UX Research & Design

Cultural probes: a deep dive into user experience

IREGULARLY advise library staff not to use the accepted technical names for different research methods with users. For instance, having users "draw a picture" rather than a cognitive map, or "showing you round the library" rather than giving you a touchstone tour. In the case of this month's method, you should definitely never say to someone that you want to do a cultural probe on them!

Diving deep for information

I usually describe a cultural probe as a deep dive for information, an opportunity to uncover insights into how the people you are studying operate: where they source information from; their daily priorities and routines; and their perceptions of your service.

Core to the method is a cultural probe kit: a collection of materials and tasks intended to inspire participants to think more deeply about their experience.

This exploration is undertaken by participants at a distance from the researcher, making them an ideal research method to use with distance learners, those who choose to only interact with your digital offering, or even non-users, with a view to understanding what might encourage them to use the library.

Usually participants are asked to contribute to a cultural probe for around two weeks, starting with an initial in-person briefing to ensure the subject understands the project, with regular email contact throughout to motivate and check on their progress, followed by an in-person debrief at the project close.

The probe might be timed to coincide with specific times, for example, at universities during the first term of an academic year to understand pain points at this key time.

UX is all about identifying actionable insights not statistical significance, so I'd suggest recruiting no more than 10 people in total.

Handwritten diary

Materials typically include a printed diary or blog, which you ask participants to maintain for the duration of the project, with some means of regular prompting so that they know what they should be writing entries about. For example: "Today, we would like you to write about your most recent visit to a library," or, "What are the most important features of the library for you?". These entries can also be linked to tasks: "Search the catalogue for X. How easy was it to find?"

In my experience, people love the discipline of a printed diary, especially if the researcher has taken the time to handwrite specific questions in advance, encouraging the participant to take the time to write a detailed response in turn.

Other tasks – sealed in envelopes to be opened on specific dates – typically include: the drawing of cognitive maps ("draw how the library fits, or doesn't fit, into your life"); writing a break-up letter to the library and having them post it to you (in a pre-paid envelope); and the taking of photos to further illuminate needs and behaviours. Digital apps, such as 'dscout', can also be used, which can regularly prompt participants to write notes and take photographs as they go about their daily business, which are then automatically shared with you as the researcher.

Depending on your audience, you may choose to produce kits with a specific theme or design making them fun and inviting enough to motivate participants throughout the project. Needless to say, filling them with free colourful stationery is usually a winner!

Andy Priestner (info@andypriestnertraining.com @andypriestner) is a freelance UX trainer and consultant and Chair of the UX in Libraries conference andypriestnertraining.com uxlib.org.

Honest feedback

All UX methods are about trying to discern the real needs and routines of library users rather than those things they think we want to hear. Cultural probes are uniquely positioned to facilitate this honesty because of their longer duration than most methods, their inherent prompting of evaluation and reflection, and their incorporation of tasks which embrace and encourage creativity and individuality. If you're looking for deeper insight into user experience then a cultural probe might be the answer, just never call them that to anyone.

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