

# ACTIVATE AGENCY

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Empower Your Students to  
Own Their Learning

MOUNT VERNON VENTURES

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# **ACTIVATE AGENCY**

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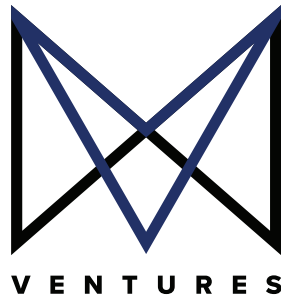
**EMPOWER YOUR STUDENTS  
TO OWN THEIR LEARNING**

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Mount Vernon Ventures is a Transformation R&D Company, an integral part of The Mount Vernon School Organization, based in Atlanta, Georgia. Ventures has a team of industry recognized experts and practitioners partnering with educators and leaders all over the world to strengthen brand identity, deepen organizational innovation, scale community impact, and build a transformative curriculum.

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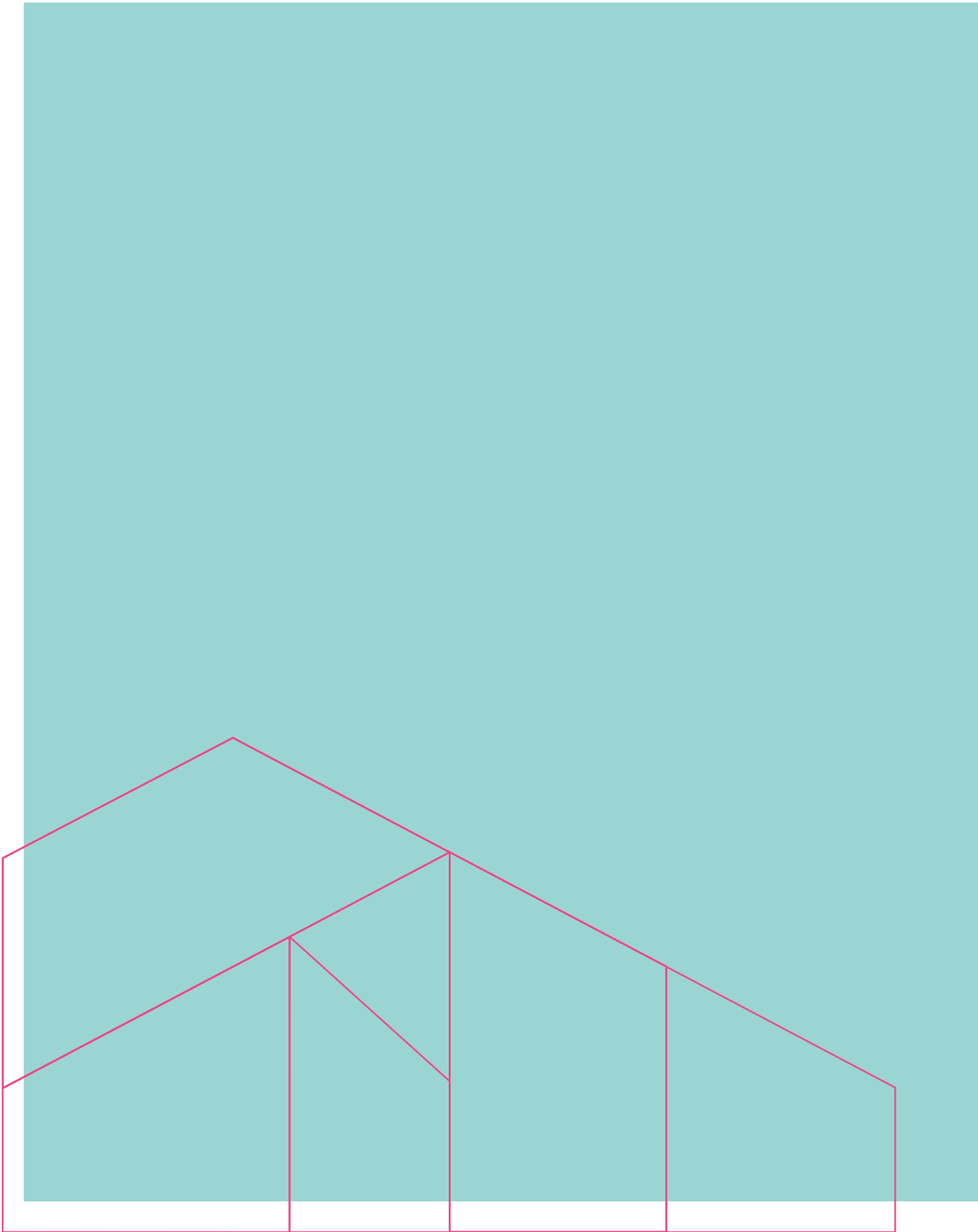
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## DEDICATED TO

former and current iD students and  
faculty members at The Mount  
Vernon School designing a  
better world... together.



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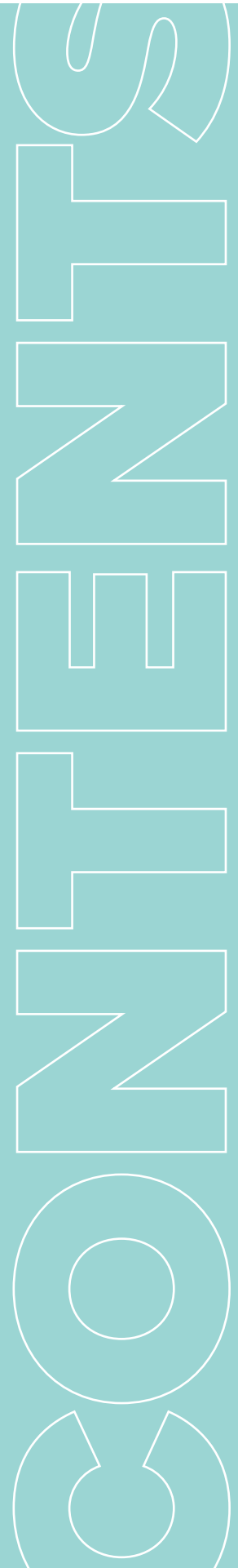
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**a·gen·cy**

**/ˈājənsē/**

*noun*

the ability and the will to positively influence one's own life and the world; the capacity to set a goal, reflect, and act responsibly to effect change; the reliance on motivation, hope, self-efficacy, and a growth mindset to navigate towards well-being and to act with a sense of purpose.

*-Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)*

# INTRODUCTION

At every stage from early childhood to adolescence to adulthood, the acquisition of knowledge and the application of knowledge optimize full engagement and deep learning when agency is activated through relevant and contextualized pathways and experiences.

Being active participants in wondering and wandering through the fields of knowledge gives learners greater ownership of their learning and extraordinary meaning and purpose to their world.

Matter of fact, when “learners are placed in the front seat of their learning journey and supported to become drivers of it” (Education Reimagined), positive identity is nurtured, purpose emerges, and impact is realized.

*Activate Agency: Empower Your Students to Own Their Own Learning* amplifies the joyous endeavor of learners traversing all dimensions of community where there are no defined limits and no barriers to entry, fueled with the passion to seek and to explore. This book is dedicated to illustrating agency being activated through a program launched in 2014 at The Mount Vernon School, based in Atlanta, Georgia.

This program is known as Innovation Diploma (iD). Innovation Diploma is a student-led, transformation design studio that inspires, creates, and implements high-impact work. Additionally, iD is a 3 to 4-year high school program that culminates in students cultivating long term professional relationships, facilitating positive change in partnered organizations and communities, and having an active role in changing the world around them.

Touring The Mount Vernon School, you would hear stories about design projects, what we call Design Briefs (more on that later!), with Chick-fil-A, Delta Air Lines, Porsche North America, AT&T, the Center for Civil and Human Rights, and numerous other businesses, nonprofits, and government agencies. We would share that students have designed a park, created marketing campaigns for national brands, curated museum experiences, and developed tools to facilitate corporate innovation. While those stories are compelling, they are only part of iD’s magic. From the beginning, we developed a relational environment where students are comfortable with failing and empowered to believe that their age does not equal their capability. We would not be where we are today without this intentional focus.

This step-by-step guide empowers you to run a similar type of program, course, club, or even an after-school workshop in your school community. In these pages, we share what we’ve learned and the curricular framework we’ve designed for onboarding students into a program that challenges the widely accepted version of what school should look like. Specifically, we provide a map for how to facilitate an 18-week learning experience where students gain the mindsets and skills necessary for working on complex design challenges, all while sharing the importance of laying a foundational knowledge of innovation and design.

You can decide on an entry point of transformation that is accessible and attainable for you and your team. Whether it is optimizing, transforming, or disrupting your practice or school, begin with a practical pace and approach along this purpose-driven journey that aligns with your mission, community needs, and budget.

We want to help you get started on this journey to empower your students to own their learning. Let’s get to work!



# AGENCY BY DESIGN

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# THE WHY

*“YOU NEVER CHANGE THINGS BY FIGHTING THE EXISTING REALITY. TO CHANGE SOMETHING, BUILD A NEW MODEL THAT MAKES THE EXISTING MODEL OBSOLETE.”*

*-BUCKMINSTER FULLER*

The last few years sped up the process of change in schools. The global pandemic revealed gaps between the expectations and experiences of our students, teachers, and families. There isn't a constituent in a school who hasn't recognized that there are opportunities to build new programs, prototype new approaches, and create dynamic learning environments that are responsive to the world outside the walls of school.

Students are graduating school and entering a workforce that looks fundamentally different than it did 5 years ago. Ted Dintersmith in *What School Could Be* writes, "In today's world, everyone needs to be entrepreneurial. Not entrepreneurial in the sense of starting a for profit business but in the sense of fighting tirelessly to improve your world through your skills, passions, perseverance, audacity, and community support." If we accept that truth, it demands that we take action. There is work to be done to make sure that we are graduating students who are equipped with "future-citizen skills" (McKinsey, 2021) to thrive in any future environment.

We believe that making school look more like the lives our students will live in the future is the key. And our hope is that the resources shared here will help your school "build a new model that makes [your] existing model obsolete."



# FUTURE-CITIZEN SKILLS



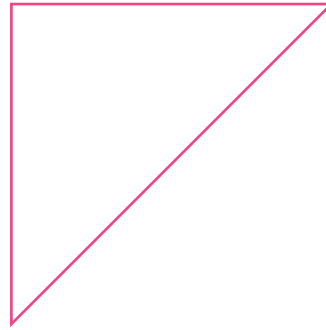
– Defining the skills citizens will need in the future world of work (McKinsey, 2021)



## WHY DOES SCHOOL NEED TO CHANGE?

As you get started on this work, we have curated playlists throughout the book to provide an opportunity for a deep dive into different areas of interest. These playlists are collections of resources that we've gathered over the last several years that have proven to be incredibly valuable to our thinking around Innovation Diploma. Here is a list of our favorite resources for making the case for a shift in education.

- *In Search of Deeper Learning: The Quest to Remake the American High School* by Jal Mehta and Sarah Fine
- *Creating Innovators: The Making of Young People Who Will Change the World* by Tony Wagner
- *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know* by Adam Grant
- *Range: Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World* by David Epstein
- *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure* by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt



# THE STORY

## WHAT IS INNOVATION DIPLOMA?

In 2014, The Mount Vernon Upper School (Grades 9 – 12) decided that we needed a program in our own community where we could prototype what the future of school could be. We wanted, in the words of Bruce Mau, to “make hope visible.”

It’s one thing to be able to talk about educational change and point to examples at other schools in different states serving different populations. It’s entirely different to publically engage in such a bold endeavor with all of your own stakeholders watching. We knew that building a robust program would take time and would be messy. But we are biased toward action, so we got started without having the program fully mapped out. We knew that we wanted it to be a four-year program that was grounded in connecting students with external partners, rich inquiry-based experiences, and robust feedback. We wanted an environment that was focused on multidisciplinary learning, collaboration, intrinsic motivation, and creation.

Over the past decade, iD has steadily grown in curricular offerings and enrollment. iD is no longer an elective but rather a school-within-a-school that awards credit for: Humanities; Chemistry; Biology; Social Entrepreneurship; Maker, Design, and Engineering; and Arts that focus on Graphic Design and Live Event Production. This expanded approach has given us a space to test different educational strategies and approaches at scale, like inquiry-based learning, design thinking, external partnerships, and competency-based education. Also, this approach allowed us to interact with and witness school change first-hand. We made our ideas about the future of education visible, and, over time, people became more comfortable with the changes we made, which led to a gradual increase in iD enrollment. iD currently enrolls between 25% – 30% of Upper School students.

Consulting opportunities have evolved too. iD Upperclassmen now participate in multiple Design Brief partnerships with outside organizations during their Junior and Senior year. Since its inception, learners have worked with Fortune 100 companies, non-profit organizations, government agencies, small businesses, and start-ups to forecast the future of retail, curate a museum experience, develop a scale prototype of the future of air travel, and make a boy’s lifelong dream of flying in a Millenium Falcon come true.



Clients have included AT&T Foundry, AWS, Chick-fil-A, the Children's Museum of Atlanta, Delta Air Lines, Mercedes Benz, Newell Brands, and Porsche North America. By offering Design Briefs, we have learned that when students are tasked with solving a complex problem for an authentic audience, the stakes of learning fundamentally change. The bar is set higher because the student work matters not only to a teacher, peer, or parent but to an external partner who is relying on them. For Mount Vernon, all of this starts with the intentional building of a robust culture of learner agency that is grounded in transferrable experiences.

- Engaging with a **challenging problem**, framed through a problem statement that sets clear expectations for the work.
- Experiencing **sustained inquiry** by forming Design Teams to work for 9 weeks to deeply understand the problem and connect with experts who serve as mentors.
- **Authenticity** by working with the Upper School Admin and having deadlines they needed to consistently meet.
- The responsibility of making decisions along the way about what they wanted to learn more about. The commitment to **student voice and choice** led to a culture of ownership of their own learning.
- Thoughtful **reflection** through the daily group check-ins, what we call Stand-up meetings, and individual journaling where they thought deeply about what was working, and not working, with their group.
- Intentional **critique and revision** at several points along the way. Students met with upperclassmen, external experts, the iD team, and peers to ask for feedback on their progress. Each time they were critiqued, they found ways to improve their work.
- High-stakes **public products** where failure felt possible. They had to lean into the momentum of their own learning to take them to new places they did not expect.

– PBL Works Gold Standard

# THE IMPACT

## A PARENT CASE STUDY

Innovation Diploma exists to make school more reflective of the life that Liam is likely to live after he leaves Mount Vernon.

### **How have you seen iD prepare him for his future?**

Innovation Diploma expects more from Liam, especially in how responsible he has to be with his work. He has a seriousness in the way that he approaches work. Already he can carry on conversations with adults and have open discussions with his peers. In both situations, he confidently shares his opinions. These communication skills will always stay with him.

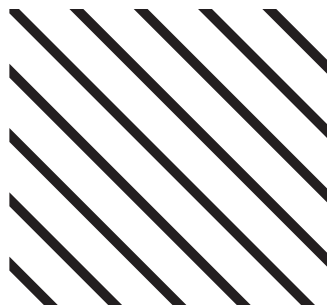
We also know that college requires a certain amount of self-motivation and desire to succeed. Innovation Diploma already asks that of Liam. He isn't just marching through school; he's challenged in the way that he thinks and how he works with his peers. Those challenges will help him for years to come in whatever college or career he is in.

At Mount Vernon, we believe that relationships are foundational to learning.

### **How have relationships in iD impacted Liam?**

The teachers in Innovation Diploma are different. They took the time to really know Liam personally and helped him uncover what he is capable of doing. iD is an extremely collaborative environment that allows students to make their own decisions. This type of freedom helped Liam realize how important it is to do what he really enjoys doing instead of following a path because people are telling him to. All of the iD teachers guide students in ways that push them toward success.

The fear I had for Liam was that he would be anonymous. At other schools, you could go through years of being anonymous. There's no version of being anonymous in iD. You will be known and challenged.





Working with identifiable organizations through Design Briefs is a signature aspect of Innovation Diploma.

**In what ways have you seen design briefs help Liam?**

Liam is getting the opportunity to see what real work feels like and have experiences that push him out of his comfort zone. As a sophomore, Liam has already stepped into a board room to speak to corporate executives. He is getting a chance early on to build a comfort level in situations that should intimidate him, but Design Briefs take away the intimidation factor. He knows that if he fails now that he can learn from it. Now is the best time for him to learn how to fail and recover. He'll keep getting these opportunities and by the time he graduates from MV, he'll be ready to talk to any executive anywhere.

**Why should parents believe in a program like iD?**

It's likely going to be different from the school experience you had. In the beginning, I was nervous, but the more we saw how Liam was evolving, we relaxed because he was happy and growing into his own person with his own direction

If you have a child who likes to do things, likes to be engaged, and likes to be thought of as an individual and important, that's what iD gives you. I didn't want him to just sit back in the back of a class and listen all day. Liam is engaged all day. It's not just a mantra for iD, their students are making an impact in the world today.



# WEEK 2

# INTRODUCTION TO DESIGN THINKING

Design Thinking is people-centered problem solving. It provides a framework for seeking and creating solutions for people's needs. All designers take different approaches when trying to solve complex problems. At Mount Vernon, we created the **COMPASS** to guide us through the wonderfully confusing terrain of design work. We use the Compass to help find our bearing and choose our routes as we embark on various design challenge journeys.

## THE CORE

Empathy, prototyping, and feedback are the center of design thinking. As designers we are not simply creating shiny objects and convincing people they need them. Rather, we work tirelessly to:

- Understand people's needs by empathizing with their situations and circumstances
- Build prototypes so that we can make our thinking visible, learn by doing, and see what physical things emerge.
- Gather feedback so that we may evolve our prototypes to higher levels of complexity and clarity.

## THE THINKING MODES

The outer ring of the Compass consists of the four thinking modes: Discover, Define, Design, and Deploy. Solving real-world problems rarely takes a linear path. In fact, you'll often change your course many times. These modes provide designers with ways to check their bearing and to ensure they are headed toward their goal.

- **Discover** – This is where designers explore with curiosity through research, site visits, and interviews so they can gain insights about the problem or client.
- **Define** – Using the insights gained through Discover, designers create problem statements that guide them through the rest of their work
- **Design** – Designers create testable prototypes and physical solutions that are grounded in their insights.
- **Deploy** – Designers launch a version of the solution so they can receive feedback from their client. Design is an iterative process so this feedback provides more insight for the next version of the solution.

## THE DESIGN APPROACHES

The inner ring of the Compass consists of four design approaches: Critique, Idea Exchange, Fabrication, and Craftsmanship. These approaches help to ensure that the prototypes and experiences designers create are meaningful to their clients.

- **Critique** – Designers need to honestly examine their work. While there is judgment and value placed during Critique, the main spirit is to improve, enhance, and make better.
- **Idea Exchange** – Associative thinking, connecting with a diverse network, and realizing that no one person’s idea is perfect is what makes a designer truly impactful.
- **Fabrication** – One of the toughest jobs of a designer is bringing form to ideas and making hope visible for their clients. It’s one thing to tell someone about an idea, it’s more productive to show the client an idea.
- **Craftsmanship** – Designers strive to create a balance of form and function by dwelling on the final product long enough to get it just right.



This is a lot of information for a student to take in all at once. It is a sophisticated model that is best learned by experiencing it first hand. We designed the next few learning experiences to let students engage in design thinking work at a deep level while still moving quickly through the process. Teaching and learning design thinking is all about getting more and more practice with increasingly complex problems.



## DESIGN THINKING

A quick Google search about design thinking will uncover a wide range of resources and opinions about what this process is and how it should be used. Here are the resources that have helped us make design thinking work for our context.

- *CAD Monkeys, Dinosaur Babies, and T-Shaped People: Inside the World of Design Thinking and How It Can Spark Creativity and Innovation* by Warren Berger
- *Change by Design, Revised and Updated: How Design Thinking Transforms Organizations and Inspires Innovation* by Tim Brown
- *Creative Confidence: Unleashing the Creative Potential within Us All* by Tom Kelley and David Kelley
- *Design Is Storytelling* by Ellen Lupton