

Another culture, another method

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Apala Lahiri Chavan

Vice President - Asia
Human Factors International
Chemtex House, 4th Floor
Hiranandani Gardens, Powai
Mumbai 400 072
apala@humanfactors.com

Abstract

The paper explores the area of methods used in the design process and the need to adapt them for use in different cultures. We have seen that there are several dimensions on which cultures differ (Geert Hofstede, 1991). It is now not uncommon to question the 'one size fits all' worldview. There are design guidelines that are emerging, in the domain of cross cultural design (Del Galdo, E., and Nielsen J, Anderson, 1996). However, one area that has not received as much attention as it should is that of the methods and tools used in the design process. If we accept that fact that there are fundamental differences among cultures, then does it not imply that we cannot have a 'one method fits all' approach. Any method is influenced by the culture where it originates and hence it 'corrupts' the data that is collected when using that alien method, in a completely different culture (Anderson, R.J., 1994). Are there ways we can adapt methods to suit different cultures (Barab, S.A., Thomas, M.K., Dodge, T., Newell, M. & Squire, K., 2003)? If yes, what and how can this be done?

1 Introduction

Cultural localisation involves gathering data and testing interfaces in the target user cultures. Usability testing follows the well established 'think aloud' protocol method that works so well in North America. The task-oriented think aloud session is preceded or followed by a questionnaire or interview. Data gathering is very often based on an interview and/or contextual inquiry.

All the methods used in the Western world are based on the premise that participants will find it easy to articulate their thoughts and feel comfortable to say what works for them and what does not (Hall Edward). However, this assumption is heavily loaded in favour of certain cultures and against others.

Taking India as an example, one of the most difficult problems in evaluating any product is the hesitation on the part of Indian users to say that 'this is bad because of problem xyzee' (Charles P.Mayer, 1998). The Indian cultural milieu largely advocates acceptance of the state of a given situation and then if possible, to work around it. To give an obviously negative opinion about people or things is uncomfortable for most people.

In addition to this, getting an 'individual' opinion is difficult. India is a collectivist culture and so, opinions are always collective in nature. Even when an individual opinion is obtained, the individual expresses the opinion that she thinks the collective holds.

And finally, Indian users do not feel comfortable when under the spotlight. Hence, situations where an individual is given a set of tasks and is 'observed' in any kind of usability evaluation scenario, prove largely unproductive. The very presence of the observer makes the user uncomfortable and it is perceived to be an 'examination' situation even more than in Western cultures.

1.1 Use the collective

This method attempts to take advantage of the collective nature of Indian society. Thus this method attempts to obtain individual opinions from amongst a collective of people. This is different from a focus group in as much as this method does not simply brainstorm about possible usage or preferences. On the other hand, specific feedback is obtained regarding individual interaction with a product (Beyer, H. & Holtzblatt K., 2002).

This method involves setting the evaluation in the midst of a group of users. The method was used by way of an experiment that involved evaluating mobile phone interfaces. Mobile phone users were observed interacting with the specified mobile phone during a train journey from suburban Bombay to the financial hub of Bombay.

In addition to making use of the presence and participation of the collective, there was another important variation from conventional usability evaluation. The onus of doing the specified tasks was first the evaluator's. In other words, the evaluator was in the hot seat to begin with, not any of the users.

Five users who participated in the train 'study' were also later observed individually, in their offices. During the second round they did similar tasks as on the train but using a different handset.

1.2 Evaluation Bollywood Style

The second method involved individual 'critiquing'. Under normal circumstances an individual user would find it difficult to critique any product. Users would tend to take a middle ground and say that every product is good and if there are problems it is the user's responsibility to work around them. Hence this method made use of the popular film review format.

Hindi or Bollywood (Bombay + Hollywood) films are immensely popular throughout the country. And so are film reviews. Bollywood films are an integral part of every Indian's life. Hence Indians are also major readers of film reviews. Many reviewers are almost as popular as the film stars themselves.

Since the film review format is perhaps the only popular and accepted format for critiquing and comparing 'products', (in this case, films), we experimented with the use of this format for critiquing websites. The intention was to transfer the 'critiquing' mindset from films to websites by borrowing the format.

Scenarios were generated (some of them dramatic) and woven into an entire story line of using the web sites being evaluated. Several analogies to popular films and their reviews were alluded to in the description of the scenarios.

The critiquing formed the second round of evaluation. In the first round, the same users evaluated a different website using conventional usability evaluation methodology.

1.3 Culture Probes

Cultural Probes are not analytical tools but are meant to provide inspirational insights that 'reflect' the local culture of participants (Gaver, W.H., Hooker, B. and Dunne, A., 1999).

1.3.1 Examples Of Culture Probe

1.3.1.1 Jungian Archetype Folk Probes

This method has been designed to make use of archetype folk characters rooted in the Chinese culture and to have users transfer those archetypal characteristics to other contexts. This objective is to understand deeper associations that Chinese users form about the subject being studied and related entities (Gannon Martin, 1994).

The method entails using little pewter statues of characters from Chinese folk tales. These characters are very well known amongst the Chinese population. The statues (10 in number) are placed in front of the users and they are asked to label them. The labels are already provided (and consist of all the entities being studied). The users have to simply match a label with a statue, depending on their preference. Once the labelling is done, it is possible to probe the associations demonstrated by the labelling, as well as the relationship between the various entities (as constructed by the users).

Exploring archetypal associations in a 'playful' and projective mode helps elicit unfiltered and deep responses from normally 'formal' and 'not free with strangers' Chinese users.

1.3.1.2 Rasas and the emotion ticket

We designed this cultural probe in the form of 'emotion tickets'. These were designed to resemble cinema 'tickets'. These tickets were categorized into the nine 'rasas' or emotions used traditionally in Indian performing arts. These 'rasas' are: *shingara* (desire/romance) *hasya* (mirth), *karuna* (pathos or sadness), *rudra* (anger or fury), *veer* (valorous or heroic), *bhayanak* (fear or terror), *vibhatsa* (disgust), *adhbata* (wonder or surprise) and *shanta* (peace or tranquility).

Each 'rasa' was expressed through appropriate images and dialogues from Bollywood films, in the booklet. The idea was to have users articulate their feelings when interacting/using the product being evaluated, by recording it using the appropriate emotion ticket. They recorded the reason they felt a particular emotion, what product they used or interacted with and when did the trigger happen.

Being able to record these with no one watching and over a period of time, provided very deep insights.

2 Results

2.1 Use the collective

Subjects were far more willing to explore and critique the mobile phone being evaluated, when the evaluator pretended to be the subject. There was enthusiastic collective participation in the entire evaluation exercise.

The same subjects reverted to usual Indian 'subject' behavior when asked to individually evaluate a different hand set.

2.2 Evaluation Bollywood Style

The difference in response was striking when subjects were given a dramatic story line and asked to accomplish a task on one of the two websites being evaluated.

The subjects, when asked to critique the first site, rated it as good and commented that nothing needed reworking on the site.

All subjects were unexpectedly forthcoming with their criticism of the second site. Many actually offered design solutions!

2.3 Emotion Ticket

The broad categories into which the triggers for the emotional reactions could be classified, were: internet/sms/telephones, entertainment, technology- delivering and failing (both sides of the coin), security/disaster, philosophy.

The Indian participants had almost equal number of comments running across all nine emotions. The participants from Iowa had most comments for 'courage', 'fear' and 'desire' and very little for the rest.

The American participants' comments when organized by frequency of comments within each category differed considerably from that of the Indian participants.

Several commonly used cultural dimensions were also validated.

The emotion tickets offered the following advantages:

- Incorporated local pop culture icons as part of the ticket design and thus could be easily localized.
- The informality and 'fun' value of the tickets made users less defensive and thus give more frank answers.
- In India where people are uncomfortable with talking about themselves the emotion tickets managed to break through the façade and elicit personal information.

- They provided both macro level insights about power distance, individualism etc. and micro level insights about preferences and dislikes etc.

The next step would be to validate the cross cultural applicability of this form of ‘cultural probe’ as well as to explore finer grain analysis of the ‘rasas’ by decomposing each ‘rasa’ into its constituent ‘bhavas’ or moods.

3 Conclusion

The results obtained from the improvised usability evaluation and cultural probing methods provide validation of the fact that a shift in the cultural milieu actually warrants a shift in the methodologies used for evaluating products and their interfaces (Kineta Hung and Kent Monroe (ed), 1998). Much more research needs to be done to arrive at guidelines for possible differences that one could incorporate in methodology when evaluating in a specific cultural setting (Willis, P.,2003).

We are moving towards a more modern, but not necessarily a more Western society (Masaru Ariga, 1991). A world of more modern culture does not necessarily mean a more homogenous world. Cultures will respond differently to the process of modernization and will remain unique. Even the use of identical products in different parts of the world does not indicate a sameness of cultures. Users will continue to be influenced by their unique cultures and thus user behavior will continue to vary cross-culturally.

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