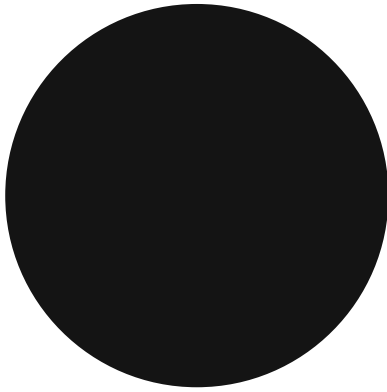


Cultural Probes



Cultural probes are designed objects or a combination of several things that are given to participants so they can express themselves in absence of the researcher.

Cultural Probes

A probe package may include a notepad, pens, instant camera, clay, a diary, postcards, and perhaps other forms that encourage the participant to reveal something about their life.

What are they?

As an example, consider a blank postcard that asks a participant to draw their dearest place in the neighbourhood, as well as their least comfortable place. Once posted to the researcher, it gives a glimpse of what inspires, motivates, or worries people. What will they draw when you ask them for 'three wishes' with regard to some technology? What will they photograph when you ask for their favourite clothing details?

Probes are often given to participants some time in advance of an interview session to get them thinking about the topic. Apart from that insight into their thoughts and issues, it will greatly enhance what you could get out of such an interview as it's easier to get into depth. Alternatively, probes are given after an interview (or another kind of session) to add additional insight or track some behaviour.

Where do you use them?

Cultural probes are best regarded as appetisers for later, more concrete investigations. Their strength lies in being able to evoke a creative response to their open-ended format. Data from probes is rich, evocative, and can provoke reflection both by the participant and researcher. In other words, these probes are ideal 'icebreakers' to let people open up and engage with your research themes. It gets people to think about a topic, kickstarting any later activities such as interviews. The probes can provide a lot of material to talk about!

Ultimately, cultural probes are about fostering empathy and engagement with the participant's world. Probes are collections of evocative tasks, to elicit rich response without being comprehensive. It should not be regarded as a 'drop in' replacement for ethnography or other such time-costly methods. However, this method is very suitable at early stages or when you are not sure what kind of themes and concerns resonate with your audience. Alternatively, probes can be a way to initiate a conversation with people less inclined to talk to you in other ways. It puts their input and expressions first.

Cultural Probes

What do you need?

What exactly constitutes a cultural probe is very open. It can be a package of various materials (like a notepad, pens, postcards), an instant camera, or some custom activity sheets that participants can use and/or may complete over a period of time. As a researcher, care should be taken to get participants to think about your topic without being heavy-handed (that is, enforcing what they ought to consider).

Often, this means you will be making your own templates, creative exercises, and so on. Not giving lined paper, boxes to tick or textfields to fill will inspire your participants to draw, annotate, or collage. Probes are commonly very material for this reason; to inspire someone to respond the way they would like, free from the expectations of text-based methods (such as questionnaires).

How do you evaluate probes?

Cultural probes and their responses are inherently less structured than other methods, ambiguous even. This is how probes were intended by their creators (Gaver, Dunne, & Pacenti, 1999). In their view, probes encourage designers to tell stories about their participants. This may even raise tension as you realise your conceptualisation of these people is constantly challenged by their produced probes. This view on probes asks you to intuitively interpret the meaning and in doing so, embeds you deeper into the world of your participants.

Alternative views on probes (as reviewed by Boehner, Vertesi, Sengers, & Dourish, 2007) tend to regard them as ways of acquiring qualitative user information that can be readily interpreted and compared, similar to other methods. Probes would then be used to canvas participants' needs and requirements, through comparison, extraction of themes, etc. Keep in mind that probes are subjective in the way topics are introduced, how people interpret and execute those tasks, and that your eventual interpretation may also introduce some bias as you are 'reading into' imperfect but hopefully inspirational data.

References

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