

Understanding the Characteristics of UX Malaysia UXD Community of Practice (Cop): A Participants' Observation

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Abstract:

This study reports on the research involving the use of a participant observation approach to understand the characteristics of UX Malaysia, a community of practice for user experience design (UXD). This qualitative approach provides insight into the behaviour, characteristics and attitude of the members of the community of practice which they may not express when other research approaches are used. The results reveal deep insight about the characteristics of the observed community of practice.

Keywords: *Community of practice, participant observation, user experience design*

I. INTRODUCTION

Notably, the term “user experience design (UXD)” in this study has been coined to label the process of achieving hedonic experience that goes beyond pragmatic usability (Hassenzahl et al., 2008; Unger & Chandler, 2009; Hobbs et al., 2010). As a comparison, traditional user centred design (UCD) has focused more on the cognitive aspects which underestimate the influence of emotions in design (Spillers, 2004; Khalid, 2006; Benyon 2010). UXD applies UCD techniques and interactive design methods in the development process with the inclusion of hedonic portions and emotion in design

process (Boersma, 2004; Davis, 2011, 2012). Considering the various definitions available and the relevance to this study, the researchers chose to focus on the people who produce systems, products or services with the intention of achieving both usability and user experience (Bevan, 2009; ISO 9241-210, 2010; Davis, 2012). The labels of professionals whose work focus was on fitness-for-purpose during the ergonomics age have duly changed in line with technology waves as well as HCI directions (Karat & Karat, 2003; Bark et al., 2006; Isbister&Höök, 2009; Kolko, 2011; Norman, 2010b; Putnam & Kolko, 2012).

The definition of experience varies in history and meaning (Jay, 2005; Hassenzahl et al., 2013). However, there are two world views that positioned experience from a designer's perspective: one is related to the phenomenological/pragmatist view while the other was inspired by experimental psychology (Law et al., 2007). Phenomenological or pragmatist experience is related to a formation of attitude in desires and purpose (Kolb, 1984). Experience is "felt" and strongly emphasised in the situation and uniqueness of the experience itself (McCarthy & Wright, 2004). Any experience that does not impact on expectation would not be categorised as an experience (Kolb, 1984). On the other hand, experimental psychology segments experience into single components such as motivation, trust, hedonics and fun (Law et al., 2007). This is in response to the development of IT and digital media – mobile media, social media, ubiquitous computing and pervasive computing; meaning that HCI is shifting from the information world to the experience world (Jensen, 2013).

Alben (1996) defined experience as "the way (a product) feels in their hands, how well they understand how it works, how they feel about it while they're using it, how well it serves its purpose, and how well it fits into the entire context in which they are using it". Forlizzi and Ford (2000) categorised experience in three ways: experience as a whole, an experience and experience as a story. Experience happens during consciousness and is shown by self-talk or self-narration of a person when

passing this stage. An experience is an episode, a chunk of time that one went through with sights and sounds, feelings and thought, motives and actions (Hassenzahl et al., 2013). This type of experience has a beginning and an end, and changes the user or the context of the experience as a result (Forlizzi & Ford, 2000). Experience as a story is stored in memory, labelled and relived, communicated to others, and sometimes emerges from the dialogue of a person with their world through action (Hassenzahl et al., 2010). McCarthy and Wright (2004) identified four threads of experience: (1) compositional; (2) emotional; (3) spatio-temporal and (4) sensual. Composition refers to the narrative structure, action possibility, plausibility, consequences and explanations of actions. Emotional refers to the value judgments which relate to the user's needs and desires (McCarthy & Wright, 2004); it tends to be kept in the mind. Spatio-temporal experience draws attention to the quality of place and time on a user's affection and willingness to repeat such experience. Sensual experience relies on the visceral character of experience such as the look and feel of a mobile phone. Ultimately, experience design is an approach that focuses on the design of a pleasurable and meaningful moment which is embedded into and mediated through material such as products (Hassenzahl et al., 2013). The central focus of experience design is to achieve a user's happiness and wellbeing (Sääksjärvi & Hellén, 2013) (see Hussain et al., 2016; 2017a; 2017b; 2017d; 2018).

This study employed participant observation as an approach to capture the characteristics of a user experience design (UXD) community of practice. Observation of a group of people is implied if the selected group can be categorised as a community of practice based on their behavior during their meetings. Observation is qualitative approach used in getting insight into a group’s salient behavior and characteristics. Observation can be both passive and active. In a passive observation, the researcher participates in the activities of a group without controlling the members of the group. However, in an active observation, the researcher asks questions and controls the flow of information. The community of practice (CoP) plays a vital role as a platform for learning and improving a practice. It is seen as important to the development process leading to the formation of disciplines, even though the community members are not explicitly teachers by nature (Hobbs et al., 2010). Data gathered from the observation are interpreted and given a meaningful construction. The theory of constructivism argues that humans generate knowledge and meaning through their experience in the world. The central concern of constructivism is to know how humans create knowledge and how they learn. Software development is an intellectual task, subject to the effects of cognitive and motivational processes.

II. METHODOLOGY

Observation can be in two forms: first, passive observation where the researcher participates in the activities without controlling the members; and

second, active observation where the researcher asks questions and controls the flow of information. The second method can also be considered as a focus group session as the researchers lead the discussion. In this study, the passive types of observation was used to study the members of UX Malaysia to understand them in terms of their needs, goals and why they attended the gathering (motivation). Their levels of knowledge in user experience, and skills in other relevant domains, were identified. Attitudes, language and behaviour of the members were observed, written up in notes and recorded on video. In this way, explicit characteristics of practice were identified through the language used and the issues raised by the participants. Attitudes were analysed through discussions of scenarios. All other utterances were included during the observation to identify agreement and disagreement of the participants on issues being discussed.

Table 1: Observation method used

Observations Date	Objectives	Number of Participants	Data Collection Technique
10 October 2012	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To identify the characteristics of UX Malaysia attendees 2. To understand why the participants attended UX Malaysia 	19	Video-recorded and transcribed on paper.

It can be seen from Table 1 that participant observation was conducted on the 10 October 2012. The aim was to complement the findings from an earlier netnography approach (Hussain et al., 2019c), that the online community has similar concerns and problems relating to practising UX. The objective was to investigate whether UX Malaysia represents the characteristics of the community of practice. Participants' observations were video recorded and stored on a hard disk for future retrieval for reference. In order to transcribe the observations, the researchers watched and listened to the recorded video more than twice to obtain the main ideas of each participant in every session. These observations were performed during the UX Malaysia meetings. In the controlled session, the researcher was able to assess and listen to the participants. The participant observations focused on the interaction between the moderator and the participants and among the participants. To further investigate various aspects of the on-going interaction, a reflective dialogue between the observers and participants was performed. The observation notes and reflective dialogues were video recorded and a verbatim transcription made. The session of observation was manually transcribed by the researchers.

The data from observing participants was coded by social meanings: intentions, motives, beliefs, rules and values (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). To maintain the reliability of the results, the researchers acted as functioning members whom the group members recognised as

those conducting research. This was done by the announcing the researchers' presence in the group and requesting permission from the other members to conduct research. During the observation, the researchers requested permission to use the video recording of their activities during each meeting as a study sample. In order to maintain the natural setting, the researchers participated in all discussions and activities. In Table 2, P1_OBS1 represents the observation session for participant 1.

Table 2: Labels for data analysis matrices

Method of Data Collection	Meaning	Explanation
Observations	OBS1: Observation 1 OBS2: Observation 2	Data collected via observation on 10 October 2012 Data collected via observation on 14 November 2012 P1_OBS1 = Participant 1 for Observation 1 P1_OBS2= Participant 1 for observation 2

III. RESULTS

The aim of participant observations was to identify if UX Malaysia can be categorised as a community of practice (CoP) according to their goals, meeting intentions, background profession and perhaps level of UX knowledge. For this purpose, the researchers had requested permission from the organisers to record the meetings. Meetings were casual rather than formal gatherings, and attendees were practitioners in their own domains. The

meetings were video recorded and field notes were taken to complement points missed during recording. Two types of data analysis were performed on the observations. First, the recorded video was reviewed over three times to gain an overall impression, then processed and transcribed. This included informal utterances such “hmm” and “err” in order to assess the participants’ agreement and acceptance of the issue raised (Roter&Larson, 2002). This is also known as paralinguistics study in a non-verbal behavior (Yammiyavar et al., 2008). Observations were conducted on different occasions, the meetings takes place on the second Wednesday of each month. This observation was passive, where the researchers did not ask questions..

Observation 1: Investigating the Domain Interest

The first observation was conducted on 10 October 2012 during a - session from

7pm to 10pm. The venue was Mindvalley office, Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur, the 26th floor of a commercial building comprising different offices on different floors. The organiser of the event was approached and briefly told what the study was about. After a verbal agreement, the participants were also told about the study and permission gained to video record the session. There were 19 participants at the start, although one left after the introduction because he thought he was in the wrong meeting. 18 participants were recorded and included for data analysis.

Demographics of Participants:

Three participants had been involved in the previous netnography study (Hussain et al., 2019c), identified by their name and Facebook account in the UX Malaysia Group. 22% of the participants (4 out of 18) were female and 78% (15) male.

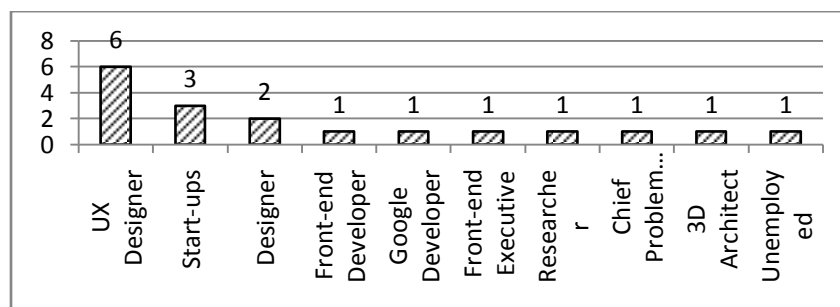


Figure 1: UX job title by participant during the first observation

Figure 1 shows the frequency of participants with a UX job title. Six had the job title UX Designer. One participant claimed her job title had evolved from 2D Designer, to Web Designer, then UX Designer. Another claimed to be hired by profession or job label and another was a

‘junior’ UX Designer. One UX Designer was a freelancer and another was the founder of UX Malaysia working with the CodeArmy Company. It can be inferred that the profession was very new, and even if the people were recruited by the job label, they were not necessarily experienced designers.

Only one UX Designer had been working for about 5 years and could be considered as experienced, but she is based in Hong Kong, not Malaysia, so her company cannot be included in the number of Malaysian companies employing UX Designers at that time. One female participant was a freelance UI/UX Mobile Designer and the other was a university UX Researcher. Three male participants worked as UX Designers. There were three startup owners. Two participants mentioned their job title as “Designer”: one, whose background education was Digital Media, started his career as a Flash Designer, then became a Motion Grapher; the second had a background in advertising

and claimed to have strength in branding and art direction. One participant identified himself as a Front-End Developer his job having evolved from back-end to front-end developer but still heavily focused on coding development. The remaining six participants were a Google Developer who claimed to be a UI/UX Android Designer; a Senior Front-end Executive; a Researcher; a Chief Problem Solver; a 3D Architect; and Unemployed. The 3D Architect Designer had come to see what UX was all about, as he was exploring new fields; He had learnt about the meeting from friends’ invitation to join.

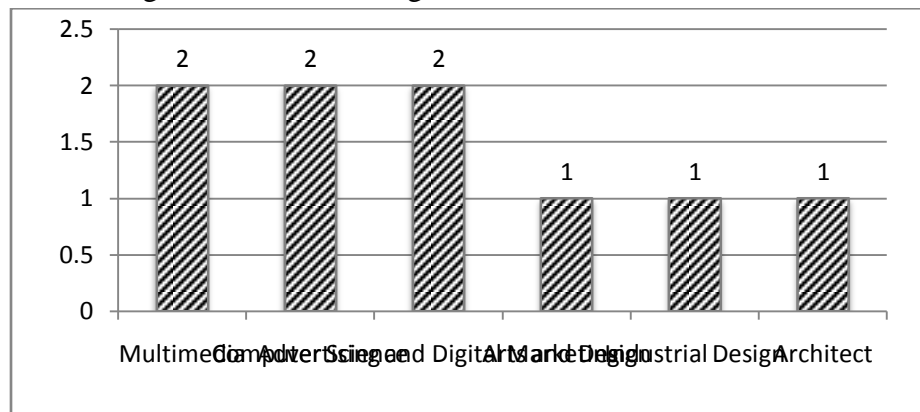


Figure 2: Educational background of some of the participants

Five people were working in the same company, and four in another. Educational background was not investigated, although when they introduced themselves, some participants mentioned it. Figure 2 shows these: two participants each had a background in Multimedia, Computer Science, and Advertising and Digital Marketing, while three other individuals came from Arts and Design, Industrial Design and Architecture.

Characteristics of CoP: The practice of UX can be assessed by identifying the action and motivation categories of passion or practice, by knowledge but not practice, by passion but not practice, or by knowledge as in Table 3. In Table 3 the excerpts were coded using first cycle coding and second cycle coding (Saldana, 2012). In Table 3, most participants were passionate about how to include end-user feedback in the development process. This could be seen

from the words they used to describe why they participated in UX Malaysia meetings, and what they were doing in relation to UX practice. However, the participants lacked the knowledge to define UX, just as the discipline itself is known to have an ambiguous definition. There may be some guidance in the order of importance of needs to be fulfilled outlined in Maslow’s (1968) hierarchical model.

Table 3: Coding examples for UX practice assessment

Excerpt	First Cycle Coding	Second Cycle Coding
Enthusiast in Android UI/UX I like UX It’s quite interesting “...trying to learn every day” “I came to understand about UX and it’s quite interesting so far” My personal agenda is to help and have a community to support all start ups coming up with proper usability and proper UX Doing towards UX and mobile	Enthusiast Like Interesting Learn every day Interesting Helping Towards	UX practitioners are passionate, interested and motivated to learn and help end users towards better user experience
Not much to do with UX, Product Start-up It’s hard to find someone who knows about UX I almost gave up on UI/UX because dealing with clients is just crazy	Lack of UX knowledge Hard to find Gave up, dealing with clients is crazy	Constraints in limited knowledge, skillset and clients’ attitude.
We have lots of companies doing	Potential of UX	Share the resources

software, web development where UX would be a vital role At least there is a hope that we are advancing to the global standard The boss say it’s going to be a lot of UX in future Malaysia’s the hub of UX in ASEAN “..to have a community of UX practitioners that would help create awareness, support and establish UX in Malaysia”	Hope for UX Boss sees benefits of UX Helping create awareness, support and establishing UX	among CoP and improve current practice by helping each other.
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A startup is a “temporary organisation designed to discover a business model that begins with no process, no culture and no repeatable business model (Davila et al., 2010). Two of the three startup owners identified themselves as non-UXD practitioners. “I am not a UX person at all. I never graduated. Partly because my main core is that I ran two startups. One is more towards the social end, where I can do digital marketing and the other is more towards this area of UX, mobile and things like that. So, I am here just to find out how hard is it to find someone who knows UX” (P15_OBS1). This last excerpt implies one of the characteristics possessed by members of a community of practice: finding anyone of similar interest. Running a startup takes time and requires experience in the field. This startup owner mentioned that he was not new to the marketing and digital industries and had foreseen the trend towards mobile technologies. He said that it was nearly impossible to find people who practised UX in the local context. The

second had high-profile job experience at IDEO but confessed to not being enough of a UX person. He had initiated webcamp (Webcamp KL Community) in collaboration with Singapore and many other countries, besides conducting training and mentoring for website designers. He explained that his experience with UX began when he worked as a user researcher at IDEO: “I am not a UX designer though I did finish art school in London. My start with UX began since I was a user researcher at IDEO. So that’s how I got into UX” (P14_OBS1). 26% of the participants (5 out of 18) admitted that they were not UX people. However, according to their background profiles, all of them believed in UX and supported it by providing resources for other people to practise UX, such as providing venues, financial support and so on.

Some of the participants claimed that UX is an evolving job title. They had just transformed into the UX label, but basically all were practitioners in their own fields. For example, one participant identified himself as having worked in IT since 1999 in the UK. Another had worked in Astro (a media-based company in Malaysia) for seven years before deciding to become a UX practitioner, while yet another had just begun to learn about UX even though his job was in branding direction and art. There was also one participant who had been working as UX Designer in different countries: “I’ve been in UX for about 5 years. I used to work with [x] but now I am working as a user experience researcher in JobsDB, Hong Kong. If you are in UX, you’ll probably see my post asking people for interviews. That’s

one of my focuses. Last year, I was doing research on Malaysians; how jobseekers in Malaysia find jobs, their behaviours and things like that. Also, I used to work in Singapore, China and Korea. I lived in Singapore for three years to pursue my master’s while working at an agency” (P4_OBS1). This participant had acquired the job title UX Designer while working in other countries. She had a Master’s qualification and her attendance at the meeting demonstrated her passion for UX. She also expressed her belief in UX by promoting it to other members, one of whom commented: “I am actually an architect in 3D. UX is nothing to do with it. I just came because she invited me to see ... you know ... sort of to expose myself to other industries as well. So, you know, I heard it’s quite interesting to see what this is about” (P4_OB1). Some participants were novices in UX but an expert in their own domain and profession; for example, the following excerpt comes from a developer who was involved in the design and development process; “I went through most of the spectrum of development from designing, graphic design to back-end programming, system registration and front-end development. I first thought of UX as a problem when I realised that making an interface efficient for a computer was different from making an interface efficient for a human being to use. This was because when I do back-end programming, trying to apply the efficiencies and optimisation for front-end development was actually very different and now we have to consider a lot of things and picture a lot of questions,

intentions, hidden agendas, and the user using your applications. That's how it is" (P18_OBS1).

This participant was an experienced back-end developer who had just become a front-end developer. He found that the tasks and job responsibilities between developer and designer were different, emphasising that design and development for machines and for human beings is not the same. Hence, further exploration should be done to differentiate between designing for machines (programming) and for humans (user interface), and the line between back-end and front-end developer drawn clearly. During the introductory session, many participants repeatedly stressed how they could offer help in their specialised areas to other participant attendees. The following excerpt illustrates the attitudes of a participant of the community of practice who was willing to share experiences, knowledge and ways of addressing problems in the UX domain: "I actually founded AndroidUIUX.com. So, enthusiasts in Android and anything design, anything with android design could come to me" (P1_OBS1). The mission in terms of CoP values was clearly presented by the moderator during the closing session. On a personal note, the moderator said: "Part of my personal agenda is to have a community and to support all up-and-coming startups in proper usability and proper user experience" (P10_OBS1). Some of the UX Designers were newly recruited to the profession and liked their jobs, being very keen to learn about UX. Another participant added, "So far, I like UX so that's why I am here". The

words used to describe why they were at the meeting were mostly related to emotion, implying their attitudes, values and beliefs in UX. "In dealing with mobile web, I almost gave up on UI/UX because dealing with clients is just crazy. They just don't understand that we need to study such thing called user experience I am just so thankful that this was initiated, this is because it shows that there's hope that we are advancing towards a global standard" (P12OB1). This excerpt points to the lack of UX practice in industry settings. In line with the observation on the UX Malaysia Facebook page, the problems persist mainly because of clients who are not necessarily end users.

Observation 2: Understanding the Shared Repertoire of Sources

The second observation took place on 14 November 2012 at Mindvalley, Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur, with 14 people in attendance. The founder had clearly made an effort to invite experienced UX professionals to participate in the event, and live video calls were made with several UX designers who had experience of working for several years in different countries, including the UK and USA. These people were very passionate about UX and were willing to help guide UX Malaysia members. They had initiated plans to come to Malaysia to help organise future events, give talks on UX processes and share their experience as UX practitioners in other countries. The meeting was divided into three sessions, and the first was the

introduction of a new logo, mission, vision and agenda for UX Malaysia.

Passive Observation: This first and second sessions were held in the *Hall of Awesomeness* at Mindvalley.. The video-recorded data was viewed more than twice to understand the speech and was transcribed verbatim into a word processor. Values coding was applied to reflect the participants’ values, attitudes and beliefs, representing their perspectives on UX. Conceptual values, attitudes and beliefs, introduced by phrases such as “We are dead serious about UX Malaysia”, “We want to establish”, “We want it to happen”, were translated into code. The researchers’ inferences took into account the participants’ professional and personal experiences and reflected on their collective meaning, interaction and interplay.

Table 4: Theme building based on categories

Excerpt	Code	Categories	Theme
“We are dead serious about UX”	A passion for UX	Domain of CoP is UX	Groups of professionals who share a concern or a passion for UX practice and learn how to create local awareness of the importance of UX.
“We want it to happen.. we want it to established. We want to establish it” “We wanna establish user experience	A commitment to develop a shared repertoire of resources	Characteristics of community	

in Malaysia”			
“We created new logo which means we want to open perspectives and opening mindset to get everyone in Malaysia”	A way to engage members to join activities and help each other	Characteristics of community	
“Companies, individuals, designers they think they do UX but we want to teach them more in-depth about how UX works”	Learn how to do it better	Characteristics of community of practice – ways of addressing recurring problems	Members are practitioners who develop a shared repertoire of resources to share experience, stories and to address recurring problem
“I am still look for places to do UX conference . Is it possible to have it here?”	Requests for information	Characteristics of community to help each other	
“What you’ve done at work, what you done	Seeking experience	Characteristics of the domain by sharing competence of members	

outside and we can have like a whole discussion going on”			
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Table 4 identifies these characteristics of the CoP for the UX domain. It can be seen that UX Malaysia is categorised as a professional association in which professionals from different organisations seek ways to improve UX knowledge and practice through other people’s experience and reflection on practice. These characteristics were identified during the organiser’s speech, which was transcribed verbatim. The code was applied to the speech, with categories according to Saldaña (2012). A theme was created to verify the UX Malaysia as a community of practice. The second session was described as a *thinking aloud* session, and the observation was conducted to identify activities performed by members of the community of practice during the

meeting. The following table provides typical examples of what communities of practice look like.

Table 5: Examples of activities identifying stages of CoP

Activities	Examples
Problem solving	“Can you try the apps and share your thoughts of the usability issues and advice on how to improve it’
Discussion	“How to improve current registration and login experience of this apps”
Seeking experience	“Have you experience buying book via amazon?”
Requests for information	“Where can I find any framework for UX?”

Table 5 lists the activities observed during this session, where some members of the group showed their progress with online apps. The apps were displayed on a large screen provided by the organiser. The moderator asked the participants’ opinion on usability issues and on enhancing the apps’ experience. Details of the apps are not given in this study to respect the confidentiality requested by the participants.



Figure 3: Field observations for the *Thinking Aloud session*

Figure 3 shows the sharing session by the community of practice. This session was important for the participants to identify issues related to the design of their products, share their own experience and learn how to solve the problems that occurred. In general terms, the first app was an online bookstore developed for a company based in the Philippines. The participants evaluated the app based on their own experience as both designers and users. The first comment was on functionality and accessibility issues when a person tried to sign up for the app using a mobile phone: “My comment is that when I signed up for the service there was an error on the phone and I needed to refill the form once again. So, I think I wouldn’t do that just to fill only what I have filled and whichever I have filled previously. Actually, you can type and you don’t have to type the same things all over again” (P18_OBS1). This participant was clearly aware of the user’s difficulties in performing the sign-up task. The main problem highlighted in this simple task walkthrough was in error recovery rather than ease of use, and related first to function and only second to usability. The second comment was based on the user’s expectations when trying to view and buy a book. The process provided by the app did not support the user’s main task, getting a book. For example, to view a book, the user needed to submit an agreement form; if the user decided to get the book, a second pop-up form appeared. However, the user who wanted to quit needed to close both forms to move forward or backward. Further issues raised by the participants were related to the interface, where the pop-up windows

had too many words, making them difficult to read. According to the participants, the form should provide a dropdown menu instead of requiring the user to manually fill in the details. A sorting technique was also needed to arrange the books by primary school or secondary school or the level of the grades. The participants also recommended that the developer get the details of the book (e.g. ISBN number) from an established online bookstore such as Amazon, to make it easier and faster than the existing design. In terms of design, the layout was identified as not supporting the user’s visceral properties as the mouse was moved vertically instead of intuitively. The password setup did not follow a global setting and was perceived as being against user expectations. There was a lack of feedback when the user filled in the wrong password: The user needs to know how strong their password is and there was no feedback on this. It was just two fields and spaced out.

In summary, the participant who presented the app failed to show the main characteristics of an HCI practitioner or apply design thinking, which is akin to “being in the user’s shoes” (Iivari, 2006; Adikari et al., 2013); it seemed as if “developer mindset” (Bak et al., 2008; Clemmensen, 2013) was dominant. The participant strongly rejected the suggestions provided by the other members, giving a reason for every valid comment: Probably, the user actually has to wait until the whole form is complete before getting feedback. On the interface design issues, the size of the form was considered too big on the

screen and the captions were too small. The participants provided a few options to the presenter on how to improve the design. Again, the presenter asked questions such as “What are the benefits of having the list on the next screen?”. The researchers did not actively participate in this observation session as the objective was to assess the level of user experience knowledge among the participants. Further excerpts are not included in the paper because of privacy concerns; one of the members on the floor raised the point that the apps were not yet published, and exposure of their identity would compromise the privacy of clients. In conclusion, the attendees were trying to develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools and ways of addressing recurring problems – in short, a shared practice. For this observation, the assessment of the participants’ knowledge was based on knowledge of user experience terminology and awareness of one’s own cognition (Kratwohl, 2002).

IV. CONCLUSION

In this study, a participant observation approach was used to understand the characteristics of UX Malaysia, a community of practice for user experience design (UXD). This qualitative approach (passive participant observation) provides insight into the behaviour, characteristics and attitude of the members of the community of practice which they may not express when other research approaches are used. The results reveal deep insight about the characteristics of the observed community of practice. It also confirms the association between existing

knowledge and experience, which empirically support the theory of constructivism that argues that humans generate knowledge and meaning through their experience in the world. The central concern of constructivism is to know how humans create knowledge and how they learn. The findings contributed to the proven pedagogical value of this philosophical theory.

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