Local Users, Global Takeaways: Methodological Considerations for Audience Advocacy in Communication Design Research

Feminist Approaches for Communication Design Research

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# Slide #1: Title / Introduction

Hi there! My name is Dr. Allegra W. Smith, and I’m an Assistant Professor of English (in Professional Writing) at Jacksonville State University, which is located in eastern Alabama. My contribution to this fantastic panel on different methodological approaches to research in communication design focuses on feminist user research interventions.

# Slide #2: Feminist Approaches in Technical Communication Research

You might first ask: why feminist approaches to user research? First, feminist research methodologies, or ways of researching, have been popular within technical communication since the 1990s, when innovative scholars like Patricia Sullivan, Nancy Blyler, Gesa Kirsch, Ann Blakeslee, and Rachel Spilka (just to name a few) took traditional methodologies—like interviewing, survey design, and observation—and modified them to start their work with underrepresented populations, folks traditionally marginalized within the work of technology or the academy. Folks like women, but also folks who might include, disabled people, racial and ethnic minorities, and—like in my work—older adults, age 70 and up.

One can argue that user research in and of itself is a feminist act, particularly in its most participatory forms, because of its focus on “…rendering the invisible visible, bringing the margin to the center, [and] rendering the trivial important,” like the daily experiences—the ordinary experiences—of users. In this way, feminist theory informs the methods chosen to collect data and interact with participants, creating a “research stance” that shapes the course of the project.

# Slide #3: Feminist Methodological Tactics

I would argue that the different interventions that I describe here are *tactical* in nature. That’s because they trouble traditional research practices; they complicate dominant paradigms of positivism and value-neutrality, seeing researcher position as something that enriches work, rather than contaminating it. They also foreground things like empathy, listening, and the agency of participants to trouble those power dynamics.

# Slide #4: Dissertation Project

I knew coming into graduate school that I wanted my dissertation project to look at the technological user experiences of folks over the age of 70: older adults. This population was important to me, and I saw it as one that was typically ignored by technology research and design. To do this, I used methods like interviews, ethnographic observations, and task analyses to gather rich qualitative and quantitative data from residents of a retirement community in central Florida: folks who were typically over the age of 80.

# Slide #5: Feminist Tactic #1—Consent and Access

When adopting these methods, I used feminist tactics to make sure that I was interacting justly with participants, maximizing benefits and minimizing harm, and truly listening to them. The first of three tactics that I want to describe to you involves *consent and access* for contextual inquiry—inquiry that begins in folks’ contexts of use, in this case of retirees, their homes.

My research within the retirement community hit a speed bump when my IRB at my university required that I obtain a letter from the community’s director to do observations and task analyses back in 2018. My previous institution had not required such a letter, and in contacting the community director, I never got a response. I traveled to the community anyway after months of trying to get in touch with this person, went straight to her office but no one was there. No one… except this tubby beagle on the floor, pictured with one of my research participants. I got on the floor and started petting the beagle, because I didn’t know what to do, and the community director came out and immediately saw me petting her baby and said she’d give me any letter I wanted.

This shows the importance of connecting with participants—particularly gatekeepers—on a human level. Sometimes it’s easy to forget the “human” in “human-computer interaction,” but this is really important to build accountability and trust with research participants.

# Slide #6: Expanding Consent

This graphic from Planned Parenthood illustrates the importance of considering the contextual nature of consent. Consent to research needs to be freely given. It needs to be reversible, informed, enthusiastic, and specific. This shows the importance of reminding participants, particularly those who don’t typically engage in university-sponsored or user research, that they can say “no” to any activities that they don’t want to participate in, and they can also change their context. For example, I had two elderly widowers in my project who were concerned about having a young woman alone in their apartments to watch them on their computers. So we instead moved them to public or semi-private locations to maximize their comfort and to calm the rumor mill.

# Slide #7: Feminist Tactic #2—Listening to Understand

The second tactic that I want to talk about is *listening*. Technology design collaborations should be grounded in listening, but it’s not something that’s discussed very often in user research. We say we need to listen to users, but we don’t really provide advice on *how* to.

The tactic of rhetorical listening, coined by scholar Krista Ratcliffe, is one way to bridge the gap here. Rhetorical listening focuses on understanding “cultural logics” that underlie actions and words. In the case of my research, age is one such cultural logic. Each generation is its own culture in and of itself. By seeking to understand folks and proceeding with an accountability logic, we can be more just user researchers. Instead of making an opposition or seeing our participants as “other,” trying to engage in cross-cultural listening helps us to communicate across differences.

What would it look like if we created more heuristics or resources for listening in user research and communication design? Things like websites, videos, quick guides, maybe even a book about listening in user research.

# Slide #8: Feminist Tactic #3—Practicing Reciprocity

The third feminist methodological tactic that I want to highlight is *reciprocity*. Reciprocity, or giving back to research participants, is a feminist practice. Feminist research aims to provide direct benefits to the communities it involves. These benefits can run the gamut from material things like money or gifts, to more symbolic things like time or listening. We, as designers of communication, are really well-suited to reciprocity, because we’re equipped to effect change on the conditions we study and work with, particularly documentation, the design of technology, and training or education.

**Slide #9: Lo-Fi Documentation**

Here are a couple of examples of ways that I gave back to the participants in my project—the older adults in the retirement community. I wrote a lot of what I call “lo-fi documentation” to help them solve problems that came up in their observations, interviews, or task analyses. For example, here’s a way that I explained the steps to send a Facebook message to a 92-year-old woman who wanted to wish her friend a happy birthday. And another set of steps teaching a man how to make email lists for different groups he participated in, and using keyboard shortcuts to make text bigger and smaller on his internet browser.

**Slide # 10: Thanks!**

I hope that hearing these tactics inspired you to make your research more just, equitable, and feminist. Here’s my contact info if you have any questions. Thanks!