

31 Directed Storytelling

Directed storytelling allows designers to easily gather rich stories of lived experiences from participants, using thoughtful prompts and guiding and framing questions in conversation.¹

Directed storytelling is rooted in the social science method of narrative inquiry, whereby researchers understand people and document their experiences from the personal stories they tell.² As a method of design ethnography, directed storytelling is a shorthand means of collecting compelling stories from participants when time or other factors prevent direct observation or longer forms of research inquiry.

Directed storytelling sessions are started with a prompt by the researcher to the storyteller such as “Tell me a story about the last time you...” Guidance from the research leader continues throughout the storytelling session, to keep the storyteller comfortable in flowing narrative. Additional guiding questions are posed in terms of who, what, when, where, and how. For example, if the topic of design inquiry was focused on the last time they were admitted to a hospital, guiding questions for the storyteller might include: With whom did you interact? What means of communication were involved? When did this take place, and how long did the process take? Where did the interaction occur? Were there aspects of the environment that affected your experience? How did you feel about the interactions and experience? While the research leader directs the story, ideally another person on the research team documents the session.

To interpret directed storytelling sessions the documentation is critical. The central ideas of the story need to be identified through the storyteller’s own emphasis and interpretation by the documenter. The ideas that emerge from stories can then be clustered using common methods such as affinity diagramming, looking for consistent patterns within and across experiences. Once clusters are formed and named, the themes that characterize experiences can be modeled into a tangible framework, with maps or diagrams serving as a reference artifact for what is most significant about participant experiences. This visible knowledge serves as a critical tool in communication, and in affecting design decisions about the content, hierarchy, and form of information or interactions.

As an exploratory research tool, directed storytelling is most powerful in expressing the essence of experiences for design teams, without a large investment of time or resources. Ideally the results of directed storytelling contribute directly to design decisions. However, the method may provide a more subtle reinforcement and validation of existing design directions, or identify the need for additional research.

1. Evenson, Shelley. “Directed Storytelling: Interpreting Experience for Design” in *Design Studies: Theory and Research in Graphic Design, A Reader*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006.

2. Clandinin, Jean, and Michael Connelly. *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000.

Behavioral
Attitudinal

Quantitative
Qualitative

Innovative
Adapted
Traditional

Exploratory
Generative
Evaluative

Participatory
Observational
Self reporting
Expert review
Design process