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Designing Our Way to Equity in Unprecedented Times

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Campuses are seeking ways to address two major issues: racial equity and ongoing pandemic-related challenges. One approach to addressing these issues that few leaders have considered is liberatory design thinking (LDT). LDT is a well-established process that is uniquely positioned to mitigate these issues. In a recent research study that investigated how campuses designed improved supports for non-tenure-track faculty, we found that design teams used LDT to create innovative solutions to equity-related issues that affect non-tenure-track faculty. The LDT process has also been used in other social settings with similarly favorable results. Prior to our study, however, it had not been empirically investigated in the higher education context.

In addition to introducing the LDT model to academic leaders, we also suggest some key considerations for using it in higher education to foster needed innovations. For more details about the campuses in our study, the innovations they developed, and the equity challenges they addressed, please see [our report](#) ^[1].

Created by the National Equity Project in 2016–2017, the LDT model addresses the inequities at the root of many social problems and to emphasize power sharing in the design thinking process (Clifford & design school X, 2020). LDT includes seven phases: notice, empathize, define, ideate, prototype, test, and reflect. It also involves liberatory mindsets: notice bias and power; reflect on identity and values; collaborate and build relational trust; and attend to emotions and healing. Figure 1 provides a visual of the LDT framework.

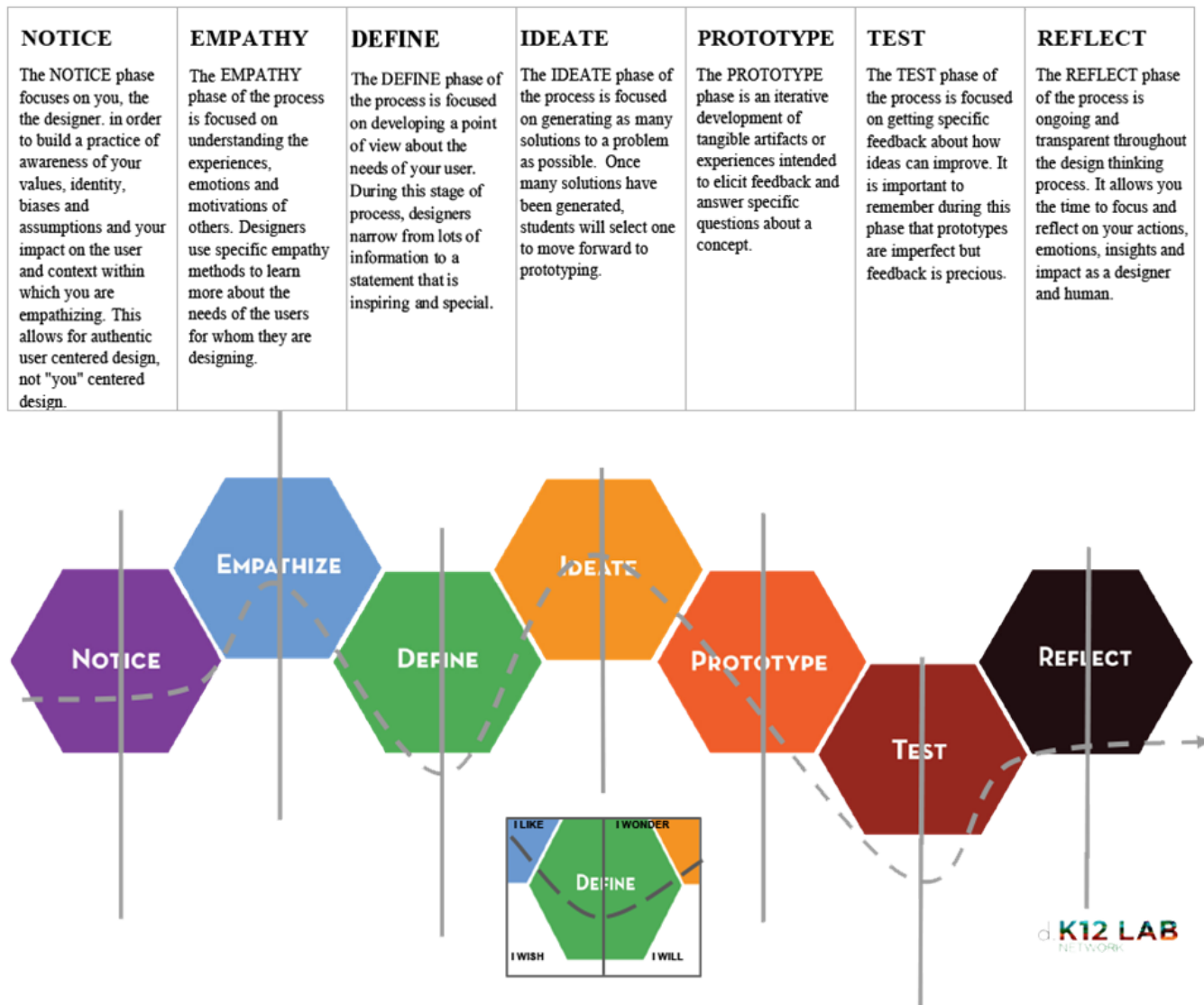


Figure 1. Liberatory design thinking

In the notice phase, designers are encouraged to engage in activities that promote self-awareness of identity, values, emotion, assumptions, and positionality within the team before beginning with the design process, so that the team can engage authentically in the process. This phase also includes identifying power issues both within the design team and relative to institutional power and interrogating the process's intent to ensure that the design product increases equity. Conducting these activities before engaging in other phases of design thinking helps to build relational trust among the team.

Our study helped us learn about some key variations in activating LDT in higher education that arise from the political and bureaucratic nature of higher education institutions. We offer advice for those wanting to obtain the promise of LDT while also sharing potential challenges within the higher education landscape and suggesting ways to navigate them up front. Our lessons are captured in a modified version of LDT for the higher education context in Figure 2.

In higher education, LDT requires an initial phase of *organizing as a group*, which is central to a strong outcome. For example, given the culture of shared governance in higher education, the design teams we studied made intentional choices around representation and inclusion. Effective LDT teams in higher education are best comprised of designers with varying levels and types of expertise, with some who understand the institutional landscape, some who can leverage political opportunities, and others who understand the problem firsthand.

At the same time, the siloed nature of higher education and the historically rooted tensions that often exist between stakeholders can create challenges for the process both internally within the team and in their external interactions. As the diverse teams are being developed, initial work to confront tensions is necessary so tensions do not affect process along the way. Thus, the *team-building process and liberatory mindsets* are key within the initial organize phase and need to be continuously revisited during the team process.

Ideating is much more challenging in higher education than in some other sectors. Status quo forces are arguably stronger in higher education than elsewhere. Teams researched potential solutions by reading scholarship and looking at models from other institutions—sources of ideation that are not usually part of the design thinking approach. While these approaches can help with brainstorming, they are also relatively conservative as replication limits the potential for innovation. Pushing teams to truly embrace breaking free of tradition will require much intentional planning. Naming this challenge is part of overcoming it.

A *prototyping mindset* was challenging for those engaged in LDT in higher education. Teams felt pressure from colleagues and supervisors to advance a complete, polished solution that is ready to be implemented rather than engaging in an iterative process with many rough drafts. LDT encourages the latter.

Prototyping can be enhanced through strategies we learned about in our study that address the information asymmetry inherent in loosely coupled organizations, like higher education. LDT teams crafted narratives (stories) of the (re)defined problem, solution, and the overall design process to share alongside their prototypes. Information gathered in the empathy phase gives these narratives a well-needed humanizing and emotional element, which helps justify the proposed solution(s).

The importance of buy-in. The LDT teams we studied engaged in complex work to move solutions into implementation and testing that involved getting buy-in. Two liberatory mindsets defined by Anassie and colleagues (2020) were critical in the buy-in phase: share, don't sell (again, tell stories), and address emotions. As LDT teams shared their problem-and-solution narrative, they connected their story to institutional objectives related to faculty success, student success, and strategic planning to inform and persuade various key stakeholders. LDT teams also acknowledged emotional challenges within the team related to the practice of nonattachment; they had to let go of some solutions and compromise on others to get buy-in. They did so in part because they were willing to trust that better solutions would emerge from the complicated, sometimes messy work of negotiating for buy-in.

With the advice and lessons learned from our study, campus leaders can better engage LDT, a process that is helping campuses create the innovations needed to solve the complex challenges higher education faces in unprecedented times. We encourage campuses that are interested in adapting our modifications to LDT (the Design for Equity in Higher Education model) to access our [report](#) ^[2] and the accompanying [guide for practice](#) ^[3].

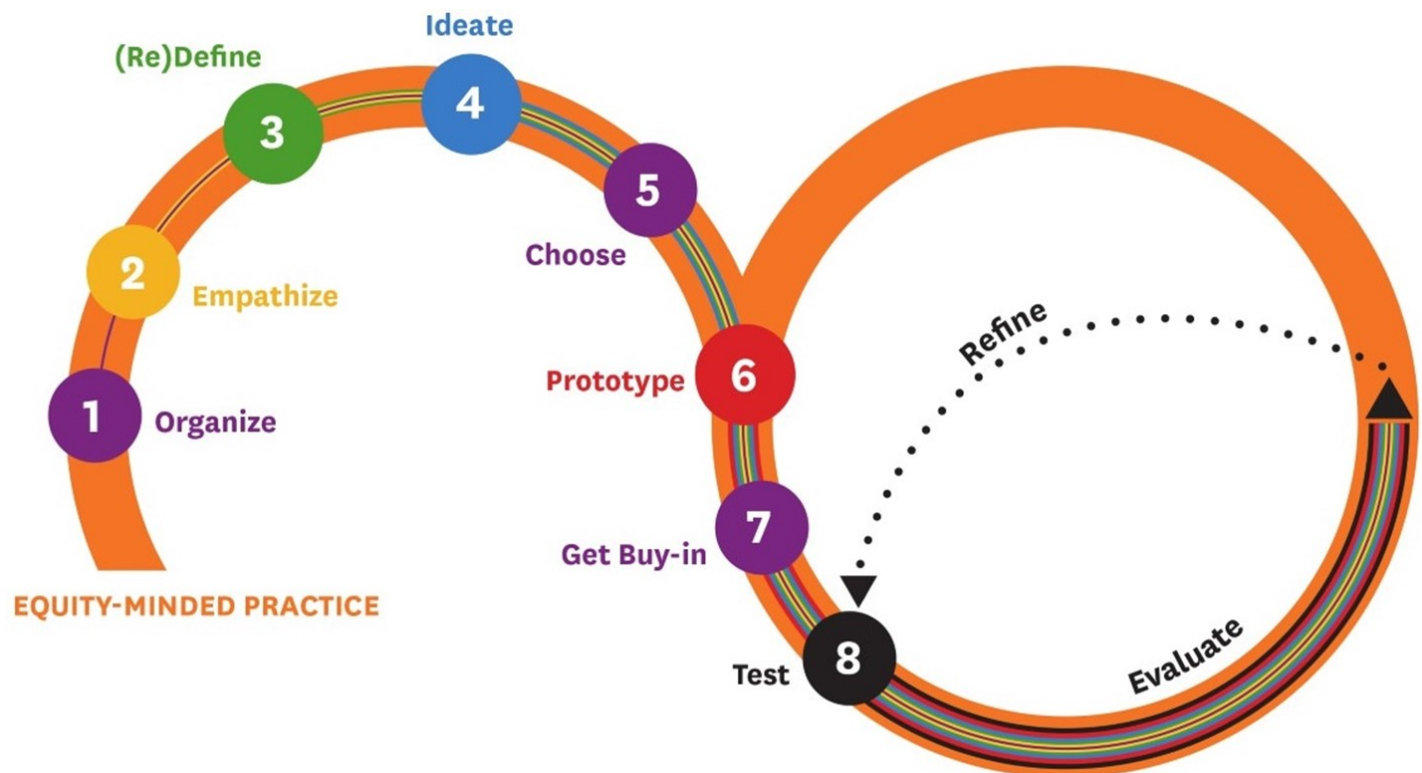


Figure 2. Design for equity in higher education

References

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<https://pullias.usc.edu/download/design-for-equity-in-higher-education> ^[1]

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[1] our report: <https://pullias.usc.edu/download/design-for-equity-in-higher-education>

[2] report: <https://pullias.usc.edu/download/design-for-equity-in-higher-education/>

[3] guide for practice: <https://pullias.usc.edu/download/using-design-for-equity-in-higher-education-for-liberatory-change-a-guide-for-practice/>

[4] <https://dschool.stanford.edu/s/Liberatory-Design-Cards.pdf>: <https://dschool.stanford.edu/s/Liberatory-Design-Cards.pdf>

[5] <https://dschool.stanford.edu/resources/equity-centered-design-framework>: <https://dschool.stanford.edu/resources/equity-centered-design-framework>

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