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Project Proposal: Designing a cultural probe to explore adolescent deep engagement

In our efforts to better understand Deep Engagement, it would be worth while to consider using cultural probes alongside more traditional methods such as focus groups, interviews or tests. The cultural probe methodology can potentially introduce designers to new ways of understanding experiences that would otherwise be excluded from a more predictable scientific approach. By emphasizing empathy and imagination in the designers' quest for understanding experiences, they open up the possibility to generate new and unexpected ideas for technologies that offer a deep level of engagement. In this way, the project offers an approach available to designer's that invites their own engagement while focusing on experiences of others.

This project would lend itself best to designers seeking to develop technologies that pose difficulties for testing in a traditional lab environment. Such technologies could include items used in a home, restaurant, or in transit while walking or driving.

Volunteers will be solicited through channels appropriate for adolescents (I am not currently familiar with procedures/protocol for this process). Participants must also live within the Boston metropolitan area. The number of participants will be determined by budget allowance. Each selected participant will be given a probe kit that will be returned to the lab within an established period of time (10 days).

The kit will contain a variety of objects and instructions for their use. These items will be employed by the child to collect her thoughts surrounding experiences at school and home. The objective of such probes is not to generate preconceived meaningful statistical data, but instead to foster the development of a mental model for designers working with the demographic.

A preliminary list of items includes:

- Disposable camera
- A multi-colored deck of post-its
- Abstract drawing cards
- (...)

While the format for such an exploration is in itself not novel, the value offered by applying this methodology to a young demographic is promising. The uncertainty of potential responses is sure to stimulate in designers much speculation and empathy for the subjects in part byway of albeit incomplete narrative development.