

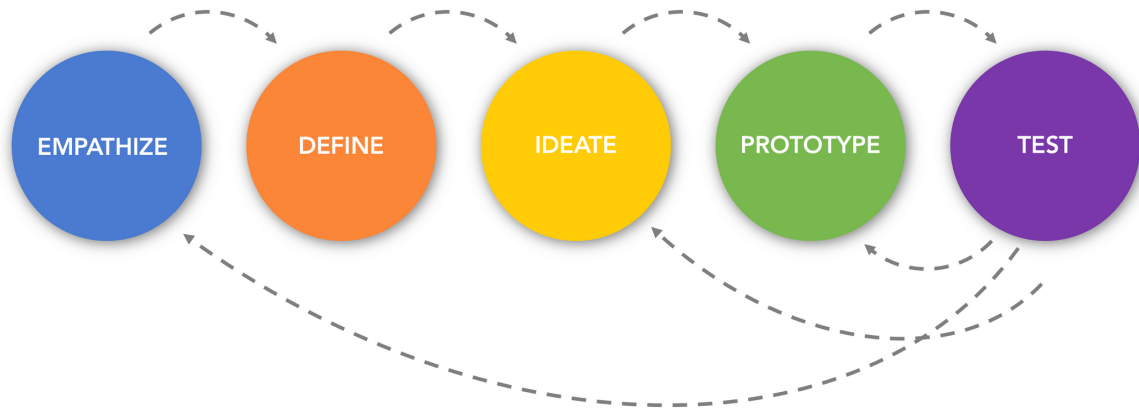
*A Case Study:*

# Using Design Thinking to Facilitate More Strategic Thinking in Communications Students

For communications students, possessing a strong sense of curiosity should be a given. But, often, it seems to be missing in action. There's a rush to get to an answer or solution or idea as quickly as possible. And that typically means they'll go with the first idea that pops into their minds. No looking back. And with little to no concern about whether it's remarkable—or even minimally "okay."

**How can we, as faculty, help our students rediscover their sense of curiosity and show them how to put it to use in finding the most effective solutions to communications challenges?**

## Design Thinking: A Problem-Solving Framework



Design thinking is a process that provides a simple and clear framework for problem-solving—both strategically and creatively. Because of that, it's a wonderful tool for helping our students think more deeply about communications-related challenges and to push themselves and their peers further when looking for solutions.

## The Stages

### Empathize with Your Target Audience

Before finding an effective solution, you first have to fully understand your audience and the specific challenge they're facing. During this phase, students conduct research in a way that allows them to "step into the shoes" of those in the target audience. One-on-one interviews with members of the target audience can be very effective.

## Define the Problem

Do we have a clear understanding of the specific challenge the target audience is facing? Is it what we thought it was? Is it different? If so, how? Using the research results gathered during the empathy phase, the define-the-problem phase helps students frame the challenge they'll be working on. And, because they've learned about the challenge from the perspective of the target audience, this helps minimize their own biases and preconceived notions.

## Ideate with No Self-Editing

This is where the brainstorming of ideas takes place. Put any and all ideas for solutions up on the wall—literally. There should be NO self-editing and NO parameters that limit the free flow of ideas. Encourage students to let their imaginations run wild. They shouldn't be limiting their thinking to what's practical or realistic at this point.

## Prototype Quickly and Imperfectly

Once the ideation phase has been completed, team members look at all of the ideas that have been thrown out, evaluate each of them, and decide on one to pursue as a potential solution. (It could also be a combination of multiple ideas that complement each other.) Then, the team should quickly develop a very rough prototype of the concept. This is NOT the time for perfection. Prototypes can simply be sketches, models made of pipe cleaners and paperclips, etc. The purpose is to put something together that will help the target audience understand the solution being offered.

## Test to Make the Solution Even Better

Once the prototype has been developed, it's presented to members of the target audience for feedback. The team then takes this feedback and applies it to the original idea through an iterative process OR—if the prototype doesn't resonate at all with the majority of respondents—the team might need to start over again with a new idea and prototype.

**All or specific phases of the design thinking process should be repeated again and again until a majority of the feedback received from the target audience indicates that the proposed solution actually and effectively addresses the problem identified and defined during the initial research phase.**

## Resources

**The following are design thinking resources I've found to be particularly helpful:**

- **IDEO Design Thinking:** <https://designthinking.ideo.com>
- **Design Thinking for Educators:** <https://designthinkingforeducators.com/>
- **Design Kit:** <https://www.designkit.org/resources/1>

**Want to talk about design thinking? Great! Me, too! Feel free to reach out by phone at 336.278.5665 or by email at [mlashley@elon.edu](mailto:mlashley@elon.edu).**