Summary of Empathic Design
By Peter Landwehr

Description
The purpose of Empathic Design is to develop new products based on observation of individual user activity. By monitoring a given user or set of members of a user group in their own environment as opposed to a lab, a designer can determine what new products a user needs. Properly using Empathic Design can require significant preparation because users must get used to being observed before their reactions can be trusted as genuine and not a product of being aware that they are under observation in a non-lab location.

There are three ideas behind the use of Empathic Design. The first is that users will come up with partial solutions to shortcomings in product – by observing these new compromise solutions, it is possible to create a new product that implements them more efficiently. The second, somewhat contradictory, idea is that users will often fail to articulate their needs – a minor design flaw will go accepted and unnoticed until an official remedy is offered, and the only way to notice such a flaw is to observe users of the product. The final idea is simply that the context in which a user or product functions determines many of the problems that they or it have. Thus observation of users and products in their environments is key to finding areas where new or improved products are necessary.

When using Empathic Design, a researcher will follow a five step process:
1. Observation: Figure out who and what process/product needs to be observed.
2. Capturing data: Use video, photographs, drawing, or whatever is expedient to capture data while observing
3. Reflection and analysis: Consider and analyze what was seen.
4. Brainstorming: Brainstorm for solutions to perceived problems
5. Developing prototypes of possible solutions: work on constructing prototypes.

Background
Empathic Design was first put forward as a technique by Rayport and Leonard-Barton in an article in the Harvard Business Review[1].

References
A transcription of the above article (with mistyped title and minimal formatting) is located at http://faculty.fuqua.duke.edu/~moorman/GeneralMills/Section3/Section3Documents/Spark.htm
The actual article can be found for sale at http://harvardbusinessonline.hbsp.harvard.edu/b02/en/common/item_detail.jhtml?id=97606