CPSC 444 Tutorial: Field Studies 1

Description:

- In this tutorial, you will learn to develop focal points and interview questions for a hypothetical field study.

Objectives:

- By the end of the tutorial, you will be able to:
  - Understand the purpose of field methods (advantages, disadvantages)
  - Make an informed choice about when field methods are appropriate
  - Design and evaluate focal points for field study research
  - Generate, evaluate and critique field interview questions
  - Critically analyze tradeoffs of different design decisions

Tentative Schedule:

- Quiz + discussion (~15 min)

- Focal point activity
  - the TA will briefly review qualities that focal points should have
  - critiquing focal points (see activity description below); group & class discussion (~10 min)
  - generating focal points for a field study (~20 min)
    - each group's focal points are to be listed on the whiteboard
  - critiquing others' focal points (~20 min)
    - students are to visit other groups' focal points
    - each student must leave at least one sticky note critiquing the focal points in question at each other group's whiteboard

- Interview question design activity
  - generate 10-20 interview questions based on your focal points (~20 min)
  - critique other groups' questions (~15 min)
  - roll critiques back into your own interview questions (~5 min)

- Design brainstorm (time permitting)

Focal Points [1]: Focusing Field Work

The key strength of field work is its open-endedness: where the analysis proceeds, what particular artifacts or ideas become of interest—all of these things are flexible when engaging in field work. The purpose of field work is typically to sensitize oneself to the particular details of the processes that are at play—especially when the details are unknown at the outset. The key weakness of field work is also open-endedness: field work can quickly become overwhelming because of the sheer *volume* of collected data, or a feeling of being "lost" in the environment ("There are so many things to look at, what should I pay attention to?" is a common statements).

To alleviate this problem, experienced researchers advocate setting aside time early on to identify *focal points* [2]. Focal points are similar to "research questions," and are really an articulation of *what the researcher intends to gain an understanding*. Typically, may be include (but are not limited

to): an activity, the participants in an activity, or how technologies or artifacts are used in an activity. Focal points provide structure for study methods, setting expectations for the type of findings that are desired. The articulate a particular perspective or viewpoint *without* specific or anticipated answers. They are typically driven by research objectives or development goals, and are general in nature.

Notes:
- [1] This material has been appropriated from lectures by Sara Bly.
- [2] This concept is sometimes known as *theoretical sensitivity*.

Activity: Critique Focal Points

Imagine you are a designer trying to understand how technologies can be designed support information sharing among home activities. Evaluate the following focal points. Individually, what makes each focal point useful? What problems does each focal point have? How would you modify these focal points (if at all)?

- 1. Where are message centres located in the home? How does the location of these message centres facilitate coordination and communication?
- 2. How is incoming information (e.g. letters, phone messages) handled and delegated in the home?
- 3. Where is information placed when the intended recipient is not at home?
- 4. What constitutes "information" inside a home environment?
- 5. What kinds of "information" inside a home environment are passed around, but without physical embodiment? Why do they not have physical embodiment?
- 6. What information is not shared among home inhabitants?
- 7. How does the relationship among home inhabitants affect the nature of information sharing?

Activity: Derive Focal Points for Hypothetical Field Study

Imagine that you work for an educational consulting firm that helps educators, educational software and technology hardware vendors. While your company has made great strides in the "school" environment, your company recognizes that much of the learning that takes place occurs outside of the school context.

The problem is that your company does not understand how students make use of space to study. For instance, your company knows that students study in a variety of contexts: at the kitchen table, in the bedroom, or even outside in the living room. Yet a variety of questions remain: Why do they use these different areas to study? What do the different areas afford? What do they do in these different areas? How do they arrange study materials in these different areas?

Your group is asked to help design a field study that helps provide an understanding of study spaces in relation to study areas for university students.

Develop 2 to 5 focal points for this study. Write them on the whiteboard. Save room on whiteboard for next activity.

Activity: Interview question design

Assume that your group plans to conduct interviews with real students (who are not in CPSC 444, and whom you do not know well). **Generate 10-20 interview questions based on your focal**

points. Write them on the whiteboard.

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