

## ▶ Activity: Making Sense of Empathy Interviews

Tell stories and find themes from empathy interviews



### Framing

After interviewing students, families, teachers, and classified staff, you likely have lots of ideas about what changes can make classes more equitable and resilient, to work for more students. It can be tempting to jump right into problem-solving and design work. However, it's critical to spend time deeply considering the stories and ideas you heard before moving to action.

In unpacking interviewees' comments, identify themes and patterns. For instance, if multiple students spoke about feeling disengaged in their classes, this can be a good indication of a particularly acute pain point that you might address. However, it is also important to consider any voices of dissent or people with unique perspectives to share; these people may have particular vantage points and prior experiences that shine light on often overlooked needs in your district.

### Ensuring Equity & Resiliency

**Equity looks like** taking the time to reflect on and empathize with interviewees' messages, especially from students, families, teachers, and classified staff who may not typically be asked for their perspectives. This may mean putting more weight on the comments of someone who is not well-served by today's system for teaching and learning – after all, that is the person you seek to serve better in designing for the future.

**Resiliency looks like** being willing to go do more empathy interviews as the process continues to evolve your understanding. For example, if students frequently point to feeling disconnected with their learning experiences but you're not sure what makes them feel engaged, that is a good sign that you need to have more conversations. If no themes or patterns stand out, or if you're not getting to the issues your data identified, you may also need to adapt who you are interviewing and/or what you are asking. Resiliency also looks like your design team being willing to expand your initial visions for the future and flex your initial hunches about what changes need to be made. The input you have received is valuable new insight – and your team should adapt your thinking accordingly!

## Steps to Implementation

Suggested time: 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](#). Make sure your team has conducted a range of empathy interviews with students, families, teachers, and classified staff, and ask participants to share their interview notes ahead of time via the [Empathy Interview Planner](#) (see *Appendix: Workpages*).
2. Have each person take ten minutes to review their notes and identify stories, quotes, or anecdotes from interviews to share with the group. Alternatively, you could ask team members to do this reflection in advance.
3. Give each team member about five minutes (feel free to adjust, depending on group size) to share their stories. While speaking, try to be specific and focus on what was literally said by the interviewee; avoid editorializing or jumping to conclusions (what we call, “staying low on the inference scale”).
4. While listening, other team members should write notes on stickies, including one thought per note.
  - a. Consider the sentence starter: “This makes me think…”
  - b. Keep the language simple.
  - c. Add initials to each sticky note.
5. Post the sticky notes where everyone in the group can see them and take five minutes for the team to silently review. Invite participants to add a “+1,” dot, or check mark to indicate that something resonates.
6. Cluster sticky notes by theme. Draw a circle around each theme and name it as best as you can.
7. Discuss the themes as a team. Questions for discussion might include:

Discussion Question	Notes
What did we learn about our stakeholders’ experiences?	
Where did people seem to disagree? Why do we think that is?	

Discussion Question	Notes
What confirmed or challenged an assumption you held?	
What surprised you?	
What connections do you see between what we're hearing from our community and what we learned about from other innovative schools?	

8. Close by summarizing key takeaways from the interviews.

Key Takeaways

9. Next, you will define a specific problem of practice to address via your design work, based on the interview themes you identified in this activity and the prior research you have done.

*This activity was inspired by the [Share Inspiring Stories](#) and [Find Themes](#) Method Cards in the IDEO Design Kit.*



**Cedar Rapids** surfaced themes about opportunities to build relationships, to create more personalized and authentic learning experiences, and to reconsider effective feedback for students.

Themes from **Mastery's** empathy interviews fell into several categories: supporting students and teachers with technology, fostering digital access, and creating independent learners.

Themes from **Monterey's** empathy interviews fall into multiple categories: developing stronger connections between and amongst students and teachers, and personalizing support for students' academic development.

*See Appendix: Case Studies for more details*

## Additional Resources

[Design Thinking: How to Create Your POV \(Part 4\)](#) - Perficient Blogs