Enhancing design and innovation practices through "blogging ethnography”

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Abstract

Designers have always wanted to understand the “needs and wants” of products or service users. One of the methods that have received an important attention in the design practice is the ethnography.

Nevertheless, if its importance has been highly recognized, there are numerous drawbacks that limit its use in a business setting. An example would the time constraints facing a designer in a company, versus the need of a long immersion for the ethnologists to ensure familiarity with the observed and analysed situation.

In order to overcome these limitations, the authors have tested a new setting, where all observations and analysis done by the ethnographic team are offered on a live basis to an innovation team (marketing, innovation and in-house anthropologist). One of the Groupe SEB’s innovation team served as a test group for an ethnography done in Malaysia and based on blogging ethnography.

Results are highly promising: they allowed to cut the time needed to provide a coherent ethnological report, offered a great interactivity between the ethnographers and the innovation team, interactivity that lacks in the normal methodology and could lead to critical gap between

initial request made by the innovation team and the one after one month due to business or industrial issue.

In terms of future research, it is extremely challenging: numerous questions are raised around the type of information that should be proposed on a blogging basis, the ones that should wait for analysis, the design of a specific framework to increase the reliability of the process, the role of the innovation team and the impact they should or not have on the observational setting etc. Those issues will be discussed in the paper.

Keywords: ethnography, blogging ethnography, innovation, design

Introduction

1. Presentation of the study: objectives and methods of the blogging ethnography

1.1. Looking for ethnographic methods that are closer to companies' needs

Designers, and industry at large, have always wanted to understand the "needs and wants" of products or service users. One of the methods that have received an important attention in the design practice is the ethnographic one since a rather long time (Salvador & al. 1999, Wasson 2000, Gunn & Donovan 2012, Jordan 2012). Several advantages of the ethnographic methods are currently well know by some companies in the field of innovation, business, marketing or human resources (Aguilera 1996, Baba 2006, Cefkin 2010, Strang 2009). Ethnography is a valuable resource:

To get in depth knowledge of actual practices, mixing identification of actual and potential needs and a description of contextual dimensions of behaviours (Sunderland & Denny 2009).

To collect design innovation made by actual customers (called "bricolage") dealing with their manufactured environment (Louridas 1999, Maestri & Wakkary 2011).

To offer an alternative to corporate customer vision or even offer a human centred perspective to the whole company (Bell 2001).

The ability of the ethnographic team to deliver relevant data and to have a significant impact on the delivering of goods and service depend not only on the quality of ethnographic material, but also the quality of the integration of this process in the design process (Jones 2006). To achieve this, some methods in design thinking have been developed to transform ethnographic data into actionable material, from newly designed ways to represent data (personas, experience flow, ...) to participatory approaches giving voices to users during the design process (Crabtree 1998).

Nevertheless, if its importance has been highly recognized, there are numerous drawbacks that limit its use in a business setting. For instance, current researches in the new field of "design anthropology" highlight the need for a reframing of the relation between use and design by reducing the gap between the contexts, practices of use and design (Kjaersgaard & Otto 2013: 178). Beside this specific epistemology, the methods used to connect ethnographic data production and design conception appear to be a critical issue.

A well-known issue is the time constraints facing a designer in a company, versus the need of a long immersion for the ethnographers to ensure familiarity with the observed and analysed situation. Private customers wait for short-term work because of price, but also to stay attuned to several business agendas. Some have then develop tools to challenge those issues (Bauwens & Kloetzer 2013 : 51-52). A classic one is called "**post-cards from the field**". This small artefact shows a single picture of a representative or unusual situation adding some descriptive comments. An other tool is the "**hot report**"; a one or two pages review of each critical time shared to customers written. Both are mostly used to create a sense of engagement and make time pressure a less critical issue. The fieldwork tends to become less obscure and time needed to doing it shown its relevance.

A second rang of critical issue about ethnographic practice in design process is the need for a balanced ratio between disruptive analysis and findings in line with business or industrial needs. Ethnography is mostly valuable when setting aside *a priori* and offering new understanding of a range of behaviours. However, grounded within a unique and subjective understanding of fieldwork, those shifts might look too “alien” for customers and fail to find connection with actual design environment (like industrial, organizational or business constraints).

Here again, time of fieldwork is a central issue, but mostly as a risk of disjunction between the actual vision of the ethnographic team, and the one carried by the several stockholders within the client organization. This is especially true when client team continue to work on the topic, gathering other expertise or working on its own concept.

A third critical issue is the ability to share a common understanding of the actual situations observed by ethnographers. What is relevant to ethnographer might be irrelevant to customer, and *vice versa*. Each fieldwork is made of minor key findings, issue fascinating *a priori* but relevant once interrelated to other issues. Of course, being able to do that job in a proper way depends a lot of the quality of the ethnographer, but is always an issue as each stakeholder tend to focus on specific dimension of the ethnographic material. Some Design tools like personas do exist and are supposed to reduce this gap (Pruitt & Adlin 2006). Unfortunately, they continue to deliver ethnographic material once the fieldwork is done, offering only few opportunities to challenge or refine client’s understanding of the situation.

However connected to innovation issues, those last two issues (taking into account customer point of view in ethnographic work and sharing a mutual understanding of the situation) are connected to rather classical debate common in the academic ethnographic work. Specifically, a large range of works concerned how ethnographer is able to write about cultures he knows from the inside by allowing reader to perform its own understanding of the original situation? Given academic standards, in a "good ethnographic talk or paper,

> « the original fieldnotes stand here, embedded within the analysis, allowing any reader to listen closely to members' voices, to vicariously experience their actions, and **to imagine other interpretations**. In the end, it seems, the reader has her say. » (Emerson & al. 2011 : 242, highlighted by ourselves)

In other words, ethnographic writing should allow reader (client) and writer (ethnographer) to co-create a mutual reality. To do so the process of writing should remain open to multiple interpretations. As such, analytic findings made by the team should not hide raw material (fieldnote *per se*) and intermediate conclusion. In this ideal – but also quite academic configuration –

> « (…) ethnographers write fieldnotes tales that reflect daily experience rather than crafted, artful, suspense-driven narratives. (…) each narrative links to, and comment on, other episodes and tales within a set of fieldnotes. In that sense, each tale – as one version among many – remains **open-ended.**" (Emerson & al. 2011 : 122).

Taking this point seriously imply a first attitude quite opposite to the one performed by external agency in marketing which is the need to deliver clear-cut analysis and offer some power point description of reality without any opportunity to contest or re-formulate the content of the material. However, the shared material should be challenged not only at the stage of the final report sharing, but also in the process of field-working itself.

Taking advantage of recent research in the field of visual anthropology, where both situation of producing and sharing data are connected, we hypothesis Internet offers new way to write fieldwork in more collaborative ways (Cora-Garcia & al. 2009, Heng 2011, Pink 2012). Among solution already tested by ethnographer working in a design environment, blogs appear to be promising tool. As the two cases bellow demonstrate, blogs offer opportunities to share and create a common understanding of the field, sharing authority and producing a mixed and original understanding.

Case 1. "**Life fieldnoting**" by ethnographer Tricia Wang (2012). Looking how to share notable findings from the field on a daily basis to an open community (like followers of public blog) she decided to publish raw material made of one picture (thanks to an *instagram* device) added to a short description of the interactional situation and its meaning for the ethnographer/ participant. Each situation is located in time and space and offer an understanding of the field open to multiple interpretation. Even if it remain a by-product of the research, it demonstrate the value of this kind of electronic format to share real time key finding of ethnographic work.

Case 2. "**Collaborative blogging**" by team Pacific Ethnography (Erickson & Heyen 2007). For some work they have created private blog aiming at better understanding the needs of the client. Some pictures from the field were sent on a irregular basis with a title summarizing the main issue (a "rich point") and a one page report describing the analytical point. Client is then able to comment, ask some revision or even express disagreement about analysis. It demonstrates the relevance of having feedback from the customer organization in the course of on-going fieldwork.

Those two cases are attempts at highlighting the relevance of the collaboration between ethnography and design buy finding way to get closer to companies needs. However they still give priority to classic ethnographic work made once and analysis in a second time. Paying attention to the very nature of ethnographic writing which is to remain open to interpretation, and to (1) the need to reduce time pressure, to (2) find way to take into account customer point of view in ethnographic work and to (3) be able to share a mutual understanding of the situation, we have developed a ethnographic tool based on a private blog. This device has been thought to allow ethnographic team to share on a daily basis short summary of interviews and observation and short dirty analysis; and to let customer team ask question, request more information on a specific topic or express larger feelings about the way fieldwork evolve.

The blog functions by mixing benefits of *life blogging* and *collaborative blogging*:

From *life blogging* we have requested to ethnographic team to share some raw material soon after each ethnographic encounter.

- Each post on the blog is structured by a picture
- Each post talks about a specific situation, which is described in terms of location, short "objective description", and meaning for informants.

Aiming to organize the whole ethnographic study on this basis, we also requested that sometimes ethnographers post might produce short dirty analysis to start to build analytic links between posts.

From *collaborative blogging* we decided that ethnographic team should:

- Use a private blog, only available to members of the ethnographic team and members of the innovation team within the company. During field work, it might be limited to a small amount of people to be able to manage the flow of communication
- Each post is made to let start a dialogue between members from both teams.

As a model for each post, we offer here some example of academic ethnographic studies, offering original way to short ethnographic description, mixing excerpt of fieldwork, pictures, short analytic point and other comments.

Figure 1

To test the method and identify benefits and limits we had the opportunity to work an innovation project mixing two ranges of stakeholders. Customers were members of Groupe Seb innovation team, three people with background in engineering, marketing and anthropology. Groupe Seb is a French company in the field of small domestic appliances, selling goods on a worldwide scale. Ethnographic team were student from a Ms in Marketing, Design & creation of Audencia School of Management. The aim of the collaboration was about defining needs about some specific food material in Malaysia.

1.2. A two tep test of a blogging ethnographic protocole

Before testing the protocol in Malaysia, the researchers tested it on a national level (France) in order to address beforehand the potential limitations of the method. 9 teams of 2 students were constituted and were asked to develop dedicated blogs and to start a month long ethnography of Chinese expatriates' relationship with some specific food practices.

As it was a first for the innovation team also, the learning by doing aspect of the interaction was extremely important and led to numerous remarks and evolutions as to what the final setting for Malaysia should be. Among the points that were underlined during this first period, some were considered as being critical to the second part of the test:

One of the ethnographic blogging's purposes is to allow an easier and faster interaction between the innovation and the ethnographic team. As such, the focus should be put on this interaction, and less on the look and feel of the blog itself. Since the researchers were dealing with creative students, this led to numerous questions regarding the way to "design" the way of sharing the information. As can be seen in Figure 2 and 3, students had the tendency to spend quite some time on the quality of the final rendering, sometimes confounding the "raw" material of ethnography with its final delivery. In the Figure 2 in particular, an experience map is made in order to explain what is the process of making steamed bred. The team has obviously been spending quite some time on the production of map, using illustrator in order to have a nice rendering. The question here is to know whether this is really adding value to the innovation team, or is a more basic experience map, but handed out earlier would not have been a better solution?

Figure 2

The same remark goes for the Figure 3 where the rendering of the user scenario could have been more developed in terms of analysis, but less in terms of graphic rendering.

Figure 3

Both preceding figures also highlight the fact that the innovation team needs to be open minded as regards the quality of the day-to-day rendering. When used to having fully analyzed and detailed reports, looking at rough materials on a day-to-day basis can be challenging for some people.

The preceding remark leads to the question of the degree of analysis regarding the materials produced and shared quickly appeared to be a critical matter: should it be “rough”, or should the ethnographic team enter in a direct analysis of what is being observed? The differentiation between rough, analyzed and “around the analysis” material seemed critical to the success of the Malaysian ethnography.

Finally, the temporality of the exchange between the ethnographic and innovation team was underlined as critical: how much materials should be shared, and at what time. Should the comments and questions by the innovation team be replied upon directly or the following day? Here, the question of authority started to appear: when having no news from the innovation team, does it mean that it is a go, should the ethnographic team wait for remarks, go on but be afraid of taking the wrong “road” etc.

1.3. Going to Malaysia: applying the method

After a full month of work, each blog was analyzed in order to define who would be the most capable of producing the best material when in Malaysia. A number of criterions were developed based on the preceding remarks (degree of analysis, management of the temporality with the innovation team etc.), and some others were included in the evaluation. One of them was the proven capacity of producing a plurality of materials ad it has been a major component of the choice. Since the blog allows texts, videos, pictures etc. to be shared together, researchers were expecting a much richer material to be produced and offered for analysis, even if only on a rough basis.

Just as an example, the figure 4 shows a movie made by the winning team in order to summarize both the basic user scenario in making Mantous, but also their perception of how they would address the research when in Malaysia. Their capacity to understand the problematic and choose the best medium to transmit it was an extremely important variable in the selection.

The team then went on a 7 days fieldwork to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in order to do the ethnographic work. The team was mixed and comprised of a professional ethnologist, two students of the Master, firm's representative for this part of the globe and a fixer who was in charge of introduction to people, translation etc.

Fieldwork was done during the day and over 20 interviews were done in one week. Places such as restaurants, homes, street food places, supermarkets etc. were analyzed in order to grasp the differences in terms of some specific food consumption, cooking etc. One of the main challenges that the team had to deal with was the availability of a good Internet connection. This led to a reporting that was more sequenced than planned in the sense that days were regularly punctuated by the search for a Wi-Fi access. In this kind of setting, the implication is that blogging was mostly done during available time at the hotel. Also, this necessity to blog also led to an arbitration between the time spent on fieldwork, and the time spent blogging.

Conclusions of the ethnographic work was in itself extremely relevant for the innovation team in the sense that it helped understanding what are the specific food habits of Malaysian people. It also helped widen the scope of the original product development in order to incorporate more services linked to the notions of catering and take away food.

2. Analysis of the method

The tool has been designed to allow both teams to create a mutual analysis of the field. The value of the method might be judge by connecting the quality of the material and its impact on the innovation process.

2.1. Sharing the project's experience: ethnographic team's perception

The ethnographic team’s perceptions and feedbacks on the blogging ethnography has been both positive and negative:

For the positive aspects, we have mainly five points:

The first one is that the blog served as a motivational tool, showing actual commitment from the innovation team stakeholders. This also put the ethnographic team in a situation where “progress” had to be done and shared in the sense that there were obvious expectations from the innovation team. This should not be understand as a pressure on producing analysis and materials, but more as a way of reassuring the ethnographic team about the innovation team’s interest in their work.

By allowing to take and store images, videos or comments in a “grab and post” way, it offered the opportunity to create some microanalysis that proved very useful in terms of reflection about the field once back at home.

Interestingly, the exchange on the blog offered reflexivity about the interest and hidden agenda of the stakeholders. As a consequence, the ethnographic team was in a situation to understand their “clients” real demands and expectations. If this point should be considered as positive, it should also be highlighted that it has limitations in the sense that the ethnographic team should not try to compose with this agenda on a day-to-day basis, hence taking the risk of not answering the first objective of the mission.

The tool offers an interesting way of capitalizing on the “ethnographic facts”, the on-going analysis, and the “behind the scene”. All these materials are highly relevant for both teams in terms of understanding the choices that are made during the field. Blog allows creating a clear distinction between these three categories of data, something that is not done in current ethnographic practices. As an example, the ethnographic team created a “behind the scene” directory on the blog in order to share these data on a daily basis.

Figure 5

Finally, the last and maybe most important point is that it is easier to obtain conviction and collaboration from the innovation team in the sense that they are immerged in the analysis that is being made, and have some “control” through the interactions. As an example, it is much easier this way to avoid the production of a deceptive report since both teams have been co-producing it

The ethnographic team nevertheless found three major drawbacks in this new ethnographic setting:

- First of all, it appeared to be a fairly time consuming practice, leaving the ethnographic team with a constant arbitration between time spent doing the field work, and time spent blogging. Here, there is a real question in terms of equilibrium between the two teams’ agendas, hidden or not.
- Knowing the fact that they would be read almost immediately, members of the ethnographic team had a tendency to adopt a formal mode of writing due to the customer/client relation. This led to some “over analysis” or “over writing”. Building the

trust and having the ethnographic team understand that they will not be judged on publishing purely raw materials is here extremely important.

- Finally, the ethnographic team consisting of four people, the “one interface only” aspect of the tool led to some stress about the leadership in the field, with the most senior ethnographer taking the lead and reorienting the work.

2.2. Sharing the project’s experience: the innovation perception

As the innovation team has requested the ethnographic team to publish some posts at least once a day, it started to read and comment them on the same temporal basis. Given time difference between Malaysia and France the job was done at the end of the day, spending around one hour a day.

A first issue was about the ability to get a sense of the field. It has two dimensions.

A first benefit of the method was the opportunity to stay attuned to the fieldwork, having a real sense of being there which is useful to manipulate ethnographic data further. After one week of inquiry, this time was awaited by time as a joyful moment.

As an Internet media, innovation team was invited to add to its reading activity some search on Internet to find more contextual information about specific recipes, some cultural dimension or even ability to get a better sense of the location of the fieldwork that day.

A first result is all members of the innovation team shared a strong feeling of connection with the field, being able to talk about anecdotic event and not only major insights.

A second range of benefit was about the ability to interact with the ethnographic team day after day. Nearly all post give rise to at least one comment. Half of the time it was about the surprise of the finding, the pleasure to read such a funny story, or simply the interest for was has been wrote. The other half of the time was dedicated to remarks waiting for some specific move on the field. All have been negotiated, the blog format letting ethnographers in the field the freedom to analysis the request and share their understanding of the innovation team request. Three mode of inquiries have been offer, none of them having been planned before the mission.

First, innovation team shared some specific questions about detail that seems to be relevant to its own point of view. The request might be clearly to find back the same information, or the same situation, to offer clarification and specification. This is precious but needed to be restricted to very important findings. If not, it is too directive for ethnographers. As a general question, it might be an opportunity for ethnographers to ask themselves: why do they put so much value on this? Then it offers reflexivity about the hidden agenda in mind of the customer. And even if they decide not to ask for more information about a specific point, they have opportunity to collect and the material needed to sustain their point of view.

Second, client had expressed some doubts about direction of research made by the ethnographic team. One was about the decision by the ethnographic team to give up some dimension of field, which was defined as key by both teams before the field. This decision has been discussed through several requests to pay more attention to specific issue, when ethnographic team shared some trouble to find any relevant information. After several posts and comments, ethnographic team decided to clearly abandon this topic and focus on a second one. For the client team the benefit was to be convinced by this give thanks to new material dedicated to this issue. We assume the same situation wouldn't have been so well perceived if announced during a final power point talk.

Third client share some knowledge from its ongoing work in progress on prototype dedicated to the project. They allow some refinement in the analytical process and allow collect of specific material to challenge technical solution.

As a result, when fieldwork was over, a mutual understanding of the situation started to be shared between both teams. It was clear when, for instance, some private jokes about anecdotic events have been shared during formal talks to a wider audience within the company. If we did observe some disagreement between two teams about some conclusion ethnographic team made, both shared some intimate knowledge of event allowing for in depth discussion

3. *Conclusion and implications for further research*

In terms of implications for future research, there are mainly two. The first one deals with the "level" of materials that is produced during the ethnographic work. The second deals with the information and workflow that needs to be correctly managed

3.1. Working in the "levels" of the materials that need to be produced

The first challenge here is to set up beforehand the kind of analysis that is expected on the materials. As an example, as the ethnographic team maybe felt that it being "watched over" by the innovation one, it had a tendency not to share absolutely raw materials. This could be improved in the sense that even non analyzed data can be interesting for the innovation team

On the other hand, there is also a need of having some explanations and analysis on the material. As an example, a picture could be shared with a slight comment explaining quickly "why do I blog this".

As a first conclusion, the correct mix of raw, slightly analyzed and fully analyzed material is more difficult to manage that in a classic ethnographic setting. This highlights the necessity of further research on this problematic, and the exchange that has to be done before starting the field work.

3.2. Working on the flow and the interactions

Concerning the flow and the interactions, one of the major point here is that the innovation team has to be cautious concerning his role in terms of authority. As an example, asking for more details can be interpreted by the ethnographic team as the fact they are misled in their work, and that they have to adapt to the “client’s requests”. From this point of view, the relationship and the trust between the stakeholders has to be built before the fieldwork.

The second point is based on the preceding one. One solution to this problem is to take time for one phone call or more during the fieldwork in order to talk about some *a priori* and emotional tension. The blog interface can lead to misinterpretation on both sides that have to be relieved from time to time.

Finally, the blogging approach does not close the analytical process in itself. If it is an interesting tool, some more time is still needed in order to analyze the material obtained. This fact has to be very clear for the customer who might think that the tool allows him get a full analysis in a shorter time. It has to be more seen as an intermediary object.

As a conclusion, this new ethnographic setting proved to be highly relevant to the innovation team that is now working on implementing it a more systematic way. Nevertheless, in order to be successful, both the levels of materials produced and the flow and interactions really have to be adapted in order to prove this setting to be fully efficient.

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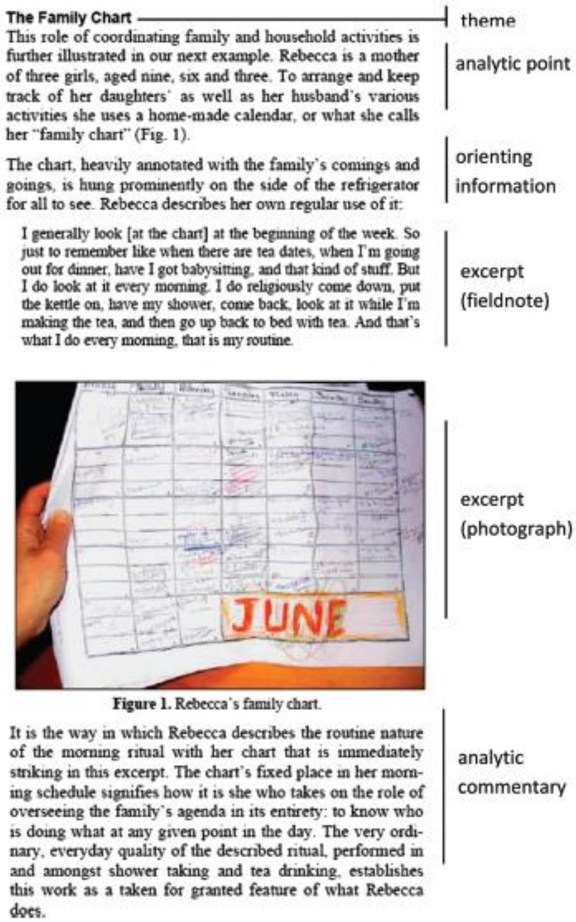
Figure 1– An example of a short ethnographic structure of blog post. (Hartel & Thomson 2011: description used as a model to define the 6).



The Family Chart

This role of coordinating family and household activities is further illustrated in our next example. Rebecca is a mother of three girls, aged nine, six and three. To arrange and keep track of her daughters' as well as her husband's various activities she uses a home-made calendar, or what she calls her "family chart" (Fig. 1).

The chart, heavily annotated with the family's comings and goings, is hung prominently on the side of the refrigerator for all to see. Rebecca describes her own regular use of it:

> I generally look [at the chart] at the beginning of the week. So just to remember like when there are tea dates, when I'm going out for dinner, have I got babysitting, and that kind of stuff. But I do look at it every morning. I do religiously come down, put the kettle on, have my shower, come back, look at it while I'm making the tea, and then go up back to bed with tea. And that's what I do every morning, that is my routine.

Figure 1. Rebecca's family chart.

It is the way in which Rebecca describes the routine nature of the morning ritual with her chart that is immediately striking in this excerpt. The chart's fixed place in her morning schedule signifies how it is she who takes on the role of overseeing the family's agenda in its entirety: to know who is doing what at any given point in the day. The very ordinary, everyday quality of the described ritual, performed in and amongst shower taking and tea drinking, establishes this work as a taken for granted feature of what Rebecca does.

Figure 2 – Excerpt from "Les Mantoulogues' blog" – Presentation of a usage scenario

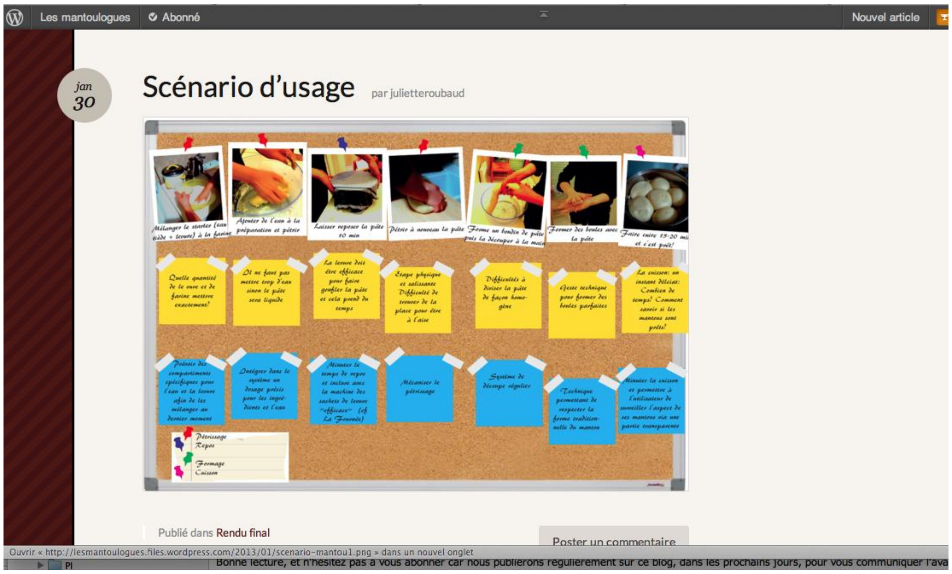


Figure 3: Excerpt from "Ethnography of Mantou's blog" – Presentation of a usage scenario

Figure 4: Excerpt from the winning team's final presentation video

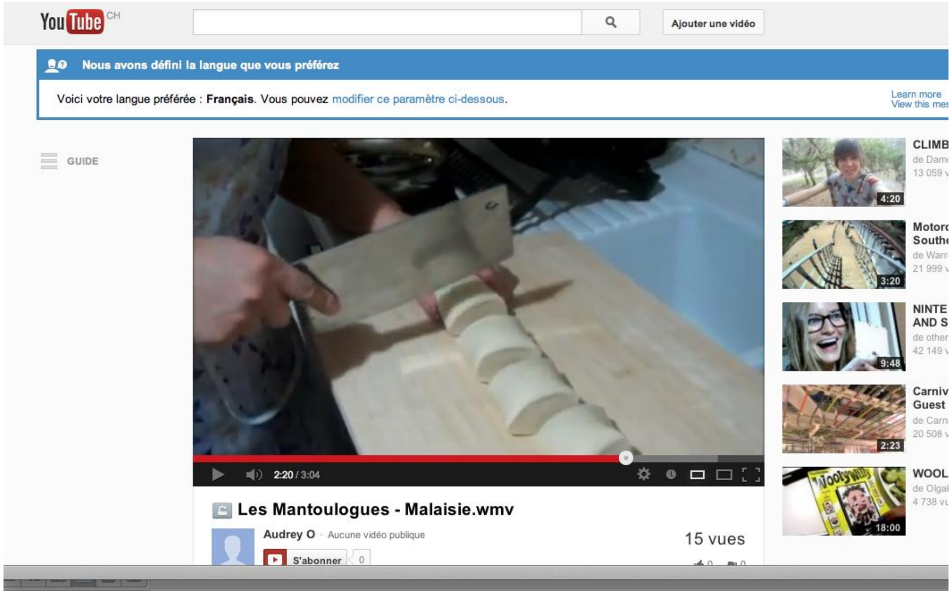


Figure 5: Excerpt from the “behind the scene” section of the blog