



Simmons Learning Solutions

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Empathy Mapping for Training Development: A Comprehensive Guide

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Executive Summary

Empathy mapping is a strategic tool that enables training developers to deeply understand their learners' perspectives, needs, and challenges. By focusing on what learners say, think, feel, do, experience as pain points, and identify as needs, this approach ensures the design of learner-centered training that is highly relevant, engaging, and impactful.

This method moves beyond generic content creation by addressing real-world barriers learners face, aligning training content and delivery with their preferences and motivations. The result is training that not only meets organizational goals but also resonates deeply with the target audience.

Empathy Mapping for Training Development: A Comprehensive Guide

Empathy mapping is a powerful tool for understanding the learners you're designing training for. By diving deep into their experiences, emotions, and challenges, you can craft training programs that resonate, engage, and deliver meaningful results. In the context of training, empathy mapping ensures the content is not only relevant but also learner-centered, addressing their real-world pain points and aspirations.

This guide explains what empathy mapping is, why it's critical for developing impactful training, and provides a step-by-step framework for applying it effectively.

What is Empathy Mapping?

Empathy mapping is a collaborative visualization tool that helps you gain insights into your learners' perspectives. It captures their thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and needs, offering a comprehensive understanding of their experiences. This process allows instructional designers to move beyond assumptions and design training that aligns with what learners truly require to succeed.

When used in training development, empathy mapping helps:

- Align training content with learners' specific challenges.
- Foster emotional engagement by addressing learner concerns and aspirations.

- Improve the relevance and impact of training programs.
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Why is Empathy Mapping Important for Training?

Training programs that fail to consider learners' perspectives risk being ignored or misunderstood. Learners may feel frustrated, overwhelmed, or disengaged if training doesn't address their needs or resonate with their context. Empathy mapping bridges this gap by:

- Creating a learner-first design process.
 - Highlighting barriers to learning that need to be addressed.
 - Enhancing the overall learner experience, increasing engagement and retention.
 - Tailoring delivery methods to suit different learner preferences and behaviors.
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Empathy Mapping Framework

A standard empathy map consists of **six core sections**:

1. **Says:** What learners openly express.
2. **Thinks:** Internal thoughts learners may not verbalize.
3. **Feels:** Emotional drivers influencing their behavior.
4. **Does:** Observable actions or behaviors.
5. **Pain Points:** Challenges or barriers learners face.
6. **Needs:** Goals or outcomes learners aim to achieve.

Each section provides critical insights into the learner's world, helping you design training that meets their needs holistically.

How to Conduct Empathy Mapping for Training



Step 1: Define the Purpose and Audience

Start by identifying:

- **Why** you are creating the training (e.g., onboarding, skill-building, compliance).
- **Who** the training is for (e.g., managers, frontline workers, new hires).
- **Desired outcomes** for the learners and organization (e.g., increased efficiency, compliance adherence).

Clearly defining the scope ensures the empathy map focuses on the right priorities.

Step 2: Gather Data

Effective empathy mapping relies on robust learner insights. Use multiple methods to collect this data:

- **Interviews:** Speak with learners to understand their experiences, preferences, and challenges.
 - Example: Ask, “What’s the most frustrating part of your current workflow?”
- **Surveys:** Distribute questionnaires to gather broad insights into learner needs and pain points.

- **Observations:** Watch how learners interact with systems or processes in their environment.
- **Feedback Analysis:** Review past training evaluations or learner feedback to identify gaps and successes.

The more comprehensive your data, the more accurate and actionable your empathy map will be.

Step 3: Assemble a Diverse Team

Empathy mapping is most effective when conducted collaboratively. Include stakeholders such as:

- **Instructional designers:** To focus on creating effective training experiences.
- **Subject matter experts (SMEs):** To ensure content relevance.
- **Managers:** To represent organizational goals and expectations.
- **Learners:** If possible, involve representatives from your target audience.

This diversity ensures a well-rounded understanding of learner needs.

Step 4: Create the Empathy Map

Use a physical whiteboard, digital tools like Miro or MURAL, or even a simple spreadsheet to structure your empathy map. Divide the map into the six sections (Says, Thinks, Feels, Does, Pain Points, Needs). Label each quadrant and leave space for sticky notes or annotations.

Step 5: Populate the Quadrants

Draw from your collected data to fill in each section of the map:

- **Says:** Capture direct quotes or commonly expressed phrases.
 - Example: “I don’t have time for long training sessions.”
- **Thinks:** Reflect unspoken thoughts learners might have.
 - Example: “What if this training isn’t relevant to my job?”

- **Feels:** Identify emotions that influence learner attitudes.
 - Example: Anxiety about new systems or frustration with unclear instructions.
 - **Does:** Note observable behaviors.
 - Example: Learners skipping optional modules or frequently asking colleagues for help.
 - **Pain Points:** Highlight challenges learners face.
 - Example: Overwhelmed by technical jargon or lack of hands-on practice.
 - **Needs:** Specify what learners require to succeed.
 - Example: Clear, step-by-step guides or bite-sized training modules.
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Step 6: Analyze and Prioritize Insights

Once your map is complete, analyze it to identify:

- **Patterns:** What challenges or needs appear repeatedly?
- **Critical issues:** Which pain points are most urgent to address?
- **Opportunities:** How can your training add value or solve specific problems?

Prioritize insights that align with your training goals and audience needs.

Step 7: Design Training Based on Empathy Map Insights

Use the insights from the empathy map to inform every aspect of your training design:

1. **Content:** Focus on addressing pain points and delivering on needs.
 - Example: Simplify complex topics with clear visuals and examples.
 2. **Delivery Method:** Choose formats that suit learner preferences.
 - Example: Use microlearning for time-constrained learners or simulations for hands-on practice.
 3. **Engagement Strategies:** Design emotionally engaging experiences.
 - Example: Incorporate motivational stories, real-world examples, or gamified elements.
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Practical Example: Empathy Mapping for Software Training

Audience: Employees learning a new CRM platform.

Empathy Map Insights:

- **Says:** “I don’t know where to start with this system.”
- **Thinks:** “Will this training help me hit my targets?”
- **Feels:** Frustrated with complexity, anxious about errors.
- **Does:** Avoids using the new system, relies on colleagues for help.
- **Pain Points:** Confusion about navigation, fear of poor performance.
- **Needs:** Clear step-by-step guides, hands-on practice scenarios.

Training Design:

- Task-based tutorials to simplify navigation.
 - Hands-on simulations to build confidence.
 - Quick-reference job aids for easy access during work.
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Best Practices for Effective Empathy Mapping

1. **Use Real Data:** Avoid assumptions; base your map on direct learner feedback.
 2. **Collaborate:** Involve diverse perspectives to ensure a comprehensive view.
 3. **Iterate:** Update the empathy map as you gather new insights or pilot the training.
 4. **Visualize:** Make the empathy map clear and easy to understand, using visuals or digital tools.
 5. **Act on Insights:** Translate the empathy map into actionable design decisions that enhance learning outcomes.
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Empathy mapping is a critical step in creating training that connects with learners on a deeper level. By stepping into their shoes, you can design programs that are not only

educational but also relevant, engaging, and impactful. This learner-first approach ensures training solutions that truly address real-world challenges and drive success.

About Simmons Learning Solutions

At Simmons Learning Solutions, we specialize in creating and delivering impactful learning experiences. We offer interactive, off-the-shelf courses on today's most in-demand topics. Our approach to training is comprehensive, blending eLearning, Instructor-Led Training (ILT), Virtual Instructor-Led Training (VILT), performance support, and video development to meet a wide range of organizational needs.

We provide end-to-end services tailored to your specific goals, from content creation and curriculum design to facilitator training and technology setup. Our team of experienced instructional designers and trainers works collaboratively to craft engaging, effective, and adaptable training programs that maximize knowledge transfer and participant satisfaction.

We're passionate about delivering highly engaging, innovative, and interactive training experiences. By leveraging our expertise in instructional design and the latest technology, we help our clients achieve their strategic learning objectives.

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