Paper Discussions

To preserve the seminar nature of the discussion, we need to foster on-line discussion.

Last year, online discussion worked, but it is less than ideal for student-presented papers. As a result, student papers will be discussed in-person during PC-style meetings. However, assigned readings for my lectures will have online discussion so that the entire class can participate. As a result, the discussion process will be a two-phase process as described below.

In setting up deliverables for online discussion, I am using an Australian resource titled “The Guide to Fostering Asynchronous Online Discussion in Higher Education”. I wanted to provide you with this reference so that you could understand the rationale behind the steps I am proposing for paper discussion.

If you don’t want to read the guide (you don’t have to), let me summarize a couple of key points for you. First, the guide sets out four components to aim for in order to foster effective online discussion: Outcome-Oriented Task Design (which means that the goals of each task should be well-understood by all); Explicit Communication Strategies (which means that we structure discussion in an academic manner around content); Interaction Scaffolding by the Instructor (which this document begins to do); and Clear Expectations for Participation (which this document will begin to do, but which will evolve over the term).

A Two-Phase Discussion:

If I were to identify, as a snippet, the goal of my seminar course, then I would say the goal is the following: “I want students who take my course to be able to think critically about the design of HCI style experiments to answer research questions that they pose.” So, given a (HCI-related) research question, I want everyone in my course to come out of the course able to articulate alternatives and to be able to argue for and/or against different alternatives in designing an experiment to explore that research question. To do this, I want us to consider the discussion as a two-phase process.

· Phase 1: Reading the papers and developing personal opinions on content.

· Phase 2: Discussion of content, including an identification of strengths and weaknesses and areas of agreement and disagreement.

Phase 1: Reading and Personal Opinions

Phase 1 involves posting a synopsis on each paper. The synopsis should be 4 or 5 sentences long, and should include the following:

- Sentence 1: The research goal or research question being asked.
- Sentence 2: A summary of findings in one sentence.
- Sentence 3: Good aspects of the paper.
- Sentence 4: Weaknesses of the paper.
- Optional sentence: Anything you don't understand (e.g. One thing I'm not sure of is exactly what a Latin Square is; I had to google it, and I think I've got it now.).

Phase 2: Discussion

In the discussion phase, we want to leverage explicit communication strategies to support a positive discussion. A discussion comment should be up to about 70 words, can be shorter, but should be more than an acknowledgement. Do not stress about being exactly grammatically correct in discussion; the goal is to get your point across clearly and the measure of that is whether others have understood. And, if someone doesn't understand you, there are ways that they can use discussion to clarify points. But to do this, we need to foster positive interaction, and that's where these strategies come in.

There are three primary aspects mentioned in the guide that I would like us to respect.

1. Positive Social Space in Discussion:

In online forums, you can come across as much nastier than you are in person. For example, some of you may have noted that aspects of my email on Monday could be interpreted as blunt (e.g. some students find the Piazza etiquette to be rude). The same is true in discussion forms or email.

One way that you can build positive social space in discussion is to directly name the people you are responding to and to acknowledge something that they've said: "Hi Ed, you mentioned Piazza etiquette. I've had a similar experience with undergrad students when TAing. We had explicit office hours, but it still got difficult to not respond when we saw something important going by. I feel like I ended up spending at least as much time online writing answers as I did grading or meeting students during office hours."

2. Building Collective Understanding:

There are three ways that we can build collective understanding. They are by re-stating, extending, and presenting alternatives. For example, you can say, "I agree with your point about this paper feeling very specific to pen-tablet hardware. I'm not sure if I see ways that the results could be used on modern day multi-touch tablets, where the pen seems to be something that we only use for a specific purpose rather than as a primary input device." This is an example of restating and extending, both. It restates a point that you agree with, and it highlights that the

world has changed since research work on pen-tablet computers: now, when we think tablet, we think iPad and variants, i.e. multi-touch tablets. Alternatives can be a bit more complex, but you can also do things in the same way: “I get where you’re coming from with the pen-tablet nature of the study. Perhaps the reason we were assigned this paper wasn’t so much for the content of the paper, itself, but because of the experimental design described in this paper. It seems like the experiments were well done, and I can think of ways that I could adapt this to a research project that I have.”

3. Fostering Diverse Opinions:

Sometimes you are going to disagree with something that was posted, or you are going to see alternatives. Sometimes someone will disagree with you and you want to go back and justify your opinion. Doing something like this in discussion can be challenging, because people can feel attacked. One of the ways you can present alternatives, disagree with someone, or justify yourself is by remembering that you are expressing personal opinions and you can couch things like that. Say, for example, that I said that I really liked the interaction techniques tested in a paper and someone says. “The interaction techniques were really obvious ones. The authors just weren’t creative.” It can be taken as rude, even if that is not the intention, and it shuts down discussion.

You can modify this to enhance a discussion by remembering the first two communication strategies and that you are expressing an opinion. For example, “Hi Ed, I know you liked the interaction techniques tested, but I’m not sure I agree. To me, they seemed really obvious. I wish the authors could have been more creative in identifying some additional options for X.” To which I could then reply, “Thanks, Edith. I get your point on creativity, but, for me, I’ve never seen a direct comparison like this done before. To me, there may be a benefit in testing some of these straightforward approaches so that, at the very least, we have a baseline.”

Despite the risk of disagreement, there are ways that you can do this that invite engagement in a positive manner. For example:

· You commented that _____ but another way of looking at it might be _____.

· I can see why you thought _____ but, in my opinion _____.

An important part of this is the acknowledgement of what the other person said. This can do a lot to smooth discussion, if it is done fairly, because the other party feels like you acknowledged what they’ve said.

Expectations:

To foster this discussion, for each paper discussion I will provide a deadline. Your goal should be to complete Phase 1 by the deadline, i.e. to read the paper and post the 4 or 5 sentence

synopsis. For the synopsis, you should post your synopsis as a follow-up within a post created for each paper (I will create the top level posts). This will allow things to be grouped together.

I will then present a synopsis of the research paper in my screencast lecture. I may use material from your posts in the video on the paper.

Phase 2 begins after class and extends for two weekdays after class (so until Monday for Thursday papers, for example). During Phase 2, aim to present approximately four posts over the 48 hour period. Try not to create all posts at once. Try to come back and extend others' discussions. So, for example, post two on day one, then come back and revisit the posts on day 2 to see if you want to respond to any of the posts. Also, take some time, on day 2, to look at your post because maybe a class member has responded to you and you want to re-respond to them. And always feel free to do more than four posts, but, if you do, try to do it as part of a multi-person discussion.