EMPATHY INTERVIEWS

BY KARI NELSESTUEN AND JULIE SMITH

There has never been a more important time to practice empathy, as we face the formidable task of teaching and caring for students and their families during the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and systemic racism.

Empathy means trying to understand deeply the experiences and feelings of other people. It is both a mindset to embrace and a skill to practice. While we can never fully understand the experiences of another person, we can listen deeply to their stories and perspectives to uncover unacknowledged needs. As we listen, we must simultaneously examine how our own identities, biases, values, and experiences influence how we make meaning of what others share with us.

While many of us may already practice empathy in our daily lives, we've learned that one practice — empathy interviews — can help create more human-centered improvement practices across school systems.

Empathy interviews usually are one-on-one conversations that use open-ended questions to elicit stories about specific experiences that help uncover unacknowledged needs. A protocol allows the interviewer to probe more deeply into stories than a more traditional interview.

Empathy interviews help ensure that the diverse lived experiences of people are centered in decisions and actions. Although there is well-founded attention to data and research-based strategies in education, it is critical to include lived experience to more accurately and directly represent the lives of students and families who are often marginalized and excluded from traditional data and research methods.

For this reason, empathy interviews should be conducted with humility and awareness of the potential power dynamics at play, such as when teachers try to understand the lived experiences of chronically absent students and their families.

Examples of empathy interviews include:

- In virtual design camps, high school teachers conducted empathy interviews with students to more deeply understand their experiences with virtual learning. Teachers and students used the interview themes to co-design prototypes to improve the virtual experience.
- Educators from across a district conducted empathy interviews with students and families about attendance. They used the information to identify the root causes of chronic absenteeism from the community's perspective.
- A regional network focused on supporting Black, Indigenous, and people of color educators used data from empathy interviews to design system changes to increase retention rates.

Empathy interviews can help identify issues that need to be addressed by the system, unpack the root causes of a problem from a community perspective, and gather information that inspires new, human-centered change ideas. Some people report that their interview practice is an intervention in and of itself since it provides a new structure for voices to be heard.

•

Kari Nelsestuen (kari@communitydesignpartners.com) and Julie Smith (julie@communitydesignpartners.com) launched Community Design Partners in 2019.

HOW TO CONDUCT EMPATHY INTERVIEWS

Empathy interviews consist of open-ended questions tailored to the situation. Although interview questions are personalized, guidelines can help interviewers embody the principles of being intentional, human-centered, and equity-focused. This tool highlights tips and considerations that can be modified to meet the needs of each unique context.

PLANNING			
Step	**Key question**	**Considerations**	**Notes and action items**
Identify your why.	What's your purpose? Are you collecting stories to identify or refine a problem of practice? To understand the root causes? To design change ideas?	Clearly articulate your purpose and make sure that empathy interviews are the right tool for that purpose. Other data collection tools such as surveys and focus groups should remain in your tool kit as they are well-suited for other purposes.	
Identify whom to interview.	Whose stories need to be heard?	Choosing to listen deeply to students and families who have been historically marginalized by our systems is a way to build equity. It is important to be intentional about whom you include in interviews and be aware of who is not included. If only people with "average" experiences are interviewed, empathy interviews will only confirm what we already know.	
Assemble an empathy interview team.	Who will conduct the interviews?	Assemble a team of interviewers that is both broad and diverse. As you build the team, consider: • **Relationships.** When possible, consider an interviewer who already has a trusting relationship with an interviewee. • **Power dynamics.** Consider how race, position, age, or gender might play out in an empathy interview setting. Deliberately work to reduce harm. • **Language needs.** Include multilingual interviewers or translators on your team. • **Community.** Consider including students, families, and community members as interviewers.	
Plan the when and how.	What are the logistics?	**Number of interviews.** The most important consideration is not how many interviews, but whom to interview. Consider resources, size of interview team, and purpose when deciding how many to conduct. **Data management**. Make sure interviewers can store their notes in a secure data portal and that names and identifying information are not recorded in the data set. **When and where.** Arrange interviews at a time and place that feels safe and not disruptive to the interviewee. When possible, conduct interviews in person (but phone and video can work, too).	
Prepare for analysis.	How will you analyze the data?	One common method of analysis is **headlining**. Team members form pairs or small groups to read and summarize headlines from each interview using descriptive sentences or direct quotes. Once finished, group all of the headlines by theme. Make sure to remain descriptive and avoid judgment, inference, or solutions. Once analyzed, you should be ready to apply what you learned to your original purpose. Allow for the possibility that your purpose might have changed as a result of what you heard. Save time to share stories, reflect on the process, and debrief for next time.	

HOW TO CONDUCT EMPATHY INTERVIEWS, continued

DESIGNING YOUR QUESTIONS

A typical empathy interview protocol has four to eight open-ended, story-based questions. Use question stems such as:

- Tell me about a time when …
- Tell me about the last time you …
- What are your best/worst experiences with ____?
- Can you share a story that would help me understand more about …?

These questions should be followed by open-ended prompts like, "Tell me more," "Why?," and "What were you feeling then?" The following checklist can help ensure that your protocol is as unbiased as possible and creates a comfortable space for the conversation.

Element	Feature	Is feature present? yes/ not yet	If not yet, explain next steps
Our protocol has an introduction that does the following:	Describes why we are conducting the interviews.		
	Explains how we will use the data.		
	Includes our confidentiality agreement.		
	States that the interview, and each question in the interview, is voluntary.		
Our empathy interview questions do the following:	Start with the positive.		
	Are free of acronyms and jargon.		
	Are free of bias.		
	Primarily ask for stories, not solutions.		
	Include questions about experiences in a range of contexts for a broad picture. For example, when asking about sense of belonging in school, ask about belonging in other settings as well.		
	Include suggested follow-up prompts, such as, "Tell me more," "Why?" and "How did you feel?"		

HOW TO CONDUCT EMPATHY INTERVIEWS, continued

PREPARE YOUR TEAM

Empathy interviews might seem straightforward but they actually require specific mindsets and technical skills that can be improved through practice. Training interviewers is an important part of preparation. The following checklist can help ensure that your interviewer training focuses on important aspects of the process.

Element	Feature	How will you build this feature?
Give space.	Pay attention to how the interviewee is feeling and responding. Never force a story. Be aware that your questions may trigger past trauma. Give space and stop the interview at any time.	
Stay neutral.	Be careful not to imply that any question has a right answer or to suggest an answer.	
Be aware of your own bias.	Reflect on questions such as, "How does my identity affect how and what people share with me?" and "How do I maintain awareness of my biases and challenge them?"	
Take notes.	It may feel like note-taking is rude or impacts the rapport, but actually it is an important safeguard against bias and inference.	
Follow up if necessary.	Asking questions can bring up intense emotions or memories sometimes. Follow up with the person you interviewed — or find someone else who can — if you think they need follow-up care.	

ABOUT COMMUNITY DESIGN PARTNERS

Community Design Partners' facilitators, coaches, and advisors partner with organizations and schools dedicated to a wide range of social justice issues such as accessing postsecondary options, diversifying the teaching workforce, and advancing student success by removing systemic barriers. Learn more at **communitydesignpartners.com.**