

STEP 2: EXPLORE RESEARCH METHODS

Observations

Observation is an important part of design thinking because people may tell you one thing and then do another. In fact, people are often unaware of many things they do. While you can learn about a person's motivations and values in a user interview, it is ideal to learn about actual behavior through observation. Observation can become one of your best tools for design thinking. The key is keep your eyes open—actively look at what your users are doing, inside the library and out.

PLAN YOUR OBSERVATIONS

Choose a group, event or activity that you would like to observe. Or if you work directly with your users, spend some time observing their behaviors relevant to your project. You could end up observing their behaviors during an interview. You can ask people to show you how they do things or where they keep things. Keep your eyes open for anything interesting or unexpected.

REFLECT ON WHAT YOU'VE OBSERVED

Immediately after your observation, reflect upon the moments you found most interesting. Capture them on Post-its or in your notebook so you will be able to share back with your team in a way that is accurate, vivid, and visual.

EXAMPLE

On a health care project at IDEO, we interviewed a woman who was taking several prescription medications. The woman was arthritic, so the interviewer asked her if it was difficult to open her medication. She replied “no.” The interviewer then asked if she could show them how she opened her medication, and she proceeded to use a meat grinder to open the bottle. This was an important learning for the team because she had found a workaround to make it easier to open her bottles, but it was a very extreme solution. They would have never learned this if they hadn't observed her actual behavior.



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Immersive Experiences

Immersive Experience, also known as participant observation, is practiced by ethnographers, and is very useful for design thinking. It is an excellent way to build empathy with your users and to understand the world from their point of view. While you may not spend weeks on end with your users in their environment, you can be conscientious about meeting them in an environment that's natural, or routine, for them.

FRESH EYES

Because you work in the library on a daily basis, you have developed ingrained habits and perspectives. One great way to bring freshness back to your perspective is to spend a day “in your patron’s shoes.” Spend a day as a patron in the library: check out a book, use a patron-facing computer, or go to spaces you generally don’t visit. If you are working with children, look at the world from their four-foot tall vantage point. If you are working with people who use a wheelchair, try to get around the city or the library in one. These experiences will change the way you see the world.

NEW EXPERIENCES

Another option is to seek out new experiences that might help you build empathy with your users. For example, if you are looking for new ideas on ways to provide healthier food options for people in need, you might visit a low-cost cafeteria or fast food restaurant during the lunchtime rush. Wait in line, order a meal, and observe the space as you eat.

EXAMPLE

On a project about increasing smallholder farmer income for IDE Ethiopia, IDEO’s design team stayed overnight in Arsi Negelle, Ethiopia, where the team plowed the family’s fields the next morning. The overnight enabled the team to get beyond the common stories people tell NGOs and instead learn about one farmer’s intimate plans for the future.

