

“Good to Great Research” with Jessica Coffey, Wed. March 3

Jessica Zoey Coffey
Teneo Studios

The talk is not on the difference between good research and bad research, but on the difference between good research and great research. There are other resources for making your research good (by choosing the right participants, avoiding leading questions, etc.).

Working from a formula or recipe gives predictable outcomes – that’s a strong benefit. But sometimes you need to move beyond a predictable outcome and beyond a formula. That’s the leap from good research to great.

This talk focuses on qualitative research, not quantitative. The speaker consults on research, has perspective on a lot of projects.

When planning, companies often proscribe the familiar, habitual approach. This shortcuts the conversation about what really needs to be learned. What decisions need to be made out of this research? What’s the gap in knowledge between what is known and what needs to be known? Develop a research approach to address the knowledge gap.

Jessica gave the example of consulting for a team that wanted users to prioritize 113 features of a forward-looking product. The sponsors of the research were set on using focus groups, even though it wouldn’t be feasible to run a focus group for that many features, on a product category that would be new to the participants. So Jessica learned about future scenario planning, another form of research, and adapted it to fit both the research situation and a focus group format. (Jessica also fudged the definition of a focus group to better support future scenario planning.) This is an example of the kind of great research that can come when you don’t get locked into one method, or one definition of a method.

The reason we talk to people is because they’re experts in their everyday lived experience. The goal isn’t simply to get answers, it’s to go through an exploration. Most participants don’t do research for the money; they want to participate in the process and help. You will get better help if you’re genuinely interested in them and their lives. Go beyond simple rapport building.

If you ask people if they like something, they’ll either gravitate to familiar or novel. That’s not a good predictor of how they’ll behave in a non-research situation. Instead, focus on what they do know, and use that as a future predictor.

Give people enough to respond to. Don’t ask them to imagine too much. Jessica gave the example of doing research with TV projectors in the living room (back before they gained widespread release). When discussing the projectors in abstract, people generally liked them. Then, participants were given a cardboard box representing the projector and asked to place it in their living room. Having the

concrete representation of the projector brought up many new issues. Without it, participants didn't have enough to respond to.

Question: These lessons talk about tangible activities. How do you adapt this to situations like phone conferences, where you can't work with tangibles?

Answer: It depends on how relatable the topic of investigation is. The research will probably be unsuccessful if the topic is unfamiliar and hard to imagine.

The goal in research is to learn. If you're right about everything, you didn't learn anything. It's human to guard your ego against failure. Finding out you're wrong, in research, is succeeding – you've learned something. Validation, proving that things are okay, is not the same as exploration to look for problems.

Remember, the sooner you find out you're wrong, the lower the cost of course correction. Be aware of the constraints on you – if nothing can change, why do research? There's also CYA research (done at the end of a project, when nothing can really change); acknowledge that it's risk assessment or gathering knowledge for version 2.

Don't be afraid of leaps of logic. Sometimes, Jessica works with researchers who intuitively know the right answer, but can't construct it logically from the research data. If the constructivist approach isn't getting anywhere, try leaping ahead to a (tentative) conclusion and work backwards to connect the conclusion to the data (trying, also, to disprove the tentative conclusion). It's okay to listen to the voice in your mind saying "this is the answer."

At the end of research, your original questions often seem naive. At the end of research, you think about project in a different way. For example, you might find out your original segmentation of people is wrong.

Remember that not everyone wants to move away from formulaic research. It takes a comfort with ambiguity and due diligence as well as an ability to move between detail and big picture.

Question: Advice about doing fieldwork overseas. E.g., going into people's homes

Answer: It varies by region and culture. There are places where it's not as easy. Even in the US, there are certain cultures – shadowing in a large corporation can be hard. Vary your approach to fit the situation. Work with people who know the local cultures (your translator can be a great resource). Give yourself some time to adapt to the culture. Don't stay in an American chain hotel. Don't spend all your time in your hotel. Be out among people and soak up the culture.

Notes taken by Evan Dickinson, at the Art Institute, Portland, OR on March 3, 2010