

Interpreting the interpretation

Sharon Williams

Umeå Institute of Design

Umeå University

SE-901 87 Umeå, Sweden

+46 763 21 58 74

shacawine@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the process of peer portraying a member of a group, and reflects on the veracity of data gathered based on interviews as a research method.

Keywords

Collaborative skills, Group dynamics, Self-reflection, Interview, User Research.

1. INTRODUCTION

A group of ten individuals, myself included, had the task of portraying each other using various crossed medias as a part of a graphic design course. The goal of the project was to understand the value of reflecting on how we perceive others and ourselves, and highlight the importance of developing collaborative skills in order to improve the experience of group dynamics. The project was divided into four stages. In each stage we were asked to reflect on a classmate in one media, to then pass the material on to the next student for the next stage of the process. By the end of it, we all had portrayed and had been portrayed by four fellow students in four different medias. The stages were the following:

1. Written Portraits. They describe and analyze a person giving deep insight that goes beyond superficial.
2. Documentary Photography. It attempts to address a certain issue by capturing the essence of a character.
3. Poster Design. An exercise to express the different levels of information by using typography, photography, illustration and layout.
4. Motion Graphics. They play with the illusion of movement and sounds as a way to finalize the conveyance of a subject.

The duration of the project was five weeks, and it was the first time that the group members worked together in a collaborative

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project. The final outcome was a physical exhibition (see Figure1) and a web exhibition of all the material created.



Figure 1. Peer-Portrait exhibition, showcasing text, photo and poster design.

In this paper I will focus on the first two stages of the process: the written portrait and the photography essay. What is here described is based on group reflections and later discussions on the process.

2. FROM CRITICAL FEEDBACK TO GROUP DYNAMICS

Before the initial stage, we were assigned a critical friend: someone that would offer assessment feedback and helpful critique. The benefit of having a fellow student that would look at our work from a different perspective is that it forces us to step away from it, opening the limits of our vision. It trains us on giving and receiving constructive criticism, with the only purpose of ensuring the success of our work. This is highly valuable during self-evaluation, as it increases the learning performance about ourselves, our work, and our profession [2]. The establishment of trust-based one-to-one relationships within the group members proved very significant. Beyond the obvious cultural distinctions, it created awareness of our differences as individuals. During the process we discovered each others flaws, goals, and more importantly, set of skills. Revealing multiple distinctive profiles of strengths and weaknesses helped us identify our personal zones of panic, stretch and comfort. This is important because, in a healthy group environment, the strength of a team member encourages and helps others to surpass personal challenges.

Multidisciplinary work teams happen world-wide within the design field, and overcoming differences is a challenge that designers have to face. Hence the importance of building on a team, investing time and effort on creating group dynamics with the aim of promoting an environment prevailed by sharing and collaborating, rather than comparing and competing.

3. THE STAGES OF PEER-PORTRAIT

As mentioned in the introduction, the project was divided into four stages: written portraits, documentary photography, poster design and motion graphics. Where as the first two were very reflection-oriented and approached in a rather emotional way, the last two were more technique-based, and the time and effort was more focused in learning while improving a skill.

3.1 Written portraits and the photo essay

For the written portrait we used the ethnographic research method of in-depth, open ended interview. That allowed us to verbally explore and obtain information about each other as unknown subjects. Open-ended questions enabled the interviewees to respond in a way that is not restricted by alternatives or constraints. In the same line, probes encouraged the interviewees to think beyond the stated to offer a deeper, broader perspective of the issue. In the end, the information gathered from the interviews came from the subject in a narrative way, and the dialog experience was perceived as an open conversation rather than an intrusive way of getting personal information from each other.

The stage of documentary photography had the intention of connecting two realities through one media. The photograph that portrays the subject, stands in between the photographer and the viewer. If we understand photography as a language, the end result is a visual depiction of the subject that is being portrayed in it, and it attempts to capture his or her character in different layers of meaning.



Figure 2. Portrait of one of the group members, using the media of photography.

3.2 Subjective outcome

Even though photography is considered an objective translation of reality; as put by Roland Barthes, a “message without a code” [1]; it actually expresses the photographer subjective point of view. Furthermore, the final outcome is at the same time victim of the viewers subjective interpretation. This was also an inevitable

consequence of the previous mentioned stage. Despite the supposedly realistic outcome after using open-ended interviews, where all the information came from the interviewee himself, the subjectivity that arose in a method based on personal interpretation of how we perceived each other was undeniable.

The question appears when realizing that these are methods generally used when conducting user research. The resulting outcome of interviews, photography, user observations, user testing, design probes or workshops with users to mention some; can be influenced and altered by the context in which the research method takes place, or by its disruptive nature. How can we rely on this somewhat distorted information, that has to face a later stage of analysis influenced by our subjective preconceptions and misinterpretations?

The management and analysis of researched data is something experienced differently by every designer. As for every person there is a unique personality, the interpretation of the same fact by different interaction designers will probably convey an uneven result. It becomes necessary to be aware of this subjective outcome because different perspectives induce disagreements that have to be dealt with and managed within the team members of the multidisciplinary practice of interaction design.

4. DECEITFUL INFORMATION

The openness of the methodology created an environment where empathy and positiveness about others ideas and work, made easier a process that was complex and challenging.

The written portraits were for most participants conceived as the most challenging. On the next stages, the previously mentioned empathy, in a collaborative process, paradoxically played against us: helping and cooperating with each other affected both the experiences of portraying and being portrayed, and ultimately the final result.

When portraying one another, we avoided being too intrusive. The usage of manners helped to lighten up the process of getting information. However, the conversations were exceeded in courtesy, and turned the exercise into a somewhat fake and awkward experience. This directly affected the end result, since we were only portrayed by our positive qualities. On the other hand, when being portrayed we all adopted an evasive behavior: there was a general feeling of discomfort when it came to give personal information to someone we just met. The direct consequence of this behavior was a clear pattern of answers characterized by omission and deceit.

4.1 Interviews as user research methods

Interviews are one of the most commonly used methods in the user research process [4]. It is important because it helps us understand potential users and costumers, how they behave and what they think. However, despite its benefits it can provide inaccurate information, mainly caused by self-reporting error. In addition to that, the answers are subject to the interpretation of the interviewers (see section 3.2), making it a less objective research method.

The success of an interview can be determined by many other different factors: from language and cultural differences, to the lack of rapport between interviewer and interviewee. One of

special interest for this paper is that it can be physically and emotionally invasive, as the description showed it happened in the exercise. In relation to that, the interviewees can experience the feeling that they are going to be judged by their answers, which explains and introduces the concept of deception.

Deceiving is an intentional activity [5], and it appears in order to conceal feelings and emotions, specially guilt. Furthermore, unmasking and revealing certain lies may humiliate the victim or a third party [3]. How we as designers can cope with research based information that is potentially deceitful, and justify our future work based on them? What is then the value of user research?

Verifications can be conducted to make sure all the information gathered in the interview is true. However, doubting and being skeptical when conducting interviews might not be the best way. Instead, creating awareness among interaction designers of the fact that the information gathered when interviewing may be deceitful, and trying to understand the reasons behind it, might result in more honest research conclusions for further stages of the design process.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The doubtfulness veracity of the information obtained by peer-interviewing each other was the first consequence of the exercise. Even though the project started with a clear peer-reflection approach, the final portraits showed a questionable representation of who we really are. Moreover, the final outcome of the exercise better portrayed the personality of the author rather than the subject, and was very much influenced by the media that was being used (text, photo, poster or motion graphics movie). Because of the nature of the exercise, crossing medias, the result ended up being four different interpretations of the same subject, as opposed to the expected single interpretation of each one of us.



Figure3. Frame of the portrait of the same group member as in Figure 2, using motion graphics as a media.

It also made clear the importance of having good group dynamics, as we continue feeling the benefits from it even months after the closure of the project. Having assigned critical friends was a good starting point for it, but they were not strictly maintained after the end of this specific project. On the contrary, stronger bonds emerged with other students that would give us assessment feedback in a trust-based kind of relationship.

The process also introduced the importance of self-reflection as a design practice. In the project described, having ourselves being portrayed by four different people in four different medias, created a sense of self-awareness. Interaction design is a very user-aware practice. Conducting user research means in many cases getting to know about personal stories of different people in specific circumstances. When reflecting about others, a feeling of empathy occurs, as we mirror ourselves in their stories. By means of self-reflection, we personally can better shape and define ourselves in the field of interaction design. This becomes fundamental, as it makes us question and helps us understand what we do, and the reason why we do it, to further understand our profession and our role in it.

Finally, this project served to create awareness of the subjectivity that is embedded in every decision we make as designers, and of the need to have a critical attitude throughout the whole design process.

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