

Ethnography

Definition of Ethnography

Ethnography is a method of research in which the researcher gathers data within a natural setting that involves a dynamic network of interrelated variables. No attempt is made to control variables within the setting for this could alter or destroy the phenomenon being studied. The purpose of ethnographic research is to attempt to understand what is happening naturally in the setting and to interpret the data gathered to see what implications could be formed from the data. Ethnographic research is also known as *qualitative* research.

The instrument used to gather data in the study is the researcher. Data can be gathered through interviews, observations, and document analysis. Questionnaires containing open-ended questions may also be used. Sessions are often videotaped for viewing from different perspectives. In studies involving computer software, traces that capture user selections are often built into the software to provide the researcher with a more detailed set of data of user actions and choices. Validity of this type research depends heavily on the skill, competence and rigor of the researchers. Data is gathered using more than one of the data collection methods. The researcher crosschecks data and interpretations by pitting data obtained from one source against that obtained from another source in order to confirm information and to explore inconsistencies. Data analysis begins with and overlaps data collection. The final product produced from an ethnographic study should be a “thick description” of the situation, so that the situation appears sufficiently realistic, and so that others in examining the description can determine whether the implications formed in the study can be applied to other settings.

Ethnography as a Tool in HCI Design

Left to their own devices, computer programmers tend to take a “systems-centered point of view” concerned about “how software works and what parts of it do what” [Landauer, p. 217-218]. Yet users of these systems want applications that are natural to use without concern about how the software works. The HCI course at Southern Illinois University focuses on contextual design [Beyer and Holtzblatt], one of several approaches in HCI that are user-centered.

Throughout the contextual design process, members of a design team engage in activities requiring the same skills used by ethnographic researchers. These skills include putting oneself in the situation one is trying to learn about and performing focused observations, recording field notes that include observations and insights, interviewing users, and interpreting data gained from observations and interviews. Two aspects of the redesigned curriculum for the HCI course have focused on students’ development of these skills. Materials and exercises that focus on observation, interview and data interpretation skills are now part of the course. In addition students in the course have the opportunity to use these skills with student volunteers who serve as users for a project designed as a major course requirement.