

What is a Cultural Probe?

Cultural probes (also known as diary studies) provide a way of gathering information about people and their activities.

Unlike direct observation (like usability testing or traditional field studies), the technique allows users to self-report.

Information gathered from cultural probes is particularly useful early in the design process.

When are Cultural Probes appropriate?

Cultural probes are appropriate when you need to gather information from users with minimal influence on their actions, or when the process or event you're exploring takes place intermittently or over a long period.

For example, you could use cultural probes to explore how patients feel over the weeks or months following a surgical procedure, or how travelling salespeople manage their work.

How are Cultural Probes conducted?

Selected participants are briefed, given a kit of materials, and briefed about the requirement to record or note specific events, feelings or interactions over a specified period.

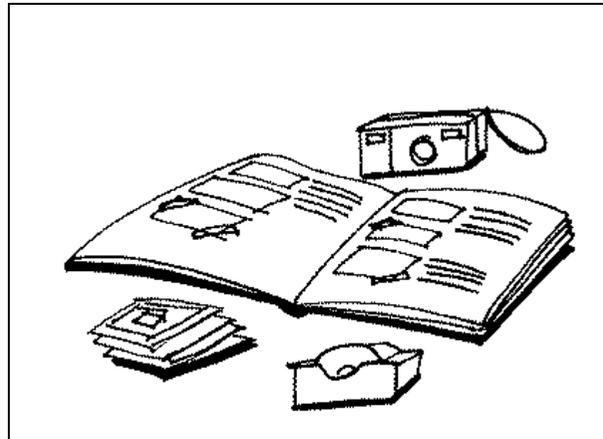
Typically, a follow-up interview is conducted at some point after the briefing session. This helps ensure that participants are actively engaged, and are collecting the required information.

At the end of the specified period, the materials are collected and analysed.

A de-briefing session is also typically conducted, in order to supplement, validate and otherwise

explore the information gathered by the participants.

Information gathered is then analysed, and documented in some fashion.



What's in a Cultural Probe Kit?

The contents of the kit depend on what type of information you want to gather, and on the materials with which participants are familiar.

Most kits contain a diary for recording comments or impressions. The kit may also contain a scrapbook, or this may be combined with the diary.

Other contents may include a camera with printing capability (an instant camera or digital camera with printer).

It may also contain items such as a voice recorder, pens, post-it notes, staplers and the like – anything that can help the user gather and record information.

People respond positively to attractive kits, so using good quality materials is worthwhile.

Recruitment

Recruiting is particularly important with cultural probes, since they rely on a large investment of participants' time.

Participants in cultural probes are expected to spend at least several hours during the course of the activity, so they are likely to require remuneration that is more significant than that for, say, usability testing. In addition, they usually cannot be monitored closely, so problems may not be picked up during the course of the activity.

Therefore, it's particularly important to ensure that you recruit the right participants, and that you monitor and support them as well as possible throughout the process.

The Right Data

You can help participants gather the right information by briefing them carefully, and by providing kits that prompt them for the types of information you want. However, you also need to take care not to unduly restrict the information they gather, in case you miss out on important insights.

Providing a contact phone number that they can feel free to call for assistance or advice throughout the data-gathering period is a good idea.

Analysis and Documentation

Use affinity diagramming to analyse the data gathered. The data is also likely to be useful in creating personas, and this provides a good communication medium. Making participants' notes and photos available to project team members also provides a good way to communicate findings.