LIBR 202 / PROJECT 1: INDIVIDUAL EVALUATION

Project One had many firsts for me. From this being my first semester at SJSU, to building databases, to using Google Docs, to becoming familiar with Blackboard Collaborate for online group meetings, my learning curve was steep but well worth the effort.

My role was as the ‘scribe’ and I took notes during our meetings and then transcribed them to our Group 14 Google Doc for others to add to. I enjoyed being the first to type up the notes as I found that it gave me new ideas and helped me expand on already discussed ideas and put them down so my fellow group members could comment on them.

I was very thorough in my note taking and very prompt in typing them up, usually the night of our group collaborate meeting. We had a definite timeframe we were sticking to so we didn’t become overwhelmed and weren’t scrambling at the last minute to get our work done to our own satisfaction.

I think my timely transposing of the notes to the Google doc allowed other members of the group time to take a look at what we discussed and add to it and also gave our ‘editor’ time to rewrite it and format it for submitting.

I also contributed to online collaborate discussions and read the instructions beforehand to make sure I knew what we were doing and if not to ask for clarification from my fellow group members.
In Group 14 we decided to build a database for artisanal cheeses to be utilized by a person either having a party such as celebrating Bastille Day (my personal suggestion) or a person who tasted a cheese and wanted to see if they could locate what it was.

Overall, the database design was successful especially if a person wanted to find an unusual cheese for a special occasion. Where it fell a little flat was the assumption that a person who “was not very well-versed in cheeses” could find a cheese they had tasted once and could not remember the name of. Group 9 pointed out that even though our database was easy to use and had a variety of cheese and many different fields, there’s a good chance the individual may find the cheese they are looking for only if the cheese had a very particular characteristic otherwise it’s very subjective, what you consider ‘sharp’ may not be what I consider ‘sharp’. It’s not foolproof. I think that this part of the statement could be clarified or left out altogether and just stick with the ‘party’ aspect of the database. However, Group 9 stated the database was easy to use and easy to add fields to and the fields we used matched characteristics a person would commonly use to find information on different types of cheeses. Therefore, it met our SOP’s objectives.

Reading further into Group 9’s evaluation of our artisanal cheese database made me realize the most important thing is to have the user in mind from the very inception of the database, even before getting to the building part of the assignment, you have to realize that it’s not going to exist in a vacuum. The database is there to be used and the more user-friendly the better.

Regarding the rules, Group 9 pointed out many shortfalls and again it made me realize that you have to keep in mind they are being entered into your database by an
indexer who has to decide how to proceed by looking at the objects in front of them that need cataloguing. You aren’t going to be there to be asked questions of, therefore, the rules cannot be ambiguous, they have to be specific. For example, Group 9 suggested that in the ‘country of origin’ field, a rule is needed as to how to type in a country name and they gave the example of the United States of America. Should it be USA or United States? And also under the ‘shelf life’ field, are the numbers written as a digit, for example a 2, or as a word, for example two. Both of these suggestions seem so obvious to me but when our Group were adding them, we were thinking more about what the rules should be and not how they should be typed into the database. We were primarily thinking about how to describe cheese and not the incidentals like numbers and spelling of country of origin.

In our discussions, a few of us were still not quite sure how to write a rule even though we had done the previous ‘writing a rule’ assignment. So our group leader offered to write the first few and after that it made more sense to me and I realized it was more a ‘fear’ thing than anything else. I can see that to write the rules for an indexer for a specific database is a ‘job’ in and of itself. It is extremely time consuming and one of the most important set of instructions.

Group 9 also made another good point. Since our database contained foreign names, how would an indexer type in the accents? Not everybody knows how to use accent code shortcuts on the keyboard to be able to do a French acute accent such as in the French cheese, Comté, a semi-hard cow’s milk cheese. I have a Mac computer and to get the acute accent I had to hold down the option key then press the ‘e’ key then release
both keys and press the e. A lot of moves to get one accent and hard to explain to an indexer so maybe we should have eliminated accents and had that as a rule.

Concerning lessons learned relating to the broader context of information retrieval, the bottom line seems to be that when developing databases you have to keep the user in mind from the very outset when creating them and you can’t be too specific with the rules. As I’m learning with other classes, accessing information needs to be a pleasant experience and the easier a database is to use the better. Therefore, I have to agree with the quote on the front page of our LIBR 202 homepage, “findability precedes usability… you can’t use what you can’t find (Morville / Ambient Findability).”