Motivation and Non-Majors in CS1: Identifying Discrete Audiences for Introductory Computer Science

Andrea Forte and Mark Guzdial

Abstract—Traditional introductory computer science courses (CS1) have had little success engaging non-computer science (CS) majors. At Georgia Institute of Technology, where CS1 is a requirement for CS majors and non-majors alike, two tailored CS1 courses were introduced as an alternative to the traditional course. The results were encouraging: more non-majors succeeded (completed and passed) in tailored courses than in the traditional course, students expressed fewer negative reactions to the course content, and many reported that they would be interested in taking another tailored CS course. The authors present findings from a pilot study of the three courses and briefly discuss some of the issues surrounding tailored CS1 for non-majors: programming, context, choice of language, and classroom culture.

Index Terms—CS1, non-majors, motivation, programming, classroom culture

I. INTRODUCTION

Learning to program is a difficult accomplishment for CS and non-CS majors alike, but students who have elected to major in CS have a motivational advantage over their non-major peers in introductory CS courses. Majors have chosen to learn programming, whereas non-majors are often required to do so regardless of their personal opinions of its value or utility. Lack of student motivation may contribute to some known problems in computer science education, such as high DWF (D-grade, withdrawal, and failure) rates reported by many institutions [1], [2] and low enrollment among females and minorities [3]-[5].

As the predicament of non-majors in introductory CS courses receives more attention from educational researchers [6]-[10], computer science departments find themselves balancing their interest in preparing CS majors for a long curriculum sequence with that of welcoming students from other disciplines whose latent interest in CS may go untapped. Clearly, one class cannot fit all. In traditional programming-first CS1, generic problems are often used to introduce foundational programming skills and concepts that will become important to students as they progress to more advanced courses and attempt to solve more complex problems. Unfortunately, since the relevance of basic programming skills is often revealed in later courses, non-majors who are compelled or decide to take CS1 seldom experience the gratification of using their programming skills in a personally meaningful context. By failing to connect programming and computer science concepts with students’ diverse interests and backgrounds, traditional introductory courses fail to motivate many students and may even discourage them from pursuing further CS learning.

In a tailored CS1 course, students encounter programming and computer science concepts in the context of their chosen discipline, or something related to it. Tailored CS1 courses, designed to accommodate a variety of student interests and backgrounds, can offer a more motivating and engaging context for the learning of programming and computer science concepts than traditional course implementations. Stronger motivation and sustained engagement among non-CS majors in CS1 will lead to less anxiety about the course, increased interest in CS, higher achievement, and, eventually, positive changes in non-majors’ perceptions of the discipline.

At the Georgia Institute of Technology, introductory computer science is a requirement for all undergraduates. Traditionally, all students have taken the same course, but in spring semester 2003, three separate CS1 courses were offered:

- CS1321 Introduction to Computing is the traditional CS1 course at Georgia Tech. It is taught in lecture sections of 200 students and more, with recitation groups of 20-30, using the programming language Scheme with a strong focus on design process and documentation. It covers data structures through lists and trees, including binary search trees. An example of the kinds of problems students are assigned in this traditional course: define several functions such as the function called list-pick, which consumes a non-negative integer and a list, then returns the nth position element out of the list, starting from the left most element in position zero of the list.

- CS1361 Introduction to Computing for Engineers was an introductory computing course tailored for students of...
engineering. The section that was studied uses the programming language MATLAB, includes an introduction to Java, and was taught in a 75 person lecture with recitation groups of 20-30. It covers the same kinds of base content and data structures as CS1321. One of the first assignments in this class was, given a matrix A, create several new matrices based on A, such as a diagonal array with the values in the diagonal of A, a matrix with the same values as A except there are 0’s in the diagonal, and a matrix whose values are three times the corresponding values in A.

- **CS1315 Introduction to Media Computation** was trialed in the spring 2003 semester. It was tailored for non-CS and non-engineering majors and taught in a section of 120 students with recitation groups of 20-30, using the programming language Python. Students learned how different media are encoded electronically and wrote basic code to manipulate digital images, audio, video, and text. Six homework assignments required students to program and each entailed the creation of original media. A midterm assignment required students to write code that would create a 7.5 by 9 inch collage out of (at least) one image used a minimum of three times using a variety of manipulations such as scaling, negative image, color shifting, cropping, and any other visual effects they could produce using code.

In order to determine how both the tailored and traditional CS1 courses impacted student motivation and perceptions of computer science, researchers examined DWF (D-grade, withdrawal, and failure) rates and surveyed students’ attitudes toward CS and programming at the beginning, midpoint, and end of the semester. Interviews conducted with students both in the media computation course and in the traditional computer science course during the following summer session provide qualitative insight into the experiences of individual students. The results of the trial course offerings at Georgia Tech are followed by a discussion of the characteristics of CS1 students in each course that distinguish discrete audiences for CS, the role of programming in non-majors CS courses and, finally, potential avenues for building on this pilot study.

### II. DATA COLLECTION

Surveys and interviews were carried out by a research team lead by a graduate student. Course instructors did not have access to student surveys or interviews until the semester was over. Initial survey response rates ranged from approximately 60%-70% in the three courses; however, the study suffered from high attrition and response rates only reached 20%-45% for the final survey. Frequent responses to survey questions were used to develop codes for analyzing short answers on each survey. Two coders independently tested the codes on a sample of answers and, after some minor changes to the code definitions, reached nearly 90% intercoder reliability. A single coder applied the final codes to the entire set of initial survey answers.

Seven interviews were conducted at midterm and shortly before finals with female students in the media computation course to establish whether or not the course was engaging female students, who we know are traditionally underrepresented in computer science programs. Another seven interviews were conducted during the summer session immediately following the pilot study to capture the experiences of female students in the traditional course. Female students were chosen because there exists a wealth of literature on the under-representation of women in computing and the likely reasons that women generally demonstrate low levels of interest in computer science. Our assumption is that many of the reasons women do not choose to participate in computing will also apply more broadly to other groups of students who do not exhibit interest in computer science. If women’s experiences in tailored CS1 courses differ from those in traditional CS1 courses, many other students experiences will likewise differ.

### III. STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS

Students were surveyed during the first week of class to establish relevant characteristics of each group such as programming experience, perceptions of computer science, and general demographics. The distribution of our initial survey data sample by college of major is represented in Figure 1. Because the data was collected in spring semester, when virtually no CS majors take introductory CS, the populations sampled were comprised almost exclusively of non-majors. The percentage of male and female students in each course sample varied considerably; media computation had by far the highest representation of females, with an average of 65% for all three surveys (early, mid and end of semester), followed by traditional CS1 at 37% female, and CS1 for engineers at 17%.

![Fig. 1. Distribution of survey sample in each course by college of major.](image-url)
Fewer media computation students reported programming experience than peers taking traditional CS1 and CS1 for engineers. Of those who reported some experience, traditional CS1 and CS1 for engineers students reported an average of 1.6 and 1.7 years of experience whereas no media computation student reported more than one year of experience. Answers to the question, “What is computer science to you?” were asked of all three classes’ students, and these are summarized in Table I. Media computation students were unique in defining computer science in terms of the Internet and were most likely to define computer science as something difficult or frightening. Engineers were more likely to think of computer science as the study of how computers work than students in either of the other courses.

IV. MEASURING STUDENT MOTIVATION AND ENGAGEMENT

Two indicators of students’ attitudes toward a class is the rate at which they drop the course and the rate at which they ultimately succeed in passing it. From fall semester 2000 through fall 2002, DWF (drop, withdrawal and failure) rates for CS1 at Georgia Tech averaged about 28%. Other institutions have reported DWF rates ranging from 25% - 50% [1], [2]. Both drop rates and DWF rates for the courses we studied in spring 2003 indicated that non-majors responded favorably to the tailored courses. Drop rates were radically lower in tailored courses. The combined DWF rate for students in the traditional CS1 course was 42%--over double that of CS1 for engineers and nearly four times as high as media computation. (See Table II.)

Survey responses also suggest that non-majors in the tailored courses enjoyed the CS1 experience more than their peers in traditional CS1. For example, at midterm, students were asked what they liked best about the courses they were taking. When responses to the question “What do you like best about this class?” were analyzed, some significant differences emerged. (See Table III.) Over 18% of the students in traditional CS1 indicated that there was nothing enjoyable about the traditional course, whereas none of the media computation students reported a complete aversion to the course. Over a quarter of the engineering students surveyed reported that useful content was their favorite aspect of the tailored CS1 for engineers, but not one student in traditional CS1 named the utility of course content as a favorite feature.

To better understand what students found engaging about each course, we asked them to name something they had learned that they found particularly useful, interesting or surprising. (See Table IV.) Again, students surveyed in the traditional CS1 course returned the highest percentage of unenthusiastic responses to the course material. Over 18% reported that they had learned nothing interesting, useful, or surprising in CS1 by midterm; only about 3% of respondents in each of the tailored CS1 courses responded with such cynicism. Not surprisingly, the type of content that was specifically tailored to each audience was mentioned by over half of the media computation respondents (internet/media) and nearly one third of the engineering respondents (data analysis/visualization). Engineers were more impressed with their new programming skills than either of the other two groups; we believe this is because engineering students are more likely to need and use programming outside of class than other non-CS majors. (Across all three courses, nearly 28% of engineering students reported programming outside of class; the only other two majors who reported programming outside of class were liberal arts students at 8% and business students at 5%.) Finally, even when asked to specify something positive about the course, over 12% of the respondents in the traditional CS1 commented on the fact that programming or the language used for the course was useless or disagreeable.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE I</th>
<th>SELECTED STUDENT RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION: “WHAT IS COMPUTER SCIENCE TO YOU?”</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Don’t Know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional CS1</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>CS1 for Engineers</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Computation</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
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</tbody>
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| TABLE III | SELECTED STUDENT RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION: “WHAT DO YOU LIKE BEST ABOUT THIS CLASS?” |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------------------|----------------|-------------------|-----------------|----------------|----------------|
|                 | Nothing | Media/Internet | Graphing/Data Manipulation | Programming | General IT Skills | Negative Response to Language/Programming |
| Traditional CS1 | 15.2% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 6.1% | 15.2% | 12.1% |
| CS1 for Engineers | 3.2% | 0.0% | 32.3% | 25.8% | 9.0% | 0.0% |
| Media Computation | 2.2% | 56.2% | 0.0% | 11.2% | 0.0% | 0.0% |
affirmatively; however, when asked whether they would be
not they plan to take more CS courses. Only 6% responded
survey, media computation students were asked whether or
programming as something fun to play with. On the final
interviews, several media computation students described
that included far more complex code than was required and, in
programs to reverse popular songs and alter personal
new skills outside of the class. Students reported writing
advantage of the creative aspects of the course and using their
media computation students all indicated that students were
not only enjoying the material, they were also taking
advantage of the creative aspects of the course and using their
new skills outside of the class. Students reported writing programs to reverse popular songs and alter personal photographs. Students often turned in homework assignments that included far more complex code than was required and, in interviews, several media computation students described programming as something fun to play with. On the final survey, media computation students were asked whether or not they plan to take more CS courses. Only 6% responded affirmatively; however, when asked whether they would be interested in taking advanced media computation (which is not currently offered), the percentage of affirmative responses rose to over 60%. Clearly, media computation has captured the interest of many students who otherwise would not choose to pursue CS learning.

V. PROGRAMMING – FIRST, SECOND, OR NOT AT ALL

The reluctance of many students to learn programming, combined with the increasingly marginal role of programming in general computer use, has led some institutions to eliminate programming altogether in introductory computing courses for non-majors. Arguments against programming-first CS1 implementations for non-majors suggest that emphasis on programming leads to negative perceptions of computer science as a discipline, that programming is incompatible with many students’ needs and interests, and that programming concepts are not transferable to other domains [13], [10]. Accordingly, some institutions have developed breadth-first or application-centered CS0 courses in which students become acquainted with problems from interesting areas of computer science that normally lie beyond the scope of CS1, or practice problem solving using a variety of applications without actually programming.

Tailored CS1 courses call for a fundamentally different perspective on the relationship between programming, non-majors, and a liberal education. First, programming itself is not viewed as inherently uninteresting or inaccessible to non-majors; instead, traditional presentations of programming are viewed as inappropriate and demotivating for many students. Tailored courses offer audience-appropriate contexts for engaging in programming tasks. Second, just as traditional literacy involves both reading and writing, computational literacy necessarily involves the ability to create computational artifacts, not simply use them [14], [15]. By concealing programming from non-majors by removing it from their experience altogether, we effectively limit their computer-mediated modes of expression to those dictated by the creators of the applications they use.

Understanding computer language represents an increasingly important facet of general education for those students who will not pursue CS as a career, but who wish to better understand their culture and environment. Consider the role of calculus in general education. Calculus is the study of rates and generally considered part of a liberal education. Computer science, the study of process, is equally (if not more) important to a wide variety of fields [16]. Finally, because one of the objectives of introductory computer science is to generate interest in computer science and even attract potential CS majors, fundamental programming skills are essential to students’ ability to pursue this interest further. If non-CS majors do not encounter programming in introductory CS courses, many of them will never encounter it at all—for some students, that means eliminating the prospect of ever discovering an interest in or aptitude for programming.

VI. TAILORING CS1

The procedure for tailoring a CS1 course involves identifying discrete audiences and recognizing interests that lend themselves to learning about computation. The selection of an appropriate introductory programming language is a long-debated, fundamental concern. For engineers, whose professions may require modest amounts of coding, language selection is an important aspect of tailoring; many students are eager to learn a language that will help them perform their jobs. One engineering student who took the traditional CS1 course in the summer session 2003 reported in an interview that “I think if anything [should be required] it should be the second one [CS2], like Java. A lot of people know that Scheme isn’t used and so a lot of people just want to copy the homework and get through it. They’re not very motivated. I’ve heard that Java and C and all those, they are different, and I’d like to learn C and Java and all that.” Language choice is not the only element to consider when tailoring CS1 for engineers. As revealed in surveys, engineering students place
great importance on data manipulation and visualization tools. Sorting and visualizing large data sets is a context for programming that seems to appeal to engineers.

For students concerned with communication, the choice of language is less central to motivation; for these students, providing a meaningful and expressive context for programming is essential. All media are being published today in digital formats that are amenable to manipulation, creation, analysis, and transformation by computer. In the context of images, text, sound and video, knowing how to program becomes a communication skill that many students enjoy. As one student expressed in a survey, “I think that we’re doing things that I could actually use as an architecture major—I like dealing with pictures and sounds.”

We believe that the content of tailored CS1 courses is only partially responsible for their positive reception among non-majors. The culture of the courses also contribute to students’ success and confidence. Making sure that students feel comfortable asking questions and in the classroom is not just conventional wisdom; a study on factors contributing to success in CS1 found that the best predictor of success in introductory computer science courses is students’ comfort level [12]. In tailored courses, students learn CS1 material with peers who share similar backgrounds, goals, and frustrations. One media computation student revealed that when posting questions on the class web site: “…Sometimes I ask a specific question and he [the professor] asks for clarification. I would feel different in a class with a bunch of CS majors. But since we are there with a bunch of management—other students—it’s kind of more comfortable.”

Tailoring CS1 courses also involves a reassessment of learning objectives. In terms of programming, traditional CS1 at Georgia Tech initiates students into the practice of software development. CS1 for engineers requires students to become adept at writing relatively short pieces of code from scratch. Media computation students are expected to comprehend, combine, and modify existing code to achieve desired outcomes. Naturally, assignments should support the unique objectives of each course, and should be related to the context in which the course material is being presented. It is not enough, for example, to explain that digital images are encoded as matrices of numerical data and then ask students to manipulate such matrices. Instead, assignments should be directly related to the tailored context in which matrices are presented. A contextual assignment may involve manipulating or analyzing a given digital image in a way that utilizes students’ new knowledge of matrices.

VII. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

Three discrete audiences for CS1 have been identified at Georgia Tech and three corresponding tailored courses have been designed and offered with encouraging outcomes. Initial results suggest that students in tailored courses are more likely to “stick it out,” less likely to dislike introductory CS material, and, in the case of media computation, more likely to consider further CS learning. Still, many questions remain unanswered. For example, it is not yet clear to what degree fundamental programming achievement can be compared between students in traditional and tailored courses. Logistical difficulties and modifications made by individual instructors rendered the common exam problems that were developed for the pilot study incomparable. In general, students in all three courses seemed to exhibit many of the same misapprehensions of programming concepts described in computer science education literature. The question of actual programming achievement is one that will continue to be addressed in future evaluation efforts.

The effects of differing classroom cultures on student retention and performance are also unclear. Not only are different practices likely to affect student motivation and attitude more generally, but students from different fields of study are also accustomed to different standards of competition and collaboration that may or may not harmonize with traditional computer science culture. Future evaluation will focus on identifying classroom practices that contribute to non-majors’ favorable reactions to and improved learning of introductory computer science skills and concepts.

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REFERENCES


