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Being user-oriented: Convergences, divergences, and the potentials for systematic dialogue between disciplines and between researchers, designers, and providers

Sponsored by SIG/USE and SIG/HCI

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Abstract

The challenge this panel addresses is drawn from intersecting literature reviews and critical commentaries focusing on: 1) user studies in multiple fields; and 2) the difficulties of bringing different disciplines and perspectives to bear on user-oriented research, design, and practice. ¹

The challenge is that while we have made some progress in collaborative work, we have some distance to go to become user-oriented in inter-disciplinary and inter-perspective ways. The varieties of our approaches and solutions are, as some observers suggest, an increasing cacophony. One major difficulty is that most discussions are solution-oriented, offering arguments of this sort -- "if only we addressed users in this way..." Each solution becomes yet another addition to the cacophony.

This panel implements a central approach documented for its utility by communication researchers and long used by communication mediators and negotiators -- that of focusing not on communication but rather on meta-communication: communicating about communication. The intent in the context of this panel is to help us refocus attention from too frequent polarizations between alternative solutions to the possibility of coming to understand what is behind the alternatives and where they point to experientially-based convergences and divergences, both of which might potentially contribute to synergies.

The background project for this panel comes from a series of in-depth interviews with expert researchers, designers, and providers in three field groupings -- library and information science; human computer interaction/information technology; and communication and media studies. One set of interviews involved 5-hour focus groups with directors of academic and public libraries serving 44 colleges and universities in central Ohio; the second involved one-on-one interviews averaging 50 minutes with 81 nationally-internationally known experts in the 3 fields, 25-27 interviews per field. Using Dervin's Sense-Making Methodological approach to interviewing, the expert interviews of both kinds asked each interviewee: what he/she considered to be the big unanswered questions about users and what explained why the questions have not been answered; and, what he/she saw as hindering versus helping in attempts to communicate about users across disciplinary and perspective gaps. ²

The panel consists of six teams, two from each field. Prior to the panel presentation at ASIST, each team will have read the set of interviews and completed impressionistic essays of what patterns and themes they saw as emerging. At this stage, team members will purposively not homogenize their differences and most will write solo-authored essays that will be placed on a web-site accessible to ASIST members prior to the November meeting. In addition, at least one systematic analysis will be completed and available online. ³

At the ASIST panel, each team's leader will present a brief and intentionally provocative impressionist account of what his/her team came to understand about our struggles communicating across fields and perspectives about users. Again, each team will purposively not homogenize its own differences in viewpoints, but rather highlight them as fodder for discussion. A major purpose will be to invite audience members to join the panel in discussion. At least 20 minutes will be left open for this purpose.

Rationale

Panel Rationale Despite disagreements on how to conceptualize users, and whether any conceptualization of the user as an entity is any longer useful, there is little doubt that being user-oriented has become a universal imperative. Every field with a mandated audience, by whatever name -- users, customers, patrons, patients, consumers, clients, readers, viewers - has expressed this concern. Each field is now conducting its own brand of user studies, using a variety of data gathering techniques -- user surveys, transaction log analyses, usability studies, in-depth interviews, journaling, and so on. The call for user-oriented research marches hand in hand with calls for user-oriented design, service, and practice.

In the midst of these movements, there are bursts of attention to the communication problematics inherent in bridging gaps between differing fields (e.g. communication, library and information science, and human computer interaction) and differing applications (e.g. research, design, service, and practice). These gaps are based in how these fields conceptualize and study users and how to incorporate input from those studies into design, service, and practice. In some views, the three targeted fields -- library and information science; human computer interaction/information technology; and communication and media studies -- are sister disciplines and, thus do not offer a robust ground for this dialogue. This, however, is a widely contested conclusion. Some would charge that the fields do a lot of talking but have little capacity to hear each other.

A cursory survey of the 43 papers and 46 panels listed in the 2005 ASIST proceedings showed that at least half focused, in whole or part, on bridging gaps of some kind in the advance toward being more user oriented. Every such presentation is anchored in its own field/discipline with its own intended application and usually in its own specific discourse community. Discourse communities usually consist of smaller networks of scholars or practitioners who have a consensual agreement and often unstated assumptions (ontological, epistemological,

teleological, axiological, methodological) at their core, which drive their use of concepts, definitions, methods, analytic approaches, and interpretations.

An underlying assumption behind all these efforts to bridge gaps in fields/perspectives is that more time spent communicating across differences will enable gap-bridging. Rarely, however, is there communication (i.e. meta-communication) about this fundamental assumption. As a result, these efforts exhibit a number of usually unstated dialectical tensions. In the growing body of work in the applied social sciences focusing on issues of communicating across disciplines and perspectives (Dervin, 2003), one begins to see these tensions explicated. As but one example, typical attempts to cross disciplinary and perspective borders in the quest for being user-oriented have exhibited these tensions:

1. The efforts to often advance in isolation and as if being user-oriented is a new invention.
2. The typical approach proposes solutions. The solutions, being themselves anchored in particular discourse communities, nest within them all the hidden assumptions and agreements that are characteristic of their discourse communities. In essence, the solutions add to the cacophony.
3. The typical approach focuses on ecumenical inclusivity of differences. The result is usually the development of a shopping list of concepts, definitions, methods, and even conclusions and interpretations yielding a supermarket approach to inter-disciplinarity/perspectivity.
4. When bridging differences is addressed, the most common approach is a call for translation -- a system that would allow moving between the vocabularies of one discourse community and that of others. Communication research has, however, documented that translation as a bridging strategy, while useful in some contexts, is at best a rudimentary strategy useful for only the most simplistic of communication gaps.
5. An unstated assumption is often the quest for "best practices" as a means of bridging gaps. Again, research in both communication and education suggests that learning and understanding is itself paradoxically more successful when focused not on successes but on analyzing failures in situated practices and on the learning and change made possible as a result.
6. When the communication involved in attempting to cross disciplinary and perspective borders moves from translation as a strategy to a call for mutual understanding, usually collaborators are instructed that they need to listen well, be empathetic and patient, and allow sufficient time. Research has shown, however, that this array of "soft" communication directives too often end up reducing capacities for crossing borders to the personality strengths of the few rather than as systematic sets of performance options available to all.

Research in the field of communication suggests, that we can do much more -- that we can design procedures, structures, and systems that assist border crossing.

Focus and plan

The purpose of this panel is to advance our understanding of what is involved in bringing multiple disciplines and perspectives to bear on being user-oriented in research, design, and service. The panel will focus on approaching the crossing of borders between disciplines and perspectives as a dialogic imperative -- a mandate to invent strategies not for treating communication as a problem that can be solved but rather as a problematic that requires systematic and iteratively used gap-bridging strategies that treat communication as communication, as process requiring dialogue and interaction which can be systematically guided for greater effectiveness and efficiency.

While the panelists will be presenting impressionist and provocative essays as a result of their reviews of the interviews with experts in the three field groupings (library and information science; human computer interaction and information technology; and, communication and media studies), the panel's primary purpose will be to provide a basis for engaging the panel audience in helping us advance our understanding of what communication inventions we might apply and/or create in order to be user-oriented in inter-disciplinary and inter-perspective ways.

As background for the panel, the collaborators will have reviews the set of qualitative interviews of researchers, designers, and providers in the three field groupings -- library and information science, human computer interaction and information technology, and communication and media studies. The interviews used the same set of questions, designed to tease out commentary addressing both convergences and divergences in how informants look at being user-oriented and their understandings of struggles and successes in implementing inter-disciplinary and inter-perspective collaboration. The interviews used Dervin's Sense-Making Methodology approach to interviewing, designed to advance communication to a deeper more situated and experientially-anchored level.

Figure 1 below provides the basic instrument that was adapted to the experiential perspective of each informant.

<p style="text-align: center;">A. ABOUT USERS/ AUDIENCES AND THEIR USES OF LIBRARY/ INFORMATION / COMMUNICATION/ MEDIA SYSTEMS</p> <p>1. What are the big unanswered questions about users/ audiences and their uses of _____ systems? FOR EACH: What explains why we do not yet have answers? How would an answer facilitate of help?</p> <p>2. What are the biggest challenges the advance of electronic information/communications/library systems present to understanding and serving users/audiences well? FOR EACH: What would help or facilitate facing this challenge?</p> <p>3. What bugs you about user/audience research? [OR: What would make user/audience research more useful?] FOR EACH: How would a change help?</p> <p style="text-align: center;">B. ABOUT THE MULTIPLE FIELDS/ PERSPECTIVES BROUGHT TO BEAR ON USER/ AUDIENCE RESEARCH</p> <p>4. How have these multiplicity of approaches hindered? FOR EACH: If you had a magic wand, what would help?</p> <p style="text-align: center;">5. How have these multiplicity of approaches helped?</p> <p style="text-align: center;">C. ABOUT THE GAPS BETWEEN RESEARCHERS AND PRACTITIONERS/DESIGNERS</p> <p>6. How have the differences between practice/design and research hindered? FOR EACH: If you had a magic wand, what would help?</p> <p style="text-align: center;">7. How have the differences between practice/design and research helped?</p> <p style="text-align: center;">D. AN IDEAL USER STUDY</p> <p>8. If you could wave a magic wand and had no restraints on money, what would be your design for an ideal user study?</p>
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Figure 1: The basic structure of the in-depth expert interview

The proposed design for this panel is as follows. Each panel presentation will come from a team of analysts -- 2 teams each representing each of the three focal field groupings. Preparatory to the panel, each team will have completed one or more impressionistic essays on themes they saw emerging from the 1250 transcription pages of expert interviews. Guiding foci for these essays include summarizing what the experts said, comparing and contrasting barriers and struggles between perspectives and disciplines, and teasing out explicit suggestions for communication strategies that might make gap-bridgings more successful. In addition, preparatory to the panel presentation, at least one of the teams will also have used this set of impressionist essays as a basis for preparing a thematic analysis of the interviews. These impressionist essays and analyses will be made available to ASIST members prior to the panel presentation on the IMLS project website. (c)

At the panel presentation itself, each team leader will talk for 8-10 minutes on what his/her team teased out from the expert interviews and about the differences in how his/her own team members made sense of the database. The 8-10 minute talks - one from each of the six teams -- will be designed to be provocative, to raise questions, and to inspire participation from the panel audience. At least 20 minutes will be left open for engaging the panel audience in helping us advance our understanding of what is involved in being user-oriented in inter-disciplinary and inter-perspective ways. There are also plans to initiate an online site for the dialogue to continue after ASIST06.

Notes

¹ The rationale for this panel comes from a series of reviews focusing on the search for coherence in user-studies and the challenges of interdisciplinarity. See, in particular, as examples: Brewer, 1999; Carter, 2003; Dervin, 2003; Dervin & Clark, 2003; Hjørland, 1996; Olaisen, 1996; Palmer, 1999; Sullivan, 1996; Vakkari, 1997; Wilson, 2000; Zuo, 1997. [Back](#)

2

The original impetus for conducting expert interviews focusing on the potentials for dialogue across disciplinary and research-design-practice divides was embedded as one purpose in the "Sense-making the information confluence" project. Funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Resources, Ohio State University, and the Online Computer Library Center, the project is being implemented by Brenda Dervin (Professor of Communication and Joan N. Huber Fellow of Social & Behavioral Science, Ohio State University) as Principal Investigator; and Lynn Silipigni Connaway (OCLC

Consulting Research Scientist III) and Chandra Prahba (OCLC Senior Research Scientist), as Co-Investigators. More information can be obtained at: <http://imlsosuoclcproject.jcomm.ohio-state.edu/> The original project design incorporated two avenues for getting dialogic input. One involved focus groups with representatives from academic and public libraries serving the 44 colleges and universities in central Ohio; the other involved interviews with nationally known experts in the three target fields - library and information science; human computer interaction and information technology; communication and media studies. The original intent was to complete about 50 interviews in total. The final total that informs this panel includes 31 local experts and 81 national/international. The dialogue interview base was enlarged because initial interviews brought to the fore such a wide diversity of views and such animated interest by the interviewees that the OSU team launched the interviewing project as a larger project drawing on volunteer independent studies students from five different OSU departments and on willing colleagues and their student teams from four other universities. [Back](#)

³ As documents come available from this project, they will be placed online at:

http://imlsosuoclcproject.jcomm.ohio-state.edu/imls_papers/asist06panel_list.html [Back](#)

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