Designing from User Data

The term *research* takes on different meanings and sets different expectations with people depending on their particular discipline or industry. Even within the UX arena, I encounter professionals using very different methods, as well as different variations of those methods and processes. This may be due to the fact that in the UX industry, many practitioners have no formal training in research — and what they learn on the job is just like the game of *telephone*; you can easily lose something in translation. Of course, this is changing for the better and educational programs like this one at GPS are emerging to fill the gap and officially train professionals in best practices. Hopefully this will help standardize what research means to us in UX. I have seen a large shift in recent years and it is becoming more of a requirement that anyone in UX has at least a decent working knowledge of user research even if they aren't directly leading research efforts — which is obviously a good thing!

This is important to note because when we get into designing and prototyping many people might think we are done with research. That is actually very far from the truth. If we are truly working from a user centered design mandate checking in with our users throughout the process then research really never really ends.

Believe it or not, but many designers working today see no reason why they need to check in with users for major feature ideas in development and some teams see usability studies as something to simply check off as part of a project, but in no way would leverage the research findings and lead them to change their design in any fundamental way. I say this because even though in this course we will have high standards and learn best practices, you will likely encounter colleagues and collaborators who may think your methods are not necessary to the process. I want you to be aware that how we define UX research here may not be how everyone will see it. Many practitioners in senior positions feel that the years they have worked in the field are enough for them to be experts, when in fact they might have missed out on key learnings and standards of best practice that have more recently emerged.

Prototypes are Research Tools

Many people think about prototypes in a very literal way. They think it is an exact representation of the product you hope to build. At the later stages, a prototype iteratively becomes more and more refined — that may be true — but initially, at least,

it's really just the manifestation of a hypothesis about what you *think* users might need as based on your initial research findings. In this way, the prototype is a document that represents your ideas and your best guess around user needs for the experience you're designing. Because of this, it is impossible for your work to be a truly accurate representation of the product because its intended purpose is to discover and evolve what the end product should be.

This framing is very important to keep in mind because you will see yourself and others struggle with this concept a lot. Once we see a working design, it can be hard for us to imagine it differently, and with a prototype you should always creating a new version of your designs, and sometimes even starting over again from scratch.

Determining the right approach

Many companies view "research" as expensive and daunting. When they approve a set of research, they will typically approve the methods that seem the cheapest and least time consuming. Interestingly enough, many view remote user testing as easy and affordable and in some ways it is, however, in order to do this you need to create a digital prototype and get the technology working for both the tester and the interviewer, which can be quite challenging. The available tools for this have improved greatly in the past few years making this a great option. However, remote user testing can be overused. And sometimes it replaces a method that would be more effective for the kind of insights you need to gather as a team.

Remote testing is great when you are in later stages of development, or making smaller optimizations to an existing product. If you have already met your users in person through contextual interviews and paper prototype testing, you can move on to remote testing because you have been grounded in the user needs. Remote testing will not be helpful if you have never even seen a user in person working through the tasks you give them. In this instance, you would be lacking sufficient context to help properly understand other aspects of your research. Keep in mind that there are pluses and minuses to every approach, and what works well in one context may not necessarily work in another.

Getting Pushback from Stakeholders

"They just don't get it and they won't permit me to do any user research." I hear this all the time from designers in the field. When this subject comes up in conversation, I

always try to dig in and understand why that might be the case. In my experience, if you can effectively communicate the value of user research to the organization, in most situations, you can get official approval for it. From my observations, it appears that designers have an unfortunate tendency to communicate with stakeholders only around the value of how user research helps them do their job as designers. This is never a good strategy. Instead, designers should push the discussion toward a high level business vantage point. Bring up how research makes for better innovation, excellent business and potentially increased profits. When I have gotten pushback on user research in the past, I always ask the question, "Can we really afford to make the wrong product?" This type of provocative question usually gives people pause, and in no time we end up delving into examples where due diligence in regards to users was not pursued and how badly the product that lacked this sort of research performed upon release.

We will explore how to incorporate user feedback into our design process in this course so that you can experience the strengths of working in a user centered mindset.