Activity: Define a Problem of Practice

Translate feedback into a clear problem statement that your design team will address

Framing

As you reflect on stakeholder feedback, your design team will need to select the one problem you will address via this process out of the many that have been raised. That requires you to think about what is *most important* to address, as well as what is *most feasible* to address. Remember that the design process focuses on one area for improvement at a time (though as you build your muscles with this process, you may be inclined to run multiple design cycles concurrently).

Framing the problem as an opportunity is key to garnering support and building buy-in for the work. Creating a **"How might we?"** statement is common in design thinking, as it helps to highlight the possibility in the change you seek. For example, framing a problem about student apathy and disengagement as, "How might we increase high schoolers' engagement in core classes like math and literature?" is a simple way to turn a problem into an opportunity. This will help your team continue to prioritize creativity and to stay open to multiple potential solutions, while also garnering support for the project (as the old adage goes, you'll catch more flies with honey).

Ensuring Equity & Resiliency

Equity looks like ensuring that the problem you choose to address is a meaningful barrier to equity in teaching and learning today, such that addressing it will lead to more students receiving what they need. For example, using the problem above ("How might we increase high schoolers' engagement in core classes like math and literature?"), the design team would need to explore (via data, feedback, etc.) whether the lack of student engagement is a root cause of performance gaps between students of color and their peers.

Resiliency looks like choosing a problem that will help your district be more adaptable to the changing needs of students, such as new expectations for "college and career ready" or disruptions in learning that result from natural disasters. The problem you choose should also help your district better adapt to the unique needs of each student. For example, using the problem above ("How might we increase high schoolers' engagement in core classes like math and literature?"), the design team would want to explore (via data, feedback, etc.) how student engagement will lead to a more personalized and flexible approach to supporting each student.

Steps to Implementation

Suggested time: 1-2 hours

1. Gather your team in a room (in-person or virtual) with access to sticky notes or a digital alternative, such as [Google Jamboard](#).

   a. Make sure your team has reflected on your district's historical context and current data and has spoken with students, families, teachers, and classified staff. This will help you define a strong problem of practice.

2. Review the key stories and themes your team identified from empathy interviews with stakeholders, and revisit the headlines from your research into your district's historical context and current data.

3. Discuss which themes are best to tackle through this design process, and choose one particular theme to focus on when designing a problem statement. Consider the following as you review each theme:

   a. Would solving this problem lead to greater equity and resiliency?

   b. Does it reflect what we have heard from our stakeholders?

   c. Is the problem the right size? That is, is it something ambitious, but that we can feasibly address?

4. Ask each member of your design team to generate 2-3 problem statements based on the theme(s) identified.

   a. Start each question with, "How might we...?"

   b. Use clear, concise language.

5. As a team, review, refine, and discuss your problem statements. A well-defined statement should consider the following:

   a. Are there many (10+) possible solutions?

   b. Is there a solution embedded in the question? Consider rewriting questions in a way that leaves them open to multiple possible solutions.

   c. Does the question use oppressive or deficit-based language? Consider rewriting questions to state the problem in empowering, asset-based language.

   d. Is the solution the right size? Try to avoid the bathtub (too small) and the ocean (too big).

   e. Can we remix or combine different "How might we?" statements to make a better one?

6. Select the most compelling "How might we?" question as your chosen problem statement to guide further design work. To choose among the options, consider:

   a. Bringing draft problem statements to students, families, teachers, and classified staff to get their feedback and perspectives on which problems are most urgent and important to address.

   b. Use prioritization methods (like voting dots or allowing each team member to put a "+1" on the two problem statements they like most) to narrow the options with your team.

7. Document your final problem statement.

How might we:

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8. Next, you will brainstorm solutions to your problem of practice.

This activity was inspired by the How Might We…? *method card from Stanford d.school.*

Cedar Rapids' Problem of Practice on Standards-Aligned Feedback:
"How might we provide relevant, standards-aligned feedback to students so that every student reaches mastery?"

Mastery's Problem of Practice on a Culturally Relevant Blended Learning Model:
"How might we build a blended learning model that fosters achievement and independence in our high school students?

Monterey's Problem of Practice on Belonging and Connection:
"How might we increase flexibility and personalization to build a sense of belonging and connection within the context of our labor and policy constraints?"

See Appendix: Case Studies for more details

Additional Resources

- Stanford d.School - How Might We Questions

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