**Usability Assessment - Feedback to Class**

This feedback is aimed to assist you to achieve the learnings and insights that you need to successfully conduct usability testing in a professional setting. There a quite a few things that many of you need to attend to and practice.

Let’s start with the abstract. Here’s a typical kind of thing:

X is a wonderful technology. X will be used by modern people to create new and wonderful things. X is soon going to be everywhere. We did usability testing on X. Usability testing is the best way. The purpose of this test was to observe how usable X was for all users and to give some suggestions to solve problems. So this report tells you the methodology used and the data gathered and the recommendations to solve the usability problems. And there is future work discussed too.

Now, tell me as a reader, what were the recommendations? You can’t. Tell me what are the next steps? You can’t. Please now read your abstract and see if does its job. Do you think the first five sentences of the abstract above are necessary? They aren’t for me. Also, do not provide a table of contents when a report is so short, it only clutters it, and is counter to its purpose of assisting navigation.

In an industry style report you don’t clutter it with academics’ ideas of usability. You back your own analyses. You do not regurgitate some other person’s work. You creatively and actively engage with reality; you do not practice compliance. The only article I stressed you read is “Liberating Usability Testing” because it is my best go at describing the method that I’m trying to teach. However, if you made practical use of some academic’s model or ideas, then good.

A very useful way to approach the writing of a report is with the principal sensibility of usability. That is; what is the reader’s experience? Does it work for them? Does it do the job they require of it? This principle is misleading in its simplicity because when it is applied, it requires careful and consistent thought. It is not so easy. The writer must repeatedly step back from the task of writing and ask the questions: what am I saying? Does the reader want to know? What bits first? How can I do as much work as I can for the reader?

The essential value of this assignment are the recommendations and the evidence. Are these presented precisely and accurately? In many reports, the results of individual usability testings were given before the recommendations and the linkage between the recommendations and the results was weak. Therefore, the reader had to do a lot of work to make the connections and to work out for themselves whether the recommendations were justified. This is not work the reader should have to do. You should be doing that.

Unfortunately, many of you only categorised the users you used in testing rather than all potential users. The updated descriptions needed to be of all users. I wanted you to do an analysis of all types of uses and tasks. If new users were tested, why? How representative were they of typical users and usage? How do you know? Where is there doubt? How can that be found out about more? Why did you choose these tasks? How representative are they of all, typical tasks? How do you know, etc…You must be able to do this analysis; otherwise, you just can’t know how comprehensive your testing is and therefore what future work needs to be done. Your recommendations and the value of your work for an organisation will be very limited or even damaging. Same thing with criteria. Effectiveness, efficiency are not really criteria, they are category titles under which actual criteria can be grouped. The real criteria should be generated from users’ goals and motivations. I hope you can get to really understand this. Doing the next assignment will assist you in this area.

In the next assignment, spend lots of time investigating users; their goals, motivations, purpose, actions, behaviours. These are the basis for the design. If you manage to do some kind of usability testing, make sure you give equal weight to what works well in addition to hunting for what doesn’t work well. It may also assist you to read my article “Liberating Usability Testing” and make sure you get to practice “situated co-inquiry”. It is not just observation; it is co-inquiry within think aloud. It can only be appreciated and learnt through practice.

Most of all, if you find yourself enjoying this type of investigation, then keep going, practice it, get competent in it. The motivation that arises naturally of itself from within to meet up with something is to be paid serious attention. Then there is work, hard work. Then you will be satisfied. And there will be a good chance that a very good job will find you. Wishing you success.

Phil Carter

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