AP CS A Exploration of a Change from GridWorld to Labs

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ABSTRACT
The AP CS A program is exploring the possibility of moving from the utilization of the GridWorld case study to the inclusion of several in-class laboratory exercises, beginning in 2014-2015 or later. The Development Committee believes labs may achieve many benefits of the past case studies, but a lab format will allow teachers more flexibility in teaching and a more agile development cycle for new materials.

This Special Session will review the motivations, experiences, limitations, and constraints of case studies, motivations for the use of in-class laboratory exercises, and some components of three laboratory exercises that currently are under development by the AP CS A program.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.3.2 [Computer and Information Science Education]: computer science education, curriculum Language

General Terms
Algorithms, Design, Experimentation

Keywords
Laboratory exercises, case studies, active learning, computing applications.

1. SUMMARY
The AP CS A program is exploring the possibility of moving from the utilization of the GridWorld case study to the inclusion of several in-class laboratory exercises, beginning in 2014-2015 or later. The Development Committee believes labs may achieve many benefits of the past case studies, but a lab format will allow teachers more flexibility in teaching and a more agile development cycle for new materials.

This Special Session will review
• the motivations and experiences of the use of case studies, which were first used on the 1995 AP CS exams,
• limitations and constraints with the case-study model,
• motivations for the use of in-class laboratory exercises, and
• the main components of three laboratory exercises that currently are under development by the AP CS A program.

2. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND
Beginning with the 1995 AP CS exams, the Advanced Placement Computer Science program has utilized case studies. Three goals articulated in the original AP CS Directory Manager Case Study included:
a. "They emphasize process over end product ...providing a sort of apprenticeship in the craft of programming.
   b. They make large programs accessible. ...
c. They provide a good vehicle for assessment." [7]

In recent years, case studies also have been a vehicle to highlight principles of object-oriented problem solving. [3]

Although case studies have important benefits, their size and complexity have constrained the AP CS program in adapting to new course content and pedagogy. As a result, the AP CS A Development Committee is exploring a shift from the case study (GridWorld [5, 6]) to in-class laboratory exercises [2], perhaps in 2014-2015. The AP CS A Development Committee believes that a lab format may promote student learning, just as the case studies did. In addition, several lab experiences could provide a venue to suggest some real world applications. (A lab may not provide extensive details regarding an application, but a lab can suggest directions and encourage further investigation.) Altogether, the lab format allows flexibility for teachers, encourages creativity, allows courses to address local needs of students, encourages consideration of application areas, and allows an agile development cycle for new materials.

Should the AP CS A course move to lab-based experiences? The AP CS A program will identify important characteristics of lab-based experiences, and teachers will be able to choose labs that fit their courses [4].

Since the development of labs is time intensive, the AP CS A Development Committee, working with the College Board, is developing three new labs that may meet identified goals and objectives for an introductory computer science course [2]. These labs may be used at various times throughout a course, and may be of interest to both high school and college teachers.
3. SESSION OBJECTIVES
This session is designed to provide information to high school and college faculty alike on a possible transition of the AP CS A course from the GridWorld case study [5, 6] to in-class laboratory exercises. More specifically, the session has these objectives:

• Clarify the motivation and experiences with past AP CS case studies, especially the use of case studies as a pedagogical device for student learning of key concepts. [1]
• Review limitations of the case study approach for AP CS.
• Explain the approach of active student engagement through in-class labs, as described in many papers, such as [8-13].
• Outline the possible role of labs for AP CS A for 2014-2015 or later, including a review of important lab characteristics for a AP CS A course. [4].
• Present an overview of three draft AP CS A Labs, being developed by the AP CS A Development Committee to provide hands-on experiences with many topics of the course. [2]

4. OUTLINE OF THE SESSION
The following outline provides time to review the main topics (described above), followed by audience questions and feedback.

• Introduction and welcome --5 minutes, Walker
• Historical use of case studies (e.g., in AP CS) -- 5 minutes, Martin
• Limitations of the case study approach -- 5 minutes, Ciezki
• Use of labs within introductory computer science -- 5 minutes, Walker
• Role of labs for the AP CS course and exam, 5 minutes, Diaz
• Characteristics of in-class labs for AP CS A -- 5 minutes, Diaz
• Three draft lab resources under development for AP CS A
  • Overview, use in classes -- 5 minutes, Ciezki
  • Magpie Lab, 5 minutes, Walker
  • Picture Lab, 5 minutes, Ciezki
  • Elevens Lab, 5 minutes, Martin
• Questions, audience feedback, discussion, 25 minutes

5. EXPECTATIONS
This proposal has at least two primary audiences:

• Secondary school teachers (particularly AP CS A teachers) who organize introductory CS courses and who want to utilize current pedagogy and resources. These teachers want their students to be well prepared for the AP CS A course, so possible changes in content, exam coverage, and pedagogy can make a difference as courses are planned and taught.
• Teachers of introductory computer science at all levels, who wish to engage students and utilize laboratory exercises effectively. The new AP CS A Labs provide a new resource for teachers that could be useful in many settings.

Both of these audiences are likely to have questions regarding the possible dropping of the GridWorld case study and the inclusion of in-class labs, so the session will conclude with a 25-minute question-answer session with attendees.

6. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
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7. REFERENCES