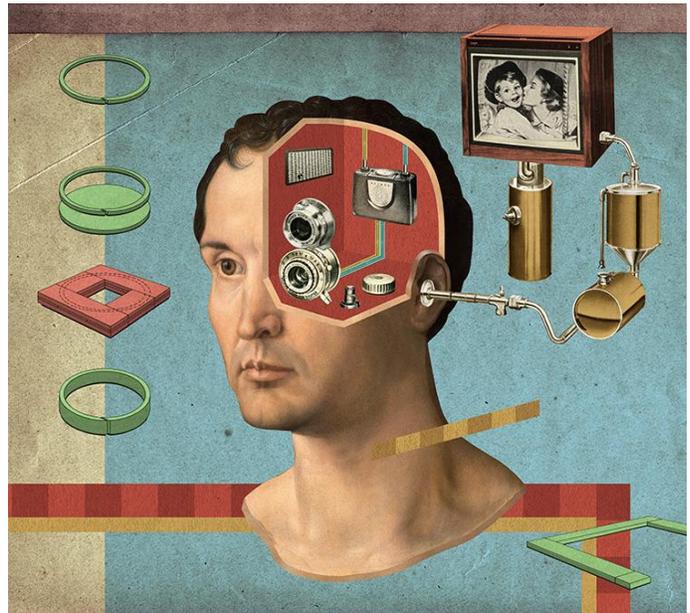


Recall/Occurrence

**Real-time 'occurrent' feedback
trumps delayed recall**



The human capability for recall is subject to a number of major flaws. The only way to close the gap between what testers do on your site and what they tell you they did on your site is to listen to their thoughts in real-time.

Recall: the retrieval of information stored in the memory.

We all rely on it every day – Where did I leave my phone charger? Which gas station has the lowest prices? What filename did I save that document under?

In usability research, recall is the basis of surveys and usually focus group studies. Such methods rely on asking questions to testers after the fact – What did you think of the registration process? Did you have any trouble finding the contact information? How did the site make you feel?

What's wrong with recall?

A cursory reading of Wikipedia reveals a number of factors that exert a major influence on recall accuracy, including:

- **attention** – divided attention has been shown to seriously hamper the memory-encoding process that allows recall later on
- **motivation** – the greater the incentive for accuracy, the more reliable respondents' recollections are likely to be (and vice versa)
- **primacy & recency effects** – people tend to be better at remembering the first and last elements of a series than the middle elements
- **interference** – a delay between the encoding of a memory and the subsequent remembering, especially if filled with another task, impairs recall
- **context & state dependency** – items are recalled more reliably in the same environment or mental state in which they were initially encoded to memory, and less in different ones

Wikipedia? The freely editable online encyclopedia has been found to display a level of reliability on par with *Encyclopedia Britannica*, a fact attributed to a phenomenon called the “wisdom of crowds” – the ideological cornerstone of all crowdsourcing.

On top of all this, your respondents' answers can be subject to various other manipulations depending on the format, including social pressures coming from fellow testers leading to conformity, bandwagoning, or lying to hide what could be perceived as incompetence; inadvertent pressure from a test administrator to answer a certain way or confirm a given expectation; question-framing issues that influence responses (think 'leading the witness'); and more.

The human mind is capable of endless shape-shifting, over-imagination, and self-deception – more than enough reasons to think twice about your focus group results.

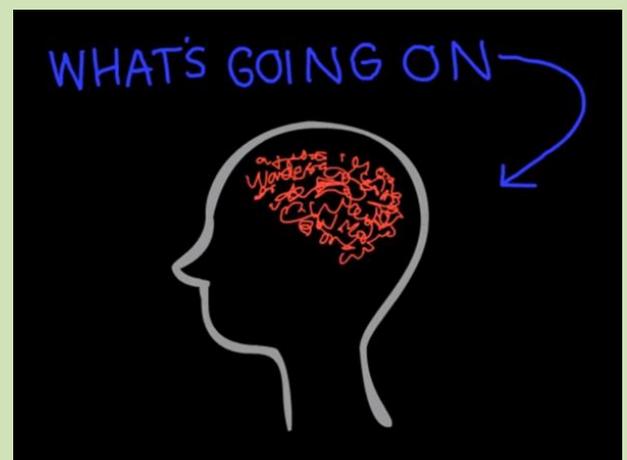
So if waiting until the end to ask your questions is such a feedback faux pas, what's the solution? Problems like division of attention or context dependency might be diminished by confining testers to a controlled environment, but at the cost of losing a genuine, true-to-life look at the user experience. Primacy, recency, and interference could be combatted by asking testers questions at the end of each task, but at the cost of obstructing the natural flow of their journey through your website.

There is simply no way to eliminate all the distortions at once from a usability study that follows the format:

1. Have testers use the website.
2. Ask questions later.

Replacing recall with occurrence

The only way to close the gap between what users do on your site and what they remember doing on your site, or what they say they've done on your site, is to look at their *occurrent thoughts* – that is, the thoughts that pass through their mind in the exact moment of those actions.



The goal: understand what's going on, without the filters.

No recall is required – no flawed mental filters, no forgetting of middle elements or transitioning between mental states – just verbalization of the thought process as it happens. It's something that comes naturally to us: most people talk to themselves, especially while alone. Remote usability testing allows you to tap into that natural tendency, listening to testers' thoughts in real-time and getting the full, unadulterated picture.

Effectively, you're looking into your user's mind, understanding what they do and why at the most direct level. The pitfalls of relying on recall are avoided, and the problems that crop up when testers are influenced by judgmental peers, by hovering researchers, and by the wording of questions never arise. They have simply to open their mouth and let their minds flow out.

Remote usability testing allows us to tap into people's natural thought patterns in real-time without hovering over their shoulder.

Summary

Occurrence is the key to getting the best feedback on your website. Relying on recall forces dependence on imperfect cognitive processes and delayed responses that render a filtered, second-degree understanding of your site.

Forget recall; tap into real-time occurrent thought to truly peek into your users' heads.

See an example of remote usability testing that puts occurrent thoughts to use with integrated video and audio capture [here](#).

For more information

Psychological abstracts:

Attention: [The effects of divided attention on encoding and retrieval processes in human memory](#)

Motivation: [The role of accuracy motivation on children's and adults' event recall](#)

Primacy & recency: [Serial position effect](#)

Interference: [Forgetting in immediate serial recall: Decay, temporal distinctiveness, or interference?](#)

Context dependency: [Context-dependent memory in two natural environments: On land and underwater](#)

'Self talk': When talking to yourself, the way you do it makes a difference:

<http://online.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304831304579543772121720600>

Cover image from

<http://www.randymora.com/filter/COMMISSIONED/A-Guide-to-Maximise-Your-Memory>



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