SI 501: Interpretation Sessions

Objectives

- To review information from interviews with the other team members.
- To extract individual pieces of data from your interviews.

Introduction

As soon as possible after any of your team members conduct an interview, you should conduct an *interpretation session*. The goal of the interpretation session is to take the content of an interview and to turn it into discrete pieces of qualitative data – basically, sentences that assert something about what you learned through the interview. In contextual inquiry, these pieces of data are called "affinity notes" because they will later be used to construct an *affinity wall*.

Note: The instructions below are based on Chapter 5 of Holtzblatt et al. (2005), but with quite a few modifications. Reference: Holtzblatt, Karen, Jessamyn Burns Wendell, and Shelley Wood. 2005. *Rapid Contextual Design: A How-To Guide to Key Techniques for User-Centered Design*. San Francisco: Elsevier/Morgan Kaufmann.

To minimize the amount you have to read, these instructions have been condensed. That also means that there is important information in every line. Each team member should read these instructions carefully so that everyone knows what should happen during an interpretation session.

Guidelines

- Try to hold interpretation sessions as soon as possible after an interview is conducted, ideally within a day or two. As soon as you have scheduled an interview, you can schedule the interpretation session.
  - Sometimes, scheduling constraints may make it difficult to have an interpretation session soon after the interview – if so, that's fine. Late is better than never.
- Interpretation sessions should take about the same amount of time as the interview itself – expect a 60-minute interview to require a 60-minute interpretation session. However, allocate a little more time for your first couple of interpretation sessions. It takes a bit longer until the team as a whole gets used to it.
- Ideally, all team members will attend each interpretation session.
  - If this isn't possible, make sure that at least the interviewer and at least one person who was not at the interview (i.e., not the note-taker) are present for the interpretation session.
- During the session, there are three types of roles: (1) interviewer; (2) interpretation-session note-taker; and (3) general interpretation team member.
- **Interviewer**: During the interpretation session, begin by reviewing any important background about the interview, especially what the interview participant's relationship is to the client or the problem. Then, the interviewer's main job is to go through what happened in the interview and observation point by point. There are two ways to do this:

  - If an audio recording is available, the recording can be played back from beginning to end. (Of course, skip over the introduction, conclusion, and anything that was recorded that isn't useful.) If all team members are comfortable doing so, and if the playback device/software allows it, it can be useful to run the playback at 1.25x or 1.5x speed. The interviewer should frequently pause the recording and add insights: things they noticed that weren't captured in audio; what they were trying to get at; additional questions they should have asked; etc.
  - If no audio recording is available, the interviewer should relate what happened as best as they can remember, using any notes as aids. Since we do interviews in pairs in this course, the person who served as the interview note-taker should also jump in and add anything they remember.
- **Interpretation Session Note-taker:** The interpretation session note-taker's role is to capture individual pieces of data from the interview as discrete affinity notes, and separately, to take notes that might be useful for later reference. (This person is not necessarily the same as the note-taker during the interview.) Instructions for interpretation session note-takers:
  - For this class, it is strongly recommended that you record *all* affinity notes, for *all* interviewees, in a *single* Google Sheets spreadsheet. This spreadsheet should be shared with the whole team. (Later, this will allow you to quickly convert the affinity notes into sticky notes for the affinity wall, when we get to that. In the spreadsheet, use a single row for each affinity note. Use three columns as follows:
    - Use one column (e.g., Column A) for interviewee code (see below).
    - Use another column (e.g., Column B) for affinity notes.
    - Use a third column (e.g., Column C) for any comments you might have.
  - Interviewee code: For the purposes of confidentiality, use a unique code for each interviewee, such as "U02" for user 2, "M03" for manager 3, or "P05" for participant 5. Make sure the code is unique to the interview participant. Similarly, use codewords for specific organizations, etc. Nowhere in the affinity note spreadsheet should you use actual names (this helps protect confidentiality). To make sure that you don't forget what codes represent, save the codes along with what they represent in a separate document or spreadsheet shared by the whole team.
  - Affinity notes: An affinity note is a sentence (or two) or an interviewee quotation capturing a single fact that emerges from the interview and observation.
    - An affinity note can be a paraphrased statement about something the interviewee said or that the interviewer observed. For example, `U02 thinks they receive too much email.`
    - An affinity note can be a relevant quotation by the interviewee. Use quotation marks, and indicate who said it: `U02 said, "I'm always overwhelmed by email."`
    - An affinity note can be anything that team members highlight as true or likely. These may include additional interpretation on top of what was explicit in the interview/observation. Indicate that a team member said it: `Mary believes U02 is overwhelmed by email.`
    - Affinity notes should consist of one or more declarative sentences. They should state a fact or make an assertion.

- Affinity notes should be self-contained; someone should be able to understand what a note is saying, without having to know about any other affinity note. This is because affinity notes will be wildly re-organized during analysis, and they will not stay in the original order. This might mean that you need to repeat the same context in multiple notes. For example, the following might be two successive affinity notes:
  - `U02 spends so much time responding to email that they have no time for other work.`
  - `U02 spends so much time responding to email that they feel isolated from the rest of the office.`
- Be concrete whenever possible. For example, "M02 spent 13 workdays over the last month labeling and indexing new items at Museum X even though she doesn't believe that is really her job," is better than "M02 spent a lot of time indexing."
- Be clear and concise, but don't worry too much about wording, or it will slow you down. As long as the meaning is understandable to the team, that's sufficient. Affinity notes will only be used for analysis.
- Try to stick to one idea per affinity note. You can always create two or more affinity notes to capture multiple ideas.
- Aim for about one affinity note per minute of interview/observation.

- It can be helpful to other team members, if you make some indication each time you write an affinity note. E.g., "I got that," or "I'm including that quote," etc.
- **Non-affinity-note comments**: Throughout an interpretation session, team members may make remarks that are worth capturing, but that aren't good affinity notes. Write these down in a *separate* document (or in a separate tab of the spreadsheet). These might include…
  - Questions that should be asked in future interviews.
  - Potential solutions or recommendations for problems the client is facing.

- **General team member:** Everyone else's role is to listen, ask questions, add interpretations, and keep the session on track.
  - Listen for potential affinity notes, and make sure the note-taker is recording them.
  - If you notice a trend or pattern within the responses of the interview participant, or across interview participants, mention it and ask the note-taker to capture it as an affinity note.
  - If you notice that the team has gotten stuck on an issue, or has begun discussing things not relevant to reviewing the interview, encourage everyone to move on.
- **Other guidelines:**
  - Keep things moving quickly! In particular, avoid long discussions about any one topic, arguments about affinity notes, brainstorming solutions, etc. Focus on extracting data from the interview and observation.
    - Should two team members have different opinions about a specific affinity note, just create two separate affinity notes (one for each opinion), and move on.

- Encourage everyone to participate. If some team members are silent, occasionally prompt them for input. If some team members are dominating the session, ask them to allow others to participate. If someone feels they have too much to contribute to keep quiet, ask them to add their own notes to the spreadsheet, so that all of their thoughts are captured. It's OK if occasionally there are duplicate affinity notes.

Note: Affinity notes are essential for constructing the affinity wall, so you cannot skip interpretation sessions. We will not ask you to submit your affinity notes on their own, but they will be the raw material for your affinity wall later, which you will be required to submit. So, make sure that you're conducting interpretation sessions and recording affinity notes!