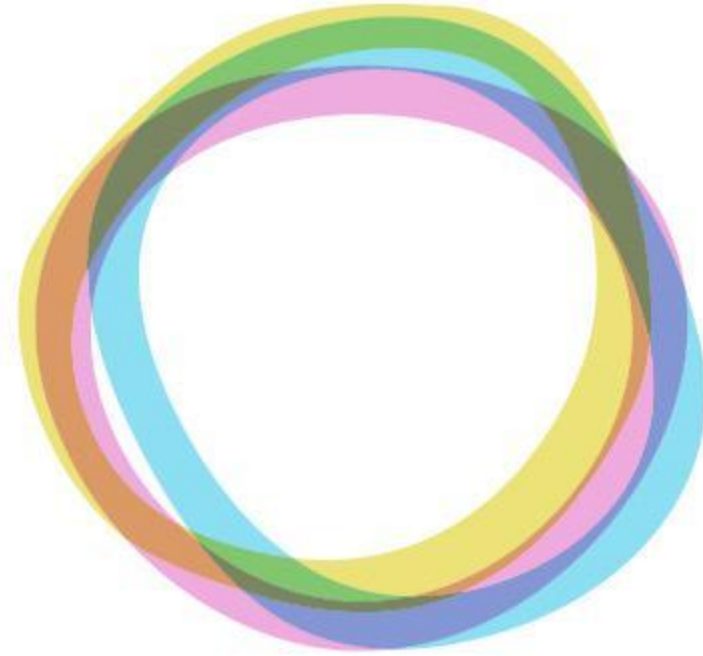Erasmus+

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EMERGING MEDIA EXPLORATION

Virtual Production: Visioning Course

Conducting UX Interviews

How to use interviews as a source for inspiration and requirements in User Experience Design

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Why can't I just send a questionnaire?

For some reason, students love questionnaires. It looks simple and straightforward: you write down your questions, somebody else answers them.

From the perspective of UX Design, questionnaires have the following shortcomings (some lie in the very nature of questionnaires, others in insufficient diligence in execution):

- You only ask for things you consider important yourself. This limits insights to the frame of your own stereotypes. What you want to know is what is important from a user point of view.
- Often only quantitative questions are considered ("How many teens own a smartphone with mobile data flat rate?", "How often do you use Instagram?")
- There is no chance for the interviewer to ask follow-up questions. Small remarks may spark big ideas. To spot and follow such leads is much easier in a conversation.
- When reading the analysis, people often disregard possible correlations between the different scales of the questionnaire. The user often simply gets modelled according to the most common answers to each question. The result is a stereotypical user who does not relate to any single user out there.
- All persons asked are considered to be the target group. Yet the actual primary target group for your product might be way smaller. To discover your real target group is also something that is much better done in a series of conversations.

How to create an interview guide?

User interviews are ideally conducted as a semi-structured interview. This gives you guidance when you need it, but leaves you the freedom to follow up promising leads.

First, you need to formulate the problem you want to research on. In the most simple case you find it in the course assignment. In other cases the finding of the right problem to solve is the actual target of the interviews (e.g. Design Thinking emphasizes the phase of finding the right problem).

Collect in keywords, what the problem context comprises, try to map the "problem space". E.g. for the theme of "the future of TV" it could be individual interests, times and habits of TV usage, devices, questions about the living room, motivations for watching TV, etc.

Formulate questions related to the keywords. Do this separately and then discuss the questions in your group, so you'll have more choice and alternative phrasing.

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How to create an interview guide?

At the beginning of the interview guide, concentrate on what the person does, e.g. "when did you watch TV during the day yesterday?". Some questions will be ambiguous to the interviewee, so to the last question, somebody might as "do you count YouTube as TV"? Be sure to be able to dissolve such ambiguities.

If you ask what people have actually done (on a particular day or in general), they will be able to answer them quite straight away and the answers have weight - as now you know what these people have done, as opposed what they'd like to do or think what others ought to do. This is a good entry point into an interview. From the perspective of interaction design, you could go on and ask more specifically to break down in steps what they did and how. If you are still at the ideation stage, you might not need as much detail.

Later in the interview you can also ask for interests, opinions and comments, but first try to get some "ground truth" to work with. People also love answering to hypothetical questions ("could you imagine doing/using XYZ?"), but these types of questions should only be introduced in the second half of the interview.

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How do I conduct the interview?

Welcome your interview partner. Introduce yourself and give a brief explanation of the purpose of the interview. Say how long it will approximately last and get reassurance that this is okay with the partner. Explain how the results will be used. Be sure to prepare a consent form if you intend to share or publish data.

Ask whether you may record the interview. If you are working in a team, you could also opt for live logging it instead of recording. However, you have to concentrate and type quickly. And don't do it if you work alone.

Be patient and give the interviewee ample time for answering. You should expect periods of silence, as often the most relevant impulses come as second thoughts. The first answer often states the obvious, while the second is more reflective and special.

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How do I conduct the interview?

Help the interviewee focus on his/her own experiences and needs by asking them for clarification of their answers: "Why would that be important to you?", "Could you give an example how you did that this morning?", "What irritates you personally with that practice?" etc.

It is important that people tell about themselves and not about others. When they start suggesting solutions, ask them "Which particular problem would that solve for you personally?"

When you feel no relevant new information is flowing for the current question or the time is running, go to the next question in the interview guide. Remember that you do not have to go through the whole interview guide. Most important is that the conversation is relevant to the problem.

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How do I conduct the interview?

When preparing your interview guide, you might want to mark questions you consider secondary, so you can jump over them in case you are running out of time.

You can use a stimulus to get the conversation going. This can be a prototype, a photo or maybe a short scenario or situation that you describe to them.

Say thank you. Don't take your interview partner's engagement for granted.

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Contextual Inquiry

A special interview method in interaction design is the so-called "contextual inquiry".

The interview partners are interviewed within the context in which they would use the product that shall be developed.

The focus of contextual inquiry is on learning the details steps of the current workflows. The interviewee can demonstrate them hands-on instead of merely talking about it.

Thanks to the context the information is much more vivid and exhaustive. Also, being in the right context sparks richer conversations with the interviewees.

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Qualitative Interview – Example

When you play computer games, do you play download games or browser games?

Usually download games, but sometimes also on an online gaming site (Names the site:: Jetztspielen.de)

You don't play on the smartphone because you do not own one, or do you?

Sometimes I play with my mother's or my father's phone, but rarely.

If you play, do you play alone or with others?

I only play board games with Mum or Dad, if they got time, and very rarely with my sister, because she usually does not fancy it. With Nintendo you can hold them like … together like this and play against each other. But I do it very rarely.

Your mother told me that you sometimes play computer games together?

Yes, Dad then connects it to the TV set. We finished "Book of unwritten tales". And now we started "Deponia".

Please go back to the last slide and think about what could have been done better.

Solution

Hindsight is 20/20, but from the interview text one can make the following remarks:

- The answers are rather short, so the interviewer probably could not stand the silence.
- The interviewer did not really follow up the answers, but just went on to the next question in the guide.
- Questions are closed (either-or questions or a question that suggests an answer)

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Typical challenges in interviews

You ask what your interview partner has been doing this morning. Instead the interviewee tells you what he/she does in the mornings in general.

Most interview partners have a tendency to generalize. They do this, because they want to help you, but do not understand that it is you who has to draw these conclusions.

React to this by continuing to ask for concrete events and details.

Typical challenges in interviews

You ask, if your interview partner would use a particular application. Actually she would rather not, but does not want to disappoint you and starts talking about other persons. She says something like: "I could imagine people using this."

When the partners makes assumptions about other people, concretize your question again: "But I really would like to know if you personally would use this app."

Typical challenges in interviews

Time's nearly up and you are only halfway through your interview guide.

In a semi-structured interview, often a lot of questions are already answered without being asked explicitly. You will learn to judge which questions have been sufficiently answered already.

More important than being able to check off each question on the guide is that the conversation remains focused with respect to the design problem.

Transcription & Analysis

Use a tool like http://otranscribe.com/ to transcribe your interview. There are also some automatic transcription tools around, use them if you are in search of some fun ;-). Transcription usually is not fun, but the best way to make your interview accessible for in-depth analysis in your group.

When analysing, easiest way is to work with a simple spreadsheet with the following column headers: Nr., quote, requirement or problem that you see in that quote, keyword

Read the transcript and choose quotes that provide insight towards the problem that guides your research. Usually, quotes should be something between 3 words and a sentence. Give a short interpretation of each quote and find a keyword that summarizes the content well.

Work in parallel in your team and merge your tables after you're done. Try to match the keywords to identify main problem categories.

If you can, make a visualization with a photo of each interviewed person (or a stock photo, for privacy reasons) and their key quotes sorted by the categories. This can be an excellent reference in the further design process.

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What to look for during analysis

Questionnaires usually are designed to look for what the majority does and tend to ignore what particular individuals do. But interviews in User Experience Design do not work that way.

Look for the peculiar, the surprising and the extremes. Try to find out which opposites your design would need to harmonize to serve the desired target group well. Alan Cooper once suggested to design for the extreme edges of your target group, as the center would take care of itself.

See what very different characters of users have in common and what sets them apart. If you leave your stereotypes at the doorstep, you will find interesting things that e.g. the old and the young might have in common, but which are fundamentally different between different groups of the same age.

Look beyond demographics.

What to look for during analysis

Talking about the young and the old. Try to work with your transcript and leave aside impressions you might have about the persons because of their age, gender or profession. If it is not in the interview, it does not exist (at least during this course, let's keep it that way).

Finally: the chosen text passages should also inspire you. It is not strictly necessary to fully and truly understand and represent the person you have interviewed.

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Expert Interviews

In general, most of the instructions given here also apply to interviewing experts. However, the major difference is that it is okay to ask experts not only about their personal experiences, but also about their judgement of the state-of-the-art and future development of the problem field.

The boundary between "expert" and "user" is often fluid. Ask yourself, whether the person has had enough experience with what others do in the field, along with sufficient competence, so that he/she can give an analytical overview of her own.

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Experts vs. Lead Users

Eric von Hippel popularized the idea of "lead users", meaning users that are at the forefront of current trends and often make small incremental tweaks and innovations themselves by exploring the limits of given products and tools.

"Lead users" are able to make informed suggestions about his/her future needs and application scenarios, which regular users are not. Whether a person is to be considered an Expert or a Lead User is always a matter of perspective: A successful Virtual Reality Author may e.g. be interviewed as an expert on the topic of VR Storytelling, but would be rather considered a lead user with respect to virtual production technologies.

The main difference remains: users as well as lead users should be interviewed around their individual needs and perspectives, while experts are usually interviewed to answer about the state of the art of a matter in general.

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Literature

Alan Cooper: About Face 3. => Contextual Inquiry, interview-based Persona-Process

Steve Portigal: Interviewing Users. => Interview-techniques in the context of User Experience Design. Very close to practice.