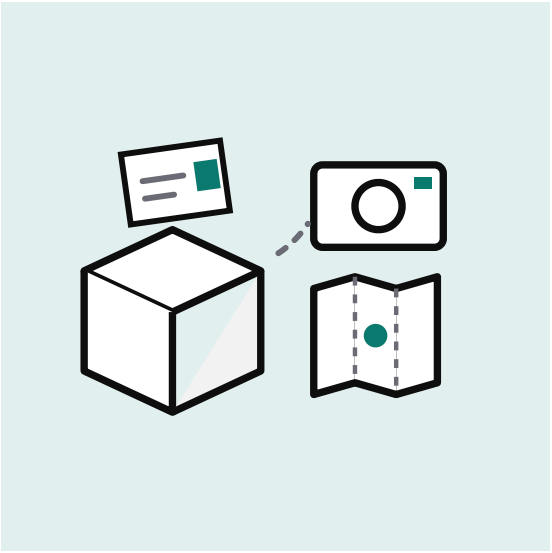
Method

Cultural probes

A pack of materials with open-ended tasks, such as postcards, maps, a camera or a diary, that people complete on their own over a few days and then return to the team.



In Spanish
Sondas culturales

Origin
Gaver, Dunne, and Pacenti (1999)

Output
Photos, maps, postcards, and notes from people that inspire ideas about their daily lives

What it's for

Helps you get close to the lives of people you can't observe up close, and find ideas an interview wouldn't bring out.

Key elements

Open, playful tasks
Questions that invite people to tell and imagine, not to tick answers.

Each person does it at their own pace
With no one from the team present, at home and in their daily life.

To inspire, not to measure
What comes back is read as clues, not as data to be counted.

How it's done

1

Design the pack with tasks made for that group of people.

2

People complete it over a few days, on their own.

3

The team reads it together and draws design ideas from it.

Applications in design

When to use it

At the start of a project, when you want to learn about a group's daily life and open up new ideas.

Avoid

Treating them like a survey and counting answers.

Don't fall for it

What comes back is incomplete and chosen by each person: complement it with conversations.

Connections

Used by

- Critical design
- Service design
- Design research

Related to

- Diary study
- Ethnography
- Generative tools
- Research through design

Authors and works

1999	**Bill Gaver, Tony Dunne, and Elena Pacenti**	They created probes in a project with older people in three European communities: they sent packs with postcards, maps, a disposable camera, and a diary, and made clear they weren't after an objective view of people's needs, but inspiration.
2007	**Kirsten Boehner, Janet Vertesi, Phoebe Sengers, and Paul Dourish**	They reviewed how probes had been used in human–computer interaction and showed that they had often become just another way to collect data.

Sources

Original sources

- Gaver, B., Dunne, T., & Pacenti, E. (1999). Design: Cultural probes. interactions, 6(1), 21–29. View source (https://doi.org/10.1145/291224.291235)

Academic reviews

- Boehner, K., Vertesi, J., Sengers, P., & Dourish, P. (2007). How HCI interprets the probes. In Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '07) (pp. 1077–1086). ACM. View source (https://doi.org/10.1145/1240624.1240789)

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