



THN

The UX Playbook

*A field guide to designing with people, not just for them
— from the first spark of an idea to a product in
someone's hands.*

FOREWORD

Read this as a compass, not a checklist.

This playbook doubles as an onboarding document and a working reference for how UX strategy shows up across THN's projects. It's part explainer, part map — meant to make the case for user-centered thinking, keep real people at the center of every decision, and describe how the UX process plays out inside THN specifically.

Consider it a living reference rather than a finished manual — built to turn messy, uncertain problems into clear, human-centered recommendations the team can actually use.

Over the pages that follow, it's meant to help the team:

Get grounded in UX

**Know who's
invested**

Map what's ahead

**Center the user in
every call**

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What UX design actually means

The term dates to 1995, coined by Don Norman — but it describes a mindset, not a job title.

UX design spans every layer of how someone experiences a system — from industrial design and visuals to interface and physical interaction. Put simply, it's the practice of making a product's experience as good as it can possibly be.

The goal is to draw people toward something they actually want, then smooth the path from that first glance all the way to daily, effortless use.

“Design is really an act of communication, which means having a deep understanding of the person with whom the designer is communicating.”

DONALD A. NORMAN

02 / FOUNDATIONS

Why it matters, and what good looks like

THE GOALS

Get clear on what users and customers need, and the context they're operating in.

Apply that understanding to shape a product, service, or app that works within real business and technical limits.

THE BENEFITS

Good UX makes the product better to use, full stop.

And when the experience is good, **more people stick with** the product.

At THN, every decision should be...

01**Useful**

It solves a real problem someone actually has.

02**Usable**

It's clear and easy to figure out.

03**Delightful**

It's enjoyable to use, not just functional.

Balancing the product experience means aligning what users need with what the business needs — and at THN, that means clearing all three bars above, not settling for one or two.

03 / FOUNDATIONS

What good UX buys THN

Investing in the user pays off in four tangible ways.

01

Better products

Involving real users throughout the process, without losing sight of business goals, leads to a product that simply does its job better for the people it's built for.

02

Cheaper to fix problems

Catching what doesn't work early means fixing it while it's still cheap. Reworking a wireframe costs a fraction of a post-launch code fix.

03

Less risk

Frequent early testing surfaces problems back in Discover, not after launch — which meaningfully lowers the odds the product fails.

04

Research brings insight

Deep research reveals where the product can stand apart from competitors. It replaces opinion with evidence.

FRAMEWORK

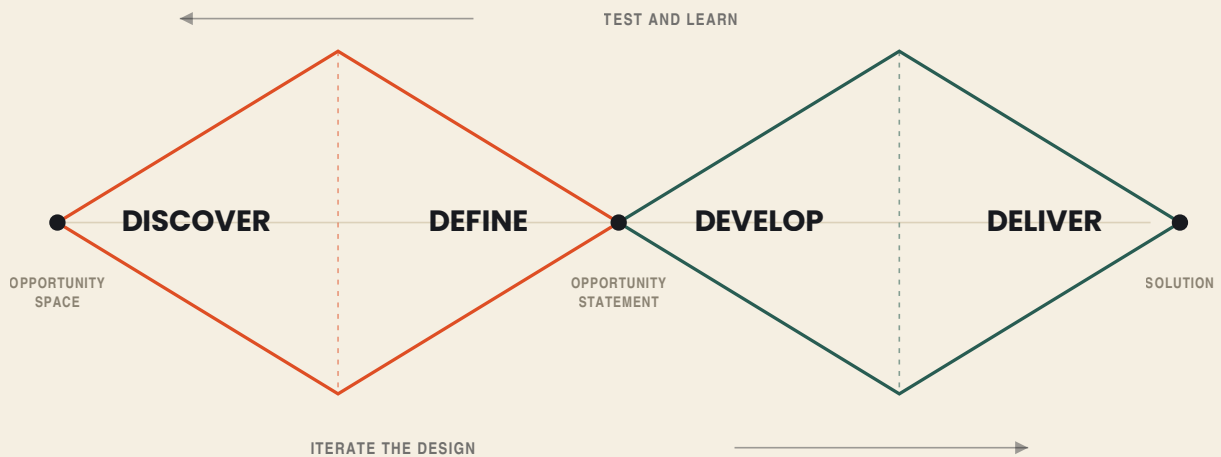
Solve the right problem. Then solve it well.

*THN's user-centered approach runs on a single loop,
repeated: discover, define, develop, deliver — then start
again.*

04 / FRAMEWORK

The Double Diamond

Two rounds of opening up and narrowing down give THN a repeatable way to learn and get better.



DISCOVER → DEFINE

Discover: uncover and understand what end users actually need, working alongside them. **Define:** pull together feedback, make sense of it, and turn it into a clear opportunity statement.

DEVELOP → DELIVER

Develop: generate and build out concepts based on what Define surfaced. **Deliver:** prototype, test, and refine those concepts with real users, on repeat.

Four principles that apply the whole way through

Keep these in view no matter where you are in the Double Diamond.

01

Put people first

Users come before anything else — understand what they need, what they're capable of, and what they're after before you design a thing.

02

Iterate, iterate, iterate

Keep revising. Iteration is what lowers risk and strengthens the solution — first drafts never survive contact with real users, and that's the point.

03

Collaborate + co-create

Work with others and stay curious about what they're doing — don't design in isolation.

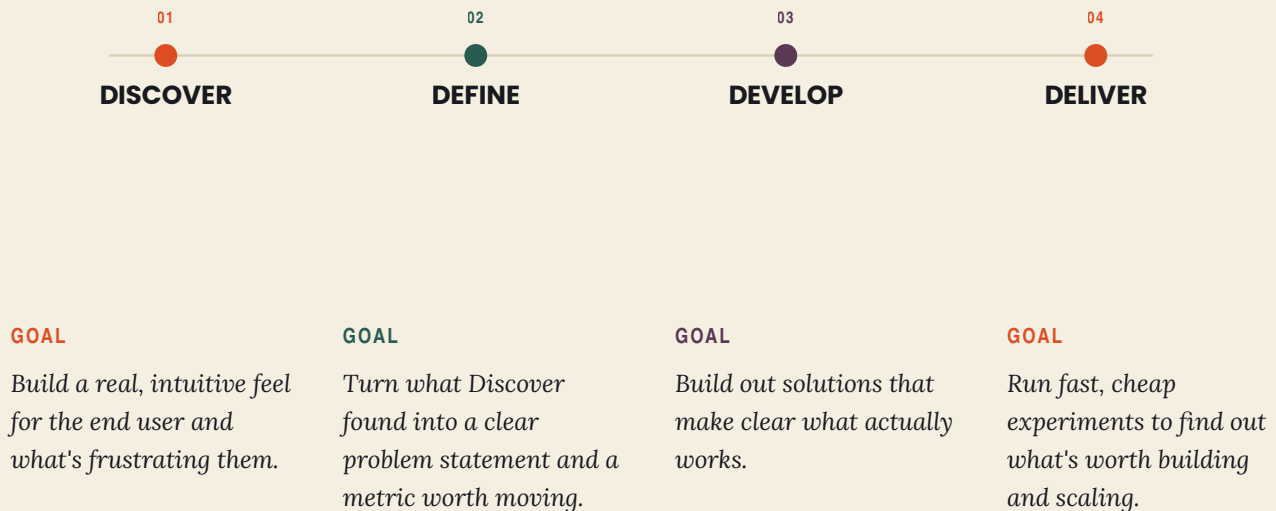
04

Communicate

Bring people in. Help them understand the problem you're solving, and let them help generate the ideas.

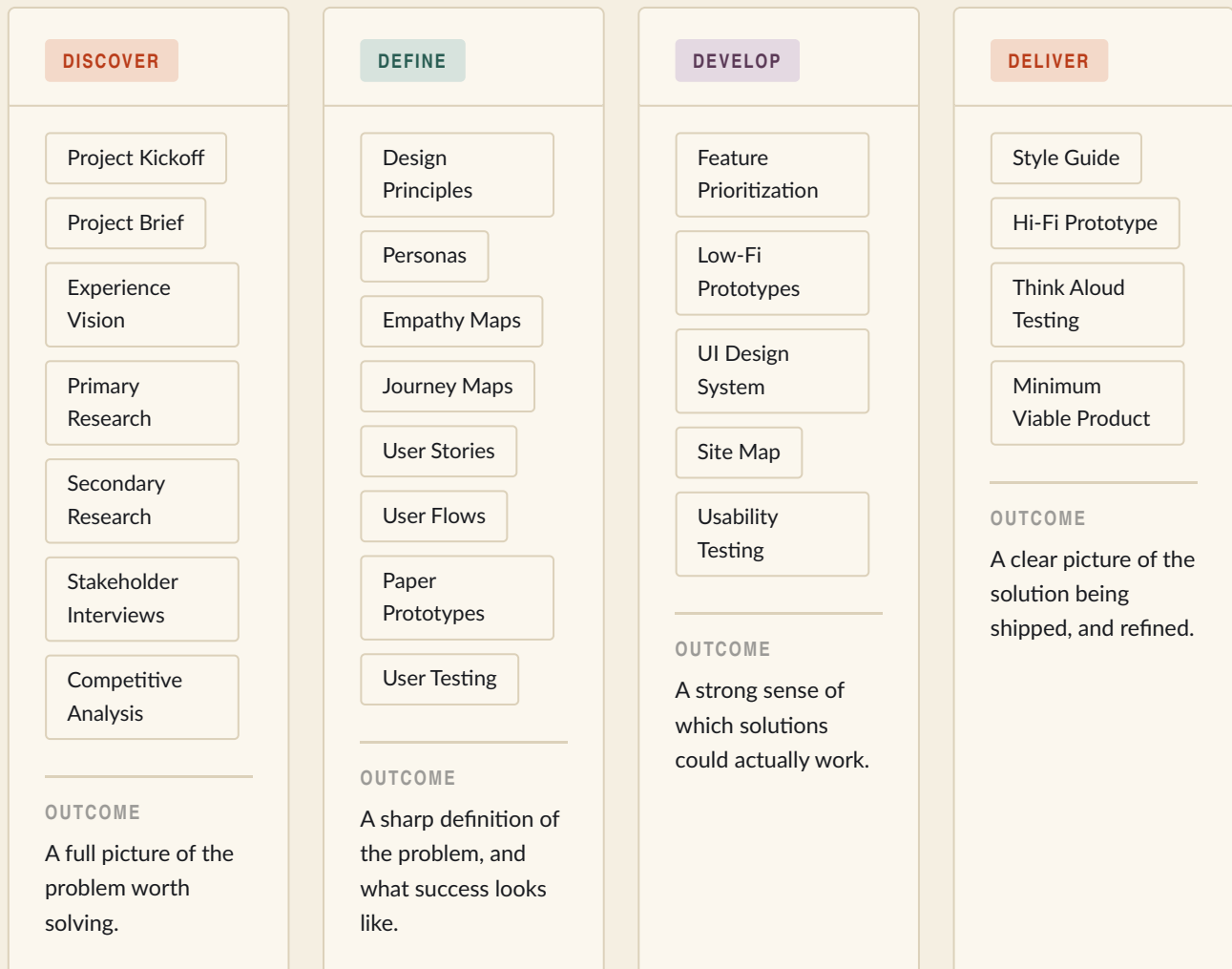
The process, start to finish

Four phases moving in one direction — each with its own goal, methods, and outcome.



Part Four, **The Method Library**, covers each phase in detail — the questions it's meant to answer, the methods involved, and notes on how THN specifically should use each one.

What each phase uses, and produces



PHASE 01

Discover

Get close to end users, through research and working alongside them, until their needs are genuinely understood.

THIS PHASE WILL HELP YOU ANSWER

- ☐ Who are we really designing for, and what's frustrating them?
- ☐ Who's already solving this, and where do they fall short?
- ☐ What could we offer that nobody else does?
- ☐ Who's on the team, and what gaps are we missing?
- ☐ How often are we sprinting, and how are we staying in sync?
- ☐ What's the vision for the product?

TOOLKIT

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Experience Vision

01

A five-year, research-backed picture of what the experience should feel like for primary users.

An experience vision tells a story — often a storyboard or short video — of the experience you're aiming to create, giving the whole organization something to build toward. It's working when leadership points back to it while discussing new features, and everyone on the team can trace their own work back to it.

DELIVERABLE

One or more storyboards that visualize the product vision.

WHAT IT AFFECTS

Keeps current and future team members pointed in the same direction.

FOR THN

Show how THN delivers the strongest possible educational experience for students with a range of cognitive abilities.

Competitive Analysis

02

A side-by-side look at how competitors are solving the same problem.

Competitive analysis maps out the companies fighting for the same market share. Done well, it keeps surfacing needs no competitor has addressed yet — giving the product a real, evidence-backed edge instead of a guess.

DELIVERABLE

A comparison chart of features, pricing, and strengths/weaknesses, plus a SWOT analysis.

WHAT IT AFFECTS

Shapes go-to-market strategy and sharpens what makes the product different — and who competitors are already serving.

FOR THN

Prioritize existing Learning Management Systems and education platforms with real market share, and run a patent search to spot open ground.

Project Brief

03

A concise summary of what the project is and why it exists.

A project brief lays out the essentials — goals, success metrics, stakeholders, budget, milestones, and timeline. Teams that keep one can explain exactly how their work connects to the bigger goal, and that clarity alone has been shown to roughly double motivation.

DELIVERABLE

A living document that holds all the key project details.

WHAT IT AFFECTS

Keeps research and product priorities defined and aligned.

FOR THN

Pull the top findings from early Discover research to define the product's core, user-centered goals and features.

Stakeholder Interviews

04

One-on-ones that surface business goals, technical limits, and usability issues.

One-on-one conversations with people invested in the product's success. They lay the groundwork with insight into user needs, business goals, technical constraints, and stakeholder expectations — and help stakeholders see firsthand that research beats guesswork.

DELIVERABLE

A synthesis of findings that shapes UX milestones and goals.

WHAT IT AFFECTS

Turns stakeholders into co-owners of the design process and gets everyone aligned on next steps.

FOR THN

Meet with new THN hires to talk through user needs, business goals, and technical constraints.

Primary Research

05

First-hand conversations and observation that reveal what real users think, want, and struggle with.

Research underpins everything else in human-centered design. Primary research is gathered directly by the team — through surveys, interviews, diary studies, contextual inquiries, ethnography — and it's what reveals the unpredictable parts of human behavior. It's working when the organization internalizes one idea: "I'm designing for the user, and I am not the user."

DELIVERABLE

Synthesized findings, delivered as an AEIOU framework, empathy map, or insights doc.

WHAT IT AFFECTS

Builds the team's empathy for users, sharpens problem identification, and feeds personas and accessible design.

FOR THN

Since so little existing research covers these specific users, primary research isn't optional — get in the field, regularly.

Secondary Research

06

Existing research from others, used to catch the team up on how similar problems have played out before.

Secondary research fills in the industry, economic, and social context around the problem, drawing on academic papers, white papers, industry studies, and news coverage. It grounds the team before primary research starts, turning raw assumptions into hypotheses worth actually testing.

DELIVERABLE

Synthesized findings, delivered as a competitive analysis, a Knowns/Unknowns/Assumptions doc, or an insights summary.

WHAT IT AFFECTS

Gives the team the industry, social, and competitive context that shapes design and business decisions.

FOR THN

Competitive analysis will surface existing design and business models, plus any open white space. Fold in accessibility research so the product itself holds up.

PHASE 02

Define

Take what Discover turned up and shape it into the right problem to solve, with a metric that matters.

THIS PHASE WILL HELP YOU ANSWER

- ☐ What does what we learned actually mean?
- ☐ How do insights become real, testable ideas?
- ☐ How are users solving this problem right now, without us?
- ☐ What's the full shape of their experience today?
- ☐ Which touchpoints have the most room to improve things?
- ☐ Is what we're designing actually accessible?

TOOLKIT

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Empathy Map

01

A shared visual of everything the team knows about a given type of user.

An empathy map is a collaborative visual that builds a sharper understanding of customers, users, or stakeholders — organizing their goals, thoughts, senses, and actions around a set of guiding questions. It's working when the team pulls it up every time a new feature comes up, and people who never used to talk about user needs start bringing them up on their own.

DELIVERABLE

An empathy map that feeds directly into personas and journey maps.

WHAT IT AFFECTS

Builds a shared understanding of user needs, cuts bias out of design, and helps prioritization.

FOR THN

Build one empathy map per primary user — student, teacher, parent — to spot research gaps and understand what's driving their behavior.

Persona

02

A representative user whose goals and traits stand in for a larger group's needs.

Built from research, a persona captures behavior patterns, goals, skills, attitudes, background, and the environment a user operates in. Teams that use them well start resolving design disagreements by asking what the persona actually needs — and eventually talk about them like they're real.

DELIVERABLE

A one- or two-page persona doc.

WHAT IT AFFECTS

Builds empathy across the team and shapes both product strategy and feature priorities.

FOR THN

Build a persona for every primary user — student, teacher, parent — and keep them posted where the team can see them.

User Journey Maps

03

A visual walkthrough of everything a person does to reach a goal.

Journey maps shift with context, but generally track how a user moves through your product over time — persona, scenario, phase, action, mindset, emotion, opportunity. Done well, they surface pain points nobody had raised yet, and give the whole team a shared mental model to work from.

DELIVERABLE

A visual map of the key moments in a user's experience with the product.

WHAT IT AFFECTS

Opens up conversation about the user experience and gives the team a common reference point.

FOR THN

Map out journeys for student, teacher, and parent — and flag anywhere their needs pull in different directions.

User Stories

04

Small slices of a real person's day, used to spark ideas that solve real problems.

Borrowed from Agile, a user story is an informal description of a feature, written from the end user's point of view — spelling out the value it delivers back to them. Teams that write good ones always know what to build next, and why it matters to an actual person.

DELIVERABLE

Dev tasks framed as “persona + need + purpose.”

WHAT IT AFFECTS

Keeps flows and prototypes anchored to real problems instead of assumptions.

FOR THN

Write user stories per primary user to track the key tasks standing between now and an MVP.

User Flows

05

A mapped-out path showing how a typical user completes a task in your product.

A user flow charts the path someone takes to complete a task — the pages, logic, and actions involved. Teams that nail this stop obsessing over information architecture or visuals, and start focusing on what the user actually wants from the interaction.

DELIVERABLE

A documented user flow chart.

WHAT IT AFFECTS

Surfaces unfinished goals early, speeds up stakeholder conversations, and cuts down development errors.

FOR THN

Map the path a student takes to get help with a question, and the path a teacher takes to upload content — then test both with low-fi prototypes.

Paper Prototyping

06

A cheap, fast way to sketch out and share early-stage ideas.

Paper prototyping works through ideas and user flows using hand-drawn screens that test the big picture, not fine interaction detail. It works best as a group activity that includes non-designers — when everyone wants a hand in both the prototyping and the testing that follows.

DELIVERABLE

A set of wireframe ideas ready to be tested.

WHAT IT AFFECTS

Pulls non-designers into the process earlier, and cuts tech debt by testing before a line of code exists.

FOR THN

Push for paper prototyping early — it saves time and budget before anything gets built digitally.

PHASE 03

Develop

Build out candidate solutions to user needs, and let them show you what actually works.

THIS PHASE WILL HELP YOU ANSWER

- ☐ Which problem, if solved, matters most to users?
- ☐ What's worth prototyping first, and why?
- ☐ Did the prototype actually meet users' needs?
- ☐ Is it accessible?

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Feature Prioritization

01

Charts and matrices that rank features by evidence, not by whoever's loudest.

Prioritization gets users, stakeholders, and the design team on the same page about what matters most and where resources should go. Common frameworks include the Kano model, (R)ICE, Effort vs. Impact, MoSCoW, and the Eisenhower Matrix. It's working when the team builds the highest-priority features first — not whatever has the loudest champion.

DELIVERABLE

A ranked, visualized feature list, high priority to low.

WHAT IT AFFECTS

Guides where design and development resources go from here on out.

FOR THN

Because research participants are hard to come by, lean on internal-facing methods like (R)ICE and the Eisenhower Matrix rather than the Kano model, which needs a bigger participant pool.

Low Fidelity Prototypes

02

A fast way to turn a rough concept into something people can actually react to.

A low-fidelity prototype is a rough, fast stand-in for a concept, flow, or information structure — built to get feedback before branding and UI design are locked in. It's working when developers start paying attention to usability, and problems get caught before any code exists.

DELIVERABLE

A hand sketch or a quick digital prototype (Figma, InVision, or similar).

WHAT IT AFFECTS

Confirms whether the concept holds up, and becomes the tool for the usability testing that follows.

FOR THN

Build lo-fi digital wireframes alongside the IA's key screens, so they can double as quick, clickable flows later.

UI Design System

03

A shared rulebook for how every touchpoint between a user and the product looks and behaves.

A UI design system brings design and code into one consistent practice — part instruction manual, part parts bin. It's working when it actually helps users navigate the product intuitively, not just when the file looks tidy.

DELIVERABLE

A set of standards built out in whatever design tool the team uses.

WHAT IT AFFECTS

How intuitively users can move through the whole product, start to finish.

FOR THN

Accessible, easy-to-understand UI matters a lot here. Test assumptions early with primary users, and fall back on WCAG guidance wherever primary research isn't available.

Product Design Principles

04

A set of guardrails for major product decisions — separate from the process principles back in Part Two.

Design principles are shared, agreed-upon values that act as a compass for the product — specific and actionable, not vague slogans. They're working when they translate the experience vision into something concrete for this exact mission and user base, and the team actually keeps coming back to them.

DELIVERABLE

A living document that pulls together the team's synthesized findings.

WHAT IT AFFECTS

Every design decision going forward, especially the ones that pull in opposite directions.

FOR THN

Keep accessibility front and center — lean on the W3C Accessibility Principles — and build every principle around the primary users.

Navigation + Content Map

05

A top-down view of the product that makes better design decisions easier.

A sitemap diagrams how pages are ranked, linked, and labeled — giving the team a full view of the product and which pages could be trimmed or cut outright. It's working when users can get to what they need in the fewest clicks possible.

DELIVERABLE

A sitemap, both digital and printed.

WHAT IT AFFECTS

Shapes foundational wireframes, usability planning, and where to cut.

FOR THN

Since this is being built from scratch, prioritize the key user flows first, and keep the sitemap flat — under four levels deep — to make things easier to find.

Usability Testing

06

Watching real, representative users try to use the design.

Usability testing means watching users work through real tasks — repeated from early development all the way to release. As Steve Krug puts it, testing one user beats testing none. It's working when problems surface early, before they become expensive to fix.

DELIVERABLE

An insights and recommendations report, or a testing debrief.

WHAT IT AFFECTS

Flags design flaws, surfaces opportunities to improve, and shows what users actually do.

FOR THN

One of the highest-value steps in Develop — aim for a weekly cadence in front of users to catch issues early and protect limited resources.

PHASE 04

Deliver

Test solutions through fast, low-cost experiments, and learn what's ready to build for real.

THIS PHASE WILL HELP YOU ANSWER

- ☐ How do we turn the concept into something real?
- ☐ How do we know if it's working?
- ☐ What does long-term upkeep and refinement look like?
- ☐ What does the brand look and feel like?

TOOLKIT

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Style Guide

01

A living record of design decisions as they emerge from the process.

A style guide ties a digital product's interface and experience together — elements, interactions, components, iconography, color, and type, all in one place. It's working when it's baked into the team's everyday design language and referenced on every quick iteration, keeping things consistent as the product grows.

DELIVERABLE

A living document that evolves alongside the design.

WHAT IT AFFECTS

Keeps the team aligned on look and feel, and smooths the handoff from design to dev.

FOR THN

Accessibility comes first here — follow WCAG guidelines, and trim the number of screens needed per task to ease cognitive load.

Think Aloud Protocol

02

A method where users narrate what they're doing and thinking while working through a task.

One of the most common ways to evaluate usability, think-aloud testing has people say out loud what they're thinking, doing, and feeling as they go — surfacing exactly what delights, confuses, or frustrates them in the interface. It's working when the team stays quiet and lets the user do the talking, instead of filling in the blanks themselves.

DELIVERABLE

Anything from raw audio/video recordings to a findings report on what needs fixing.

WHAT IT AFFECTS

Surfaces usability problems early enough for the team to prioritize fixes before launch.

FOR THN

A reliable way to hear issues straight from the source — run it alongside usability testing to catch problems early.

High Fidelity Prototypes

03

An interactive, on-screen version of the product that's as close to final as it gets before build.

Interactive prototypes let target users test usability and give feedback on both the visuals and the experience — interactions, flow, behavior — while showing the dev team exactly what the final build needs. It's working when developers have a firm handle on what to code, and post-launch rework stays minimal.

DELIVERABLE

A set of polished, interactive prototype screens (Figma, InVision, or similar).

WHAT IT AFFECTS

Catches user-flow problems before code gets written, and smooths the design-to-dev handoff.

FOR THN

Lean on WCAG guidelines here too, and keep looking for ways to cut the number of screens a task requires.

Minimum Viable Product (MVP)

04

The leanest version of the product that can still prove its value.

An MVP is built to squeeze out the most validated learning about customers for the least effort — test cheap and early, then fix what's broken before investing further. It's working when the result is functional first, then reliable, then usable, then delightful — in that order.

DELIVERABLE

A pared-down version of the final product, ready to be tested.

WHAT IT AFFECTS

Surfaces friction early and clarifies what the product is actually worth to both the business and its users.

FOR THN

Test the top-priority features using Wizard-of-Oz or concierge-style testing to catch gaps in key flows, and pair that with marketing A/B tests or crowdfunding to validate the business assumptions.

APPENDIX

Mapping the stakeholders

Knowing exactly who has a stake in this project makes success more likely.

DEFINITION

Stakeholder mapping means identifying everyone with a real interest in a project's outcome. That could be a single person, or dozens, depending on the project's scale.

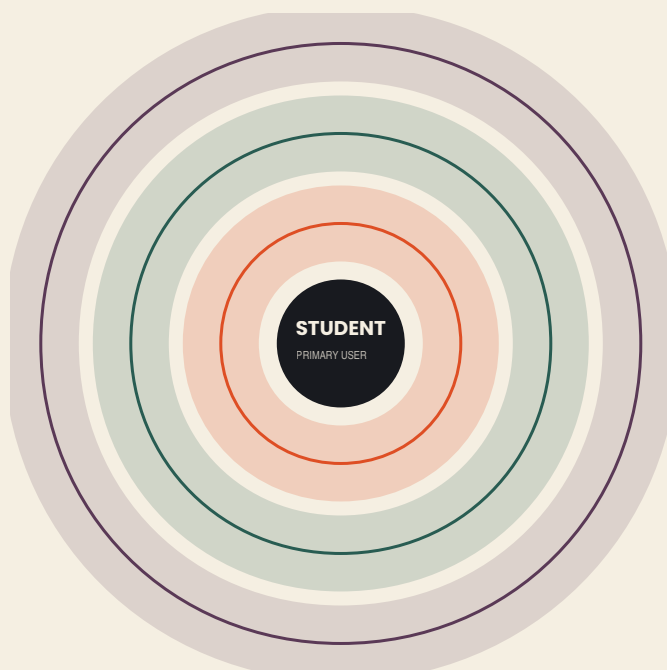
HOW TO READ THE MAP

The student sits at the center; each ring outward marks a different kind of relationship to THN:

- INVOLVED** Builds and runs THN
- IMPACTED** Kept in the loop on THN
- INFLUENCERS** Can meaningfully sway outcomes

APPENDIX

The stakeholders, ring by ring



INVOLVED	IMPACTED	INFLUENCERS
UX Designer	Teachers	Local Government
UX Researcher	Parents	Small Business Assn.
Developer	Case Managers	Banks
THN CEO	Speech Pathologist	Investors
Marketing Agency	Special Education Assistants	Teacher's Union
FedBiz Opps	Peers	School Board Members
Content Writer	School Officials	Education Leaders in Local Gov't
Customer Service	Independent Learning Institutes	
Researcher (UofM)		

APPENDIX

Five lenses on the same map

The same list of stakeholders, sorted a different way — handy when a specific conversation, like budget, calls for a specific group.

FUNDING	DESIGN	BUSINESS	USERS	PURCHASER
Local Government	Researcher (UofM)	THN CEO	Teachers	School Officials
Small Business Assn.	UX Researcher	Marketing Agency	Case Managers	Independent Learning Institutes
Banks	Developer	FedBiz Opps	Customer Service	Teacher's Union
Investors	UX Designer		Parents	School Board Members
			Special Ed. Assistants	Education Leaders in Local Gov't
			Speech Pathologist	
			Peers	

APPENDIX

Design sprint cadence

Test early. Test often.

DEFINITION

A design sprint is a time-boxed framework that applies design-thinking to test ideas, work through product challenges, and get the team aligned on both vision and clear goals.

MAKE A PLAN

The exact cadence is up to the team, but aim for at least **30 minutes in front of users every week** — whether that's interviews during Discover or usability testing during Develop.

*“Testing one user is
100 percent better
than testing none.”*

STEVE KRUG

QUESTIONS? LET'S CHAT.

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