

Observing Uno

A Participant Observation Exercise · ACCB6020 Usability Engineering · Collecting Data

This exercise gives you a first, low-stakes opportunity to practise the observational skills used in contextual inquiry and ethnographic HCI research. In small groups, you will take turns playing a modified game of Uno and observing it — recording what people say and do, distinguishing description from interpretation, and noticing the small breakdowns and negotiations that reveal a group's unwritten rules.

Group size	4–5 students per group
Materials	1 standard Uno deck per group · 1 set of role cards per group · Observer recording sheets (one per round, per group)
Round length	10 minutes
Total running time	40 minutes (groups of 4) or 50 minutes (groups of 5)
Rotation	One player observes each round; after 10 minutes they rejoin as a player and a different player becomes the observer

Running order

- Setup (5 min): form groups, distribute one Uno deck per group, deal role cards face-down (players keep their role secret throughout), Round 1's observer gets their recording sheet from the tutor.
- Rounds (10 min each): play proceeds as a normal Uno game. The observer does not play — they sit slightly outside the group and complete the recording sheet. Give a 30-second warning before each rotation.
- Rotation: the previous observer replaces a player, the outgoing player keeps their role card but hands over their Uno cards to the incoming player and becomes the next observer; a different player hands off their cards and becomes the next observer in the next round.
- Debrief (10–15 min, after the final round): discuss as a group using the debrief prompts found on the Debrief Form on Moodle.

How the role cards work

Each player is secretly assigned a role that shapes how they behave during the game, for example, how strictly they follow the rules, how much they talk, or how impatient they seem. Nobody announces their role. This creates small, realistic tensions (a disputed rule, a rushed turn, an ignored comment) for the observer to notice, rather than a flat, uneventful game. For groups of 4, use four roles; for groups of 5, a fifth role card will be provided.

A note for the observer

Your job is not to guess people's roles. It's to build a habit of separating raw description (what you actually saw and heard) from interpretation (what you think it meant). Both matter in ethnographic fieldwork, but conflating them early is the most common novice mistake, so the recording sheet (provided by the tutor) keeps them in separate columns on purpose.

Rotation schedule

Groups of 4 students (40 minutes)

Round	Time	Observer	Players
1	0–10 min	Student A	Student B, Student C, Student D
2	10–20 min	Student B	Student A, Student C, Student D
3	20–30 min	Student C	Student A, Student B, Student D
4	30–40 min	Student D	Student A, Student B, Student C

Groups of 5 students (50 minutes)

Round	Time	Observer	Players
1	0–10 min	Student A	Student B, Student C, Student D, Student E
2	10–20 min	Student B	Student A, Student C, Student D, Student E
3	20–30 min	Student C	Student A, Student B, Student D, Student E
4	30–40 min	Student D	Student A, Student B, Student C, Student E
5	40–50 min	Student E	Student A, Student B, Student C, Student D

When a player becomes the observer, the previous observer replaces a player, the outgoing player keeps their role card but hands over their Uno cards to the incoming player and becomes the next observer, the role assignments in the group stay fixed to the person, only the observer seat rotates.