

UX Research in the Real World: Stories from Rwanda

What happens when you do user experience research in a context different from the United States? In June 2010, I learned three ways that UX research in Rwanda is different from what we are accustomed to in the United States.

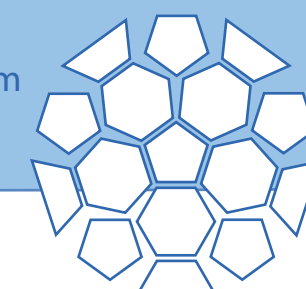
After the UX research team understood these differences, we were able to come up with approaches that enabled us to test our product—a website to help teachers talk to one another and share resources—in a context where we had not yet worked.

Veronica Erb

Veronica has moderated user experience research in Rwanda and the United States for an international non-profit. Her temperament enables her not only to allow humans to attempt usability tasks, but also to write clean HTML and CSS.

Currently, she refers to herself as a User Experience Designer, but she has also answered to “web designer,” “helpdesker,” and just plain “verb.”

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No schedule: think in chunks

The Rwandan perception of time is less linear than that in the US, so it was difficult to carry out strict research schedules. Instead, we organized our research in stand-alone chunks, which allowed for flexibility and creativity.

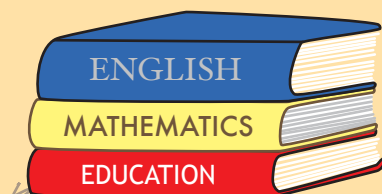


Our research chunks:

- | | | |
|-----------------|-------------------------------|-------------|
| First priority | 1. Non-leading interviews | Exploratory |
| | 2. Usability tests | Evaluative |
| Second priority | 3. Observing website training | |
| | 4. Campus tours | |

The flexibility of thinking in chunks allowed improvised research as well, including exploring a physical library that could influence the digital library we are creating on our site.

Our participant criteria:



What subject do you teach?

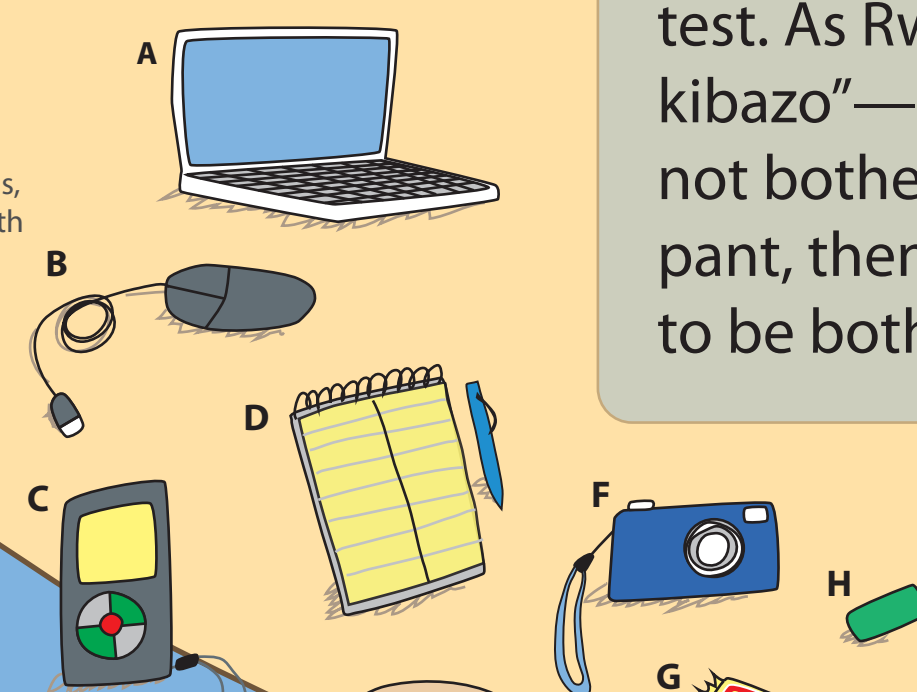
We wanted to talk to teachers of a variety of subjects, but English teachers tended to be great participants, since they were most comfortable talking with us.



How often do you use computers?

We were looking for users who had basic skills, and we did not want to skew our research with results from technology experts.

Our mobile lab essentials:



- A. Laptop for usability testing and note taking;
- B. A mouse! Most of our users are not accustomed to track pads;
- C. Simple video camera (for audio, too);
- D. Notebook for quieter and more reliable notetaking;
- E. A friendly face;

F. Point and shoot camera, because photographs of important documents are faster than notes or photocopies;

G. Snacks: You have to take care of yourself if you're going to take care of your participants;

H. Wireless modem, because some of our schools had temporary problems with their internet connections.

2

No recruiting: know your criteria

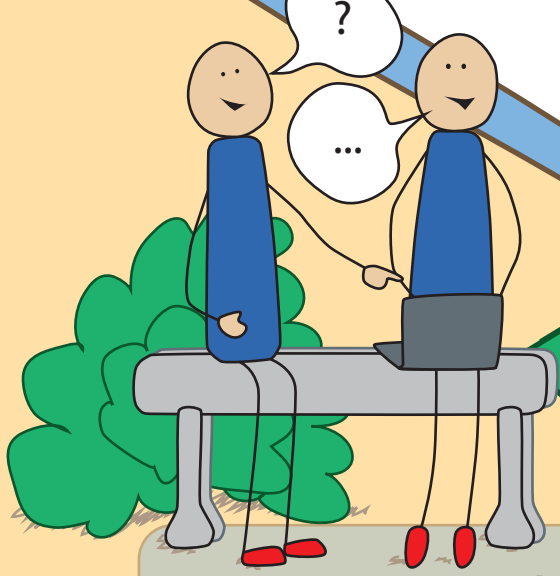
Without the ability to schedule ahead of time, we recruited on the spot. We learned to know our criteria so we could determine whether a new acquaintance could help us learn.



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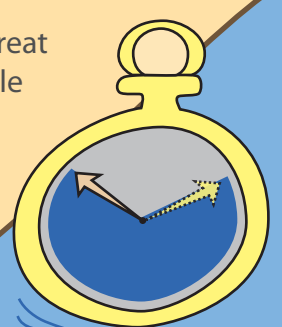
No lab: nta kibazo

Sometimes the person who lent you space might decide to use his filing cabinet in the middle of your usability test. As Rwandans say, “nta kibazo”—no worries. If it is not bothering your participant, then you do not have to be bothered either.



Do you have time to meet with us?

Teachers' schedules varied a lot. Some had time for both an interview and a usability test, but for others, we had to choose one activity.



A bit about Rwanda

- A small country, about the size of Maryland, located in central Africa
- In the process of rebuilding and recovering after a devastating genocide in 1994
- With a population of 11 million, it has one of the highest population densities in Africa
- Exports fantastic coffee and tea
- Until 2009, schools were taught in French, but today teachers are expected to use English in the classroom, and most Rwandans speak Kinyarwanda as their first language

