

LifeScribe Mobile App Meta-Analysis

Interoffice Memorandum

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From Kaitlin Coyle
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Introduction

The following memo addresses the MTPC Portfolio Committee's request for a meta-analysis of my LifeScribe mobile app designed in Shu-When Tzeng's INDD 7650: Design Theories course. The analysis discusses the audience, context, purpose, design process, and theories that informed the app's creation.

Audience, Context, Purpose

The LifeScribe mobile app's purpose is to serve as users' mobile agenda, keeping track of their tasks, goals, and events in one place. This app's audience is busy and multi-tasking graduate students; however, it can also be used by anyone seeking an organizational tool. I envisioned users' contexts of use as "emergent," "dynamic," and "changing" (Mirel, 2002); some might be in an office space, at the bus stop, in between classes, etc. Wherever users' context is, I imagined each would be in a rush, so my goal was to create something efficient and easy to use.

Design Process & Theory

While designing my app, I engaged in Design Thinking (DT) and Participatory Design (PD). Tham et al. (2022) describe DT as an "iterative design methodology" that solves "wicked problems" and democratizes the design process by involving users, leading to PD which sees users as "co-creators" (Weaver, 2022, p. 129) alongside designers, leading to more human-centered and advocacy-based designs (Rose, 2016). The DT phases include 1) Empathize, 2) Define, 3) Ideate, 4) Prototype, and 5) Test (Tham & Grace, 2024). I discuss how I engaged in these phases, and PD, below.

Empathize, Define, Ideate

Empathy means sharing and experiencing "the feelings of another person," differing from sympathy—which simply acknowledges someone's emotions—by invoking "action" and creating a desire to change the situation (Tham & Grace, 2024, p. 25). In UX and IxD, empathy is practiced through user research which helps designers understand users, their problems ("Define"), and context of use, allowing them to generate ideas to solve those problems—"Ideate" (Tham & Grace, 2024).

In “Empathize,” I spoke to friends about app ideas. Someone suggested a mobile planner app because it would solve problems students had with physical planners (i.e., time of writing down tasks, extra weight in a backpack, students always being in a rush). I ran with this idea and created a user persona—a “fictional representation” of my user, including their goals, skills, needs, and frustrations (Barnum, 2021, p. 120)—based on a real graduate student, so I could engage in PD. I noted she was detailed, organized, and held three different jobs. Her frustrations included a short attention span, and being moderately decent with technology.

During “Define,” I developed a user need—or “problem statement” (Gibbons, 2020; Wible, 2022)—based on my persona: “As a multitasking student, I need a quick and easy way to organize my school, work, and life-related tasks, so I can avoid procrastination.” Blair-Early and Zender (2008) describe user intentions as two extremes: the “hunter” or “browser.” Users that browse are “open to new experiences” while hunters are “destination-driven,” valuing an interface’s “speed and efficiency” (p. 92-93). Based on these principles, I classified my persona as “the hunter” and based my design choices on this.

In “Ideate,” I selected one of four content delivery strategies, discussed by Blair-Early and Zender (2008) as the relationship between content type, UI design, and users. Because my persona expressed difficulties with technology, I chose “Educational—The Instructor;” this strategy uses a teacher persona, instructing how to use an app in a “step-by-step fashion” (p. 91). Following this, I used onboarding screens to show users different UI elements and flows.

Prototype & Test

In “Prototype,” I consulted my persona for input on features to include. She noted several: pushing tasks to the next day, viewing task progress, and including “Goals.” Based on this, I chose five main design features for the app’s navigation bar: Dashboard, Tasks, Calendar, Notes, and Goals. I then created two low-fidelity paper prototypes of my app’s initial design and presented them to my persona. Her preferred design had Tasks appearing as “sticky tabs” rather than square blocks, noting she appreciated the office metaphor. I then created an interaction flowchart—a tool to help “plot how users move through an interface,” allowing me to visualize users’ decisions on the app (Interaction Design Foundation [IxDF], n.d.).

I then created high-fidelity prototypes using Adobe XD’s design and prototype functions. I created two versions of each function (i.e., Dashboard, Tasks, Notes, etc.) and presented them to my persona. She chose versions that maintained design coherence in the UI and appeared more “modern” and “sleek.” The final prototype implemented all my user’s feedback.

Conclusion

Although this project was lengthy, it taught me the value of DT and PD in design. My completed app supported my persona’s goals and was user- and human-centered because I treated her as a “co-creator” while designing (Weaver, 2022, p. 129). I also spent a large amount of time in DT’s pre-design phases—Empathize, Define, and Ideate—demonstrating that effective user research always results in a useful product.

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