

# Where Empathy Meets Learning: Exploring Design Abilities in K–12 Classrooms

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## Introduction

My first experience as a reading teacher was with a twelve-year-old boy who struggled greatly with every aspect of the process. Ari was very earnest and hardworking, but I sensed a great frustration within him. It was as if he knew he had a problem but felt powerless to solve it. We began each one-hour intensive session with a conversation. Ari and I both were passionate about basketball and we enjoyed discussing the latest game results and how the players performed. When Ari shared a newspaper clipping about the UNLV Runnin' Rebels basketball team's win the previous night and began to read it to me, something clicked. He had an ease that wasn't there when we were using his classroom reader. He was motivated to find out the details in the article. I decided that we would only read about basketball as a way to help Ari master effective reading strategies. I made a list of every NCAA basketball team. Since he was familiar with the names of the teams, he was able to make sound-to-print connections, and his fluency improved. Ari was thrilled to be reading about something he was excited about. As we moved through the months, he began to enjoy reading and saw that there was a purpose—one that mattered to him.

It was through this experience that I believed I became a true reading teacher. At least that is what I thought then, over twenty years ago. But what I realize, and continue to realize, is that knowing someone's interests isn't enough. That isn't what empathy is really about. Instead, it requires us to acknowledge historical context and constructs and bring students' identities, experiences, family rituals, and languages into the classroom. My journey to

understand this was shaped by my graduate school experiences. I read the work of Shirley Brice Heath, Luis Moll, Anne Haas Dyson, Kathryn Hu-pei Au, Maxine Green, Paolo Freire, and James Gee, all of whom broadened my understanding of literacy and helped shape my understanding of student-centered learning. And now, as the work I am doing centers on design, I have been both challenged and delighted to explore another nuance of the role of empathy in the education landscape.

## Design Abilities

At Stanford University's Hasso Plattner of Design (d.school) we are exploring *design abilities* and how they are an essential part of the teaching and learning relationship. Much of the work that has been done on design thinking features the five hexagons: empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test (see Figure 1). Little, however, has been done yet on what it means to fully, equitably embrace behaving and living as a designer. Design is more than a step-by-step process that we follow to create powerful solutions; it is a way of being and operating in the world that challenges us to become more observant, curious, and open to the possibilities of education in the twenty-first century.

Design abilities represent an attempt to think more deeply about the nature of design and move beyond simply following a series of steps. Design abilities are a set of mindsets and behaviors that emphasize what students are learning and recognize the habits they are developing. The eight design abilities are: Navigate Ambiguity, Learn from Others (People and Context), Synthesize Information, Rapidly Experiment, Move

between Concrete and Abstract, Build and Craft Intentionally, Communicate Deliberately, and Design Your Design Work. Using the lens of the design ability Learning from Others through Context places empathy at the center of instruction and reframes teaching and learning as a communal, co-constructed act.

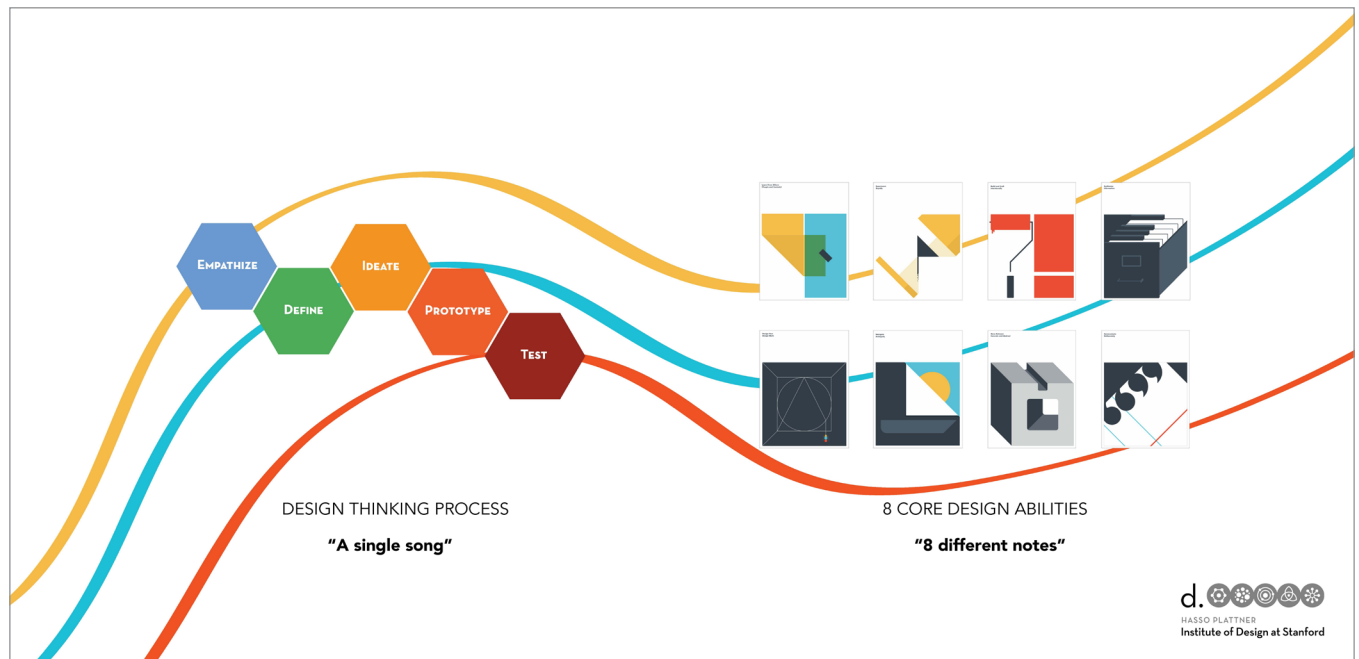
One of the first things we did in our work at the d.school was to broaden the definition of this design ability to include not only learning *from* others (people and context) but learning *with* others (people and context). This reframe gave us a deeper understanding of what empathy looks like in our classrooms and provided a theoretical vantage point to help us examine how we can best meet our students' needs. We want to acknowledge that empathy, when done incorrectly, can feel like a transactional experience where the designer is extracting information from the stakeholder for their own purpose. Embracing empathy work as a co-constructed act enables the interaction to be a mutual learning experience and enables both parties to act as designers. To fully develop this ability as educators, we must set aside our own assumptions and our hardwired world views in order to gain insight into the world of our students and design learning experiences that embody a deeper understanding of empathy.

Constructivist teaching is based on the belief that learning occurs as learners are actively involved in a process of meaning and knowledge construction rather

than passively receiving information. Learners are the makers of meaning and knowledge. Our classrooms must reflect the mutuality of teaching and learning with empathy at its core. Learning from and with people and contexts is not simply a step that we reference in the design process; instead, it permeates the work of a designer. It requires deliberate practice, as we must intentionally seek opportunities to connect deeply with people in meaningful ways. What does learning from and with others look like in a design-driven, learner-centered classroom? It begins and ends with empathy.

## Empathy in Design-Driven Classrooms

**Designing with empathy requires that students have a stake in what they are learning.** We know that the ability to deeply empathize with our students is essential; yet, often when designing for instruction, we create a lesson first and then work to fit our students into that lesson. Instead, we need to embrace our students as collaborators on the learning journey with us. An important element of the design process is the focus on creating problem “finders” rather than simply problem “solvers.” To do this requires students to develop a sense of agency and ownership around their learning. There need not be walls around our students' curiosity. We want them, like designers, to have real-world impact. This requires time spent out in the world.



**Figure 1.** Design thinking process and design abilities. Courtesy of Kelly Schmutte, curriculum designer and lecturer, Stanford d.school and founder, PerfectFit Pointe; Jess Munro, Stanford design educator and founder of Entrepreneurs by Design; and Emily Callaghan, owner, DESIGN+ Labs and lecturer, Stanford d.school.

Having real-world impact can occur through the use of design challenges. First, students identify a problem they feel is worth solving. The student's task is to be the problem finder and conduct an in-depth exploration of the problem space. As teachers, our job is to determine how to shape the design challenge in a way that amplifies the content underpinning the challenge area and supports the instructional goals the student has selected. We can provide support and direction, but we must allow the students' ownership to drive the project forward. We need to examine what co-constructed teaching and learning looks like through the lens of empathy. As educators, we need to make difficult decisions about how to let students' curiosity and creativity lead their learning. We need to ask questions like: *If a student's curiosity drove learning, what, if anything, would be missing?* and *If a teacher's choices drove learning, what, if anything would be missing?* Negotiating that sweet spot where the answers to these two questions meet is our task as student-centered educators.

**Empathy embodies a sense of belonging.** We must create classrooms where students can bring their whole selves to the learning experience. Luis Moll (2013) describes "funds of knowledge" as the skills and knowledge that have been historically and culturally developed to enable an individual or household to function within a given culture. We need to acknowledge that our students are not empty vessels waiting to be filled. Instead, they come to use with rich and diverse life experiences. And our task is to create a culture where students know that who they are truly matters to us. It means designing big and small ways in which their funds of knowledge act as an essential part of the design process in the class and are not merely regulated to icebreakers and get-to-know-me exercises. Their insights, experiences, and politics become the fabric of the lesson and a pathway for developing the critical thinking skills needed to connect the content they explore to the world around them.

Projects like Disrupt Texts, which is a crowdsourced, grassroots effort by teachers for teachers to challenge the traditional canon in order to create a more inclusive, representative, and equitable language arts curriculum, provide a way to build a culture of trust. Bishop (1990) describes how literature provides access to a diversity of experiences by providing *mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors* to develop empathy and understanding. Langer (2010) details the literacy experience through the concept of reader stance and how it allows one to be outside of and then step into an envisionment, be inside and moving through an envisionment, and how doing so can lead to rethinking what one knows. There must be a sense of shared power as we co-construct and

negotiate meaning. This is how empathy can flourish in our classrooms. This is when our students trust us in welcoming them. There can be no outsiders in our classrooms. We must learn from and with others. Ultimately, our instructional practices must be designed to reflect the pluriverse, which is defined as multiple ways of knowing, being and thinking that are rooted in specific places and communities of human experience (Escobar 2017).

In order to create a culture where trust matters, we have to be vulnerable ourselves. We must acknowledge what we don't know. We must create safe spaces where students can bring fears and emotions and know that they are welcomed. We need to show our students that perhaps questions matter as much as answers. Brené Brown describes how "when we start losing our tolerance for vulnerability, uncertainty, for risk—we move away from the things we need and crave the most like joy and love and belonging, trust, empathy, creativity" (NPR/ TED Staff, 2013).

**Empathy begins with an awareness of one's biases, race and privilege and us to take action.** Building that trust begins with an awareness of one's identity, biases, and privilege, and it asks us to take actionable steps to make our classrooms, lessons, content, behaviors, and language more inclusive. Liberatory Design is an approach to addressing equity challenges and change efforts in complex systems. It is a process and practice for transforming power by shifting the relationships between those who hold the power to design and those impacted by these designs. We need to think deeply about what practices actively oppress our students' authentic selves versus those that liberate our students to freely and creatively express ideas that represent their complex identities, experiences, and politics. This means we need to practice both awareness and humility and, ultimately, change the structures or behaviors in our classrooms that systematically marginalize our most oppressed students.

Earlier conceptions of the "empathize" step in the design process invite us to learn through observing and interviewing the stakeholders we are designing solutions for. A more nuanced understanding of this is captured by the design ability learning from and *with* others (people and context). We must invite our stakeholders to be part of designing solutions. And our students are our stakeholders. We are designing for and with them and modeling how they can embrace design in their own lives by doing the same. These experiences are designed to help our students better understand others' perspectives as they learn from and with others.

**Empathy, ultimately, is about building relationships.** We believe that relationship building is at the heart of empathy. There are many opportunities

to connect with our students. These interactions often happen unexpectedly, such as in the interstitial times before or after class, during recess, or when walking down the school hallways. These unexpected, unscripted moments give us the opportunity to connect authentically without an agenda so we can see each other as complex human beings. By asking questions about their lives and listening to the stories they are eager to share in and, more regularly, outside the classroom, we can build culturally relevant learning experiences. We believe that a successful learning journey is one where we learn as much as we teach. The design ability of *learning from and with others* provides the opportunity to practice humility, curiosity, vulnerability, and deep empathy, paving the way for mutual learning.

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