UX PRACTITIONERS’ ENGAGEMENT WITH INTERMEDIATE-LEVEL KNOWLEDGE

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ABSTRACT

Scholars have repeatedly called for the knowledge production efforts of the HCI research community to have resonance with the needs of practitioners. These efforts, refocused in approaches such as “implications for design,” annotated portfolios, and other forms of intermediate-level knowledge have begun to address this concern. In this study, we analyze resources shared via URLs that pointed to external websites within a practitioner-focused Reddit community. Using Löwgren’s taxonomy of intermediate-level knowledge, we identified the types of knowledge these resources represent, and use this analysis as a provocation for future exploration into the kinds of knowledge practitioners desire and use to support their practice.

BACKGROUND

Numerous efforts have been made by HCI scholars in the past decade to support knowledge production that has relevance for practice, respecting both the varied nature of knowledge (as contrasted with fully objective, scientific knowledge) and the means of adequately representing this knowledge with potential uptake for future scholarship and practice [1,2,3,4,7]. However, it is unclear how—if at all—these research-driven conversations have impacted the use of academic HCI knowledge in practice. In this work-in-progress, we seek to describe the types of knowledge that UX practitioners share and rely upon to support their design activities, expanding previous conversations on the nature of design scholarship in a practice-led framing.

In this study, we use the notion of intermediate-level knowledge [5,6] to frame a practice-led study of UX practitioner interactions on Reddit. In particular, we operationalize the different types of knowledge proposed to exist in the intermediate space between theory and ultimate particulars [6] to categorize and describe the knowledge that UX practitioners share to support their practice, thus furthering HCI researchers’ understanding of what knowledge is perceived to be useful. The contribution of this study is two-fold: (1) operationalizing the proposed categories of intermediate-level knowledge in order to make sense of the knowledge that is valued by practitioners; and (2) providing a provocation for future research on the knowledge desired and used by practitioners, and the ways in which HCI researchers may be productively intertwined in this knowledge-generation process.

METHOD

To understand how UX practitioners rely upon knowledge-sharing practices to support their work, we have engaged in extended study of a specific community on Reddit, a subreddit known as /r/uxexperience. We collected all posts, comments, and metadata from this community from January 15, 2016 to August 24, 2016, yielding 9,707 posts. These posts were then analyzed through an open thematic approach to understand what topics were discussed, and the relative frequency of these topics. The present study focuses on one theme, which represented posts that describe discussions or sharing of information that participants indicated is relevant or essential for UX practice, comprising 182 posts. Of these posts, 154 included a link to an external resource, which represented some knowledge that the post author deemed relevant for the UX community.

We analyzed this subset of posts by following each URL and attempting to describe the kind of knowledge the linked resource contained. We used the Löwgren taxonomy of intermediate-level knowledge as a set of a priori codes, performing a closed coding of the different types of knowledge proposed to exist in the intermediate space between theory and ultimate particulars to categorize and describe the knowledge that UX practitioners share to support their practice, thus furthering HCI researchers’ understanding of what knowledge is perceived to be useful. The contribution of this study is two-fold: (1) operationalizing the proposed categories of intermediate-level knowledge in order to make sense of the knowledge that is valued by practitioners; and (2) providing a provocation for future research on the knowledge desired and used by practitioners, and the ways in which HCI researchers may be productively intertwined in this knowledge-generation process.

FINDINGS

UX practitioners in this subreddit shared a wide range of intermediate-level knowledge, including every category except concepts. Practitioners appeared to appreciate clear-cut guidelines, heuristics, patterns, or a combination of these types as displayed in an annotated portfolio format (where not only the abstract organizing principle is stated, but also visual examples that exemplify this principle). In fact, almost half of all intermediate-level knowledge posts were of this type (n=93/152). Based on our initial analysis, these resources appear to translate common UX challenges into an objective or objective-like form of knowledge, bracketing aside the judgment of the designer who will need to modify or apply this knowledge in a specific design situation. However, some resources revealed a willingness and ability to engage in critique of the field, occasionally through external disciplinary perspectives, but more frequently through humor and parody.

DISCUSSION

This study documents the use and articulation of intermediate-level knowledge in UX through an analysis of practitioners’ online interactions. This identification of intermediate-level knowledge in practitioner-selected artifacts may serve as an important provocation to the HCI research community, extending the discussion of implications for design that began over a decade ago. In particular, the interactions within this Reddit community underscores the types of knowledge that are desired and used by practitioners. This knowledge is primarily action-oriented, concrete, and pragmatic, often including exemplars to illustrate various ways of incorporating or approach under discussion.

In some ways, this strong link between image and text has been taken up in the Pictorial format at DS [1], but more discussion of precedent knowledge and how this knowledge supports practice in unpredictable, designer-driven ways is needed to more fully contextualize the value of these forms of intermediate-level knowledge. The Löwgren taxonomy was likely not intended to identify the kind of knowledge that practitioners build and rely upon to support their work, being open to a more balanced and bidirectional relationship among academics and practitioners.

In this study, we use the notion of intermediate-level knowledge [5,6] to frame a practice-led study of UX practitioner interactions on Reddit. In particular, we operationalize the different types of knowledge proposed to exist in the intermediate space between theory and ultimate particulars [6] to categorize and describe the knowledge that UX practitioners share to support their practice, thus furthering HCI researchers’ understanding of what knowledge is perceived to be useful. The contribution of this study is two-fold: (1) operationalizing the proposed categories of intermediate-level knowledge in order to make sense of the knowledge that is valued by practitioners; and (2) providing a provocation for future research on the knowledge desired and used by practitioners, and the ways in which HCI researchers may be productively intertwined in this knowledge-generation process.

REFERENCES

8. Colin M. Gray & Yubo Kou. 2018. Seeking out knowledge that may allow for greater understanding of practice. Design and analyze the kinds of knowledge that appear to be valued by practitioners. Describe how practitioners consume and use resources in their practice, and how these resources may promote discussion in online practitioner communities.

FUTURE WORK

Seek out knowledge that may allow for greater understanding of practice. Design and analyze the kinds of knowledge that appear to be valued by practitioners. Describe how practitioners consume and use resources in their practice, and how these resources may promote discussion in online practitioner communities.

Bubbling-up these insights may enrich the current conversation on intermediate-level knowledge, and may reveal additional ways in which researchers may be productively intertwined in the knowledge-generation and dissemination process.