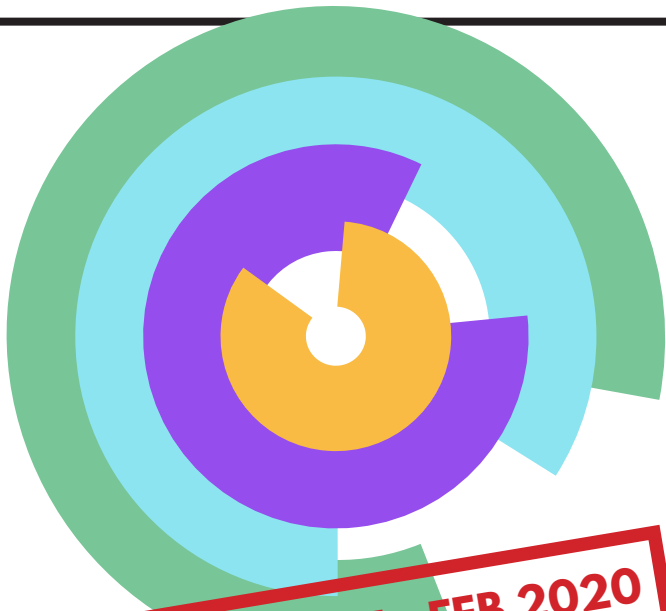# LIBERATORY DESIGN

mindsets and modes to design for equity

NEP PROTOTYPE - FEB 2020

What is this card deck?

This deck is a resource to practice Liberatory Design. It includes:

Liberatory Design Mindsets

To practice Liberatory Design authentically, it is important to carry certain mindsets in all the work you do.

Liberatory Design Modes

We've adapted the design thinking process to include modes that we believe are essential to practicing design for liberation.
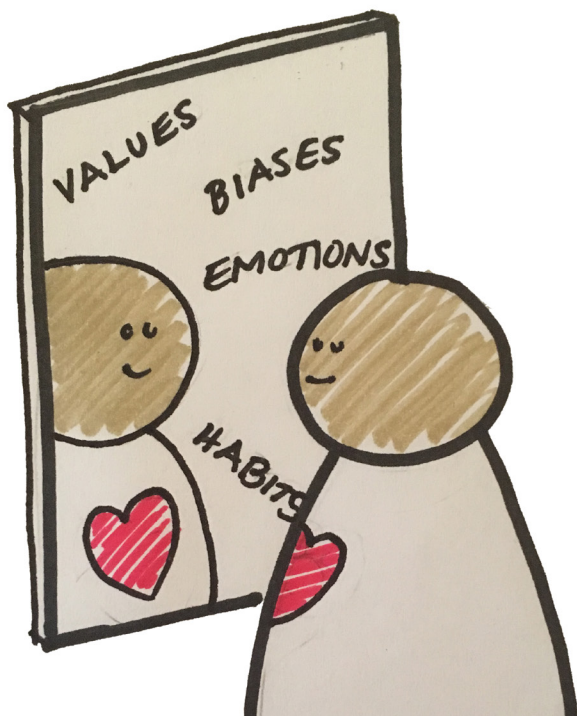
LIBERATORY DESIGN MINDSETS

Liberatory Design Mindsets

The Liberatory Design Mindsets are evolutions of the design mindsets commonly used at the Stanford d.school.

They have been enhanced with the explicit intention of building Liberatory Design leaders through a collaboration between the National Equity Project and the Stanford d.school's K12 Lab.

The goal is to develop the Liberatory Design muscles held within us all. As we build our own muscles, it allows others who work with us to develop the equity-centered creative agency to solve their own problems in community with others.

Tania Anaissie, Victor Cary, David Clifford, Tom Malarkey, Susie Wise

Practice Self-Awareness

We design from who we are. So we need a clear "mirror" to better see how who we are shapes what we see, how we relate, and how we design.

Practice Self-Awareness

Why?

Liberatory Design requires we minimize the harmful effects of our blind spots and maximize the potential for non-oppressive partnerships. Liberatory Design has the potential to change us to the extent we work with humility, curiosity and courage.

How

- Ask yourself, "How am I positioned (relative to privilege and/or oppression) in all aspects of my identities (e.g. race, class, gender, language)?"
- Ask yourself, "How might these identities impact people and our process?"
- Surface what you don't know. Ask yourself, "What is unfamiliar to me here?"
- Challenge your assumptions.
- Expand your equity consciousness by seeking out new information about privilege and oppression.
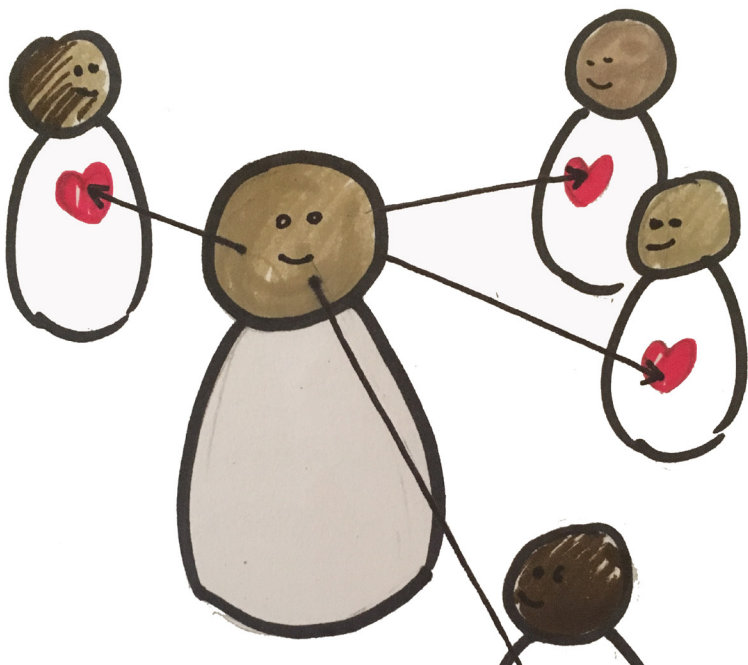
Focus on Human Values

Seek as many ways as possible to get to know your end users including immersion, observation, and co-design.

Focus on Human Values

Why?

In order to create change that empowers communities from the inside-out, we must place users at the center of all our work. They are the experts on the challenges that face their community.

To do this as designers, we must invest in getting to know the community and honor the stories they share with us.

In addition, we must honor human values on our own design teams and make time for emotions.

How

- Listen from a place of love. Be humble and acknowledge that you are not the expert.
- Honor the stories, experiences, and emotions people share with you.
- Stay connected to the community in all phases of the project.
- Engage in collective sense-making.
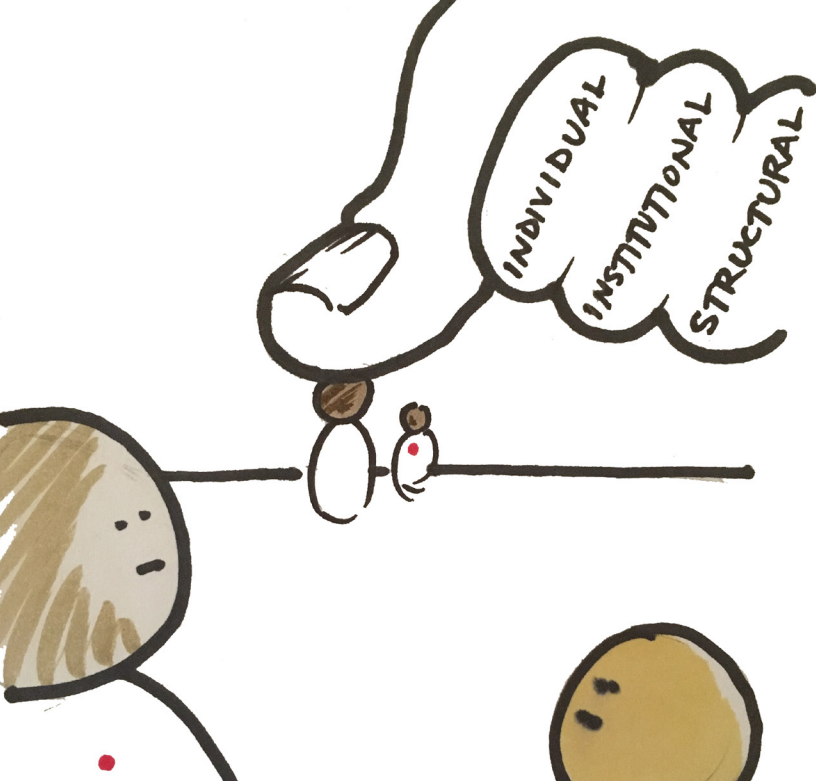
Recognize Oppression

Our designs depend on how we frame a challenge. So we need a clear "window" to see how oppression may be at play in our context.

Recognize Oppression

Why?

The people we are designing with and the challenges they face do not sit in a vacuum. If we are able to see root causes and systemic inequities more clearly, our design work has the potential to address deeper needs. Our design process should build our capacity to recognize oppression at play at individual, institutional, and structural levels.

How

- Ask, "What identity-related patterns and inequities are we seeing in this context?"
- Ask, "What barriers are in the way of achieving equitable outcomes?"
- Ask, "What might be some unintended consequences of our designs?"
- Ask, "What is this community's experience with 'design' and how does that affect how we do this work?"
- Ask, "How are relationships and power differentials affecting the truth that is told here?"
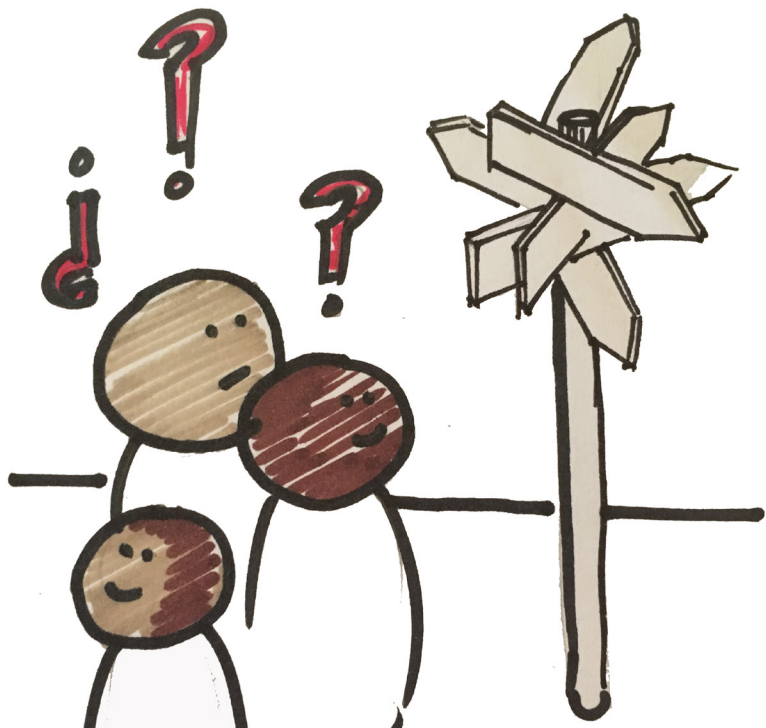
Embrace Complexity

When the going gets messy, stay open to possibility. Powerful design emerges from the mess, not from avoiding it.

Embrace Complexity

Why?

Equity challenges, by their nature, are complex, and moments of ambiguity are common when using the design process.

While it can be uncomfortable not knowing what's next or not having a clear answer, jumping to a solution out of discomfort risks defaulting to comfortable or reproductive practices.

Wading through the complexity and ambiguity of this kind of work with patience will allow you to develop more innovative and equitable outcomes.

How

- Acknowledge the confusion and discomfort of the uncertainty present in your work.
- Find ways to care for the team and yourself as you wade through the uncertainty.
- Welcome diversity of discourse even when it can feel complicating.
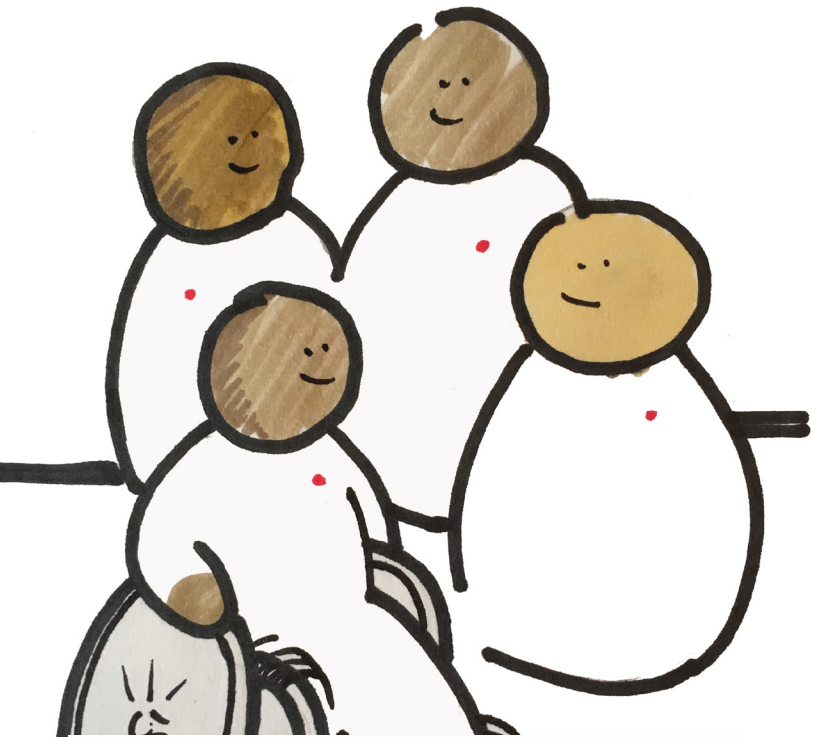
Seek Liberatory Collaboration

Recognize differences in power and identity.
Design "with" instead of "for."

Seek Liberatory Collaboration

Why?

Design work is fraught with power and identity dynamics (e.g. designer as expert, who's generally situated with advantage). To fully realize the liberatory potential of a design process, both for the people we are designing with and for the designer, it's critical to reframe the relationship as one of partnership.

How

- Actively seek diverse identities and skill sets as you build your team.
- Acknowledge and build from the strengths, stories, and skills of each other.
- Set conditions for collective learning, risk-taking, and action.
- When framing the question, "How Might We…?" ensure the "We" is diverse and inclusive.

Build Relational Trust

Intentionally invest in relationships, especially across difference. Honor stories and listen for emotions.

Build Relational Trust

Why?

Relational trust is the glue in equity-centered design work. When working across difference on difficult challenges, teams must invest in developing emotional trust in order to authentically collaborate.

If we are comfortable identifying and processing emotions with our team, we create opportunities for healing and prevent distortion of our work.

How

- Enable personal connections through pair-shares (people share what matters to them).
- Make time and space for people to bring forward their fuller selves and identities.
- Emphasize the importance of non-judgmental listening.
- Hold space for community to reflect, express and process thoughts and emotions.
- Create culture that invites dialogue.
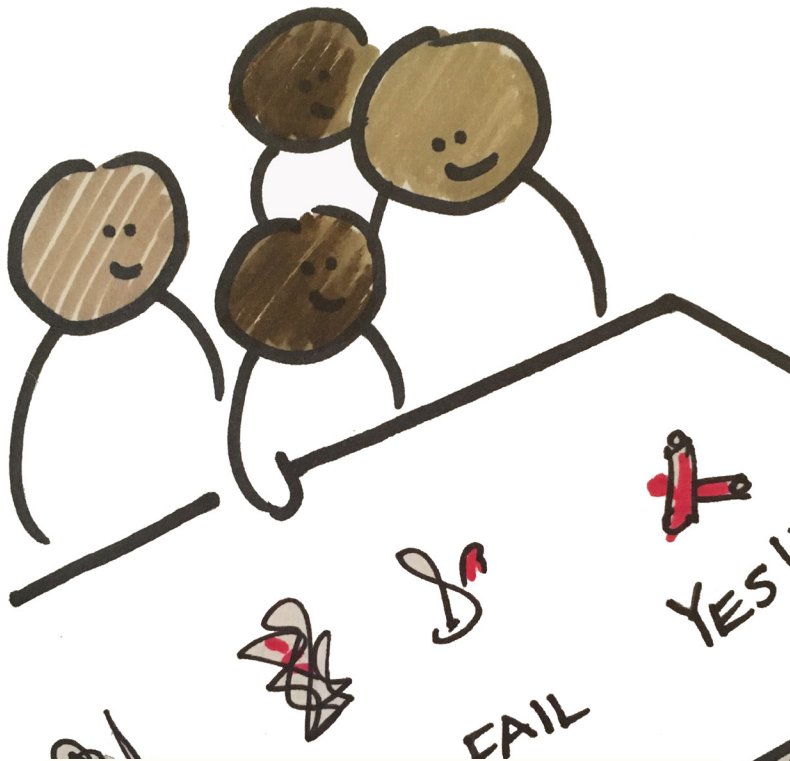
Bias Towards Experimentation

The complexity of oppression requires courageous action. Build to think and learn.

Bias Towards Experimentation

Why?

Oppression thrives on risk-averse behavior. It's important to fail fast. Small changes can have large effects - AND hacking oppression requires longshots. Liberatory Design is an ever-evolving craft that is never "done."

How

- Co-design safe-to-fail experiments to learn more.
- Build trust through experiments increasing in scale or risk over time.
- Build agency and capacity in the community through co-designed and implemented experiments.
- Balance quick action with thoughtful reflection.
- Choose a direction, not a single or final solution.

Share, Don't Sell

Practice transparency of process and non-attachment to ideas.

Share, Don't Sell

Why?

When sharing your work, find ways to invite people in instead of trying to convince them of value. When you share your work humbly, it invites feedback and questions that could advance your work. In addition, it widens your circle of collaborators and invites those people to co-design with you.

Conversely, if we focus on selling or convincing, we are losing opportunities to refine our work and incorporate new perspectives.

How

- Be transparent about the team's process, mindsets, shared goals, expectations and co-constructed narratives.
- Share as an opportunity to learn and grow.
- Earn trust through actions and not just words.
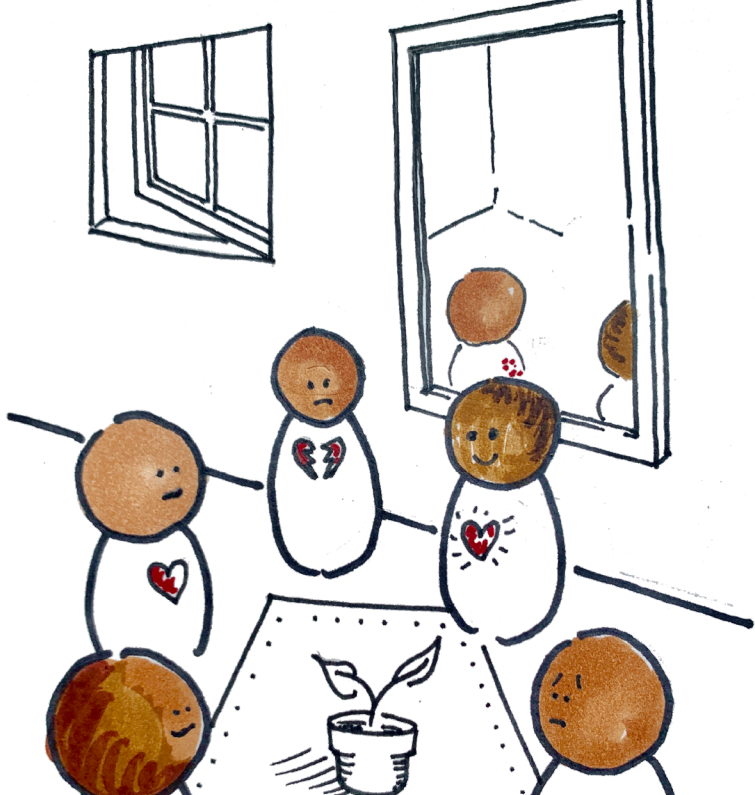
Attend to Healing

Doing equity work includes on-going healing from the effects of oppression to increase our agency for liberatory design thinking.

Attend to Healing

Why?

We must attend to healing from past and current traumas to be able to stay in this work, engender a sense of well-being, collaborate in truly liberatory ways, and build authentic relationships as co-designers. Modern work culture pressures us to be constantly executing, working through pain and discomfort in order to be efficient and productive. We believe this brings toxicity into teams and fuels inequitable work. We instead believe that healing is a critical element of this work. We acknowledge that healing is a never-ending state of being and not something to be "resolved."

How

- Establish protocols for how to name when someone is feeling pain or there is opportunity for healing.
- Identify regular methods to practice healing in group and private settings (poetry, check-ins, somatic body work, work retreats, mental health support, etc).
- Include time and space for healing in all project planning timelines.
- Explore existing frameworks for managing conflict equitably, for example restorative justice practices.
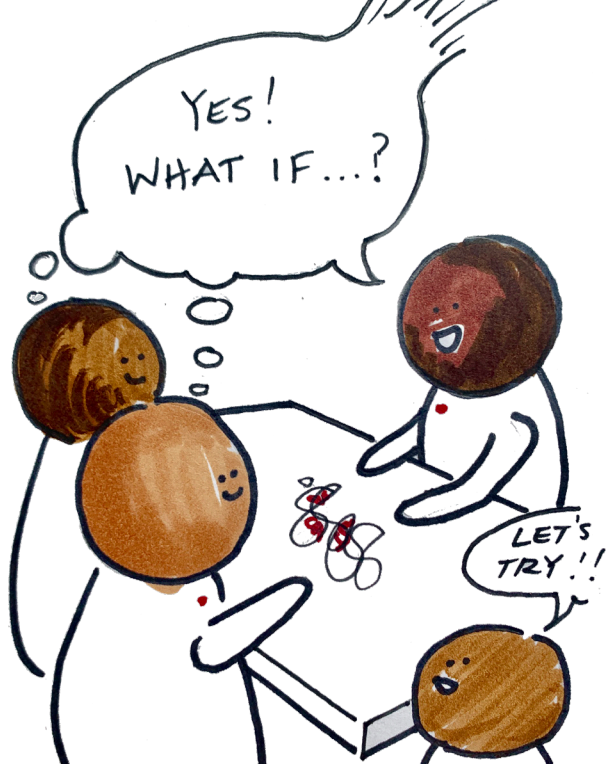
Exercise Your Creative Courage

Every human has the capacity to be creative. Before there is confidence, there is the courage required to navigate self-doubt and creative fragility. Trust your inherent creativity muscles and flex them with courage.

Exercise Your Creative Courage

Why?

We believe that everyone is creative. Further, we believe all humans are designers, intentionally or not. Because of school, work and the media, many people are led to believe that only a select few are born creative and others of us are not, nor will ever be. Coming to see oneself as creative, as a designer, is a liberatory process.

Creativity is fundamental to equity and liberation. We need to imagine possibilities beyond the boxes of dominant culture. And, since joy, connection and healing flow from creative experiences, we must make creative expression part of our collaborative processes. At times the critical part of "critical consciousness" can suppress creative risk-taking. Liberatory Design can help build the creative courage needed to interrupt oppression.

How

- Design a learning or work environment that invites each member to feel the courage to be creative. This might look like:
- Collectively define what design or creativity means (looks like, feels like, lives like) to your organization/team.
- Value creativity as a literacy and crucial skill for designing for liberation.
- Invite wild ideas and celebrate the mistakes that come with actually trying them, publicly.
- Notice and affirm creative moves by your collaborators.
- Leadership models creative approaches to a problem.
- Identify places in your context/process (activities, interactions, rituals, and objects) that can catalyze creativity.
- Listen with a curious heart, not critical. The results will astound you.
- Remember, creativity is not magic. It is a life-long rigorous discipline requiring intention and practice.
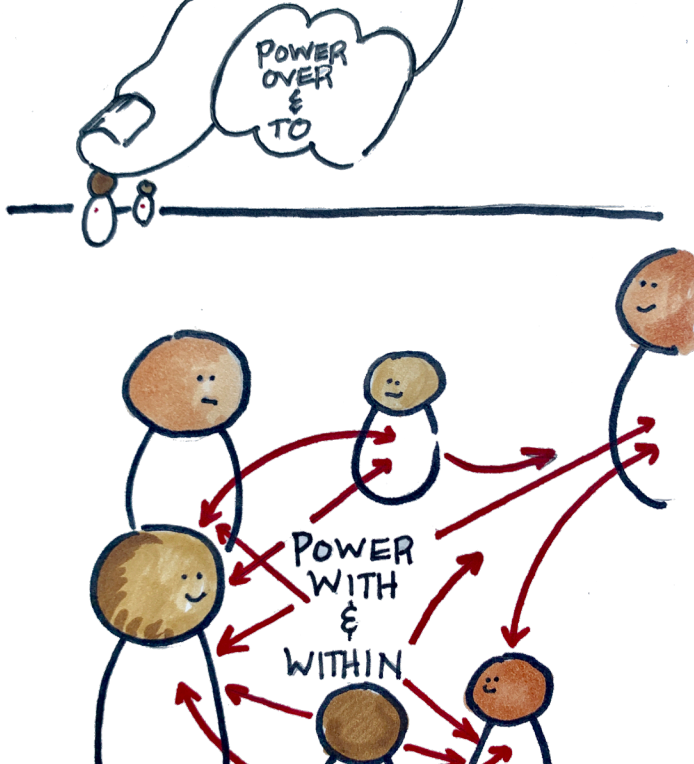
Catalyze Opportunities to Transform Power

Inequity thrives in situations of power imbalance. Look for ways to transform power to invite and experience liberatory collaboration. Move away from power "over" or "to" and design toward power "with" and "within" to interrupt the reproduction of power dynamics.

Catalyze Opportunities to Transform Power

Why?

Transforming power allows our teams to contribute authentically and challenge inequity when it manifests in the work or on the team. Power structures shape aspects of our identity and role, and our relative positions can often impede collaboration or replicate inequity when not addressed.

Opportunities to transform power:
Process:
Who's designing (choices around co-design)?
How do we address power within the design group (internal practices)?
How does the design group engages with those impacted (external practices)?
Product:
Do our designs serve to transform power?

How

- Reflect on identities and roles across the team. Discuss potential power imbalances that would occur in various situations. How might they manifest in our processes?
- Build a strategy to transform power in conversations, decision-making, presentations, etc.
- Build shared protocols to name and intercept power imbalances in action as soon as they manifest.
- Notice and discuss power in both it's earned and unearned manifestations based on what our society values.
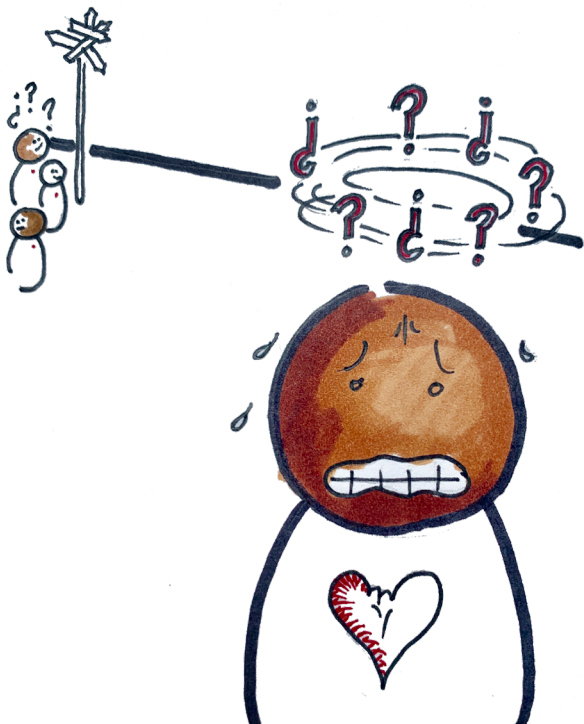
Work with Our Fear and Discomfort

Fear and discomfort are an anticipated parts of this work.
This includes feelings related to the situation, as well as
what it brings up for you as a designer given who you are.
Identifying sources of the fear and discomfort allows us to
advance our design work if good or address it if harmful.

Work with Our Fear and Discomfort

Why?

Working in emergent ways on high-stakes challenges of inequity can be stressful. The fear and discomfort we feel is an anticipated part of the Liberatory Design process. It signals to us that there are aspects of our work that are unresolved.

Note, there is a difference between discomfort that arises from the complexity of the challenge and its unknown direction and the discomfort that arises from inequitable dynamics or structures. The first can be a source of growth and creativity while the latter can be destructive and should be addressed. Refer to "Attend to Healing" in that case to release emotions and work towards well-being.

How

- Give space to process and accept that it is present.
- Name the fear or discomfort and discuss what the sources of it might be: lack of clarity? How we're working? A conflict?
- Establish protocols for how to name fear and discomfort and explore their sources as a team.
- Reflect on why it's occurring and if it's a productive moment of fear/ discomfort or if it's becoming unproductive and we need to seek ways to alleviate it.

LIBERATORY DESIGN MODES
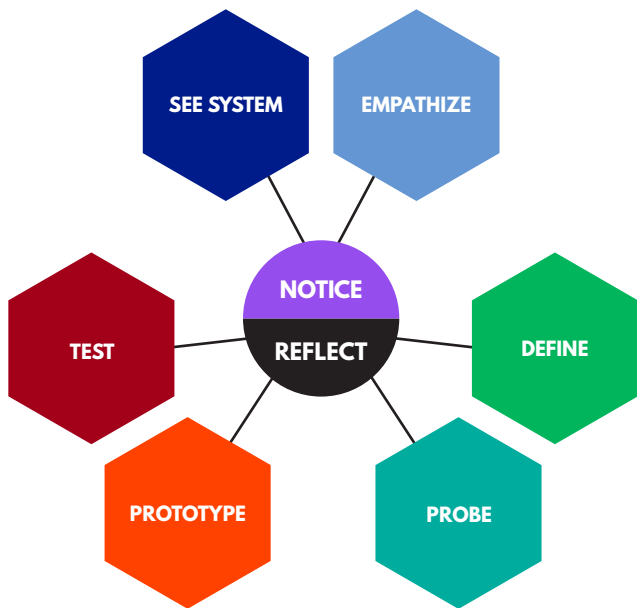
Liberatory Design Modes

The Liberatory Design Modes are adapted from the Stanford d.school's design thinking process.

We've adapted the original framework to create the opportunity for designers to NOTICE + REFLECT on what they are bringing to a design thinking challenge.

Noticing and reflecting through the modes allows designers to redesign themselves as equity-centered. These new designers emerge self-aware of their identity, beliefs, biases and values. They are able to make authentic connections between who they are and who they're designing with. They co-create and co-construct a new paradigm of design, one that is diverse, inclusive and equitable.

Alphabetically: Tania Anaissie, Victor Cary, David Clifford, Tom Malarkey, Susie Wise

NOTICE

REFLECT

NOTICE & REFLECT

What?

NOTICE and REFLECT are the core of Liberatory Design. We return to these throughout our process. In the NOTICE mode we practice self-awareness (mirror) and situational awareness (window) so we can approach our design work intentionally. In the REFLECT mode, we pause our process to reflect on our actions, impact, emotions, relationship —and adjust our intentions, direction, presence. In both modes, the Liberatory Design MINDSETS are key tools to use.

Key Questions to Ask

Identity: Who am I? Who are we? Who are we designing for? What biases and assumptions might we be bringing?

Power: What are the roles and power relationships on our team? Where does decision-making authority relative to our design focus sit?

Emotion: What feelings are present? What do we want to be aware of?

Context: What is the current state of our 'design situation'? What has led to this current state?

SEE THE SYSTEM

SEE THE SYSTEM

What?

The SEE THE SYSTEM phase of the process starts with situational awareness by people in an organization or system. It involves recognizing the current state of the system from different angles: (inequitable) patterns of outcomes and experiences; the current state of structures, plans, policies and processes; and the deeper ways that history and systemic oppression has shaped the current situation.

At the start of a design process, Seeing the System enables designers to identify potential equity challenges to focus on and what they need to learn more about as they engage in Empathy work.

Key Questions to Ask

What patterns of experience and outcomes (inequities) are playing out in our system? How do we know?

What structures are at play in this? What is the current state of these structures? What has been emerging in our system relative to these patterns?

2

EMPATHIZE

EMPATHIZE

What?

The EMPATHIZE phase of the process is focused on understanding the experiences, emotions and motivations of others. Designers use specific empathy methods to learn more about the needs of the users for whom they are designing.

Key Questions to Ask

How does my identity and role in this project affect how and what people share with me?

How do I maintain awareness of my biases and challenge them in order to see this community more authentically?

What do people in this community identify as their needs?

How do systemic oppression and/or privilege affect this community, and how does that relate to this project?

DEFINE

DEFINE

What?

The DEFINE phase of the process is focused on developing a point of view about the needs of the community. It is especially important in this phase to work alongside community members. In this phase, you search for patterns or insights from your interviews that reveal deeper needs of the community. Using what you've distilled from the conversations, you narrow the project focus.

It is important to notice and reflect on what comprises the team of "We" when creating "How might we..." problem statements.

Key Questions to Ask

How can we insure we are reaching a point of view that is authentic and not distorted by biases?

What is the larger ecosystem in which our project focus lives? What influences it?

PROBE

PROBE

What?

The PROBE phase of the process is focused on small, "safe to fail" actions that help us better understand the complex equity challenge we're addressing. Probes are typically not solutions or interventions, but easily doable moves that reveal important information about the context and challenge. A probe is like a flashlight - illuminating the dark (complex) terrain ahead, so you have a better sense of where to go (and not go) next.

We design and learn from Probes to help us better Define the challenge and provide a clearer direction for our Prototyping.

Key Questions to Ask

What do we still need to better understand - about our stakeholders, the system, and what is creating the inequity were focused on?

What are available opportunities to try small things that will reveal more?

PROTOTYPE

PROTOTYPE

What?

The PROTOTYPE phase involves iterative development of tangible artifacts or experiences intended to elicit feedback and answer specific questions about a concept.

In this phase, we Build to Think. Building out an idea raises new questions and pushes the team to refine ideas.

Key Questions to Ask

What assumptions are we making that we want tested in this prototype?

How can we quickly build a representation of our idea that does not require a lot of explanation?

TEST

TEST

What?

The TEST phase of the process is focused on getting specific feedback on our prototype, checking our assumptions, and learning how to improve our design. It is important to remember during this phase that prototypes are imperfect and feedback is a gift.

Key Questions to Ask

How are we creating the right environment so that it is truly safe to fail?

Have we included all the voices and identities necessary into the room to receive feedback?

Credits + an Invitation

Thank you, team!

Thank you to the wonderful people who put love, brain power, and intention into the making of the original card deck (alphabetically):

Tania Anaissie (Content + Visual Design)
Victor Cary (Content)
David Clifford (Content + Illustrations)
Tom Malarkey (Content)
Susie Wise (Content)

Iterated content for this prototype made by Victor Cary and Tom Malarkey.

We Want to Hear From You

This card deck is a work in progress. This is NEP's first prototype with new modes, and we'd love to hear your feedback! What do you like about it? What do you wish was different about it? Any new ideas? Do you use it at work? Why or why not?

Email us at liberatorydesign@gmail.com

This deck is an iteration of the original deck created through a collaboration between the National Equity Project and the Stanford d.school's K12 Lab in 2016-2017.

NATIONAL
EQUITY
PROJECT

d.K12 LAB
NETWORK