

User Research

Rachel Chang, Erik Onsager, Lisa Pomerlyan

Project Description:

Ultimately, the purpose of our user research is to create a platform that enables communication between professors and students, especially while both users are adjusting back to in-person learning. A potential feature would be where students check in with professors by sending anonymous feedback through an app. This app will be made accessible to students throughout the quarter, allowing for professors to consistently receive notifications on any adjustments that need to be made for students' needs. Overall, we want the platform to place focus on mental health through an improved learning environment.

Professor Insights:

- Professors look for increased interactivity outside class time and look forward to meeting with students and discussing any related subjects. Especially, having dialogue is potentially better than filling out feedback forms, a dialogue has more friction and interactivity with the professors. Would it be possible that we can create a platform for instructors to post their available services and for students to view and find something that interests them? (Such as career development, insights on some career paths, etc.)
- UW course evaluations have a mixed level of responses, some are useful, some are not.
- Transitions from online to in-person have built a habit for students to reach out more via Slack or Canvas and ask questions.
- Most professors have already established their own feedback form system and try to incorporate it into their teaching environment.
- An option to submit both anonymous and public feedback to the instructor would be useful. Some feedback would need to be followed up by the professors, and they would need to know who submitted it. There could be a way where students can leave their email to receive a response.

Student Insights:

- Even though online learning tends to be more difficult than in-person learning, UW still has a good support system in place and professors try to record lectures and accommodate those who need to do work remotely.
- There's room for improvement with the UW course evaluations - having an open form throughout the term or options to give feedback halfway through the term could help.
- Most professors tend to be approachable regarding positive things (office hours, meetings, etc.), and there isn't much that needs to be done there.
- However, if a student has issues or concerns about the course, anonymity would make it much easier to reach out.

- Pain: The interviewee stated that she feels “scared of the professor” and finds it difficult to approach them when communicating with them verbally.
- Motivations: For the app, “if the layout is nice” and isn’t too confusing, the interviewee would want to use it more often. For the feedback survey, if there is extra credit given to students who fill them out, it would motivate users.
- Goals: An improved learning environment that is engaging and also makes it comfortable for students to approach professors for help is the user’s goal.

Interview Questions:

1. How many years have you taught at UW?
2. How was it like doing online teaching?
3. How many years have they taught at UW?
4. What was it about it being so terrible?
5. How is your transition from online to in-person teaching going?
6. Have you faced any new difficulties with students reaching out to you?
7. When you get feedback, do you try to incorporate it as soon as possible, or do you wait until the term ends to make adjustments?
8. Do you think having TAs be the main source of contact with students works well?
9. Do you feel like the learning environment is welcoming and supportive in the new school year after being quarantined at home?
10. What are the ways you’ve modified your classes to make them accessible for those attending class/working from home?
11. Can you think of any experiences where a student was having problems and did not try to get help until it was too late?
 - a. Do you think it could have helped them if they reached out to you asking for help?
12. How do you feel about the end-of-quarter course evaluations that are currently conducted for each of your classes?
13. Would making the response a small extra credit activity help to get more responses?
14. Is there anything you wish had been different about end-of-quarter evaluations?
15. How do you feel about the idea of students filling out surveys more frequently throughout the quarter?
16. How would anonymous surveys throughout the quarter help your students?
17. How would you describe your comfort and convenience using mobile apps in general? (vs. website)
18. Do you think we could add a feature we can add a feature where students can request to meet in person through the app instead of emailing you directly?
 - a. Would the app encourage students to meet with you more often?
 - b. Do you think it would promote the learning environment for students?

Professor Interview Transcript:

I interviewed a 50-year-old professor who has been teaching at UW for 6 years. He experienced online teaching and is now transitioning back to in-person teaching.

Q: All your responses will remain confidential and will only be used for the purposes of this project. Are you okay with me recording our interview?

A: Yes, I consent.

Q: How many years have you taught at UW?

A: Let's see ... Well, in total, 6 years.

Q: How was it like doing online teaching?

A: Terrible, absolutely terrible.

Q: What was it about it being so terrible?

A: The lack of communication, from a teacher's perspective very few students have their cameras on, and most students are kind of reluctant to talk in class anyway without their cameras on, basically you are just talking to yourself. It is difficult to keep your motivation on to teach in the virtual environment.

Q: How is your transition from online to in-person teaching going?

A: Pretty good time, not too bad.

Q: Have you faced any new difficulties with students reaching out to you?

A: I do not think so, in fact, I found maybe that people are more used to reaching out via Slack or Canvas. Not sure if that is true, but that is my impression.

A: When you get feedback, do you try to incorporate it as soon as possible, or do you wait until the term ends to make adjustments?

A: I am always trying to adjust and make my class better for students.

Q: Do you think having TAs be the main source of contact with students works well?

A: I do not generally do it that way, my TAs are usually graders, but I find students reaching out to me and talking. One of the main reasons I teach is for interaction and helping people.

Q: Do you feel like the learning environment is welcoming and supportive in the new school year after being quarantined at home?

Q: Yes.

Q: What are the ways you've modified your classes to make them accessible for those attending class/working from home?

A: Actually, I haven't. It is mostly in-person. We have been given guidance that we are not supposed to be doing that because it is complicated and difficult.

Q: Can you think of any experiences where a student was having problems and did not try to get help until it was too late?

A: Sure, that definitely happened.

Q: Do you think it could have helped them if they reached out to you asking for help?

A: Absolutely.

Q: How do you feel about the end-of-quarter course evaluations that are currently conducted for each of your classes?

A: They are a mixed bag, sometimes the feedback is useful, and I can make changes based on that, sometimes it feels good when people say nice things, but an awful lot of times the feedback seems not so useful.

Q: Would making the response a small extra credit activity help to get more responses?

A: As you know, we do reflections in our class and I have been using that more and more as a way to both allow students to synthesize and think about the material but also when I read them, I gain insight into how things are going.

Q: Is there anything you wish had been different about end-of-quarter evaluations?

A: I do not know how we would change it.

Q: How do you feel about the idea of students filling out surveys more frequently throughout the quarter?

A: That is interesting, I have done that in the past, I have done mid quarter evaluations and that can be very useful to get some feedback and reflect that before the course ends, so in my experience it was useful. Though, with a 10-week quarter, it is tricky when to do that because the quarter is so short.

Q: How would anonymous surveys throughout the quarter help your students?

A: It could, potentially.

Q: How would you describe your comfort and convenience using mobile apps in general? (vs. website)

A: High comfort, very comfortable.

Q: Do you think we could add a feature where students can request to meet in person through the app instead of emailing you directly?

A: Sure. One thing I find is students do not take advantage of meeting with me. As much as I often say, "I would love to meet with you" but it *never happens*.

Q: Do you think it would promote the learning environment for students?

A: Anything that increases the interaction between the students and faculty is a good thing. So, as much as we can do that, it would be great. I think that it has pros and cons, obviously it is anonymous survey is going to be less friction for people to fill them out, sometimes a dialogue is the best thing as opposed to just like little bullets. So, if there was a way to have dialogue, that would be better.

Q: Would the app encourage students to meet with you more often?

A: Depends on the design of the app, but it might.

Student Interview Questions:

1. How was your experience with online learning?
2. How is your transition from online to in-person learning going?
3. Do you feel like the in-person learning environment is welcoming and supportive?
 - a. If not, what can UW do better to create a more supportive learning environment?
4. Have you faced any difficulties with reaching out to or contacting your professors?
5. Have your professors been accommodating with hybrid learning/attending class/working from home?
 - a. Are you experiencing anything that you would like to anonymously inform your professor about and make a change?
6. Have you found that professors tend to incorporate feedback rapidly or adhere to a specific course plan throughout the term?
7. Is a TA oftentimes your main source of contact when you need help in a class?
 - a. Do you think that being in contact with a TA is “good enough” for your needs?
8. What do you often do if you have a concern about how a professor conducts their class?
 - Do you talk to the professor, talk about it with classmates, etc.?
 - If you don’t talk to the professor, what could be a way to make it more comfortable for more people to reach out to professors?
 - Would anonymous surveys help?
9. What surveys have you used to give feedback to professors? Have they been effective?
 - a. "How do you feel about these surveys (i.e. the end-of-quarter course evaluations/other department surveys) that are currently conducted for each of your classes?"
 - b. Is there anything you wish had been different?
 - c. How do you feel about the idea of students filling out surveys more frequently throughout the quarter?
10. Do you believe reaching out to professors throughout the quarter could be a way to help with the transition back to in-person?
11. What do you think would be a good way to get the entire pool of students in the class involved in the surveys throughout the quarter?
 - a. Would extra credit points help?
12. How can we make the surveys more accessible?
13. Do you mostly use a smartphone or a laptop?
14. Do you think you would use an app that enables communication and meeting with professors outside of class?

Student 1 Interview Transcript:

I interviewed a 19-year-old male sophomore currently attending UW. He experienced online learning last year and is currently transitioning back to in-person classes.

Q: Okay, I'm going to start recording this, and just to make sure, do you consent to be recorded? I'll just use it for the transcript and delete the recording afterward, you'll remain fully anonymous and any information you tell me will be only used for the purposes of my team's project.

A: Yes, I consent to be recorded. Fire away.

Q: Alright, just to start things off, can I have you say your age, preferred pronouns, and your current year at UW?

A: I am 19 years old, I use he/him pronouns, and do you want my graduating year?

Q: Just class standing - freshman, sophomore, junior, senior.

A: Oh, I'm a sophomore this year.

Q: Thank you for confirming that. And, for a bit of context for you, the purpose of our research here is to study communication between students and professors throughout the term, especially while we are still adjusting to in-person learning.

A: Okey-dokey.

Q: Alright, so can I just start by asking how your experience with online learning was?

A: It was kind of - it was pretty bad. I didn't really like it.

Q: Can you elaborate on some of the main issues that you had with it?

A: I mean, personally, I had a hard time focusing on class because - I don't know exactly how to describe it, but there's not that in-person class. It's easy to get distracted without being grounded in the classroom - you're not looking at a screen, you're not looking at 2D images; everything's happening around you, so it's easier to pay attention.

Q: Yeah, that makes sense, that makes sense. Would you say that your transition from online to in-person learning has been getting better?

A: Yes, yes, I would agree with that. It's going way better, I actually feel like I'm learning more. So, yeah.

Q: Do you feel like the in-person learning environment is welcoming and supportive for you?

A: Yes, it definitely is, there's a lot of people, you know, out there, being very supportive and, you know, helping you deal with academic issues and, you know, personal issues. So, very supportive.

Q: That's good. Do you think there's anything that UW can do to make things *more* supportive, for you, or are you pretty happy with how things are going right now?

A: I know that I'm pretty happy with it. But I'm not sure. You know, if you ask someone different, I'm sure they have something to say. So there's probably something that could be modified.

Q: And have you had any difficulties reaching out to your TAs or contacting your professors, either online or in-person?

A: No, no, pretty easy to contact. Yeah, I think it's good enough they've been accommodating if you ever need to work from home or attend class remotely. Well, one of them I know there's like a live recording of the class so if you miss a class you can go, you can watch it after. So you don't always have to be in person. But yeah, most of the lectures are can be accessed remotely. The only thing I think is the issue is like smaller quiz sections or labs, you know, you can't really make those up, you have to do them in-person.

Q: And since they're who you interact with in those quiz sections and labs, would you say that TAs are the main source of contact when you need to reach out in a class?

A: Yes, I would say that. Yeah.

Q: Okay, do you think that that's good enough for most of your purposes? Or would you ever want to contact your professor directly about something?

A: Um, I mean that feels like enough for me, but there's maybe, I don't think - I can't think of a scenario, but like there's probably some time when I would want to be able to maybe anonymously contact the professor.

Q: Yeah, would that be something that helped if you had an actual concern about how a professor conducts their class? For example, would you start off by messaging the professor - like would you bring it straight to them or would you talk about it with classmates first?

A: First, probably talk about it with classmates and, you know, see what they think. And, you know, if it's like a big issue. Yeah, I'd definitely want to reach out to the professor and tell them: you know this is what I see, here's what I don't like, you know.

Q: And do you think that being anonymous would help in that situation; make you more willing to reach out?

A: Yeah, I think anonymity would be important - it would help, you know.

Q: Alright, and on the topic of feedback, what surveys have you used to give feedback to professors in the past, and have they been effective?

A: Um, I've used the ones, the ones that like UW sends out. I don't really know what they're called.

Q: The end-of-term course evaluations?

A: Yeah, I've used those. That's it. I don't know how effective they are, since I don't really hear much about professors after I've taken their class, but some seem to really value the feedback they get.

Q: Definitely, did the format of the evaluations work for you, or did it leave you with things that you still wanted to say?

A: Not really, I think it works pretty well.

Q: Okay, that's good. Are you happy filling it out once at the end, or would you rather fill out maybe more surveys throughout the quarter to give constant feedback?

A: Maybe like if you had one sort of in the middle of the quarter, as well as the end.

Q: How about a form that's open throughout the term, and you can leave feedback whenever?

A: Hmm, think that'd be useful. It might be useful.

Q: Also, do you typically respond to all the feedback forms, or do you think having something like extra credit points attributed to that would motivate you to respond?

A: I will usually respond to them. But I know that I think like not personally but for other people, you know, having extra credit if you get past a certain, you know, percentage of the class to take the survey, would be maybe more motivated - would definitely motivate more people to do it.

Q: And are there any other issues that you can think of that relate to this “communicating with professors idea” that you have in mind? For example, do you prefer in-person or online office hours?

A: I have not been to in-person office hours yet, so I don't, I can't speak on that, but I feel like it's more of a person-to-person thing, you know, some people would prefer in-person some others might prefer online. Yeah.

Q: Alright, it's good to hear your perspective on that. And also, can I ask: do you tend to use a smartphone or a laptop more?

A: Like in class?

Q: In general, what would you say you have the easiest access to, and you feel most comfortable with?

A: I use them both pretty much equally, but I usually have access to my phone all the time.

Q: Do you think you would use an app that enables communication and meeting with professors outside of class?

A: Okay. Hmm. I don't know. I feel like I don't know if I would use it, but I know that professors are, you know, there to talk anyway. So, I guess if I had any problems with anything. You know, I could, I guess I could go talk to them, and they would probably be open to that. I know professors say that all, they do say that, too.

Student 2 Interview Transcript:

Q: How was your experience with online learning?

A: I would say when covid first started, it took a bit of getting used to like with transitioning to everything being online and on zoom. I feel like professors were also learning, like the best way to teach and to like handle breakout rooms. I would say over the past year I got used to being on zoom and just like learning from the screen I guess.

Q: How is your transition from online to in-person learning going?

A: It's definitely a little weird being back around people, especially because we're all like wearing masks. I like being in person better than online, like I think just being able to see people face to face definitely helps a lot with like group projects and group discussions.

Q: In an in-person learning environment, what is your preferred way of communication?

A: I would say verbal.

Q: Why do you prefer verbal communication?

A: Yeah, I would say it's more and with verbal communication I guess it's easier to, like, get my point across if I have a question, because if I ask it in like text in slack or something there might be like missing information.

Q: Do you feel like the in-person learning environment at UW is welcoming and supportive?

A: Yeah, for the most part, I feel like for smaller classes more so than like larger classes. In freshman year, I had classes that were very large that felt like the connection between peers and also like professors was a little bit like. I don't know, there was a separation.

Q: For those bigger classes, what do you think they could do better to create a more supportive learning environment?

A: Oh, I like that we had quiz sections for those classes, because there would be certain days, where we would see like a smaller group of people from the same class and then in those quiz

section, sometimes we had like group discussion and group work which helped with getting to know other people in the class.

Q: Have your professors been accommodating with hybrid learning? Have they been giving you the option to watch class online?

A: I have one class in person, and I think he's been pretty accommodating, because I know he does record class sessions and put them on zoom in case people miss class. I saw he posted on Slack that people are going to be gone, and then he posted like extra stuff for those people.

Q: Would you say that your professor's way of doing things is good enough to accommodate for students?

A: Yeah, I think so, and like he's also available during office hours if I have questions or need any extra help.

Q: Are you experiencing anything that you would like to anonymously inform your professor about and make a change?

A: I think I'm okay right now.

Q: In general, have you found that professors tend to incorporate feedback rapidly, or do they stick to the same course plan throughout the term?

A: From the professors I've had, most of them seem pretty flexible with the way they teach class. Like I have one Professor right now he's teaching everything on zoom and after every class he sends out a survey link, which is just like a short Google form, where we can give suggestions on what went well in class and what we think would benefit our learning, and then I think he's been using these suggestions in the next times we've had class because I know on the first day of class I think it's because he's new at Zoom, he like didn't open the chat and people had questions in the chat, and they weren't answered until the end of class, but now recently people ask questions, and then he addresses them after like a couple of minutes or so.

Q: Is a TA oftentimes your main source of contact when you need help in a class?

A: I think it depends on the class. I think TAs are more approachable.

Q: Do you think that being in contact with a TA is "good enough" for your needs?

A: Most of the time TAs are pretty helpful, but sometimes they may give answers, if I have a question, that might be vague, and then I just try to figure it out myself.

Q: What do you often do if you have a concern about how a professor conducts their class?

A: Usually I would just talk to my classmates about it. Sometimes I'm scared of the professor, like there's that distance.

Q: What could be a way to make it more comfortable for more people to reach out to professors?

A: With indirect communication, I think surveys would be good. And sometimes it also does have that level of anonymity, so it's like your name isn't out there, but I think if it's like getting comfortable with verbal communication, maybe like having casual chats with the professor just to get to know them.

Q: During your time at UW, what surveys have you used to give feedback to professors? Have they been effective?

A: I've used the ones like Google surveys that the professors send out, as well as like the UW ones we fill out at the end of every quarter. I think they're pretty helpful because they asked things like what students think of the class and, like, the teaching and ways it could be improved.

Q: Is there anything you wish had been different about the surveys?

A: I guess, sometimes there are questions I don't know how to answer. Like, I don't know if my responses would be helpful.

Q: Would specific descriptions of how they want you to answer the questions be helpful for the surveys?

A: Yeah, sometimes the questions are ambiguous.

Q: I think all the questions aren't required on the surveys, do you think having them all required could help or just keeping it so students go through the ones they want to do is more helpful?

A: I think for now going through the ones I want to do.

Q: How do you feel about the idea of students filling out surveys more frequently throughout the quarter?

A: I think it would be helpful, like rather than just once, at least a couple of times, just so professors can get a gauge on like what's working and what's not and if they see a need for making changes they can make those changes and then see if students are learning any better.

Q: Do you believe reaching out to professors throughout the quarter could be a way to help with the transition back to in-person?

A: Yeah, I think so because professors are also having to transition back to in-person classes, which they also might find strange. I think everyone's just learning how to learn in the new environment.

Q: Would reaching out to them throughout the quarter help you with getting better grades?

A: Yeah, I think reaching out through like attending office hours could help with cementing material if it's confusing or like going over class concepts again.

Q: Do you think having the feedback surveys throughout the quarter could help with getting better grades as well.

A: I guess it depends on what the survey asked. I guess if the way they run lectures is confusing or there are stuff that's not working and then if I give suggestions and then the professor implements them, it might help with the way they teach and get material across.

Q: What do you think would be a good way to get the entire pool of students in the class involved in the surveys throughout the quarter?

A: Maybe give students incentive to fill it out, like, for my class right now with the surveys, the Professor assigned them as extra credit, so it could help boost our grades, I think. If grades are put on the surveys, it might make more people more likely to take the surveys to improve your grade.

Q: How could surveys be made more accessible?

A: I guess having the link on canvas to make them easy to find.

Q: In general, do you mostly use a smartphone or a laptop?

A: I would say for school stuff I usually use my laptop and then like other stuff is my phone.

Q: How would you describe your comfort and convenience using mobile apps in general versus websites?

A: I'm pretty comfortable using Apps. But if there's something that has a website and app, I would say I'm more comfortable with the website, like Canvas. I heard the Canvas app is like hard to use, I don't know, I've never used it.

Q: If you had the option to do so, do you think you would use an app for class improvement, possibly one that's centered around mental health?

A: Yeah, I think so. If the layout is nice, and it's not like confusing.

Q: Would you like to use an app or a website for this app?

A: If it's something I would check like multiple times during the day, I think having an app would be more helpful because it's easier to access.

Q: If our platform had feedback surveys, do you think they should be done weekly or be open at any time?

A: Weekly might be a little bit too frequent, so maybe monthly or quarterly. I think also having it open at any time is also a good idea.

Q: What kind of input format would you want the surveys to have? (i.e. do you have ideas on what kind of questions you want it to have, what kind of feedback you would want to submit, etc.)?

A: Maybe it could be like rating the effect, and this on like a scale. And I think also having like an option to give short answer input would be helpful.

Q: Do you have any ideas of other features that would be useful? This doesn't have to directly relate to feedback surveys, it could relate to mental health as well.

A: For mental health, maybe having links to resources.

Q: How often do you think you would use the platform?

A: Maybe like once a day.

References:

UW Course Evaluation Catalog: <https://www.washington.edu/cec/>

UW Course Evaluation Resources: <https://www.washington.edu/assessment/course-evaluations/>

UW Teaching Evaluations:

<https://www.engr.washington.edu/mycoe/academic/teaching-evaluation>