

GRACE TEO: In terms of choosing our clients there were a few criteria that we were looking for. Other than the fact that they had a disability, you had to have been pretty stable, so it wasn't going to be fluctuating too much over the semester. And that is to make the design constraints a little bit more simple for the students. Apart from a stable disability, I think what we loved about the clients this semester is their motivation to educate our students. Having that intrinsic quality of being an educator was important for us. They had to be able to articulate their challenges really well for the students, and be able to be patient with the students, because they're all learning through this process. And they might not get the design process right the first time. But having clients that were adventurous, willing to try out new things with the students, that was very important. The third piece was purely logistical. So, our students are going to want to interact with their clients as many times as possible over the semester, so we made sure that they were all accessible from MIT, I think within a one hour radius of MIT.

I think one thing you'll find in a disability community is that once you talk to one person, it's such a tight community that word travels really fast. So we had a little bit of a lucky break in that we contacted the Cambridge Commission for People with Disabilities, and Kate Thurman there helped us to send out an email to the entire community of people with disabilities. And then I'm pretty sure we got about 50 emails, if not more, from people who were interested in being clients. And so we either tried to talk to them over the phone or visit them in person to get to know them.

WILLIAM LI: I think, to be very honest though, in terms of having clients involved in the class-- participating in lectures and some of the labs, and also certainly being very much a part of the design process-- to be very honest it's a tricky decision, and something that we decided to try this year sort of to see what would happen. I think a big part of it is really the user-centered or participatory design nature of the class that we really want students to understand the person that they're working with. Understand their challenges, and realities, in all the contexts that they're in, in their home, or when they're out in Boston, or even at MIT as well.

So I think one big part of it was to really give students the opportunity to interact more with their clients, and really get their feedback quickly, and work on the design process together. I think the other part is we really tried to see our clients as collaborators with the students. As Grace mentioned, really, I think clients are most attuned to their own needs, and their own

ideas. Or their own needs in terms of what assistive technologies might be useful. So they really are able to give kind of the best possible feedback. So having them [? embedded, ?] or participating in the class, I think was really important and really a valuable experiment or experience to try.

GRACE TEO:

William is exactly right. It was an experiment this year. We had lab assistants in the class this year who were students last year, and they did not have clients in their class. And when we first made a decision to say OK, clients can be in our class, and our lab assistants saw how that was going, they raised quite a few concerns. By the end of the day we said, you know what, our students just need to learn how to negotiate these situations. It's part of the learning process. It's an important thing to be able to work around these kinds of situations. And that's fine.

The other thing that I don't like is when we talk about disability, or we teach students how to talk about disability, as if people with disabilities are this outside group that we are kind of observing from the inside. I think it's a much more inclusive way of teaching if we can bring in people with disabilities to talk about their own experiences with the students. Instead of us just showing slides and saying, these are the terms that you should use when you're talking to people with disabilities. It means so much more coming from the people with disabilities themselves.

In terms of how we set up the students and the clients and coordinated that interaction-- so let me start right from the beginning. We meet with the clients. Once we know we've selected them, I believe we selected about 15 clients at the start of the class. And we told them, there is a potential that you will get to work with students this semester, and this is the expectation, that you are able to give two to three hours each week to meet with our students from this date to this date.

Then we went to our students and gave them a whole list of the clients. And we didn't describe the clients in too much detail other than some potential challenges that they had that students might want to work on. Then we let the students decide for themselves which clients they were interested in working with. Based on their skill sets, and based on their interests, we meshed up students with the clients. And so at the end of it, we actually only had 11 student teams and so 11 clients that were matched. So we had to tell the remaining four clients, I'm sorry, you were not matched for this semester, but we really appreciate your availability.

So right after we finished that matching, we basically sent an email to the clients and the students, introduced them, told them this is how you can contact each other. And then for the very first client meeting for the students, their mentors went along with the students to just make sure the interaction went well. Something that Seth, Professor Teller, established in the class probably from the first year or so, was the student client contract, where the student will say, we are going to work with you as well as we can, these are the expectations that you can hold us to. And then the clients also have expectations that the students can hold them to, and they both sign off for that. And it's just a way of facilitating that initial interaction so that both sides are able to talk about what they will be able to do, and what they won't be able to do. And managing those expectations is a huge part of any kind of relationship.

WILLIAM LI:

Yeah, this contract, and really setting the expectations. Setting the stage for students to succeed, and clients to really understand what the process is about and how they can be most valuable to the students in terms of giving feedback and sharing their ideas openly, and really knowing that they're kind of an equal partner in the team's project is really key.

I think Grace did a lot of great work this year in terms of the curation part. We had a chance to talk to a lot of potential clients, and really figure out what would be the best match for the expected makeup of students in our class. As grace mentioned, clients who are adventurous, and interested in learning, and interested in teaching, and open minded, have some assistive technology idea in mind. I think this is a big part, the front part of the class that can be really valuable to help set it up for success for the semester.