



EMPATHY TOOLKIT

START WITH YOURSELF

Before the interview, take some time to reflect on your identity. Ask yourself:

- What power and privilege will I bring to this conversation?
- What biases do I know that I have? How will I mitigate those?
- What about my own current situation may create distance or closeness to the person I'll be talking to?

The point is that you are not invisible in the interview: you have an intersectional identity with potential biases that can shape how you hear the student, teacher, or parent and understand their experience. Naming and analyzing your own privilege can help you manage those biases and cede power in the conversation.

COMMON PITFALLS

When starting your empathy interviews, be mindful of these common pitfalls and misunderstandings:

WHAT YOU ASK

- Asking overly detailed or specific questions that lead to the answers you want or expect to hear.
- Asking “yes or no” questions as opposed to “tell me about...” questions
- Not asking follow-up questions you might not have planned
- Only asking informative questions and not using other techniques such as shadowing

WHO YOU ASK

- Only conducting a few interviews
- Picking the wrong people
- Not prioritizing
- Not acknowledging stakeholder groups
- Talking to the same type of people
- Assuming young students can't give strong data or information
- Talking to students who are easy to get ahold of

HOW YOU ASK

- Not taking direct quotes, recording, or having someone transcribe the interview
- Waiting too long to conduct interviews
- Not doing an equity pause before going into an interview
- Not considering who will conduct the interview - sometimes the project leader is not the best person to conduct the interview
- Treating the interview as a way to get information, but not seeing it as a relationship building opportunity



QUESTIONS

These questions are intended as a guide to prompt powerful ideas and stories. You do not need to use all of them - choose some if they are helpful, modify them, or add your own.

FOR STUDENTS

Schedule

- When do you feel most energized and ready to do school work? Tell me about this!
- Walk me through your daily routine. What are your favorite parts of the day? Why?

Relationships

- Have there been times - in school or outside of school - when you really felt seen, heard, or understood by someone else? When someone really got you?
- What do you wish your teachers knew about you?
 - What do you wish your teachers knew about you as a person?
 - What do you wish your teachers knew about you in regards to math or reading?
- Do you have a teacher or other adult from school whom you can count on to help you, no matter what?
- Could you describe a time when you felt most connected during virtual learning to the school? You class? A teacher? What made it enjoyable? What could have made it better?

Additional Help, Small Group, and Tutoring Experiences

- When has a teacher helped you? Tell me about it!
- When have you been in a small group and felt good about it? What made it feel that way?
- Are there times when you don't like being pulled for small group support? Tell me about those times.
- Tell me about a time when you got help from a teacher.
 - What was it?
 - How did you feel?
 - Was it help for just you or for a group?
 - Were your friends with you?
 - Did you actually get the help you needed?

QUESTIONS FOR ADULTS

Planning, Schedule, and Communication

- When do you get your best planning done?
- Can you tell me how you spend your time scheduling and teaching during the week?
- Tell me about what you know about how we build the school schedule?
- How do you communicate schedules to your students?
- How do you communicate with students and families outside of class time?



Student Supports

- When do you support students who need additional help?
- How do you identify which students need help?
- How do you keep students on-track if they miss some or all of your class?
- How do you know if students are accessing the resources and getting the help they need?
- If students attend tutoring, how will you know if tutoring is benefiting them?
- How much help do you believe students will need?
- Tell me about how other faculty or adults support your teaching (co-teaching, pull out groups, etc)?
- What current tools are you using that work? In what ways do they help?

STUDENT OBSERVATIONS

Student observations are an additional strategy for gathering empathy data. Observing a student within the environment you are researching will strengthen your ability to paint a more robust picture of the student experience. Student observations, when done well, are intentionally planned. Consider the following prior to engaging in the observation:

- **Set a goal for observation.** Student engagement? Student risk-taking? Student-to-student interactions? Pick a focus area.
- **Pick a student or two.** It will be difficult to effectively observe more than one student within a student-focused observation.
- **Pay attention to the student experience.** Students will react to the environment that the adults have created. Make note of what adults are doing, but pay closest attention to how students respond. In the case of schedule redesign, make note of the dispositions of students, the time of day, and/or structures that support or distract from the most optimal learning experience.
- **Do the work of a student.** Truly embrace the full student experience by putting yourself in their shoes.
- **Stay curious.** Wait until you leave the observation to draw conclusions. While in the observation watch carefully as one or fewer students experience the learning environment. Where possible, follow up with the student you observed to make sure your conclusions are correct.
- **Do not intrude.** Resist the temptation to support students who may be struggling or have questions.
- **Take notes, lots of them.** Be prepared with a note-taking or tracking tool to support effective note-taking. The tool should align to your observation goals.

The Stanford d.School has a useful toolkit that supports a more robust student observation protocol called [“Shadow a Student”](#). Feel free to use this toolkit when planning and conducting your observations of students.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Here is a list of additional empathy interview resources:

- Journey maps
 - [Journey mapping guide #1](#)
 - [Journey mapping guide #2](#)
 - [Veterans example of journey mapping](#) and [background](#)
- CityBridge Design Fellowship Resources
 - [Empathy interview prework](#)
 - Empathy interview [example](#)
 - [Empathy map](#): This visualization show how to use the “empathy mapping” protocol to analyze the example
 - [Video explanation](#): This video explains how CityBridge team member Andrew Pratt used empathy mapping to interpret the interview
- Stanford d.school [empathy mapping method](#)