

# Contextual Inquiry

SWE 632  
Spring 2018



# Administrivia

- HW 1 due today
- HW 2 due next week

# Principles of contextual inquiry

# Contextual design

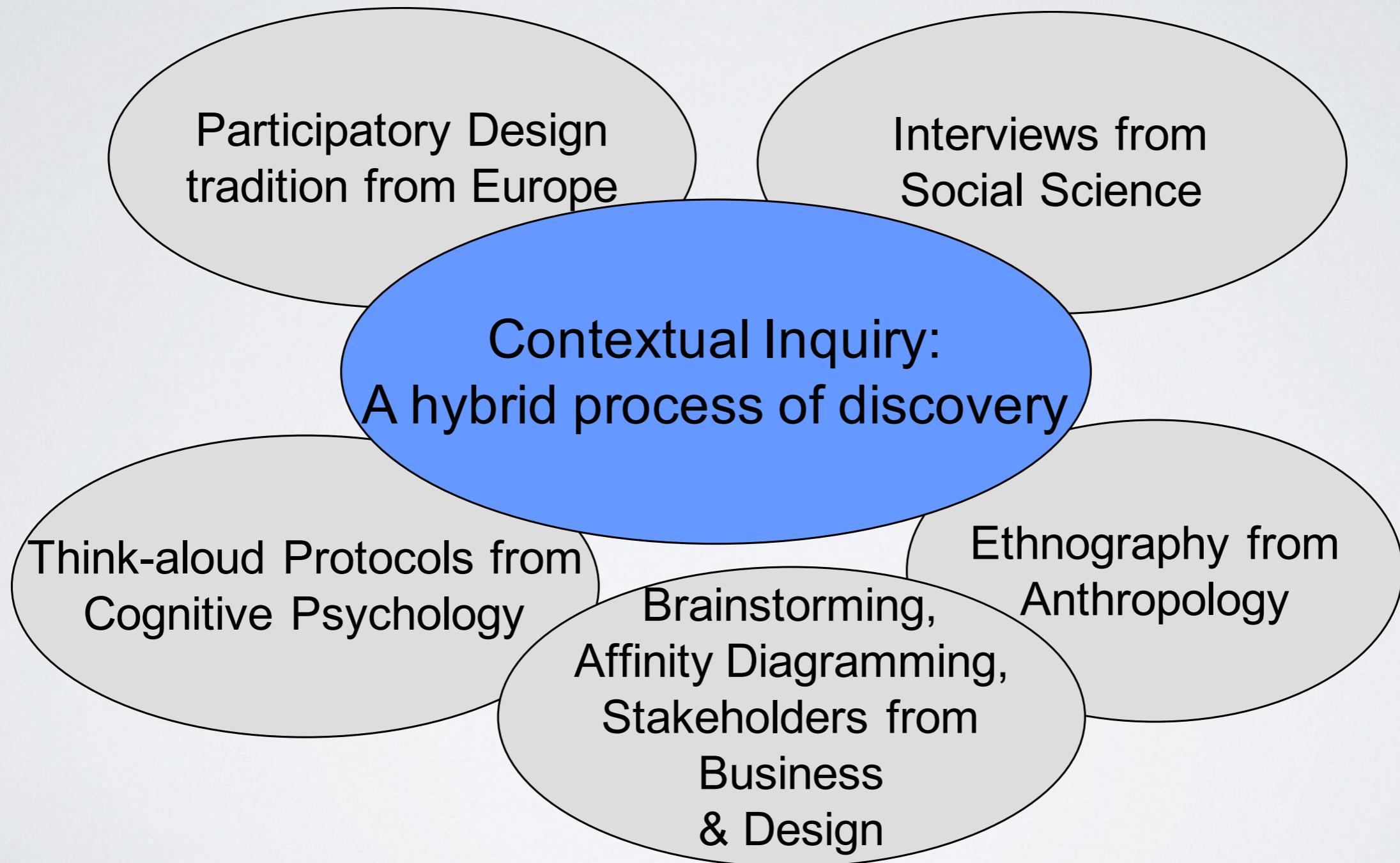
- An approach to answering the question, “What should we build to help people do their work better?”
- Key elements
  - Contextual Inquiry – Gather data from customers while they do their **work** to help decide what system should do.
  - Work modeling – Use data to build **models** of work that are explicit and sharable.
  - Work redesign – Use data and models to design work model for how customers will work in the future. The core design problem is **work design**, rather than technology design.
  - Use work model and iterative prototyping to drive detailed user interface design.
- Customer data, modeling and work design drive technology design.

# Why do contextual inquiry?

- Need to understand what will help people do their work better while fitting into their lives and matching their culture.



# Historical influences on Contextual inquiry



# Purposes of Contextual Inquiry (CI)

- To obtain **data** from users in their context
  - insights about the users' **environment**
  - insights about their many **tasks**
  - insights about the **people** they work with
  - insights about **cultural influences** on work (expectations, desires, policies, values, etc.)
  - understanding of **breakdowns** in current processes
- To help define requirements, plans and designs and to prioritize

# Approach of contextual inquiry

- **Actions** speak louder than words
  - People usually cannot say what innovations they would like and even when they can, are sometimes wrong about what would be helpful.
- Have **conversations** with users in the **context** of their work
  - “Direct observation” when possible
  - When not possible
    - Cued recall of past experience, or
    - Re-creation of related experience  
(we'll eventually see that this is similar to Think Aloud usability studies)

# Principles of contextual inquiry

## 1. Context:

Understand users' **needs** in their work environment

## 2. Partnership:

Work with users as **co-investigators**

## 3. Interpretation:

Assign **meaning** to the observations

## 4. Focus:

Listen & **probe** from a clearly defined set of concerns

# 1. Context

- Definition:
  - The interrelated conditions within which something occurs or exists
- Understand work in its natural environment
  - Go to the stakeholders (users, agents, etc.)
  - Observe real work
  - Interview while she/he is working

# Key differences in methods

## **Interviews, surveys, focus groups**

- Remembered experience (or summary data & abstractions)
- Subjective
- Limited by reliability of human memory
- What customers think & say they do

## **Contextual Inquiry**

- Ongoing experience & concrete data where work is happening
- Objective
- Limited by ability to observe directly
- What customers do

# Context do's & don'ts

- Go to the workplace & see the work as it unfolds
  - **Seek concrete data**
    - Direct conversation to ongoing work

Customer: "I usually record appointments in my calendar"

Interviewer: "Could you go ahead & walk me through the process"
    - If direct observation is not possible in area of focus, elicit retrospective accounts

"Think about the last time you used System-X. Take me through the steps you went through with the system to get the job done."
  - **Avoid summary information**
    - Don't ask:

"What do you dislike about the ordering system"
    - Instead ask:

"Could you show me what you have to do in order to place an order. Let me know about things you like and don't like about the process as we go through it"

# Context do's & don'ts

- **Avoid abstract data**
  - Watch out for words like "usually", "generally" etc.
  - Abstractions are open to interpretation & can compromise the concrete data needed to guide design
  - Instead, direct conversation towards ongoing work or recent past events
  - You want responses that include words like:  
“Let me show you...”  
“Here's how I do it ...”  
“Last time, I ...”

# Pay attention!

- User's work space
- User's work
- User's work intentions
- User's words
- Tools used
- How people work together
- Business goals
- Organizational and cultural structure
- **Be guided by focus** (and open to changing focus if the changed focus falls within another area of concern)

# 2. Partnership

- Definition:
  - A relationship characterized by **close cooperation**.
  - The goal is to make the customer and you collaborators in understanding the customer's work within your area of focus.  
The participant should understand the focus.
- Build an **equitable** relationship with the user
  - Not traditional interviewer-interviewee
  - Not master-apprentice model
    - An approximation for partnership, but has limitations
  - Not expert-novice (unless they are experts)
  - Not host-guest (be nosy)
- AIM FOR EQUALITY
  - CI Interviewer must built a partnership

# Partnership => informed consent

- Informed consent is a very important principle in doing empirical work
  - Tell people why you are doing the inquiry and ask for their consent
  - It is the “right thing” to do ...and it may be required by law (depending on your employer)
- Keep data confidential!
  - Do not use data for any purposes not disclosed in the consent agreement

# Establishing partnership

- Share control
- Use **open-ended** questions that invite users to talk:
  - "What are you doing?"
  - "Is that what you expect?"
  - "Why are you doing X ...?"
- Let the user lead the conversation (provided on focus)
- Listen!
- Pay attention to communication that is non-verbal

# Partnership do's & don'ts

- **Engage user as a partner in design**
  - Be **nosy** -- clarify, probe, watch
  - **Test** design ideas in work context in which they might be relevant
    - “would it be useful if ...”
  - Use caution on “would it be” questions
- **Do not assume role of interviewer**
  - Ongoing work ceases in a question & answer mode
  - Instead, questions should be in context of ongoing work

# Partnership do's & don'ts

- **Do not assume role of expert**
  - Answering user questions about system alters their behavior
  - Instead: "Why don't you go ahead & do what you'd do if I weren't here, I'll answer any questions you may have at the end."
- **Do not assume role of guest**
  - Being overly polite may inhibit the kind of interaction that may lead to a better understanding of work. Instead, be nosy!

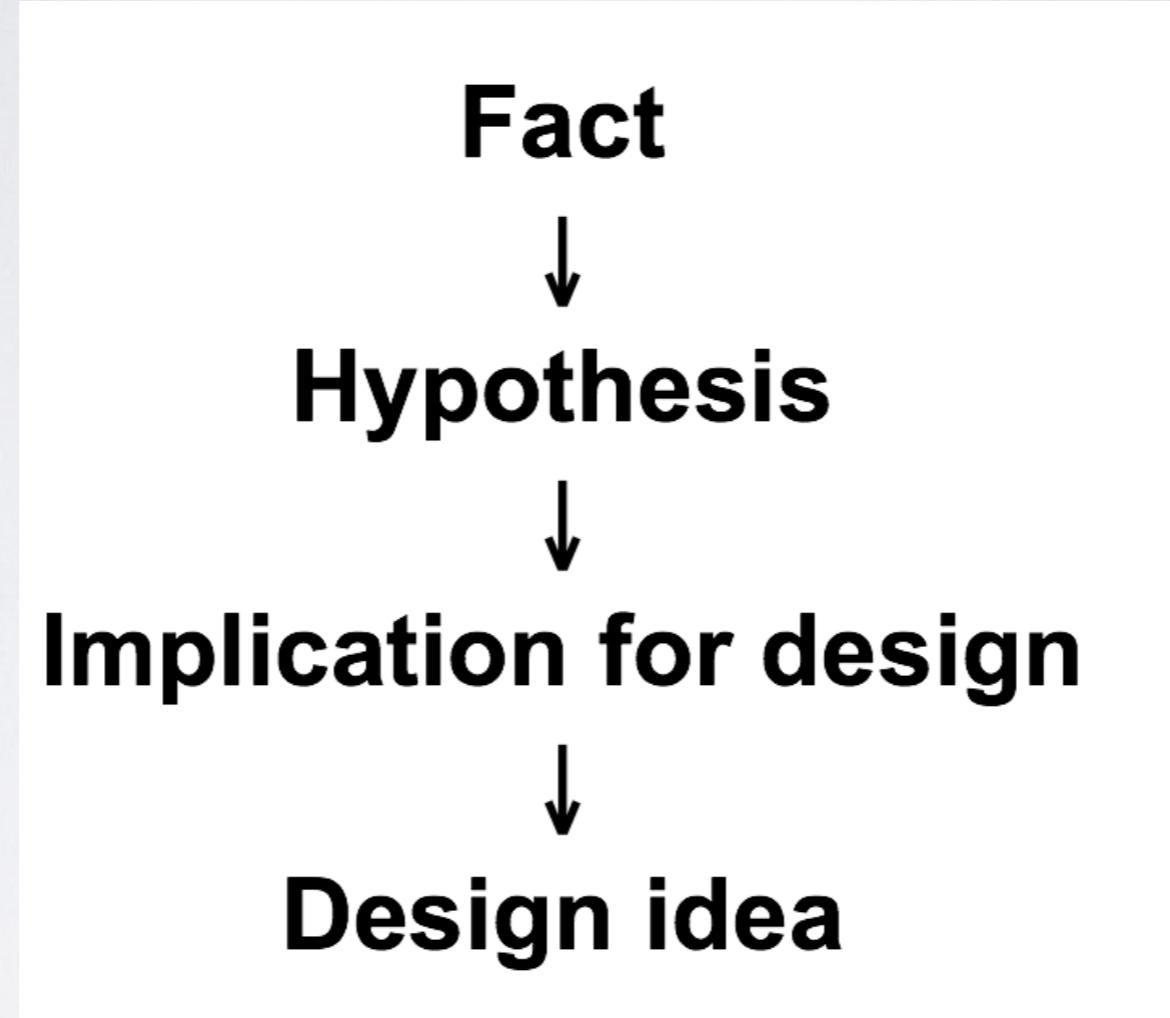
# Attitude during the CI

- Be open to possibilities
- Be committed to expand and ground the focus (more about focus soon)
- Learn rather than teach
- Be willing to modify your thinking
- Pay attention to the participant's needs
- Pay attention to your needs

# Useful interview techniques

- Repetition and rephrase
- Get behind the behavior
- Ask for an example
- Step by step
- Question terms and concepts (even if you think you know it)
- Summarize and draw out a conclusion or concept
- Question pronoun reference
- Check for deviant cases
- Go for generalization
- Clarify expectations
- Clarify activity
- Clarify metaphors
- Ask for a story

# 3. Interpretation



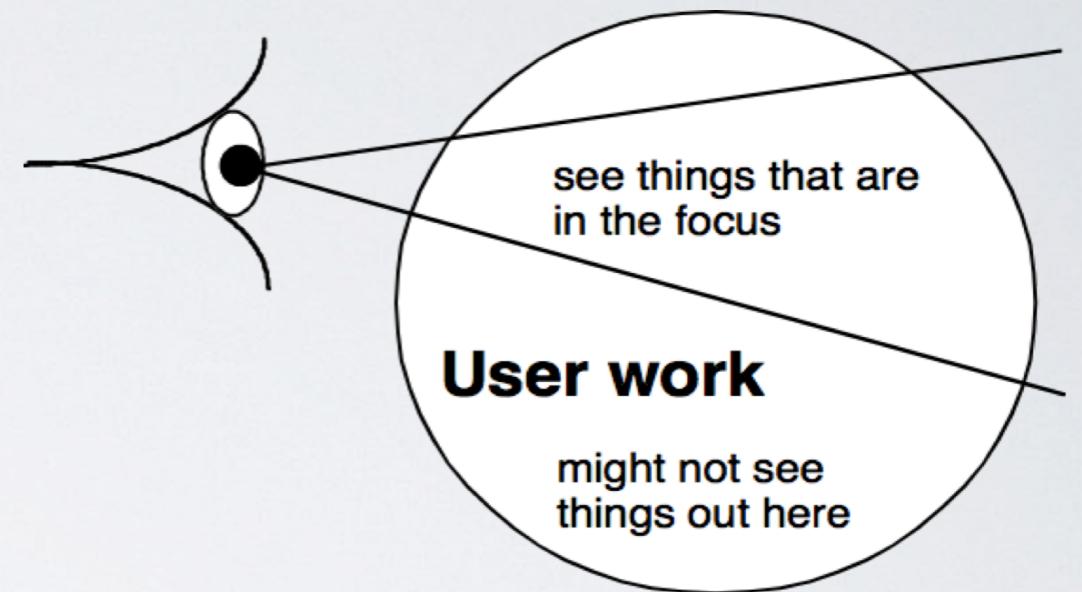
- You can't escape this, so make it explicit!
- Two kinds of interpretation: During data collection and after data collection

# Isn't this really time consuming?

- Rephrasing, getting behind the behavior, asking for examples, step-by-step, questioning terms and concepts, etc. really makes things go slowly.
- How do I know what to focus on?

# 4. Focus

- Focus is a perspective
- We always have an entering focus
- Better to make it explicit
- Characteristics of focus:
  - Helps keep conversation on useful topics
  - Set of pre-conceived assumptions & beliefs
  - Reveals & conceals



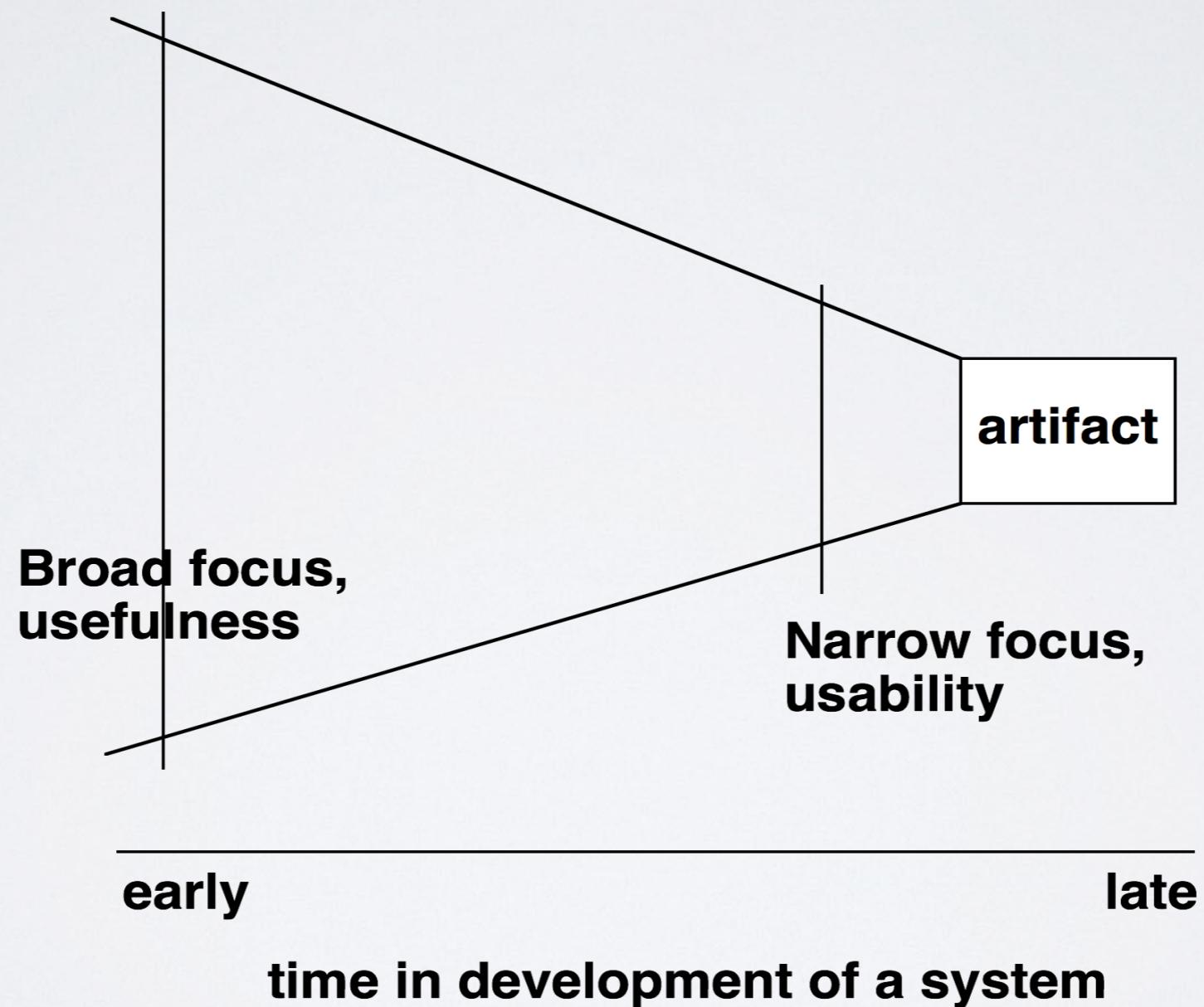
# Role of focus

- Directs the selection of participants
- Directs questioning
- Creates understanding
- Provides rich data

# Focus do's & don'ts

- DO allow focus to **steer** conversation
- DO allow focus to **expand**
  - Probe surprises & contradictions
  - Probe what you don't know or understand
  - Be wary of nodding in agreement (Do you REALLY understand?)
- DO **challenge** focus assumptions
  - DON'T try to validate them
- DO avoid “expert blind spot”

# Focus will differ in different stages of development



# Setting focus

1. Form a team of stakeholders
2. Brainstorm: questions, assumptions, design ideas
3. Record the ideas generated
4. Prune questions
5. Group questions w/ sticky notes (affinity diagram)
6. Develop generalized focus statement
7. Review focus w/ the team

Conducting a contextual inquiry

# Work-based interview

- Use when:
  - Product or process already exists
  - User is able to complete a task while you observe
  - Work can be interrupted

# Steps in a work-based interview

1. Introduction

2. Transition

3. Observation and Interpretation

4. Wrap-up

# 1. Introduction

1. **Introduce** yourself & any other team members present & their roles

2. Get consent/permission to record (if applicable)

3. Articulate your **focus**

Vital for creating partnership

4. Get an **overview** of their work

Helps you interpret what you will be seeing

5. Solicit opinions about tools (if relevant)

# 2. Transition

Transition to OBSERVING THEM DO THE ACTUAL THE WORK

“OK, we’ve been talking about your work, but now I’d like to watch you do your actual work <in focus area>. Just do what you would normally do. I’d like you to talk aloud about what you’re doing as you work. And if there are things I don’t understand or would like to know more about, I will ask you about them. If it’s not a good time to interrupt, just let me know. I want you to basically do your work. Ready to get started?”

- Key points
  - Customer will do **work** while you watch
  - Encourage **thinking aloud**
  - Interviewer will **interrupt**; OK for participant to say “Not a good time for an interruption.”

# 3. Observation and interpretation

- Encourage users to "think aloud" as they work
- Take **notes**
- Follow your **focus** and draw the user out
- Interpret & get **validation**
- OPTIONAL: Co-design with the user (CAUTION: be careful not to use up the precious time you have to observe the work with speculations about what “would” be useful, especially if the design idea is complex; there are often better ways, such as prototyping, to co-design)

# 4. Wrap-up

- Summarize **understandings**
- Ask any "pet" questions
- Give tips on system use
- **Thank the user**
- Leave door **open** for future explorations
  - Important for contextual design, should you discover things you should have asked but didn't
  - Important for designing prototypes

# What people do know

- What they do
- How they do things
- Their opinions about their current activities
- Their complaints about their current activities
- How much they like one thing that they know compared with another thing that they know

# What people do not often know

- What they would do/like/want
- How often they do things
- How much they like things on an absolute scale
- If you ask, they will “guesstimate”

# Problems with asking about new features

- People understand their world within a structure (“functional fixedness”)
- What we usually get: adding new features, fixing problems, transferring features we’ve seen elsewhere. Seldom a total redesign.
- People have difficulty imagining hypothetical situations
- People are happy to make something up

# Use interviews to find out

- Current behavior patterns
- Opinions of currently used products/services
- Complaints about poor or missing functionality
- Comparisons of two or more known options

# If you want UNRELIABLE data, ask:

- If people would like a new feature or product
- What features they would like
- How much people would like or want one option
- How to design a user interface
- Any design issues
- Anything that makes people imagine hypothetical situations!
- **But who wants UNRELIABLE data??**

# What not to do: Would you like this feature...

**Q. Can you think of some uses that, if you had a microphone on the front and a little panel that would let you record stuff, do you think that would be useful or not useful?**

**A: *I'm not sure what I'd use it for...***

**Q: Anything?**

**A: *I'd like something that I could just talk to and have it do things for me (laughs)***

**Q: Yeah, especially 'cause you're...**

**A: *Get rid of this keypad!***

**Q: Yeah, right.**

*This user couldn't imagine any reasons to have audio until the interviewer led him along.*

# Information you want to know

- Understand people's underlying goals
  - What are people trying to **accomplish**?
- Understand their current behavior
  - How do they spend their **time**?
  - What are their **priorities**?
  - What problems do they currently have? What **inefficiencies** or costs are they putting up with?
  - How do they feel about different **experiences** they have?

# Pay attention!

- What, exactly, should you pay attention to?
  - Flow of work
  - Sequence of work
  - Culture of the work
  - Artifacts used in the work

# Flow of the work

<b>Questions You Want Answered</b>	<b>Contextual Inquiry Activity</b>
What role(s) is the participant playing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ What is your job title?</li><li>▪ What are your responsibilities?</li></ul>
How is work divided among people? What people/groups are involved in getting the work done?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Who do you work with?</li><li>▪ What are their responsibilities?</li></ul>
What communication actions between people occur, through what channels and artifacts (conversations, documents, emails, phone calls, etc.) in order to coordinate the work?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪&lt;Observe&gt;</li><li>▪Who sent you that?</li><li>▪Who are you sending that to?</li></ul>
Are there any places people go to coordinate (e.g., meeting rooms)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪&lt;Observe&gt;</li><li>▪&lt;Ask&gt;</li></ul>
Where are the problems in coordination?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪&lt;Ask about problems&gt;</li></ul>

# Sequence of the work

<b>Questions You Want Answered</b>	<b>Contextual Inquiry Activity</b>
What are the steps in the task?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Show me</li><li>▪ Walk me through step-by-step</li></ul>
What is the intent?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ &lt;Infer from data&gt; or</li><li>▪ Can you tell me (more) about what the purpose of this? Why did you do that?</li></ul>
What event(s) initiates the task?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ &lt;Derive from observation&gt; or</li><li>▪ When do you start this?</li></ul>
Is there an order to the steps?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ &lt;Derive from observations&gt; or</li><li>▪ Are these steps always in this order or are different orders possible?</li></ul>
Are there conditions that change what steps are taken?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ &lt;Derive from observations&gt; or</li><li>▪ Are these steps always the same or are there sometimes different ones?</li></ul>
What are the problems?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ &lt;Watch for hesitations, errors&gt;</li><li>▪ &lt;Ask about problems&gt;</li></ul>

# The culture in which the work exists

<b>Questions You Want Answered</b>	<b>Contextual Inquiry Activity</b>
What are the expectations, desires, policies, values that influence the approach to the work?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Are there policies?</li><li>▪ Who sets policy?</li><li>▪ Who has the right to decide?</li><li>▪ Who are the influencers?</li><li>▪ Watch for “We do it this way” or “We don’t do this way” types of statements</li><li>▪ &lt;Watch for emotions&gt;</li><li>▪ &lt;Probe for what’s important&gt;</li></ul>

# Artifacts, formal and informal, used to get work done

<b>Questions You Want Answered</b>	<b>Contextual Inquiry Activity</b>
What is the content?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪&lt;Get close-ups&gt;</li><li>▪&lt;Ask for explanations&gt;</li></ul>
What is the structure (parts)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪&lt;Get close-ups&gt;</li><li>▪&lt;Ask for explanations&gt;</li></ul>
How does the artifact support the users' goals (intent)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪&lt;Probe on artifact&gt;</li><li>▪&lt;Ask for explanations&gt;</li></ul>
How does the artifact support the users' values (culture)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪&lt;Probe on artifact&gt;</li><li>▪&lt;Look for personalizations&gt;</li><li>▪&lt;Ask for explanations&gt;</li></ul>

# What novice interviewers do

- They give their **opinions**
  - People want to please and interviewer opinions shape what people tell them.
- They do all the **talking**
  - They forget the interview is not about them.
  - The interviewer should aim for 20-25% of total interview word count.
- They fail to **follow up** interviewee remarks
  - When inspiration fails, “Can you tell me more about that?”

# Tips for conducting the interview

**The interview is about them not you.**

A: My only frustration is when the server goes down, everything will just freeze

Q-: I know, I would like some kind of indication when everything freezes up, so you know that your work isn't gone.

**Q+: What do you do then?**

A: Yeah, is that stuff I've been working on really going to be there when it comes back up?

Q-: That makes me feel real nervous when that happens to me

**Q+: What's your reaction when that happens?**

# Tips for conducting the interview

## Ask unbiased questions

-Q: Which of the desktop applications do you use regularly? It looks like file manager, calendar manager...

*Avoid presenting options*

A: I use calendar manager and mail tool constantly

Q-: And do you use that to uh set up the uh the appointments with the people that you work with or do you keep track on your own?

**Q+: What do you use calendar manager for?**

# Tips for conducting interview

## Ask the question and let them answer

Q: Mr. Moore let me ask you, what about the difference, the growing gap between those schools that have computers and those that don't?

A: That is a real prob -

**Q-: It's very costly to do this isn't it?**

Let him finish the first question, then ask "How costly is it to set up computers in schools?"

Example

# Scenario: User

- You just won two free plane tickets to Rome!! Pick a place to stay and plan a detailed itinerary of what you will do each day for a 3 day trip.

# Scenario: Interviewer

- You work for ComeToItaly.com, an online travel site sponsored by the Italian government to encourage travel to Italy. The site has become dated, and your team is looking for ideas on how it can better support users in making travel plans.
- Focus: understand the factors that users consider when identifying activities to include in their itinerary
- Note: you should **not** tell users to use a specific website, as you're interested in how they perform searches more generally.
- Take notes on user actions & think aloud

# In class demo

In class activity

# Group activity

- In groups of 2
  - Two roles (1) interviewer and (2) user
  - Based on provided scenario, conduct a contextual inquiry
  - 15 mins (will get 5 min warning to wrapup)

# Scenario: User

- You want to grab dinner with a friend tomorrow night and need to find a restaurant. You know your friend likes fun and unique spots, but you don't want something really expensive and you're a little worried that trendy spots might not have any tables. Find a dinner suggestion for your friend.

# Scenario: Interviewer

- You work for Yelp. Given the many options and features, your team has become concerned that users are getting overwhelmed and are looking to streamline the process for choosing a restaurant.
- Focus: what is the process by which users identify restaurant choices and what factors influence these decisions
- Note: You should **not** instruct users to use Yelp, as you're interested in understanding how they use such recommendation sites in general, not only yours.
- Take notes on user actions & think aloud

# Scenario

15 mins