

Liberatory Design Thinking for Equity-Centered Instructional Design: A Systems Thinking Analysis

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Instructional Design

Systems Thinking

Liberatory Design Thinking

Equity-centered Design

Unconscious Bias

Psychological Safety

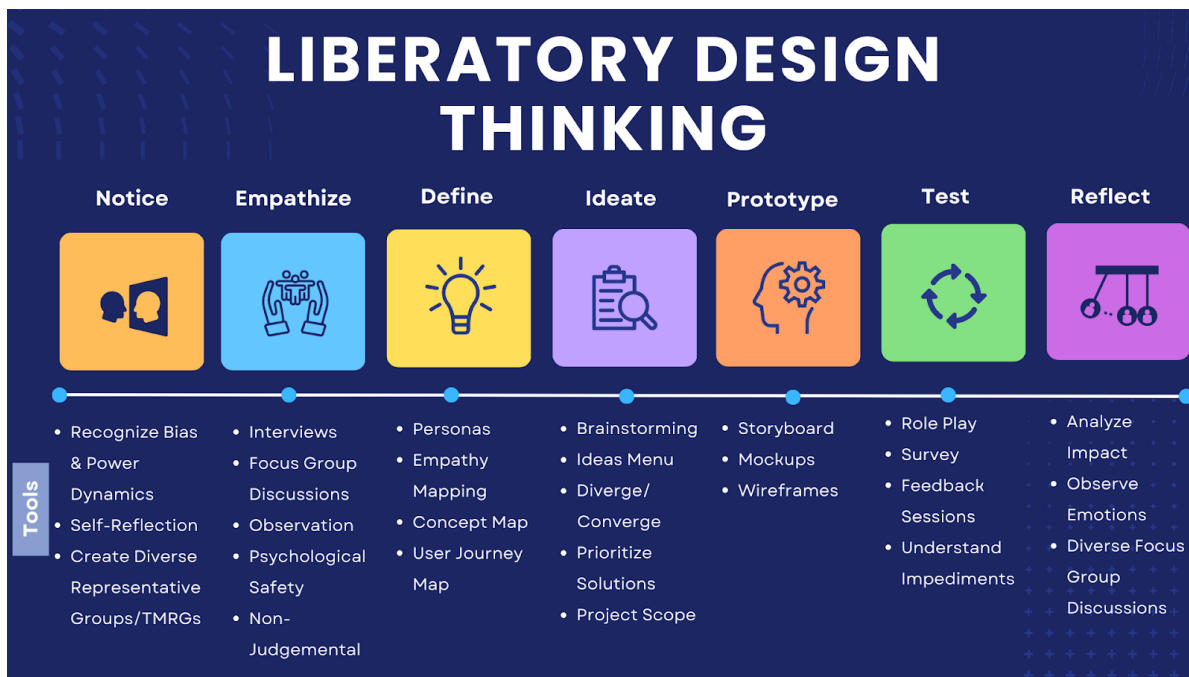
As per the National Equity Project, any system that produces inequities, injustices, and inequalities is often a product of design. Research has shown that systemic inequity often results from the design process and can rupture the power balance producing inequitable relationships in the social justice arena (NEP, n.d.). Systems design in K-12, higher education, and other organizational or workplace contexts are crucial to empower every learner with equitable opportunities or create more inequities. The historical data shows that systemic inequities were intentionally designed with oppression as the goal; hence the importance of equity-centered systems design justice becomes indispensable for producing equitable learning experiences for everyone (NEP, n.d.). Equity-centered systems design is pivotal in dismantling systems of oppression and empowering people of color, people with disability, the LGBTQ+ community, the indigenous, and other marginalized communities. Using the liberatory design thinking framework, instructional designers can recognize individual, institutional, and structural inequities and create opportunities to produce equitable learning experiences for learners. An equity-centered liberatory design thinking approach can support instructional designers in identifying and addressing the problems of inequities in an existing system. By considering the ethos and strategies necessary to center equity by design, instructional designers can provide a platform and opportunity for all stakeholders to practice converging and divergent thinking. Furthermore, the needs and beliefs about learning design as they ideate solutions grounded in the experiences of people from diverse backgrounds, especially people with disability, the LGBTQ+ community, the indigenous, and other marginalized communities. (Khalil, 2020).

Introduction

Liberatory design thinking is an equity-centered design framework that was co-created by Tania Anaissie, Victor Cary, David Clifford, Tom Malarkey, and Susie Wise during a collaboration in the year 2016 and 2017 with the National Equity Project and Stanford d.school's K12 Lab expanding the familial design thinking process (Anaissie et al., 2017). While design thinking has five phases —Empathize, Define, Ideate, Prototype, and Test (The Interaction Design Foundation, n.d), liberatory design thinking has two added phases: Notice and Reflect, as shown in Figure 1. These phases in the context of learning experience design focus on what instructional designers can do to add equity to designing and developing learning experiences. In the liberatory context, systems thinking can identify, analyze and challenge the systems of power and design interventions and strategies for promoting social justice and liberation. It involves identifying the root causes of inequities and analyzing how different systems and structures contribute to or reinforce those inequities. It can also include envisioning alternative, more equitable systems and redesigning strategies for transitioning to those systems. In this context, liberatory design thinking helps from systems thinking perspective, i.e., systems to bring that social change and help to promote a more holistic and nuanced understanding of the systemic inequities at hand and design inclusive learning experiences. The liberatory design thinking framework is non-linear and does not need to be followed in a sequence. Design directions and alternatives can be generated, presented, and evaluated simultaneously and in real time, making it agile and non-rigid (Anaissie et al., 2017).

Figure 1

Liberatory Design Thinking Framework (Anaissie et al., 2017)



Design Challenge

In this paper, the author explores a design case in a nonprofit organization following the 'liberatory design thinking' framework for designing and developing a learning program by challenging the systemic inequities and empowering people of color, the LGBTQ+ community, people with disabilities, and marginalized communities for better learning experience outcomes. At heart, a design case is a description of an experience that has been intentionally designed, tracing the inception of an idea through the design process to the use of the ultimate design (Glanz & Lipton, 2003). While implementing the liberatory design thinking framework, the design case focused on a systems-thinking approach to implementing the framework within the constraints of the existing system for designing an equitable learning experience using the 'liberatory design thinking' framework.

The nonprofit organization in the context of this study experienced high turnover during the COVID-19 pandemic combined with other factors like a significant organizational restructuring. The exit survey showed that many employees left within the first few months of joining the organization. Most of the reasons were inequity in job expectations, inequities in resource availability, and lack of inclusion in team member experience. The organization realized that one central area to improve team member experience was the onboarding and orientation learning program focusing on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. Apart from other policy changes in the context of DEI initiatives, like hiring a more diverse workforce, the learning and development department was asked to redesign the onboarding and orientation learning program as the previous program neither resonated with the diverse workforce nor addressed their needs. Furthermore, the senior leadership asked the learning and development department to create a framework for future learning program design that dismantles inequities and provides team members with an inclusive learning experience.

The author, the sole instructional designer on this project, introduced the 'liberatory design thinking' framework and inquired two significant questions: How do instructional designers implement an equity-centered framework to design learning experiences that disassembles structural inequities? Second, how might instructional designers promote effective instructions and learning strategies within the constraints and interdependencies in an existing system?

The new onboarding and orientation learning program focused on the following core objectives:

- **Identify and address power imbalances:** Identify how team members in the organization may have different levels of access to resources, power, and privilege, moreover, how this may affect their ability to engage with and benefit from the learning experience of team members.
- **Make instructions accessible:** How to make instructions accessible, ensuring instructions are clear and written in concise language. What types of multiple media formats can be used (e.g., text, audio, video), and what modalities do the learners prefer? What are the language preferences, transcription, closed captioning needs, and accessible color contrasts to make instructions accessible to a diverse audience?
- **Provide context and scaffolding:** How to ensure that instructions are grounded in a real-world context, culturally inclusive, and provide the necessary background knowledge and support for learners to succeed.
- **Use inclusive language:** Learners have diverse backgrounds, experiences, and needs; hence, consider providing inclusive language. Inclusive language refers to acknowledging diversity, respecting everyone, being sensitive to differences, and promoting equal and equitable opportunities. Inclusive language recognizes a language that may unintentionally lead to marginalization, offense, misrepresentation, or the perpetuation of stereotypes (Linguistic Society of America, n.d.).
- **Use a learner-centered approach:** Put the needs and interests of learners at the center of the instructions and learning experience. The learner-centered approach allows flexibility and choice in how they engage with the instructions and learning experience.
- **Continuously assess and revise:** Regularly evaluate the effectiveness, impact, and emotions of the instructions and learning experience. It can be done by seeking feedback from learners to identify areas for improvement and make necessary adjustments.

Design Limitations

While the findings from the design case will provide significant insights into the framework of liberatory design thinking, it must be kept in mind that the findings are based on one single design case with a non-profit organization and within the constraints of the existing system of the organization. Furthermore, the author was the only instructional designer in the project; hence, the author's perspective may only partially capture the experiences and perspectives of the studied community. Additionally, the design case was exploratory and involved observing and interacting in an unstructured way. As a result, the author had limited control over the variables and might have needed help establishing causal relationships.

Although the findings have low generalizability, instructional designers, learning and development professionals, and other stakeholders may find the transferability of the findings significant.

Design Decision and Outcome

The 'liberatory design thinking' framework's proponents stress the process's iterative nature, conceptualizing the phases as a system of overlapping spaces rather than a sequence of orderly steps (Brown & Wyatt, 2010). Hence, an important place to start is noticing with empathy. As such, the design team focused on the intersection of the 'Notice' and 'Reflect' phases overlapping with the other liberatory design phases to indicate the recursive nature of the process. However, the additive nature of each phase of the liberatory design thinking framework was kept in mind, such that the empathy work conducted early in the process shaped the latter phases (Kulver et al., 2021). As shown in Figure 2, the project plan was designed per the liberatory design thinking framework with a liberatory mindset as the core philosophy by connecting diverse people through the design process. The project started with creating a project plan using the 'liberatory design thinking' framework, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Project plan for liberatory designing thinking phases (Self-Design)

PROJECT PLAN - MANAGER TOOLKIT					
PROJECT TITLE			PROJECT ROLES		
Onboarding and Orientation			START DATE	Individual Names and their roles	
PROJECT TEAM			02/01/23		
Core and Reflection Design Team			END DATE		
			12/15/23		
*WBS NO.	TASK NAME	MILESTONE STATUS	Assigned To	DUE DATE	COMMENTS
1	PHASE I - NOTICE AND EMPATHIZE				
1.1	– Project Conception, and Kickstart	Done			
1.2	– Notice Exercise	Done			
1.3	– Empathy based Research	Done			
2	PHASE II - DEFINE AND IDEATE				
2.1	– Create Personas	Done			
2.2	– Synthesize Data	Done			
2.3	– Learner Personas	Done			
2.4	– Ideate Solutions/Project Scope	Done			
3	PHASE III - PROTOTYPE				
3.1	– Program Goals and Learning Objectives	Done			
3.2	– Content Breakdown	Done			
3.3	– Task Analysis, High Level Course Design	Done			
3.4	– Opening Module (Pre-Arrival)	Done			
3.5	– Module 1 (First 2 Weeks)	Done			
3.6	– Module 2 (First 30 Days)	Done			
3.7	– Module 3 (First 60 Days)	Done			
3.8	– Module 4 (First 90 Days)	Done			
3.9	– Module 5 (First 90 - 180 Days & Closing)	Done			
4	PHASE IV - TEST AND REFLECT				
4.1	– Pilot Release Focus Group Feedback - Opening (Pre-Arrival) and Module 1 (First-Two Weeks)	Done			
4.2	– Pilot Release Focus Group Feedback - Module 2 (30 Days) and Module 3 (60 Days)	Done			
4.3	– Pilot Release Focus Group Feedback - Module 4 (90 Days) and Module 5 (90-180 Days)	Done			
4.4	– Communication Strategy & Email Templates	Done			
4.5	– Final Course Launch	Done			

The Notice Phase: As per the liberatory design thinking framework, the Notice phase focuses on stakeholders, designers, and people who hold power to influence the design to build a practice of self-awareness. It includes awareness of their values, identities, biases (unconscious, conscious, and subconscious biases), assumptions, and their impact on the end-users or learners. It allows for authentic learner-centered design, dismantling inequities in the design process. Some tools to practice the Notice phase are creating diverse team member resource groups for multiple perspectives, self-reflection exercises, and self-inquiry.

The first initiative taken before moving on with the project was to create a design team. Traditionally, people who participated in the design team were from the learning and development department consisting of instructional designers, training facilitators, learning administrators, content writers, project managers, leaders, and subject matter experts. In order to bring a liberatory mindset, multiple stakeholders were invited who were impacted by learning designs, i.e., the team member representatives. These representatives were from the 'team member resource groups' known in the organization as TMRGs. As part of the nonprofit organization's commitment to building a culture of inclusion and belonging, the organization established TMRGs; the TMRG groups consisted of team members from the Black and African communities, Younger Professionals, Women, LGBTQ+ communities, People with Disabilities Communities, Hispanic and Latino Communities, Asian Communities, Inter-Faith Communities, Multicultural Communities, and Veterans Communities. The TMRGs were team member-led groups around shared characteristics or life experiences. The objective was to amplify the voices of traditionally under-represented people and marginalized communities by providing them a platform for the members of these communities and their allies to connect in the organization.

When the author introduced the 'liberatory design thinking' framework, the senior leadership provided excellent support as it aligned with the organization's inclusion mandate. However, the thought of inviting external team members to the design team created tension in the existing team. The tensions were due to insecurities about giving up the power of design decisions and overlapping team member roles and responsibilities. In order to address these concerns, several discussions were held between the existing team, senior leadership, and TMRG representatives. In a democratic environment and with collaborative consent, it was decided that the design team would be divided into two sub-teams: the 'core' team and the 'reflection' team. While the 'core' team consisted of members from the learning and development department, with clearly defined roles for each member. The reflection team consisted of the TMRG representatives and subject matter experts to provide crucial feedback at each iteration and have a final voice for a more inclusive learning design.

Second, to notice with empathy, both the core team and the reflection team started a self-reflection exercise to notice shared values, identities, biases (including unconscious, conscious, and subconscious biases), power imbalances, and assumptions and assess the impact of the design on the end users or the learners. The objective was to ensure increased equity, authenticity, leverage systems priorities, and political will. The reflection exercise helped to notice constraints and opportunities and negotiate with key stakeholders and people in power to influence the overall design. The self-reflection exercise consisted of questions, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Liberatory questions for the Notice phase (Self-Design)

Liberatory Questions for the Notice Phase

1. Who am I/we? Who are our learners? What do I/we know about our learners?
2. How does my identity or job title position me in improving the learning experience?
3. Do I have privileges enjoyed by others? How does it impact the learning design to improve learning experiences?
4. Do I see patterns in the previous learning designs that might be biased and affect the learning experience?
5. Have I/we designed learning programs using inclusive language? Have I/we included examples and language that was culturally sensitive? Were the learning programs accessible to people with disabilities?
6. Do learners have the flexibility and choice to engage with the instructions and learning experience?
7. How do my leader's identities and positional power shape what I see/feel and experience in the design decisions?
8. What is my wildest idea to make the learning experiences inclusive?

The Empathy Phase: The Empathize phase is core to understanding the people for whom the learning experience is designed. It means considering learners' experiences, perspectives, and needs when designing learning programs. This approach prioritizes the voices and perspectives of especially marginalized and underrepresented learners. The empathy phase also helps to understand the social and cultural contexts in which learners live and learn and consider how these contexts may impact their experiences and needs. The Empathize phase helps to have a new perspective from a liberatory mindset to have awareness about the learners' motivations, experiences, physical and emotional needs, and what is meaningful to them (Anaissie et al., 2017). Some tools to empathize with learners include interviews, focus group discussions, observations, and shadowing in a non-judgemental environment.

During this phase, the 'core' team collected data through ethnographic methods, including observations, interviews, and focus group discussions from both the 'reflection' team and with team members who joined the organization in the past 12 months and were impacted by the current onboarding and orientation learning program. The core team focused on liberatory questions that opened the door for more profound and meaningful data collection, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Liberatory questions for the Empathy phase (Self-Design)

Liberatory Questions for the Empathy Phase

1. What do my learners wish/like/wonder about the current onboarding and orientation learning program?
2. How does my identity and role in this project affect how and what people share with me about their lived experiences? Do the learners feel safe to share their experiences?
3. What are the core needs of the learners? What are their struggles and aspirations regarding the onboarding and orientation program? When and where do their struggles occur? How often does this happen? Are there any additional data available?
4. Are the learners clear about their job expectations? Do they have any inequities in resource availability? Do the learners feel included? Do they feel their opinions and viewpoints are given a platform to be heard? What do my learners hear, think, and feel about the onboarding and orientation learning program? What do they see in their environment that affects their learning experiences?
5. What is the purpose of the new onboarding and orientation learning program, and how will the new program help the learners?
6. How will we know the learning program was effective? What constitutes an 'Aha' moment?
7. How will the learners, managers, and other stakeholders perceive this?

Another critical aspect followed throughout the Empathy phase was creating an environment of psychological safety. In a systems approach, it is a shared expectation that leaders or people with power to influence will not embarrass, reject, or punish each other for sharing ideas, taking risks, or soliciting feedback (Staff, 2022). When learners feel psychologically safe, they are more likely to provide honest feedback about their experiences, needs, and perspectives. This honest feedback is crucial to creating inclusive, equitable, and responsive systems. Creating psychological safety in a system is a continuous process that requires active engagement and commitment from all stakeholders, including designers, educators, and learners.

Psychological safety was a core inclusion mandate for the non-profit organization to build a system-wide safety culture. Hence, it merged perfectly well with the Empathy phase when team members shared their opinions that there would be no punishment or retaliation for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes throughout the liberatory design thinking phases. The success of creating an environment of psychological safety depended on the organizational leadership, as they had the political will to create an environment of psychological safety. Psychological safety was crucial to get meaningful feedback. During this phase, it was noticed that while some team members were comfortable sharing their experiences in front of others, others needed more privacy to feel safe. Hence, the 'core' team took the following steps to provide a platform that promotes safety:

- Anonymous feedback forum if team members are unwilling to disclose their identity.
- Multiple options to collect data using personal interviews, anonymous surveys, and focus group discussions. Hence, the team members can share their experiences in whichever format they prefer to feel safe.
- Encouraging open and non-judgemental communication and active listening with no interruptions when someone shares their opinions, ideas, frustrations, or pain points
- No personal remarks and respecting diverse perspectives and lived experiences
- Focus and prioritize the well-being and safety of all stakeholders.

The Define Phase: The Define phase focuses on developing a point of view and defining the user or learner's needs. Some tools used in this phase are creating user or learner personas, empathy maps, concept maps, or user/learner journey maps. Liberatory mindsets are critical in the Define phase to embrace complexity and ambiguity and recognize and name oppression that may contribute to systemic inequities (Anaissie et al., 2017).

In the Define phase, the design team, including the 'core' and the 'reflection' teams, collaborated to synthesize the findings and articulated the insights by creating learner personas and empathy maps, as shown in Figure 3. During this phase, the design team narrowed down the information collected during the Notice and Empathy phases to a visualization capturing the data and the essence of the learner's needs. At the same time, the learner personas helped to visualize the target learner or group of learners for whom the learning programs were designed. On the other hand, the empathy maps helped to understand what the end users, i.e., the learners felt, thought, saw, and heard, what pains and gains they experienced, and what were their own biases. During this phase, the team used whiteboards and visualization tools like the Miro visualization and collaboration platform to brainstorm and narrow down the key learner personas, their characteristics, behaviors, likes, pain points, and needs, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3

An empathy map showing a learner's persona and needs (Self-Design).



The 'core' and the 'reflection' teams were given the raw data collected during the Notice and Empathy phases. The Project Manager asked everyone to come to a brainstorming session with generated themes while synthesizing the data. Sensemaking in the Define phase opened a Pandora's box reflecting the systemic inequities that existed, affecting overall team member experiences in the organization. Both the 'core' and the 'reflection' teams struggled to wrestle with the reality that the learning program would need to be designed to accommodate multiple interests and concerns. While some members captured themes of lack of cultural sensitivity, feelings of isolation, disengagement, and even discrimination, ultimately hindering the employee's ability to thrive and succeed within the organization. Others felt that these themes were not the actual representation of the majority. One member said, "I do not think this is an accurate theme; all the team members I spoke with said good things about their onboarding experience." Someone else said, "We are not here to start a movement but create a learning program that solves business problems. Too much diversity is making others feel marginalized."

Challenges in navigating politics and power imbalances were a significant consideration during the brainstorming session; however, the moderator appointed for the brainstorming session captured core themes and asked everyone to vote to conclude the themes for each learner's personas. This phase turned out to be more difficult than expected; however, it allowed both the 'core' team and the 'reflection' team to provide their viewpoints, collaborate, brainstorm together, and in a democratic environment, come to a consensus.

The visualization also helped to understand what leaders and team members went through during the onboarding and orientation program. The learner personas and empathy maps helped the design team narrow the information to a visualization capturing the inequities of users or learners, and the essence of the learner needs, as shown in Figure 3.

The Ideate Phase: The Ideate phase is at the heart of the innovation in the design thinking process. This phase provides solutions to the challenges and opportunities in the earlier phases. Here, the design team brainstorms various possible solutions without judgment or feasibility. By refusing to be bound by constraints, the design team also challenges assumptions about the nature of the problem and potential solutions (Culver et al., 2021). Imagination is crucial in distinguishing liberatory design thinking from other frameworks.

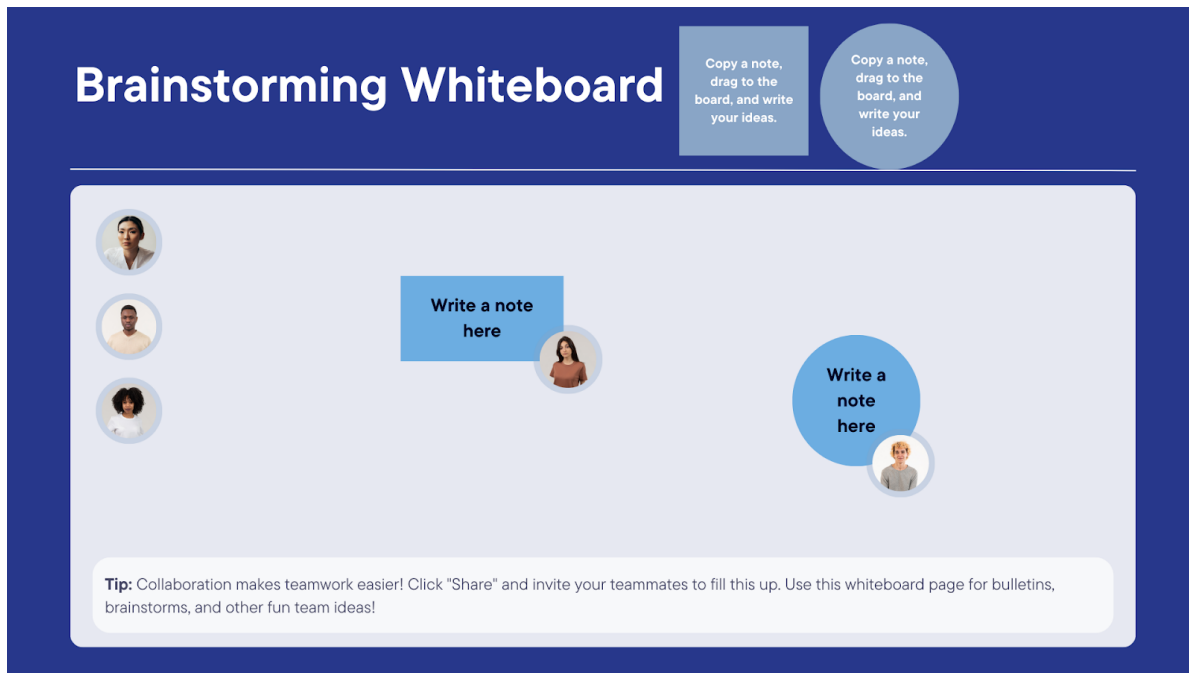
After the Define phase, the senior leadership received feedback about the challenges the design team faced navigating politics and power imbalances. However, the senior leadership had the political will to embrace a culture of psychological safety; hence, despite the fierce debate, the entire team was advised to form relational trust. The design, including the 'core' and 'reflection' teams, ideated multiple solutions relying primarily on experiential knowledge gained through lived experiences, researching recent studies on diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives on onboarding and orientation practices, and benchmarking other similar organizations. As the design team transitioned to the Prototype phase, they knew that selecting solutions out of all the solutions offered would have an afar-reaching impact beyond their colleagues, especially considering how chosen solutions may affect equity and inclusion.

To ideate learning solutions using liberatory design thinking, the design team used virtual whiteboards for brainstorming sessions. A similar format of having a moderator during the brainstorming sessions helped to moderate the team environment. It allowed everyone to share their viewpoints, collaborate, brainstorm together in a democratic environment, and come to a consensus.

The 'reflection' team consisting of the TMRG representatives, played a crucial role in offering insights into the solutions. The TMRGs also were involved in the co-design processes to co-create solutions that met their needs and aligned with their values. The Ideate phase also overlapped with other phases, especially the 'Reflect' phase. Taking feedback from multiple stakeholders, including the TMRG group members, helped to understand the impact of the learning solutions. Furthermore, to make adjustments as needed to ensure that it genuinely empowers marginalized individuals and communities, as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4

A virtual whiteboard for a brainstorming session for the Ideate phase (Self-Design).



The Prototype Phase: The Prototype phase involves the iterative development of tangible artifacts or learning experiences intended to elicit feedback and answer specific questions about a concept. Some tools to prototype are creating storyboards, mockups, and wireframes. Prototyping learning solutions using liberatory design thinking involves creating a preliminary version of the solution that can be tested in the context of the larger systems in which it operates. At the same time, feedback is critical from the diverse community of learners it wants to serve. In liberatory design thinking, rapid prototyping is essential; rather than spending much time to develop a solution fully, designers quickly sketch out the solution to experiment with it. Prototyping is a form of thinking and learning by creating; as designers build out the specifics of a solution, they can recognize new challenges and opportunities revealed by the process (Culver et al., 2021).

During the Prototype phase, the 'core' team designed prototypes incorporating learning principles like the backward design model and adult learning principles and created storyboards and wireframes. The 'reflection' team, which included the TMRG representatives, played a crucial role in providing feedback to co-design the learning solution at each iteration.

The design team at the nonprofit organization followed a few criteria to prototype the learning solutions:

- The solution must address the problems, challenges, and core learning goals within the larger systems in which it operates. It included understanding the social, economic, political, and cultural contexts that impact the systemic inequities affecting onboarding and orientation learning experiences from the core themes captured in the empathy maps.
- The solution must address and ensure that it aligns with the needs and values of diverse learners, especially the marginalized and underrepresented learners, and communities.
- Use systems mapping techniques to visually represent the current systems and identify key stakeholders, feedback loops, and leverage areas. It included considering the potential ripple effects of the solution on the more extensive system and how it can be scaled or adapted over time.
- Use co-design techniques to involve multiple stakeholders, including representatives from the TMRG groups, in the prototyping process. Encourage participation, listen to feedback, and incorporate suggestions.
- Use inclusive and accessible design principles when creating the prototype. It included ensuring the prototype was accessible to diverse team members with different needs. For example, ensuring closed captioning, good color contrast, culturally relevant images and language, and other WCAG (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines) protocols were maintained.

Differences in opinions did arrive in the Prototype phase. These differences were primarily due to power imbalances, cultural biases, unconscious biases, conflicts of value, and resource limitations. Like other phases, an appointed moderator played a crucial role in helping to solve conflicts during the Prototype phase. The moderator ensured there was no dominant voice in the room and everyone had an opportunity to contribute, especially those who may be marginalized or have less power. The moderator also had the notes from the Notice phase encouraging team members to practice active listening, relational trust, and empathy.

The Test Phase: The Test phase focuses on getting specific feedback about how ideas and solutions can improve. Did the solutions answer the existing inequities? During this phase, it is essential to remember that prototypes are imperfect, but feedback is precious. Some tools to test are role plays, surveys, feedback sessions, and understanding impediments. In liberatory design thinking, testing a learning solution involves considering the solution as part of a more extensive system and evaluating its impact on that system. Moreover, testing the solution with multiple stakeholders, especially marginalized community members, to understand the impact and effectiveness of the learning solutions to address systemic inequities is crucial. It includes conducting user research, pilot testing, and ongoing evaluation to ensure that the solution is inclusive and promotes empowerment for a diverse community of learners.

In this phase, moderators from different departments were invited to conduct focus group discussions with multiple stakeholders, including leaders and team members impacted by the new onboarding and orientation learning program to gather feedback on the solution's effectiveness in meeting their needs and addressing systemic issues. Inviting diverse moderators was to ensure the data capturing removes any bias. These moderators brought a fresh perspective and were not directly involved in the design process. This independence and objectivity helped identify and challenge biases that may be present in the testing phase. The external moderator then provided feedback to the design team to make necessary adjustments before rolling it out more widely.

The Reflect Phase: The Reflect phase is ongoing and transparent throughout the design thinking process. It allows one to focus and reflect on the actions taken, observe the emotions, and analyze the insights and impact of the design on the users/learners as a designer for a more liberatory design. Some tools are self-reflection and returning to the TMRG representatives to understand the impact and make necessary changes in the design. Reflecting on a learning solution in a liberatory design framework involves considering how the solution aligns with social justice and equity principles and promotes empowerment for diverse users, especially marginalized communities.

The design team at the nonprofit organization incorporated reflection as an essential part of the liberatory design framework by creating an assessment plan and a questionnaire, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Reflection questions in a 'liberatory design thinking' framework (Self-Design)

Liberatory Questions for the Reflection Phase
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. As a team, does the learning experience feel equitable and inclusive? If not, why? What and how should we adjust? 2. How might cultural norms trigger unconscious biases that impede our relationships and work? What are the suggestions to improve the learning program? 3. What emotional state affects representative groups after experiencing the learning program? 4. How can we share or release distressful emotions to move through the Liberatory Design process with care for each other?

Although the new onboarding and orientation learning program is in a pilot release phase, however, practicing reflection on the design process and the solutions, the design team is committed to ensuring that learning experiences align with the principles of the liberatory design thinking framework and that the solution does not perpetuate oppressive systemic structures.

Like the empathy phase, the design team developed some core protocols for the Reflection phase to promote safety and authentic program assessment:

- Anonymous feedback forum if team members are unwilling to disclose their identity.
- Multiple options to collect data using personal interviews, anonymous surveys, and focus group discussions. Hence, the team members can share their experiences in whichever format they prefer to feel safe.
- Encouraging open and non-judgemental communication and active listening with no interruptions when someone shares their opinions, ideas, frustrations, or pain points
- No personal remarks and respecting diverse perspectives and lived experiences
- Focus and prioritize the well-being and safety of all stakeholders.
- Review the design process and user feedback to identify areas where the solution may not have met the needs of marginalized communities or addressed systemic issues.
- Analyze the solution's impact on learners and communities, and consider how it may have perpetuated or challenged oppressive structures.
- Reflect on the values and assumptions that guided the design process and consider how they may have influenced the solution.
- Gather feedback from users and stakeholders to understand the long-term impact of the solution.
- Identify improvement opportunities and make necessary adjustments to the solution to ensure it remains inclusive and effective over time.
- Continuously reflect on the solution in the context of ongoing social and political changes to ensure it remains aligned with the principles of liberatory design thinking.

Conclusion

To conclude, the author explored a design case using the equity-centered 'liberatory design thinking' framework to address systemic inequities that affect learning design and experiences. The design team of a nonprofit organization implemented the 'liberatory design thinking' framework to redesign an onboarding and orientation learning program. The 'liberatory design thinking' framework challenged the systemic inequities by empowering people of color, the LGBTQ+ community, and indigenous and marginalized communities for better onboarding and orientation, and learning experience outcomes. The guidelines explored in the design case intend to be benchmarked by other corporate or academic organizations to design more equitable learning experiences.

The author observed three critical observations in the design case for successfully implementing the 'liberatory design thinking' framework. These were:

- Create a diverse design team including traditional stakeholders and members from diverse backgrounds, especially marginalized members. The nonprofit organization created team member resource groups known as TMRGs. The TMRG groups comprised team members from the Black and African communities, younger professionals, women, LGBTQ+ communities, people with disabilities, Hispanic and Latino communities, Asian communities, inter-faith communities, multicultural communities, and veterans communities. These diverse representatives provided valuable feedback during the entire design process.
- Promote psychological safety. Psychological safety was another critical element for successfully implementing the 'liberatory design thinking' framework. Given the inequities plaguing organizations in the corporate sector or academic institutions, the author observed that political will from the senior leadership is critical to promote psychological safety and inclusion.
- Appoint moderators who can serve as facilitators, mediators, and champions of inclusivity, working to create an environment that challenges biases, promotes equity, and fosters social justice. Their contributions throughout the design process are essential in realizing the goals of liberatory design.

Furthermore, systems thinking is another essential aspect in vetting, reconfiguring, and addressing the complex issues in a system. Liberatory design thinking focuses on empowering a diverse community, especially marginalized communities, by involving them in the design process and addressing oppressive structures. Combining the liberatory design in a systems thinking approach helps to understand the complex interactions and relationships within a system and the impact of a solution on the system as a whole.

Instructional designers, educators, learning professionals, and design teams can create solutions that empower marginalized communities while addressing the complex issues within a system by following the guidelines explored in the design case. Finally, it is vital to remember that liberatory design thinking is an ongoing process that requires continuous reflection, adaptation, and monitoring to ensure that the solution effectively addresses the complex issues within the system.

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