

## Using Design Thinking to Emphasize Empathy

This session will focus on helping students to develop skills with empathy building. In Design Thinking, developing empathy for the user is the first and most important step, (hence the related term Empathetic Design.) For our students to become Agents of Change will requires an empathic understanding of the stakeholders involved. The session will introduce a variety of techniques and how they might be applied in different types of student projects.

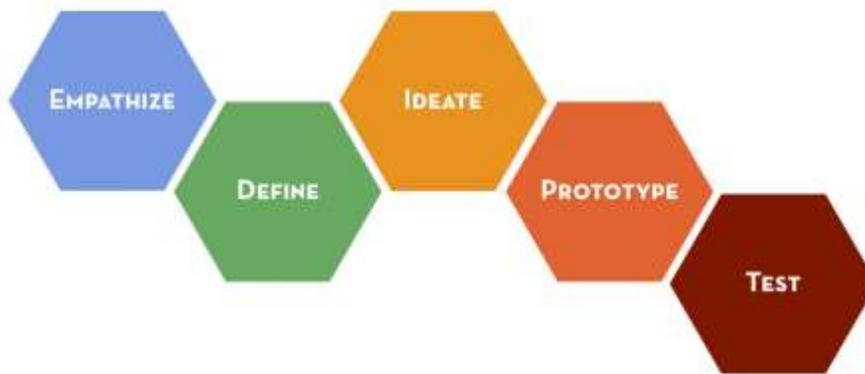
Design thinking; Empathy; Techniques

## **Introduction**

For students to act as Agents of Change, it is important that they understand how to gain empathy for stakeholders. Design Thinking (or Empathetic Design) emphasizes the importance of gaining such empathy as the very first step of the design process. In this session, I will describe and demonstrate a number of techniques related to developing empathy drawn from the Stanford d-school and Ideo approaches. These techniques can be applied in courses in organizational change, innovation, management consulting, or any course that includes a project where students will directly engage with users. They are applicable to courses at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, with traditional and non-traditional students, and in executive education.

## **Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications**

Design thinking as a concept was developed in the Joint Program in Design (Product Design) program at Stanford and elaborated and defined by David Kelley, Tim Brown, and Bill Moggridge, the founders of Ideo, the San Francisco based design firm. Kelley drew on his own experiences as a graduate student in Stanford's Product Design program and the work of faculty members Bob McKim and Larry Leifer, among others, who taught unprecedented courses in product design within the Mechanical Engineering department. These courses focused on ill-structured problems and emphasized human-centered approaches, creativity, art, aesthetics, and what McKim called "visual thinking". Designers in the 1970s were just starting to think in terms of human factors and aesthetics as critical elements. The design thinking model as it currently is described, has five stages: empathy, definition, ideation, prototyping, and testing. It is particularly suited to "wicked problems", those that are not easily solved by traditional problem solving approaches, but require new viewpoints.



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Similar concepts are found in Google’s “design sprints” under the heading Understand and in the Austin Center for Design Educational Program under the heading Ethnography. These and other models all start with developing an empathic understanding of the user as the first step.

### **Learning Objectives**

I will focus on the first stage of the design thinking process, developing empathy. The objective is to have participants be able to apply various empathy techniques and to be able to identify where those techniques could be integrated into their courses. Among the possible course areas where developing empathy are applicable include change management, consulting, innovation, design thinking, or any course where engagement with stakeholders is needed.

### **Exercise Overview**

1. 10 minute overview of design thinking and role of empathy. How do design thinkers approach problems differently? How does starting with empathy change our approach to problem solving? How does it foster better change agency among students?
2. 15 minute introduction to some of the techniques used in developing empathy

- Empathy Maps – “a collaborative visualization used to articulate what we know about a particular type of user.” (Gibbons, 2018)
  - Learn, Look, Ask, Try – IDEO’s categorization of four ways to empathize with people (IDEO, 2003)
  - Journey Mapping (Liedtka & Ogilvie, 2011) – a visual representation of the user’s experience.
3. 20 minute small group ideation of how to apply these techniques in classroom settings.  
What types of projects do they best lend themselves to? How can we design better learning experiences by using them ourselves as instructors?
  4. 15 minute share-out and discussion. What are some common themes that emerged?  
What are the “costs and benefits” of trying to introduce greater understanding of the role of empathy in solving difficult problems and leading change?

### **Session Description**

I will provide a brief, 5 to 10 minute overview of design thinking. Then I will focus on the empathy stage of the design thinking process. I will introduce several techniques drawn from Ideo Method Cards and other sources, that approach development of empathy through observation, interviewing, experimentation, and analysis. The bulk of the time will be focused on providing time for participants, in small groups, to generate ideas for how they can creatively integrate the particular techniques into their own courses.

Gibbons, S. (2018) Empathy mapping: The first step in design thinking.

<https://www.nngroup.com/articles/empathy-mapping/>

IDEO (2003) *IDEO Method Cards: 51 ways to inspire design*, San Francisco, CA: William Stout Architectural Books.

Liedtka, J & T. Ogilvie (2011) *Designing for growth: A design thinking tool kit for managers.*

New York, NY: Columbia Business School Publishing.