
When things go wrong or how to try saving a user study on map design during a pandemic

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Abstract:

Together with project partners from Atri, a small town in Italy, I had planned to conduct a usability study in March and April 2020. The project partners had organized a workshop series with more than 200 high school students and we wanted to append a field survey to these workshops. A few weeks before the first workshop was planned to be held, the corona virus increased rapidly in the Northern parts of Italy and slowly spread over the entire country (and later over the entire world). 10 days before the first workshop was intended to be carried out, all workshops were cancelled.

As I had to carry out the usability study for my PhD work program, I had to change my plans. The questions that I needed to address were 1) how can I carry out my intended usability survey to be able to respond to my research questions?, 2) where can I recruit participants without the help of project partners (which now were pandemic-related very busy)?, and 3) how can I carry out my study without losing much time? A particular constrain was that the communication with my supervisors to discuss possible solutions was very limited during that time as all of them had to react to all the changes that occurred. My approach was to tackle the most relevant issue, which was the recruitment of study participants. I sought out channels, which I had direct access to without having to rely on colleagues or project partners: newsletters from my University, student email lists, and social media. Besides that, I kept the survey as it was designed for the workshops in Atri.

Reflecting on the time, there were several things, which I learned from the experience, which potentially apply to other circumstances where changes occur. However, and undoubtedly, a pandemic is a special case, related to high levels of uncertainty and decreased communication. Nevertheless, I learned that when things go wrong, I should be confident to adjust, if needed, even drastically (e.g., decrease the complexity of the study design). I also learned the relevance to reflect on these issues in the responding article and discuss the impact of the things that went wrong and potential ways to overcome them. And I realized how useful it was to have the survey online, which could be distributed easily over the internet.

Since I kept the survey as it was initially designed, I still face the question of whether and how I should have changed the survey, and probably the entire study design, to have been able to better respond to the changes in plans. This, in particular, refers to the change of survey distribution (online survey instead of field survey) and the decrease of participants. As both issues had a direct impact on the results of the study, I would be grateful to discuss them in the workshop.