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Introduction to HCI

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Ethnography of Wendt Commons WISCEL Lab

For our ethnography we wanted to choose a setting that was used in many different applications. We were interested in spaces that are multi-use, and the particular utilities that these spaces exhibit. We also wanted to choose somewhere on campus that was easily accessible for all group members. We ended up choosing the Wendt Commons, otherwise known as the WISCEL lab. We specifically wanted to focus on shared technology and how one single piece of technology can be re-used in many different applications for many different subjects. Initially, when we visited the WISCEL lab, we noticed many types of shared technology including projectors, printers, digital sign-on boards, E-Boards, and laptops. The laptops stood out most to us so we wanted to focus on them.

For collecting data, we conducted two field tests and four interviews. In the field tests we observed from the back of the lab and took notes on what students were doing. We did not limit our field tests to just the shared laptops, we wanted to observe a full spectrum of the space and how everything works together to produce a productive space. Each field observation was 1-2 hours in length and the type of activity happening at the time varied. In some there was a class, and in others there was just open study. Those are the two main uses of the WISCEL lab, but how those activities are conducted can differ greatly. When we conducted our interviews, we wanted to make sure we interviewed people from the different breadths of activity. Therefore we had 4 interviewees. When approaching our interviewees, we confronted them and explained what we were doing here and asked for their consent to interview. We initially approached people who we observed doing certain tasks, or taking on certain roles in the space. We asked a total of five people, and only one person declined. When we conducted the interviews, we sat where we first approached the interviewees. We took a video of the recordings just so we had verbal and visual documentation of how the interview happened for reference. We wanted to make sure we had this data for the coding part. We also took notes, and then later when transcribing the interview, we could watch back the video and make sure we did not miss anything. We analyzed the data by making some affinity diagrams and models of the observations we took.

Using these affinity diagrams helped us conduct coding on the interviews and be able to categorize our observations in a way that is easy to understand. We wanted to keep the coding simple and efficient so we could have precise data. We were able to come up with important activities that occurred in Wednt Commons for the open codes. Later we classified these into more of a general concept in the axial codes. And lastly, we came up with a simple selective coding.

We studied two groups of students that were in a lecture. We found that in those classes, the laptops are very important to the work-flow of the class. Because students needed to log into the CAE domain, the laptops had to be set up specifically for the network. Therefore students who wanted to work together had to get there early enough to find a table that had enough open seats. It seemed from one of our interviews that these laptops were certainly outdated. The students are somewhat forced to use these because there is not an easy way setup for them to connect to the domain from their personal devices. The classes we observed were also known as split classes. These promote group work and collaboration to solve exercises. It seemed many students needed help and that there was a bottleneck of the number of TAs to the number of students. According to our interview with a student, some of them need to wait up to 15 minutes to get help from a TA. For some students who understand the content, they are allowed to walk around and help other students. In each class we were able to identify at least three students who took on this pseudo-TA role. From this information, we noticed that many students would benefit from adding additional TAs or professors that would assist in this process. It seemed a lot of students got off-track when waiting for TAs to answer questions, and some never got to finish the activity. Another important factor we noticed was the inability for students to use their own laptops to complete these exercises. These laptops are quite outdated and take up alot of desk space. In the interviews, our student expressed to us that using these laptops was not a good use of their time, and it took up a lot of table space that could be used to accommodate more students in larger groups. They suggested that a use of a VNC viewer to login to a CAE virtual machine could be a better solution to this problem. Although not all students mentioned this, we did notice that almost every other student had a personal device of some sort, either a laptop or a tablet that they were also using on the desk at the same time. This seems like an inconvenient use of the WISCEL space. From this, we wanted to know more about the multi-use nature of the space. Without these laptops would it open up the space for more students? Larger group tables? Perhaps even more tables? The answer seemed to be yes. Not all students even used the laptops. In the other field observation, the students were not in class, instead it was just open work space. These laptops were taking up unnecessary space and not being used by the majority of the occupants. Overall, these large classes that take place in the WISCEL lab could benefit from adding more TAs, allowing students to access the domain through a VNC viewer (this would also allow for remote connection if students are sick), and the space could be much more accessible to more students and allow for more study space if these laptops were gone.

In conclusion, conducting a design ethnography is not an easy task. We noticed that taking field notes is one of the easier task because it does not require any analysis. You get to sit back and just observe what is happening in front of you. We were able to take a lot of field notes because the space is large and there are a lot of things going on. We did not expect the communal laptops as a focal point in our ethnography, but as it turns out, they are much more important than we first thought. Conducting interviews was somewhat hard for us. Because we did not have a list of questions, the interviews were more free flowing and we had to adapt to bring the interview in a direction that best suited us. One thing that surprised us is how many different uses that space has, over our observations and interviews there were people in that space for at least 5 different reasons. This made our ethnography a bit more broad than what we expected, but we were able to identify the main goal and what we wanted to focus on. A lot of our field observations are quite useful as watching how people interact with technology is often the best way to understand what they like/dislike about it. We learned that in this seemingly “optimal” learning space, there were some improvements that could be made to streamline workflow and optimize collaboration.