MIT Schwarzman College of Computing

Active Learning Project on Developing Codes on Conduct

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Associated MIT SERC Case Study:

[Hacking Technology, Hacking Communities: Codes of Conduct and Community Standards in Open Source](#)

Dunbar-Hester, C. (2021). Hacking Technology, Hacking Communities: Codes of Conduct and Community Standards in Open Source. *MIT Case Studies in Social and Ethical Responsibilities of Computing*, (Summer 2021). https://doi.org/10.21428/2c646de5.07bc6308

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Introduction

This project guides students in the creation and design of codes of conduct (CoCs) for users of the technology they develop. Many MIT classes, including WebLab, 6.08, 6.031, 6.170, and BattleCode, all have "final project" team assignments where groups of students build applications and share a code base; students of these classes could benefit from this ALP.

In this document, we focus on creating CoCs for team-based projects in Github-hosted project repositories. README files are considered an essential and default aspect of repositories, and we believe a code of conduct should be equally essential for both developers and users. After creating the CoC, the team may choose to enforce the document passively, by only applying restorative justice when guidelines have been violated, or actively, by asking team members to periodically reflect on the document throughout the term.

While writing the file, it might be helpful to bear in mind the following questions:
- ➜ Why might creating a code of conduct be helpful? Do you feel it's necessary to do so? (Note: this may be circumstantial.)
- ➜ What is the goal of this team? Which values will be most salient to advancing this mission?
- ➜ What types of behavior will not be tolerated? If harassment is a prohibited behavior, how can you create specific guidelines that will identify what would be classified as harassment (even if unintentional)?
- ➜ How can the team rigorously enforce this code of conduct? Who will benefit from adhering to the rules outlined in this document? Who is responsible for its passive and/or active enforcement?

Our active learning project will guide users through the creation of codes of conduct for any Github-hosted team projects; however, the guiding questions and thought process can be applied to any team project.

This project directly connects to real-world applications and promotes best practices for computer science students at MIT. While the codes do not have to replace any team contracts already being used in classes, merging them with existing practices may encourage further use of codes of conduct in other projects, generally resulting in more open and inclusive communities. Below, we detail a guideline to creating a code of conduct, including a guide on how to create and add one to a Github repository.

Creating a Github Code of Conduct

This active learning project uses Github as an example because it is a common classroom tool; however, note that codes of conduct can be adapted and applied to other code-sharing bases and team projects.

Option 1: Using the built-in Code of Conduct feature

GitHub already has code of conduct templates available; the video below demonstrates how one can be created. This option requires the least amount of work from course staff, but they should read through the template to ensure it aligns with their class goals before choosing this option.

Option 2: Course Staff Design a Code of Conduct Template

Codes of conduct may vary depending upon the context of the projects given to students. (For example, some projects may or may not be intended for the general public, so creating "community" guidelines can differ). However, at the very least, any code of conduct template given to students must contain the content within the guideline described in the "Code of Conduct Guidelines" section of this paper. Below are two demos from GitHub Classroom; course staff can create a template repo with an existing code of conduct for students to clone and create assignments from.

Code of Conduct Guidelines

In this section, we guide users through important sections of a standard code of conduct applied to a classroom team project. We describe flexible guidelines and alternatives, so these sections may be adjusted as necessary.

I. Team Purpose and Pledge

➔ Present a brief overview of team goals and the project description. Provide a purpose and motivation for the project, as well as an overview of the code of conduct.

➔ Generally describe the goals for the code of conduct and which values the team considers important

➔ Consider including aspects from standard team contracts, such as timelines, deliverables, and general project goals.

➔ Consider including project rubric, work breakdown by member, and other project-related information.

II. List of Standards

➔ List and describe best practices for maintaining a strong sense of community and inclusivity within the project.

➔ Detail behaviors that lead to an inclusive and positive project and team environment.

➔ Outline what respectful, positive, and considerate conversations look like, as well as general standards for detailing and signaling an open and accepting environment.

➔ May include general team contract points, including which forms of communication to use or when/how often meetings occur, but the main goal should be to define respectful conduct.

➔ May include examples of positive situations or successful conversations.

III. Unacceptable Behavior

➜ Define what actions or conversations are disallowed in order to maintain a positive working environment.

➜ Provide examples of behavior by team members that would be considered inappropriate for the project's setting.

➜ May include threatening or bullying speech, spam, insulting comments, or actions that invade privacy.

➜ May include any behavior specifically disallowed by the team through discussions and team meetings.

IV. Enforcement

➜ Provide a brief outline of what to do if the code of conduct is violated.

➜ What instances of negative or harmful behavior should be resolved by the group members, and how? Which situations should be resolved by the team, and which should be addressed by outside parties such as course staff?

➜ Describe courses of action that could be taken in cases where a team member is not as active as required, or if a team member feels uncomfortable with any conversations or work related to the project.

Additional Sections

Here, we provide examples of additional sections that may be included in a code of conduct. These may not be relevant for all projects, but incorporating these sections may serve to create productive conversations for the team and class.

Project Ethics

➜ Discussions addressing potential ethical problems related to the specific project. For example, describe the ethical pitfalls of models or datasets used for a machine learning project, or the problems related to data privacy or misuse for a security project.

➔ This section allows course staff to integrate more discussions and conversations about the social and ethical responsibilities of computing into class projects. It may be used as an assignment in and of itself for classes focused on generating more conversations about ethics (e.g., 6.806, 6.036, or 6.170).

Real-World Examples

➔ As part of the assignment, groups can read a short article or case study about a real-world code of conduct before writing their own; this would both ground the assignment in reality and encourage students to think more critically about the reasons codes of conduct have been encouraged, such as the following.

◆ *Hacking Technology, Hacking Communities: Codes of Conduct and Community Standards in Open Source* by Christina Dunbar-Hester

◆ After Working at Google, I'll Never Let Myself Love a Job Again, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/07/opinion/google-job-harassment.html

Scope

➔ Define the scope of the code of conduct.

➔ Does it apply both within project spaces and public spaces when an individual is representing the project or its community? Does it only apply within online settings, or does it apply to in-person conversations?

Recommendations for CoC Discussions

Conversations about creating a code of conduct may reveal conflicting values between team members, so it is important for teaching staff to maintain discussion guidelines. One resource from the University of Michigan outlines the following set of guidelines for planned, high-stakes conversations:

- Identify a clear purpose
- Establish ground rules
- Provide a common basis for understanding

- Create a framework for the discussion that maintains focus and flow
- Include everyone
- Be an active facilitator
- Summarize discussion and gather student feedback

One difficulty we perceive in following this template is the ability of course staff to be present for every team's CoC discussion, especially in classes with few TAs and 100 or more students. Without an active, trained facilitator, the risk of CoC conversations ending poorly increases, so course staff should plan accordingly. One solution is to remove a lecture or recitation during one week of the semester to set aside time for team meetings with a course instructor/TA.

Another template for facilitating CoC discussions is "SPECS", developed by the University of Washington's Center of Neurotechnology (CNT) Neuroethics Trust. It involves an individual survey of ethics topics and a facilitated group discussion, and can be adapted to CoC discussions by providing students with a guiding survey to answer before taking part in a facilitated conversation. During this discussion, students would discuss their survey answers and motivations under the supervision of a course staff member. Benefits of this method include that it saves time (students take the survey and reflect on it before meeting), and that discussion is more controlled because it centers on specific cases and questions presented by the survey (which, we assume, has been created by course staff).

Course Staff Considerations

➔ How will defining and resolving disputes play out among students?
  ◆ *Retributive justice approaches to conflict* — will students feel about how this approach influences interpersonal dynamics? Will this resolution approach create too much reliance upon authority figures (course staff) when resolving issues? How will staff choose to handle instances where unacceptable behavior is reported?

- Once behavior has been reported to course staff, the issue is out of students' hands and their code of conduct "enforcement" is no longer in play; this removes student autonomy and input.
- Will staff work with students as a group to decide what happens when behavior is reported? (This would be taking a more "restorative justice" type of approach.)
- *Restorative justice approaches* encourage students to figure out how to resolve conflicts amongst themselves.
  - Have students talk to each other about issues, such as a member not putting in enough work. Why has this been an issue? How can the team accommodate members with extenuating circumstances?
  - Make decisions based on shared values (which may differ from those of other groups or the course staff). For example, in a situation where someone is not meeting a deadline due to personal reasons, perhaps the value of care is more important than the value of achievement.
  - Note that students should still be encouraged to work with course staff when they feel they are out of their depth. We do not want them to feel they have to handle everything.
- How will the process of developing a code of conduct influence students' thinking of what is necessary to address DEI issues in open-source communities.
  - If students think that developing a code of conduct is all that needs to be done, then codes of conduct simply become "security theater," in which actions taken give the feeling of improving the situation, while accomplishing little or nothing else.

Conclusion

By encouraging students and instructors to incorporate a code of conduct into team-based projects within an undergraduate curriculum, our active learning proposal is intended to promote a more inclusive environment for student teams working on Github-based projects, as well as to increase mindfulness with respect to the ethical

implications of the technology the students create. To develop a CoC, instructors may either use the default CoC template provided or create a template repo with their own CoC (the latter is useful when the structure of the desired CoC deviates from GitHub's provided one).

When writing the document, there are several sections students *must* fill out, including: a team purpose, list of standards, list of unacceptable behaviors, and mechanisms for enforcement. While these form the bare minimum for a code of conduct, we provide additional sections students may find useful: a discussion of project ethics, which allows students to dive into the ethical and social issues that may result from the use of their final product; a deep dive into real-world examples when a CoC was (or was not) effective; and a broader scoping that covers which spaces and conversations the CoC should apply to.

Once the CoC is finally drafted out, several more discussions should take place. The first deals with CoC enforcement: students should decide whether to let figures of higher authority handle CoC violations or resolve conflict amongst themselves. After that, it'd be useful for students to recognize and discuss the limitations of their CoC — namely, that it won't address larger diversity, equity, or inclusion issues within open-source communities, as its scope is limited to the single community it's designed for.

Creating a code of conduct is just the first step toward affecting change and making open-source communities more welcoming and transparent. By nudging students and instructors toward these essential conversations about behavior, community standards, and the implications their work may have on others, our project hopes to take the first step toward creating more self-aware and inclusive technology, as well as more just technology development communities.