Theory of human-computer interaction

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General Feedback on Previous Years' Courswork Submissions

Summarisation is a difficult skill, and to some extent your essays brought this home to me. There was a very common error, which I regret not trying harder to discourage in my instructions, it was this.

When summarising an article's contribution, and moving on the critique the article, too many of you seemed to assume that your reader would already know the details of the article. This led you to characterise aspects of the research that should instead have been described (albeit briefly). I'll try to make this clearer. Imagine you were summarising the Henderson & Card, ROOMS paper that I will be lecturing on in class.

The right way to do this is to describe the main ideas of ROOMS and where they came from. So you might say something like "ROOMS is a window management system that gathers groups of windows and their placements (i.e. positions on the screen) into 'rooms' that support certain constellations of tasks. The motivation behind ROOMS is the observation that although multitaskers swap between windows a lot, they don't do this randomly, rather they typically have a small 'working set' of windows that they switch between during a work period."

In other words, the summary should actually mention the key ideas, not just allude to them, not just characterise them.

Similarly, when critiquing a study, the most important things to focus on are questions about whether the study is well designed – e..g are the particpants' tasks a representative or illustrative model of the real world behaviour of interest? And, occasionally, some parametric aspects of the study such as the number and representativeness of the participant sample etc. Also, I'd like to see critique of the authors' arguments.

But to make such critiques some brief details about the study are necessary – usually the most critical things are the tasks the participants were asked to perform, and with what technology how their performance was measured, and what effects were found and discussed.

Again, although you have to be brief, you have to be quite specific. In general people stayed at too high, abstract a level when describing innovative technologies and empirical studies.

When describing Future Work that the study suggests, this should not be limited to the Future Work the authors themselves describe. Rather, the idea is for you to think about where the work could lead, how it could be developed. Briefly, as ever!

Finally, a minor but important point. A lot of people used the word "prove" or "proof" ill-advisedly. Empirical studies can't prove hypotheses, they merely offer support for hypotheses (or fail to).

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⚙ Administration

Course administration

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