



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

School of Computing

MJ22: feedback

Thanks for giving your opinions last Thursday – all anonymous of course. Here's a summary:

1. **What was most interesting?**

The great majority found the real-world applications useful and interesting; many singled out letter recognition.

2. **What was most easiest?**

Quite a few people recorded 'nothing was easy'! I think most people found the earlier material fairly straightforward.

3. **What was least interesting?**

Quite a range here: many people recorded 'none', and a few recorded 'all' (neither of which accord with my personal definition of a strict ordering!). If there's a theme, several people found the deeper theory, and aspects of the software, challenging.

4. **What was most hardest?**

The dominant topic here was software, especially Java and C++. See further comments on this below.

5. **What might you have wished to do that we didn't?**

Many people asked for more practical examples - fair enough. Quite a few wanted to implement from scratch (see below).

6. **Practical work: it's value, time demand, what you have learnt?**

Overwhelmingly, people found this helpful *and* difficult (for me, a good result!). Clearly more prior programming experience would have helped quite a few. Several people suggested it took too much time: I can attend to this given concrete data. Maybe I should have asked how many hours in total people spent on my part of MJ22 – you know the official budget.

Various people made very specific comments:

- *The pace was very quick*: I was unsure in my own mind if it was too fast, too slow or about right. I tried to aim at a class of clever second year students, which is what I saw from my position. 5 weeks for these algorithms in many universities would be regarded as lavish :-).
- *... a chance to implement some of the algorithms from scratch ...*: I think there's a point being missed here. It's not a SE or programming module; when you 'solve problems' in the real world using computers, in most circumstances you are hacking someone else's code (which is often of low quality), or mashing together other systems. This is very much the sort of experience 'Practical Problem Solving' should give you. It's tough, and doesn't have the intellectual satisfaction of 'doing it yourself' ... but I do believe it's invaluable.

- *I'd like to see answers to the questions posed in lectures:* I'm not going to compromise on this. If you do the work of trying to answer these, and post me attempted solutions or specific queries, then we can engage further – if I just post answers, there's a danger nobody learns anything. In any event, as we already discover, there's often no one right answer, and this is very valuable to learn.

I've been running my lectures like this for years & I firmly believe it's a good thing to do, so get used to it :-).

- *[lack of] experience in Java is a flaw in the whole course ... Python is not used in industry:* (there were a few comments in this vein). Firstly, we hope that you do collect a front-line knowledge of Java - from your first year and second year. If this is proving too light then that's clearly something to change. Secondly, it just not true to say that Python is not in use in industry. Ben Blundell posted something on this very topic earlier this week

More fundamentally, as an exercise in 'Practical Problem Solving', attacking someone else's systems, often not written to production standards, and often written in a language that is not your first choice, this is what I would expect to see. It's certainly hard, but support mechanisms do exist, and when you graduate it's really important that you be able to write on your CV 'Experience in teaching myself new systems/languages/paradigms'.

If the answer to this is more supported lab. sessions, I'd like to know (but attendance on Wednesday mornings was not terrific, and I wasn't actually asked that many questions).

These views are welcomed and useful – there will be some adjustments to this stuff for next year's class as a result. Good luck in the exam; I will continue to monitor the bulletin board for questions. If you want a revision session in May that is easy to arrange (but you'll have to ask!).

RDB, February 27, 2009