

# Contextualizing Cultures for the Commercial World: Techniques for Presenting Field Research in Business Environments

Brooke E. Foucault  
Intel Corporation  
5200 NE Elam Young Parkway, HF3-96  
Hillsboro, OR 97124  
brooke.e.foucault@intel.com

## Abstract

This paper describes four new techniques for presenting ethnographic research to corporate product development teams. The techniques discussed are *Mood Boards* for quickly disseminating information from the field, *Culture Cards* for tangibly disseminating research results, *Culture-Scapes* for developing empathy during research presentations, and *Culture Capsules* for accessibly representing unfamiliar cultures within office spaces. All four techniques were used to effectively showcase field research conducted in Asia, as well as work conducted with various sub-cultures in the United States. Examples from these studies are used to demonstrate how the techniques ease understanding and incorporation of ethnographic research results in corporate product development teams. They are also used to highlight which techniques most successfully impacted product development and provided business value.

## 1 Introduction

Ethnography is increasingly receiving attention as a method for informing product design, and for helping the commercial world understand and develop for growing markets worldwide. However, the fit between ethnographic research reporting and corporate timetables is often tenuous, at best. Field reports, laden with lengthy descriptions of foreign cultures and scores of unfamiliar photographs, can be inconsumable by corporate personnel who are accustomed to slide-sets and executive summaries.

Aggressive commercial project schedules often necessitate quick turn-around of research results, regardless of methods or techniques. In order to stay relevant and respond to corporate pressures, ethnographic researchers in industry must develop techniques to quickly and easily distribute research results to project teams and key stakeholders. Without effective presentation techniques valuable insights from ethnographic research fail to make their way into product design and development.

Several authors have commented on the difficulty of making field research results tractable for product development teams, and many have offered compelling arguments for the increased time and expense (relative to more traditional lab-based studies) that is required for in situ research (Lewis, Mateas, Palmiter, & Lynch, 1996, Gilmore, 2002). Similarly, many authors have suggested iconic and diagrammatic representations for field results in order to make those results more accessible and useful (Diggins & Tolmic, 2003, Salvador, Bell, & Anderson, 1999). Although undeniably useful tools, the main criticism of these representations of field work is that the process of producing them invariably strips away some of the context that makes ethnographic

research so interesting, and compels development teams to commit to the extra time and expense required. In many cases, even the authors suggesting diagrammatic representations struggle to find a balance between reducing field results to a consumable volume and maintaining contextual richness.

Various authors have suggested techniques for representing field work without losing contextual richness. Most notably, Alan Cooper (1999) has made great strides in popularizing *Personas*, a tool for focusing designers on the most important needs and characteristics of target users by presenting them as real people with names, faces, and life stories. Although Cooper's personas were originally intended to aid software development, they have been repurposed for a variety of situations including web, product, and experience development.

However, Manning, Temkin, and Belanger (2003) found that personas alone are not sufficient for articulating research results within business organizations. In fact, they found that despite a growing enthusiasm for personas, only 25% of companies are using them. Of those that do use personas, one in three are dissatisfied with them. Although they are relatively more consumable than raw research results or lengthy reports, personas are not facilitating research integration to the greatest extent possible.

In the following sections, we describe four new techniques for presenting ethnographic research in business settings. The techniques discussed are *Mood Boards*, *Culture Cards*, *Culture Scapes*, and *Culture Capsules*, and each is an attempt to represent field results while maintaining contextual richness. Many of these techniques draw inspiration from research methods such as Gaver & Dunne's (1999) *Cultural Probes* that are designed to capture the richness of everyday life. Cues from these methods combined with the representational techniques discussed in the design ethnography literature led to the graphic, immersive representational models discussed below.

## **2 Mood Boards**

The Mood Board technique was developed in response to pressure to demonstrate early qualitative research results as quickly as possible. The term "mood board" was adopted from the fashion industry, where designers collect and assemble swatches of fabric, color chips, photographs, and other materials to inspire upcoming clothing lines. Similarly, research Mood Boards are the assembly of raw research results in a physical format for use as inspiration early in development cycles. Typically included in Mood Boards are such materials as quotes from interviews, excerpts or facts from secondary research, photographs or images of project-related people, places, and things, and field artifacts such as food packages, fabric swatches, and other iconography. Generally, these items are arranged and printed or attached to a large poster-sized board, although they can also be printed and assembled in boxes or other containers as appropriate.

We have found this technique to be especially effective at exposing development teams to interesting and unexpected nuances about cultures or populations of users, and for exposing product designers to the design aesthetics of different populations. Since they represent results that are not yet refined or synthesized and can therefore be presented to development teams much earlier than normal, we have had great success in using Mood Boards to inspire very early directional decisions for product development. In our experience, this kind of directional influencing works best when several potential product development paths and/or user needs are characterized in Mood Boards. Then, development teams can compare the relative importance or strategic fit of each development path and increase their chances for success by choosing

appropriate targets very early in the project. For example, for a project to design technology for US elders, we developed a variety of Mood Boards to represent different areas for product intercepts including Elderly Fitness, Urban Elderly, and Fraud Against Elders. Our development team used these Mood boards to compare the potential for technology-based solutions in each need area, and selected the area that seemed to represent the best fit between the user needs and solutions we had to offer.

### **3 Culture Cards**

Many organizations have experimented with the use of cards to inspire product design. IDEO, a Palo Alto, California-based design firm popularized the notion with their “Method Cards,” a deck of cards designed to coax developers to think creatively about their users (Coupland, 2003). In our own organization anthropologists, including Dr. Genevieve Bell and others, used similar cards to communicate facts and images about various cultures and countries visited during field research trips. Using these cards as inspiration, we developed the Culture Cards technique for tangibly disseminating relevant field results to design teams. Culture Cards are physical cards made by printing short (one-two sentence) research facts, user descriptions, user needs, or interesting field photographs on materials of cultural significance – greeting cards or handmade paper, for example. Typically, a deck of 20-30 cards is created shortly after returning from the field to highlight key findings for product development. More motivational than prescriptive, decks of cards are distributed to product designers and other development team members to inspire culturally sensitive and appropriate product design decisions.

By coupling relevant facts, quotes, and images with iconography of cultural significance, Culture Cards serve two purposes. First, they orient designers to information of particular significance for product design by presenting it in consumable chunks. Second, they cue designers in to appropriate aesthetics through cultural artefacts. Because of the significance of this coupling, we have found that Culture Cards are the most effective method for communicating surprising or unexpected information about cultures unfamiliar to the design team. For example, after returning from field work in schools in the People’s Republic of China, we developed a set of Culture Cards using images, facts, and quotes about the Chinese educational system, all printed on pages from children’s language learning books. Our product designers, in particular, found the Culture Cards to provide a useful overview of key design considerations for Asian children, and they often used the cards in brainstorm and working sessions to inspire design decisions and directions.

### **4 Culture Scapes**

The third technique, Culture Scapes, uses artifacts and simulations to create multi-sensory research reports for project stakeholders. Smell, sound, texture, and flavor from the target culture are used to add dimension to research findings, engage stakeholders, and meaningfully direct them to the most important results. We developed this technique because, like many researchers, we were disappointed in the decontextualization that occurred as we tried to communicate field research results using the tools of business, namely PowerPoint slides, executive summaries, and conference-room meetings. Furthermore, we found it very difficult to communicate many cultural concepts with images and words alone. Because many of the findings relevant for product design are complex interplays of environment, culture, and aesthetics, we felt it important to include elements of these experiences in our research reports. Culture Scapes appeal to many senses at once and become living snapshots that enable stakeholders to more richly experience target cultures and relevant research findings.

In order for the Culture Scapes technique to be truly successful, researchers must be mindful of how they will use the technique while they are in the field. While conducting field research, we frequently ask ourselves, “Which sensory experiences are particularly relevant for product design?” “What artifacts do I need in order to recreate the relevant aspects of those experiences for the project team?” We then collect and assemble those artifacts to recreate sensory experiences to supplement our reports. For example, while investigating the use of mobile technologies in Singapore, we were struck by the oppressiveness of the heat and humidity there, and its effect on technology use outdoors. To communicate this finding to the product development team, we conducted the first development session in a room that was heated to 90 degrees Fahrenheit, and humidified to 85% humidity. The uncomfortable project team could not help but consider the implications of heat and humidity on product design!

## **5 Culture Capsules**

The final technique, Culture Capsules, discussed previously in Foucault, Russell, Bell (2004), uses images and artifacts to physically re-create elements of researched cultures. Just as museum installations offer glimpses into other lives and times, Culture Capsules simulate pared-down realities of the physicality of other cultures. Using photographs from the field as a guide, Culture Capsules are created by assembling appropriate artifacts and arranging them to mimic a physical space in the target culture. Typically, specific rooms or sections of rooms are created in order to inspire culturally and spatially appropriate product design. These rooms serve as liminal spaces that encourage designers to distance themselves from their personal physical realities while they think about culturally-appropriate product design. The artifacts and spatial arrangements served as prompts and mnemonics for an altered mind-set.

We use Culture Capsules in order to inspire culturally and spatially appropriate product design. They are most relevant and useful when spatial considerations significantly influence product design decisions. For instance, we created a Culture Capsule to mimic the space constraints of a typical Chinese home as we were developing computers for Chinese families. Referencing photographs from field work in the People’s Republic of China, we collected important cultural objects including books, jewellery boxes, political and religious paraphernalia, and technology and arranged them with appropriately-proportioned desks, chairs, and other furniture to demonstrate the space available for computer components in a typical home office area. In addition to providing relevant cues in an accessible way, The Culture Capsule was enormously popular as a brainstorming site, and a project showcase.

## **6 Conclusion**

The four techniques described above are intended to be context-rich alternatives to typical industry research summaries and overviews. Each strikes a balance between communicating the contextual richness of ethnographic research with the quick-turn around and easy consumption required for research to be relevant to product development teams. Although each technique has strengths and weaknesses, we have used all with great success on various product development projects. Mood Boards are an effective means of communicating preliminary research findings so that field work can inspire product design earlier in the development cycle. Culture Cards cue designers in to the most relevant findings, while offering aesthetic cues for appropriate design. Culture Scapes contextualize research presentations, and effectively and efficiently communicate complex environmental, cultural, and aesthetic interplays. And, Culture Capsules showcase the physicality

of life in unfamiliar cultures so that development teams may experience different realities and respond with culturally appropriate product designs.

These techniques are presented to demonstrate how ethnographic research can maintain relevance within the constraints of corporate product development cycles. Our hope is that the presentation here is viewed not only as a methodological intervention, but also as a more general point about the ways in which ethnographic work can and should be made valuable to a business audience, without compromising the integrity and nuance of the field data.

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