

Making user studies matter: thank you Mister Feynman, Monsieur Foucault

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Normatively, scholarship -- both in the sciences and the humanities -- must necessarily proceed on a business-as-usual basis working within tight discourse communities that have accepted legacies of premises, terms, definitions, and methods. Thankfully, there have always been a few scholars whose circumstances have allowed them to self-reflexively critique what they are about.

Recent critiques of the social sciences in general and user studies in particular have begun to focus on some fundamental themes which transcend the usual arguments of the sort "you-need-to-study-what-I-study-in-the-way-I-study-it" or "you-need-to-use-all-numbers " or "you-need-to-use-all-words." Converging themes include, for example, calls for: a) syntheses that make sense of the growing edifices of unconnected studies focusing on the same phenomenon; b) increased interdisciplinary efforts; c) calls for building on the strengths of divergent methodologies; and d) attempts to bridge the gaps between the worlds of scholars and those of the everyday.

These critiques are almost always accompanied by cries of dismay about how hard it is to get from here-to-there. Drawing on such critiques of the social sciences from a variety of usually polarized discourses -- e.g., qualitative and quantitative, critical and administrative, scientific and deconstructionist, transmission-focused and communication-focused -- this presentation will offer a set of propositions -- both realistic and utopian -- for making user studies matter.

(Published version of this presentation to be co-authored by Brenda Dervin and CarrieLynn D. Reinhard).