



R E S O U R C E

Charting Your Course: Problem Clarification



Suggested Citation:

El Mallah, S. & Forrester, J. (2025, January). *Chart Your Course Problem Clarification [for Youth]*. University of Virginia School of Education and Human Development. <http://education.virginia.edu/Youth-Nex/YPAR>



SCHOOL of EDUCATION
and HUMAN DEVELOPMENT
YOUTH-NEX

Problem Clarification

Clarifying Your Problem: A Foundation for Effective Action

Now that you've identified a problem, it's time to dive in a bit deeper and gain a more comprehensive understanding of the problem. A well-clarified problem will provide a solid foundation for your action plan. There are multiple ways to gather more information about a problem. Below are five common strategies.

Empathy Mapping

An empathy map is a tool used to understand the thoughts, feelings, perceptions and experiences of a particular person or group of people. It helps you step into their shoes to think more deeply about how to develop a solution that will benefit them.

1. Identify the individual or group most impacted by the problem.

- Individuals can experience problems *directly* or *indirectly*, depending on their personal circumstances and relationships to the issue.
 - Individuals who are directly affected by a problem often have a deep understanding of its impact. They may have experienced it personally, or it may affect their loved ones or community.
 - Individuals who experience the problem indirectly may not have experienced the problem firsthand but are still aware of it through personal connections, news, social media, etc.

Example:

For the problem of bullying in schools, potential impacted individuals include victims of bullying (directly experience the problem), as well as peer bystanders and school staff (indirectly experience the problem).

2. Create an empathy map with four quadrants.

- **THINK**
 - What are their thoughts and beliefs?
 - Consider their perspectives, opinions, and assumptions.

➔ **FEEL**

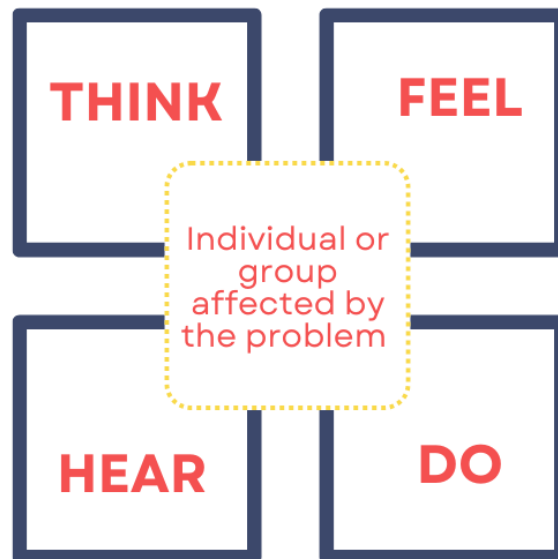
- What emotions do they experience?
- Identify feelings they may experience (e.g., joy, sadness, anger, or frustration).
- Consider the potential of both positive and negative emotions.

➔ **HEAR**

- What do they hear from others?
- Consider the messages they receive from friends, family, teachers, and society.

➔ **DO**

- How do they act/behaves?
- Identify their behaviors, habits, and decisions.



3. Analyze the information in each quadrant to identify patterns and trends.

- ➔ Are there any recurring thoughts, feelings, statements, or actions?
- ➔ Are there any contradictions or conflicts within the map?
- ➔ How do the different quadrants relate to each other- do the thoughts, feelings, statements, and actions align or contradict each other?
- ➔ What does the empathy map reveal about the person's or group's experiences and needs?

Example:

A Hispanic student attending a predominantly White school.



This empathy map reveals that while a Hispanic student in a predominantly White school may feel isolated and pressured to represent their culture, they also have a strong sense of pride and a desire to find the necessary support that can facilitate a positive change.

Provided next is a sample empathy map for printing.

THINK

FEEL

Individual or group affected
by the problem

HEAR

DO

Peer Interviews or Focus Groups

Peer interviews or focus groups with individuals affected by a problem allow for an in-depth exploration of their experiences and perspectives. The interview or focus group protocol can be adapted to fit the specific needs and interests of the participants.

1. Consider the format and choose the method that best aligns with your goals.

- ➔ Individual interviews are best for sensitive topics or when you need detailed information from each participant.
- ➔ Focus groups are best for exploring group dynamics, generating new ideas, or obtaining a wider range of perspectives.

2. Recruit participants.

- ➔ Individual interviews are best for sensitive topics or when you need detailed information from each participant.

3. Develop a protocol.

- ➔ Create a list of open-ended questions that will prompt relevant and thoughtful responses.
- ➔ Organize your questions into a logical sequence.

Example:

Experiences of LGBTQ+ students in high school.

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to share more about your experiences at this school.

The purpose of this interview [or focus group] is to better understand what are the positive and negative aspects of the lives of LGBTQ+ students at this school.

All responses will be kept confidential.

Sample Questions

To what extent do you feel a sense of belonging at school?

Have you experienced any discrimination or bullying?

What support or resources would you like to see in place for LGBTQ+ students?

What are your experiences with school policies and practices related to LGBTQ+ students?

Closing

Thank you for your time and contributions.

Shadowing

The purpose of shadowing is to observe a target group's experiences and challenges in their natural environment. Shadowing can help you see the problem within its broader context and is particularly useful for understanding how individuals interact with their environment and others.

1. Consider the format and choose the method that best aligns with your goals.

- Which particular individuals or groups do you want to focus on?
- What specific behaviors or interactions are you interested in observing?

2. Identify key locations.

- Which does the problem occur most frequently?
- What settings or environments are most relevant to the problem you have identified?

3. Develop a list of observation categories.

- Create categories that align with your research objectives.

Examples: Interactions with peers, interactions with teachers, use of resources, participation in activities.

4. Create a data collection sheet.

- Design a form or table to record your observations.
- Include columns for date, time, location, and specific observations for each category.

5. Observe and take notes.

- Be specific (include examples, avoid generalizations, etc.).
- Clearly indicate the date, time, location, and context of each observation.
- Take notes on everything from body language to interactions with others.

Example:

Shadowing a student with a learning disability during a typical day in high school.

Category	Observation	Notes
Interactions with peers	Frequency of social interactions	Observed in the classroom and during lunch. Student rarely interacts with peers, often sitting alone.
Interactions with teachers	Frequency of requests for help	Observed during class and one-on-one sessions. Student frequently raises hand to ask questions or request clarification.
Use of Accommodations	Frequency and effectiveness of accommodations	Observed in the classroom and during assessments. Student uses extended time on tests and receives individualized instruction in reading and writing.
Participation in Activities	Level of participation	Observed in various settings. Student participates in some classroom activities but avoids extracurriculars due to academic struggles.

Surveys

Surveys are a powerful tool for gathering information from a large group of people. They can be used to collect data on attitudes, beliefs, experiences, and behaviors. By

conducting surveys, you can gain valuable insights into the problem you have identified to inform your action planning.

1. Choose a survey method.

- **Online surveys:** Easy to distribute and collect data.
- **Paper surveys:** Can be distributed in person which sometimes help to ensure more individuals complete it.
- **In-person surveys:** Allow for follow-up questions and clarification.

2. Develop survey questions.

- Determine which type of survey question is most appropriate:

Type of Question	Description	When to use	Sample Questions
Open-ended Questions	Allows respondents to provide detailed subjective answers in their own words.	<p>Gather in-depth information: Open-ended questions provide space for respondents to share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences.</p> <p>Explore new perspectives: Open-ended questions can help you discover unexpected insights or ideas that you may not have considered.</p> <p>Encourage creativity: Open-ended questions can inspire respondents to think critically and creatively about the topic.</p>	<p>What are your thoughts on the new school policy?</p> <p>What would you like to see changed about the current curriculum to make it more inclusive of all students?</p> <p>Describe your experience with the counseling services at our school?</p> <p>How can we better celebrate and acknowledge the holidays and traditions of our diverse student body?</p>

Type of Question	Description	When to use	Sample Questions
Closed-ended Questions	Provides respondents with a limited number of predetermined choices.	<p>Collect specific, statistical data: Closed-ended questions can be used to gather information about frequencies, preferences, or demographics.</p> <p>Compare and analyze responses: Closed-ended questions can be easily analyzed using statistical methods to understand similarities and differences between groups, changes between two timepoints, etc.</p>	<p>Do you feel that our school is adequately equipped to accommodate students with disabilities? (Yes/No)</p> <p>How often do you feel that your mental health needs are being met by the school? (Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often)</p> <p>Please rank the following topics in order of importance for inclusion in our sex education curriculum:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Reproductive health ➤ Consent and healthy relationships ➤ Sexual orientation and gender identity ➤ STIs and HIV/AIDS

3. Design the survey layout.

- Keep it visually appealing by using a clear and easy-to-read format.
- Provide instructions that include the purpose of the survey and clearly explain how to complete the survey.
- Group similar questions and organize the survey into logical sections.
- Give participants a clear deadline for completing the survey.

4. Collect and analyze survey data.

- Consider using survey analysis software that generates automated results (e.g., SurveyMonkey, Google Forms).
- Compare data to expectations: see if the results align with your initial hypotheses.



- ➔ Identify trends and patterns: look for common themes and insights.

Document Analysis

Document analysis is a research method that involves examining existing documents to gather information about a particular topic or group of people. This method can be valuable when it is not possible to collect new data or to explore when you want to examine how a problem has evolved over time.

1. Identify relevant documents.

- ➔ Consider the types of documents that might contain relevant information, such as:
 - **Existing data:** Student surveys, attendance records, standardized test scores.
 - **Policy documents:** School handbooks, district guidelines.
 - **Media reports:** News articles, blog posts.
 - **Social media posts:** Posts from students, teachers, or community members.
 - **Research articles:** Scientific evidence of frequency, severity, or impact.

2. Collect the documents.

- ➔ Request access to necessary documents from schools or organizations.
- ➔ Ensure that you have permission to use and analyze the chosen documents.

3. Develop a coding framework.

- ➔ Codes are labels that you assign to specific pieces of text within your documents. They help you categorize and organize information, making it easier to identify patterns, trends, and themes.
- ➔ Based on your research objectives, brainstorm a list of all potential codes. Consider using keywords, phrases, or concepts that are relevant to your topic.

4. Pilot test and refine your codes.

- ➔ Ensure that your codes are clear, consistent, and comprehensive.
- ➔ Apply your codes to a small sample of documents. Evaluate whether the codes are effective at capturing the relevant information.

- Make adjustments to your codes as needed based on your pilot test.

Example:

Sample codes for the experiences of ELL students in a high school

- **Academic Performance:** Grades, test scores, participation in class.
- **Language Proficiency:** English language proficiency levels, language support services.
- **Social Experiences:** Interactions with peers, extracurricular involvement.