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University Relations, "Improving the design of familiar tasks" (2007). *Campus News Archive*. 1065.
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Improving the design of familiar tasks

Summary: University of Minnesota, Morris students involved with a Human-Computer Interaction course hosted a poster session on ways to improve the design of familiar tasks such as doing laundry, carpooling, saving energy and registering for or buying gifts for a wedding.

(November 8, 2007)-University of Minnesota, Morris students involved with a Human-Computer Interaction course recently hosted a poster session that presented ways to improve the design of existing programs. The programs dealt directly with tasks that anyone might engage in, such as doing laundry, carpooling, saving energy, registering for or buying gifts for a wedding or using Mathematica, a fully integrated environment for technical and scientific computing.

University of Minnesota, Morris Professor of Computer Science Kristin Lamberty explained the project: “The students will use these projects mostly as a design exercise. They are each designing a system to meet some need that they saw. There are five groups in the class and each group was formed around an idea that all the group members saw as interesting. Some of the projects might be developed further when the course is finished, but that is not necessarily the main goal of the course. The main thing is that students will have been immersed in design experience where they studied the problem space, found the requirements, designed several possible prototype ideas, chose a system to test, and ran some evaluations.”

After the completion of the course, some projects maybe further developed by collaborating with larger companies. According to Lamberty, the main objective of the project was to allow students to have some design experience in finding problem space, requirements to correct and improve the problem, design numerous prototype ideas, chose a system to test and evaluate the findings.

Regarding the pertinence of the project in linking the community and the campus, Lamberty said, “...they deal with supporting tasks that everyone might want to do...Each project is unique. For the students in the course, the exact project is not the important part. From an educational experience, each project presents different challenges, but all of them are related to things that you need to keep in mind when you are designing a system that will be used by people.

“Only one group – the ride share project, an on campus program that allows students traveling home to car pool with others going to the same places or places en route to their destination – plans to continue the development of their project to the point where the campus or community might actually see results,” said Lamberty, possibly by the end of UMM’s Spring Semester.

Lamberty commented that the event was well received and was pleased with the students’ aptitude for explaining their projects. She plans to keep the project in future offerings of the class. Lamberty also explained that the essential connection between sustainability and human-computer interaction, the focus of the class, is dependent on the tasks people wish to accomplish, and projects concerning sustainability deal in part with discovering ways to help in energy consumption awareness. “[This connection] is important because technology is so much a part of our lives that if we didn’t think about sustainability, we could easily miss opportunities to be good citizens of the earth.”

Photo by Kim Melchert

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