



# Cultural Probes

# Contents



I. Introduction

II. Materials

III. Instructions

IV. Advantages & Disadvantages

V. References

# Introduction

Cultural Probes are artefacts designed by researchers and given to participants to understand their culture.

The participants use the probes to **reflect and document** activities, moods, preferences, etc.

The researchers collect the probes to gather insights and inspirations of local cultures.

## Design Phases



# Introduction

Use when:

- ▶ Qualitative data are needed
- ▶ Can't get in touch with the users personally (like in corona times)
- ▶ A new culture is identified and needs research
- ▶ The users are willing to record and reflect their activities



## Materials

- ▶ Whiteboard in which the problems to solve or goals are written down (it is really important to have clear the issue you want to engage)
- ▶ Colored cardboard of 6 different colors
- ▶ Colors, pens, and markers
- ▶ Paper sheets, sticky notes

# Instructions



1. Specify the probes
2. Design the probes
3. Launching the probes
4. Collecting the probes

## Rules

- Design or choose the probes with aesthetic details
- Explain the mission clearly to the users
- Let users keep the probes at least a week
- Don't analyse the results too much or force design ideas

## Specifying The Probes

Specify the probes based on the target users. Try to provoke inspirational answers besides self-reporting questions to have in mind:

- ▶ How many participants and who are they?
- ▶ What probes can they use comfortably?
- ▶ What can they report using the probes?
- ▶ What are the differences between different probes?



# Designing The Probes

Design the probes aesthetically. Not merely beautiful but motivate the users as well.

- ▶ Maps
- ▶ Diaries
- ▶ Postcards
- ▶ Media Devices



## Launching The Probes

Bundle the probes in a kit and give it to the users. Make sure the users feel respected and motivated.

- ▶ All probes should be bundled as a toolkit
- ▶ Clear instructions should be given on how to use the whole kit
- ▶ Try to give the probes personally to the users

## Collecting The Probes

Collect the results and get inspired user-centered inspirations, but not **directly** leading to design.

- ▶ Some probes may have been ignored by the users
  - ▶ reflect the reasons
  - ▶ encourage the users next time
- ▶ Use an impressionistic approach and don't force analysis

## Advantages

- ▶ First-hand qualitative data from multiple users
- ▶ Contribute to understanding the culture and underlying motives
- ▶ Once the probes are launched, little effort for the researchers

## Disadvantages

- ▶ No face-to-face contact with the users
- ▶ Delay in self-reporting and reflection from the users
- ▶ Cannot lead directly to design ideas.

# References

Jarke, J., & Maaß, S. (2018). Probes as participatory design practice. *i-com*, 17(2), 99-102.

Maaß, S., & Buchmüller, S. (2018). The crucial role of cultural probes in participatory design for and with older adults. *i-com*, 17(2), 119-135

Gaver, B., Dunne, T., & Pacenti, E. (1999). Design: cultural probes. *interactions*, 6(1), 21-29.

Gaver, W. W., Boucher, A., Pennington, S., & Walker, B. (2004). Cultural probes and the value of uncertainty. *interactions*, 11(5), 53-56



# Contact

[usability-siegen.de](https://usability-siegen.de)

[fablab-siegen.de](https://fablab-siegen.de)