Cultural Probes and Diary Studies

What are diary studies?

• Not quite interviews
• Not quite observational research

• We ask subjects to document their own experiences, thoughts, opinions
• Provide enough structure to make these notes useful
  – Prompting for specific experiences/opinions
  – Prompting at specific times/places
  – Sometimes accompanied by other data collection methods (screenshots, pictures, etc.) => Cultural probe
Cultural Probes

• A cultural probe is an information gathering package which contains a number of information gathering tools i.e. postcards, a camera, questionnaires etc.

• Probes are handed out to the user/target group, and users periodically return materials.

• Not intended as the sole source of data, but rather a supplemental source.

Cultural Probe Package

• Probes may contain:
  - Postcards: (with questions on the back)
    • Questions could deal with attitudes towards live, culture and technology.
    • Why postcards? – They are an informal, friendly mode of communication.
  - Maps:
    • Marking zones on a map showing where they go to meet people, to be alone etc.
    • Why maps? – Useful for exploring the user/target groups local environment.
  - Camera: (disposable)
    • Unassigned pictures and a list of requests for pictures such as: your home, something boring etc.
  - Photo Album: Use a specific number of pictures to tell us your story.
  - Media Diary: Used to record television and radio use, incoming and outgoing phone calls, their relationship with the caller, and the subject of the calls, etc.

• The user carries out a number of tasks and then return the probes.
**Advantages**

- Gives insight and helps to overcome cultural and privacy boundaries in an unobtrusive way.
- Quite often useful for gathering information about emotions, impact of design/situation
- Useful for gathering data on situations which we wouldn’t normally have access to, or over extended periods of time

**Disadvantages**

- There is a risk that the results can be overly diffused and receptive too subjective interpretation
- Unless data is gathered immediately, data can be summative or speculative
- Can be difficult to interpret
- Can result in low quality data
When to use cultural probes?

• When we don’t have easy access to users/environments
• When we need more longitudinal observations
• When it is important to capture users attitudes and emotional states
• When we want to have the user involved in the design/analysis process
What is Ethnographic Observation About?

Data gathering practice
- First person involvement/experience
- Primarily qualitative, but not always
- Can be quite demanding
  - Learning new language
  - Learning new culture
  - Learning new skills
- Always involves going into the field, adapting to new environments, and interpreting these

What we Observe

• Activities
• Behaviors
• Actions
• Conversations
• Interpersonal Interactions
• Organizational or community processes
• Observable human experiences
• Locations, tools & contexts

• Data consists of detailed descriptions capturing context
**Known Unknown vs. Unknown Unknown**

- Do you go in as a known observer?
  - Comfort level of observed vs ethical obligation
  - Depends on your goals and environment
  - Importance of building rapport/confidence

**Participatory vs. Non-Participatory Apprentice vs. Fly on the Participant**

**Participant**
- You join the culture as a full or junior member
- Carry all/many/most/some out their activities
- Your observer status not necessarily known to all

**Non-participant**
- Outside observer
  - Sometimes not possible for you to be part of culture
- Careful observation
  - Can be confusing, boring, overwhelming

- In addition, observing and taking notes
- May supplement with interview data
Common Concerns

• When there is a choice of sites choose the one most likely to give you most access, and most useful data

• Enter the field with written documentation about yourself and your project, when possible, and where appropriate

• Use contacts to help you gain access, and be sensitive to local concerns

• Think through what you will say when people ask why you are there, and what you are doing

Observer Experience

• Excitement about project and site
  – Abundance of data, good problems everywhere!

• Culture shock
  – Culture seizes to be novel, now is frustratingly difficult

• Systematic data collection begins
  – Have enough understanding/knowledge to structure observations

• Cycle of break and collection
  – Go off to do analysis, find new questions, return to confirm understanding
Emotional Experience

• A change is as good as a rest?
• Away from your own culture, colleagues, comfort zone
• If unknown unknown, expect to be talked down to, or at the very least expected to go through lots of training
• If known unknown, expect to be treated as an outsider, and dealing with politics

Breeching Experiments

• Doing something which breaks cultural norms, and seeing how people react to this

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NJEpazcAL9k

• Can be used to
  – Sensitize yourself to the culture
  – Explore boundaries of your knowledge
**Recording**

- Begin with your research question: Might provide guidance on what is especially important
- Do not overly constrain yourself at first
- Take notes on
  - What’s directly relevant
  - What strikes you as interesting
  - Everything else

- Space - Describe the physical properties of the space your observing
- Time - Note the time of recording, date, time, place
- Integrate materials into notes
- Names of participants

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**On Space**

- Space is designed
  - Intentional and unintentional effects
- Space influences use
  - Users adapt and change space
- Space changes with time
Space: Appropriateness

Space shapes your design space.

• Nose?
• Light?
• Traffic?
• Flow?
• Barriers?

These not only influence the use of the space, but the technology that can be used in the space.

On Objects

Objects shape use, they also set tone.
Guidelines to Observing People

• Be respectful
  – These are real people you are interacting with, it is not their job to help you, do not get in their way, be respectful, be safe.

• Important to capture the variety, this determines your design constraints

• Be aware of “Gatekeepers,” manage them appropriately

• Generate rich descriptions, very useful later for generating scenarios, use cases, and personas

• Be honest, separate opinion from observed fact