Abstraction Abstracted
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ABSTRACT
Abstraction generally takes the form of the extraction and reification of an essential core from some area of interest. In software, the process of abstraction is often called refactoring. When understood more generally, abstraction is the process we use to understand the world. Both forms of abstraction are important to software engineering, and we can teach them both to students. But the ability to create and use abstractions is a skill. Like any other skill, some people will be better at it than others.

Keywords
Abstraction, conceptual model, mental model, refactoring, self-awareness, thought externalization.

1. INTRODUCTION
Liskov [11] describes what she claims are two kinds of abstraction: abstraction by parameterization and abstraction by specification. Abstraction by parameterization covers the traditional forms of software abstraction such as procedural abstraction (procedures, functions, methods, etc.), data abstraction (data types, classes, etc.), iteration abstraction, and polymorphic abstraction. Abstraction by parameterization extracts an essential core of some computational element, usually a process or structure, and reifies that core as a named computational element of its own, leaving parameters to be filled in when the abstraction is instantiated. A while-loop construct, for example, abstracts the notion of iteration and by providing slots into which a boolean expression and a procedural code segment may be inserted makes iteration available in a generic form. Abstraction in this sense gives software the elegance prized by software developers. Section 2 discusses software elegance.

Abstraction by parameterization is in my view the essence of abstraction. In order to do abstraction as parameterization constructs must be available for constructing the abstraction. These constructs generally consist of both prerequisite abstractions and notations. Programming languages, software frameworks, and design patterns provide many of those constructs.

According to Liskov, “Abstraction by specification abstracts from the implementation details (how the module is implemented) to the behavior users can depend on (what the module does).” The implication is that one finds a piece of code, figures out what it does, and then expresses that understanding as an abstraction. Occasionally this may actually happen, but in most cases, the abstraction process goes in the opposite direction. One knows the behavior one wants and then writes code that implements it.1

How does one know what one wants? The flippant answer is that one makes it up. But in fact, that is what happens. One determines what one wants by building mental models, i.e., abstractions, about the world, real or imagined. What is a mental model? It is a conceptualization, i.e., an abstraction. Encarta2 offers the following as one of the senses of abstraction.

PHILOSOPHY conceptualization: the philosophical process by which people develop concepts either from experience or from other concepts.

Although labeled as the “philosophical sense,” conceptualization captures what we mean by abstraction by parameterization. When an entity, biological or mechanical, makes a distinction (e.g. by behaving differently under different circumstances) has it created an abstraction? No, the difference between a distinction and an abstraction is that an abstraction is a reified distinction, a distinction for which the entity has a name and to which it can refer—abstractly. The philosophical literature uses the term apperception (contrast with perception) for the latter. Abstraction implies conceptualization which implies a mind that holds the abstraction.

Another useful pair of terms is awareness—which may be understood at the ability to make a distinction—and self-awareness—which may be understood as the ability to refer to a distinction one is making. Self-awareness in this sense is not about how one feels about the distinction but the awareness that one is making it.

The ability to do abstraction as conceptualization is one of the distinguishing characteristics of human beings. It is relevant to software engineering when we use that ability to understand an application domain and to write requirements as a first step in developing a software system.

So I agree with Liskov that abstraction—somewhat reformulated—plays two important roles in software engineering. Abstraction allows developers to write better software. Sections 3, 4 and 5 discuss this sense of abstraction. Abstraction allows us to build mental models of our world. We can then externalize those mental models, first as requirements and then as the software that captures and animates them. Section 6 discusses this sense.

2. SOFTWARE ELEGANCE
I would guess that most of the participants in this workshop think of themselves—undoubtedly with justification—as top-notch abstraction practitioners.3 We are among those whom Kramer and Hazzan [10] singled out as being

1 Of course that description is grossly simplified. Most of the time, one starts with an idea, codes a version of it, works with the written code, discovers that it’s not exactly what one wants, changes one’s idea about what one wants, etc.


3 Other than to think itself and its synonyms, I have been unable to find an English word that refers to the act of creating and manipulating abstractions—she abstracts very well—or to someone who abstracts expertly—he’s a superior abstractor.
able to produce clear, elegant designs and programs ... Abstraction is suggested as the source for this phenomenon.

Some software is simply far more elegant and conceptually inviting than other software. Software is art—or at least many of the most accomplished practitioners of software development think so. Knuth’s 1974 Turing Award lecture [9] was entitled “Computer Programming as an Art” and his still incomplete 7 volume work on software is called The Art of Computer Programming. In [9] Knuth described his feelings about software.

When we prepare a program, it can be like composing poetry or music ...

The possibility of writing beautiful programs, even in assembly language, is what got me hooked on programming in the first place. ...

Some programs are elegant, some are exquisite, some are sparkling. My claim is that it is possible to write grand programs, noble programs, truly magnificent ones!

As a programmer I have my own sense of what I mean by abstraction and elegance in software. I often use the analogy of climbing a mountain. To realize that there is an abstraction that incorporates a number of previously disparate elements of one’s code as special cases is like reaching a spot from which one can look out over the valley below. One has a better perspective of how things that were once familiar in detail are related to each other more abstractly. One also sees that one is not at the top, that another refactoring will take one to the next lookout area. After climbing to that overview one has an even broader perspective. But once one has understood the view from there one sees that with a bit more effort, one can reach a still higher level. It seems never to end. As each level one catches glimpses of yet higher peaks with better views. No matter how God-like one’s view of the code, there seems to be an even more elegant and more abstract way of understanding it.

But I also find myself getting closer and closer my code. The analogy I use in describing that experience is to someone who loves woodworking. After building an initial serviceable version of an artifact her next step is to make it more finished by going over it with fine sandpaper. She lovingly takes her time with it until the artifact her next step is to make it more finished by going over it with fine sandpaper. She lovingly takes her time with it until the wood is soft and smooth. As she works the material, smoothing it, polishing it, and shining it, it begins to glow with an inner light. One cannot resist running one’s hands over its subtle surfaces.

With software one takes both journeys simultaneously. As the code becomes more abstract it also becomes more clarified, its surface more limpid and elegant. The farther the software as a vehicle for generality and abstraction allows you to see, the more one appreciates its detailed beauty, the ingenious simplicity of each element, the mind-satisfying shape of each line of code, the clarity of thought revealed by each construct.

One of the earliest proposed “methodologies” for software development was called “stepwise refinement.” [12] Refinement in Wirth’s sense meant decomposition from higher level constructs into lower level details. That sort of refinement is not what I find myself doing when I develop software. But if one understands refinement in its other sense—to polish, to improve, and to perfect—then for those who appreciate it, software development is indeed successive (if not necessarily “stepwise”) refinement.

3. REFACTORING: THE ROYAL ROAD TO ABSTRACTION

Refactoring is commonly understood as “the process of changing a software system in such a way that it does not alter the external behaviour of the code, yet improves its internal structure.” [6]

Why would anyone want to do that? If refactored software behaves no differently from unfactored software, why bother? The standard answer appeals to pragmatic benefits: when one later wants to modify the software the refactored code with its “improved internal structure” will be easier to understand and less expensive to fix or extend. I doubt that most programmers would agree that the ultimate measure of software quality is how easy it is to maintain. Software quality is more than ease of maintenance.

Most expert programmers are fanatical about refactoring. Why? In my view, expert programmers refactor to reveal and express abstractions—in particular the abstractions that identify and reflect the essential structure of the software.

Plato spoke of “carving Nature at its joints” (Phaedrus 265d-266a). When we refactor software, we don’t so much as carve the software at its joints as bring those joints into focus, like seeing the software in an X-ray picture. What had seemed somewhat amorphous comes to have bones and other essential skeletal structures. Refactoring is the identification of an underlying structure.

Here’s an example. In writing an expression evaluator in Prolog one could write the following.6

\[
\text{eval}(A + B, C) :-
\text{eval}(A, AVal),
\text{eval}(B, BVal),
C \text{ is } AVal + BVal.
\]

\[
\text{eval}(A - B, C) :-
\text{eval}(A, AVal),
\text{eval}(B, BVal),
C \text{ is } AVal - BVal.
\]

\[
\text{eval}(A * B, C) :-
\text{eval}(A, AVal),
\text{eval}(B, BVal),
C \text{ is } AVal * BVal.
\]

[5] If you feel uncomfortable reading Prolog code, see Section 5.

[6] Prolog programs manipulate tree structures. Thus A + B is the tree structure with root + and children A and B. The Prolog is operator evaluates its right hand argument (as long as it is an arithmetic expression) and attempts to unify the result with its left hand argument. Thus the first clause (the first four lines) says that to evaluate the expression A + B one should evaluate the arguments and then apply the + operator to the results.

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4 My Ph.D. is in Computer Science, and I am a professor of computer science. But at heart I’m a programmer. The job title of programmer is commonly denigrated as referring to a low level task. I think that’s a mistake. One of the most important attributes of software is that it be executable. That requirement is what keeps software developers honest. To program is to creating executable software.
But one could also write the following.

\[
\text{eval(Expr, Result) ::}
\begin{align*}
\text{Expr} &= [\text{Op | Args}], \\
\text{isArithmeticOp}(\text{Op}), \\
\text{map}(&\text{eval, Args, ArgsVals}), \\
\text{Expr1} &= [\text{Op | ArgsVals}], \\
\text{Result is Expr1.}
\end{align*}
\]

Why is this better? It’s certainly simpler; there is far less code. More importantly, it is more powerful—because it is explicit about what one does to evaluate an arithmetic expression. One extracts the arguments, evaluates them, reconstitutes the expression using the argument values instead of the arguments, and then performs the expression’s operator on the result.

In being explicit about how to evaluate an arithmetic expression this refactored version of the code is an explicit representation of the general process of evaluating an arithmetic expression. One can then apply that process to any arithmetic expression.

Of course this is not new; it is procedural abstraction, the sort of abstraction represented by any software subprogram. This example may seem more elegant because it manipulates symbolic expressions. But it’s really no different.

The conversion of the first version of the program to the second is a prototypical example of refactoring. The process of evaluating arithmetic expressions has been made explicit and reified by factoring it out of the original code and expressing it separately. By extracting and reifying the essence of the expression evaluation process one has gained leverage: a unit of knowledge has been created and made available for further use. This is not a minor issue. Virtually every concept is an abstraction. When we as human beings create and name a concept we have captured and tamed it (tamed in the sense of breaking a horse) at least to the extent that we can refer to it whenever we choose. So when one factors out and thereby reifies an aspect of a computation, one not only creates a concept but also “breaks it to the saddle” so that one can put it to work elsewhere.

4. CLIMBING MOUNT ABSTRACTION

This section offers a simple illustration of how one abstraction leads to another. Figures 1 and 2 show standard Java versions of depth-first and breadth-first search. The idea is that these searches are methods in a Goal class. A goal (instance of Goal) is passed the root Node of a tree, which is searched for a node that satisfies it. The test that determines whether a node satisfies this goal is the following.

\[\text{this.isSatisfiedBy(node)}\]

The method dfSearch uses recursion to perform a depth-first search. The method bfSearch uses a frontier list (of Nodes) to keep track of the nodes to be examined at the current and next levels. In bfSearch the frontier is the argument. When passed it contains the tree’s root node as its sole element. Although it may appear that dfSearch does not keep a list of nodes to be searched, in fact it does. Its call stack is essentially such a list. The primary difference between the lists kept by bfSearch and dfSearch is that the list implicitly embodied in the call stack is treated as a stack whereas the frontier list maintained explicitly by bfSearch is treated as a queue.

If the implicit list embodied by the depth-first search call stack is made explicit, the two search approaches can be unified. The reasoning is as follows. Both searches keep a list of nodes to be examined. Breadth-first search calls that list a frontier. In depth-first search the list is implicit. But let’s call it a frontier also. In both searches, nodes are removed from the front of the frontier. The difference is that in breadth-first search the frontier is treated as a queue (the list of children is appended to the frontier) whereas in depth-first search the frontier is treated as a stack (the list of children is prepended to the frontier). This realization can be expressed as the code in Figure 3.

One may justifiably argue that combing breadth-first and depth-first search in this way does no honor to abstraction. After all, these two searches have very different qualities. Most notably, depth-first is not complete whereas breadth-first is, and breadth-first search is much more memory intensive than depth-first. Figure 3 makes the two seem like twins, which they aren’t.

Nonetheless, Figure 3 illustrates two important features of refactoring: (a) An implicit element (the depth-first search list of yet-to-be-examined nodes) is made explicit. (b) An underlying essential procedural similarity is highlighted and parameterized.

More interesting is the next step. Figure 3 suggests that the key to search types is how the children of a node are added to the frontier. Best-first search is different from both breadth-first and depth-first in that it maintains the frontier sorted by a measure of goodness. So to add best-first search one would merge the children into the frontier according to some measure of “goodness.”

But why not abstract out the entire question of how to combine the children and the frontier? Figure 4 illustrates how that can be done: pass as a parameter to the search method an object that represents the search type and let that object decide how to combine the children and the frontier. This refactoring reifies the search type itself.

The two refactorings in this sequence both illustrate the transformation of an implicit computation element (first a list and then a code segment) into a first class computational element. The sequence also illustrates how taking one abstraction step can set the stage for more as one climbs the mountain of abstraction.

One could continue along this line by noting that the frontier need not be a list. All that is required is that the frontier (a) serve up
elements if it has any and (b) accept new elements and determine in which order to serve them. One could create a Stream class that that provides that service. It would be parameterized by an ordering component, which in this case would be a search type object.

But instead of continuing along these lines, let’s step back from code level abstractions and abstract the second abstraction step itself. We can notice that virtually any code-level abstractions and abstract the second abstraction step. But instead of continuing along these lines, let’s step back from component, which in this case would be a search type object. In which order to serve them. One could create a Stream class that provides that service. It would be parameterized by an order-
in which order to serve them. One could create a Stream class that represents the generic activity of the code fragment and (b) create a separate subclass for each case—just as Figure 4 did for search types. (Of course, just because one can build such an abstraction doesn’t mean that one always should.)

Abstracting a collection of comparable behaviors in this way is known as the Strategy Design Pattern [7]. Using the strategy design pattern is the fundamental and prototypical act of abstraction. As discussed earlier, the difference between a distinction and an abstraction is explicit identification and reification of the distinction. A distinction becomes an abstraction when one names the category or concept that embodies or carries the distinction. Virtually all design patterns are abstractions. Every design pattern identifies and refines a generic arrangement of software elements.

This section has explored two kinds of abstractions: code-level abstractions and abstraction patterns. The title of the section deliberately echoes Dawkins’ Climbing Mount Improbable [3], which explains how evaluation is able to create improbably intricate designs through random variation and environmental selection. I happen to agree with [4] that all creativity, even human creativity, is a result of random variation and selection. But that’s not why I echoed Dawkins’ book.

I echoed Dawson’s book title to make the point that both evolution and (the process of) abstraction are bottom-up processes. In both cases, one builds higher levels (of functionality or abstraction) from an existing base.

Evolution is said to be a tinkerer. Its products are bricolage, cobbled together from whatever happens to be available—a bottom-up process. Abstractions are products of human awareness. The process of abstraction is the extraction and reification of the essence of something (or of a collection of things). But one cannot extract from something unless that thing exists in the first place. So like evolution, abstraction is a bottom-up process. As this section has illustrated, as a bottom-up process, abstraction, like evolution builds upon itself.9

One of our gifts as human beings is a certain degree of self-awareness. Awareness can lead to abstraction when we become aware of patterns, for example that we are repeatedly performing the same kinds of abstractions. The discussion in section 1 dis-

9 James Burke has made a career out of tracing such sequences. His Connections, a popular public television series three decades ago, was accompanied by an eponymous book [Burke].

cusses awareness as the conceptual capturing of a distinction. A pattern is really a distinction: it distinguishes between those cases that fit the pattern and those that don’t. When applied to software awareness of this sort results in design patterns. Like abstractions that build on each other on one level, abstractions that grow from self-awareness are also bottom-up. We can become aware of patterns only when confronted with examples that embody them.

A significant thread in computer science can be understood in terms of this sort of pattern-level awareness. The process of becoming aware of a pattern followed by its formalization can be seen in even the earliest days of computing. John Backus developed Fortran, the first higher-level language—and a compiler to translate it into machine language—when he realized that it was possible to program a computer to do the same sort of translation that programmers of the day did manually—and laboriously. Soon software developers abstracted the compilation process by defining grammars for programming languages and building them explicitly into compilers. The discipline moved to the next level of awareness when we developed compiler generators, which reified grammars as computational objects. Virtually all programming languages, tools, and frameworks reflect a similar trajectory of progressively more abstract awareness and reification.

Why bother making this point? There seems to be a never-ending debate about how software is developed: top-down, bottom-up, middle-out. To the extent that software development is abstraction, it is a bottom-up process. But see section 6, which discusses thought externalization, when abstractions precede the software.

5. CAN ABSTRACTION BE TAUGHT?

One of the issues to be explored in this workshop is whether the process of abstraction can be taught. I have three answers: yes, yes but with difficulty, and no.

Yes, abstraction can be taught. We teach it every day. Whenever we teach a programming language we are teaching abstraction. When we teach design patterns we are teaching abstraction. When we teach a framework for a software architecture, we are teaching abstraction. In these and similar cases we are teaching students how to use pre-packaged abstractions—abstractions that most of them would not have thought of on their own. Software languages, tools, frameworks, and design patterns are abstractions that we can teach—and that students can learn and apply.

Of course some students will apply abstractions more successfully than others. But that’s true of every skill. The point, though, is that once an abstraction has been identified and captured in some recorded formulation, it can be taught. I would be willing to bet that because our knowledge of software abstraction has advanced considerably in the past two decades today’s programmers produce significantly better software—with more effective use of abstractions—than that produced two decades ago.

Improvement of that sort illustrates the power of culture. Culture enables us to record and share knowledge. We don’t have to discover for ourselves everything that isn’t built into our genes.

Interestingly, some computer scientists think that using pre-packaged abstractions is a bad idea. Dewar and Schonberg [5] discuss what they call a “worrisome trend.”

The irresistible beauty of programming consists in the reduction of complex formal processes to a very small set of primitive operations. Java, instead of exposing this beauty, encourages the
programmer to approach problem-solving like a plumber in a hardware store: by rummaging through a multitude of drawers (i.e. packages) we will end up finding some gadget (i.e. class) that does roughly what we want. How it does it is not interesting!

Although I wouldn’t use such a dismissive term, in my view teaching students to “rummage about” until they find the right pre-packaged abstraction is exactly the right approach. (And one shouldn’t care how it is implemented as long as it meets one’s time, space, and scalability needs.) One shouldn’t ask students to reduce all programming to a very small set of primitive operations. Doing so would be to tell them to throw away all the abstractions that our community has developed. Students should understand that a rich collection of abstractions is available for developing software. A significant part of the difference between elegant and ugly code is finding and using the right ones.

But Dewar and Schonberg aside, even if we agree that teaching students about pre-packaged abstractions is a good idea, there is a serious qualification to the assertion that such abstractions can be taught. To understand many abstractions one must first understand notations and prerequisite abstractions. Abstractions often build upon previously developed abstractions. One can’t learn about subclass hierarchies, for example, until one learns about classes.

Notations present a different sort of problem. Notation is generally easy to teach. But it is often difficult to learn a notation well enough so that it becomes second nature. Notation shouldn’t stand in the way between a person and an idea. Yet it frequently does.

When most of us read something in our native language, the sentences generally enter our minds more or less directly as meaning. We don’t struggle first to translate the words into individual units. When most of us read something in our native language, the sentences generally enter our minds more or less directly as meaning. It frequently does. Yet it frequently does.

Think of the difference between looking at code in a programming language you know and code in a programming language you don’t know. How comfortable were you, for example, with the Prolog code earlier in this article?

I know Java reasonably well; I’ve been programming in it since it was first developed. When I see a page of Java code I feel at home. I’ve never felt that way about C or C++. It’s even worse now; I haven’t written any C/C++ code in a long time. When I look at a page of C/C++ code, my mind rebels. What are those strange ampersands, asterisks, dashes, and angles? I don’t want to have to remember and translate them into meaning before I can understand the code.

Do you know Haskell? Consider the following Haskell code.

\[
\text{primes} = \text{sieve} [2 \ldots ] \quad \\
\text{where } \text{sieve} (\text{p}\&\text{x}) = \text{p}\&\text{sieve} [x | x <- \text{xs}, (x \mod p) /= 0]
\]

Does it feel comfortable? It’s a definition of the prime numbers. It’s beautifully elegant. But it relies on many concepts and notations—including the idea of infinite lists and the notation for list comprehension and list construction. In addition, it puts mod in strange-looking single forward-quotes. One can probably guess what where means, but it’s not something one sees in most languages. It appears that s\text{ieve} is defined recursively. But where is the termination condition? With lazy evaluation, which is the default in Haskell, one doesn’t need a termination condition.

Now consider this widely quoted Haskell formulation for the Fibonacci numbers.

\[
\text{fib} = 1 : 2 : \text{zipWith} (+) \text{fib} (\text{tail} \text{fib})
\]

Again, quite elegant. It too uses infinite lists and lazy evaluation. It uses the standard library function tail (whose meaning one might easily guess) and the less transparent zipWith, which takes (+), whatever that means, as its first argument. If you didn’t know Haskell would you know that the second “;” creates a list whose tail is the list returned by the call to zipWith?

This definition also seems to be recursive—and again with no termination condition. Not only that, the recursive reference seems to define fib directly in terms of itself: the fib that appears in the body isn’t applied to a modified version of the arguments. At least in primes, sieve was applied to something derived from the tail of the argument in the sieve signature. But then fib doesn’t seem to have any arguments. So what is fib, a function with no arguments, a list? How should all this be understood?

The answer is that fib is a list, not a function, and it’s not defined recursively. This fib definition works by constraining the list fib to be the Fibonacci numbers. The first two are given. After that each Fibonacci number is the sum of the previous two. If one pairwise adds the list of Fibonacci numbers (fib) to the tail of the list of Fibonacci numbers (tail fib), one gets the list of Fibonacci numbers starting with the third Fibonacci number. That’s what zipWith (+) does. Once that structure is set up, the list of Fibonacci numbers can be generated iteratively (and lazily), not recursively.

The point of these examples is not to criticize Haskell, which is a wonderful language. It is that when abstractions are expressed in terms of unfamiliar notations and prerequisite abstractions they precipitate as meaning in one’s mind only with difficulty.

This is a serious problem. It often takes some time for ideas and abstractions to become familiar enough to serve as a foundation for further ideas. Fortunately it’s not new ideas that are difficult to learn; it’s the language in which new ideas are expressed that creates a barrier to understanding.

Yes, self-awareness can be taught, but with difficulty. Self-awareness is a far different skill from applying pre-packaged abstractions. By self-awareness I am referring to an awareness of one’s own thought processes along with the insight that those thought processes can be captured, externalized, and expressed in code. John Backus’s genius was not the invention of Fortran. His genius was his awareness that the mental process he laboriously and tediously went through whenever translating equations into machine code could be automated. It is self-awareness at that level that leads to the most important software abstractions.

Even though self-awareness can be taught—at least I believe it can—it is not a skill that we generally attempt to teach. Self-awareness is more subtle than most skills. It is more difficult to grade, and its visible products are harder to measure. Because we have not directed our attention to teaching self-awareness, we have virtually no academic experience in doing so. It does not belong to any single discipline; it has no natural academic home.

No accredited University offers a self-awareness major.

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10 Debora Shuger, Professor of early modern English, claims (personal communication) that the humanities teach it. I’m skeptical.
But I believe that we can teach self-awareness and that we can do so as a concrete, discipline-specific skill. At the most prosaic level self-awareness refers to an awareness of patterns. To teach an introductory course in software-oriented self-awareness we could give students code to which design patterns would apply and ask them how to improve the code. We would teach such a course before teaching design patterns—because in this course we be encouraging them to invent design patterns on their own.11

Such a course would be difficult to teach. Many students would have difficulty inventing the needed design patterns and might find the course quite frustrating. For some students, once they discovered that they were supposed to invent design patterns they would have great difficulty not looking up design patterns in advance and seeing which ones fit. Two points should be made to any student who does that. The first is that using a catalog of design patterns makes it impossible to practice self-awareness. So the student will be losing the benefit of the course. But the second is that the student has already practiced self-awareness at least once. In realizing that the objective is to make up one’s own design patterns, the student has become aware of something on his own—and should be congratulated for doing so. The student who truly misses out is the one who finds out about using a catalog of design patterns from someone another student.

The point of the course would not be to invent the right design pattern for each example. The point of the course would be to become aware of one’s own process of understanding so that one could use the skill of becoming aware elsewhere.

Would we really be able to teach this sort of self-awareness? I don’t know. Do we have time to teach it? I don’t know the answer to that either. There are so many known and useful abstractions that we spend all our time teaching them. Yet difficult as it might be such a class would probably be worth the effort. As far as I know, no one has attempted to develop a course like this.12

No, abstraction as brilliance cannot be taught. Creativity and insight are not evenly distributed. It’s difficult to imagine that one can teach anyone and everyone to be a brilliant programmer—or a brilliant composer, writer, or painter. Even though for most fields one can teach how to recognize elegance and creativity, I can’t imagine that one can teach—as a dependable skill—how to produce elegance and creativity. I might be able to analyze one of Garrison Keiler’s “Guy Noir” scripts and tell you why it’s funny. But that doesn’t mean I can write one myself. Perhaps this is another (unprovable?) example of $P \neq NP$. Production seems to be a lot harder than recognition.

6. SOFTWARE IS EXTERNALIZED THOUGHT

So far I have focused on abstraction as a way of writing better software. This section looks at abstraction as a way of deciding what software to write.

In [1] I claim that computation is externalized thought and that software is the medium we use for that externalization. Although software development is usually an iterative process13—write a version, see how it looks, modify it, etc.—to a first approximation, one can think of software as an external representation of an idea in the mind of the developer.

So my fundamental perspective is that when we write software we construct in our minds an idea of what we want the software to do and then externalize that idea as software. When writing software we are transforming ideas into code.

The power of computing springs from the fact that we have developed languages that have both of the following properties.

- We can use the language to express our thoughts.
- The language is executable. It can have a real effect in the material world without human intervention.

Never in history have we had such a capability. Every previous symbolic medium for thought externalization required a human being to interpret it.

That software corresponds to and represents ideas is not new. It is quite traditional to refer to the “conceptual model” implemented by software. Unfortunately, we often treat conceptual models as if they were software by-products. Of course, the ordering is reversed; the idea precedes the software. Software that doesn’t match its conceptual model is said to have a bug—or as the joke goes, we change the conceptual model to make the bug a feature.

So if software is an externalized conceptual model, to be better software developers (and to train better software developers) we should improve our ability to create conceptual models. To do that we should study how we think and how we externalize our thoughts as software—and we should do so for as wide a variety of disciplines as possible. In other words, we should do our best to understand how people in various fields use computers to help them think.

To do so, it makes sense to develop one or more courses in which students experience a wide range of domain-specific applications. It would be particularly useful to include systems with powerful visualization and data manipulation features.

In helping students learn about the abstractions used in various disciplines it’s important to focus concretely on how a discipline uses its abstractions to model the world—and not on the abstractions themselves as the subject matter. I call this the model-first approach in contrast to the theory-first approach.

A simple example of the distinction between model-first and theory-first is if we are teaching students about a discipline that uses numbers to count (and I mean something as simple and basic as counting), we should not require that students first master number theory. One need not know what Goldbach’s conjecture is before one can use numbers to count.

Obvious as this may seem, we don’t always follow this guidance. A course that teaches students how to build systems dynamics models might use a simulation engine that is based on differential
such courses should not attempt to teach the mathematics of differential equations. The abstractions needed to build models based on rates of change are not very difficult; the mathematics of differential equations requires significant prerequisites.

If you think about it, we use the model-first approach in our own discipline. When we teach computer science we first teach students how to build mental models and how to externalize those models in a programming language. We don’t start off by teaching students formal language theory, compilers, and techniques for implementing operational semantics in virtual machines.

I believe we should pursue such a model-first approach. Teach students as many ways as possible both to build mental models and to externalize those models as software.

Students who understand how to develop mental models of the world—and especially mental models that can be externalized as software—will always be in demand. They will serve as knowledge middlemen—otherwise known as requirements analysts.

7. SUMMARY
The subject matter of this workshop is abstraction in software engineering. Abstractions are concepts. Software is nothing if it is not about concepts. Abstractions, play two distinct and important roles in software engineering. (a) We use abstractions to build more powerful and more elegant software. The richness and continued development of our software abstraction ecology and the vibrancy of our software community suggests that we have not come close to exhausting the space of software abstractions. (b) As human beings, we use abstractions to build mental models of our world. Software engineers help both with the development of these mental models and with their externalization and animation as software.

8. REFERENCES
All Internet accesses are as of January 24, 2007.


[7] Gamma, Erich; Richard Helm, Ralph Johnson, and John Vlissides, Design Patterns: Elements of Reusable Object-Oriented Software. Addison-Wesley, 1995.


Figures

```java
public Node dfSearch(Node node) {
    if (this.isSatisfiedBy(node)) return node;
    for (Node child : node.children) {
        Node solution = this.dfSearch(child);
        if (solution != null) return solution;
    }
    return null;
}
```

**Figure 1.** Depth-first search.

```java
public Node bfSearch(List< Node > frontier) {
    while (!frontier.isEmpty()) {
        Node node = frontier.remove(0);
        if (this.isSatisfiedBy(node)) return node;
        frontier = append(frontier, node.children);
    }
    return null;
}
```

**Figure 2.** Breadth-first search.
public Node parameterizedSearch(List< Node > frontier, boolean depthFirst) {
    while (!frontier.isEmpty()) {
        Node node = frontier.remove(0);
        if (this.isSatisfiedBy(node)) return node;

        // For depth-first search put the children at the front of the frontier, simulating a stack.
        // For breadth-first search put the children at the end of the frontier as usual.
        frontier = depthFirst ? prepend(node.children, frontier) : append(frontier, node.children);
    }
    return null;
}

Figure 3. The search type has been parameterized: depth-first or breadth-first.

public Node abstractedSearch(List< Node > frontier, SearchType searchType) {
    while (!frontier.isEmpty()) {
        Node node = frontier.remove(0);
        if (this.isSatisfiedBy(node)) return node;

        // searchType.merge(node.children, frontier) merges node.children
        // into frontier. Depending on the SearchType, the merge may yield
        // breadth-first, depth-first, best-first, A* or some other search strategy.
        frontier = searchType.merge(frontier, node.children);
    }
    return null;
}

Figure 4. The search type has been abstracted.