

Tool: Empathy Mapping

Overview

Adults working in schools often operate with certain blind spots that prevent us from understanding students' holistic experience while at school. Over the years we have all accumulated assumptions, misconceptions, and value judgments that can obscure our ability to clearly observe what is going on around us. Empathy techniques allow us to be more student centered in our thinking and see our work with a fresh set of eyes in order to use the insights to better meet our students' needs. If you are interested in understanding what your students think the problem is, or want to better understand some variation in student outcomes, this activity can help.

Empathy mapping is a two-step process. First, members of the improvement team each choose one of the approaches listed below to collect more data about the problem focus area that the team is investigating. After collecting data using one of the approaches, members meet together to combine their findings in an empathy map.

Step 1: Choose an Approach to Collect Data

There is more than one way to collect data for empathy mapping. Choose the one that feels like the best fit for you, your problem, and your school. If time allows, you may also have different team members engage in different approaches in parallel to create a more diverse conversation when you debrief together.

Student Interviews

- Prepare questions in advance. They should follow a trajectory of:
 - personal introduction (or reintroduction) and introduction to the purpose of the project and the interview
 - basic questions designed to break the ice and build rapport
 - question(s) asking students to tell a story or personal experience about the topic
 - question(s) asking students to describe feelings/emotions relating to the experience
- Conduct interview. These are semi-structured, so ask follow-up questions and ask “Why?”

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Shadowing

- Identify students of interest to shadow for a part of the day (or whole day!). They should be chosen either because they are representative of a particular kind of challenge, or because they are a “paradoxical example” of a student who excels in the face of challenges or struggles despite your school’s best efforts.
- Explain the goal of the project and ask the student for permission to shadow them.
- Notice and take notes on what they see, hear, and do.
- Notice *the way* they do things, and write down adjectives to describe what you see.
- Where appropriate, you can also arrange time for a short interview with the student. During the interview, ask them to explain or describe anything that you don’t entirely understand or that piqued your interest. Be careful to be nonjudgmental and base your questions on things you saw and not your interpretation of them.

Self-Documentation

- Brief the chosen student on the issue of interest and tell them what you hope to learn.
- Have the student use a journal or self-reflection tool (such as a template or tally sheet) to record their experience.

Try It Yourself

- Try a particular process that students go through (e.g., take a test, participate in a class, go through the college application process, sit in on a class taught in a language you don’t know, etc.).
- Do everything as if you were a student and take note of what you feel or notice about the experience.

Step 2: Empathy Mapping

Make sure to collect and bring notes you collected in Step 1 to the debrief meeting. If meeting time is tight, it may speed things along to pre-sort notes into categories for things the student said, did, thought, and felt.

Empathy Mapping Meeting Agenda and Facilitation Guide

1. Introduction

- Open the meeting by reminding participants that the goal of this meeting and their investigation of student experience is to shed new light on the problem we want to solve.
- Distribute copies of the graphic organizer and encourage participants to use it for notetaking.
- Walk participants through the agenda and remind them that the purpose of the activity is to understand student experiences first, and that they should leave their interpretations until the final step.

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2. Mapping

- Draw the quadrant below on a white board or chart paper, and ask team members who did the empathy work in Step 1 to organize their notes within these quadrants, sharing as they go. You may opt to use sticky notes to pre-write before sharing.
- During sharing, encourage other team members to ask clarifying questions, and allow for any new interpretations of what students think or feel to be included in quadrants.

<p>Students say . . . <i>What are some quotes and defining words the student said?</i></p>	<p>Students do . . . <i>What actions or behaviors did you notice?</i></p>
<p>Students think . . . <i>What might the student be thinking? What does this tell you about their beliefs?</i></p>	<p>Students feel . . . <i>What emotions might the student be feeling?</i></p>

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3. Identify Needs

- After you have completed all four quadrants, ask participants to take a moment to reflect individually on what has been shared, and try to define one or two student needs that you see represented in the data.
- Share the needs the team has identified and record them on a white board or chart paper, consolidating needs that are very similar.
 - **Coaching tip:** Remember needs should be expressed from the student perspective; avoid deficit perspective and solutions. Leave interpretations for the next step!

4. Identify Insights

- The final step is to turn the fresh-thinking student needs into insights that can lead your improvement work forward. Ask participants to reflect in pairs on the following three questions:
 - *What insight have you gained about your students' experiences and needs?*
 - *What tensions or contradictions do you notice?*
 - *What does this suggest about potential approaches to addressing the problem?*
- After a few minutes, come back together as a whole group to share. Group the insights into themes and record them for later use.

5. Next Steps

- Use *Problem Statement Readiness Check* to guide next steps (see page 37).

Participant Graphic Organizer

The purpose of this empathy activity is to take time to deeply and holistically understand student experiences before making a decision about what they need. As you reflect on what you have observed, use the four quadrants below to separate what you have observed the students say and do, and what you can deduce about what your students think or feel.

1. Mapping Empathy Data

<p>Students say . . . <i>What are some quotes and defining words the student said?</i></p>	<p>Students do . . . <i>What actions or behaviors did you notice?</i></p>
<p>Students think . . . <i>What might the student be thinking? What does this tell you about their beliefs?</i></p>	<p>Students feel . . . <i>What emotions might the student be feeling?</i></p>

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2. Identify Student Needs

Focus on the students' experience, and collectively decide what this tells you about their needs, especially those needs that aren't being met. Leave conclusions and solutions until later.



3. Identify Insights

What insights have you gained about your students' experiences and needs?

What tensions or contradictions do you notice?

What does this suggest about potential approaches to addressing the problem?

