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Culminating Experience Reflection

A true culminating experience should be the summation of your entire time spent at an institution. It represents proof that the student is competent enough in their subject matter to begin practicing these skills outside of an academic setting. I came to the school of sustainability as a software tester with a desire to expand my potential to create a positive impact in the world. While admittedly naive, I had an understanding that a perfect storm of complex problems and a public paralyzed by both the depth and breadth of risks being presented to them was creating a cocktail of disaster. I did not want to just sit back and watch it happen. Unfortunately, my undergraduate degree in the health sciences, while generally helpful, was not a very helpful knowledge resource in this particular academic setting, or at least not in the beginning. So I spent the first year avidly absorbing everything I could across the entire sustainable spectrum. From energy and climate change to food systems and sustainable enterprise, I wanted to learn about everything. It was around the end of this year that I began to understand that all the information I was learning about creating possible solutions pathways through the confusion of modern day decision making was only going to be as beneficial as my ability to translate that information for other people. This notion was repeatedly confirmed every time I was the faced with the question, “What exactly is sustainability?” Each time I had to find a way to frame the answer in a way that fit the individual I was talking to or the conversation would stall. This began my new self assigned mission to become a sustainability translator. This mission and the timely rediscovery of my passion for digital media is what brought me to the exploration of collisions between art, sustainability, and communication for my culminating experience.

Over the course of development of an interdisciplinary, interactive art/science communication project we naturally encountered many challenges. Time is the natural enemy of the creative design and development process because there are always improvements that can be made and processes to refine. There is always the potential for increased levels of symbolism and breadth of representation to explore. In our case, more advanced and stable tracking and more sophisticated visuals were the always advancing targets. In this stream of endless decisions and minor tweaks, utilizing a design guide with an existing set of process steps proved to be an invaluable tool that often refocused the project team when we encountered challenges. It gave us an operational framework and a structure for testing and receiving user feedback. As a team we struggled most with finding a unifying theme that tied our desired cooperative interactions with sustainability because as it turns out sustainability is just as hard to determine how to represent visually
as it is to define academically. There are many layers vying for representation and they are all complex, but at some point it becomes necessary to bound the interaction. In the beginning we thought it was most important to test and determine functionality of the sensor and potential methods of engagement before thinking about how the interactions themselves overlap with the competencies of sustainability. We feared over simplifying sustainability as an environmental issue and felt compelled to represent the social side of sustainability in a significant way. We began by creating desired interaction outcomes and then tested various prototypes while observing the user interactions. After proof of concept, from the technical end, we dove deeper into searching for a grounding theme or theory for the experience.

At this point we created an opportunity to expand our collaboration outside of art and sustainability by including stakeholders from the Aktipis Lab at ASU which studies conflict and cooperation from an evolutionary and social psychology perspective. This proved to be a fruitful engagement for both the project and my own experience. Researching, contacting, and setting up the informational interview with the lab was a valuable opportunity to test the waters of stakeholder engagement and creative collaboration. They offered numerous insights about our desired outcomes that we may not have discovered on our own and asked questions that help us understand what a user experience might feel like more completely. The lab also offered additional conceptual ideas to help us find appropriate visualizations that might help to meet our sustainability learning objectives. It was during this part of the process that I was able to begin aligning my own learning from the last two years at the School of Sustainability with a general audience. I was able to begin considering the impact of different platforms for communication and what they might mean for the learning and discovery of sustainability competencies. The collaborative process is always enlightening but proved to be especially beneficial in this interdisciplinary setting and offered up many insights beyond the echo chamber of the school itself.

In the end the creation and testing of our prototype taught us that translating sustainability and the expression of sustainable values is just as difficult as the physical action steps to get there but that it is equally important to create a place for people to play with ideas about values and expression because they have such a dominant impact on behavior. Examination of dominant cultural values pushed us to learn how cooperative discovery can be implemented both during the design process and as a part of the end user experience. For me, the most important takeaway from this process was an overall emphasis on a greater need for sustainability actors to engage with artists and other disciplines to practice their own translation skills and explore what their work in sustainability might mean through the perspective of others. The language of sustainability is only beneficial if everyone knows what it means and how to speak it and I hope to continue working on these concepts for a long time to come.