Story Collecting: Practical Tips from Ethnography

Ethnography is a research methodology originally developed by cultural anthropologists to gather empirical data about a society or social group. This data is usually, but not necessarily, analyzed using qualitative methods.

Ethnographers can be viewed as storytellers who collect and interpret stories so as to convey the meanings of a social group to others. (*Editor's note:* For more on storytelling in user experience, see the resources from the UPA 2006 conference, "Usability Through Storytelling," available on the UPA web site.) Ethnographers mediate between different worlds. This resonates with the practice and goals of user experience research, in which the researcher "represents" the users by listening to, interpreting, and reporting their needs.

What distinguishes ethnography from an interview, field visit, or observational study is the complex and layered work of analysis, inference, and interpretation that embraces all the subjects, artifacts, dynamics, and practices in the study—including the researchers and the conceptual tools they use for their elaborations.

One of the core aspects of the ethnographic method is "participant observation," which for the researcher involves a delicate balance between participation and detachment. Another is maintaining context: since ethnographers believe that things have meaning only in context, it's important to differentiate between a lab environment and the natural environment within which a product or service is to be used. Ethnography occurs in this latter environment.

In ethnography we use *informants*, who are somewhat similar to the *participants* of laboratory studies. Informants are a small segment of the population who can convey relevant information to the researcher about the group and its practices. Informant selections are based on specific criteria, such as how representative they are or their competence and knowledge in the specific domain of interest to the researcher.

The Value of Ethnography in User Experience Research

Ethnography enhances user experience research by helping practitioners understand the elements that form a whole experience. It brings to the surface significances which remain hidden to other research methods and it helps to map and explain the relationships between components of the whole user experience.

However, detailed ethnographic research is frequently ruled out of user experience research because it is considered to be too time-consuming or expensive when compared to other (typically lab-based) methods. It is true that classic anthropologic or ethnographic studies may take years to complete, depending on the research questions and goals. Ethnography, however, can blend smoothly with other design research methods since it is, like usability testing, a small-scale activity. **UX**

—By Eliana Martell

Tips from the World of Ethnography

TIP: If time is constrained, it becomes more important to ensure that participants (or informants) are representative. Find key group members and focus on extracting "hidden" or "undeclared" information.

TIP: Sensibility and tact are of utmost importance to keeping the interaction as natural and spontaneous as the circumstances allow. For example, if you visit an elderly person in her own home, it might be disconcerting if more than one researcher is present.

TIP: Combine the visit with participatory design exercises.

TIP: On site visits, don't just observe, but interact. Steer your visit. Crosscheck your impressions using advanced interviewing techniques such as *controlled bias.* By intentionally injecting a bias in the conversation, it is possible to verify, test, or confute assumptions based on earlier statements or observations. Appropriately used, controlled bias is a powerful way to test the authenticity of statements and to disambiguate discrepancies between verbal and non-verbal messages. Of course, account for controlled bias during your data analysis and interpretation.

TIP: Bring members of the team with you into the field. One of you should be the primary researcher, and the others can contribute, suggest, take notes, observe, and notice things the primary researcher might miss. However, make sure that all team members are trained in ethnographic methods—especially to not interfere and to have no impact on the observations.

TIP: Run interpretative sessions with your team, especially those who were in the field with you, immediately after a session. Find out what they noticed that you, as the primary researcher, may have not have, and brainstorm explanations and interpretations of the behaviors you saw.

TIP: Take advantage of textual data-analysis software such as ATLAS.ti (http://www.atlasti.com) or NVivo (http://www.qsrinternational.com), which classify, sort, and arrange qualitative (rather than quantitative) information.

ABOUT ELIANA MARTELLA, PH.D.

Eliana Martella, Ph.D., is a senior user experience researcher at Microsoft. A cultural anthropologist by training, her professional practice is grounded in her experience in market research and product management. For more information, see the author's website, www.emuseme.com.