

My journey through the Design Thinking course

Being creative is an intrinsic part of design thinking and is often seen as the driving force to build solutions which are aesthetic and tackle technical design challenges. It does not have a singular form and thus can be expressed in multiple forms. I have tried to pen down my thoughts about my journey as I sailed through the design thinking course in the form of a poem to embrace my creative side and take a step towards applying the design thinking principles.

“The course that happened in 2022 December”

The course that happened in 2022 December,
Is what I will always remember.
As we designed our own version of backpack,
Making the design user-centric is the new hack.
As we learnt about the double diamond design thinking process,
Separating problem and solution space set a product to success.
While discovery and developing pushes our ideas to diverge,
Defining and delivering makes sure our ideas converge.
The network of problems could be convoluted,
But it brings forth underlying causes that are deep-rooted.
While we worked on asking repeated Why's,
We realized more reasons why our customer would buy.
These reasons lead us to our fundamental objective,
No wonder why this activity is so effective.
We expanded our horizon of thinking by answering the WH questions,
Making sure we looked at the same problem from different dimensions.
With the needs of users in mind,
The problem statement was defined.
Our problem statement set our vision,
All our future work were aligned with this decision.
As we dwelled into the problem statement more,
Many assumptions were explored.
Validating these assumptions became our goal,
The user studies played a crucial role.
Customer interview style so exploratory,

That it let customers tell their story.
These stories painted a different picture than we expected,
But we realized early our user base needed to be corrected.
With so many ideas already in mind,
We did know there were many more ideas to find.
As our brainstorming cells were activated,
Many new ideas were generated.
Plethora of ideas made things challenging,
But having tools to structure and select our ideas kept us cruising.
The final ideas were picked,
Using speech critique did not let us conflict.
The final ideas were made into a digital prototype,
An assumption of user flow was tested virtually with users through skype.
The testing gave us a way-forward,
Now we just need to push forward.
The course may have ended,
But the experience has been splendid.
The course that happened in 2022 December,
Is what I will always remember.

According to the International Design Foundation, Design Thinking is a non-linear, iterative process that teams use to understand users, challenge assumptions, redefine problems, and create innovative solutions to prototype and test. For the next part of my learning essay, I have drawn an analogy to treat myself as the subject of design thinking as I:

- Understood myself as the practitioner of design thinking principles
- Challenged my own assumptions
- Redefine my strategy to deal with the problems and solutions

The learning essay concludes with a letter of gratitude for the professor.

'Sometimes it takes a good fall to know where you stand'

-Hayley Williams

Understanding users myself as the practitioner of design thinking

As an aspiring product manager, learning about design thinking principles is extremely necessary because these principles incorporate design characteristics at each step from ideation till a product is launched. Here are my key takeaways from the course as I understood more about the underlying problems in my thinking and my approaches:

- Being a software engineering graduate, I have always looked at how technology can be used to solve it. But now, I realize the importance of being in the problem space and appreciating the need to find the actual need before jumping into how technology can be used to solve it.
- I have always thought of myself as a non-creative person and that has always been a barrier for me to sit down and brainstorm ideas and innovative solutions. Because of the course, I realize that there is still a long way for me to achieve creativity but if I keep practicing and following the principles, this could be the best and the easiest way for me to develop human centered and creative solutions.
- Empathy has always been one of my greatest strengths because I am able to get into the shoes of others quite easily. I thought that was enough for me to use this strength to my advantage but through the course, I realized that I am not being a great observant and even though I notice small details, I am not thinking beyond that and connecting the dots. My definition for how I engage with people and observe them has changed and I am slowly noticing a change in the way I look at things now.
- I have made many prototypes in the past but I never developed them with the thought of what I want to be answered from the prototype testing. I have always placed more importance on how it looks and how many features it must have. I would have continued to make this mistake but now because of the course, I now know that I must limit the scope of my prototype to evaluate the questions with which it was developed.

'It's not the things you don't know that trip you up. It's the things you think you know, but you don't. You fail to ask a certain question because you believe you know the answer. Separating your information from your assumptions can be very tricky business'

-Claudia Gray

Challenging my assumptions

Design Thinking is an iterative process that helps us understand our users, refine our problems as we learn more, and develop innovative solutions. The course has challenged a lot of assumptions I had earlier regarding this whole domain:

The domain of design is only for those who have a knack for creativity

I never thought of the domain of design as a discipline of science. The first thought that crosses our minds when we think of design is beautiful and aesthetic looking products and interfaces. Just like how we are inclined towards pursuing our career as an engineer or a doctor based on our interest in mathematics or biology respectively, we prevent ourselves from pursuing a career in design because of our preconceived notions and our belief that the field is only for those who are naturally talented and creative.

But this course made me realize that the product we see is not magically made just like that. The process till the product is developed requires a lot of structured thinking and framework. This framework and thinking process can enable anyone who is willing to put efforts and follow the principles to develop an innovative solution which is human centric. The design thinking double diamond enables one to apply the design characteristics at each step to achieve creativity and produce a user-centered solution.

Be specific while asking questions in interviews

I have always been very conscious about the user's time in interviews especially when they are volunteering their time to answer questions. Because of the paucity of time, I had always thought that the best strategy to derive maximum value is to not ask open-ended questions and be specific about the questions to prevent the user from deviating from the topic. In fact, during my stint as the offshore lead when I was working with multiple stakeholders, I had been conditioned to think and follow this without fail.

However, when we were asked to conduct exploratory interviews-we focused on letting the users drive the interview and tell their story. It was surprising to witness how the users were so willing to share their opinions and that helped us get a larger overview of the scenario compared to what we would have got had we stucked to our list of questions. Asking open-

ended questions also lead to the discovery of a lot more ideas which eventually paved into our idea generation step.

Having too many ideas is a bad thing

Having too many ideas is considered bad because it is believed that if one has too many ideas, they would unnecessarily spend a lot of time thinking about the ideas and would have a hard time shortlisting what they would want to finally work on. It is often considered as the distracting element.

However, my viewpoint regarding this changed when we were asked to generate as many ideas as we could no matter how silly they are. Initially, I thought of just writing the silly ideas only for it to be discarded at the time of idea selection but to my surprise, some of the silly ideas too made it to the next stage of shortlisting because they offered a decent value in return of low efforts which were the metrics we were considering. This was an eye opener because had we not been asked to generate a hundred ideas-a number that sounded too big of a goal to achieve, we would not have even thought about these silly ideas at all. This also made me appreciate that we need not develop a technological solution for everything-sometimes, the solutions can be fairly simple and yet solve the same problem.

'The essence of strategy is knowing what not to do'

-Michael Porter

Redefining ~~problem~~-my strategy to deal with problems

Here are my key takeaways from the course on how I aim to change the way I deal with the problems:

- Embrace uncertainty- The problems for which we have a background knowledge and have some clarity seem to be more enticing to begin with. But if we wish to come up with a breakthrough innovation, it is worth spending some time getting clarity on the problems which seem uncertain and the ideas which are not explored.
- Defer judgement-Because of the expertise we bring to the table, we often are inclined towards a particular problem because the solution for it may sound relatively more interesting to solve. But this leads us to have a bias which can only be prevented if we give each problem an equal opportunity by setting aside our bias and judgements.
- Be agile- As we learn more about the problem, the problem may evolve based on the findings from the interviews and market research. Rather than sticking to the problem we started with because of the fear of starting all over again if we fail, it is better to fail early and acknowledge the mistakes because
- Break down the problems- The problems may look complex but when it is broken down into subsets, it helps to prioritize and understand how different problems relate to each other. Drawing a network of problems helps to realize the path to achieve the solution for a complex problem by solving the broken-down problems individually.

Here are my key takeaways from the course on how I am to change the way I deal with solutions:

- Set bias aside-Not every problem demands a technological solution. So, it is important to reflect and consider whether using technology as a solution would offer more value.
- Be open to criticism and feedback-If we work long hours to develop a feature or an application, we have a tendency not to shelve it even though the solution might draw negative criticism from the customers. But rather than wasting more time in building a solution which is not aligned with the interests of the end users, it is important to adapt and make reforms as soon we get feedback.
- Offer many options-Having different versions of the application or feature helps the end users to voice their choices and state their preference clearly. If there is just one

version, the users may suggest changes that cater to their interests exclusively and we might end up with a lot more versions to build.

'What the teacher is, is more important than what he teaches'

-Karl Meninger

Letter of Gratitude

Dear professor Jitesh,

I am not sure if this learning essay has done justice to the immense amount of learning I have acquired throughout this course. Thank you so much for pushing us to actively participate in the activities and making us learn the concepts in an interactive manner.

I will always remember you for being kind, open to giving quality feedback, and always being available to listen to us. It means a lot to us and certainly meant a great deal for me.

I hope you continue to thrive in your mission to impact as many students as you can through your teaching. The course length was short, but it was truly transformative in many ways.

Thanks a ton, professor!

Regards,

Pratyay Prakhar

