Structured Observation

The goal of this assignment is to develop your ability to perform a structured observation. You will practice planning and running an observation by identifying a research question, planning a protocol, developing a coding sheet, running an observation, and reflecting on the process. This will introduce you to the concept of piloting (testing out your planned observation), since, inevitably, your observation will go differently than you planned. That’s OK! That’s part of it.

Record each step individually in your research journal. You should conduct your observations in groups of 2-3, making sure that everyone has the chance to observe. Your completed observation and reflections should be completed by the beginning of class next week.

a) Brainstorm interfaces and activities (10 mins in class): Get into groups of 2-3, and brainstorm interfaces that you could perform an observation on. You will be actually performing these observations, so be sure to think of interfaces and activities that you have access to. They can be online interfaces (banking, file sharing…), computer interfaces on real objects (microwaves, projectors…), or physical interfaces (building entries, walkways…).

b) Develop research questions (10 mins in class): Decide on a small set of questions that will drive your research. They should be short, clear, and measurable. Asking questions to “drill down” is appropriate. For example, here are some research questions you might perform while observing people washing their hands in a washroom where there is both a paper towel dispenser and a touchless hand dryer:

   RQ1. How many people use only the touchless hand dryer? Paper towels? Both? Neither?
   RQ2. How many people wash their hands?
   RQ3. Of those who wash their hands, what are the typical washing behaviours? E.g. do they flick the water off of their hands, use soap, etc.?

c) Design a protocol and coding sheet (20 mins in class): Decide how you are going to perform your observation. Design a protocol (think “script”) that your experimenters and participants will follow. Be very specific. Simultaneously, decide on how to record data during the observation on your coding sheet. Decide who will be performing what roles in your observations. Shoot for a 5-15 min protocol.

d) Pilot your protocol and iterate on your plan (120 mins at home): Test your protocol out by running through the observation with your group. Record the problems that come up, and make changes to your protocol. Make sure to try to be as “realistic” as possible with your pilots: it’s tempting to skip parts, but you’ll only be deferring problems, not avoiding them.

e) Perform your observation (80 mins at home): Coordinate with another group to actually carry out your observations. Make sure that everyone has a chance to interact with participants.

f) Reflect (60 mins at home): Reflect on your observation. What worked well? What didn’t? Did you define your research questions clearly enough? How about your protocol?