



Stolle Creative
empathy • strategy • design

Designers engage in generative research at the start of a project to seek problems, develop empathy, and gain a deeper understanding of people's needs and desires. The methods tend to be qualitative and open-ended. Generative research can help ministry leaders develop empathy for our neighbors, as well as invite others into a creative, collaborative process that invigorates our ministries.

Practicing Empathy

Moses and Holy Ground

Exodus 3 tells the story of Moses tending his father-in-law's flock of sheep. (He is in hiding after killing an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew man—one of Moses own people.) On the hunt for food, Moses leads the flock beyond the wilderness to Horeb, the mountain of God.

The angel of the Lord appears in a flame of fire out of a bush.

The bush isn't directly in Moses' path. Moses notices it and changes course to go closer. He turns aside to investigate this sight.

At this point, when Moses ventures off his path, God calls from the bush: Moses, Moses!

Here I am.

The Lord tells Moses to remove his sandals before coming closer. This is holy ground he's standing on. Here, in this place, is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And Moses hides his face, afraid to look at God.



From Figures de la Bible, Gerard Hoet (1648–1733) and others, published by P. de Hondt in The Hague in 1728.

God continues: “I have taken a good, long look at the affliction of my people in Egypt. I've heard their cries for deliverance from their slave masters; I know all about their pain. And now I have come down to help them, pry them loose from the grip of Egypt, get them out of that country and bring them to a good land with wide-open spaces, a land lush with milk and honey” (Exodus 3:7-8, The Message).

God has heard the cries of the Israelites, has seen and felt their oppression. And now God is going to take action to free the people. Through Moses.

Now, Moses isn't totally sure about this plan. He questions God's decision and names multiple reasons he doesn't qualify for the job. Isn't there someone else—anyone else—who can go instead?

Nevertheless, in this holy moment, barefoot on sacred ground, Moses is called. And in subsequent chapters, he proceeds to lead the Israelites, his people, out of slavery in Egypt.

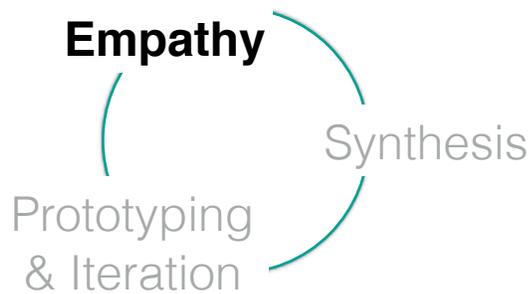
When God appears, Moses is present. He takes notice of the burning bush and is curious enough to look closer. God hears the cries and pain of the Israelites and seems to feel it too. Their suffering compels both God and Moses into action.

Grounded in empathy, design thinking offers a way of noticing, discerning, and serving others. Design research doesn't simply provide a set of tools for learning about problems and people. Instead, it offers a way to connect with others, hear their stories, feel their pain, and enter a holy moment. Together.

Generative Research

Designers use many research methods to develop empathy and better understand peoples' needs. Sometimes, designers conduct *evaluative research*, with the intent of assessing and improving an existing concept, product, or service. But long before making things—or even coming up with ideas—designers practice *generative research*.

Generative research is open-ended and problem-seeking. Drawing inspiration from fields like ethnography and anthropology, designers observe humans in context to develop empathy. Designers may go “into the field” with hunches and biases, but they try to set them aside to prioritize understanding participants’ behaviors, motivations, needs, and culture. To notice outliers, peculiarities, and unarticulated needs. Generative research is the rich material that provokes new ideas. While design researchers may speak with multiple people, often, initial trends and inspiration strikes after 6-8 interviews.



(Generative research is different than the more familiar concept of market research. While market research can use both qualitative and ethnographic methods, the marketer’s goal is to understand a small group of people and generalize their responses to predict behavior for a broader population. Market researchers also use evaluative methods to test whether an idea or product is viable in the marketplace, whereas designers typically start with generative methods; later, designers use evaluative research to get feedback on usability and usefulness in order to iterate on the design.)

Contextual Inquiry

A Contextual Inquiry is a semi-structured approach to interviewing and observing a person in their own environment. What a person says they do, and what they actually do, can sometimes be different, and a contextual inquiry reveals the gaps between perception and reality. Conducting an interview in context makes it easier to see someone’s workflows, tools, and work-arounds. The environment also provides clues and can prompt questions the researcher wouldn’t know to ask if the interview took place in a neutral location.

The designer may have a list of questions, topics, or activities in mind, but the interview isn’t rigid. With this method, the design researcher becomes the apprentice as the participant goes about their activities and describes what they are doing and why.

Contextual Inquiries reveal rich information about a person and inspire fresh ideas during the synthesis process. However, the method can also be time-consuming because the researcher often spends a couple hours or more with each participant. It also requires planning and preparation to identify and recruit the right people, and to arrange a time to meet.



During a Contextual Inquiry to explore confirmation ministry, designers attended a worship service where students affirmed their baptisms. When youth had the chance to share their statement of faith with the congregation, several showed videos, sang songs, or projected artwork. After the service, we met with pastors and youth and discovered they made faith “portfolios” over the course of the confirmation program. Instead of a traditional written document, youth were given creative prompts to explore core confirmation topics. For many, these projects challenged them to articulate their beliefs and claim their Christian identity.

Try It: Contextual Inquiry

To use this research method, start with these steps:

1. **Set your research focus.** *What do you want to learn? Write it down in a couple sentences.*
2. **Identify the context.** *When you think about your focus, where can you learn about this? What activities would you want to observe? What kind of conversations would you hope to have?*
3. **Identify your participants.** *Given your focus and the context, to whom do you want to talk? Get specific—age, demographics, experiences, job/role, and anything else that clarifies who you want to develop empathy for. Then figure out a recruiting plan—how will you find potential participants? Will you compensate them?*
4. **Create a list of guiding questions.** *What high-level questions do you want to answer? What’s key to learning from and empathizing with this group of people?*
5. **Develop a research guide.** *You can be thorough and describe your research focus, participant criteria, methodology, and interview structure. Or for a more streamlined version, you can script an introduction of who you are and why you’re there. Then write up a set of interview questions, ideally grouped into themes and prioritized so it’s easy to skim. Include a brief scripted wrap-up to thank the participant, identify any next steps, and leave space for questions. You can also include rough time estimates in case you need to redirect.*
6. **Practice.** *If possible, do a dry run once or twice to prepare.*
7. **Interview.** *Go to the site and conduct the interview! Get consent and record what you see and hear. Keep in mind that contextual inquiry is a mix of observation and interview—back and forth—throughout your time with the participant. Learn what they do and why, and share your recaps and interpretations so the participant correct or clarify along the way.*

Cultural Probe

A Cultural Probe is a way to gather input from people intermittently or over a longer period of time than can be done with an in-person interview. Typically, the designer develops a “kit” with instructions for tasks to complete and creative ways to document them. The activities are evocative, and the responses become a source of empathy and inspiration. Because the participant responds to the prompts on their own time, their actions are less likely to be influenced by the researcher.

Cultural Probes can be fun and insightful, but they also require a bit of work to generate creative (achievable) activities, assemble kits with all the materials, identify and recruit participants, distribute kits, and follow up if people don't respond.



An example of a cultural probe that asks participants to complete a photo scavenger hunt and journaling postcards. Activities are open-ended and include prompts for photos like, “Where I feel close to God,” and “Someone who has influenced my beliefs,” and “My number one possession,” and “One of my favorite habits or rituals,” and “A place I feel respected.” Journaling activities include writing notes to a meaningful person in the participant's past, documenting important activities from a day, a gratitude journal, and so forth.

Try It: Cultural Probe

To use this research method, start with these steps:

1. **Set your research focus.** *What do you want to learn? Write it down in a couple sentences.*
2. **Identify your participants.** *Who do you want to learn from? Figure out your recruiting plan—how will you find potential participants? How will you get the kits to them and collect them afterward? Do you plan to schedule a debrief? Will you compensate them somehow?*
3. **Create a list of guiding questions.** *What high-level questions do you want to answer? What's key to empathizing with this group of people?*
4. **Generate questions and activities.** *What open-ended questions would you want to ask? How can you transform these into activities? What materials or technology do you want to use? What would be fun and delightful for the participant—but also attainable and not intimidating?*
5. **Develop your kits.** *Collect all the materials and assemble them into Cultural Probe kits. Test it with one or two people to make sure the instructions are clear, but not so prescriptive that they limit the potential insights.*

6. **Send them out.** *Make sure you communicate how and when participants should return their completed activities.*
7. **Collect and review.** *When responses come in, review them. If possible, schedule a follow-up interview to debrief the artifacts that were submitted. Ask the participant to walk through each of their responses, and discuss your interpretations to see whether they're on track.*

Participatory Interview

A Participatory Interview uses hands-on activities, visual stimuli, and other symbolic elements so participants can construct a narrative and express their ideals in a creative way. The method can involve mapping experiences onto timelines or spectrums, sorting images and words into categories, arranging tangible objects to represent something new, and a number of other methods. This interview format moves beyond the limitations of words and becomes a tangible, shared canvas for conversation. Plus, having a shared focal point can reduce the awkwardness or intimidation of a face-to-face interview.

Participatory Interviews can lead to deep insights, but they require initial time to develop hands-on activities and prepare materials. It's important to maintain the spirit of generative research and keep the activities open-ended enough for new insight. (This isn't the place to trot out a current design and ask participants to critique or rework it; save that for usability testing or evaluative research down the road.)



During a participatory interview about how churches support faith formation in families, a Christian Education Director sorted images into “ideal” and “not ideal” categories. She placed an image of a hand puppet on the “ideal” side and proceeded to tell about a talent show at family camp. One of the youngest attendees got up on stage and did a short puppet show. It was silly (and not particularly great), but the older family campers encouraged and affirmed the young child's contributions.

Try It: Participatory Interview

To use this research method, start with these steps:

1. **Set your research focus.** *What do you want to learn? Write it down in a couple sentences.*
2. **Identify your participants.** *Who do you want to learn from? How will you find and recruit participants? Do you want to “prime” them with homework beforehand? Compensation?*

3. **Create a list of guiding questions.** *What high-level questions do you want to answer? What's key to empathizing with this group of people?*
4. **Come up with activities and visual stimuli.** *What activities can help you uncover stories and explore your guiding questions? What images and tangible objects can you provide for participants to use? Tip: If you use images, put numbers on them and refer to the numbers during the interview so you don't assign a value or interpretation to the image.*
5. **Craft open-ended follow-up questions.** *What questions can you ask to dig deeper into the participant's creation? For example, "Why would that be valuable to you?" or "Can you share a story about a time you felt ____?" or "How would you want to change that experience?" and "What are the obstacles or barriers to that?"*
6. **Practice.** *If possible, do a dry run once or twice to prepare. Refine the stimuli and questions as needed.*
7. **Interview.** *Meet your participant, and conduct the interview. Get consent and record what you see and hear. Ask follow-up questions to uncover stories, and then work together to imagine how the future could look.*

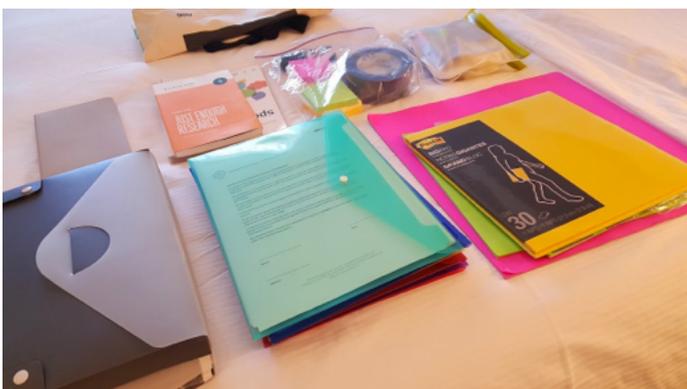
photos, sticky notes, markers, tape, scissors, or postcards. If participants will be compensated (such as gift cards or coffee cards), these can go in the kit too.

It's valuable to capture photos and audio or video recordings of the interview. Some designers create complete transcripts of each interview to use during synthesis. Down the road, this thorough approach enables a traceable path from the outcome back to the empathetic interview that inspired it. Even if the interview won't be transcribed, photos and audio recordings are still a valuable reference point if the researchers can't capture all the salient points in written notes. They also make it easier to share the interview with team members who weren't there.

Finally, if photos and audio/video will be captured, it's critical to provide the participant with an informed consent document at the very start of the interview. The consent form outlines who is conducting the research and why. It also clarifies that participation is entirely optional and grants the interviewee the right to end the session at any point. Finally, the form asks for permission to photograph and audio record, describes how information will be collected and used, and requests a signature.

Going Out

No matter what method you use, it's valuable to create a research guide that articulates the research focus, the participant criteria, and key questions. One way to do this with sticky notes. All the designers externalize the questions they want to ask, one per note. Then they can post and group them into themes, adding more questions as needed. This forms the body of the interview questions and also becomes a visual way to see where the interview may go.



A research kit, including separate folders with materials for each participant so the designers didn't need to shuffle through papers and supplies at the start of the interview.

The team should also assemble a research kit with a notebook and pens, and an audio or video recorder, and a camera (though a cell phone works too). The kit includes copies of the research guide and consent forms, plus any special materials needed for the probes or participatory activities, like large sheets of papers,

Research Tips

Ready to go into the field? Here are some tips for facilitating generative research:

- **Define roles.** *It's ideal to have two researchers in each interview: a facilitator running the audio recorder and a photographer/note taker. The note taker may ask questions, but the facilitator is the clear point person. (This also frees up the note taker to snap photos more inconspicuously.) More than three researchers gets intimidating.*
- **Be the apprentice.** *That means ask why, even if you think you know the answer.*
- **AEIOU.** *It's easy to focus on words, so jotting AEIOU in your notebook is a reminder to pay attention to the Activities, Environments, Interactions, Objects, and Users the research sees or hears about during the session.*
- **Search for stories.** *Ground participants in stories and experiences over hypotheticals, and capture lots and lots of photos and direct quotes. These become great reference points during synthesis.*
- **Count to 5.** *This grants participants time to complete a thought, and it gives the designer a moment to think about the next question. Plus, people get uncomfortable with silence and often leap to fill it with another comment or story.*
- **Follow the emotion.** *The point of generative research is to develop empathy. If there's emotion in the participant's voice, that's a great cue for follow-up questions that will uncover a meaningful story, pain point, or need.*

Designing Barefoot

Design research can be awkward. The researcher asks someone to let them into their lives for a short period of time with a goal of learning, understanding, and developing empathy. While designers have questions in mind, their role is facilitator and apprentice, following the lead of the interviewees. It requires building trust and rapport quickly, remaining neutral so each participant feels comfortable opening up about topics that may be difficult to discuss.

Whenever I go into someone's home or work to develop empathy, it's a privilege to be invited in. To hear their stories. I've bounced their babies on my lap, taken notes with the family parakeet perched on my shoulder, sipped from their coffee mugs, and offered tissues as we cried together.

And I always take my shoes off at the door and enter the home barefoot. Because I know I'm standing on holy ground.

As you enter others' lives to develop empathy, may you recognize the privilege of being invited in, of hearing their stories, of being present. And may you feel the holy ground beneath your feet.

Design Challenge

Want to put design thinking into practice? Start here!

1. Revisit your “problem space” and biases.

What did you identify in the first session? Take out your sticky notes and review.

2. Select a research method.

When you think about the problem space, which approach (Contextual Inquiry, Cultural Probe, Participatory Interview) is most compelling? What fits with your goals and timeframe?

3. Create a research guide.

Begin by setting your focus and defining your participant criteria. Then come up with a set of key questions, as well as any tools, prompts, or activities based on your chosen research method. Roughly script out the interview, including an intro, questions and activities, and a wrap-up. Put together a consent form.

4. Assemble your research kit.

Find a folder or bag to keep all your research materials together: notebook, pens, recording device, research guides, consent forms, and any relevant materials for cultural probes or participatory activities.

5. Empathize!

Recruit participants, and then go into the field. Take lots of photos and notes, and spend 20-30 minutes after each interview debriefing. Make a note of any highlights from the interview (What surprised you? What is becoming a recurring theme? What else do you want to know?), and figure out if you want to tweak anything in the next session.

Designing with others? Work together, but consider assigning roles—develop the focus statement and participant criteria together, but then have someone lead the research guide development, while another focuses on recruiting and scheduling, and another collects materials for the research kits. Team up to conduct interviews. Then sit down as a larger group to share out initial reflections and revise the research guide for later interviews, if necessary.

Next Steps

Check out the next session at stollecreeative.com/resources to learn several methods for synthesis and ideation. Keep your interview notes and recordings handy because you'll use them to make sense of the interviews and use that empathy to generate new possibilities!

Learn More

For more on design thinking, check out these resources:

Articles & Books

- “[A Taxonomy of Innovation](#)” by Luma Institute
- “[What You Will Find on a Design Researcher's Bookshelf](#)” by Jon Freach
- [101 Design Methods](#) by Vijay Kumar
- [Doorbells, Danger, and Dead Batteries](#) by Steve Portigal
- [Interviewing Users](#) by Steve Portigal
- [Just Enough Research](#) by Erika Hall
- “[A Taxonomy of Innovation](#)” by Luma Institute

Toolkits

- Austin Center for Design resource library library.ac4d.com
- frog design Collection Action Toolkit frogdesign.com/work/frog-collective-action-toolkit
- IDEO's Design Kits designkit.org/resources
- Stanford d.school resources dschool.stanford.edu/resources