Simple Ethnography

Idea In Short

When a team relies on assumptions about what people need, go observe the work in context. Simple Ethnography helps participants notice the setting, activities, communication, sound, and pace of real experience, then separate what they observed from what they infer. Invite people to learn from those closest to the challenge, explain the purpose of the observation, and obtain appropriate consent. Use notes and artifacts to capture detail without disrupting the work. Afterward, compare observations and identify questions or small improvements to test. The aim is respectful learning, not surveillance or a claim that a brief visit explains an entire user group.

Organizations often design services from reports, assumptions, and secondhand accounts. Those sources can be useful, but they may miss how people actually move through a process, interpret instructions, or adapt when something does not work. Simple Ethnography invites a team to observe its context directly and learn from the people closest to a challenge. Participants pay attention to the setting, activities, communication, sound, and pace, then compare observations and develop preliminary interpretations. The practice embodies the Liberating Structures principle “Practice Deep Respect for People and Local Solutions.” It starts with a simple discipline: look carefully before deciding what the experience means.

Observe the context, not a stereotype

The invitation asks participants to immerse themselves in a local setting and learn from direct experience. A team might observe a customer completing a service process, a staff member making a handoff, or a community member navigating a public resource. The setting matters because behavior is shaped by tools, space, time, and interaction. An instruction that appears clear in a policy document may be difficult to follow at a crowded service counter or on a small phone screen.

The observation guide prompts participants to notice the site and its arrangement, what people do, who speaks and listens, background sounds, and the pace of activity. These details encourage observation across more than one channel. Participants may see that a person hesitates at a transition, ask a colleague for help, or improvise around an unavailable tool. The observer should record the behavior and context before drawing conclusions about motivation or need.

Separate what happened from what it might mean

A field note can distinguish direct observation from preliminary interpretation. “The person reread the same instruction three times and then asked the staff member for clarification” describes an observable sequence. “The instruction is confusing” is an interpretation that may be right but needs further evidence. Keeping the two apart helps the group discuss the observation without turning its first explanation into fact.

Participants can ask how the setting contributed to the experience, which activity has the greatest effect, whose needs are prioritized, and where the pace becomes difficult. The questions should invite hypotheses, not blame. If a process takes longer than expected, the cause may involve an unclear instruction, a missing tool, an interruption, or an exception the team did not anticipate. The group can identify what it needs to learn next rather than deciding immediately which explanation is correct.

Respect the people being observed

Ethnographic observation should be transparent and appropriate to the context. Explain why the team is present, how it will use what it learns, and what information it will record. Obtain consent where needed, follow organizational and legal requirements, and avoid collecting identifying details that do not serve the learning purpose. The people being observed should not be treated as subjects who have no say in how their experience is represented.

A short field visit cannot represent every customer, employee, or community member. It provides situated evidence that can help the group ask better questions. If the team sees a pattern, it can test whether the pattern occurs in other contexts or with other participants. If the experience is sensitive, participants should consider whether observation is appropriate at all and what safeguards are needed. Respect means remaining open to what the observers do not know.

Compare perspectives and artifacts

After fieldwork, participants gather in a convenient space to share notes, sketches, or artifacts. They compare what they observed and where their interpretations differ. One observer may focus on the layout, while another notices timing or communication. These differences can enrich the group's understanding. The facilitator can help identify recurring conditions without forcing agreement where the evidence is still incomplete.

The time required can range from about 50 minutes to several hours, depending on how much observation the challenge needs. The group should decide in advance whether it will observe one process, compare multiple sites, or follow an experience over time. Notebooks, pens, and cameras can help capture details, but photographs should be taken only with permission and under appropriate privacy rules. A written note may be safer and more useful than an image.

Turn observation into a test

Simple Ethnography is most valuable when it affects what the team does next. Participants can select one friction point to investigate, one assumption to test, or one small improvement to prototype. They should also decide what they will look for after the change. If a team changes an instruction, for example, it can observe whether people complete the next step without additional help. The purpose is to learn with people, not launch a redesign based on a single anecdote.

This structure is useful in service design, product development, healthcare, operations, and community work. It can help teams notice the difference between a process as specified and a process as experienced. Research and practice in human-centered design emphasize direct engagement with users and observation of behavior in context. Nielsen Norman Group outlines field studies in user research, the IDEO Design Kit explains human-centered design methods, and the U.S. Digital Services Playbook emphasizes understanding users and their needs. 1, 2, 3

Keep learning after the visit

The team should share what it learned with the people whose experience informed the work when appropriate. It can explain which observations shaped a decision and invite correction.

This loop helps prevent the organization from extracting information without accountability. It also creates an opportunity to test whether the group's interpretation matches participants' experience.

Simple Ethnography does not require specialist equipment or a large research program. It asks teams to practice attention, record context, question their interpretations, and follow up with respect. These habits can surface small design opportunities and deeper system issues alike. When observation leads to further inquiry and responsible action, a team can make decisions closer to the realities people face.

- 1Field studies
- 2IDEO Design Kit: Methods
- 3U.S. Digital Services Playbook

Summary

Simple Ethnography redirects a team from what it assumes people do to what it can observe in context. Careful notes about space, activity, communication, sound, and pace can reveal friction hidden by reports or retrospective accounts. Participants should distinguish observation from interpretation, protect privacy, and avoid generalizing from a small sample. The learning becomes useful when the group chooses a question to investigate or a small change to test with the people affected. Follow up with participants and share what the team learned. Respectful observation treats people as partners in understanding the work, not as objects under inspection. Revisit the conversation as the work changes and new evidence becomes available.