



Faculty of Design

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## Bridging the empathy gap to create systemic value in products

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Relating Systems Thinking and Design  
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## **Bridging the empathy gap to create systemic value in products**

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### [Outcome](#)

Integrating methods and practices into the transformative processes of systems design play a key role in deciding their value and future impact. As the challenges become increasingly complex and interwoven, they require an interdisciplinary approach to empathy to enable collaboration, creativity, and purposeful innovation. This activity session will demonstrate a new and unique tool for empathy, Active Empathy, and its core concept - the empathy gap. Active empathy is a collaborative tool grounded in design-driven methodologies to build deeper connections between various stakeholders and blur preconceived boundaries that hinder sustainable action. The intention is to reduce the empathy gaps between designers and stakeholders and introduce an empathic platform for systems design (Active Empathy, 2022). To do that, the participants will work with one of the components of the empathy gap - the priority gap. They will discover different aspects and develop ideas on reducing them in the context of the given challenge - "activating empathy in the hybrid world." Design can no longer be reserved for designers if the aim is to achieve better system impact. As designers and people, we must encourage the empathic flow in favour of meaningful exchanges to tackle complex needs, solve pressing issues, and provide long-term value. The current state of systems design is infused with proactive initiatives that need strong shared language and purpose to improve the conditions for life on the planet. We advocate for a bolder approach to connecting people and systems through the direct experience of empathy as a cycle of activities based on discovery, learning, sharing, and acting.

## RSD11 ACTIVITY

KEYWORDS: Systems design, systemic design, designers, stakeholders, empathy, empathy gap, active empathy, collaboration, design activities, design-driven methodologies

RSD TOPIC(S): Methods & Methodology, Cases & Practice.

### **Description**

The approach to empathy in product development and design thinking requires a reset. Empathy is more than putting yourself in the customers' shoes. While it begins there, designers and product teams need to take it one step further. To activate empathy, they require an impact-driven mindset, deeper collaboration, and tools for co-creation. Only then does empathy drive meaningful experiences and tailored solutions.

New tools for empathic collaboration should not be bound by either design thinking or systems thinking traditions. Transdisciplinary co-creation needs new ways to build a shared purpose and a language to activate and codify an empathic flow into systems design toward value creation. But for all that to happen, we need to rethink roles, activities, and the long-term impact of systemic initiatives.

To design through empathy means bridging the empathy gap between the designers and all the stakeholders. The empathy gap is a space to discover what is meaningful to the customer and design for long-term impact. We propose a model that breaks the empathy gap into three degrees of separation: priority, action, and value-creation gaps.

During the activity session, the participants will be given a design challenge to work on - "activating empathy in the hybrid world" and a unique collaborative tool to map the first empathy gap component - the priority gap. They will focus on the priority gap and explore ways to reduce it. The benefit will be a more holistic understanding of applying empathy and working with empathy gaps.

## RSD11 ACTIVITY

### Activity Session Format

The session will use the following format:

Activity	Duration	Description	Format
Introduction	5 min	Present the concept of the empathy gap, the importance of frameworks in activating empathy, and the challenge of the activity, "activating empathy in the hybrid world."	Presentation
Activity 1	5 min	Participants are invited to brainstorm together to answer the question: What are the limits of digital environments when it comes to empathy? We want to find together the empathy gap that appeared in the digital world.	Brainstorm for the Empathy Gap
Activity 2	10 min	Participants will be divided into two groups to create the priority gap between online and in-person to note the polarity further.	Empathy Gap tool
Activity 3	5 min	Participants will be tasked to rethink the problem as "hybrid work" and asked what actions they can take to reduce the priority gap to understand the misalignment.	Empathy Gap tool
Conclusion	5 min	Summarize the best ideas and insights.	Presentation

The proposed format for the activity session is online, using Miro as a digital collaboration tool.

## **Conclusion**

We want to empower the community with a practical and effective tool for empathic insights and demonstrate the new approach to embedding empathy in product development in collaborative design.

To become truly empathic, designers require space to connect with the solutions they build in a meaningful way. Without effective empathy tools, systems design will not mature enough to provide solutions, drive action, implement change, and achieve lasting impact.

The role of empathy in the systemic transformation journey is to overcome one of the biggest challenges – building meaningful connections with stakeholders. Unlocking a deeper response to their needs requires unique insights to provide more empowering experiences and make better informed strategic decisions.

Whether we consider empathy innate talent or a skill to develop in action, we need to rethink how to embed it in the collaborative processes to give it a voice (Bates, Petouhoff, 2022; Tzouramani, 2017).

What sets Active Empathy apart from other tools is the space allocated to work with uncertainty and unknowns (e.g., empathy gap, unknown pains and gains, unmet needs). We want to move toward a “third generation of design” where the designer’s role is broadened to become a facilitator that can integrate a diverse range of perspectives and seek meaningful actions guided by a shared vision of all stakeholders involved (Pourdehnad, Wexler, Wilson, 2011).

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