

Empathy Square

Uncover deep insights about learners' experiences and needs.

Inspiration for this protocol design: Empathy Map created by David Gray

Use this protocol to:

- Help you to know your students better and tune in to their experiences of learning
- Gain greater understanding into why specific students may not be making the desired progress in a specific outcome area
- Get into the 'heads and hearts' of your students and think about how their cognitive and emotional state might be affecting how they learn
- Consider the interconnections between emotion, motivation and cognition

Preparation

Each member of the group can work on their own copy of the Empathy Square Template. Alternatively, a shared large copy or wall-post version can be used. If using this format, group members can capture their individual thinking on Sticky Notes before adding them to the shared template.

Step 1: Orientate the team

When focusing on an aspect of our teaching that isn't creating the desired impact for students, it is often useful to surface human insights through empathising with the experiences of our students.

The Empathy Square Protocol is all about seeing teaching through the eyes of the learner – using this protocol, we contemplate how our teaching might be experienced by students, and we then consider how to make changes to our practice. Be driven by empathy as you complete this activity and keep it real. Empathy is about putting yourself in somebody else's shoes, in this case, your student's shoes.

Step 2: Identify which student/s you will focus on

Outline the specific learning challenge or group of students that you are going to focus the activity on. Ask each group member to bring to mind one specific student that they interact with and can focus on during the protocol.

Step 3: Complete the four questions

Each member of the group now completes the four key questions that are captured on the Empathy Square (Say, Do, Think, Feel). Each member can fill out their own template sheet or capture their responses on sticky notes.

Fill in the template through the following steps:

- Reflect and write what they 'Say' and 'Do' as learners when engaging in this learning area/process. These should be things you can see or hear (observable actions), e.g. They say, "This is dumb" or, "I can't do this", or they say stay silent. They might begin the task and then stop within the first 2 minutes. Or they might automatically begin speaking with a class member to clarify what they are meant to be doing.
- Now infer what they might be 'Thinking' and 'Feeling' when teaching is occurring in this learning area. Attuning with empathy is crucial during this step, as we are trying to ascertain what these learners are 'most likely' thinking and feeling, e.g., They might be thinking, "I'm not sure where to begin" or "I really hope she doesn't call on me". They might be feeling "anxious" or "frustrated". At this step, you are trying to carefully consider what might be happening inside this student's head and heart and connect with students' feelings, frustrations and worries. If

you don't feel like you can correctly infer at this stage, then feel free to put a '?' in the box to denote that you aren't quite sure yet.

Top Tip!

Like with our students, we want everyone actively thinking. So, make sure that teachers individually contribute, rather than getting them to complete it as a group.

Step 4: Share insights

As a group, take time to each share your specific student responses while holding up your individual template or adding your sticky notes to the group template. You can use the following structure:

The student I have focused on is... (you may also choose to keep this anonymous)

- SAY - I hear this student say things like...
- DO - I have observed that this student often...
- THINK - I have inferred that the student might be thinking...
- FEEL - I have inferred that the student might be feeling...

Discuss as a group what you've learned from the Empathy Squares and where there were obvious similarities and differences across the specific learners discussed.

Seek to gain new insights into why these students are not yet making the desired progress in this outcome area. Place particular focus on the FEEL box. Remember, emotions are the gateway to learning. Suppose students are not in the optimal emotional state. In that case, it is unlikely that they will be able to learn effectively, e.g., It is almost impossible to engage in effective learning behaviours if you are feeling angry, anxious or afraid.

Step 5: Explore adjustments

Now that you've surfaced a range of insights, discuss the adjustments you might make for particular students. Synthesise your thinking through the following questions and record your answers as a group:

- What have we learned about why these students are not making the desired progress?
- What specific learning needs have we uncovered?
- Considering our observations and inferences above, what might these students need more of?
- Considering our observations and inferences, what might these students need less of?
- How might these human insights inform our next steps in working with these students? What will we commit to trialling?

Assign action steps, responsibilities and a timeline as necessary.

Times to use an Empathy Square

Use the Empathy Square ahead of making a specific change in your practice to consider how students may experience those changes.

A list of emotions that might serve as helpful prompts for empathic reflection

They might feel ...

- | | | | |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Joyful | <input type="checkbox"/> Pride | <input type="checkbox"/> Anxious | <input type="checkbox"/> Lonely |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Happy | <input type="checkbox"/> Pleased | <input type="checkbox"/> Worried | <input type="checkbox"/> Unhappy |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Satisfied | <input type="checkbox"/> Delighted | <input type="checkbox"/> Panicked | <input type="checkbox"/> Miserable |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Interested | <input type="checkbox"/> Triumph | <input type="checkbox"/> Stressed | <input type="checkbox"/> Hopeless |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Excitement | <input type="checkbox"/> Bored | <input type="checkbox"/> Nervous | <input type="checkbox"/> Shame |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Surprised | <input type="checkbox"/> Confused | <input type="checkbox"/> Apprehensive | <input type="checkbox"/> Awkward |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Calm | | <input type="checkbox"/> Fearful | <input type="checkbox"/> Frustrated |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Relaxed | | <input type="checkbox"/> Disappointed | <input type="checkbox"/> Annoyed |
| | | <input type="checkbox"/> Sad | <input type="checkbox"/> Angry |
| | | | <input type="checkbox"/> Infuriated |
| | | | <input type="checkbox"/> Insulted |

Top Tip!

Wherever possible, inferences about what students might be thinking and feeling should be based on multiple observations, and you should be able to answer the question “So what did you observe that makes you say that?” when you have made an inference. A word of caution – be careful not to treat inferences as fact.