

University of Michigan

Winter 2023 Instructor Report

EECS 598-004: Special Topics

Westley Weimer

14 out of 18 students responded to this evaluation.

Responses to University-wide questions about the course:

	SA	A	N	D	SD	N/A	Your Median	School/College Median	Univ-Wide Median
This course advanced my understanding of the subject matter. (Q1631)	9	5	0	0	0	0	4.7	4.4	4.5
My interest in the subject has increased because of this course. (Q1632)	6	7	1	0	0	0	4.4	4.1	4.2
I knew what was expected of me in this course.(Q1633)	13	1	0	0	0	0	5.0	4.3	4.6
I had a strong desire to take this course.(Q4)	9	5	0	0	0	0	4.7	4.0	4.1
As compared with other courses of equal credit, the workload for this course was (SA=Much Lighter, A=Lighter, N=Typical, D=Heavier, SD=Much Heavier). (Q891)	4	6	4	0	0	0	4.0	2.8	3.0

Responses to University-wide questions about the instructor:

	SA	A	N	D	SD	N/A	Your Median	School/College Median	Univ-Wide Median
Westley Weimer seemed well prepared for class meetings.(Q230)	13	1	0	0	0	0	5.0	4.7	4.8
Westley Weimer explained material clearly.(Q199)	12	1	1	0	0	0	4.9	4.6	4.7
Westley Weimer treated students with respect.(Q217)	14	0	0	0	0	0	5.0	4.8	4.8

Responses to questions about the course:

	SA	A	N	D	SD	N/A	Your Median
Overall, this was an excellent course. (Q1)	11	3	0	0	0	0	4.9
The textbook made a valuable contribution to the course. (Q64)	0	0	2	0	0	12	3.0
Prerequisites provided adequate preparation for this course. (Q61)	3	7	0	0	0	4	4.2
I felt comfortable asking questions in class. (Q521)	12	2	0	0	0	0	4.9
I developed confidence in my abilities as an engineer. (Q1769)	8	5	1	0	0	0	4.6
I developed the ability to solve real world engineering problems. (Q1770)	6	6	2	0	0	0	4.3
I felt included and valued when working with other students. (Q253)	8	6	0	0	0	0	4.6

Responses to questions about the instructor:

	SA	A	N	D	SD	N/A	Your Median
Overall, Westley Weimer was an excellent teacher. (Q2)	13	1	0	0	0	0	5.0

This course involved at least as much rigor and critical thinking as other EECS graduate courses.

(custom question added by the instructor)

SA	A	N	D	SD	N/A	Your Median
8	4	1	0	1	0	4.6

This course provided useful practice on diplomatically or constructively critiquing research papers.

(custom question added by the instructor)

SA	A	N	D	SD	N/A	Your Median
12	2	0	0	0	0	4.9

This course provided useful practice on generating novel research ideas that extend prior work.

(custom question added by the instructor)

SA	A	N	SD	D	N/A	Your Median
11	3	0	0	0	0	4.9

The medians are calculated from Winter 2023 data. University-wide medians are based on all UM classes in which an item was used. The school/college medians in this report are based on classes that are graduate level with enrollment of 16 to 74 in College of Engineering.

Written Comments

Comment on the quality of instruction in this course. (Q900)

Comments
Very good. Prof. Weimer is very knowledgeable about the papers but also generally, with the amount of experience he has. He is adept at analyzing what he's experienced and imparting this knowledge to us.
Prof. Weimer was always super prepared and engaged with the class. He explained topics clearly and led the pace of the discussions well.
Great course!
Wes being the professor was probably the main reason that the course was successful. Not that other professors could not achieve the same thing, but I feel a class such as this one requires an enthusiastic professor who knows a lot about the material and is very excited to teach it.
I really enjoyed Wes's humour and his style of speaking. He is very real and honest while respecting the students in the class.
I really enjoyed how students interact with each other in the class during the discussions. It is very interesting to see how ideas build upon each other.
Prof. Weimer's position in this research area was extremely useful in providing insight into every paper.
Excellent. Because of how interactive this course was, I felt my learning was a lot more personalized and catered to my interests as well.
Exceptional. Once again, Wes fails to disappoint. Wes crafts specific relevant examples that directly apply to students. Wes is funny, personable, and makes me feel loved and supported. From day one, Wes encouraged us all to become friends. It's easy to explain my stellar rating: the quality of instruction made this course simply exceptional.
I liked how the instructor not only knew the contents of the selected papers well, but was able to provide us with "behind the scenes" details or things in the negative space that would've been very difficult for me to figure out on my own if I were to just read the papers by myself.

What were the strengths of the course ? (Q953)

Comments
No question was out of bounds for which really encouraged me to fire away. I liked the openness and the lack of judgement.
We were able to learn about at least 2–3 new topics through papers each week and we could ask questions about anything that we didn't understand, or was especially interested in.
Learning to critique papers, coming up with new paper ideas
I learned much more about what graduate school / PhD programs are like in this class than in any other. I actually was able to get a sense of what research could look like.
Actually just reading a bunch of papers for the sake of just reading it and understanding them. This is something that I wanted to do for a long time. Even though I may not go into research that deeply, I still appreciated that I get to train my scientific reading skills and ability to remember and summarise complex ideas
The course is the best possible way to introduce students to a research area in my opinion.
The strong emphasis on understanding and improving existing research ideas was very helpful, and I found myself applying strategies I picked up during the course in my research outside the course
Wes Weimer Wes Weimer Wes Weimer Wes Weimer Wes Weimer. Honestly, the open discussion and feedback were the strength of this course. I felt that since discussions could go anywhere, students were focused and interested in learning, because we could control what we learned.
I know the paper reading and discussion aspect is the main part of the course, but I really enjoyed classes where the instructor brought in personal experiences regarding things like funding or academic grudges. I liked how there was a survey on what students expect to learn outside of the papers that we are reading, and how the contents of the course were adjusted according to what students needed.

What suggestions would you make for improving the course ? (Q955)

Comments

In some class sessions, I would have liked a short break in the middle.

A bigger thing is, the class felt very much like us, the students, guiding the topics Prof. Weimer would lecture on. It didn't often feel like a ton of *discussion*. There isn't anything wrong with that per se, I very much enjoyed this format, but it was a mismatch in expectations for me. I was previously in a seminar class with Prof. Fish in his first semester here, and that class (Social Consequences of Computing) was much more what I would expect of a discussion/seminar class.

Perhaps if there was an opportunity for the students to also pick some papers to read.

None

The random number generator indeed felt a bit rigged haha. I only got called to present once, which to be honest made me a bit lenient on reading the papers. However, I still tried to read every time as much as I can because I actually don't know whether I would be called next. Perhaps there should be a mechanism to prevent student from being called too many times. My friend Lingxiao has been called way too many times, and it felt a bit weird.

I think the "random 5 minute" thing is useful in creating a Panopticon-style thing in efficiently motivating everyone to read the paper, but even with a class as small as 20 students I felt like I could take the 5% chance and not read it as closely as I should. So maybe setting expectations that you contribute something meaningful at least half the time, or something along those lines.

I would have liked to have a formal peer review session, where we would need to write a formal review for a paper. In tandem with this, an instructor session on how to effectively write a paper and provide rebuttals to review comments would have been great to have.

There's very little. Course logistics, specifically the website, could be improved by adding better formatting, or improving the syllabus, since it was vague.

I think the overall structure of the course was nice in that we get to practice reading research papers critically and see what's missing in the negative space. I think it'd be interesting to have a similarly structured course for other fields within computer science as well, especially for students who are just getting familiar with research.

Among the courses you have already taken, which proved the most (or least) effective in preparing you for this course, and why? (Q1098)

Comments

EECS 481, which had some overlap with the topics we discussed. Most grad level classes would help, as they get you understanding of the nature of academic papers and how to read them.

This course was pretty unique in the fact that it did not require explicit programming, so I think previous eeecs courses were not necessarily good for preparation. I think courses like English, Statistics, etc. and classes that taught general scientific material were good for preparation.

General knowledge about software engineering

EECS 481 was most effective because it covered some of the same topics.

EECS 481 was useful because it provided background on software engineering concepts like static/dynamic analysis, maintainability, etc.

N/A

EECS 481 was the most helpful. I learned how software is applied in the industry, which drove my interest in research adoption.

I took EECS 481 before this, and it was effective in preparing for this course because there was some overlap in the contents and I was familiar with some of the chosen papers too.

How might the class climate be made more inclusive of diverse students? (Q910)

Comments
Perhaps a way to submit questions or comments in an anonymous way would be helpful for those who are more timid. I believe Piazza could function for this purpose, though.
It was already pretty inclusive.
It was already very inclusive
I am not sure whether it is possible. Perhaps we should have more time to just hangout outside of class for the students to get to know each other. Perhaps we don't have to discuss papers in the classroom, and we can go outside to discuss when the weather is nice. I do get to make some friends throughout the class, and I believe building a mini-community help foster a sense of inclusiveness amongst students.
Also, perhaps include a more diverse range of papers if possible.
It might be interesting to have the class in a smaller classroom to make it easier to interact/hear other students. Some rooms in buildings like CSRB have arrangements that allow students to sit in a circle/ semi-circle to allow this.
N/A. Wes actively sought to include Everyone in the class. I can't imagine anything differently.

Was the course structure (readings, presentations, and discussions, but no standard homework or exams) effective at conveying a depth of understanding? Should EECS offer more courses with this structure in the future?

Comments
I think so. At least for me, it allowed me to focus on the papers rather than on assignments that might distract me.
Yes, the course structure was effective. I really felt that I was able to learn more about research and how to improve research papers.
However, I also think that it matters which professor is giving a course with this type of structure. For example, Prof Weimer is able to effectively lead discussion on specific, important points in the paper and always makes the discussions relevant and informative. But I think different professors who are not as proficient in this skill may have a harder time effectively teaching with this structure.
Yes, atleast one course of this type must be made mandatory for all students! It improves critical thinking immensely! Super beneficial to PhD students!
I believe it was effective for me. I felt by the end of each class that I was able to get a really good understanding of each paper, and I had a much better sense of software engineering research after the completion of the course. Truthfully, there were some times when I was busier and did not have time to dive deep into each paper, but this was very useful to me in terms of dealing with the stress of the semester, and overall I feel like I gained a lot from the class even with this structure.
Definitely, I actually think one of the hardest part of EECS sometimes is for the students to actually be in the classroom. I have taught discussions where there is only one person besides me in the room. I personally believe that university/grad school is just not about homework and exams. The "experience" and the "learning community" is also pretty important as well. In the future, we don't need perfect human beings who can perform well in exams, because probably chatGPT would be able to do better. Actually letting students have the space to share and discuss in official channels is something that is really lacking in the UM EECS program. Indeed, one may argue that office hours serve this purpose, but it is actually a somewhat heavy burden on students, as to do well students kind of should go to office hours for almost every class already. One may just think "to maximise my grades, I am so busy and I might as well forgo the lectures and discussions until I actually have to watch them". Imagine in this class, students can choose to write summaries and submit that for credit. I'd imagine many students simply not showing up (for good and bad reasons).
I understand that this format does not necessary work well for all classes, but it does seem that EECS's grading focuses on the "result" of the work done by students rather than the "process" of which. One may argue that this is a college-wise issue, but I perhaps find it particularly interesting phenomena in EECS.
Yes, although the effectiveness of such a course hinges on the Professor, since it is up to them to ensure a dialogue is flowing naturally.
EECS should definitely offer more courses with this structure in the future. At least on the grad level, many times I want to be introduced to a research area and this is a great way to do it (provide a reading list and a professor who is a subject-area expert). There are other classes that do this (I'm taking two right now: 588 with Ensafi and 598-003 with Guo) but I feel like in those classes, the discussion is too narrow and a lot of time is spent recapping the papers I read, which I had to read because I had to write reviews of them. So in a sense, in those classes, there are 3 reiterations of the idea that I read the paper (writing the paper review, watching the presentation, and discussing generally), when I would in actuality benefit most from jumping directly into a more in-depth discussion of the paper.

Comments

Yes. I personally found this to be one of the most useful courses I've taken so far.

I think it was effective, as not reading the papers would be obviously detrimental to class participation and considering Wes called on students at random. I think EECS should offer more courses with this structure in the future, with one addition – it would be nice to have several sections taught by multiple professors in different areas so students have choice in an area they are most interested in.

I think this kind of course structure works for non-intensive topics in the CS area. I think it would be very helpful to student if some professor who is passionate about teaching and teaches well can teach course like this and simply share their experience as a professor. I do think that this course (due to the no standard homework and exam structure) has a low workload. But I think it would be a perfect elective for students who wants to learn experiences rather than the "knowledge" from professors.

Yes and yes. Graduate students should learn how to read and write better.

Yes! This format is less stressful on students. I think it also offers perspective that you can't learn from homeworks: Namely, the people side of research. As research focused as we were in class, we learned how to give specific, actionable feedback, That's something that we aren't really taught in regular classes.

We also got to learn about the politics of research, funding, and professional grudges(by our request). The ability to offer something unique and student directed is totally new to me, and it's totally useful.

Please offer more courses like this!

I would LOVE consider attending UM grad school if I could attend courses like these (I'm an undergrad taking the course)

I think the structure of the course didn't really make it easier than other courses for me, it just required skills that are not necessarily assessed in other courses.

Having required in-person attendance and random presentations each class meant that I had to put in consistent effort (in contrast to how I could watch lecture recordings whenever I want), which I do prefer than being assessed with things like exams.

Overall I really enjoyed this class, and as mentioned earlier I think it'd be useful to have a class in this format that touches on various topics in computer science, especially geared towards students who may not have that much experience with research just yet.

Yes! I really enjoyed the format of this course and felt it really help me dive deep into the readings and think critically about new paper ideas.