

Empathy Interviews Guide

Goal: To gain a deeper understanding of a user's experience of the issue you are working to improve. Given the nature of complex systems, it is difficult to see beyond our own unique vantage point within the system. When a user opens a window into his/her experience, they are providing us with a valuable gift.

Norms for Empathy Interviews:

- Be curious and take a learning stance.
- Listen more than you speak.
- Be fully present, without distractions.
- Don't challenge, correct, or interrupt.
- Express gratitude.

Steps for Interviewing:

1. *Identify the Issue to Investigate:* What is the specific problem or gap in performance you want to understand better?
2. *Identify your users:* Which students/teachers/stakeholders might be helpful to interview about their experiences with your problem/issue, and the factors contributing to it?
3. *Question Selection/Brainstorm:* Review the sample empathy interview questions on the next page. Adapt these or generate a few questions of your own.
4. *Select & Organize:* Select/organize your top 5-6 questions. Will they help you understand what makes your problem area challenging?
5. *Plan:* Develop a plan for who you specifically you will interview, when you will interview them, and how you will conduct the interview. If you are doing the interview with a partner, decide who will interview and who will take notes.
6. *Conduct the Interview:* Consider the following best practices for interviewing
 - **Direct the conversation, but don't "lead the witness."**
 - **Ask "why?"** Even when you think you know the answer, ask people why they do or say things. Their answers will sometimes surprise you. A conversation started from one question should continue on as long as it needs to.
 - **Encourage stories.** Prompt users to share specific experiences rather than generalizations. When people tell stories, they reveal how they think about the world. Avoid binary yes/no questions in favor of questions that draw out experiences.
 - **Pay attention to nonverbal clues.** Be aware of body language and emotions.
 - **Don't be afraid of silence.** Even if they pause before answering, don't help by suggesting an answer. This can unintentionally get people to say things that agree with your expectations.
 - **Be prepared to capture data.** Always interview in pairs. If this is not possible, bring a recording device and – it's impossible to properly engage a user and take detailed notes at the same time. Be sure to tell your user that the recording will not be shared and is only for your own purposes to make sure you don't miss any details.
7. *Reflect:*
 - Content: What did we **hear**? What are we learning about the **causes** that contribute to the problem?
 - Process: How well did we follow the **norms** for empathy interviews? Were there **questions that were particularly fruitful**? Are there **questions we wish we would have asked**?

Consider these possible Empathy Interview Questions:

- Tell me about a time when you felt successful with X...
 - How did it feel?
 - Why do you think you were successful?
 - What did you do?
 - What did others do? (your teacher, your classmates, your family, your friends)
- Tell me about a time when X was hard...
 - Why was it hard?
 - How did it feel?
 - What did you do?
 - What do you wish would have happened?
 - What would have helped?
- What makes you frustrated about ...?
- How do you feel about?
- What do you like the most/least about X? Why?
- What do think are the biggest reasons for why X happens/doesn't happen? What makes you think that?
- What advice would you give another student/person about X?
- What do you wish others knew about X?

Plan

What do you want to learn from the Empathy Interviews?

What perspectives are important to answer those questions?

What questions will you ask?