Getting Involved: Perspectives on the Use of True Projects as Tools for Developing Ethical Thinking in Computer Science Students

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ABSTRACT

This article describes a unique, educational project within the field of ethics and computers that was implemented in the undergraduate study of computer science in 2002. Nesna University College has been using the example of sexual abuse of children in case study teaching in social informatics, in order to create an environment for intrinsically-motivated learning within the field of ethics in computer science. The project also gave the students a unique opportunity to get involved both emotionally and practically in the field of social informatics. The project is run in cooperation with Save the Children Norway and the Norwegian National Crime Squad. The computer science education at Nesna University College is the only computer science education in the world which has sexual abuse of children as the main topic on the computer science curriculum. The computer science students provide both the Save the Children Norway and the National Criminal Investigation Service with reports on various topics such as secure chat, camera phones and possible abuse, Freenet as a tool for sexual abuse, and so on.

Keywords: didactics; ethical/societal issues; pedagogy; social informatics

TERMINOLOGY

The terms “Internet” and “digital media” as used in this article encompass the terms “World Wide Web” and “cyberspace.” The communication that is of concern here is what is accessed via chat rooms. The term “children” or “young people” is applied to people under 16 years of age. “Sexual abuse” is used in this article to describe both the activities by grown-ups to induce children in talking about sex with them in chat rooms, meet them for sex, and the distribution and use of child pornography. The term “child pornography” is defined as any visual depiction—including any photo-
graph, film, video, picture, or computer or computer-generated image or picture, whether made or produced by electronic, mechanical, or other means—of sexually explicit conduct where children are engaged, or made to look like they are engaged, in sexual activity. The term in Norway is often replaced with the term “abusive material,” so as to underline the fact that this material is not pornography as such. “Grooming” is a term describing the activity by a grown-up to gain the trust of a child with the intent of abusing him or her sexually. ICT stands for Information and Computer Technology.

INTRODUCTION
The last decade has seen a rapid development and growth in the use of computer-based communication and information sharing. Internet—or “the Net” as it is sometimes called—has proven to be perhaps the most popular mass-communication medium in the world. As with the phone and the television, most of the society has readily adopted the technology. Its spread internationally and its penetration into almost every corner of the educational system and family life, as well as work, is often described as a “revolution.”

As one of the first countries outside the United States to be connected to the ARPANET, Norway has quickly developed its use of Internet from a purely researchers’ tool to being second on the list of European countries where Internet is used daily by its population. Children and young people in particular have readily embraced the new communication medium, and they utilize it in quite a number of ways. A wide array of digital tools is enabling kids to express themselves, to create their own identities, and to personalize the media they use. Their creativity seems limitless and includes such various forms as mp3 lists, online game characters, digital movies, and blogs. Just take a look at www.youtube.com and see how kids place themselves in full view of the whole world, or check Web sites like the Norwegian “www.deiligst.no” (Delicious.no), where teenage girls and boys ask to be evaluated by their peers on their looks and bodies. Also, blogging is all the rage, and writing innermost thoughts online instead of in the old diary book might seem quite fun.

The problem with blogging is that children reveal more online than parents know, and they do it because they think that blogs are only read by their friends. No one ever told them that everything placed on the Net is visible for everyone. There are also similar problems with YouTube and sites like “Deiligst.no.”

Since the fall of 2002, the department of computer science at Nesna University College has been working with a project called “Getting Involved.” The project was a part of the undergraduate program in computer science and the course in social informatics. The project focused on child pornography and the Internet. In March 2003, Nesna University College signed an agreement with the Norwegian Save the Children
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