

Anthropology in the Digital Landscape

Autumn Gilbert, Openfield

Introduction

One growing application of anthropological methods and theories is in digital development, more specifically User Experience or “UX” research. More and more people are in digital spaces, and they all have different experiences and needs that may or may not be supported by the tools and websites that they use. The practice of UX research aims to understand the needs or desires of people who would feasibly use a website or product, and to see if there is a way the UX team for a product can better suit these needs. Once those needs or desires are identified and designed for, we need to know if we are going in the right direction, or if we are missing information or if we are simply going in the wrong direction.

In this abbreviated essay, I will explore how anthropology can be applied in the UX field through methodology in UX research, the need to develop a holistic view of a client’s perspective, understanding the needs of different people, and how UX researchers apply the findings of the research.

Methodology

- Focus Groups
- In-field observation
- Card sorting
- Cultural probes
- Remote interviews
- In-person interviews
- Content analysis
- Surveys

Throughout my experience in the field of UX Research, I have been able to apply a variety of methods across the spectrum of qualitative and quantitative data. My education in Anthropology has been invaluable in this, because I have already been taught how to listen and learn from what I was hearing in interviews. Through Anthropology, I am able to not only focus on the question that I am asking, but why am I asking it- and this knowledge guides my follow up

questions that cover otherwise gray areas, as well as the best way to ask a question to get valuable information without being leading.

Education and training from a scientific field adds rigor and objectivity to research that is absolutely necessary in a field like UX. In the process of working on a product, there are designers, decision makers, developers, and other stakeholders that have their idea of what might be best for the users which might not be true. Designers may be focused on their attachment to a particular design that they like best, decision makers may be focused on the business side of releasing a new feature without the same focus on if it is easy to use, and developers may be focused on what design best suits their work availability to code and implement. Researchers are expected to be the advocates for the users, and this training for rigor in data collection and objectivity allows me to focus on the best interests of the users and “ignore” external biases from the other people that work on the product.

Developing a Holistic Understanding

Common in anthropology, a holistic approach is vital for understanding the different systems within a culture and how those systems work together. As the understanding of a particular system or peoples grows, it becomes easier for one to see connections between systems, as well as how to investigate those connections.

User experience researchers strive to better understand the users of whatever product we are working on. Some of the studies that I work on are as small as the process of a student completing an online assignment of multiple choice questions. In that study, I not only look at their ability to use the prototype or their reactions to the design, but how this process might fit into their everyday life. As our researchers at Openfield look at the specific experience of completing an assignment, we frame other questions to best understand the students who might use the product. How many assignments are they usually completing? If they already use the product that we are testing, how do they currently feel about the process of completing an assignment? Does the design solve any problems that they have with the current experience? Is this different for classes in their major versus classes outside of their major? How does the assignment contribute to their overall grade?

The holistic picture of what it is like for a student to submit an assignment or an instructor to enter grades is critical for researchers to understand and advocate for what is needed for users to have the best experience with whatever tool they are using. For the example of grading an assignment, if the process goes unexamined and there is a part of the process that causes annoyance or frustration; how would that be magnified by the knowledge that the professor could be grading for class sizes of several hundred students.

Understanding and Applying the Needs of People

When products are designed, a group that sometimes goes overlooked are peoples with disabilities. When working with educational technology, digital accessibility is at the forefront of our minds. After a recent lawsuit including Domino's Pizza's website, accessibility was also brought into the focus of news media. For background, a blind man filed and won a lawsuit against the company because he was unable to use Domino's website to order a pizza, even with screen reading assistive technology. Both the Court of Appeals and Supreme Court upheld this decision.

After this lawsuit, Openfield conducted a workshop as a part of Cincinnati Design Week to better understand the needs of people with disabilities and design while taking it into account. Participants of the workshop were given cards that described different hypothetical individuals with a range of abilities from color-blindness that would affect seeing the colors of buttons or text to someone with severe arthritis that affects the way they interact with a keyboard and mouse. They were then told to take post-it notes and critique different printed-off pages of websites with the abilities of the people on their cards in mind.

While this is not the same level of participant observational study that is typically conducted by anthropologists, it shows the level of empathy and understanding that is consistently employed in this field. Outside of explicit exercises such as this workshop, both researchers and designers frequently visualize themselves in their participants' shoes to see the way that they see the world.

Applying Findings of Research

After conducting studies, applying the findings from that research is critical. The standard from anthropology that is especially applicable to user experience research is recognizing bias in a study. While in anthropology, bias identified is typically the bias of the researcher (eg. gender when communicating with a range of gender identities); in user experience research, it is often any bias that could possibly affect the results of the study. For example, the fact that a few participants were not able to see the entire prototype as intended may bias results because the same amount of data is not collected over each part of the prototype, and the participants will not have a complete impression of the entire process (eg. testing the process of setting up an online assignment and a few participants didn't see the screen used to write instructions and set a due date). The most common bias encountered is that all participants are from similar disciplines and the process is intended for all instructors. This can alter the study when it comes to types of assignments or questions that are more common for particular disciplines or testing understanding of language used in the process (eg. testing grading of free-response questions and all participants are in math-related disciplines). While these biases should be acknowledged, the true effect of bias may vary with individual participant's practices.

One difference between typical applied or cultural anthropology and user experience research is the act of making recommendations. The practice of making recommendations is turning any frustration or negative points about the design or process and turning them into a plan of actions for customized solutions. Often, those recommendations do call for further testing to get a better sense of what the next step should be. These are written in the perspective of alleviating confusion or making parts of the process more clear, and are typically not design-specific. For example, if in a study none of the participants were able to find the "Save" button, the recommendation would be, "Explore ways to make save functions more clear." rather than any opinions on how to do that. Recommendations are accompanied by any information found that supports that recommendation to help designers or stakeholders come up with a solution.

Conclusion

People with anthropological training or backgrounds can provide unique perspectives to the field of digital development. Current practices and methodological knowledge are more than

applicable, whether that be extensive experience with interviews and surveys or the practice of developing a holistic understanding of your participants.