
Buxton, William (2005). Mailbag: Ethnography and Usability: Where's the Glue. *Interactions Magazine*. 12(5), September + October, 8 - 9.

Ethnography and Usability: Where's the Glue

A commentary on:

Siegel, David & Dray, Susan (2005). Avoiding the Next Schism: Ethnography and Usability. *Interactions*, March-April 2005, 58-61.

It was with equal parts curiosity and confusion that I read the article, *Avoiding the Next Schism: Ethnography and Usability*, by David Siegel and Susan Dray (Business, March-April 2005). The article begins by cautioning that a schism between these two disciplines “threatens to undermine the ability of UCD [User Centered Design] to introduce a holistic and comprehensive focus on the user into all phases of technology design.” And in its conclusion, states, “both usability and ethnography professionals need to understand the product planning and design process ...”

I do not recognize anything in the article that reflects any design process that I have ever encountered. Not that this is surprising since there is almost nothing about design in the article. Yet how can that be? It is supposedly about UCD. So let's be clear: *Design* is the operative word here (literally) as the verb in the phrase, “user-centered design.” Usability and ethnography have no meaning or relevance in product development without design. It is the glue that not only makes them relevant, but binds them to a common theme. (And let me anticipate the cries of, “No, it is the user that bind them together!” Of course ethnography, usability, and design all have a concern for users, usability, and utility. But were it not for the product being designed, they wouldn't be there.) So if ethnography and usability are coming unstuck, how can we have any kind of meaningful discussion of the issue when this glue is omitted from the discourse?

Now am I being fair?

Let's look at the data. First, look at Table 1, which characterizes and contrasts ethnography and usability along a number of dimensions. Here is something that the authors and I can agree upon: While they can both inform design in their own way, neither ethnography nor usability are design professions. And, this is reflected by the fact that design does not appear for either in the cells labeled “What they contribute to the design process,” “Formal Training,” or “Skills

Needed.” By the way, this is as it should be. I would no more expect an industrial designer to have a deep knowledge of statistical analysis than I would expect a usability person to know how to draw at a professional standard. All three professions—design, ethnography, and usability— are deep and require excellence that is hard to acquire. None is better than the other: They are just different. Ideally, in UCD, each is essential, but just not sufficient.

Having said that, we rarely have the ideal, and the reality of the economics of product development dictates that team size and composition is almost always compromised. In which case, remember what I said earlier about the operative word in UCD.

So let’s come back to design, and see what the article has to say about it. You will have to look hard, since there is very little. The one concrete statement appears in Figure 1. And what does it say? “Designer guesses about people.”

On what planet? The designers that I know are obsessed with getting to know their users, their needs, their habits, their problems, their frustrations, their aspirations and, yes, their dreams. That is what they do in their job, and that is what they are trained to do at school.

So where does all of this take us? The authors’ stated motivation in writing this article was a concern with maintaining a holistic approach to UCD. Yet, not only have they left out the glue that binds the two populations discussed, when they do mention design, they trivialize it to a point that risks causing a schism that is way deeper than that which they do address.

Yes, we do “have to understand the product planning and design process.” But my conclusion on reading this article is that to find such understanding, one must look elsewhere.