

Practice-based Design

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Abstract

Beginning in the late 1980s, a small cohort of anthropologists and computer scientists at Xerox Palo Alto Research Center developed an interdisciplinary research program concerned with the design and use of information technologies. Our projects over the years joined ethnographies of work and technologies-in-use with design interventions. This talk briefly reviews this program of research, illustrated with specific examples. Our ethnographic approach is exemplified in an early research project on information and communications technologies-in-use within a particular workplace. This project led, among other things, to a reconceptualization of what makes up an “information system” that informed all of our subsequent work. The latter turned increasingly to interventions aimed at exploring what I characterize here as practice-based design, combining elements of workplace ethnography and cooperative prototyping. These efforts are illustrated by a collaborative research and development project involving the transformation of a particular collection of documents - the project files of a civil engineering team engaged in designing a bridge - from paper to digital media.

About the Speaker

Lucy Suchman is a Professor in the Centre for Science Studies and Department of Sociology at Lancaster University. She received a Ph.D. in Social/Cultural Anthropology from the University of California at Berkeley, and spent twenty years as a researcher at Xerox’s Palo Alto Research Center. She is currently preparing a 2nd revised edition of her 1987 book, “Plans and Situated Actions: The problem of human-machine communication”, which will include an extended new Introduction looking at relevant developments since the mid 1980s both in computing and in social studies of technology. The focus will be on agent systems and new forms of human-computer interaction on the one hand, and on recent theorizing regarding humans, machines and relations between them on the other.