What are the 6 steps of the Design Thinking process?

**Step 1: Empathize**

Empathize: Develop knowledge of what your learners do, say, think, and feel.

Imagine your goal is to improve an onboarding experience for new learners, like welcoming adult learners into a new, blended-learning program. In this phase, you talk to a range of actual learners. Directly observe what they do, how they think, and what they want, asking yourself things like ‘what motivates or discourages learners?’ or ‘where do they experience frustration?’ The goal is to gather enough observations that you can truly begin to empathize with your learners and their perspectives.

**Step 2: Define**

Define: Combine all your brainstorming and begin to highlight opportunities for innovation.

Consider the onboarding example again. In the define phase, use the data gathered in the empathize phase to glean insights. Organize all your observations and draw parallels across your learners’ current experiences. Is there a common pain point across many different learners? Identify unmet learner needs.

**Step 3: Ideate**

Ideate: Brainstorm a range of creative ideas that address the unmet learner needs identified in the define phase.

At this phase, we encourage you to bring your peers, colleagues, supporting staff members, or stakeholders together and sketch out many different ideas. Then, have them share ideas with one another, mixing and remixing, building on others' ideas. Give yourself and your people total freedom; no idea is too farfetched and quantity supersedes quality.

**Step 4: Prototype**

Prototype: The goal of this phase is to understand what components of your ideas work

Make your ideas tactile. If it is a new landing page, draw out a frame and get feedback internally.  Change it based on feedback, then prototype it again in quickly. Then, share it with another group of people! In this phase, you begin to weigh the impact vs. feasibility of your ideas through feedback on your prototypes.

**Step 5: Test**

Test: Ask yourself ‘Has this solution improved how the learners might feel, think, or do their tasks?’

Put your prototype in front of real learners and verify that it achieves your goals. Has the learners’ perspective during onboarding improved? Does the new landing page increase time or money spent on your site? As you are executing your vision, continue to test along the way.

**Step 6: Implement**

Implement: Put the vision into effect. Ensure that your solution is materialized and touches the lives of your end learners.

This is the most important part of design thinking, but it is the one most often forgotten. As Don Norman preaches, “we need more design doing.” Design thinking does not free you from the actual design doing. It’s not magic. Milton Glaser’s words resonate: “There’s no such thing as a creative type. As if creativity is a verb, a very time-consuming verb. It’s about taking an idea in your head, and transforming that idea into something real. And that’s always going to be a long and difficult process. If you’re doing it right, it’s going to feel like work.” As impactful as design thinking can be for an organization, it only leads to true innovation if the vision is executed. The success of design thinking lies in its ability to transform an aspect of the end learner’s life. This sixth step — implement — is crucial.