Moral Problems in Industry-Academia Partnership – The Viewpoint of Clients on a Project Course

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Abstract: Industry-academia partnerships are common in the IT field because they benefit both parties. Research on moral issues in these relations is scarce, and this case study is aimed at increasing knowledge in this area by investigating moral problems in a form of partnership, a collaborative IT project with a university. Twenty-one client representatives from IT firms or organisations were interviewed during a project course in information systems. The analysis was inspired by phenomenography. The results show that concern for the beneficial objectives of the client organisations typically conflicts with concern for students and their learning objectives. A two-dimensional structure constituting six types of moral problems was determined. The results are compared with the existing literature, and recommendations for practice and research are presented.

1 Introduction

Industry-academia partnership benefits both parties, and there are several forms of co-operation. These include training programmes, research centres, and industry advisory boards (Watson and Huber 2000; Keithley and Redman 1997). The maintenance of inter-organisational collaboration is based on two fundamentals: for the industry it provides opportunities to acquire human resources, and for academia it ensures that research and teaching activities are relevant. Collaborative student projects are a common feature in the IT field (e.g., Bergeron 1996). They benefit industry by providing it with project results and contacts with students –possible future employees - and the students reap benefits by learning communication (Fritz 1987), team-building, and interpersonal skills (Roberts 2000), for example. Indeed, project work is recognised by computing disciplines (information systems, software engineering, computer science) as an essential component in the education of future computer professionals (Gorgone et al. 2002). Although academia-industry relationships are common in the IT field, research on the underlying ethical
ethical dilemmas from the viewpoint of academia, but studies from the perspective of industry are lacking. The aim of this study is to fill this gap by investigating morally relevant decision-making situations, i.e. moral problems, perceived by client representatives involved in a project course, and formulating the means to tackle these problems. Although there are various definitions of a moral problem (e.g., moral conflict/dilemma; Gowans 1987), for reasons of simplicity the term moral problem is used here to mean any morally relevant issue (cf. the definitions of a moral dilemma in Audi 1995).

Information about moral problems was collected through interviews, the analysis of which was inspired by phenomenography. As the study focuses on investigating individuals’ subjective interpretations, and on how they interact with the world around them, it is interpretative in nature (Trauth 2001). The results show that the beneficial objectives of the clients (the results and the employment of students) and concern about the effects of the project on the students were the most significant determinants of moral problems.

The article is organised as follows. After the introduction, the research design and results are presented, the results are discussed and evaluated, and finally, recommendations for both academia and industry are offered.

2 Research Design

Twenty-one client representatives involved in a project course were interviewed, and the analysis followed the ideas of phenomenography to some extent. The aim of the phenomenographical method is to identify and describe qualitative variation in individuals’ experiences of their reality (Marton 1986). What is characteristic of it is the endeavour to capture conceptualisations that are faithful to individuals’ experience of a selected phenomenon. These conceptions, which are typically gathered through interviews, are then categorised, and relations between the categories are further explored (Francis 1993). A phenomenographic researcher seeks qualitatively different ways of experiencing the phenomena regardless of whether the differences are between or within individuals.

The selection of the course was based on my presence at the Department of Computer Science and Information Systems at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland, which arranges a project course entitled Development Project (DP). During the course, groups consisting of five students implement a project task defined by a client, typically an IT firm such as a software house or the IT department of an organisation such as an industrial plant. Each student is expected to use 275 hours in implementing the project task, and 125 hours to demonstrate project-work.

1 This article is a partial report of a study investigating moral conflicts perceived by clients, students, and instructors involved in a project course (Vartiainen 2005).