



Identifying the digital skills needs of study skills teachers through empathy mapping activities

David Busby
University of Bath, UK

Presentation abstract

Shifts in higher education policy have resulted in increased focus for study skills practitioners to support students with digital literacy alongside academic literacy skills. This emphasis on digital up-skilling has been exacerbated by the increased focus on artificial intelligence (AI) in higher education, for example, ChatGPT, and the need for students to develop greater digital literacy and academic integrity awareness (Salvagno et al., 2023). Study skills tutors arguably lack specific expertise in digital skills and may subsequently experience a challenge to their professional status because they are not seen to have specialist powers or prestige within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Ding and Bruce, 2017).

Empathy mapping, a design thinking tool, was developed to help service designers overcome an egocentric perspective and consider the viewpoint and experiences of individual users (Chen and Tsai, 2024), which can result in a human-centred response to user needs through reflection, observation and listening. Through empathy mapping, participants are given the agency to present their nuanced perspectives on any given sociocultural context (Gurjar and Elwood, 2024); for example, study skills practitioners reflecting on professional knowledge and developmental needs when faced with challenge and change. This poster showed how empathy mapping can be used with study skills professionals to reflect on any gaps around digital literacy in their domains of knowledge (Goodwin, 2010) and highlight where professional development opportunities can take place (Figure 1).

Keywords: empathy mapping; professional knowledge; digital skills; teacher development.

Poster

Figure 1. Identifying the digital skills needs of study skills teachers through empathy mapping activities.

Identifying the digital skills needs of study skills teachers through empathy mapping activities.

Think and feel?

See?

Teacher or student

Say and do?

Hear?

What is empathy mapping?

- Process of visualization used to articulate what is known about a particular type of user/situation.
- Teachers were asked to empathise with the thoughts and feelings colleagues have when faced with teaching digital skills.
- By understanding how colleagues may feel about teaching digital skills it encouraged reflection on their own feelings.

"It's a good way to identify weak areas or areas I've either skimmed over or not noticed." Teacher A

"I think the empathy map would help me to specifically identify needs or where opportunities might be being missed." Teacher B

Completed empathy map

Findings

- Some confusion and fear about the increased focus on digital skills and feeling of redundancy in using digital tools.
- Some resistance to change
- There was buy in from some teachers
- Teachers were keen to showcase successes
- Some reported the process of developing digital skills as fun
- Need for mentoring and collaboration
- Need for consistent support from the institution in upskilling teachers

References:

- Abha M., & Sen, A., 2021 Empathetic reflection: reflecting with emotion, *Reflective Practice*, 22(4), 566-574
- Chen MC, Tsai MC., 2024. Applying team-based learning combined with empathy map to improve self-directed learning skills. *BMC Nurs.* 23(1):683

Benefits?

Empathetic reflection involves acknowledgement of the emotion of both self and others involved in the event (Abha & Sen, 2021).

"An empathy map is a tool that assists a person to understand the perspective of others" (Chen & Tsai, 2024, P.2).

This poster is supported by a handout that can be found in the Appendix.

Community response

It is reassuring to see work being done that focuses on the skills of staff, and particularly Learning Development (LD) practitioners, as so often the learning needs of those teaching our students are forgotten. It was particularly heartening to see the acknowledgement of the challenges LD practitioners may face in the support of digital literacy. From experience, I agree that the majority of LD practitioners come from language, literacy and numeracy backgrounds, and so the swell of digitally-focused assessments may present a real challenge in the area of student support. Empathy mapping looks like a great tool to address this.

I think an empathy-based approach to assessing needs is not only interesting but vital when dealing with a topic that can be quite sensitive for some; as the author explained, there can be apprehension not only around learning new digital skills but even expressing

uncertainty in the first place. Empathy mapping is not something I had thought about using before, but as someone interested in the development of teaching staff, it is certainly something I will use in future! Taking time to think about how we feel and behave in response to different situations can only make us better at what we do, so I can really see the benefit of this approach.

As an advocate of design thinking, I was thrilled to see this poster on empathy mapping. I have recently co-authored a paper, 'The transformative potential of design thinking in learning development' (Fallin and Turton, 2025), where we make a strong argument for further use of design thinking in LD. I see empathy as the very foundation of design thinking. It allows us to really connect with students and understand the issues at heart. While our article focused on advocating the use of design thinking theory and practices, we did not have the space to develop approaches forward. It is so good to see this focus on empathy mapping activities, which are one of the more practical tools used in design thinking. While I accept there are many uses of empathy mapping beyond design thinking, I still think there is a compelling link here. I hope this will give some practitioners a boost towards more participatory design processes.

Next steps and additional questions

This poster contributed to the growing interest in design within Learning Development, demonstrating a clear instrument that can be used to empathise with people as part of service design and development. Presenting online, there was a really positive response from community members in attendance. Multiple people noted they wanted to explore empathy mapping further: '[Empathy mapping] seems a great safe way to explore/face vulnerabilities and fear and then collaborate/explore to work through that to engage with whatever is then required that might not then seem so threatening'; 'I like empathy mapping - will be useful to develop in my areas'; and 'Very neat, David. I am inspired to apply this in other contexts.'

From these community responses, many practitioners are aiming to use empathy mapping in their own practice, and it will be interesting to see how these uses of the tool develop.

Author's reflection

I think there is great potential in adopting empathy mapping as a tool for reflection in several ways; for example, I recently suggested the use of empathy maps as an alternative approach for colleagues to observe peers teaching, and as a tool for course and materials planning and development. With the current drive for post-digital skills and GenAI awareness, I think this is an opportune moment to seek out ways of working that are socially focused and emphasise emotional intelligence. It would be fantastic to see others think about how to adapt empathy maps (and other design thinking approaches). This project is part of my ongoing EdD thesis, which asks how learning developers (study skills practitioners in my project) develop and accommodate the new knowledge and literacies required for helping students with their digital skills needs; clearly, community and personal practice are important elements in that process for teachers. I hope the presentation was clear; my only regret is not making the presentation attractive enough, maybe an indication of where my own digital skills need developing.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the contributors who shared their reflections and enriched our insight into this conference presentation and its impact on the audience.

The community response was edited by Lee Fallin from the University of Hull and Nikita-Marie Bridgeman from Sheffield Hallam University, who captured the key themes of the community discussion.

References

Chen, M., and Tsai, M. (2024) 'Applying team-based learning combined with empathy map to improve self-directed learning skills', *BMC Nursing*, 23(1), pp.683-7. Available at:

<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12912-024-02355-4>

Ding, A., and Bruce, I. (2017) *The English for Academic Purposes Practitioner: Operating on the Edge of Academia*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing AG.

- Fallin, L., and Turton, C. (2025) 'The transformative potential of design thinking in learning development', *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, 34. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.vi34.1314>
- Goodwin, A.L. (2010) 'Globalization and the preparation of quality teachers: rethinking knowledge domains for teaching', *Teaching Education*, 21(1), pp.19-32. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10476210903466901>
- Gurjar, N., and Elwood, S. (2024) 'Equity-based empathy mapping in learning experience design, in M. Schmidt, Y. Earnshaw, M. Exter, A. Tawfik, and B. Hokanson (eds) *Transdisciplinary Learning Experience Design*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer, pp.145-167. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-76293-2_10
- Salvagno, M., Taccone, F., and Gerli, A. (2023) 'Can artificial intelligence help for scientific writing?', *Critical Care*, 27(75). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13054-023-04380-2>

Author details

David Busby is the Head of Digital and Academic Skills in the Skills Centre at the University of Bath. Interests include teaching academic study skills/EAP, post-digital and GenAI skills, teacher education, and learner Agency and self-efficacy. David is a panel member for Trinity Diploma TESOL examinations and is SFHEA. He is currently working on his thesis for the EdD at the University of Bath.

Licence

©2025 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>. *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education (JLDHE)* is a peer-reviewed open access

journal published by the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education
(ALDinHE).

Appendix: empathy mapping activity

What is empathy mapping?

An empathy map is a tool used in design thinking to visualise and understand the thoughts, feelings, behaviours, and needs of a specific user or group. It is a collaborative process that helps teams build a shared understanding of the user's perspective. They focus on understanding the user's perspective in a given situation and this is divided into four areas:

- What the user says, both in words and actions.
- What the user is thinking and feeling.
- What the user does, their behaviours and actions.
- What the user sees and hears in their environment.

Why use empathy maps in my context?

In my context, study skills teachers are increasingly encouraged to develop students' digital skills for employment. This is a major change for teachers whose background is English for Academic Purposes, study skills and academic literacy. I encouraged pairs of teachers to complete empathy maps to reflect on how colleagues may feel, think, say and do when faced with this change of focus towards teaching digital skills. This encouraged reflection and discussion between pairs of teachers around their own feelings about this change of focus in their work.

What teachers wrote on their empathy maps

- Some teachers felt confusion and fear about the increased focus on digital skills.
- Some feeling of redundancy in using digital tools.
- Some resistance to change.
- There was buy-in from some teachers.
- Teachers were keen to showcase successes.
- Some reported the process of developing digital skills as fun.
- Need for mentoring and collaboration.
- Need for consistent support from the institution in upskilling teachers.

What teachers said about empathy mapping

‘[It] could be helpful to explore possible positives and negatives of new processes.’

‘It’s a good way to identify weak areas or areas I’ve either skimmed over or not noticed.’

‘I think the empathy map would help me to specifically identify needs or where opportunities might be being missed.’

‘It could be used for identifying the teachers’ CPD needs.’