The UsaLab Experience: A Story of Mexican Growth and Adaptation

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Abstract

We founded our usability lab, the UsaLab, as an academic unit fit for research and practice of Human-Computer Interaction in our university. Almost 15 years have passed since and nowadays our lab serves to a more wide range of activities, reflecting the same dynamic, progress of HCI in our country. We would like to share our story for feedback, as well as for the benefit of similar endeavours everywhere.

Author Keywords

Mexican usability lab; UsaLab; UCD; Human Computer-Interaction; UX.

ACM Classification Keywords

CCS → Human-centered computing → Human computer interaction (HCI) → HCI design and evaluation methods → Usability testing

Introduction

After returning to Mexico in 1994 from graduate studies in Human-Computer Interaction at the University of Glasgow, I tried to find a suitable job at large institutions in my country. I found out that most of the top universities did not include HCI in their curricula, and that research on the area was scarce. Practice was very limited and in some places, unheard of.

So I realised that if I wasn't to find what I was looking for, I decided to create it myself. So I took a position as a professor in a small and distant, but bright university, the Universidad Tecnológica de la Mixteca (UTM), in the Southern Mexican State of Oaxaca.

Oaxaca is known as a rich cultural tourist destination, but unfortunately, it is placed last on education and economic development in the country; a very appropriate place to create an advanced university of technology indeed.

I started to work at the UTM in 1997 although it was until the year 2000 in which HCI started to surface in the university. Some strategic conferences, along with student's request to have our own place to work and practice usability and User Centered Design related activities set the beginnings of our laboratory.

We established our lab, the UsaLab Laboratorio de Usabilidad in the year 2002, with lend resources we collected across campus [1]. Surprisingly enough, we found out that we were the very first usability laboratory at Mexican universities fully committed to HCI and usability, although that affirmation has been jolly debated through the years.

Turning from Academics into Practitioners

As other academic units, our UsaLab initiated developing research and academic projects within our university and in conjunction with other universities. Soon, undergraduate curriculums were modified and HCI was included. A successful graduate programme built around HCI was created as well, all that in a few years.

The UsaLab owes deeply to Dr Christian Sturm, whom came to work with us in the year 2006. In that year we realised that there were not a real usability offer of services in the Mexican industry. So we decided, in a bold movement, to offer our services to the industry. We then, became practitioners [2].

Our First International Projects

Turning our academic laboratory into a practitioner's facility took some time. We professionalised our practice, we learnt about international business and trade, also, we became members of the UPA (now UXPA). We became internationally experienced and locally savvy.

Oddly enough, our first projects were international usability studies and evaluations across several continents, cultures and teams. We were fortunate enough to have Dr Zayira Jordán on board when we developed those projects. We learnt enormously from them.

¿Habla Español? National Projects

After a number of years, sparsely, national customers started requesting quotes for national UX projects. Those quotes were met with disbelief and doubt, as the clients didn't quite understand the scope of the studies and, regrettably, they doubt the high prices.

As any Latin-American practitioner may discuss, usability and UX, for that matter, is an unfamiliar, yet required asset in the development of software and apps nowadays. Unfortunately, in our experience, skills and knowledge requirements are hardly fulfilled.

In addition to all these difficulties, we rapidly found out that working with the Mexican government is way another different situation. Negotiations may take longer, HCI goals may be different and they could even modify results and deliverables [3].

Another important source of revenue of our lab is localisation, the cultural adaptation of products and services. We thank Professor Fernanda Puentes for all the collaboration and projects we developed together localising projects in Latin America and for the Spanish population in the US.

Of Dishwashers and Mobile Phones

During those 15 years, we have evaluated, redesigned and localised a myriad of products, ranging from traditional web pages, on-line banking services, mobile apps, all the way up to voice recognition in cars, dishwashers and interactive surfaces for users in disadvantaged, rural areas.

The flow of projects reflects the mood on the market and the audiences' adoption of technologies and products. Platforms evolve, services and technologies become ubiquitous in society. Knowledge grows and requirements become stricter and they expand into new realms and with that, human-computer interaction.

The Next 15 Years

Well, maybe just the near future.

The years ahead will find the UsaLab Laboratorio de Usabilidad doing three things, as usual:

1. Academic research and teaching of all things HCI related to undergraduates and graduates alike. Spreading the word, as we say.
2. Competing in academic student competitions, as usual. Hopefully, winning them and positioning our lab and university into the first places of HCI in the region.
3. Developing more UX projects for the industry, national and internationally, reaching new markets, learning new methodologies, new tools and schemes.

Figure 1: A user in awe using his new computer for the very first time. An extraordinary example of a good UX.

Aknowledgements

We don't forget our academic roots, which we hold dear. Academic collaborations, papers, workshops, books and a much-needed National UX Laboratory are in the works.

We have been lucky enough to work with brilliant people, famous HCI researchers and practitioners on extraordinary projects and to have met a great deal of clients, which whom many of them have become our close friends.

To all of them, the UsaLab is most thankful.

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