



Shraddha Rawat's Learning & Reflection Session

Capacity Building Specialist

Interview by Liz McNeil, Senior Community Manager, HCDEXchange



SHRADDHA RAWAT

Shraddha is a Capacity building specialist with 13+ years of experience in designing and scaling up capacity building programs, building governmental partnerships, conducting research and developing curriculums, handbooks and other knowledge products.



Could you tell me a little bit about yourself and your journey, as a design practitioner, and as a practitioner that works in the social sector

Shraddha's reflections

I've been in the development sector for about 13 years now. I think of myself as a capacity building specialist. One of the focus areas of my work has been designing curriculums, training and games to facilitate learning amongst adolescents, youth facilitators, teachers, government officials and health professionals. Another focus of my work has been designing and managing large scale programs on capacity building including strategy, road mapping, monitoring etc.

The end goal of any learning product or process is behavior change; however, a great design of a learning product by itself is not sufficient to bring about behavior change. There are many other factors that influence the result of any learning program, to name a few, motivation of the participant, quality of program delivery, presence of a learning culture, effective monitoring and feedback systems etc. I am interested in designing programs (and not just products) that result in behavioral change and especially like the challenge of doing this on a large-scale. I often look to scientific research for evidence based program design besides of-course involving stakeholders in planning, piloting or prototyping (when possible), and creating feedback loops for continuous learning and improvement.

Talking about my experience with HCD, I used it in a project that focused on addressing teenage pregnancies. Teenage pregnancy is rampant in some parts of India. Young girls are often married off early, so they start reproducing early, and then the associated health issues, infant and maternal mortality, population issues, human rights issues, gender based violence etc happen because of that norm. This program was designed to address the norm of teenage pregnancies. It was the only program that did not begin with a ready made model, or a strategy - in other words nobody (including funders, implementation partners or the target audience said - "this is how teenage pregnancy can be reduced" It was the only program where we just had a goal in our minds, and we were really wanting to spend time and money and resources to figure out, "what is the real issue here and what might be possible solutions" .

IDEO held a workshop on HCD after which an India based design, a technical resource organization specializing in working on sexual/ reproductive health matters with young people, implementation organization and funding partner formed a team to use HCD to design this intervention.

We were all doing a lot of exciting stuff: doing design research, trying to figure out multiple prototypes to address some of the issues that we saw in the field. I think we designed some good products by the end and the program is still being implemented. I'm not, unfortunately, associated with the program anymore. But I'm in touch with people who are implementing it, and I hear that it's doing very well.

It was a difficult issue; we were talking about contraceptives in a culture that does not quite support conversations on sexuality. The program managed to run in public schools and I think part of it is because of the way the products were designed as well as the way institutional partnerships were managed.





I know that you were also one of the founding members of the HCDEXchange - is that the project that you were associated with when you attended that first convening of HCDEXchange in 2018?

Shraddha's reflections

Yes, I came as a representative of the same project. It was wonderful to meet designers, implementing organizations, and funders in the same space and to know that the doubts, questions and struggles we were facing were very similar to HCD practitioners across the world.



That's really wonderful! It's amazing to know that it's still running today, and in government schools, too. What were some of the most interesting or important things that came out of that experience?

Shraddha's reflections

The right partners and links to the community

I'm primarily going to talk about the process that went into designing the program. As I mentioned, sexuality is not an easy topic to tackle but we were lucky to find an implementing organization that had long-established rapport with the community/ villagers. I would give large credit to that organization and the social capital it had built over years for the smooth implementation of design research and the implementation of the program.

The other factor that made it easy was the relationship that the funders built with the important functionaries in the government departments. It helped to get the permissions to run a program on sexual and reproductive health in schools and get administrative support from the school staff.

I must mention that we did face backlash after all of this. One time our team was asked to leave the village because a young girl who was interviewed the previous day told her parents that, "these people sat me down alone and asked me dirty questions". Thankfully, the implementing organization intervened, explained the matter to the leaders in the community and managed the situation.

A deeper understanding of your user

As a development sector professional who had spent a lot of time talking to adolescents in rural and urban parts of the country and having designed and managed a bunch of programs for this group, I thought I have a fairly good sense of their lives but I remember feeling surprised and benefited after each conversation with the adolescents during the design research.

I also realized that, in this sector, we do not spend much time understanding the end user, their priorities, interests, ecosystem to design interventions. At times there are stakeholder consultations to pay lip-service and rarely there is an actual intent of listening to the user but the assumption is that the users can come up with solutions that work. More often than not, people's ideas are a reflection of what they already know or have seen and nothing more. Coming up with new problems, gaps or ideas that will make a difference requires a different kind of skill and a whole lot of testing of ideas to identify the solutions that show promise of some real impact.



Was there a specific time you were really surprised by something you learned while using HCD? Or something unexpected that came out of the research?

Shraddha's reflections

I remember our team feeling very excited and surprised when we discovered a whole new element in the adolescent's ecosystem. There was a mobile store where young boys would go in with a USB drive or their mobile to get a whole download of videos and movies. This was a key source of entertainment for them in areas where internet connectivity was an issue. The team discussed many ideas around how we use the mobile store service to share useful information on sexual health.

Another thing that surprised me is how influenced the youngsters in those areas were by a very local star. There was a local star who was famous for her provocative dancing and was a sort of a hero for these young girls. One of the girls helped me to play her dance videos on my phone. When I asked her who this girl was, she was shocked out of their wits to know that there could be a person in the world who does not know this person.

I remember that we had a lot of ideas around making her the ambassador for open conversations on sexuality, but some of these ideas were shut down, because the program also had to run in a government school. So we had to find solutions that were innovative but not controversial so that they could be adopted by the government. We really had to find a balance.



Shraddha's reflections

We finally ended up designing some sessions and card games on themes like sexual consent, sexual violence, contraception, conception etc. We spent a lot of time figuring out what kind of information or messaging will work for different adolescent archetypes that we had identified. Now, if an outsider was to look at the final product of this process, they may say that there are hundreds of sessions and games on these themes already - what is new about the idea? But only when one looks at the details can one see how unique the products were as compared with others in the market.

The idea itself was not out of the world, but the nuances of the images that were used, the design of the activities, the stories used, the messages that appealed to young boys and girls came from a very deep understanding of the users and we tested different versions of these products to arrive at the versions that work.

I've designed 20+ curricula for young people but it was the first time I felt so close to being that girl or the boy who I was designing for. It was this deep level of empathy that I experienced as a designer, and that I will always carry with me in all my work.



Beautiful. The way you explain the value of HCD by understanding the person, the ecosystem, the limitations and preferences - it makes so much sense. And that word of empathy - I can see that it influenced not just the solution itself, but also impacted the practitioners. It's incredibly powerful to hear.

You've talked about the benefits and value that you saw from using HCD, and the benefit of having strong partnership with the implementing partner. I wonder if there were challenges that you encountered during that project?

Shraddha's reflections

Lack of role clarity amongst partners, No articulation of short term goals, Time pressure to show the solution and it's worth

There was merit in not knowing what we were going to do and being very open about designing any program that would address the larger issue, but we were also pretty lost at times.

One time, a monitoring team from the funding partner came to understand the project. We were prototyping a bunch of solutions almost 6-7 months after the onset of the program and the team was quite disappointed to see that we did not have a clear plan for the large scale pilot. The more the partners, the more there is need for consensus on the process, the outcomes and the timelines.

In hindsight I feel that there was substantial confusion about the roles of partners initially. For instance, what was the role of the technical resource organization in design research, what was the role and authority of the funding partner in setting short and long term outcomes. Who was required to define these outcomes and at what stage?

Then there were design related questions that impacted the program. For example, how important was it to align the program to existing government programs (for adoption) v/s designing something totally new. Were we to look at 'evidence' (i.e. data from RCTs around the world) to inform the design of the program or not? Were there certain short term outcomes related to increase in knowledge expected of the intervention or reducing teen-age pregnancies was the only overarching goal. A goal like that cannot be achieved in a year or two) and so how were we to show that the program is working in the short term? These were some of the unanswered questions that hampered the project in the design phase. At times not knowing was useful as things were emerging and at times it resulted in waste of time and resources.



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What counts as research and what counts as evidence are at the heart of one of the biggest debates that I've encountered since working with the HCDEXchange. I'm curious, from your perspective as a researcher, what do you think might need to shift in order to view insights as quality evidence?

Shraddha's reflections

Evidence in social science research is generally understood as a fact for a specific geography or population. 'Evidence' or 'research findings' are based upon data which is collected using certain methods that ensure it adequately represents the population being studied. These methods allow researchers to state findings about the population with reasonable surety. From this lens, insights cannot be called 'evidence' but I do believe (based on my experience) that it is possible to make generalizations or state patterns through the method of design research that might be true for a reasonable number of people in a study group.

I would not get into the debate of whether these generalizations should be called 'evidence', because I think the purpose of gaining 'insights' in HCD is very different from the purpose of research in general. When a practitioner uses HCD, they are trying to build an understanding of the 'user', their priorities, thought process etc, very quickly to inform the design of a solution that would solve a problem. The amount of insights that a team can generate within a few weeks through design research cannot be generated by scientific research where a few weeks would just go into developing a scientific research method. Also, design research, unlike scientific research, is very broad, its scope is not defined deliberately to facilitate discovery of things that one would not find out if one was looking for something specific and the methods can change mid-way to align itself to the purpose of the study. It uses very non-traditional methods to gain 'insights' and is very open and emergent. It is this nature of design research that makes it possible to explore several dimensions of a person's life in a very short span of time. This would be very difficult for scientific research to do but the certainty with which scientific research can state its findings is a lot higher as compared with the certitude of insights.



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Being a practitioner first (rather than a researcher) I have an action bias and so, when designing an intervention, I would rather spend time and resources on a quick design research (along with some secondary research) and on testing prototypes than on taking on full fledged research to gain understanding of the target group. However, if I was to understand the impact of the program and share findings, I will go the scientific research route. I find HCD very helpful for designing high-impact programs/products in a rather short span of time.

Another practice for designing programs that I am recently exploring is Behavioral Insights. The field of Behavioral insights (BI) actually seems to be a combination of scientific research and elements of HCD. BI keeps the user at the center of the design process by aiming to first analyze the behavioral drivers of the issue being addressed using scientific research. Then again, it uses research methods to test the effectiveness of prototypes/solutions. This may be one of the reasons BI has found a lot of advocates in the policy space. Many countries and provinces around the world now have a BI unit within the government departments. I was surprised to learn that the Uttar Pradesh government, one of the underdeveloped states in India, has a BI unit.



How do you see the future of these insight-led methodologies being used for social programming and social policy?

Shraddha's reflections

I see a growing trend of giving precedence to "evidence" while deciding program priorities and strategies in the development space. There is a movement of evidence informed policy making and many big organizations are working with policy makers and bureaucrats in under-developed countries to help them to use evidence while making policy decisions. While principally, it all sounds great! It is always useful to make decisions based on research findings, rather than going by subjective feelings or thoughts which are mostly biased. However, there are a few issues with this approach or an obsession with 'evidence' if I may call it.



Shraddha's reflections

First of all, there isn't enough evidence out there to give us the knowledge we need to design programs. I recently came across a research paper on a capacity building program for bureaucrats in the education sector in an African country. The aim of the program was to get bureaucrats to use evidence in designing policies. I figured by reading the paper that in most cases, there was no evidence to inform the design of the policy. Further, the fact that not all research findings can be considered reliable or relevant to the context makes useful evidence even more scarce. For instance, can research conducted in Sweden be used to build policies in India, what if the research methods are not accurate, can we consider it 'evidence'?

Having said this, I do not think that the reason we as a collective have not been able to address complex social problems like unemployment, climate change, infant mortality, racism etc is because there isn't enough evidence to design effective interventions. We do not necessarily need more resources to be devoted to generating evidence but to adopt more human centered approaches of designing solutions and agile methods of testing and adopting programs before scaling them up. I have been in organizations where the majority of the organization's resources were devoted to fund research and program teams had to struggle to find support for even the smallest experiments.

I also want to add that if we keep looking for evidence from the past to justify what we are doing, well, we may not find support to try new things. It is very important for people in the social development sector where time and resources are always a constraint, to be humble and open to new ways of designing programs, of testing them and of evaluating their effectiveness.



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What is that pathway to legitimacy, of having a standard part of quality programming be human-centered elements or BI elements? How do we take those outside of the group of people who already believe in it and start to make it more compelling for people who don't?

Shraddha's reflections

Having willing champions

The people who decide where the money goes, and what background they come from, makes a lot of difference. That's something that I felt that HCDEXchange has done well: found a couple of very progressive-minded decision makers and donors. Their belief in the process, or at least their willingness to try a new thing. That matters a lot.

Advocates and champions in donors or in governments, even if it's one person in one province in a country to have a progressive minded person who says, "Okay, let's set up an HCD unit within our department," and look at one element, and then we see what impact it has - let's evaluate this, let's rebuild this. It's key to have those people, to find the champions who are willing to try it out.

It may also be useful for HCD to identify a few wicked problems that the development sector has not been able to find effective solutions for. The openness to try new ways is higher when nothing has worked in the past. Promoting entrepreneurial mindset for instance and getting abled young people to become job creators instead of job seekers requires a shift in mindset along with an ecosystem that supports entrepreneurship. These are very human problems as much as they are systemic problems and I feel HCD can contribute to designing very human centered solutions to promote entrepreneurial mindset.



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Shraddha's reflections

In the digital learning space where I have spent my time and energy in designing skilling solutions for teachers, health professionals and learners in schools, drop-out rates are very high. While digital learning offers promise of scale and quality education at a significantly low cost, we often fail to facilitate learners to fully participate in the online training and to apply the learnings from the training in their real life. I feel HCD can help in designing digital learning solutions that address learner motivation and facilitate effective learning. I would be very keen to use HCD in designing impactful tech-based skilling solutions.

I think HCD can add a lot of value to social programming. It can be used for redesigning learning products, for reimagining financial products, to facilitate entrepreneurship among young people, in microfinance and health insurance, well in every field that I've worked in, I see a potential to apply HCD. I think that question is really about how to find the champions for it? I would be very excited to actually be a part of an HCD unit within an education department of a country.

Shraddha's reflections

HCD should not compete with research but establish itself as an intervention design process

Having worked closely with the researcher community, I can understand the resistance to accept 'design research' as scientific research. A presentation made by a UX designer on 'user centered design' approach in a UN institute comes to my mind. A lot of questions were raised by the leadership (who came from research background incidentally!) about the process of design because it did not seem methodical to them.

If I was to pitch HCD to leadership of an organization, I would not dwell too much on the research part of it but instead highlight HCD's ability to come up with and test working solutions to address the problem in a rather short span of time. Of course, some research to establish the effectiveness of programs designed using HCD as compared with those that did not use HCD would come in very handy here but equally important would be to find the right problems and 'open minded' leaders who are willing to experiment.



What are you looking for as a next step in your work?

Shraddha's reflections

In my 13 years of working on several programs on capacity building, I have learnt a lot about the factors that contribute to effective learning, I intend to continue working in this space. More specifically, I am interested in designing and delivering tech based learning solutions for behavioral change. My learnings from the HCD work will always stay with me in this endeavor. HCD is as much a mindset as it is a process and I continue to use this user centered orientation in all the work that I do.