

CATAPULT DESIGN WORKSHOP SERIES

WORKSHOP

LOOK, ASK, LISTEN, REPEAT

Observational skills and inquiry are at the core of the research phase of the design process. They're even more important when entering into communities with unfamiliar norms and attempting to develop solutions to systemic problems. This workshop will go over the basics in performing contextual observation, individual interviews, and note generation. For added layers of complexity, refer to the more specialized workshops, such as cultural research and community health assessment.



AUTHOR Morgan is an anthropologist, sociologist, and cross-disciplinary problem solver working at the intersection between enterprise and social change. A Fulbright Scholar, he spent several years in Thailand and France studying language, absorbing culture, and teaching. At Tellme Networks Morgan facilitated strategy sessions and designed user experience for corporate clients. He is now a Strategist for Catapult Design, and instrumental in founding Catapult's development strategy at startup stage. Morgan has a BS in Cognitive Sciences from Stanford University.

The majority of our world's population lacks access to life's basic needs. We develop and implement human-centered products to help them thrive.

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LOOK, ASK, LISTEN, REPEAT

“LOOK” GUIDELINES

- Observe with as little bias as possible - try to think beforehand about all of the mental models you automatically apply to situations (see activity).
- Let go of expectations – beginner’s mind (easier said than done of course)
- Be open to multiple interpretations - don’t attach to your first analysis of the situation.
- And separate interpretations from direct observations. Observations come from direct sensory impressions, interpretations happen when you bring your past experience and associations to bear.

What to “look” for

- Things that prompt shifts in behavior, cause people to act differently or change their plans
- Task flows and tools - how do people
- Body language
- Obstacles and makeshift solutions
- Surprises
- Anything that inspires further questions
- Decorations/adornments/symbols - these are rife with meaning, even if people don’t consciously recognize it.
- Interactions between people, place, objects (these three elements form a sort of triangle of relationships).
- Subtle social cues (what signals are being passed non-verbally or through carefully phrased sentences?)



ACTIVITY: What’s going on in this photo?

4 min: Generate as many direct observations as possible. Focus on explicit aspects (ex: “a man is holding a child”), and not implicit interpretations (“a soldier is taking the child to see the tank”). Even saying that it’s a soldier is an interpretation based on prior associations with camouflage pattern clothing.

4 min: Generate as many potential interpretations as you can, regardless of how implausible they may seem, and if you have time, follow up with further questions to ask for clarification.

“ASK” GUIDELINES

- Remove your own mental models from the equation
- Start concrete, then move through abstract
- Listen attentively, make it conversational
- Offer reassurance to ease interviewee
- Flow with cultural norms – see Emily
- Present yourself as an equal with participant – you want to evoke unfiltered responses

“Ask” in detail

- Focus on open-ended questions
- Evoke stories – see how people view their experiences
- Ideally, at least two people – one note-taker/docu-menter, one interviewer.
- Offer reassurance to ease interviewee
- Ask lots of why questions
- Have interviewees act out tasks, show you how they do things, and narrate as they go along
- Drawing and acting can help with a language barrier



“LISTEN” GUIDELINES

- Find your own style, but find a way to support the conversation [eye contact, nodding, mirroring, etc.]
- Take direct notes – if something is interpreted, mark it as such.
- Audio recording helps if solo interviewing
- Notice when people seem to have more to say or struggle articulating and probe deeper
- Pay attention to what’s between the lines – values, mental models, etc.

EXERCISE: Ask + Listen

Try to gain empathy for the experiences of other participants in this workshop. Using the guidelines above, pick a partner and work through an interview focused on either this workshop or the overall session. When you’re finished, switch roles and go through another interview. Notice what kinds of responses are elicited by different types of questions, and what works best with your personal style.

REPEAT

As you observe, jot down questions
As you ask questions, observe participant reactions
As you listen and come up with further topics of exploration, you may repeat the process

ACTIVITY NOTES:
