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# Design Thinking Tools for Qualitative Researchers

Qualitative Research Consultants (QRCs) are experts at delivering customer experience-based insight. A sister discipline, Design Thinking (DT), grapples with the conundrum of how to inspire design, stirring the pot enough to generate fresh new approaches. When QRCs integrate DT processes into qualitative research, we reach whole new levels of insight. As QRCs, we brought a creative thinking-based moderating mindset to a thought-provoking conversation with prominent Design Thinking expert and former IDEO Team Leader, Ela Ben-Ur, to explain how DT tools can be included in the QRC arsenal.

## Design Thinking Mindset Is a Natural Fit with Qualitative Research

Essentially, Design Thinking is dedicated to a core principal referred to as “Stretch.” Successful facilitation of “stretching” reaches deep beneath the surface with participants, encourages each of us to become an observer, and challenges the thinking of client-observers. Ela describes a number of powerful benefits to the kind of stretching the Design Thinking mindset creates:

- Helping to support and foster *creative potential* within each person, honoring the leader and the learner in each individual.

- *Bringing disparate voices and teams together*, trying out all *perspectives and viewpoints*.
- Remaining *curious* and *empathic* about stories.
- Embracing *inspiration* and “*gut feelings*” as an equal partner to analytical thinking.
- Opening doors to *creatively imagining* ideas, then *pulling out all the stops* in the search for new views, drawing on limitless possibilities.
- *Not being afraid to fail*, and, with this in mind, constantly *experimenting* in courageous, resourceful, and optimistic ways.

## The Intersection of Insight & Empathy

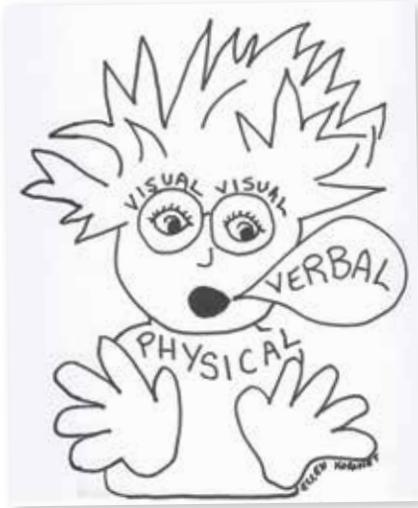
*“Insight and empathy are lingo for what happens when people are inspired to create meaningful, relevant, impactful solutions for people’s lives. Empathy is more about the heart, and is difficult to express in a recognizable form. Insight, even if it comes through an emotion or unarticulated thought, comes through verbally, can be intellectualized, and usually has a clear foothold into designing or strategic planning.”* Ela Ben-Ur

Insight and empathy are critical elements of qualitative research and DT. The intention of both is to integrate visceral or empathic connections into the process of observing, exploring, coming up with new views, and then taking the next step into designing solutions. This requires tapping into three main modes of expression: Visual, Verbal, and Physical (see exhibit 1).

Using a multi-modal approach to explore ideas, prototype them, and try them out brings all of our faculties to the table. The result is both higher quantity and quality solutions and insights as well as more internalization and engagement on the part of our clients. The goal is to trigger the imaginations of all involved. The challenge through all of this is to tap into all the ways we explore and express ideas.

“Empathy experiments involve immersion in another person’s experience, eliciting an inquisitive and curious perspective.”

EXHIBIT 1



**Bringing Expressive Modes All Together**  
*Verbal and Visual Techniques*

Verbal and visual techniques are plentiful in the QRC world. If we wish to enhance these basic modes of expression, we must draw on archetypal or metaphorical techniques. From the DT perspective, IDEO method cards present participants with design prompts that challenge habitual thinking and elicit new views. From the qualitative research side, there are a number of archetypal picture card decks. Even when used as simple icebreakers, the images and symbols enmeshed in such archetypal qualities effectively pull participants out of analytical storytelling and into the stretchy space of whole brain exploration and sharing.

Another example of enhanced visual and verbal exploration is to lead respondents through a personal analogy technique. In one method, respondents are asked to close their eyes, thus inhibiting the usual (left-brain) cues that influence storytelling, and they are then led through a visualization exercise, engaging the imagination (right-brain). In this way, participants are encouraged to let go of expectations and rutted concepts by becoming both “observer” and “participant,” capturing whole new views of the imagined experience. While still relying on verbal communication, responses are no longer contrived through the intellect but are placed back in a contextual, heartfelt space.

“We can encourage participants to let go of expectations and rutted concepts by becoming both ‘observer’ and ‘participant,’ capturing whole new views of the experience.”

*Physical Techniques*

Bringing in physical modes of expression while continuing to apply deeply-engaged observation and metaphorical thinking requires an even more deliberate effort. Some suggestions include:

- Use theatrical *improvisation* techniques to energize, engage, and have respondents bring ideas to life.
- Watch for opportunities to *physically show* an idea or response: When people say, “This is what I do” ask, “Can you show me?”

“Empathy Experiments” provide another excellent method of engaging the physical component. Empathy experiments involve immersion in another person’s experience, eliciting an inquisitive and curious perspective. For example, in a study of a consumer packaged goods product targeted at low income moms, clients were immersed in an experience to demonstrate the emotional impact of making difficult trade-offs. Clients were physically given a limited cash budget and asked to make purchases prior to fielding the study. The instructions were to be inquisitive and to observe the pain points in making selections in-store. Experiencing the pain points allowed these clients to feel empathy for the consumer experience.

**Design Thinking in Your Practice**

As QRCs, we must continue to become more thoughtful and deliberate about how we embrace the process of exploration. We can do this by introducing a “next step” into qualitative phases of research by engaging respondents in the process of designing prototypes, product ideation, or even strategic development. Even without this additional step, we can infuse Design Thinking tools all the

way through our work, keeping in mind a few useful tips.

*Tips for the Team:*

- Ask for engagement from designers and engineers prior to or as part of the qualitative research process.
- To bring the experience of what it feels like to the respondent in the moment of facing the tough decisions, recreate environments/situations (real or analogous), even asking back-room observers to perform the same tasks as respondents.
- As always, encourage clients to view qualitative research as inspiration.

*“The intent for QRCs is that you draw inspiration from the environment by eliciting imagery that will help feed designers’ needs for tangible inspiration, making sure to draw lines of inquiry and insight from these images and ideas. QRCs can and should offer implications for design as well as giving designers more to go on to visually and viscerally discover their own.”* Ela Ben-Ur

*Tips for the QRC:*

- Continue to approach every task and every discussion with the curiosity of an explorer, looking at the topic from different perspectives.
- Borrow from the “designer mindset,” going even deeper, paying more attention to “intuitive” thoughts, and making space for following “hunches.”
- Engage your whole self at every opportunity. Ask, “Am I using my eyes, ears, hands, body?” 🇺🇸