

Broken Probe

Design Research
Methods

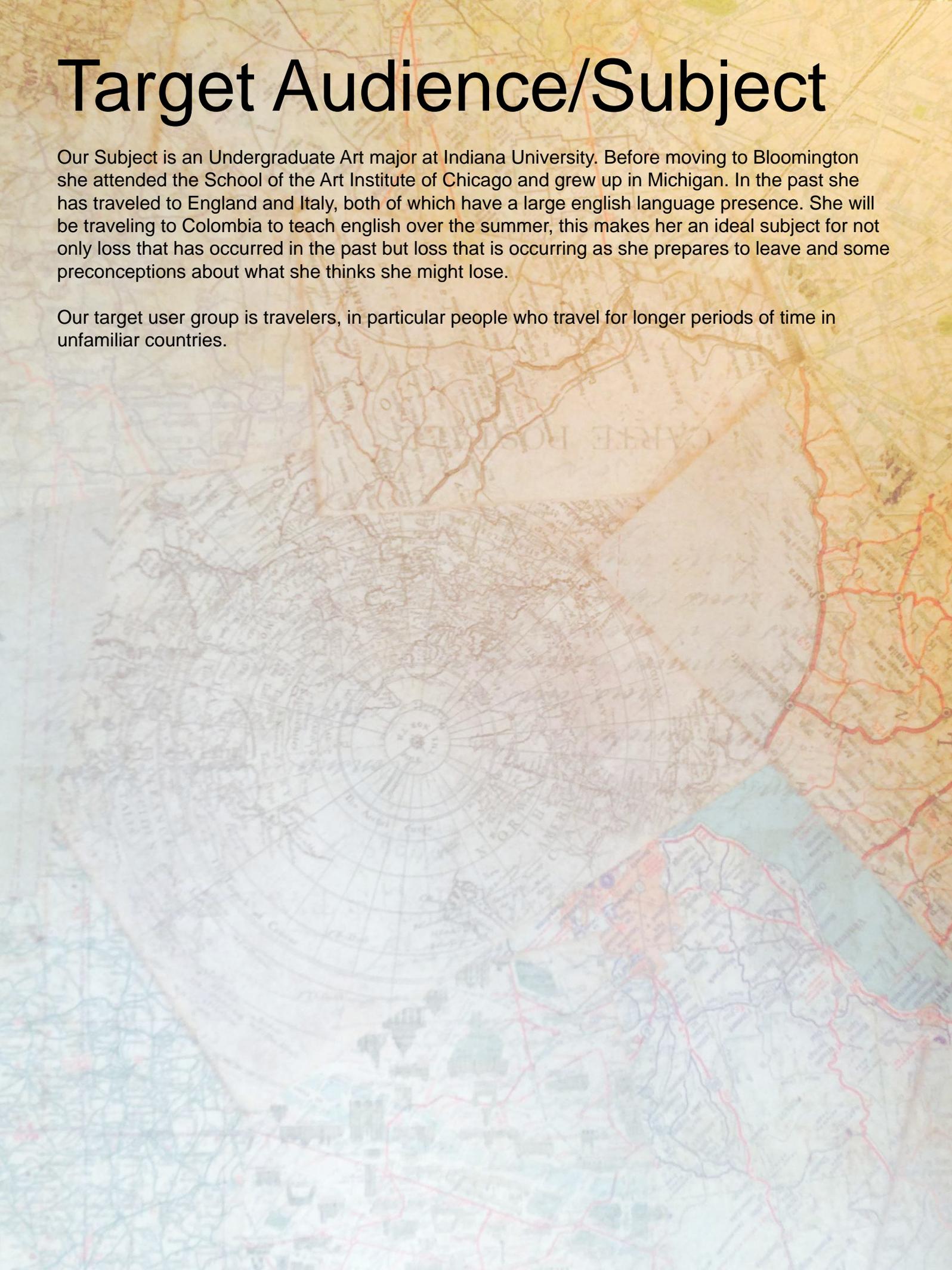
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Joel Wisneski

Target Audience/Subject

Our Subject is an Undergraduate Art major at Indiana University. Before moving to Bloomington she attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and grew up in Michigan. In the past she has traveled to England and Italy, both of which have a large english language presence. She will be traveling to Colombia to teach english over the summer, this makes her an ideal subject for not only loss that has occurred in the past but loss that is occurring as she prepares to leave and some preconceptions about what she thinks she might lose.

Our target user group is travelers, in particular people who travel for longer periods of time in unfamiliar countries.



Research Objectives

Duration of Probe: 3 days, follow-up interview on day 4

Our main objective was to study loss in the process of travel. During a trip, short or long term, we lose things. Money for flights, luggage at airports and our sense of the familiar when we arrive in a new place. Initially we moved away from the idea of death or broken relationships but the idea came back in the way we drift apart when moving away. Our subject had first hand accounts for all of these from her past travel and as she is preparing to travel this summer.

Scenario

We used a scenario since our subject would be staying in Bloomington during the break, we hoped this scenario would contextualize the project and spark some creativity for the subject.

The scenario is: “ You’ve just arrived in a new city, you flew here and it’s your first time in this city.”

Instructions

We kept our instructions vague, again as an attempt to spark some creativity and see the response. Our subject lost the passport diary so she recorded her reflections on spare sheets of paper. We broke down the activities into 3 days so it would be easier to her to schedule day to day. The activities are related to the traveling scenario and aim to get emotional responses of the past, present and future relating to travel and being in unfamiliar environments.

Day 1:

- Draw and use the included stickers to describe your mood
- Take photos of interesting sights
- Use the contents of your suitcase to record some things you’ve lost, hope not to lose, gained and hope to gain while traveling

Day 2:

- Draw and use the included stickers to describe your mood
- Take photos of interesting sights
- Write a letter to a family member or friend to describe your experience

Day 3:

- Draw and use the included stickers to describe your mood
- Take photos of interesting sights
- Take a bus to a restaurant you’ve never been to and record your experience like a diary entry

Contents



Travel and Itinerary Related

Suitcase (the box)
 Passport (diary and instructions)
 TSA Restricted Items List
 Car Key

Maps and Pamphlets

Resorts map of Cancun
 Visit Bloomington Pamphlet
 Taxi Pamphlet
 Bloomington Parking Map
 Post-Cards with Assorted Pictures

Money

20 Dollar Bill
 Foreign Currency (peso and euro)

Mementos

Bracelet with Cat
 (Japanese cat with spiritual meaning: cherish)
 Fortune Cookie Fortunes

Everyday Objects

Contact Lens Case
 Chapstick
 Gum
 Flashcards
 Postcards

Creative Tools

Envelope with Post-it Note
 ("Write a Letter" is written on the Post-it Note)
 Stickers with Writing and Drawings
 (Facial mood and action words)
 Shaped Post-It Notes
 (smiling face, arrow, tree, heart)
 Glue Stick
 Tape
 Scissors
 Pen

Worn Objects

Worn Photographs
 Subject and Father
 Subject and Boyfriend
 Subject and Brother
 Newspaper (with figures)

Process and Rationale

When we designed the package, we tried to think through the whole experience of traveling and then used different forms of objects to represent different pieces of the experience. Before leaving we need to prepare the different objects that will be needed during travel. We need to use transportation both before and during the travel. We need to connect with people while we travel. We may need to speak another language and use another type of currency. We need to visit interesting places or places that we are not familiar with. We may have problems finding the restroom. We may feel uncomfortable living in the hotel.

Once we had the idea of traveling, the idea of a suitcase and passport came naturally as a way to contextualize the activities and the scenario. Within the scenario, we thought about the implicit ways to remind our subject about travel experience. (Because she will not be actually traveling, she may miss out some aspects that should be important for her if she was on traveling.) We didn't associate the objects in the package directly with loss. Instead, we were expecting to see the loss by letting our subject to go through the whole travel process. The package ended up to be a mini world in which she can let herself imagining she's traveling to a new city.

Suitcase (The Box)

The suitcase was crafted from a Macbook Pro box. The interior was painted black and the exterior was covered with brown leather upholstery to make it look and feel like a suitcase. The imperfection inherent in crafting the box gives it a more careful, personal feel as opposed to something produced mindlessly and in mass.

Passport (Diary and Instructions)

Again the passport was handcrafted with a more personal feel. We wanted the booklet to remind the subject of a passport but also function as a pocket-sized way to record thoughts. The stationary is reminiscent of paper used in a passport.



Travel Related Objects

We wanted to give the subject an open-ended travel narrative. We included money from a few different places as well as maps and brochures so there was no specific country. The newspaper with figures was used to remind her of strangers. Worn photos and fortune cookies were used to remind her of friends and family who will remain in the U.S. Since she's going to Colombia we included Spanish flash cards for common phrases and a "Do Not Disturb" sign. The maps and taxi pamphlet were used as a way to explore the idea of navigation and transportation in an unfamiliar place.



Creative Objects

Being an artist, we wanted to give our subject a way to express herself creatively. We included some arts and crafts materials as a way to help her externalize her emotions, motives and thoughts.



Worn Objects

Photographs

We used the photographs as a chance to be provocative, when someone leaves a city they also leave the people they've built relationships with. There is an inherent difference when communicating with people who are a few hours away and people who are thousands of miles and a plane ride away because of a perceived distance. Communication in long distance relationships is not only about how easy it is to contact the other person but how easy it is to see them in person.

During the follow-up interview we also found out her boyfriend had, a few days before the probe was deployed, broken up with her because she was going to Columbia.

Newspaper with Figures, Wrapped in a Ring

People are a very important part of the travel experience and we felt that could be represented by the picture on the newspaper. It is open-ended so the subject can interpret the figures to be the nice people she will meet in the travel or the strangers who will remind her of home.

Cat Bracelet

The bracelet belongs to one of the researchers, Jiaqi. It was bought as a gift to celebrate the Chinese new year. And it was culturally related to "cherishing". We included this to represent a different culture in the package and prompt the subject to think about cherishing while traveling.

Understand the Subject

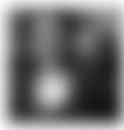
Photographs are an important tool to record a memory. We deliberately made the photos slightly worn so that they represent the age of the memories. We wanted to see how she would interact with them by looking, including them in a diary, or even tearing them. She also told us about her feelings towards the photos during the interview, she was caught off-guard by the photo of her and her (now) ex-boyfriend. This triggered a large portion of the responses through the diaries and letter. She glued this photo on her first day's diary, along with the fortune cookie fortune which was the same with the one her boyfriend got a few days ago. Her way of placing the photo actually seems to reflect feelings of pity and sorrow about this relationship.

Newspaper is common enough that we can use it in anyway we want. We intended to use this piece of newspaper as the material she can use to make the diary but we weren't sure how that would actually happen. She cut off some of the little figures and pasted them into the second day diary. In the painting, she is standing in the new city, with a lot of strangers. An interesting note is her decision to include the figures that are smiling rather than the sorrowful ones. Her expectation about the journey is a positive one with many new people, she might lose relationships but she'll gain new ones as well.

She was very fond of the bracelet and drew it in her second day diary. We didn't tell her what the bracelet means before we gave it to her, so we were curious about her reaction and perception. We thought it would be a smaller part of the probe but it was actually one of the more important pieces in her activities. She thought it was a personal spiritual guide, perhaps due to the smile. It seemed to be a comfort object for her to recover from the broken relationship and we actually gave her the bracelet during the interview as a sort of payment for her effort in the research.

Subject Reactions

Initial Reaction



Elizabeth added 2 new photos.

55 secs · 👤

Well. This is weird. I got a box. From a friend...for his school project...without a lot of instructions and some pretty uncanny things inside. Aaaaaand it hit kind of closer to home that I might have expected. I have to hand it back in 2 more days...soooo more to come Friday?



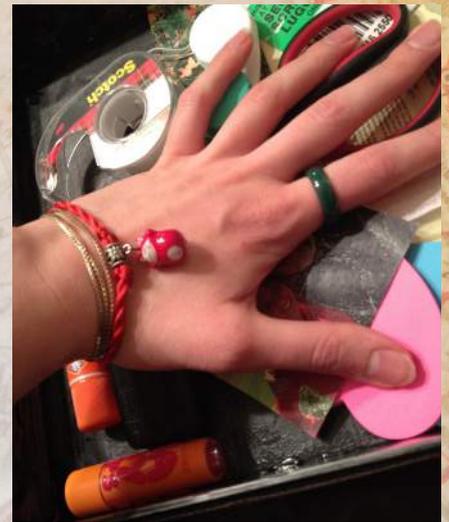
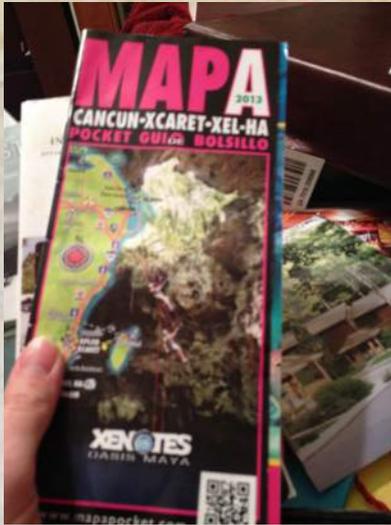
Our intention was to move away from the idea of death or relationships but inherently relationships and long term travel are at odds. Our subject mentioned when she opened the passport diary with the picture of her boyfriend she “started to bawl”. In context this could have been a more predictable reaction but we were unaware of the recent breakup.

Overall she seemed to have a positive reaction to the probe, it gave her a chance to reflect and normalize after a breakup. She seemed to use the diary aspect as a way to externalize things that she may not have otherwise.

Through the course of the probe the subject’s responses seem to transition from the relationship to other parts of the subject’s life like friends, family and her upcoming trip.

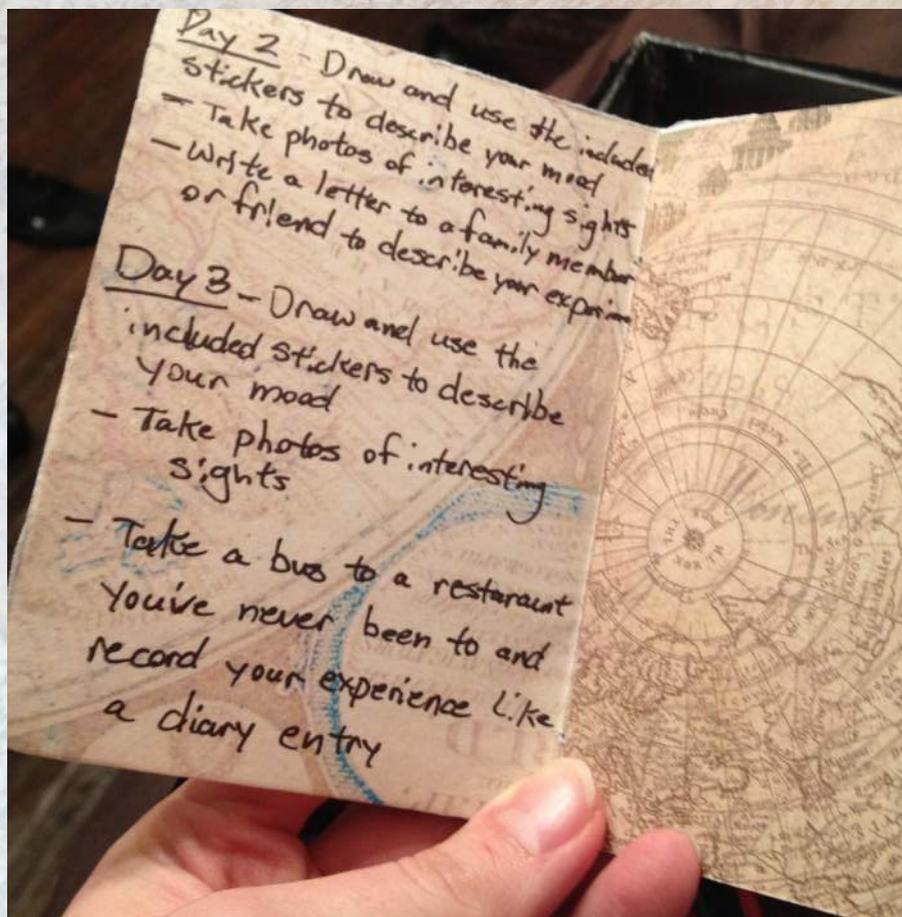
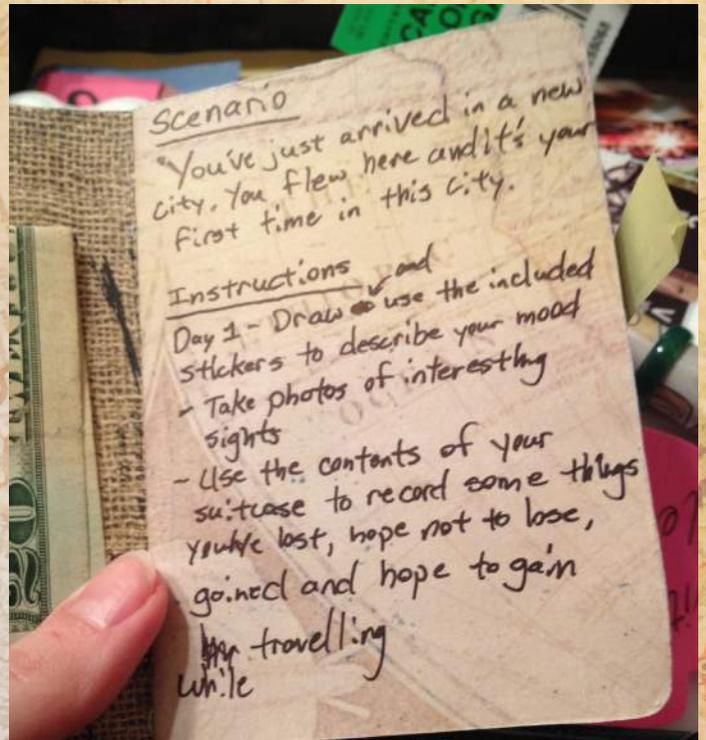
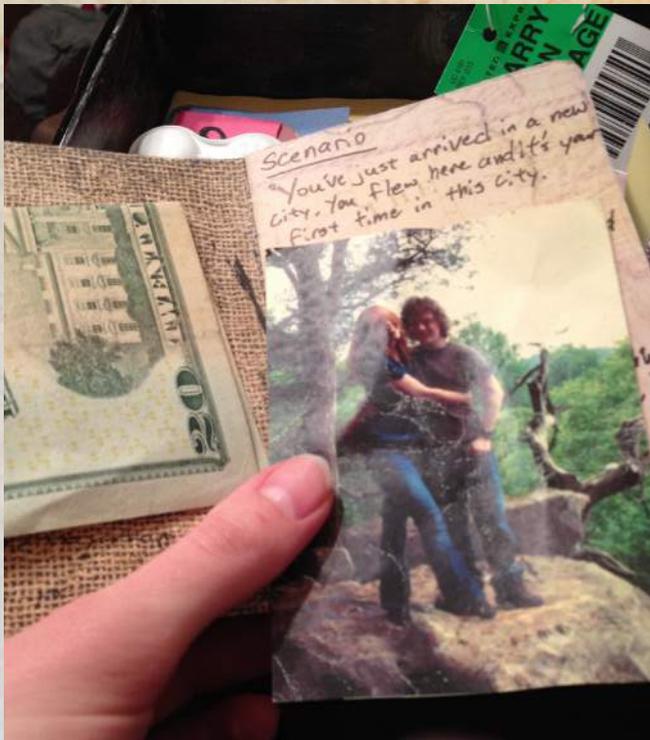
Subject Reactions

Unboxing



Subject Reactions

Unboxing



Subject Reactions

Diaries

DAY #1

LOOK FORWARD TO
A NEW ADVENTURE
PANDA EXPRESS • PANDA INN

I lost my boyfriend Michael.
He broke up w/me.

I feel strong enough to keep going
but discouraged + a little lonely
and also more certain
of my choice to
travel to the
new city.

te

LOST & FOUND

extraño.

Friends long absent are coming back to you.
Lucky # 1, 29, 30, 49, 55, 10
Learn Chinese: 'I'd be nervous, jin-zhang 紧张

¿Dónde?
estoy?
¿Qué pasó?
(en serio...)

¿SERIOUSLY?!
What were the **FUCKING**
CHANCES of getting this fortune
in the suitcase?!?! I guess it takes
on a whole new meaning... I mean...
a good one and all. I've never felt luckier
to have the friends I do. I hope not to
lose any of them + to only gain
more while I'm
here. ♡

I know just enough
Spanish to survive
yo se suficiente para sobrevivir.
en un país extranjero

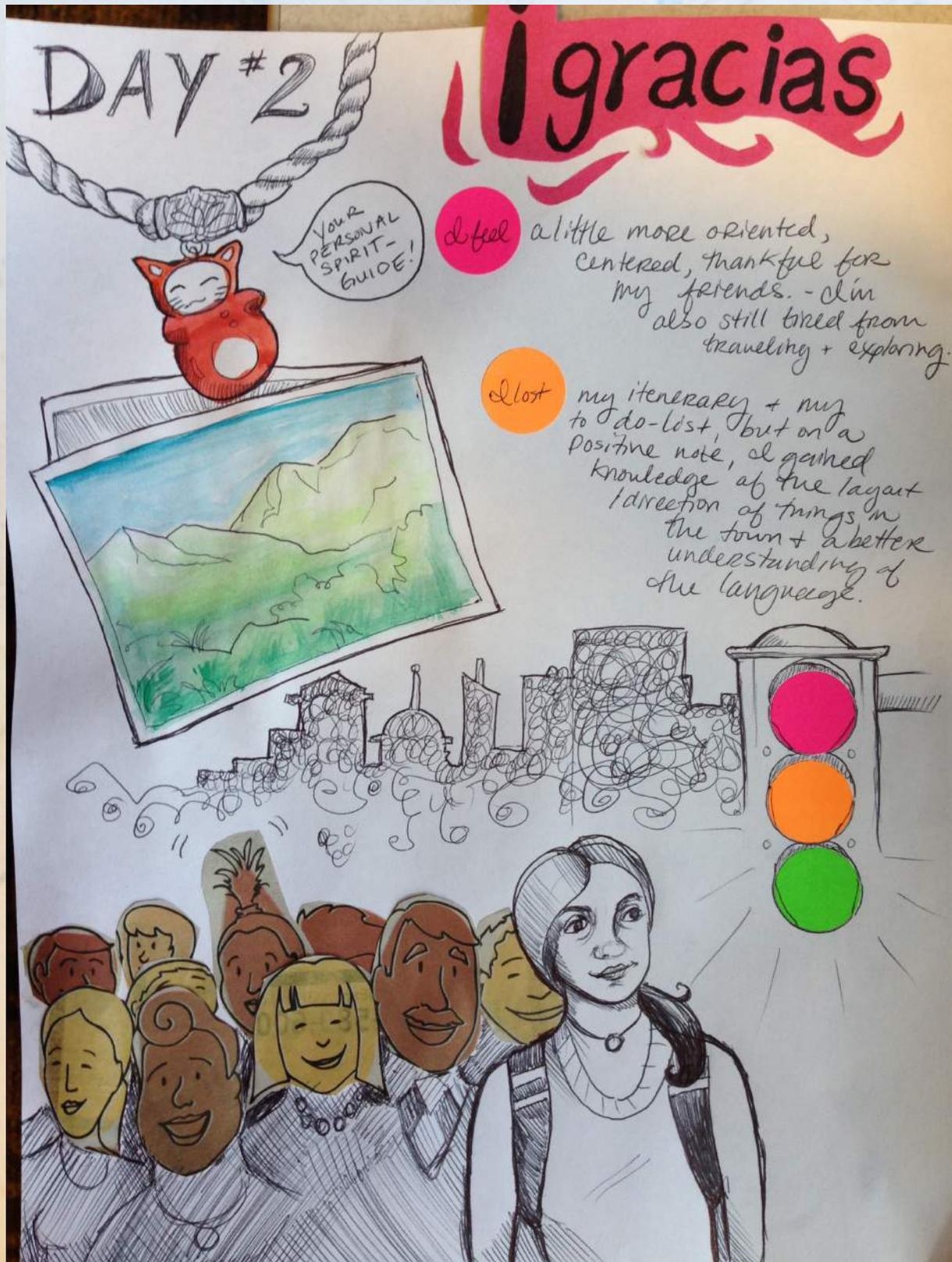
por ejemplo
creo que
puedo llamar un taxi →

HOSTEL
ALEGRIA
BOGOTÁ



Subject Reactions

Diaries



Subject Reactions

Diaries

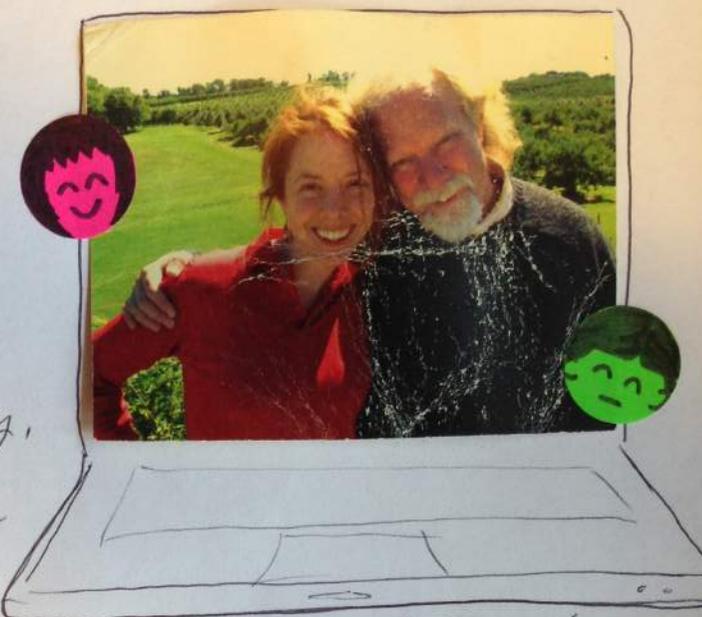
DAY #3

took the Lebus from the union to Luncible - not very far of a ride + completely empty, so there wasn't a lot to report. I had lavender tea and eggs + toast + it took up alot of space - I am a little concerned that the old guy next to me was annoyed - also because I was talking to my dad loudly - but I can't help that that's where the waitress put me.

I still haven't told him that Michael broke up w/ me - don't really want to for some reason.

Overall life is good I paid for my food, left - went to work, came home, went for a run + went to bed.

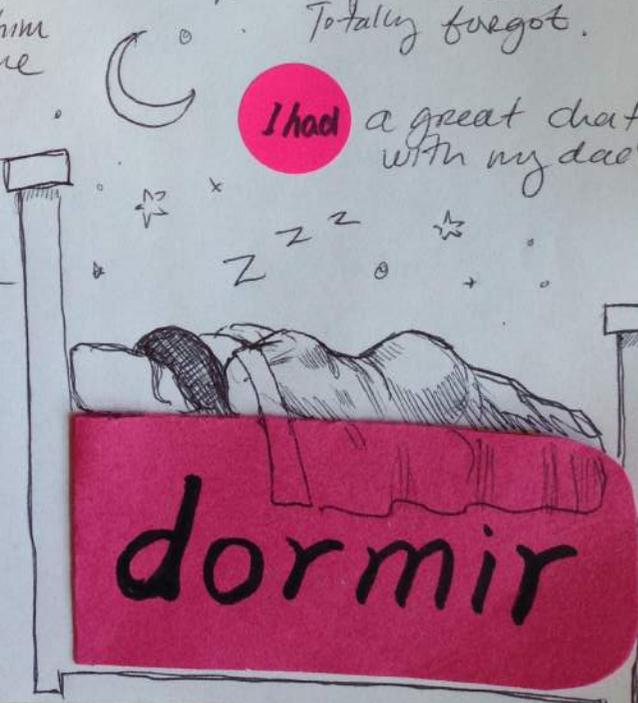
maybe I'm adjusting to the new place in which I've found myself.



SKYPE CHAT w/my dad

I paid using my credit card even though I had cash in my suitcase. Totally forgot.

I had a great chat with my dad!



Researcher Reflections

The Broken Probe

Our package was compelling to our subject mainly because of the uncanny feeling of all the objects in the package. We didn't want to tell her exactly what we expected so we cut the whole travel experience into pieces. During her creation of the diary, she was actually trying to make sense of all the objects we gave her. Since some objects, like the photos and the fortune cookie fortune pertain to what she is experiencing they offered some comfort throughout the activities. The comfort and personal feelings associated with the objects allowed her to open up more easily. She was very creative with the objects we gave her and used them to make the diary.

An interesting point to note with this probe is our subject responded to the idea of what has been lost and what has been gained in a very interesting way. The subject has already experienced loss in preparing to travel but as a response to that and the probe she realized that she's been able to reconnect with old friends that she didn't see as much due to being in a relationship.

This particular probe, though extremely short, gave us quite a bit of insight and a very intimate glance at the subject's life. Combined this with an interview was extremely helpful and certainly yielded enough for a thorough analysis and some interesting design implications. But our subject actually helped us to do a few things that we should have done but didn't think about doing. She posted a facebook message right after she got the package. Also she took photos of the process when she unboxed the package. These are all really good way to record the reactions and feelings. We provided a passport for her to record the things, but because she lost it, she used white paper to write the diary, which made the diary more creative. We should have provided more papers and maybe more colorful pens for her to express her feelings through color. Maybe we could also ask her to create a list of things that she wants to do to be happier during grief.

Throughout the process, and part of the reason we wanted to stay away from death or relationships, we felt that there was a sense that we're taking from the subject without giving back. In this particular case where we are bringing up loss it seemed a bit one sided to ask our subject to deal with these feelings but not be able to return the effort with a design that might help the subject or users in that situation. This is partially what led to our effort to make the activities fun and creative rather than tedious. In the end the subject seemed to benefit from the study itself which is something we didn't think could happen initially.

Though conducting a group research project over a break is not ideal, this actually helped us as our subject is also a college student she had more time to work on the probe and reflect for the diaries and interview.

Researcher Reflections

Cultural Probes in General

On a longer time scale it might be tough for the subject to continue the activities in the probe. It also depends on what kind of topic it is. For topics sensitive like loss, especially for loss of relationship or people, different subjects will react to the probe process. For some subjects, the probe can help them to recover from the loss for others the probe can make them feeling worse. If it's not carefully designed we could see ethical issues arising from a cultural probe method.

Cultural probes can be very good at evoking emotion. The open-ended activities for the subject encourage self expression and can highlight the creativity in that person's life. If we can conduct cultural probe at the right time (like in broken probe, right after the loss), then we can observe the change of feelings in-situ. By analyzing the responses we can generate insights that are associated with the emotional and lifestyle changes after such a life event. Unlike photo or diary studies, which can also highlight these feelings and emotional changes, cultural probes invite subjects to actively participate in the process. We've observed the insights generated from cultural probe can be more personal than many of the methods we've used so far.

Doing cultural probe can be risky. If the guidelines are too strict the subject may attempt to fulfill their idea of the ideal outcome and the method ceases to be exploratory. Less useful or already understood insights could be generated from a probe that is too vague. With an overly specific probe it may be difficult to generalize the insights for a larger population. Overall, time permitting, probes can be a great method in combination with interviews, surveys or, as we used it, incorporating elements from a diary study.