Course "Empirical Evaluation in Informatics"

Introduction

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- The notion of Empirical Evaluation
- Theory, Construction, Empiricism
- Status of empiricism in Informatics
- Hypothetical examples
- Quality criteria:
  - credibility
  - relevance
- Note on scale types
"Empirische Bewertung in der Informatik"

Einführung

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- Begriff
- Theorie, Konstruktion, Empirie
- Status der Empirie in der Informatik
- Hypothetische Anwendungsbeispiele
- Qualitätsmaßstäbe:
  - Glaubwürdigkeit
  - Relevanz
- Hinweis: Skalentypen
Science

- Science is the belief in the ignorance of experts.
  - Richard Feynman (1918-1988)
    (The pleasure of finding things out, 1999, p.187)

- (Ignorance: Unwissen)
For a successful technology, reality must take precedence over public relations, for nature cannot be fooled.

- Richard Feynman
  (last sentence of the Rogers Commission Report into the Challenger Crash, Appendix F: *Personal Observations on the Reliability of the Shuttle*)


- (Things are as they are. Just claiming something does not make it true.)
"Empirical" / "empirisch"

- Based on observation
  - (greek-latin origin)

- As opposed to being based on
  - theoretical considerations
  - intuition
  - random selection
"Evaluation" / "Bewertung"

- "to evaluate": auswerten, bewerten

- Assigning measures of goodness to something
- The purpose is typically making some kind of decision:
  - deciding **yes or no**
    - Should I do it or not (in my context)?
    - e.g. starting or stopping a project, introducing a technology or not, etc.
  - **selecting** among solution candidates
    - Which one is best for my purposes?
    - e.g. systems, methods
  - **understanding** characteristics and priorities
    - What characteristics does a certain method/tool have in my context?
    - Which of these are most relevant for me?
    - e.g. in business process automation, user interface design, etc.
"Informatics" / "Informatik"

- The science and engineering of information and information processing systems

- Very broad area

Note:
- Many of the same principles presented in this course can be applied to other areas as well
- Hence, this course is relevant far beyond where software is created or selected
Work in Informatics is often discriminated into being either

- **Technical** ("Technische Informatik")
  - having to do more or less closely with hardware
- **Applied** ("Praktische Informatik")
  - having to do mostly with software
- **Theoretical** ("Theoretische Informatik")
  - having to do mostly with mathematics
- **Furthermore: Applications** ("Angewandte Informatik")
  - having to do mostly with software in actual usage contexts

- **Problem:** Discrimination hardly relevant for practitioners
- **Problem:** The boundaries have long disappeared
Partitioning again: Theory, Construction, Empiricism (T,C,E)

A better discrimination would be **by work method**:

- **Theory**
  - produces formalisms, derives results about them, revolves around logical issues

- **Construction**
  - produces systems designs, constructs systems, revolves around practical issues

- **Empiricism**
  - produces observations of systems and interprets them, revolves around behavior in and of the real world

- At any one time, any work in Informatics is primarily in only one of these modes
  - whether practitioner work or research work
  - but good work switches mode frequently
T, C, E: What they are used for

(Our focus is solving practical Informatics problems)

• Theory:
  • structuring and understanding a domain
  • if done well, can much simplify construction
    • "There is nothing more practical than a good theory"

• Construction:
  • build a useful technical artifact, such as a software system

• Empiricism:
  • in an early phase: Understanding requirements
  • in a later phase: Understanding the characteristics of a system
    • This is the topic of the present course!
Example 1: Algorithms

1. Theory
   • Specify the problem to be solved
     • e.g. linear programming: minimize linear function given constraints
   • Specify an algorithm for solving it (e.g. simplex algorithm)
   • Maybe prove the algorithm correct, etc.

2. Construction
   • Implement the algorithm as a concrete program
     • often much longer than the theoretical algorithm because of optimizations, input/output, limitations of machine arithmetic, error handling, external interfaces, etc.

3. Empiricism
   • Determine actual characteristics of the program for different kinds of inputs
     • execution time, memory behavior, etc.
   • for heuristic or approximation algorithms: quality of results
Example 2: Software design methods

1. Empiricism
   • Determine the weaknesses of current design methods

2. Theory
   • Maybe define some new terminology
   • Maybe pose new design principles

3. Construction
   • Formulate a new design method
   • Perhaps construct support tools

4. Empiricism
   • Evaluate the behavior of the method for concrete problems
   • Probably in comparison to other methods
Informatics until recently

- Until the 1990s, Informatics research publications were often short on empirical evaluation
  - they often provided designs of systems
  - and claims for their properties
  - but little or no data on actual behavior

- In comparison, other engineering fields were much better in this respect


Figure 5: The percentage of design & modeling articles without any experimental evaluation.
Informatics today

- This situation has become a lot better
- It is now generally understood that proposed systems and methods need to be evaluated empirically

- Compared to research, practitioners' work has always been more empirical
  - However, evaluation was often very implicit, hardly conscious and often not very systematical.
  - **Systematic** empirical evaluation is becoming more and more common there as well
A glimpse of the improvement


- Categorizes 612 research articles in software engineering (from 1985, 1990, 1995) according to the empirical evaluation method that they used (if any)

- 2 of the 14 categories describe articles providing - no evaluation ("no experimentation") or - only visibly biased evaluation ("assertion")
  - 1985: 67% of the articles were in one of these two
  - 1995: 47% of the articles were in one of these two
  - still far from great, but a big improvement
  - has presumably continued to improve
# Frequency of evaluation methods (in SW Eng.)

## Table 2. Classification of 612 evaluated papers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>1985</th>
<th>1990</th>
<th>1995</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ICSE</td>
<td>IEEE Software</td>
<td>TSE</td>
<td>ICSE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>No experimentation</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Replicated</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synthetic</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dynamic analysis</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>Case study</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assertion</strong></td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>54</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lessons learned</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Static analysis</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yearly totals</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Examples

- Let us look what empirical evaluations may be used for
- and what approach we might use in each case:

  - Scenario 1: Introducing inspections in a SW project organization
  - Scenario 2: Switching the development world
  - Scenario 3: Selecting an Application Server product

In each case, we look at:
- What are the evaluation results of interest?
- What are the constraints?
- What are the most promising evaluation approaches?
Scenario 1: Introducing inspections

• A SW organization is thinking about introducing inspections into their process

• Constraint: is an IT service company doing information systems projects for varying customers
  • requirements inspections, design inspections, code inspections

• Interest:
  • Which and how many defects will be found?
  • Cost of inspections
  • How much effort is saved by finding the defects early?
    • return-on-investment (ROI)
(Scenario 1)
Code Inspections

- Possible approach:
  - inspect a number of modules; do not fix the defects found
  - measure testing and debugging cost of the same modules
  - (A quasi-experiment approach)

- Difficulties
  - What if author and tester are the same person?
    - unfair disadvantage for inspectors
  - What if measurement is too difficult?
    - due to interruptions, mixing with other tasks (e.g. debug with fix), etc.

- Other approaches
  - search the literature on this subject
  - controlled experiment: many people inspect or test the same program
(Scenario 1)
Requirements and design inspections

• **Approach:**
  • ???

• **Difficulties:**
  • Cannot afford not to fix problems found
  • If we fix them, cannot measure would-be cost for comparison
  • Estimates may be very imprecise
Scenario 2: Switching from C to Embedded Java

- A SW organization is producing car control devices
  - motor control, ABS, ESP, distance control, etc.

- Development is done in C (since many years)

- The organization considers switching to Embedded Java
  - object-oriented rather than procedural,
  - garbage collection rather than manual memory mgmt,
  - VM rather than bare machine, etc.

- Interest:
  - What/how much would our engineers have to learn?
  - What would become better or easier?
  - What would become worse or more difficult?
  - What risks are involved?
(Scenario 2)
A "laboratory" study approach

- **Approach:**
  - Select one team, let them build one prior system again
    - or a part of it
  - Evaluate relative to the experience from the original project
  - (A **case study** approach)

- **Problems:**
  - The team may be too inexperienced with Embedded Java
  - Many important differences can hardly be observed, because fundamental problems with requirements or design need not be solved again
    - (Alternative: build the system in both languages side-by-side; also a case study approach. Much better!)
  - The retrospective view of the previous project may be too imprecise
(Scenario 2)
Field study approach

- Approach:
  - Introduce Embedded Java in a (real) pilot project
  - Compare to 'usual' projects
  - (A **case study** approach)

- Problems:
  - The issues may be too project-specific for a sound comparison
  - All participants may be too busy doing the project
    - and will perhaps not really create a useful comparison
  - High risk of project failure (because of lack of experience)
    - Compensating this risk may result in an overly well-staffed, well-budgeted project and produce overly optimistic results

- Alternative (as before):
  - Build the system in both languages side-by-side;
    a case study approach with 2 cases. Much better!
Scenario 3: Selecting an Application Server product

- A SW organization building distributed information systems wants to start using a Java Enterprise Edition (Java EE) application server

- An application server is a very complex middleware product (a programming platform)
  - Several vendors offer such servers
  - In principle, they all conform to the Java EE standards and should be interchangeable

- Interest (for each product):
  - How scalable and efficient is it?
  - How stable, robust, easy-to-use is it?
  - How will it evolve in the future?
(Scenario 3)
How scalable and efficient is it?

- **Possible approach:**
  - Use several existing applications
  - Set them up for load test measurements
  - Measure and compare across the various Application Servers
  - *(A **benchmarking** approach)*

- **Problems:**
  - Where to get the applications from if this is the first application server we will use?
  - How to make sure each server is configured well?
(Scenario 3)
How stable, robust, easy-to-use is it?

• Possible approach:
  • Write one application on each server, then port it to all others
  • Protocol all interesting events (defects detected, usability and documentation traps, etc.)
  • Mostly qualitative rather than quantitative
  • (A case study or quasi-experiment approach)

• Problems:
  • This is a huge effort
  • The results depend critically on the (prior?) knowledge of the engineers
    • many will not apply to routine usage
(Scenario 3)
How will it evolve in the future?

- Answering this question requires a market analysis
- It cannot be answered technically-empirically
Lessons learned from examples

- There is a range of different empirical techniques
  - e.g. controlled experiment, quasi-experiment, case study, benchmarking, literature study

- Each evaluation problem has different characteristics
  - Often suggesting a particular technique
  - Or several techniques, with different tradeoffs

- There are usually some difficulties in an evaluation problem that cannot be fully solved
  - Most evaluations are only an approximation to the ideal one
  - But good approximations are much more useful than bad ones
The two primary quality dimensions of empirical evaluations are:

- **Credibility**
  - How trustworthy are the results?

- **Relevance**
  - How interested are we in these results?
  - How beneficial is it to have them?

- Subsequently we will often assume we are looking at a technical report about the study
Where does credibility come from?

1. Authors are open towards any result
   - rather than "We will now show that our new X is superior."
2. Setup is described in detail and is easy to understand
3. Work has been performed carefully
4. Description discusses the limitations of the evaluation
   - rather than glossing over even its obvious flaws
5. There is no leap-of-faith or jumping to conclusions
6. Purpose and results are clear
   - rather than vague or, for results, weak
7. Results are easy to grasp ("anschaulich")
   - rather than abstract or contrived

• (Some of these aspects are known as "Internal Validity")
Where does relevance come from?

1. The target of the evaluation (i.e. the question asked) is of sufficient interest
   • rather than overly specialized

2. We can generalize the results from the specific setup of the evaluation to those situations where we want to apply them
   • this is also known as "External Validity"
Qualitative vs. quantitative

- Empirical evaluations need not always be quantitative
  - i.e. counting and measuring something; providing numbers, graphs and calculations

- They can also be qualitative
  - describing non-quantifiable characteristics
  - describing contexts
  - describing events and their consequences
  - providing subjective judgements obtained from relevant people

- or can combine both approaches
  - which is almost always a good idea
Qualitative vs. quantitative: Examples

E.g. for applying a design method:

- **Quantitative questions:**
  - A. How long does it take?
    - time in minutes
  - B. How many mistakes are made in the process?
    - number of changes during work
  - C. How good is the result?
    - number of defects

- **Corresponding qualitative questions:**
  - A. What activities is the work time spent on?
  - B. Which kinds of mistake happen frequently? Why?
  - C. What are the typical kinds of flaws in the result? Why do they occur? What might be done to prevent them?
A word of warning: scale types

- An advantage of quantitative data is that it can be processed using mathematical operations
  - This can allow easy summarization or can provide additional insights

- However, not all computations are valid for all kinds of quantitative data
  - The data must be on a sufficient scale type
    - otherwise, an operation may be invalid and not make sense
  - See the next slide
The scale types

- **Categorical/categorial scale (nominal scale)**
  - Qualitative data: The values are just names
  - Example: Design method A, design method B

- **Ordinal scale (rank scale)**
  - Ordered nominal data: One value is larger than another, but we cannot characterize the size of the difference
  - Example: very good, good, OK, not so good, bad

- **Difference scale (interval scale)**
  - We can compute differences, but 0 is not equal to 'nothing'
  - Example: degrees centigrade

- **Ratio scale ("Verhältnisskala")**
  - We can compute ratios: 20 is twice as much as 10
  - Most physical quantities, degrees Kelvin

- **Absolute scale: 1 is also special (counting)**
What often goes wrong with scale types

• "Oh, 20 degrees. That's twice as warm as yesterday."
  • A difference scale is not a ratio scale
  • 20 degrees centigrade is 293 Kelvin.
      That is only 3.5% more than 283 Kelvin.

• When something qualitative is measured using an ordinal scale
  • e.g. "How well did you like using the tool?"
      very well, well, OK, not so well, did not like it
  • Often such scales are coded with numbers: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1
  • Wrong (however tempting and common it may be):
      "average satisfaction was 3.8"
  • Even worse: "average satisfaction in group B was 30% higher than in group A"
      • This is utter nonsense!
      • Assume you would have coded using 2, 1, 0, -1, -2?
Primary nonsense candidates

- There are a number of important attributes in informatics for which no good ratio scales are known
- These are frequent places of scale type mis-use

Namely
- Quality
  - And all quality attributes such as comprehensibility, usability, portability, maintainability etc. etc.
- Complexity
"There's more than one way to do it"

- Even if you do have a ratio scale, things may go wrong:
Summary

• The three basic modes of informatics are **theory, construction, and empiricism**
  • all three are essential for successful work
  • empiricism is slowly gaining ground

• There are many examples where **sound decisions** can be made on empirical basis only
  • in particular when selecting technology or methods

• The main **quality criteria** for empirical work are
  • credibility and
  • relevance

• **Scales** are often mis-used
  • Make sure you have a sufficient scale type
    • For SW quality or complexity you almost never do
http://xkcd.com/c242.html
Thank you!