Is It Time to Drop the "U" (From UX)?

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Yes, I am asking whether it's time for another name change and a re-thinking of the profession. And yes, I am aware of the upheaval that nearly fractured our community when the shift from *usability* to *user experience* was proposed nearly two decades ago. Fully mindful of likely resistance to another change, I am proposing that we drop the *user* from our name and simply refer to our field and, most importantly, what we do, as Experience Design (XD). I am fully aware that some will find this name too general, lacking specificity in what we do. I completely recognize the education and public relations burden that will accompany such a change but this can and will work. Consider the *design thinking* movement, very general but it wields tremendous clout in incredibly diverse markets based on proven performance and powerful advocacy.

In this essay, I will make the case for why we should make this effort based on the limitations of the current name, the expanding reach of the field, the opportunities this expansion offers, as well as threats looming on the horizon. The graduate program I have had the privilege to direct for the past 18 years began this transition several years back and the feedback from students and employers alike has been positive. In retrospect, I believe the shift to experience design has always been our destiny and the past forty years have simply led us to this point. Like so many other disciplines, we are a field that has gone by many different names over the years. This represents the natural maturing of a discipline. Names define us, communicate what we do, and conversely, limit other's view of the discipline and the contributions we offer.

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In the early 1980s, I was first drawn to the field of human-center design. I was excited by the writings of Donald Norman and others who espoused the virtues of behaviorally based design. I was intrigued by the notion that these principles applied broadly to "everyday objects" in our world and were not limited to just computer interfaces and interactions. As a traditionally trained designer I was captivated by the prospect of a field grounded in principles, research, and practices that were so much richer than visual appearance alone and the rigid adherence to long-established conventions. In many ways, what I am suggesting we embrace today is far more reflective of this origin than many of the iterations of the discipline we have practiced over the past three decades.

So what went wrong in the intervening years? "Wrong" is not the appropriate framing of this journey; a journey defined and guided very much by the "high tech" industry that first invited us in and a marketplace, at that time, for technology products that was exceedingly tolerant and accepting of bad design, unusable products, and users assuming the burden for engaging these same systems. Under those conditions, the world was not ready for lofty, behaviorally-based, research-driven design principles—no matter how appropriate or well grounded. Quite simply, these theories and practices, for the most part, were far ahead of the times and the demands of the marketplace. For me and others, however, these principles were not lost and forgotten. I taught my first behaviorally-based product design course in 1989; a course I have taught hundreds of times over the past 28 years to whoever would show up in the classroom. We also practiced these principles in a more "stealth" mode while engaged in other activities such as user research, iterative prototyping, and usability testing. This is where the journey began.

In the early days, we were relegated to finding and fixing problems after the fact. Slowly—painfully slowly—we were invited to have greater input earlier in the development process, and the emphasis in the field shifted increasingly to user research and informed interaction design. In both of these approaches we had greater opportunity to integrate behaviorally based, scientifically grounded principles. In more recent years, more progressive product development teams have more fully embraced a behaviorally-based approach to user research, design patterns, product design, and the far-reaching implications of experience design. While there remains tremendous variation across product groups, we can safely say the tech world "gets us" and fully appreciates the value we deliver.

In recent years, we have adapted to dramatic changes in our traditional technology "home," with the development of new interaction modes such as touch, gesture, and conversation—each requiring a deeper understanding of the human factor. Our profession has also embraced the challenges and opportunities offered by the Internet of things, cognitive computing, gamification, and augmented and virtual reality. We are also discovering the expanded possibilities of design, as seen in behavioral finance and health. These emerging areas require an even more sophisticated understanding of human behavior as well as the positive implications and risks associated with this approach. In the past, we have often defined our role through the design of the user interface. In many of the just considered developments, the interaction mode is shifting from visual to conversational, and in some cases, the interaction is completely transparent. What is our role in a world with no interface? Do we become irrelevant? Not in the world of experience design.

At the same time, new opportunities have emerged. As a discipline, we slowly started fielding inquires and plying our trade in areas outside of the traditional "tech" space. Here we see new and exciting opportunities. We discovered, as many of us already knew, that our behaviorally-based principles, research, and design practices lent value and provided actionable insights in areas as diverse as service design, the design of physical places, play, and a more all-encompassing view of the total user experience outside the product. So far-reaching are the possibilities that I began referencing the concept of the *design of everything* in the classroom years back and have encouraged our students to apply experience design thinking widely. I have found most students easily make that adjustment and embrace the opportunity.

Finally, for most of our existence we have focused all of our efforts on making today's products better, richer, more usable. That's not to say we have not contributed valuable incremental innovations around the edges. Moving forward by employing the behaviorally based principles to research and design practices, we will increasingly shape tomorrow's products—truly taking on a

more substantial role in product innovation. I have found more and more of our innovatively-minded graduates are gravitating to the start-up world or embarking on entrepreneurial ventures of their own.

And now the threats looming on the horizon. Coinciding with the emergence of the opportunities described above, we also see increased competition as we venture outside of the safe confines of technology and product. It is not unusual to see large organizations employ user experience teams, customer experience groups (CX), design thinking teams, patient experience teams in healthcare, and service-design units—all competing for the opportunity to serve the user/customer and all competing for increasingly tighter resources and influence within the larger organization. In this competitive arena a "name" and people's perception of who you are and what you do matters. With *user experience* we are limited, in many people's minds, to the confines of the technology product. For me personally and in our graduate program, we have always embraced the concept of the total user experience from the moment of product consideration, through interaction with the product, and every touch point along that journey. Globally, we strived to orchestrate and design a consistent and coherent experience across that journey. I always assumed the rest of the world was noticing what we were doing and never considered the need to more clearly and convincingly convey that vision of who we are, what we do, and the value we deliver. With the recent emergence of the customer experience field, I realize now what an incredible mistake it was not to more compellingly promote the capabilities of the UX field—demonstration was not enough. Customer experience groups are happy to allow us to control the design of the experience within the product but anything else along the journey remains under their control. In some CX models, UX is simply one component of the customer experience; a component managed by the CX team as they coordinate every touch point along the customer journey.

We must push back. The principles and practices of experience design, as framed earlier, apply broadly to all we design and create. It is a way of thinking: A problem-solving approach focused on people, the activities supported, and the use as well as social environment. With a deep understanding of each of these variables, we are capable of adding value and enhancing the experience of all that we create, at every stage of the journey.

Similarly when the solution space involves a service, the service science group takes ownership. When the product or service happens to play out in the health care sector, it is controlled increasingly by the patient experience group. Finally, when the initiative is innovation, the go-to group is most often the design thinking team. Some of these areas have emerged in recent years (CX and patient experience, others a decade ago, service science and still others more than two decades ago, e.g., design thinking). I am certain that some in our community do not see these groups as threats. As I share with my graduate students, disruptive forces typically begin on the fringe and as a consequence are rarely seen as a threat. These groups rarely remain on the fringe, however, eventually migrating around and ending up in your core space. At first, no one was threatened by the emergence of these groups. Increasingly, we are now competing at the intersection of each of these areas. Another vulnerability: Most of these competing groups benefit from the advocacy of increasingly powerful professional associations and the influence of academic programs at countless colleges and universities. UX, as a field, does not enjoy these same benefits.

This is more than politics or a simple turf battle. Most importantly, I fear it is the user/customer who will suffer from a fracturing of the experience and the competing self-interests of competing groups. Many reading this will wonder if we are properly prepared and educated to make this move. Clearly there is a challenge for broader education. We will need to build upon our deep knowledge of human behavior, research methods, and design practices by broadening our knowledge of the wider business enterprise and analytics. This does not require an MBA; most of our students achieve this expansion with two courses in designated areas of the business school determined by their career paths. A further endorsement of this more expansive view of the experience is seen in the world's largest professional consulting services frantically building-out user experience practices. While interacting with these firms, I cannot help but notice that their view of UX more closely aligns with the profession proposed in this essay than our past practices.

Looking back on my career, I see eerily similar parallels to where UX stands today and where the Society for Technical Communication (STC) stood in the early 1990s. There were a small group of rebels, of which I was part, who advocated for a more expansive view of user advocacy and support in the Society than simply the development of supporting information, which defined the technical communication field since the 1950s. For many readers of this journal, you will recall that many of the early leaders in the usability movement, were also participants in the STC. Ultimately, we lost that battle, the STC continued to define themselves as they always have and the door was left open for the formation of the Usability Professionals Association. Technical communicators continue to provide a valuable service today, but their numbers are greatly reduced, and the clout of the STC in the tech space greatly diminished.

The user experience community finds itself at a similar juncture today. We too must ask ourselves, are we going to be disrupted by others after thirty or more years advocating for people or are we going to disrupt the profession we all know by embracing, communicating, and demonstrating the broader view of experience design (XD)? Are we to realize the full potential of human-centered design first proposed nearly forty years ago? At this moment, it is not an all or nothing commitment. Not everyone will embrace the name change; others will embrace components of the expanded view of the discipline and some will continue to practice UX as we know it today. This change will not happen overnight but the time to commit to this transformation is upon us.

About the Author

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Dr. Gribbons is Director of the User Experience Programs at Bentley University. The User Experience Programs at Bentley are among the largest and most respected of this type in the country. For over thirty years he has provided consulting services to a diverse range of technology clients around the world.