Ideation session — from nothing to a problem worth solving

65 minutes. Today you go from "I don't have an idea yet" to a point-of-view statement and three people to talk to, which is most of what your proposal needs.

Two rules for the whole session:

- **Problems, not apps.** "Nobody knows which dining hall has the shortest line" is a problem. "An app for dining halls" isn't, yet.
- **Quantity first.** Your first idea is rarely your best one, and you can't pick a good idea from a list of two.

You'll need sticky notes, a pen, and a group of three (we'll help you find one).

Part 1 — Hunt for problems, on your own (12 min)

Write one problem per sticky note. Aim for **fifteen or more**. No laptop and no AI for this part: we want what *you* notice.

Use these prompts if you get stuck:

- **Places you spend time:** your dorm, a dining hall, a lab, a club, a job, the place you grew up.
- **People you know:** a relative, a coach, a professor, a friend at another school, someone who runs a local organization. What's hard about their week?
- **The last few days:** what annoyed you, slowed you down, or made you open a spreadsheet or a group chat to get something done?
- **A better world:** who near you is underserved, and what do they spend time on that they shouldn't have to?

Check:

- ☐ Fifteen or more sticky notes, each a problem, none of them an app.

Part 2 — Share and choose, in your group (13 min)

Each person picks their **three** strongest problems and pitches each in under a minute. The other two ask:

- Who *exactly* has this problem?
- How do you know?
- What do they do about it now?

Then, on your own, pick **one or two** problems to carry forward. A good one passes all four:

1. **You can reach three people who have it** soon, and talk to them.
2. **You care about it** enough to spend the rest of the term on it.
3. **A large language model (LLM) could plausibly help:** there's reading, writing, summarizing, sorting, explaining or judging in it.
4. **It's small enough** that one person could build a working version.

Check:

- ☐ You've chosen one or two problems, and each passes all four tests.

Part 3 — Practice an interview (15 min)

You'll learn more from three conversations with real people than from a week of guessing. Practice on each other now.

Pair up within your group (the third person takes notes, then rotate). Interview your partner for **four minutes** about *their* problem, using these habits:

- **Ask about the past, not the future.** "Tell me about the last time that happened" beats "Would you use an app that …?"
- **Ask why, then ask again.**

- **Ask what they do now**, and what they've tried that didn't work.
- **Don't pitch your solution.** The moment you do, people start being polite instead of honest.

Then write your own **interview guide**: five open questions you'll ask the real people who have your problem.

Check:

- ☐ Five questions, none of which can be answered with yes or no, and none of which describes your solution.

Part 4 — Define the problem (10 min)

Write a **point-of-view statement** for your strongest problem:

[user] needs *[need]* because *[insight]*.

Swap with someone in your group and check each other's:

- Is the **user** specific enough that you could find one?
- Is the **need** a verb, not a feature?
- Is the **insight** something you learned, or a guess you still need to check? (A guess is fine for now; mark it as one.)

Then write two or three **"How might we …?"** questions that open the problem up. "How might we help commuters know when to leave campus?" leaves room for many answers; "How might we build a bus tracker?" leaves room for one.

Check:

- ☐ A point-of-view statement your partner says is specific.
- ☐ Two or three "How might we" questions, none of which names a solution.

Part 5 — Crazy 8s (10 min)

Fold a sheet of paper into eight panels. Pick your favorite "How might we" question, and sketch **eight different ideas in eight minutes**: one minute each, rough boxes and arrows, no words longer than a label. The sixth, seventh and eighth are usually the interesting ones, because by then the obvious ideas are used up.

Then, for two minutes, open a chatbot and ask it for ideas you *didn't* sketch. Read its list for one you'd never have thought of, and one that's clearly worse than yours. That's the right way round: your thinking first, then the model to widen it.

Circle your favorite idea, and write next to it:

- what the LLM does in it, and
- which outside service or data it would need (a candidate application programming interface, or API).

Check:

- ☐ Eight sketches, and one circled, with its LLM job and a candidate API.

Part 6 — Before you leave (5 min)

On an index card, write:

1. your name,
2. your point-of-view statement, and
3. the three people you'll talk to.

Hand it in on your way out. Take a photo of your sticky notes and your Crazy 8s first: they're the start of your process log.

Where you are

You have a problem, a point-of-view statement, an interview guide, three people to talk to, a sketch, and an idea of what the LLM and the API would do. That's most of the proposal (see the proposal template). What's left is talking to people, and finding out whether your API really gives you what you need.