

Module 1 Reading: The Design Framework and Reflective Lens Inventory





Part I – The Design Mindset for Retention

From Intention to Design

Student retention and completion rarely happen by accident. They emerge from purposeful design—courses and programs structured to anticipate barriers, foster belonging, and guide learners toward success. A design mindset replaces reactive responses with proactive planning. It challenges educators to view persistence not as a matter of student willpower, but as an outcome of course architecture, communication, and culture.

The Design-Thinking Framework

Design thinking offers a powerful, human-centered way to tackle tough educational challenges. This dynamic approach uses five iterative phases, adaptable to any learning environment, fostering innovation and effectiveness:

01	02	03
Empathize – Understand the Learner	Define – Pinpoint the Challenge	Ideate – Brainstorm Solutions
Step into your students' shoes to truly understand their experience. Identify points of confusion, isolation, or stress. Use analytics and surveys, but also gather direct feedback and student stories to grasp their underlying needs.	Turn your observations into clear, actionable problem statements. Instead of "students drop early," refine it to "students disengage after Week 2 because expectations are unclear and feedback arrives too late." A clear problem guides effective design.	With a clear problem, generate many creative solutions. Work with colleagues or student-success teams to brainstorm. Ideas might include a "Start-Here" orientation module, peer connection activities, or early, low-stakes assessments.
04	05	
Prototype – Test Small Adjustments	Test – Evaluate and Improve	
Turn your best ideas into small experiments, not big overhauls. This could be a brief Week 1 engagement activity, a simpler syllabus, or a feedback tracker. Prototyping makes innovation manageable for quick testing and refinement.	Measure the impact of your prototypes. Did student participation or satisfaction improve? What did students say about clarity or support? Testing provides evidence to guide your next cycle of design and improvement.	



Why This Framework Matters

Iterative

Every cycle deepens insight and sharpens effectiveness

Human-Centered

Decisions begin with empathy for learners

Sustainable

Small, repeated design improvements accumulate into lasting institutional change

By using this framework, educators move from problem-solving to designing for persistence.



Reflective Pause

Recall a change you once made—perhaps adding clearer instructions, earlier feedback, or more interaction—that noticeably improved student engagement. Which phase of the design cycle did that change represent, and what evidence showed its impact?

Part II – Using the Reflective Lens Inventory

A Tool for Insight and Growth

The *Reflective Lens Inventory* (RLI) is a structured guide for examining how course design influences student persistence. It complements the design-thinking process by helping educators step back, observe patterns, and see their work through students' eyes.

Where design thinking emphasizes **process**, the RLI emphasizes **perception**—how effectively current design decisions translate into an equitable, engaging learning experience.



Seven Dimensions of Retention

The RLI focuses on seven interconnected dimensions that shape persistence and completion:

1

Orientation & Onboarding

How clearly students are guided at the start.

2

Communication & Feedback

How expectations and progress are conveyed.

3

Engagement & Belonging

How connection and community are cultivated.

4

Course Structure & Pacing

How timing and workload support steady progress.

5

Support Connections

How accessible advising and academic supports are.

6

Assessment & Scaffolding

How tasks build mastery and confidence.

7

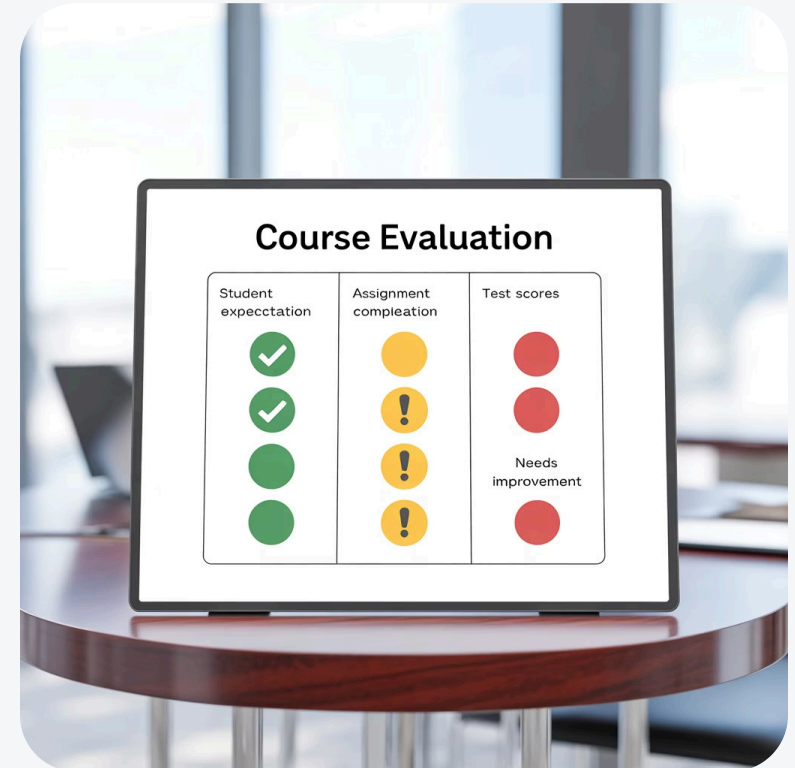
Inclusivity & Accessibility

How materials reflect diverse learners and ensure equitable access.

Each dimension represents a system of design choices that collectively influence whether students persist.

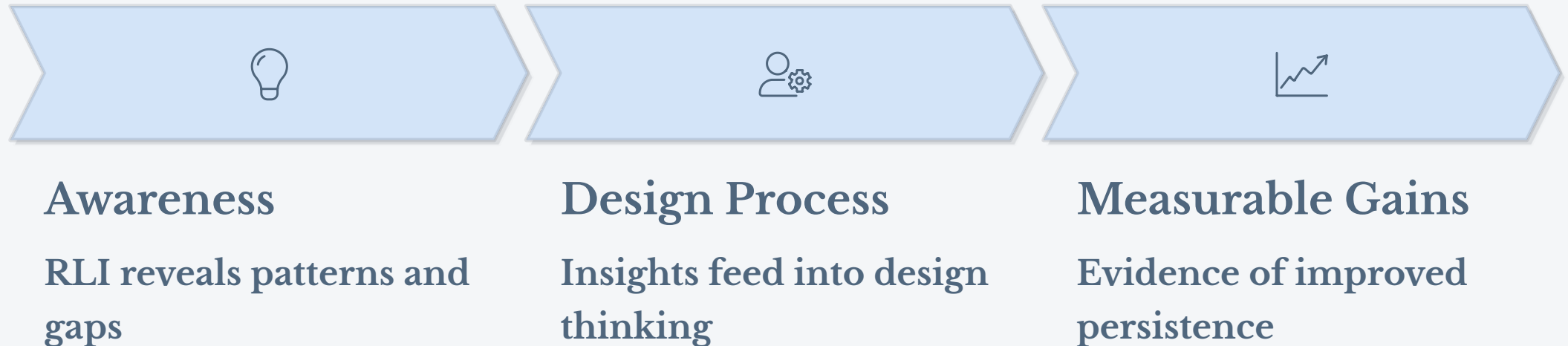
Reading the Lens

When educators rate each area as **Strength**, **Needs Work**, or **High Risk**, the goal is not judgment but discovery. Patterns of strength reveal what sustains engagement; areas marked Needs Work or High Risk highlight design opportunities. The process transforms reflection into data—helping educators see where modest redesigns could remove friction and improve the student journey.



From Awareness to Action

The insights gained from the RLI feed directly into the design-thinking cycle. Identifying strengths and gaps fulfills the *Empathize* and *Define* stages; generating targeted improvements initiates *Ideation* and *Prototyping*. Over time, repeated use of the RLI provides a longitudinal record of progress—evidence that small, intentional changes lead to measurable gains in persistence.





Reflective Pause

After reviewing the seven dimensions, consider: Which single design change could most improve persistence in your course, and how might you know when it's working?

Summary

Design thinking provides the framework for improvement. The Reflective Lens Inventory provides the **mirror** for self-assessment. Together, they turn reflection into action and transform retention from a reactive response into a deliberate, data-informed design practice.

