Teaching Psychology Students to be User Experience Researchers

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User experience research (UXR) jobs offer exciting and well-paying career opportunities for psychology students. Upon graduation, students have many of the skills to be UXRs, including understanding and knowledge of 1) user characteristics and individual differences, 2) relationships between user and task characteristics, 3) operationalization and measurement of concepts, 4) interpretation of observations, and 5) research ethics; those with graduate training possess even deeper understanding of these areas. However, psychology students may lack other skills and knowledge necessary to perform the duties of a UXR, including familiarity with: 1) common UXR methods, 2) application of psychological concepts and theories to technology, 3) software development and user experience design methods and processes, and 4) constraints of conducting research in applied environments.

In this symposia we will 1) define UXR and its relevant concepts, including an overview of the skills that psychology students have and those that they need, 2) discuss the role of UXR in industry, and 3) overview approaches, benefits and challenges to including UXR in teaching, including presentation of example projects. Panel attendees will leave with an understanding of both the values and pathways for psychology students towards roles as UXRs. Attendees will also have opportunities to expand their own knowledge of UXR and see examples of how to bring this information to their students. Attendees will have chances to share their ideas and questions during the live session.

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Understanding User Experience Research

Laura M. Leventhal (The University of Findlay), Samuel D. Jaffee (Google), Rachelle K. Hippler (Baldwin Wallace University) and Nathan J. Ward (Tufts University).

Stereotypic images of technology development often show a person, cranking out program code in a dark room. This stereotype is likely intimidating and unattractive to many psychology students. It is also not accurate. Most user experience and technology development happens in collaborative teams. To interest students in user experience research (UXR), they need to understand what UXR is and what activities are involved. In this presentation, we will review key definitions relevant to understanding the work and domains of UXR, including but not limited to:

- User and human-computer interaction
- Usability and usability engineering
- User experience and user experience engineering
- UXR

Following the overview of definitions, we will discuss the skills and roles that different fields, particularly psychology, can contribute to UXR. Next we will discuss the processes of user experience engineering and research in the development of technology. Finally we will overview how psychologists can contribute as UXRs in meaningful and rewarding ways. As a part of this discussion, we will review several recent surveys of typical UXR tasks.

References


**User Experience Research – The Industry Perspective**

Samuel D. Jaffee (Google).

Many factors determine the success of a product: product-market fit, marketing, perceived value, time to market, etc. In digital products, one key element is the user experience. A product can have fantastic product-market fit, but can be doomed by a substandard user experience. The need for quality user experiences has been further magnified by changes in work and productivity with shifting public health guidelines.

Recently, a large and growing group of companies have recognized the need for quality user experiences, leading to the growth of user experience roles, including design, writing, and research. The role of the user experience researcher (UXR) varies by company and product. Common goals in UXR work include

- discovering the needs of users (i.e. what do users need a product to do?).
- testing solutions (i.e. does the product work as intended? Is it usable for target user groups?).

Although UXRs often come from different backgrounds and fields - including anthropology, sociology, and computer science - training in psychology can provide much of the necessary background for a high-quality UXR. For example, while the methods of user experience research (UXR) may differ somewhat from those typically employed in psychology, both involve the design of studies to collect data and draw conclusions.

In this talk, the presenter will review his experience transitioning from a trained experimental psychologist to a UXR, working in industry; he will discuss the importance of UXR, some necessary skills, and how psychological training can prepare students for employment in this field.

**Engaging Students In User Experience Research**

Rachelle K. Hippler (Baldwin Wallace University) and Nathan J. Ward (Tufts University).

There are many benefits and challenges to engaging students in user experience research (UXR) activities. In this presentation, we review them and discuss some example activities.

Learning about UXR can benefit students, faculty and institutions. For example, students may

- provide tangible psychological insights to user experience projects.
- learn that their input to user experiences has positive impacts on people’s lives.
- become excited about careers in UXR.
- be attracted to psychology programs that offer interesting UXR experiences.

There are a number of potential challenges that faculty may face. For example, faculty often must

- find topics that are motivating for students and interesting to the faculty member. Securing a project with a real world client can require extensive effort. Likewise building a complex project experience can be labor intensive for an instructor.
- supervise complex projects. Students may find it disquieting to work on projects that are less well-defined than typical classroom projects.
- provide technical and laboratory support. This can be particularly challenging for faculty and institutions when projects emphasize contemporary technology.
- enable students to work successfully on collaborative, multidisciplinary teams.

In some past projects, our students

- evaluated popular websites and apps.
- participated in user experience evaluations as part of a redesign of the university library website.
- explored and applied psychological phenomena in interactive and remote environments.

The presentation will also include some links to teaching resources that we have used in the past.