

How I Approach Research

On thick description, mixed methods, and designing for who isn't in the room



Harris Anthropological Research LLC | John S. Harris, MA | July 2026

My training is in anthropology, not design, and that shapes how I do UX research more than any single method I use. Before I ever ran a usability test, I spent years doing archaeological fieldwork: reading the wear on a tool for what it revealed about how it was held and used, documenting the ground carefully enough that someone else could trust the interpretation, and staying honest about what the evidence could and could not support. That instinct has a name in UX research, trace analysis, and it carried over directly. I still read wear. It just shows up now as scroll depth, rage clicks, and the paths people actually take through a product.

The concept I return to most is thick description, a term from anthropology for the difference between recording what someone did and understanding what it meant to them, on their own terms. AEIOU, the framework organized around activities, environment, interactions, objects, and users, gives that understanding a shape a team can work with, without flattening it back into a checklist. A survey tells me a participant shops for groceries once a week. An interview, read carefully, tells me that trip is also the most reliable social contact in her week, and that redesigning it purely for efficiency would remove something she values more than the time it costs her. Both facts are real. Only one shows up if the research stops at the numbers.

That is why I do not treat qualitative and quantitative methods as a choice between two tracks. In a recent engagement for a faith-based environmental nonprofit, five years of channel analytics identified where the client's paid advertising was wasting money down to the second of engagement time. Six interviews explained why a redesign built on that data alone would still fail, because it would not account for the misinformation and burnout shaping whether people showed up to engage in the first place. Neither register was sufficient alone. Holding both, with the same rigor applied to a spreadsheet as to a life history, is the actual method, not a stylistic preference.

The other habit I carry from anthropology is attention to who a design choice affects without directly serving. Every research plan I write asks not only who the primary user is, but who else is touched by the decisions made on that user's behalf: a partner quietly absorbing invisible coordination work, a community whose trust the product depends on, a population the research sample failed to reach. I name sampling bias and scope limitations plainly in my reports rather than letting a clean-looking deliverable imply more certainty than the data supports, because that discipline is what makes the findings trustworthy enough to act on.

I bring the same posture to every engagement, whether it is a solo capstone project or a paid client study: ask the questions a purely usability-focused study would not think to ask, follow the evidence past the point where a tidy narrative would prefer to stop, and write it up so a policy maker and a community member could both trust what it says.