Texas NSI - Virtual Learning Empathy Interviews

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Follow-up conversation with
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Empathy Interview

Follow-up questions

- How do you invite students?
- How long do you schedule for each interview?
- How many students do you recommend interviewing?
- If a team decides to conduct empathy interview, do you recommend they begin with the same guiding question?
- Once a team has completed the interviews, how do we summarize and decide on actions (e.g, coding data?

Resources

- **Be Human Centered Guide**
  Empathy Interview excerpt
- **Point of View**
  summary statement stems'

The following pages are an excerpt from

Human-Centered

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Be Human-Centered

To be human-centered means that your improvement process prioritizes the perspectives and experiences of the people you're designing for.

When done well, a human-centered approach drives the creation of products and services that resonate more deeply with an audience and, thus, have greater impact. To be human-centered requires teams to diversify and be inclusive. And it means developing empathy for the users in your system. In other words, we need to deeply understand the diverse experiences, motivations, and values of students, families, and educators themselves.

Using an authentic human-centered approach is one way to operationalize our commitment to equity. When we uncover the stories, experiences, and motivations of students and families who have been historically underserved, we design with them at the center. As Tim Brown in Change by Design says,

> *By concentrating solely on the bulge at the center of the bell curve...we are more likely to confirm what we already know than learn something new and surprising. For insights at that level, we need to head to the edges, to the places where we expect to find "extreme" users who live differently, think differently, and consume differently.*

In other words, the mission of a human-centered approach is to translate user voice and experience into insights which will then become products, programs, or services that will improve lives.

These materials include information about important strategies to engage in a human-centered approach to improvement.

- Broaden the table
- Empathy data
    - Empathy interviews
    - Empathy immersion
    - Empathy observations

Collect Empathy Data

Empathy is our ability to see the world through other people's eyes, to see what they see, feel what they feel, and experience things as they do. Increasing empathy builds important insights into your community's world, uncovers their hidden needs and motivations, and guides improvement efforts. Collecting empathy data is a key way to practice the improvement principle: make the work human-centered.

You can collect empathy data in one or more of these ways:

Engage. The stories that people tell and the things that people say they do are strong indicators of their deeply held beliefs about the way the world is. Listening is a powerful way to understand and honor their truths.

Immerse. Walk the path with your user. Do what they do to understand their experience more deeply.

Observe. Watching what people do and how they interact with their environment gives you clues about what they think and feel. It helps you learn about what they need.

Why collect empathy data as part of improvement efforts? While it is always good practice to understand your user, empathy data can be particularly helpful when you want to:

- Identify or narrow down a systemic problem your team will work on
- Uncover hidden needs that aren't being met within the current system
- Understand a problem and its root causes more deeply
- Understand differences among users
- Get feedback on an idea or prototype

Finally, collecting empathy data is not a one-shot-meets-all-needs endeavor. To truly be human-centered, return to your users again and again.

Guidelines for Collecting Empathy Data

Get out of your own space. Go where you find the community. Even if your team already includes a myriad of stakeholders, don't assume you are a representative sample.

Assume a beginner's mindset. This means:

- Approach problems as a novice. Question everything, even those things you think you know.
- Lose your agenda.
- Let yourself learn. Be truly curious by assuming a posture of wonder and curiosity, especially in circumstances that seem either familiar or uncomfortable.
- Listen and don't judge.

Include *historically underserved users* in your data collection. This means that you observe, immerse, or engage with people who do not represent the historically dominant culture such as students of color, families for whom English is not their first language, or LGBTQ teachers. Understanding people in historically underserved groups helps you uncover insights that may not be as obvious through a dominant culture lens. If we concentrate only on "average" users, we are likely to only confirm what we already know, rather than learn something new. This is the most important guideline for operationalizing equity in empathy data collection.

Broaden the table. Collecting empathy data can be a powerful experience. Include as many people as possible on your data collection team. Educators, students, and families - including those from historically underserved groups - can all be trained to collect empathy data.

Practice healthy detachment. Empathizing can take an emotional toll on an individual or group, especially when you hear difficult or painful stories. Healthy detachment means you can be involved without obsessing or seeking to control the situation. Make sure each person keeps an eye on their own needs as you observe, immerse, or engage.

Apply your insights. Whether empathy data is helping to define the problem, understand the root causes, or gain insights to new ideas, make sure to keep the findings close and refer to them often.

On the next page are a few examples of how the stories from empathy data informed the work of teams.

Empathy Data Stories

Empathy data led to change ideas. Educators on a district team charged with addressing chronic absenteeism interviewed students in elementary, middle, and high school. They talked with historically underserved students (those who were chronically absent) as well as students with expected attendance patterns. One unexpected and powerful finding from the students' stories was that returning to school was often intimidating and difficult; they often felt punished for their absence, teachers piled on make-up work without enough support, and they fell further behind. When this headline emerged in analysis, educators set to work to immediately test small change ideas at the classroom level. Many teachers began a more positive routine for welcoming students back into the classroom. One teacher tested a peer-to-peer protocol where a classmate went over the key learnings that were missed. One teacher changed the way make-up work was designed, timed, and supported. Empathy interviews had uncovered an overlooked aspect of chronic absenteeism.

Empathy data helped understand a problem and locate a good place to start. A large team of educators in one district came together to address inequities in their district. The team included teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators, community members and students who interviewed students about their sense of connection and belonging in school. The analysis uncovered themes such as: students feel a sense of belonging when they are seen and heard; and students and staff feel connected and motivated when they have positive relationships. Their findings helped them identify a starting place: building positive relationships.

Empathy data helped see the system that led to the current outcomes. A middle school administrator conducted empathy interviews with students, staff, and family members to better understand why so many students were failing classes. The powerful words from community voices led to a small experiment that started with weekly grade checks with one administrator and a small group of students. After fast success, more staff and students became involved and, within six weeks, grade checks were a schoolwide practice. Student failure rates dropped drastically and most importantly, the scale up was teacher led and student owned so that the second semester's results were better than the first. As staff met with students, they realized through their own empathy learning that students were missing positive adult interactions more than they had thought and brought Homeroom back to the building. Listening to the voices of students, staff, and families allowed the school to better meet their needs and ultimately support their academic success.

Empathy Interviews

The stories that people tell and the things that people say they do are strong indicators of their deeply held beliefs about the way the world is.

Listening is a powerful way to understand individuals. Empathy interviews are designed to elicit stories and uncover hidden needs through deep listening and asking smart follow-up questions. Empathy interviews should not be confused with traditional interviews which ask for opinions and feedback on narrow topics. Rather, empathy interviews use a semi-structured protocol but follow the themes and topics that the users bring up through their stories.

These materials describe strategies for before, during, and after empathy interviews.

BEFORE INTERVIEWS

Be clear about purpose. Are you collecting stories to identify or refine a problem of practice? To understand the root causes more deeply? To identify the specific needs of certain users to ensure you design for them? In other words, how will you use the data and not just admire it?

Write interview questions. Empathy interviews use a semi-structured approach which means you begin an interview with a pre-established series of questions, but you also have the freedom to ask follow-up questions and go more deeply when possible. Your protocol should:

Ask open-ended questions. Host a conversation that builds upon stories rather than asking binary questions that are answered with one word like yes/no. Use question stems such as…

- Tell me about a time when...
- Tell me about the *last* time you…
- What are the best/worst parts about…?
- Can you help me understand more about…?

Ask about specific examples. Don't ask users to report what they "usually" do. Rather, ask them to specifically "tell me about a time when…"

Don't ask for the solutions. Users aren't designers. Interviewers should stick to concrete examination of what is happening and how the users feel, not "what should we do?"

Create conversation starters. Pictures, prototypes, or other objects can help elicit responses during interviews.

Minimize the number of questions. Usually you only have 10-15 minutes to talk to a person, so 4-6 good, open-ended questions will be sufficient.

Deal with data logistics. Who is going to collect data? When? From whom? How will you ensure that historically underserved users are represented in the sample? How will data be recorded?

Decide on the number of interviews. There is not a magic number of interviews to conduct. Think about how to have a diverse sample, including historically underserved users. Consider your resources, the size of the interview team, and the purpose of interviews. Often, four interviews can yield as many insights as 40. However, because the data collection experience itself is powerful, make sure there are enough interviews for everyone on your team.

Train your team. Model an empathy interview and then practice together. Make sure everyone conducting the interviews is familiar with the guidelines, the questions, and expectations for note-taking. Role-play an interview, or use these videos: Empathy Do's https://vimeo.com/91484863 Empathy Don'ts https://vimeo.com/91484570

Find a partner. Conducting interviews in pairs allows one person to take notes while the other person remains focused on listening and asking follow-up questions. When it isn't feasible to conduct interviews in pairs, plan your note-taking method carefully.

Attend to your own bias. Be sure to reflect on how your identity and role might affect how and what individuals share with you. Maintain an awareness of your biases and challenge them in order to see the community more authentically. Ask yourself how systemic oppression and/or privilege might affect your empathy interviews.

DURING INTERVIEWS

Make the person you're talking to feel comfortable. Provide the purpose of the interview and promise their answers will remain anonymous. Start with a light, positive, personal connection. Take the posture of humility.

Encourage stories. Stories reveal how users think about the world. Ask questions that elicit stories; not questions that can be answered on a survey.

Go deeper. Use prompts like these to learn more:

- Why? (Then ask why again). Why? Why did you say/do/think that?
- Really? Why was that? What do you think would change that?
- Tell me more. Can you say more about that?

- What were you feeling then? Why?

Be neutral. Don't imply your question has a right answer.

Look for inconsistencies. Sometimes what people say is different from what they do (e.g., I love my PLC, but I never go). These inconsistencies often reveal interesting insights.

Don't suggest answers to your questions. Even if they pause before answering, don't help them by suggesting an answer.

Capture what you hear. Capture as much as possible, including quotes. Use recordings only as a last resort and with permission.

AFTER INTERVIEWS

Prepare data for analysis. Remove any identifiable information, number the interviews, and print out the number of copies you need.

Bring a team together to analyze results. Involve people with diverse perspectives in the analysis of empathy data. Depending on amount of data and team size, allow anywhere from 30 to 90 minutes.

Debrief the process. What was the experience like for people? What worked well? What would you do differently next time?

Analyze data. Always be prepared to uncover something quite different than you expected during analysis. Three protocols are summarized below. You should revise or expand each protocol to meet your need.

Headlines. Use this analysis when you want a descriptive summary of the data you've collected.

1. As a whole group, model how headlines are created: One person shares an interview while other members capture headlines and/or representative quotes on post-it notes. These should be *descriptive* in nature; they should not contain inferences, opinions, or solutions. For example, "One time the PLC was so pointless I made my grocery list" or, "Teacher very bored by irrelevant topics in PLCs." One interview might result in one to six post-it notes.
2. Once the group understands the process, break into smaller groups or pairs to complete analysis of the data set (the size and configuration depends on the size of your data set, team size, and amount of time you have). Continue to generate post-it notes with headlines.
3. Once finished, saturate a wall space with the post-it notes and then organize the post-its into groups of related themes. Note: You may hit data saturation before you finish the full data set. That means that all the main themes have already emerged. It is okay to stop the headline activity if you agree you've reach

data saturation.

4. Label the groupings with descriptive sentences (“e.g., Feeling safe is more than just physical safety” rather than just “Safety”).
5. Discuss and apply what you’ve learned.

Possible extensions:

- As you are creating headlines, keep a side poster of: tensions, surprises, and/or contradictions.
- Create a list of insights as you move through each interview

Empathy Map. Use this analysis when you want to understand human needs or clarify the problem you are trying to solve from the user’s perspective.

1. On a whiteboard or a large flip chart, draw a four-quadrant map. Label the sections with “say,” “do,” “think,” and “feel,” respectively.
2. Write down each of your key observations from the interview on one Post-it note and populate the “say” and “do” quadrants.
3. When you run out of observations (or room) in those quadrants, begin to fill the “think” and “feel” sections with Post-its, based on the body language, tone, and choice of words you observed.
4. Take a step back and look at the map as a whole. Create two spaces labeled “insights” and “needs.” What insights or conclusions can you draw from what you’ve written down? What seems new or surprising? Are there contradictions or disconnects within or between quadrants? What unexpected patterns appear? What, if any, human needs emerge? Write them down, perhaps individually first and then collectively.

Point of View Analysis. Use this analysis when you have interviewed only one or a few people and want to go straight from human-perspective to brainstorming change ideas.

Share all of the data from an interview with a team and then generate one need statement which is *human + need + insight*. For example, the need statement is, “A seven-year-old hates doing homework because it takes forever to finish.” The next step is to turn this into a Point of View Question, which always starts with *How Might We*. “How might we create a way for this student to do his or her homework more efficiently?” The HMW statement leads directly into a brainstorm of change ideas.

Point of View Analysis for Empathy Interviews

Use this analysis after you have clustered your empathy interview data. This activity will support you in your ideation of change ideas and/or to confirm, challenge, or prioritize your drivers.

Instructions:

Share all of the data from an interview with a team, have them record themes from the interview on post-it notes. Then cluster the themes to elevate headlines that span the data from multiple interviews. From there generate one need statement which is *human + need + insight*. For example, the need statement is, "A seven-year-old hates doing homework because it takes forever to finish."

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Some students need __(a)____ because _______(b)_______.

a= general need (not a solution)
b=theme or headline from empathy data

Cluster from interview data	Headline
• Second-grader's best friend moved away • "I like it when I play dolphin with my friends at recess." • Fifth-grader likes taking the bus with his friends • Parent concerned about bullying after school	Students value positive relationships with each other but don't always have them.

Some students need <u>more friends at school</u> because <u>they value positive relationships with each other</u>.

Cluster from interview data	Headline
• “So much negativity” • “People are angry and take it out on others” • “Too many bad kids at school” • Negative environment-peer conflicts • Bored in classes • “When there are certain kids missing from math class, we can actually do work” • Feel unsafe at school	The school environment is not positive.

Some students need <u>positive interactions with peers and adults</u> because <u>they experience negativity at school</u>.

Some students need engaging classroom experiences because they are bored.

Some students need __(a)____ because _______(b)_______.

a= general need (not a solution)
b=theme or headline from empathy data

Some students need __(a)_____
because ________(b)________.

- ❖ Blame-free?
- ❖ Solution-free?
- ❖ Linked to empathy data?