Project 3: Reflection Paper

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This is my first year back at Iowa State University (ISU) as a graduate student. Prior to returning, I earned a bachelor’s degree but it has been many years since I spent time in an academic setting. In 2007, after graduating with a bachelor’s, I set out to start a career in design. The world seemed like a much bigger place before I set out to see it; in many ways it still does. This semester has taught me a number of concepts and forced me to re-evaluate my capabilities and restrictions as an individual and part of a collaborating group.

# Personal Goals

I returned to school to earn a doctorate degree in the hopes of furthering my career. I knew I would inevitably be challenged and learn something but started the year with an open mind. By the time the semester started, I was already overwhelmed simply by the concept of academic writing being different from business communications. Terminology, jargon, phrasing, and styles all seem to be different and this is a challenge I hope to overcome and understand so that I may better articulate concepts in the future.

## Resolving Personal Writing Impediments

Thankfully, my professors have been very astute and open to mentoring me through our communication differences. In human computer interaction (HCI) 504, Dr. Ana-Paula Correia, took time on multiple occasions to meet privately with me to discuss the differences between business and academic writing styles. The concept of academic writing is still a little confusing to me. Overall, I feel like I have a better understanding of layouts, punctuation, terminology, describing terms, where to find sources and citing sources; however the contextual differences, methodology differences, and other finer points of academic writing may require a class dedicated to understanding expectations of professors and publications for me to excel in this area.

# Overview of What I’ve learned

A few things I’ve specifically learned to note about academic writing this semester include:

* How to write in APA style
* How to cite sources within an article
* To always add descriptions of images and label them for cross referencing
* Joined the HCI writing group
* To double check documents for acronyms and describe their meaning
* To strictly adhere to course assignment requirements and not work too far ahead
* A better understanding of the evaluation process and how to synthesize results

# Learning in a Group

The HCI 504 course put a great deal of emphasis on peer discussion, presentations, and collaboration. Classroom collaboration gave me the opportunity to learn from my peers and to see the readings from a new perspective. I especially liked that this course required students to not only participate, but also lead discussions and provide input on methodology, practical applications, and to reflect regularly on various ways evaluation and what we learned can impact various stages of real-world processes. The course had many students with varying experience with evaluation, technology, and business/academic cultures; the diversity within the classroom also offered a great deal of opportunity to adapt perspectives based on culture; this capacity to gain intuitive understanding would not have been possible in a classroom that did not offer online discussions and in-person meetings.

## How Group Education Has Helped Me

I can think of multiple times where a concept or methodology that was explained in our readings felt too dry and I had a hard time understanding how to translate the method into my own practice of evaluation. The online discussion boards lent itself to solving this problem as a means for developing ideas and discussing other student’s experiences. The entire class was encouraged to practice netiquette while keeping an open mind and always citing sources, so the discussions always felt academic, open, honest, and welcoming. It makes me wish there were more forums where genuine intellectual conversation could be moderated without fear that someone would negatively dampen the spirit of learning.

## Example of Group Learning & Conflict Resolution

In the second half of the course, students paired up into teams to form work groups to take on an evaluation project related to education. The group I joined chose one another partially based on proximity and partially based on mutual interests in design and technology. Initially, we discussed evaluating accessibility standards, but due to restrictions with the site we chose to pursue a language learning application called Duolingo. During the early stages of the project, the team had a hard time narrowing down the focus and criteria of the evaluation so we did a meta-evaluation. The meta-evaluation encouraged everyone on the team to provide insight, so that no one was leading by force and offered everyone the opportunity to explain what they liked and disliked about the criteria. The criteria was then narrowed down by a matrix table and positive/negative voting. This method is a skill I learned while taking a program management (PMP) training.

**What I learned from working in a group:**

* How to include all members of a group so that talkative team members do not overpower quiet teammates
* How to engage users in a discussion
* How to split of project work

To perform the meta-evaluation the team used white boards and everyone brainstormed a list of ideas they would like to evaluate. After two minutes each team member presented their ideas. These ideas were then recorded on another white board in a chart and each team member numbered their prefered idea 1-10 (the numbering may be skewed since I do not remember exactly how many results we originally had). The results that were rated the lowest by all team members were removed from the list and the highest rated results were then voted on by each member as something they would want to pursue or not. If two or more team members voted no those items were removed. The remaining results were narrowed down by adding up the scores of the remaining options and discussing the final two. The final choice was overall design and usability which lead to evaluating everything from gamification, usability, hierarchy, imagery, and was based on qualitative feedback because the team determined that the small user group would have insufficient results to merit statistical analysis.

# What I learned from Presentations

The in-class presentations showed me a lot about how other students interpreted the final project. I particularly liked that one team created a drawing diagram of how their interviews where laid out, what kind of technology they used, why they placed things where they did, and used a GoPro to video tape a projector of a phone so that user details could be displayed and easily recorded. This technique shows ingenuity without requiring expensive software.

# Conclusion and Anticipating the Future

I was genuinely excited to be a part of this course and will use the skills gained from this course in my current position and likely throughout my career. After the feedback from fellow students, my current work in evaluations as a UX professional, and coursework feedback I believe I could conduct a professional evaluation or usability test. Since this was the primary goal of the class, I would say overall the course was a success. As far as my preparation to write graduate level papers, reports, or proposals I still feel inadequate and dumbfounded by a lot of the feedback I have received. I’m struggling to grasp writing expectations and sincerely wish to do well in graduate school. I’m not even sure where to begin on how to improve the way I articulate concepts and become a better academic communicator. One step I have taken to work on my academic writing, was to join the HCI writing club. I’ve also met with multiple professors to ask questions and elaborate on feedback then edit my papers based on our discussions. This may be a slow growing process, but I am hopeful that with focus and good instruction I will one day soon I may become a better writer.

The next step for me will be to continue to pursue a PhD, though a lot of the feedback I have received from my other course this semester makes me nervous about my capabilities to get into the HCI program and be successful. I’m especially worried about finding a major professor and committee. I will also apply to stay in the HCI writing club for the fall semester. This should help me continue to my efforts to improve my writing skills.

# Course Feedback

**Other feedback about the course:**

I wish the course was recorded so that I could rewatch discussions. It would also be nice to have students present their first papers, instead of or including their presentations so that all students could learn from each other. I would also like the opportunity to do in-classroom mini-evaluations where we practice hands on methods and techniques for solving problems.

* Video in-person classes
* Share papers
* Students present writing
* Offer additional resources within the school for help