

Good Intentions

The old woman remembered a swan she had bought many years ago in Shanghai for a foolish sum. This bird, boasted the market vendor, was once a duck that stretched its neck in hopes of becoming a goose, and now look!—it is too beautiful to eat.

Then the woman and the swan sailed across an ocean many thousands of li wide, stretching their necks toward America. On her journey, she cooed to the swan: “In America I will have a daughter just like me. But over there nobody will say her worth is measured by the loudness of her husband’s belch. Over there nobody will look down on her, because I will make her speak only perfect American English. And over there she will always be too full to swallow any sorrow! She will know my meaning, because I will give her this swan—a creature that became more than what was hoped for.”

But when she arrived in the new country, the immigration officials pulled the swan away from her, leaving the woman fluttering her arms and with only one swan feather for a memory... For a long time now, the woman had wanted to give her daughter the single swan feather and tell her, “This feather may look worthless, but it comes from afar and carries with it all my good intentions.”

— Amy Tan
The Joy Luck Club (1989)

They arrive. Thirty-six master’s students from China, India, Iran, Korea, Paraguay, Taiwan, Thailand, and of course the United States; I spend the first day of graduate orientation with them.

Everyone is filled with anticipation. I’m certain their views of interaction design [what I’ll simply refer to as “design”] differ from my colleagues’ perception and mine. And I know that the way many of these students solve problems is not the way they will solve problems in my course. Design is not algebra; there is no algorithm for great design. Even the computer scientists among them will balk; feature specification is not design. Many will fight these notions; they will want to know the steps, the processes, and the formulae for design; this usually takes the form of asking one of the graduate assistant mentors, “What does he want?” I will talk about this extensively throughout the semester, but for now, everyone is happy and excited.

They come with hopes and dreams—from their parents, their family, and, of course, with their own ambitions. They carry with them many good intentions.

Orientation. Every graduate program has one. Normally it consists of the program director reviewing the program requirements, courses for the fall semester, how to register and other university administrivia, those annoying but essential tasks and details that all students must endure. Sometimes cookies are served as a welcoming gesture; an enlightened director will ask the students to introduce themselves to one another with the usual name, undergraduate institution attended, and major studied: “Hi, I’m Megan. I attended the University of Illinois and I majored in Psychology.” Next? It’s not particularly friendly, but it’s efficient. Depending on the number of students in the program, the orientation will be over in an hour or two. The students will meet their professors when they attend their first classes.

But a human-centered design program must do this differently. Its program goals are about understanding human needs and relationships, and that process begins with the students it serves.

Enter room. Students sit in comfortable chairs at tables. Regardless of their angle, a screen is in each student’s line-of-sight; there are eight screens in all surrounding the room. Lights dim to black; one can barely see the person seated next to you.

The music begins: Randy Newman’s “You’ve Got a Friend in Me,” from the Pixar movie, *Toy Story 3*, and then a black and white image of a student appears on the screen; it looks like a Polaroid photo with the person’s name written below the photograph in an informal script font. One by one, images appear and fade out. The final screen is a composite of all faces; slowly the black and white images turn to color with the concluding message: Welcome to the HCI Design Master’s Program, Class of 2014. At this point the students are standing, clapping, and singing with Sister Sledge:

(Chorus)

We are family

I got all my sisters with me

We are family

Get up ev'rybody and sing

Ev'ryone can see we're together

As we walk on by

(FLY!) and we fly just like birds of a feather

I won't tell no lie

(ALL!) all of the people around us they say

Can they be that close

Just let me state for the record

We're giving love in a family dose

(Chorus)

*Living life is fun and we've just begun
To get our share of the world's delights
(HIGH!) high hopes we have for the future
And our goal's in sight
(WE!) no we don't get depressed
Here's what we call our golden rule
Have faith in you and the things you do
You won't go wrong
This is our family Jewel*

(Chorus)

Some American students are teaching the international students to do a simple line dance. It brings smiles to faces, but most of all it acknowledges each person as an individual. Additionally, it recognizes that these 36 individuals form a student cohort. In short order, everyone will know each other well; there will be no secrets among these students!

The 14-minute animated slide and music introduction is followed with individual student introductions, but not in the usual way. Each student is paired with another and they interview each other. They must learn the other person's name and how to pronounce it, the school attended as an undergraduate, and the major studied—the usual orientation trivia, all soon forgotten. But they are to discuss as well their biggest hopes and fears. The pair stands up and each introduces the other. One-third through the paired introductions, one student begins, "I'd like to introduce my new best friend, Alberto, ..." It's a pattern that gets picked up and repeated by other students.

It's the last question—what worries the student the most—that is memorable. Two years later at a graduation event, often students will recount that they met their closest friend in the program through the random orientation pairings and discussion of their fears. Common fears bind the class together. They worry that maybe they are not smart enough to succeed, that they will disappoint their parents' expectations, or that they will not be able to manage the workload. Among these very bright students—the "best of the best"—they share these fears, and they become friends.

They learn that they have already "won;" the school admitted them into the master's program. The competition is over. What they must do now is help each other succeed. Each person is an expert in something, but no one is proficient in everything. The cohort succeeds—indeed the program succeeds—when we help each other.

Two panels follow the student introductions: the five core faculty and a group of second year master's students. For the later panel, all faculty leave the room. This is when the second year and first year students begin another bonding process, this time across cohorts. They conclude the morning orientation by sharing a lunch meal. They tell stories; they communicate traditions. Anticipation builds for the first day of class.