

## Making Empathy Practical

### Artifact Analysis: Learning from Things

Artifact analysis involves systematically examining physical or digital materials created or used by stakeholders. These "quiet witnesses"—from forms and reports to digital interfaces and physical spaces—often reveal insights about behaviors, processes, and cultural contexts not captured through direct conversation.

#### Goal

This tool aims to support education and nonprofit leaders in understanding processes without disrupting normal activities, examine historical context, identify disconnects between formal policies and actual practices, and complement information gathered through other methods.

#### Advice

- Collect diverse artifacts including both formal and informal materials
- Look for adaptations and workarounds (sticky notes, handwritten notes, etc.) that suggest unmet needs
- Compare older and newer versions of similar artifacts to identify evolution
- Document what's missing or not represented, not just what's present
- Consider creation context—who made this, when, and for what purpose
- Use photography to document physical artifacts for later reference (with permission)
- Examine language choices and their implications
- Compare formal artifacts with actual practice to identify gaps



## Artifact Analysis: Learning from Things

### What It Is

Artifact analysis involves systematically examining physical or digital materials created or used by stakeholders to understand behaviors, processes, needs, and cultural contexts. These "quiet witnesses" often reveal insights not captured through direct conversation or observation.

### When to Use It

- When physical or digital environments contain relevant information
- To understand processes without disrupting normal activities
- When examining historical context is important
- To complement and verify information gathered through other methods
- When direct access to stakeholders is limited
- To identify disconnects between formal policies and actual practices

### Process

#### Before the Analysis

##### 1. **Identify relevant artifacts:** Consider:

- Documents (forms, reports, policies, communications)
- Digital systems and interfaces
- Physical spaces and environmental features
- Tools and equipment
- Created materials (artwork, projects, submissions)
- Social media content

##### 2. **Develop analysis frameworks:** Create structured ways to examine:

- Purpose and audience
- Structure and organization
- Language and terminology
- Accessibility and usability
- Embedded assumptions
- Missing elements or perspectives

## Artifact Analysis: Learning from Things

### Process, cont'd

#### Before the Analysis, cont'd

3. **Gain appropriate access:** Ensure permission to review materials, especially sensitive or private content.
4. **Prepare documentation tools:** Create templates for consistent analysis.

#### During the Analysis

1. **Document systematically:** Record:
  - Basic information (type, purpose, creator, date)
  - Content details (structure, language, visual elements)
  - Context of use (who, when, how, where)
  - Patterns across similar artifacts
2. **Look beyond the obvious:**
  - Note what's present and what's absent
  - Identify assumptions embedded in materials
  - Consider different user experiences with the artifact
  - Examine language choices and their implications
3. **Compare formal and informal artifacts:**
  - Official forms vs. handwritten notes
  - Stated procedures vs. actual workflows
  - Required elements vs. adaptations and workarounds
4. **Create visual documentation when appropriate:**
  - Photographs
  - Screenshots
  - Workflow diagrams
  - Space maps

## Artifact Analysis: Learning from Things

### Process, cont'd

#### After the Analysis

1. Organize findings by type and relevance.
2. Identify patterns and insights across multiple artifacts.
3. Generate questions for follow-up with stakeholders.
4. Create visualizations to communicate complex systems.
5. Connect insights with other research findings.

#### Tips for Success

- **Create an artifact inventory:** Catalog everything that exists before beginning deep analysis to ensure comprehensive coverage.
- **Use frameworks for consistency:** Develop structured templates to ensure you examine each artifact with the same criteria.
- **Cross-reference related artifacts:** Analyze how different artifacts connect to or contradict each other within the same system.
- **Map artifact journeys:** Track how documents or digital materials flow through an organization or process.
- **Involve stakeholders in analysis:** When possible, have actual users explain artifacts and demonstrate how they use them.
- **Seek out unofficial artifacts:** Look for informal tools, cheat sheets, or workarounds that people create to make systems function better.
- **Analyze digital and physical traces:** Consider wear patterns on physical objects or digital analytics that reveal actual usage.
- **Look for emotional signals:** Note where frustration, confusion, or satisfaction might be evident in modifications or adaptations.
- **Create visual mappings:** Develop diagrams showing how artifacts relate to processes and user journeys.

## Artifact Analysis: Learning from Things

### Tips for Success, cont'd

- **Collect artifacts longitudinally:** Gather examples over time to see seasonal patterns or evolutionary changes.
- **Note access barriers:** Consider who can and cannot easily use or create each artifact.
- **Examine organization schemes:** How information is categorized often reveals underlying mental models and priorities.

### Ethical Considerations

- Respect privacy and confidentiality in all documentation.
- Obtain permission before accessing non-public materials.
- Be mindful of intellectual property considerations.
- Consider the cultural significance of artifacts to their creators.
- Maintain objectivity in analysis while acknowledging your perspective.

### Analysis Questions

- What do these artifacts reveal about processes and workflows?
- How accessible and usable are these materials for different stakeholders?
- What values and assumptions are embedded in the design and language?
- What workarounds or adaptations suggest unmet needs?
- How do formal materials compare with actual practice?
- What gaps or inconsistencies exist across different artifacts?