



## GOING DEEPER—TEXT-BASED LEARNING

### DESIGN EMPATHY

Designers have always used a process of design based on making observations, taking small steps, and prototyping to test ideas. In recent years this way of thinking has been quantified and applied more directly to problem solving for all aspects of business and education. This work has been popularized by the Hasso Plattner Institute of Design at Stanford, otherwise known as d.school. Out of this school came the IDEO program led by David Kelley known as *design thinking*. Instead of following a traditional problem-solving process, which moves quickly from the definition of the problem to solution, design thinking opens up the process of ideation and prototyping to expand the problem frame and seek multiple options. This process requires a search for multiplicity, and the designer tests options in iterative ways to provide ongoing feedback. This is fundamentally different from the traditional rush to one “right solution.”

Brothers Tom and David Kelley (2013) of IDEO at Stanford describe how important cognitive empathy is for creative teamwork. Out of this came the concept of *design empathy*. They view empathy as a counterforce to those personal fears that can keep groups from truly paying attention to each other. Design empathy requires that groups check in with each other. It helps teams regain a perspective on what is important and what group members care about. It opens up new ways of thinking and more ways to address differences. It raises the bar, requiring that designers pay deep attention to the needs of those for whom they are designing.

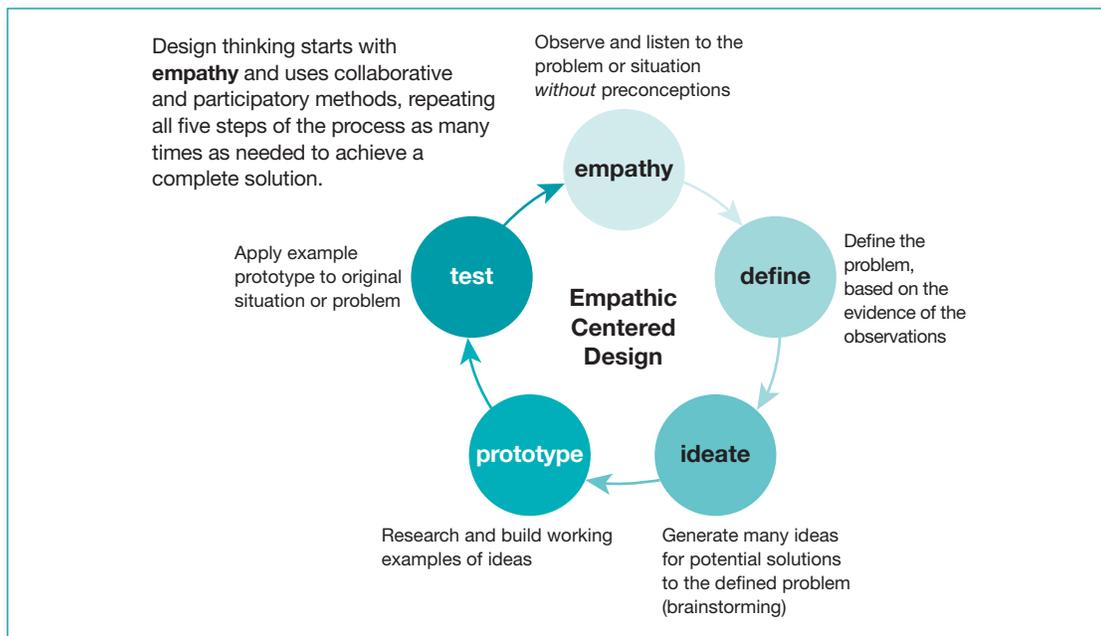
One of the critical variables of IDEO is its focus on the human point of view. This requires that team members practice deep observation and listen to the end users in order to better discover what will serve the customer needs. Hence, empathy is often added as the critical fifth step in the design process. This conscious attention to empathy requires an “out of ego mindset.” In order to understand the experiences of the client, the designer needs to let go of her role as expert or the need for status and set aside expertise and opinion. The designer needs to listen, involve more people, and make more connections. Tackling business problems as if they are design problems, even though they would not normally be approached in this way, leads to results that are functional and emotionally meaningful. Associates at IDEO have identified the following five steps in design thinking:

- Empathize—This requires both observing and talking to those who have the problem to be solved. Assumptions are challenged so as to give new thinking to the problem.
- Define—At this stage the designer creates a point of view that draws from what was learned in the first step. This is an actionable statement that defines the challenge and the needs it will address. For example, in developing countries many babies die because of limited access to hospitals and incubators. Traditional solutions dependent on electricity have failed. The design team reframed the problem to one of finding a solution that did not use electricity and instead drew from the resources at hand.

(Continued)

(Continued)

- **Ideate**—This often initiates with various forms of brainstorming, mind mapping, scenario planning, and sketching to consider all possible options without judgment. This requires that groups be highly participatory and collaborative, drawing resources from all. In working with mothers in the example above, a design team created a warming device, which they also learned needed to accommodate the mother’s need for mobility. This expanded ideation with the mothers led to the Embrace Warmer, which used newer inexpensive insulation materials that could draw heat from the mother’s own body and allowed her to stay mobile with her baby.
- **Prototype**—Throughout the process multiple solutions are sought, and feedback on the various possibilities is considered. New ideas are demonstrated through showing, not telling, to create working prototypes. In the example above, they experimented with different materials.
- **Test**—At this stage, ideas are tested with an attitude that if they don’t work, the group returns to the design process and keeps ideating and prototyping. The designer attempts to experience the innovation as much as possible so as to learn from the user’s experience, thus maintaining an empathic stance throughout the process.



Hasso Plattner Institute of Design (d.school), Stanford. CC BY-SA 2.5 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.5/>)

David Kelley views design empathy as a moral imperative. In his book *Design Thinking for School Leaders* (2018), Kelley expands design empathy to leadership: “The main tenet of design thinking is empathy for the people you’re trying to design for. Leadership is exactly the same thing—building empathy for the people you are entrusted to help.” (epigraph, Chapter 2). So as

designers of the team experience, leaders must help build empathy consciousness, which allows teams to become more open and vulnerable. The process naturally takes groups deeper into a problem through the iterative process of developing ideas, challenging assumptions, and redefining problems. The goal is to find other solutions that might not have been apparent. By seeking cognitive empathy in our work in schools, we are reminded to seek out the viewpoints of our stakeholders, both students and parents, in a meaningful way.

An interesting example of how some first-grade teachers tapped into the interests of their first graders makes the point. As a school, the teachers had posed the question: How do we engage more students in print and develop the habit of reading? As they explored the question, the first-grade teachers became curious about how young children choose books. To better understand this, they needed to better empathize with the choice-making process of these young readers. They decided to explore with the students all kinds of books about chickens and then to query them about what they liked. The results were surprising. Fully 40% of all students preferred the nonfiction books over the fictional books about chickens. The teachers were surprised to find that males preferred nonfiction 60% of the time. These findings shifted their thinking about what kinds of books most interested first graders. They discovered that the school library had had few nonfiction books for this age group. By paying deep attention and asking the students about their cognitive preferences, these teachers gained a deep empathy for the diversity of choices that even these young children are capable of making. Not only did it change the choices that teachers were making daily about what to read to and with children, it greatly influenced the library and the entire school.

Finally, relevant to schoolwork is that when empathy consciousness is added to an inquiry, the solutions find a deeper connection and a greater benefit for the end user. David Kelley found that in this process, success was not just the short-term activity, but rather that this way of thinking had a positive “life of its own.” In other words, emergent understandings about the needs of others, especially for learning, accelerates learning. At IDEO, the practice of design empathy increased the impact of the Kelley brothers’ work.