

METHOD

PROTOTYPE FOR EMPATHY



WHY prototype for empathy

It is common practice to test prototypes with users to evaluate solutions, but you can also gain empathy through prototyping, exposing different information than simply interviewing and observation might. Of course, whenever you test with a user you should consider both what you can learn about your solution and what you can learn about the person – you can always use more empathetic understanding.

But you can also develop prototypes or create situations specifically designed to gain empathy, without testing a solution at all (or even having a solution in mind). This is sometimes called “active empathy” because you are not an outside observer, you are creating conditions to bring out new information. In the same way a solution prototype helps you gain understanding about your concept, an empathy prototype helps you gain understanding about the design space and people’s mindsets about certain issues.

HOW to prototype for empathy

These empathy prototypes are often best used when you have done some work to understand the design space, and want to dig deeper into a certain area or probe an insight you are developing. Think about what aspect of the challenge you want to learn more about. Then discuss or brainstorm ways you might investigate that subject. You can create prototypes for empathy to test with users or with your design team.

Some ideas:

- Have your user draw something (for example, draw how you think about spending money, or draw how you get to work) and then talk about it afterward.
- Create a game that probes issues you want to explore (for example, you could make a simple card game which forces users to make choices related to your design challenge).
- Simulate an aspect of what users are going through to better understand it yourself (for example, if your users plant seeds while carrying a baby, get a sling and carry ten pounds while planting seeds).