless, since views on visual intrusion and opinions derived from fears about radiation from radio masts are commonly and strongly held, the video resource triggered an animated dialogue.

## Text

An obvious and practical source of material readily available on-line are the Socratic dialogues. There are copyright issues because of the need for translations. Copyright-free translations are older and not as lively as recent versions. Additionally technical occupations only receive limited attention

in the dialogues. So some interpretation is required to show the relevance of Socratic dialogues specifically to engineering and technology. Consequently only a few brief extracts from *Gorgias* were explored.

However, the Socratic dialogues do clearly illustrate styles of presentation. Firstly they distinguish different forms. The voice of a single narrator presents the *Protagoras* dialogue and *Meno* has the appearance of a play script though the character Meno continually agrees with Socrates. In *Gorgias*, Socrates with his bullying ways propels the argument forward and the dialogic form allows others to intervene. Socrates then deals with any objections. In this way the dialogue refines a philosophical view, though ultimately *Gorgias* slips into a Socratic monologue.

Secondly the dialogues illustrate the use of rhetoric in ethical debate. In *Gorgias*, Socrates challenges the importance given to rhetoric but ironically exploits rhetorical skills. Cunningly his analogies displace arguments to domains where agreement over questions of value are widely accepted. His use of stories and quotations similarly deflect and grip the reader’s attention and lend support from other authorities.

## Dialogue

In a volume dedicated to philosophical dialogue, Nussbaum’s contribution is noteworthy for, amongst other things, the mixture of styles of presentation [6]. It is in the form of fragments of a lecture, which illustrate the abstract didactic rationalising of philosophical dialogue, interspersed with conversations between the lecturer and the spectres of her dying mother and father. In a single work therefore philosophical writing appears alongside dramatic fantasies, personalised and rich in ethical issues.

Pfister [4] contrasts philosophical dialogue, which characteristically portrays an exchange of views and arguments, with dramatic utterances where something is done by the person uttering and he also warns that enacted philosophical dialogue can be “rather poor drama”. Broadly, philosophical dialogue attends to an argument rather than the engrossing transformations of relationships amongst the characters.

Characters are vital components of theatrical productions which have proved drama is a powerful way of presenting situations that encourage significant ethical debate. Epic dramas can make their point forcefully but often refer to large-scale abstractions like nations. Such dramas are allegorical and as with philosophical dialogue demand effort in drawing parallels with everyday activities. However and importantly some dramas deal with relationships on a scale that can be related easily to everyday experience.

Theatre with commercial pressure on space and cast size must find popular ways of projecting issues through the voices of just a few actors. In particular, theatre must make performances both relevant and personalised and in contrast to philosophical dialogue, theatrical drama, which is free of demands to present a rational dialogue, offers a range of expression that accommodates conflict and difference.

## Radio plays

The affiliation between the BBC and the Open University allowed us to commission four radio plays and to retain re-playing rights for the University's students. Two sessions of the experimental course therefore required students to download and listen to two plays. These two plays are linked by a fictitious incident in which a technician working abroad for a communications company is reported missing. The first play [7] is situated in the technician's home with his desperate partner, Carol. In spite of her collection of communication devices, Carol does not know what is happening. Ill-informed and lacking authority or resources, she can only wait and instinctively develop her network of relationships within the constraints set by communications technology.

In ethical terms relationships are valued. That valuation is asymmetric, and in the course of the play the characters make efforts to strengthen, weaken and exploit those relationships. So here ethics is coupled with building relationships that give the authority to act and that offer reliable channels of communication, but with different interests at stake even advancing those relationships can generate conflict.

## More audio

The second play [8] illustrates the fierce loyalty that people can show towards an institution like a company and how that loyalty strongly influences their judgements.

The play also illustrates ethical statements and arguments cropping up in everyday conversations. There is, of course, a crisis in the company but people's behaviour is not dissimilar to their behaviour in other circumstances. For instance, when the characters reveal the things they value which primarily include having ideas, having skill, loyalty to the company, not interfering, getting on with things and even ICT itself.

There are a number of incidents which throw up ethical questions notably when the security chief explains it is "easier to open a human being than an encrypted laptop".

Amongst senior management, the outcome of prime concern is that the "laptop is uncompromised" Their logic suggests the company must conceal its secrets, to protect a contract, the jobs it brings and hence the benefit to the local community. Their justification for any damaging actions exploits the dubious analogy that suggests you cannot "fight a war without taking ... casualties?".

## Playtext

For the last two sessions students were mailed individual copies of the relatively cheap paperback script for the play *Landscape with weapon* [9].

In the play, a dentist, sees a business opportunity in providing cosmetic surgery to those in the dentist's chair. He justifies his moneymaking by saying it benefits his family. His brother, a weapon designer, is initially unperturbed by involvement in the design of swarming military drones. His justifications are the common and often respected defences for those working on military projects.

In spite of being disturbed by the defence project, the dentist feels his brother should negotiate a good return. The com-

pany is keen to exploit the work but the weapons engineer wants to enter the wider world of politics using the "rights" to his ideas as an instrument. He fails to recognise his dependence on others. It is a weakness exploited by company personnel who float threats to kill the project and thus devalue the design which had become, for the designer, an integral and precious part of his identity.

In one speech, the designer reveals the ethical situation of the engineer. Firstly the engineer's prime task is "to make a machine or technology as effective as possible", secondly there is the designer's imperative to discover something which is gratifying to the designer and potentially to the engineered object's audience and thirdly the technology may have effects that conflict with a "personal morality".

## Conclusion

Dialogue provides a foil for exploring ethical issues. This points to a need for engagement in dialogue and the study of the forms and techniques of dialogue. In a recent experimental course, plays provided the primary materials for exploring dialogue and means were found to deliver at a distance suitable illustrations, texts and performances.

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