

WHITE PAPER: UNIQUEWAYS OF PROTOTYPING & UX NOW

UNIQUE WAYS OF PROTOTYPING

Inspiration

Around the time I was auditioning for TEDx I started to get opportunities to do other types of public speaking. I was teaching at the time and so when I was first approached about a topic idea I just blurted out Unique Ways of Prototyping, which probably wasn't as off the cuff as I make it sound here. I was teaching at Emily Carr University of Art and Design on the Interaction Design Certificate (formerly Interaction Design Essentials, later renamed as UX Certificate) and Interaction Design degree (Bachelor of Design, Interaction Design) programs. I was also sitting in on some Master of Design, Interaction presentations, providing feedback so my ideas were really centred there, even my tangential ideas. So when I said Unique Ways of Prototyping at that time I was already ruminating perhaps subconsciously about what something like that might be.

The first time I proposed Unique Ways of Prototyping was for the VanUX meet-up to be held at the Microsoft building in Vancouver. They trusted me to make a deck that didn't require any vetting, so I started to piece together inspiration items in the first set of slides.

The key three inspiration slides were as follows:

– A shot of me from behind in a blue collared polo writing on a whiteboard. There are no denotative elements to say it was in India but it was during a teaching appointment in Maharashtra, India where I was an Assistant Professor teaching a class called Elements of Design. I used this slide to explain that I had an “aha” moment in realizing that whiteboarding was a form of prototyping. This idea was built up on the backs of some amazing designers, for example Mike Kruzeniski (RIP) included a shot of whiteboarding in his initial portfolio after graduation, which I saw as we were both students at the same time at Emily Carr, him in industrial design and me in communication design. He would go on to hold a VP position at Twitter after completing an interaction design masters in Europe. Anyway the point of this slide was that when you are writing on a whiteboard you are bringing something into the world through writing that is based on your idea. So it can be proved and interrogated much like a conventional prototype might be.

– One slide was of me in costume during intermission at TEDx where I'm having a three person conversation with an audience member and another TEDx speaker. And because during that time I was already thinking about Unique Ways of Prototyping it occurred to me that an ordinary conversation could be prototyping at that time. It was after all a way of bringing ideas into

the world and exchanging those ideas . The explanation alongside this slide was that speaking was bringing ideas into the world sonically. This was before the ubiquity of voice user interfaces in mainstream product design. This was also before the idea that our phones are “listening” and that as we experience now, sometimes we have a conversation about a topic and our phones picking up and show an advertisement about it. Before that.

– One third slide was of me at the UX India conference in Bangalore. I was teaching at the time as an Assistant Professor in Maharashtra during which time some senior faculty were chatting in the faculty room about an upcoming event to do with user experience. I jumped in on the conversation saying I had worked as a Staff User Experience Designer at Lenovo and before knew it I was on a plane to the Bangalore conference accompanied by another professor and a 4th year student who was there to look after me. At the conference in Bangalore I was invited to be a part of two panels, a Design Heads panel and a Design Educators panel, during which time we laid down sticky notes on a table while having an exchange on a ten or twelve person conversation. Playing off the idea that conversations were prototyping and writing on a whiteboard was also prototyping, I concluded that that situation was a form of writing and conversation towards prototyping. One unexpected outcome of this was that this framework could get pigeonholed as a voice user interface scenario which wasn’t the intention. Rather it was a third instance that conversation and writing on a whiteboard, simplified as voice and writing, were prototyping.

The three first slides set the tone for what Unique Ways of Prototyping was, mainly something created based on inspiration for the purpose of a single talk, however after this it would evolve into a conference abstract that was accepted broadly on the international conference circuit, and a talk workshop continued, held at meet-up events, and graduate coursework submissions emerged at Simon Fraser University, in Graduate Liberal Studies, based on this.

Conference Abstracts

I had received an Emerging Scholar Award from a conference in Barcelona and flew from my base in Vancouver to Spain to receive that award. I had already received an RBC Emerging Scholar Award from a conference called the Spur Festival for Art, Politics and Ideas in Vancouver so I imagine after seeing that it was easier to get picked up on the international conference circuit. In any case I flew to Barcelona to receive that award which is where the international conference circuit began for me. I opted not to present at that Barcelona conference and instead just chaired plenary sessions and fulfilled my attendance through other conference duties. That worked out and lead to another Emerging Scholar Award in Vancouver, at Emily Carr, which I also didn’t present at. It was probably around the time of making the leap from being an Emerging Scholar Award Recipient to being a Invited Presenting Delegate that I started presenting material based on my conference abstracts, and one set of that material was called Unique Ways

of Prototyping. One instance of this was through a pre-recorded talk during pandemic which became a necessity because of advisories against international travel at that time. Also around that time was when Unique Ways of Prototyping started to exist as a conference abstract, first as a Workshop and later as a Paper Presentation if I remember correctly. The abstract didn't go far beyond what I just described here, but was more of a check box to spearhead presentation of Unique Ways of Prototyping on the international conference circuit.

Graduate Coursework

Also simultaneously I was enrolled in a masters program at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver and towards the latter portion of completing that degree I started to flesh out Unique Ways of Prototyping, both as a project for graduate coursework and a non-fiction essay for graduate coursework. The non-fiction essay was eventually submitted to the BC Review (formerly the Ormsby Review) and formally published that way. It was also self published repeatedly in the Emerging Scholar Series, a series of books I started writing around that time.

The academic project was probably the first time Unique Ways of Prototyping was fleshed out as five tenets, and workshopped on my own more extensively. A lot of the nuance of Unique Ways of Prototyping was created during this time - nuance that had only shown its face while getting feedback from meet-up presentations until then. Because of the academic context I wanted to reflect the nuance I was finding in Unique Ways of Prototyping and that's when the title Unique Ways of Prototyping for Instigating Change and Unique Ways of Prototyping for Amplifying Voice were created. One variation was submitted for a pass/fail course called Presidents Dream Colloquium, which I was selected to participate in towards the Simon Fraser University masters. This class spanned different graduate studies majors and was a high profile scenario.

For the Presidents Dream Colloquium submission I wanted to use some of the established processes and methods around Unique Ways of Prototyping that had been offered in the initial presentation deck. For example, if voice and writing were prototyping, how could I flesh this out? This was the beginning of making use of analog processes and methods in Unique Ways of Prototyping, like writing on large letter sized paper with a thick Sharpie as a way of visualizing ideas. I documented the process taking iPhone photos of the more nuanced processes, and began creating new slide decks that reflected the two new academic variations of Unique Ways of Prototyping. This offered new opportunities for presentation, as I was presenting the slide deck over zoom to graduate students in the course and having it vetted in a more traditional academic context. There was minimal feedback or reflection in Presidents Dream Colloquim, so it was primarily creating nuance and reflection on it and getting a handle on presenting those nuanced ideas in an academic context.

International Conference Circuit

For the academic context in terms of the international conference circuit, the first presentations were prerecorded and attached as conference participation. At the time I felt they presenting Unique Ways of Prototyping as a talk made more sense than as a workshop. I also became aware that presenting a talk about a concept at that level required a large amount of backstory in order for your audience to understand where you were coming from, so a lot of the work on Unique Ways of Prototyping was around creating and condensing backstory so that I could present it in a verbal way more efficiently. One notable early attempt at being an Invited Presenting Delegate was at a conference in Galway, Ireland which I attended remotely.

Skillshare

Skillshare approached me around this time to create a course based on Unique Ways of Prototyping, so the heft of that opportunity, which involved understanding how to better use mic's and recording environments to communicate this concept, became a notable bullet point. This was also one of the early opportunities to get quite a bit of feedback about what I was doing, both in terms of following the Skillshare format, and of getting feedback from other invited Skillshare creators. This wasn't the earliest stage of Skillshare recruitment attempts but instead a mid-stage, so a lot of the content that other people had recorded and released and was available was very high quality, whereas our cohort was working to more or less cobble something together. However it would be amiss to entirely dismiss this process, as it was a significant milestone, even though it was primarily a self initiated process at least in terms of getting the quality and production value up to par. Also there were specific and somewhat strict guidelines to follow in submitting this to Skillshare.

Tenets

The five tenets were first introduced in the second slide deck which I made after piloting the framework UX Now at a school called Tamwood, in their Tamwood Careers division, as a project I began working on after Unique Ways of Prototyping hit a mature phase. The slides were as follows:

1 People first

People first originated from the Strategyzer book called Value Proposition Design. In it there is a diagram that in the middle includes pain and gains, pain relievers and gain creators, and then on the far stretches includes people and product / service. The idea is that you think of the who it's for first (people) and what to create last (product / service) only creating what best serves the people element in the creation of the product / service.

2 Research

In the early stages of the slide deck I would often say I don't know what research is, referring to my graduate studies at Simon Fraser University which was coursework based rather than thesis based and therefore less centred on research.

3 Modalities

Dr. Ron Burnett, former president of Emily Carr University of Art and Design had a concept when he was architecting the new campus at Great Northern Way in Vancouver, Canada. He was considering the library and decided that people would use the library in the following ways: they would get books from the book stacks to read - they would go into a meeting room to discuss with their peers - and they would go into the computers and Wikipedia to read up on their ideas / and moving between these 3 spaces is moving between modalities and that's where inspiration happens. This is expressed in a slide that includes a Venn diagram showcasing book stacks - meeting rooms - computers - with a sweet spot in the middle.

4 Iterative

The process of Unique Ways of Prototyping is: get insights - write them down - show them to someone / repeat for as long as you have time for or until you run out of time. This is expressed in a slide that includes design thinking in the form of empathize - define - ideate - prototype - test but then removes empathize and define. This simplification creates a looping iterative process.

5 Visibility

Ideas should be made visible in a way that everyone can see them. Writing ideas down in large writing with a sharpie on coloured letter sized paper and putting them on the ground, creates a situation where collaborators or stakeholders can come around and read and discuss what's there. They can also move ideas around by moving pieces of paper around.

The five tenets segued into a workshop portion called role play where conversations happen in the form of prototyping through what was called the Siri Workshop. Participants are paired up and have a conversation in a role play where one person is Siri and one person is a user of Siri and they just talk to each other. This happens for an interval of ten minutes. Afterwards participants make groups of three and have the same conversation with the third person being an impartial note taker just writing everything down that happens in the conversation. The idea is that you can gain insights through this process in a cheap and fast way, through a process that

is very low fidelity or even no fidelity.

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UX NOW: TACTILE INNOVATION FOR A DIGITAL WORLD

UX Now began as a pilot program and novel way of teaching user experience. I was knee deep in graduate studies and had left my teaching post at Emily Carr when I had a past coworker reach out saying that a new career college might want to run and teach my UX offerings. I pitched my ideas in a pitch deck to a Partner at the college and put together a budget after which pretty quickly it was approved to run. This was during pandemic in Vancouver but I wanted it to be in person so we were masked up. The initial group was two students which wasn't bad if you think of it as a mentorship type of environment. Two more students would join midway through the pilot. There was a set curriculum which I built off of, first creating projects and a week by week schedule, and then adding other elements. Initially I was probably looking at it as a progression from Unique Ways of Prototyping and an extension of my teaching at Emily Carr, but it quickly became more than that. I was running classes for four days a week for several months in this variation, and probably in part due to the fact that we were properly funded, with a large UX book library, emerging technologies like a VR headset and Raspberry Pi set-up, and a teaching room with a separate lab and separate office / critique room, that it was able to run so well. After the initial running for several months we were slated to continue the offering for a next cohort.

The week-by-week breakdown looked something like this:

1 Affinity diagramming

Using physical sticky notes placed on windows and whiteboards, we create idea generation bubbles which we added value to by adding between 1 and 3 red dots, and we also added time values to. The 1 to 3 values were just made so that we could understand which idea bubbles were more important, for example if processes and methods of design thinking more important than interface design (in Adobe XD or Illustrator at that time) then they would have more dots. And then time values would rank sticky note bubbles to the extent of saying should we spend one week or two weeks on a particular sticky note bubble. We had a unique take on expanding and editing down, at some points tasking the students with taking down half of their sticky notes, and in some cases doubling the number of sticky notes. This process allowed the ideas and tasks to be more malleable and create a scenario where we weren't wedded to our ideas because we were often simply deleting them or heavily expanding on them. We also did affinity diagramming using index cards, which was occasionally confused with traditional card sorting but was in fact more of just another modality for generating ideas and mind mapping. We left these

sticky notes up for the duration of the Pilot as we had ownership over the classroom so the ideas would stay up preserved and untouched.

2 Value proposition design / Personas / Empathy mapping / SWOT / Task flow, User flow

Blending methods in entrepreneurship with more progressive methods in UX research, we began step two. Value proposition design was probably the biggest emphasis and most popular because it allowed us to focus on who we were making for and was a paradigm shift for some of the students who had been focused on simply creating artifacts up until that time. This iteration of value proposition simply has people / users on one side and products / services on the other side and asks the question of how can we move from starting with the users to creating the right product or service. Along the way we would identify pains and gains and in relievers and gain creators in line with what is specified in the Strategyzer book called Value Proposition Design. To compliment value proposition design, empathy mapping and personas are introduced. The main difference between how this is sometimes done and how we did it was that we focused on real people as opposed to hypothetical people. We used the Adaptive Path model of empathy mapping and loosely defined personas and just tried to continue to wrap our heads around the idea that we were creating for someone else. Another distinction that is introduced is that we are doing capital D Design, which is for someone else, as opposed to Art which is often for ones self.

3 Paper prototyping / User testing

This bullet point was inspired by John Maeda's early work at MIT Meria Lab, where he had students dress in cardboard cutouts of a computer, one person being a floppy disc, one person being a hard drive etc, and then they would interact with each other. Ours was less abstract and was focused on mobile devices. The first step would be to quickly sketch a mobile interface on an index card, and using a highlighter, highlight the clickable areas for the test subject to understand them, then use new index cards for the screens that one could click through to. Then as quickly as possible get the set of index cards in front of someone and ask them to interact with it, explaining that the highlighted areas are clickable and having them actually physically click on these areas, after which the student would switch the index cards to the new appropriate index card. The goal is not to develop drawing skills or create intricate prototypes, but instead sketch ideas as quickly as possible to get feedback. After showing a first person, the student would sketch in amendments or make new index cards based on feedback and then show a next person. This process isn't a replacement for high fidelity but instead complimentary towards it and can be used in early stages of the design process most obviously, but also in later stages of the design process.

4 Paper prototyping / User testing

This has a second stage allocated as it was seen as important

5 High fidelity / Case study

Based on the idea that in order to be taken seriously and to get feedback from more traditional stakeholders, a digital variation and slide deck should exist, we entered this phase. The case study could simply be photographs of the physical processes with annotation to communicate the value that was created at each stage of the process to stakeholders in a slide deck type of presentation. The high fidelity at the time was a process of replicating the physical artifacts in digital form using XD, Illustrator and Figma at that time. This would be as close as we came to creating a real working version of the interface and experience for handoff to dev.

The week-by-week breaks down into five weeks here, but in the Pilot it ran much longer. The actual more formal running (several years after the Pilot) of the program had been run in 3 hour classes for 12 weeks with two weeks assigned to each element and a last two weeks for presentation. This was presented as “User Experience for Web and Mobile”. It was also run in a 6 week variant with two hour classes titled “Advanced User Experience for Web and Mobile”. The possibility of creating beyond mobile and web became an obvious need, but the names were preserved for the duration of the program. The advanced variation was quickly determined to be overly ambitious even for advanced students.

The class-by-class structure was also fleshed out. It was divided into four parts, the first part is an inspiration sharing session called “Head Dump”. Inspiration can range from websites and books students came across during the week to what you had for lunch. Head dump can be shared by both the instructor and students. The second portion is Presentation. Based on any existing curriculum that may be handed off from a previous instructor, a slide deck is created to cover mandatory material. These informational slide decks form the back bone of the content for the class, separate from the workshop elements. Third is Workshop time. Based on the idea that homework is an old fashioned concept, time in class is allocated to work on the assignments in class. Finally we do critiques in form of check-ins to see and share any progress we’ve made. It appeared to be best to have at least two comments or questions from students per presentation.

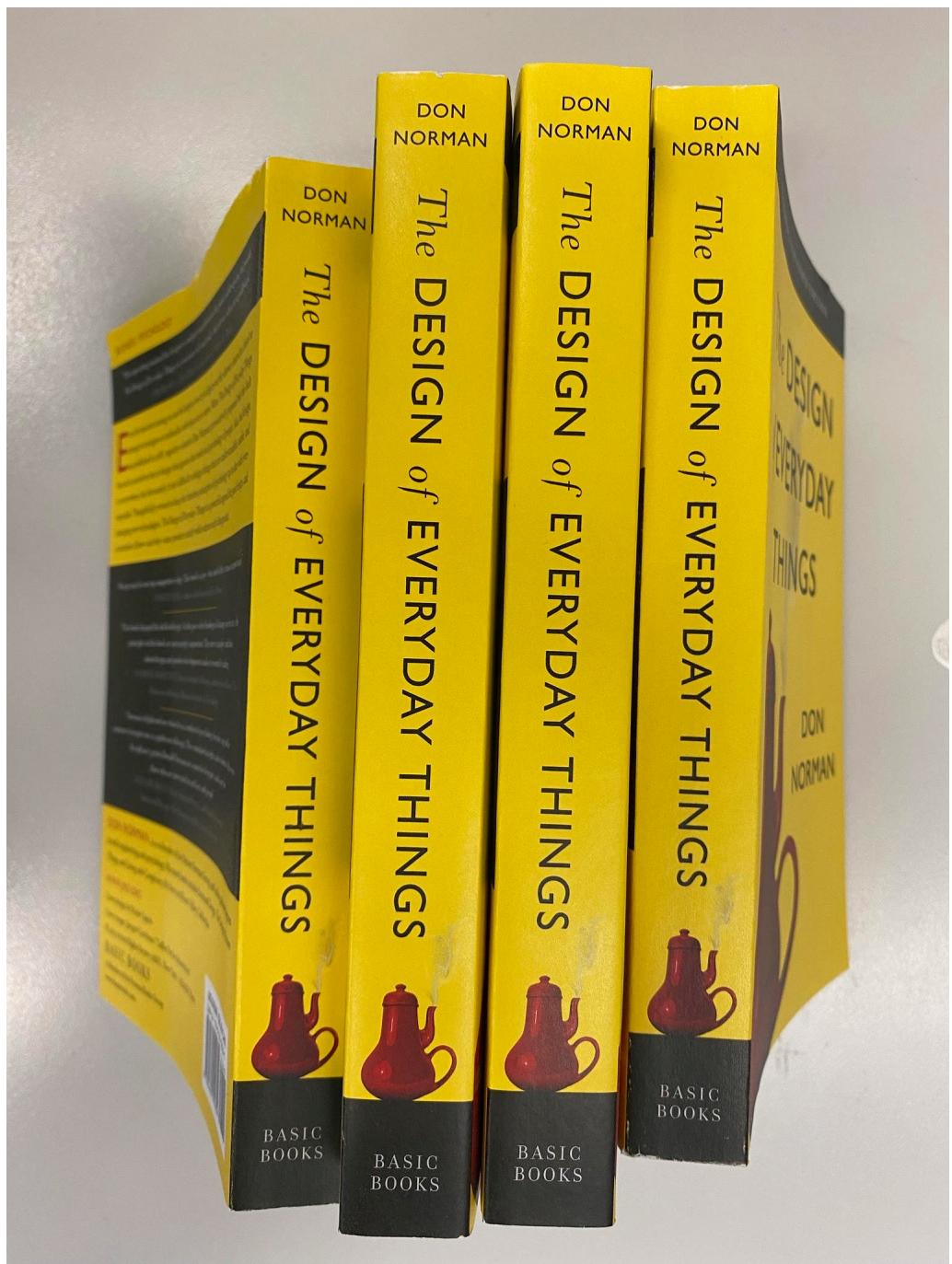
Final Abstract

In an age dominated by high-speed digital tools, UX Now offers a deliberate return to tactile, analog methods in user experience training. Spanning five weeks, this immersive program cultivates foundational UX skills through accessible, iterative processes that emphasize empathy,

storytelling, and audience-centered design. Beginning with idea generation through affinity diagramming and progressing through wireframing, paper prototyping, user testing, and high-fidelity deliverables, participants explore both divergent and convergent thinking. Each session is structured into four parts: a collaborative “Head Dump” for cross-pollination of ideas, a topic-focused presentation, guided in-class workshop time, and rigorous peer critique. Core tools include sticky notes, index cards, pens, Figma, Adobe CC, and Google Slides—used not to replace, but to extend, the power of analog ideation. Rooted in frameworks like Value Proposition Design and The Design of Everyday Things, UX Now equips learners with an entrepreneurial mindset—preparing them to prototype not only interfaces, but value. This talk explores how UX pedagogy can adapt to a world in flux by grounding innovation in the physical and the personal.

About Course Author

Thomas Girard is an Oxford-educated design thought leader recognized globally for advancing innovation at the intersection of creativity, education, and technology. A TEDx and Sorbonne speaker, Girard has keynoted at premier events including UXIndia and has been featured on TED.com, Business Insider, and Cision. He is the host of UNIQUEWAYS, a global podcast with over 250 guests—including Don Norman, Debbie Millman, and John Maeda—exploring the creative journeys of the world’s most influential thinkers. Girard is the author of Son of Greg Girard, a critically acclaimed memoir that weaves personal legacy with design history, and the founder of two widely adopted frameworks: UX Now and Unique Ways of Prototyping, which are shaping the future of user experience education in both digital and analog contexts. His contributions have earned him Emerging Scholar Awards from international bodies and fellowships recognizing leadership in design research. A former designer at the Lenovo Innovation Design Centre, Girard bridges industry and academia, with teaching appointments across top institutions. His work continues to inform global conversations on resilience, tactility, and the evolving role of design in an AI-driven world.

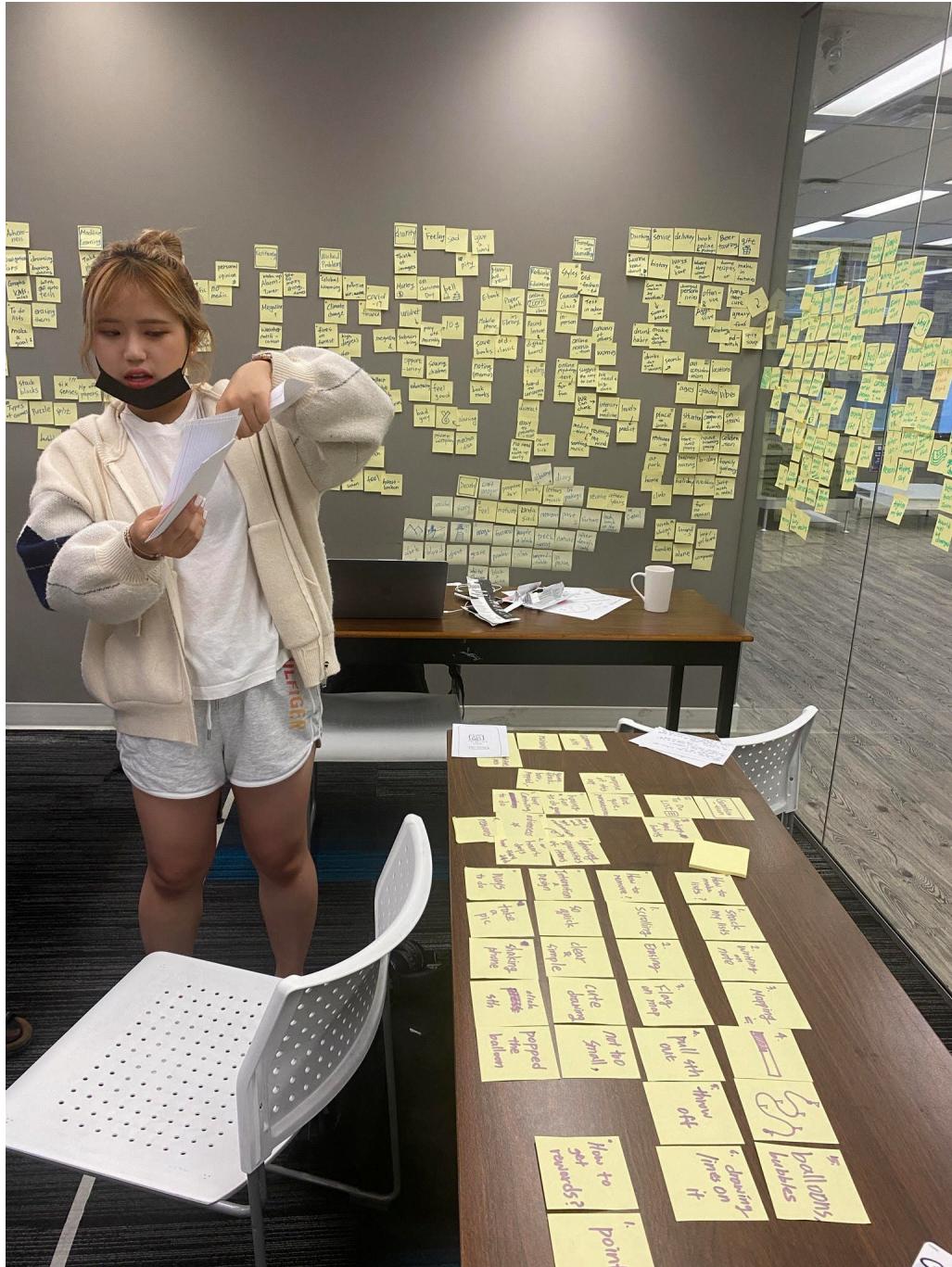


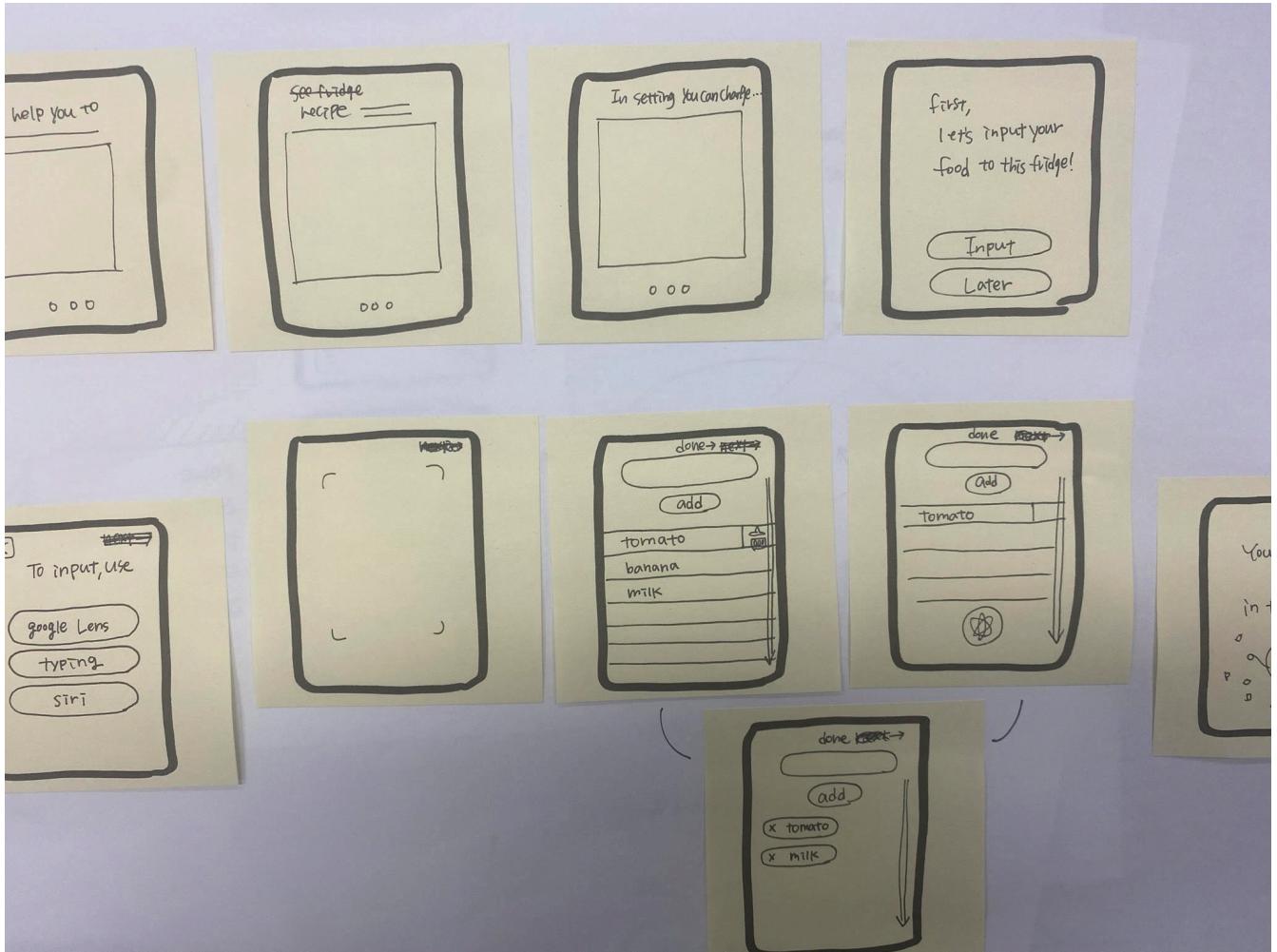


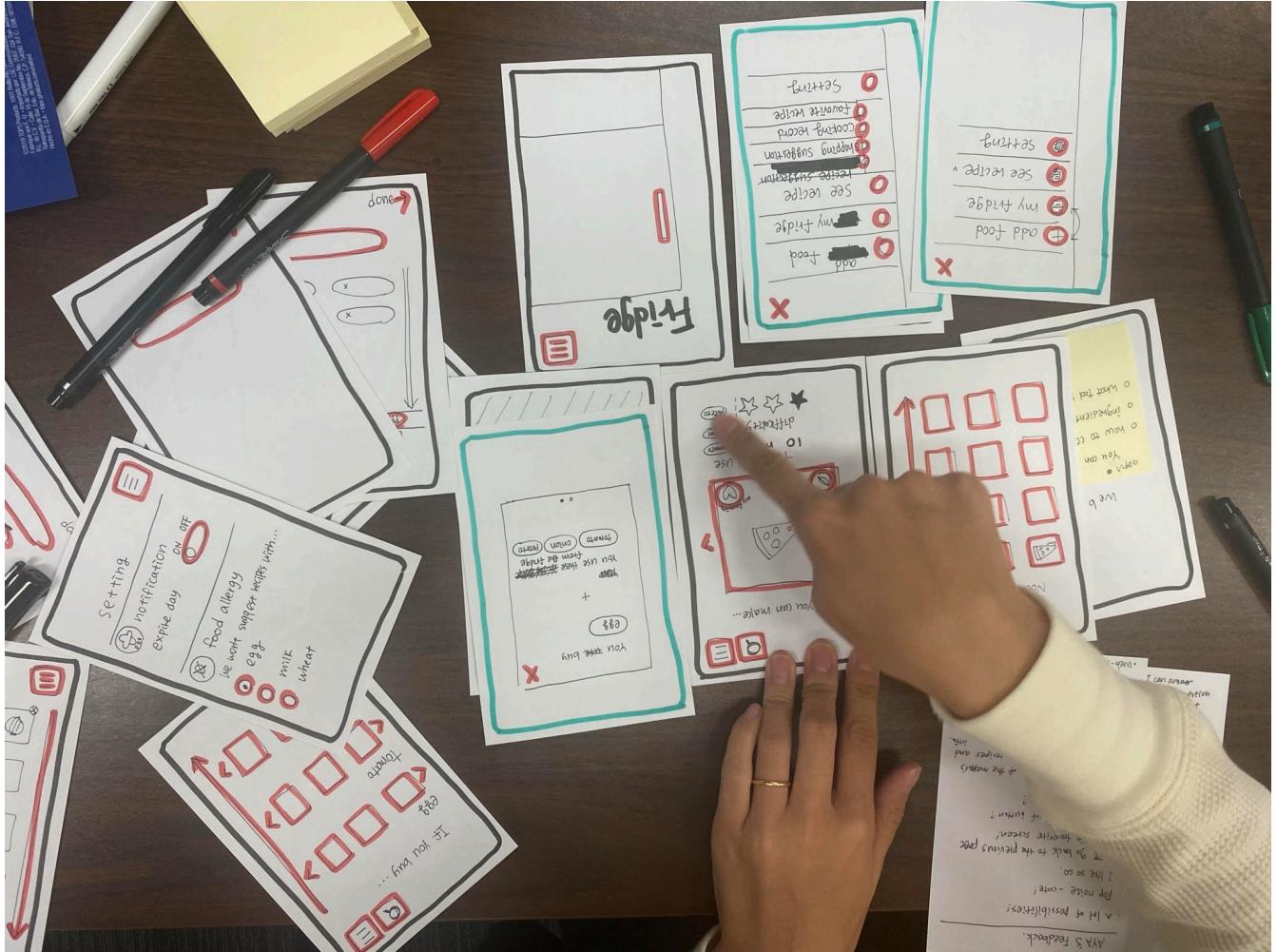












Target audience

Status: Financially secure

Income: 50K - unlimited

Location: British Columbia

Values: Dependable, married, parents

