

# Letting participants choose their own tasks

Whitney Quesenbery

Q: How do you make the tasks in a usability test relevant?

A: Create tasks that let participants explore information they are interested in, for more realistic behavior.

## 1. Find out what they want to know at the beginning of the session

- Ask about their interests first—*before* you introduce the site or material you are testing.
- Give them time to think about it. A pre-session questionnaire, this is a good place to ask them.
- Ask them to *recall* the last time they were on a site like yours (or the last time they had a question about how to use the software). Write down the details of the information they wanted.
- Or, ask them about the last time they faced a situation similar to one you want to test. Give them a chance to tell you the story, and use it as a basis for later tasks.

## 2. Give them a chance to complete their own task

- Make their own task the *first one*. It's a good chance to observe motivated behavior.
- Don't worry if they seem to go off track (that is, outside of your test plans) – let them work in their own way. It's what they would do "in real life."
- This is a good chance to understand what a successful interaction looks like to them.

## 3. Adjusting tasks to their interests

- If you have a list of specific tasks in mind, pick the ones closest to their own questions or tasks. "You said you wanted to know..., so let's try ...."
- Write tasks where you can *fill in the blank* with their own interest: For example, at the Open University, we can let them pick the subject, and then complete tasks within that subject. In our site structure, Chemistry and History look quite similar.
- Another solution is to let them decide which tasks from a list with enough variety they want to complete. This way, they can avoid tasks they *don't want*.

## Plan carefully

- Be ready to think on your feet. You have to know your material well.
- Have a clear understanding of what makes tasks similar, so you know how to adjust them and still cover all of the issues you want to test.
- Watch out for differences in the content that might affect the experience.
- Decide in advance how you are going to score task success.