



Prototyping for Empathy

What

While you will create most prototypes in order to evaluate the ideas that your team has come up with, it is also possible to use prototypes to develop empathy with your users, even when you do not have a specific product in mind to test. We call this “prototyping for empathy” or “active empathy”.

When

We usually do it in the early stages of a design project. Use empathy prototypes to gain an understanding of the problem as well as your users’ mindsets about pertinent issues. You will find that using empathy prototypes is best after you have some basic research and understanding of the design problem and users.

Why

Empathy prototypes are extremely useful in helping you probe deeper into certain issues or areas.

Best Practice

- 1** | The first thing to do is to determine **what it is you want to test**: Before building an empathy prototype you will need to figure out what aspects of a user or the environment you would like to probe deeper.
- 2** | Then, build prototypes that will effectively evaluate those aspects. For instance, if you want to find out about your users' mindsets towards reading, you could ask your users to draw how they think about reading. After they have finished, you could ask them about what they have drawn and — from there — understand how they think.
- 3** | Alternatively, you could create an empathy prototype for yourself and your team-mates so as to help you step into your users' shoes. If you are building prototypes for people with visual impairments, such as the elderly, you could create a quick prototype by applying some gel onto a pair of lightly tinted sunglasses. Wearing this prototype would simulate the poor eyesight of the elderly and enable you to gain an idea of the obstacles they face.
- 4** | **Sort out the logistics.** What do you need? For example: physical space, sunglasses, pen, paper, permits, additional staff, or anything else?
- 5** | Consider if it would be an advantage to run **a few empathy prototypes tests at once** in order to test different aspects of a user and or environment. This will allow you to test a variety of assumptions and ideas quickly.
- 6** | You should continuously capture all relevant feedback from the people you're designing for.
- 7** | Gathering feedback from prototyping sessions can feel like a haphazard process. Thankfully, a few amazing methods are available which you can use to provide some structure and organization to your feedback-gathering process: "Feedback Capture Grid", "I Like, I Wish, What If", and "Sharing Inspiring Stories".
- 8** | Continue to iterate. Continue to learn, adapt, create new prototypes, and test them.