ETHICS AND EMERGING SOCIAL PRACTICES

 Outsiders to the field often regard people interested in educational computing (whether teachers of or with computing) as mechanicist or in some way anti-social. Of course, we know that computers are an interesting and novel way of engaging in social discourse. And, like other cultural elements, the social practices that derive from our computer use are governed by ethical principles — or so it would seem. Sometimes we are perplexed when official codes of conduct (laws and institutional regulations) seem to be at variance with what we know is instinctively “right.” We may accommodate, sometimes we subvert, but often the issues remain unresolved.

 As new technologies give rise to new possibilities, so new practices are experimented with and adopted. And since the rate of technological change is rapid, so is the rise of new social practices. Conflicts arise when codified standards are left behind. Language provides ample evidence of this gap. Consider the terms ‘intellectual property’ and ‘software theft.’ They are terms whose meanings were originally bound to tangible artefacts, but now describe abstractions. But do ethical principles survive the language shift? Or do we need to ‘manufacture’ new ones? Contributors to our theme in this journal explore the nature of these questions along with the problem of teaching ethics in a field that won’t stay still.

 ETHICS WITHIN INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY EDUCATION

 In ‘The place and pedagogy of ethics in the computing curriculum’, Paula Roberts develops a carefully reasoned rationale for the overt inclusion of ethics into computer-orientated subjects. Along the way, she identifies the gap between a code of ethics developed by an IT professional body (see the Australian Computer Society’s code elsewhere in this journal) and a code that might be appropriate to the less-focused computer user. Having established a place, Paula sets about the task of sketching out ways of teaching and learning about ethical computing. Although she discusses techniques and design philosophies used in an undergraduate first-year subject, the examples and models should be useful in other levels of formal and informal education.

 Recent history, particularly the behaviour of people within business provides a starting point for Helen James in her paper ‘Teaching computer ethics: Need and methods.’ She argues that evidence of poor ethical behaviour of IT professionals provides us with cogent reasons for including ethics into relevant curricula. However, she cautions that ethics cannot simply be ‘taught.’ Instead, educators must search out imaginative ways for students to learn about and develop their own ethical positions.

 Nick Chandler in his short communication ‘Hacker values and a dilemma for information technology educators’ provides a divergent perspective. He explores the inherent dilemma faced by information technology educators who promote inventiveness and exploration but also wish to engender personal responsibility in their students. From his observations of ‘hackers’ he uncovers a form of ethical behaviour that is often lost amongst the hype that parades across the tabloid press. He joins Paula Roberts and Helen James in a message for all who are responsible for the design of subjects and courses in computer education. We may ignore ethics in information technology, but we must then accept the consequences.

 GENDERED PERSPECTIVES OF EDUCATIONAL COMPUTING

 Dale Spender is a frequent contributor on issues that deal with gender and emerging communication technologies. In an address to the 11th Australian Computers in Education Conference (1993) she dealt with the history of women’s lack of access to powerful information technologies. Her address ‘A history of information media’ is reproduced in this issue. A pattern emerges … just as women gain the keys to power, men create and appropriate new forms of technology. The message (and hope) for education is reasonably clear: we face choices as educators, to ignore, to confront or to sit on the sidelines.

 Students perceive subjects and make enrolment choices in ways that are often mysterious to teachers and course designers. This might not be a worry if it were not for the powerful effect that gendered stereotypes have on students. Joy Teague and Valerie Clarke in “Encouraging girls to study computer science — should we even try?” explore the under-representation of females in school and undergraduate computer science courses. They provide some suggestions that may be used to combat socially constructed stereotypes.

 Evelyn Bransgrove in her article ‘Teacher’s understanding of gender implications for learning with computers’ explores teacher indifference to notions of gender inequality in the use of computers in school classrooms. Evidence of contradictory beliefs suggest that the issue cannot be simply dismissed as irrelevant.

 JOURNAL DEVELOPMENTS

 Regular readers will notice a few changes in this issue. We have included a new and hopefully regular feature, Internet sites and activities which should provide some starting points for interesting Internet expeditions for both classroom and academically-based voyagers. This feature is timely given our cyberspatial theme for next issue!

 We have also re-introduced a review section. In this issue John Miller takes a look at Seymour Papert’s latest book, The Children’s Machine. We have canvassed major print and software publishers and are now looking for people who would like to review quite a wide range of resources. If you are interested, contact me through post or e-mail.

 We have also chosen to include an index to last year’s volume. Future issues should maintain a cumulative index for the journal. And when we couple this with on-line access (through our FTP site) Australian Educational Computing should become more than a static resource.

 CONTRIBUTIONS...

 No editorial would be complete without a request for contributions. What we really need is to hear from real computer-using classrooms. I recently visited a school that had the most harmonious, well-organised, productive and balanced computing facility that one is likely to see. But I left wondering … What makes this school special? Why can’t others learn from the exemplary practice that was so evident? Why did the key personnel have to learn their good practice from scratch? Perhaps computer educators tend to build (rather than adopt) solutions to problems — and are reluctant to pass on the fruits of their experience. Perhaps we are in need of a cultural change! •