

Teaching Portfolio

Nikhil Sharma

Ph.D. Candidate

School of Information,

University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

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* Original teaching evaluation documents are available on request.

Teaching Statement

My best teachers generated a curiosity and wonder towards the subject they taught and inspired students to strive to their best potential to excel in that subject. The opportunity to instruct Masters students at the School of Information (SI) has confirmed my belief that this is the role of a good teacher, to generate curiosity and inspire excellence. As a teacher at SI my goal has been to inspire students to pay attention to the most crucial aspect of information: the rich context in which information systems are used. I feel it is my job to help students focus on how information systems and technology usage is constrained by current practices and how information systems can be used to modify existing work practices in a useful directions. I have achieved this teaching goal by engaging students in real-world projects and by having students interact with each other in a safe and supportive environment.

Engaging in real-world projects

I have found that engaging in real-world projects is essential for students in order to understand the importance of the context in which information systems are used. Aligning engagement in real-world projects with the learning goals of a course can make the course more useful and interesting. I taught one such course 'Contextual Inquiry' as a Graduate Student Instructor (GSI). The students worked in groups on project as consultants with outside organizations like non-profits, corporations, libraries and museums. They studies real work-process and recommended ways of improving the process. The group project required developing a work-plan, collecting data through interviews and observations, analyzing data, and creating and presenting a final report. I myself participated in a similar project with a real client to prepare for teaching this course. This experience provided me with compelling examples and stories to use for instruction and, combined with my consulting experience working as an architect enabled me to coach groups on how to interact with clients in various situations.

Interacting in a supportive environment

I believe that to derive maximum benefit from student's experiences, engagement in real-world projects can best be complemented by fruitful interactions with other students. The interdisciplinary nature of information schools brings together students with varying backgrounds like computer-science, law, psychology and history. These varying backgrounds and experiences have been a valuable resource for my teaching. Utilizing students' experiences as a resources has sometimes required me to put aside my own role as a subject expert and act as facilitator. For example when discussing copyright issues in a 'Social Systems and Collections' course I taught as a GSI, I called on a student with a law degree to explain the nuances of copyright. I have found that when students are given the responsibility to instruct others, they internalize the concepts more comprehensively.

I believe that a safe and supportive environment is essential for this beneficial interaction between students. In such an environment students feel comfortable being honest and open about their experiences and personal opinions. Such an environment need not exclude disagreements, rather contradictory ideas can be expressed and be open to reinterpretation. To create such an environment I establish ground rules that allow free expression of opinions while stressing the need for mutual respect and care.

Group interaction activities can be most valuable when built into the course. In all the courses I have taught as a GSI, I have utilized discussions in small and large groups to clarify concepts and reinforce important concepts. Group assignments can also help focus student interaction in my opinion. I have used group assignments to highlight the process of working in groups and the ways in which groups can successfully overcome internal challenges. I have also built into my course schedules mandatory consults with each student group to discuss group dynamics and make sure group interactions are fruitful.

Conclusion

I believe that comprehensive learning should include engagement in real-world projects complemented by students interacting amongst themselves in a supportive environment. My experiences as an instructor and a student have convinced me that doing so can fulfill the role of a good teacher: to generate a curiosity about a subject and inspire students to excel in their pursuit of it. I have striven to fulfill this role while teaching four Master's student courses as a GSI and have been fortunate to be rewarded not only with a distinction (School of Information Graduate Instructor of the Year, 2006) but with generous complements from my students.

New Courses

In addition to existing courses in HCI and social aspects of information at any school, I would also be happy to develop new graduate seminars which would fit well with the school's program. Some possible courses include:

Sensemaking

This seminar would focus on how people deal with non-routine information tasks and with information related situations where people are not sure how to proceed. The students would first study various theoretical perspectives on sensemaking from various disciplines like organizational behavior, cognitive psychology and information science. The students would next study cases of sensemaking in various domains like health, shopping, intelligence-analysis etc. The students would finish by studying a sensemaking situation of their choice paying attention to important issues that affect sensemaking and identify opportunities for supporting the sensemaking in that situation.

Design Process

This seminar would focus on the process of design and decision making involved in designing. The students would first be exposed to processes involved in design like problem solving, representation construction, satisficing and visualization. Since design is often a collaborative activity the students would then study the collaborative aspects of these processes including coordination and negotiation. The students would also work on projects where they would study a design process with an eye on opportunities for improvement. This would nicely complement any existing design courses in the school.

Internet Research Methods

This course would focus on the challenges and opportunities of Internet research. The students would start by studying examples of successful quantitative and qualitative research methods in the Internet. A wide range of readings covering various methods like field experiments, content analysis, surveys, instant messaging interviews, computerized lab experiments and simulations would be employed in the course. The students would also read about important issues regarding Internet research like response rates and biases. The students would also engage in an Internet research project of their choice and write a research paper based on their research.

Numerical Evaluations of Teaching Performance

The following tables contain numerical summaries of student evaluations of the four courses I taught as a Graduate Student Instructor (GSI) at the School of Information, University of Michigan, 2004-2008. Available responses ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) unless otherwise indicated.

SI 501: Contextual Inquiry

This course is a required foundation course for graduate students at the School of Information. My primary responsibilities as a GSI were to lead two weekly discussion sections, coach and mediate student groups as they worked with outside organizations, instruct students one-on-one during office hours, and provide feedback and grades for written assignments.

Fall 2008 (based upon 34 student evaluations combined from two separate discussion sections)- **Available January 2009**

Question	Mean Response
Overall, the GSI was an excellent teacher	
The GSI appeared to have a thorough knowledge of the subject	
The GSI was willing to meet and help students outside of class	
The workload for this discussion section was (5=LIGHT...1=HEAVY)	
Students felt comfortable asking questions	
Students' difficulty with the material was recognized	
One real strength of this discussion section was the classroom discussion	

Fall 2007 (based upon 29 student evaluations combined from two separate discussion sections)

Question	Mean Response
Overall, the GSI was an excellent teacher	4.47
The GSI appeared to have a thorough knowledge of the subject	4.41
The GSI was willing to meet and help students outside of class	4.6
The workload for this discussion section was (5=LIGHT...1=HEAVY)	2.75
Students felt comfortable asking questions	4.44
Students' difficulty with the material was recognized	3.92
One real strength of this discussion section was the classroom discussion	3.94

SI 504: Social Systems and Collections

This course was a required foundation course for graduate students at the School of Information. My primary responsibilities as a GSI were to lead two weekly discussion sections, instruct students one-on-one during office hours, and provide feedback and grades for written assignments.

Fall 2005 (based upon 34 student evaluations combined from two separate discussion sections)

Question	Mean Response
Overall, the GSI was an excellent teacher	4.49
The GSI appeared to have a thorough knowledge of the subject	4.79
The GSI was willing to meet and help students outside of class	4.9
The workload for this discussion section was (5=LIGHT...1=HEAVY)	2.59
Students felt comfortable asking questions	4.5
Students' difficulty with the material was recognized	4.28

Fall 2004 (based upon 34 student evaluations combined from two separate discussion sections)

Question	Mean Response
Overall, the GSI was an excellent teacher	4.22
The GSI appeared to have a thorough knowledge of the subject	4.59
The GSI was willing to meet and help students outside of class	4.25
The workload for this discussion section was (5=LIGHT...1=HEAVY)	2.59
Students felt comfortable asking questions	4.12
Students' difficulty with the material was recognized	3.75

Narrative Evaluations of Teaching Performance (selected)

The following comments are taken from student evaluations of my teaching performance provided by the students at the end of the course (unless otherwise stated). Original spelling and grammar has been preserved.

SI 501: Contextual Inquiry- Fall 2008 (from mid-term course evaluations)

"Nikhil is a great GSI. He always has time for our group and seems to genuinely care how the class + the projects are going. "

"Nikhil has been a tremendous asset through his knowledge and insight. I have personally experienced a change in my view of the course: whereas I was initially skeptical + resistant, I have started to enjoy the work"

"Nikhil is great. His discussion section is both lively and informative, he makes the content covered in lecture (which is sometimes dry) come alive."

"Discussion section is very useful. Nikhil is full of information and encouragement. He also has been helpful in facilitating communication when our group has had difficulties"

SI 501: Contextual Inquiry- Fall 2007

"Nikhil was probably the best GSI I had this semester."

"GSI encouraged discussion + made everyone feel comfortable participating in class."

"It was great that Nikhil didn't require a 'by the book' approach. He was much more interested in ensuring we understood the spirit of the process + material. His flexibility was greatly appreciated"

"The most helpful part of the discussion section was when Nikhil spent time discussing our project individually."

"I thought the activities were very helpful, although I didn't realize it at first."

SI 504: Social Systems and Collections- Fall 2005

"My favorite aspect of this discussion section was absolutely Nikhil. He was well-informed, creative and responsive GSI. Nikhil is the only GSI I have that I can picture as a full professor. I learned a lot from him, and I feel the understanding I got from this class was deeper because of Nikhil."

"Nikhil was a fantastic GSI and I would definitely take another course with him. The discussion section was a huge part of why I liked the class. Over the semester his control of

the discussion became looser and better led as well as pulling the best out of the student's comments."

"Great presentation. Consistently aware of the material and additional sources. Great inspiration for other ideas"

"Nikhil was an excellent instructor whose approach towards course topics was very helpful-grounded in handy examples. Nikhil's commentary on assignments were thorough and helpful."

"Good job Nikhil! You were always willing to listen to student's feedback and this course really improved throughout the semester"

"Nikhil, you were a great GSI. Very smart, respectful, funny"

SI 504: Social Systems and Collections- Fall 2004

"Nikhil rocked out. He was my favorite GSI this semester. I felt that he had a firm grasp of the material, and was uncommonly articulate in his explanations. He is going to make a great professor"

"I thought this section was interactive and engaging, both b/c the facilitation was energetic and b/c, unlike in 501 we had enough time to actually have a discussion"

"I appreciated working w Nikhil I think that he worked hard to encourage participation .. the small groups helped facilitate that for me. I think he's a great teacher"

"Thank you Nikhil ! I really enjoyed your course. The readings were excellent, and I really benefited from the focused discussion on them. You did a good job balancing everybody's contributions to the discussion."

"Nikhil did a good job of leading the discussion. He kept us on task, but the class atmosphere was friendly and informal."

"The GSI was the best of the 3 I have had yet at SI. Give him a raise"

"Overall, Nikhil was an excellent GSI. He was extremely knowledgeable about the class material, genuinely seemed concerned about the well-being of his students, and directed a very engaging discussion section."