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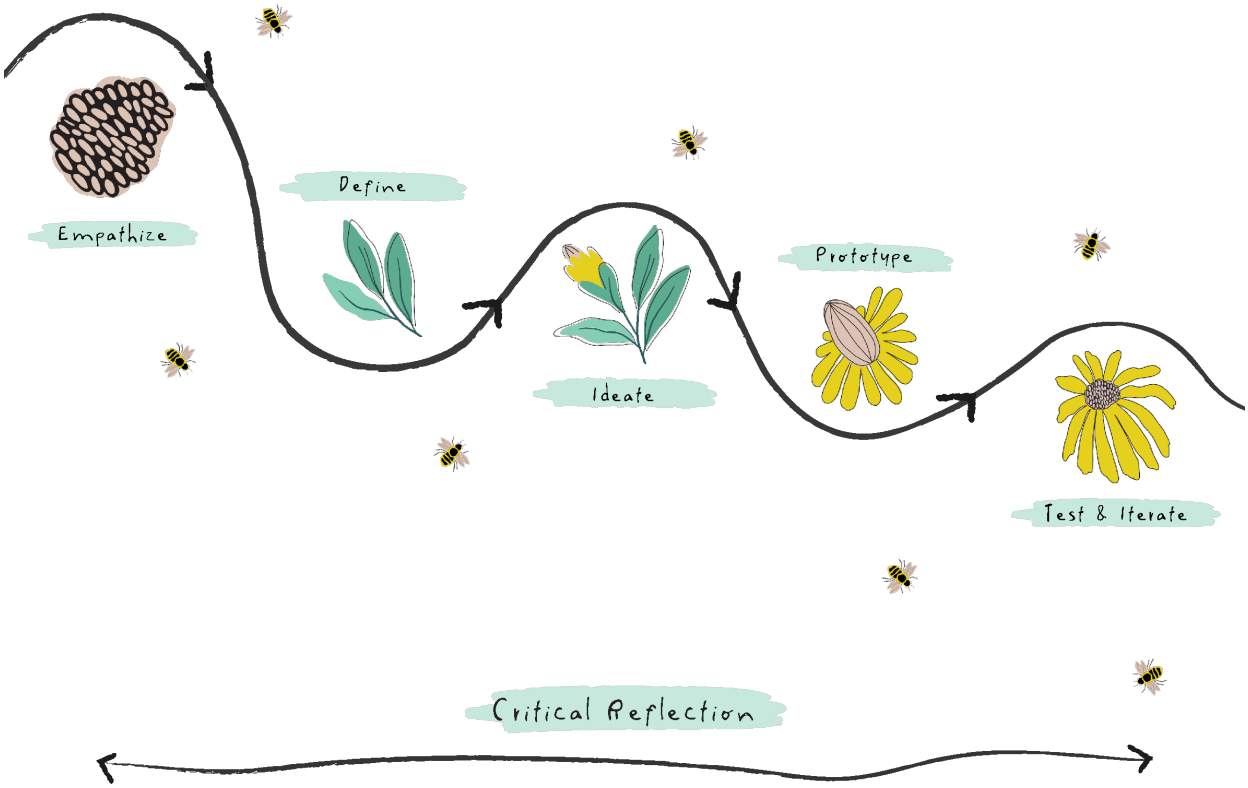
Extremes & Mainstreams

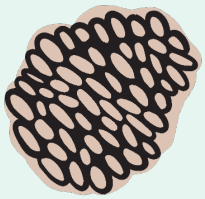
Widening the lens on whose voices shape the early stages of human-centered design

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Introduction

In the Empathize phase of human-centered design, we get our first chance to listen and learn from the end users that will eventually use the services and products we design.



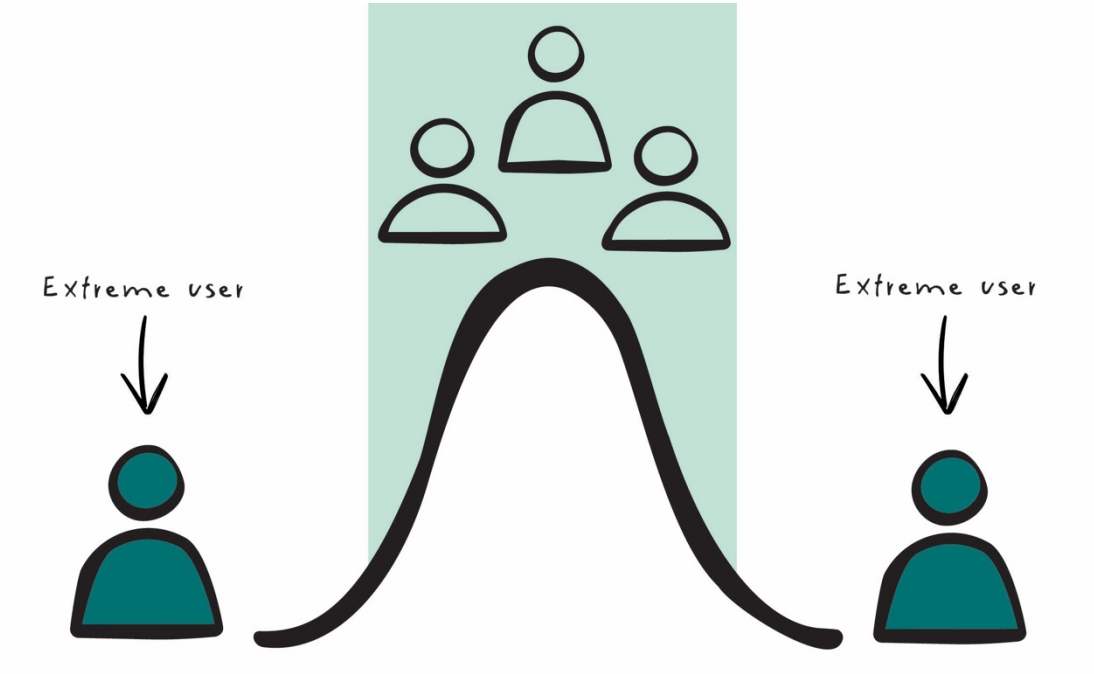


Empathize. We try to really get to know the people we are designing with by gathering information about their experiences, needs, and challenges. We conduct research to discover their needs and goals, pain points and challenges, behaviors and motivations, emotional states and attitudes, expectations and preferences, and strengths and assets.

As designers, we aim to stretch our understanding beyond our own assumptions and build a real relationship with the end user. The depth and breadth of what we learn in this phase sets the foundation for everything that follows and keeps the end user at the center of the work.

Who we listen to shapes what we learn.

In other design practices, it can be natural to focus on the **mainstream** users—the ones who fall in the middle of the spectrum. They represent the most typical use cases. In human-centered design, our role is to understand the full spectrum of users and to see those who sit more at the edges, with unusual needs or contexts. When these users' needs are neglected, the design often fails to work for them. In the Empathize phase, naming our **extreme** users helps us bring their voices into the design process.



What Are Extremes & Mainstreams?

Naming extreme users starts with noticing what makes their experience different. They might engage with something more intensely than most, have unique constraints, or find creative workarounds that no one else has thought of.

Let's say we're noticing the following problem: high school students not getting the sexual health information they need.

One extreme user might be a student whose school doesn't offer sex ed at all and is piecing things together from social media and friends.

A mainstream user might be a 10th grader who attends the standard health class, takes notes, and walks away understanding the basics.

Another extreme user might be a student who sat through the curriculum and found nothing in it that reflected their life.

These extreme cases can shine a light on hidden needs and creative solutions that benefit everyone, including mainstream users.

Mainstreams: People whose experiences resemble the majority of end users are mainstreams. They reflect common, shared, or expected patterns within a community.

Extremes: People whose experiences sit at the edges of the end-user population are extremes. They may engage with something far more than most, far less than most, or in ways that the middle does not.

Identifying Extreme Users

There are many ways to find extremes. The steps below offer one of them, moving from a design challenge to a clear set of extremes worth listening to.

1. Start with your problem area.

Name the design challenge clearly. This is the question that will shape who might fit in an extreme. Examples:

- Young people in high school wanting to talk honestly about sexual health with their peers without judgment or teasing
- Young people ages 16–24 struggling to recognize what a healthy relationship looks and feels like
- Young people feeling unseen or unheard during clinic intake

These design challenges are often written in "How might we" questions. To learn more, see this tip sheet on crafting "How might we" questions.

2. Generate categories of possible extremes.

A category is a dimension of experience, not a label on a person. For an adolescent sexual health project, categories might include adolescents' use of technology, family conversations about health, comfort talking to adults, or access to school-based health services.

If you are working with a team, take some time to generate dimensions on your own first, then come together to share. Individual thinking before group talk often surfaces a wider range of categories.

3. Identify the actual extremes within each category.

For each category, name what the edges look like. For “adolescents' use of technology,” one extreme might be teens who live online, and another might be teens who avoid technology altogether. Most categories have at least two edges, and sometimes more.

With a team, this is a good moment to talk through extremes together, so each category gets explored from multiple angles.



4. Hold space for multiple extremes within the same problem area.

A single design challenge will almost always have more than one set of edges worth exploring. Each one opens a different view of the experience. The goal is not to find the one true extreme. It is to add dimension to the design output, incorporating a wide range of experiences within the user group.

5. Choose where to begin listening.

You will not be able to reach every edge in one round. Pick the extremes most likely to reveal something you have not yet seen and stay open to returning to others as the work unfolds.

Examples

Problem area:

High school students not getting the sexual health information they need

Extreme		Category		Extreme
Never speaks. Sits in the back, processes silently, would rather not be called on at all.	←	**Confidence speaking up in class**	→	**Always has their hand up.** First to ask, first to volunteer, comfortable being seen asking about anything.
Coming in cold. Has never had a formal sex ed class, learning the basics for the first time in a room full of peers.	←	**Prior exposure to sex ed**	→	**Starting out with prior knowledge.** Had exposure to sex ed curriculum, seeks to find the answers, knows who to talk to, and is ready for deeper conversations.
Quiet at home. Sex and relationships are not discussed at home. Comes into class without that home conversation as backdrop.	←	**Family conversations about sex**	→	**Open at home.** Talks with caregivers about bodies, relationships, and health. Comes into class with home conversations already started.

Problem area:

A sex ed campaign for high schoolers

Extreme	Category	Extreme
Lives online. Sees dozens of posts about sex and relationships a day, follows sex ed creators, gets language for the body and relationships from social media.	**Online life intensity**	**Rarely scrolls.** Not on most apps, hears about sex and relationships only through friends, family, or class.
One close best friend. Confides every question in one person, has no other regular outlets.	**Size of friend group**	**Wide circle of acquaintances.** Knows many people loosely, has no one in particular to share the more vulnerable questions with.
Skeptical. Has tuned out adult voices on sex and relationships. Sees them as filtered, awkward, or out of touch.	**Trust in adult-led messaging**	**Receptive.** Trusts what schools, clinics, and public health voices say. Pays attention when adults speak about sexual health.

Applying Extremes & Mainstreams to the Design Process

Once we know who we want to reach, the *how* matters as much as the *who*. People at the extremes are often asked to share their stories without being honored for what they bring. A few practices can help:

- **Be intentional, not extractive.** Build relationships before asking for a story. Share the why of the work and what will happen with what is shared.
- **Honor the labor of sharing.** Compensate people for their time, bring food, and make space for rest.
- **Match the method to the person.** A formal interview may not feel safe or familiar. A guided tour, photo journal, collage, or conversation over a meal may open them up more.
- **Listen for what isn't being said.** Workarounds, silences, and refusals are insights, too. The unspoken experience is just as important as what gets shared verbally.
- **Hold the middle and the edges together.** Don't trade one for the other. The richness comes from the conversation between them.

Things to watch for:

Tokenizing. One conversation with one person at an edge is not the whole story. Reach for multiple voices.

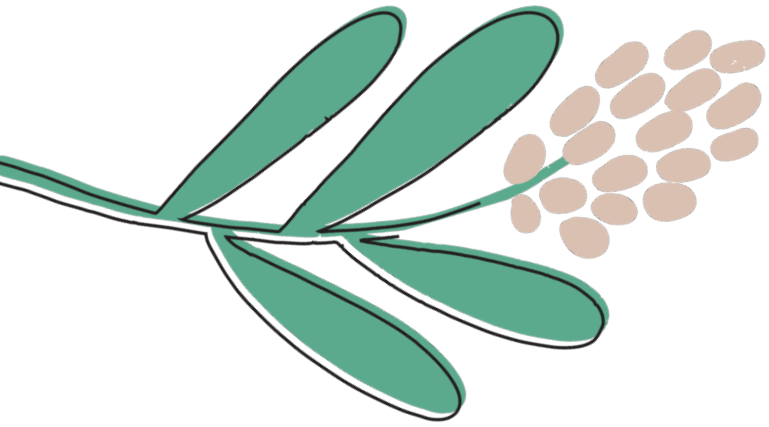
Treating one person as a spokesperson. No one represents an entire community or identity group. Each person has their own story.

Stopping at the easy edges. The edges most visible to us are often the ones our existing networks already touch. Stretch further.

Flattening the middle. The mainstream is not boring or uniform. Listen there with the same care.

Conclusion

When we design only for the mainstream, we often design for no one in particular. People whose experiences sit at the extremes tend to feel friction first and feel it most deeply. Their workarounds, adaptations, and refusals reveal what those in the middle cannot. These hidden challenges can be ripe for opportunities in human-centered design as they expand our empathy-building in the process. When we bring more people in at the extremes, we also get a better understanding of our mainstreams. We get to uncover what we'd otherwise miss that can bring impact to our innovation.



Dream with us!

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