Using co-design to support use of evidence-based health communication materials: The example of the "Unwrapped" retreat

Project Foundation & Focus

Many community-based organizations (CBOs) that serve LGBTQ+ people are being asked to use evidence-based health communication campaigns. However, CBO staff often report that these materials don't meet the needs of their organizations or communities/clients.

We hosted a co-design workshop to identify potential solutions to address these gaps. Based on participants' requests, we produced this report to recap our findings and provide insight into the rationale for the user-centered design approach we used.

Why a co-design approach?

We used methods that prioritized collaborative design **with, not for,** people at the center of the work. Here, the study team and a group of experts in user-centered design worked closely with CBO staff who focused on LGBTQ+ health.

PRE-WORK: BRINGING EXPERTS TOGETHER AND SETTING THE STAGE

Tapping user-centered design expertise

The Harvard team and user-centered design team worked together to:

- Review existing materials and research relevant to the project
- Iterate on the plan as it unfolded
- Identify 15 individuals from relevant CBOs and local institutions to participate in the events
- Prepare for pre-meet and workshop (materials, supplies, space selection, set-up, and agendas) to create an atmosphere that feels as much like a play space or retreat as much as a work-oriented event

Why hire facilitators?

We worked with Red Sofa Designs and their collaborators to tap their expertise with user-centered design. They were critical in creating a safe and inclusive space for dialogue, collaboration, and problem-solving. Two members of the group identify as LGBTQ+, and all have worked with LGBTQ+ health.

Selecting participants

Our 15-person group consisted of local creatives, implementation scientists, public health practitioners, and staff from local CBOs. Participants held a range of identities within the local LGBTQ+ community, such as peer leaders and trans elders. For privacy, we aren't sharing names publicly. The organizations represented included AccessHealth MA, BAGLY, Boston GLASS, Boston Children's Hospital, Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, GLAD, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, EmVision Productions, and Massachusetts Transgender Political Coalition.

Our past work highlighted CBO staff members' frustration with campaigns that didn't center their communities, were not developed with/for them, and didn't offer needed supports. Having diverse expertise in the room was critical to finding new ways forward.

YOU'RE INVITED TO A CO-DESIGN WORKSHOP!

Join us for a full-day, creative retreat to find ways to support community-based organizations advancing health equity for LGBTQ+ folks

SO, WHAT DOES THE WORKSHOP OFFER?

- Learn more about creative co-design concepts and methodologies
- Enjoy food, conversation, collaboration, & self-care activities
- Receive an honorarium for sharing your time and expertise
- Meet fellow changemakers

To learn more, please contact Morgan Mulhern Lopez at morganmulhern@hsph.harvard.edu

Invitation sent to participants to join our co-design retreat

PREP MEETING WITH PARTICIPANTS

An hour to say 'hi' before our deep dive

For the first engagement, participants joined a one-hour, virtual gathering a week before the full-day workshop.

Why schedule a pre-meet?

We set up time before the workshop to kick off our group engagement with the goal of:

- Fostering a sense of ease and camaraderie
- Reviewing project purpose and past work
- Building excitement for the all-day, in-person workshop held the following week
- Introducing co-design principles and setting expectations
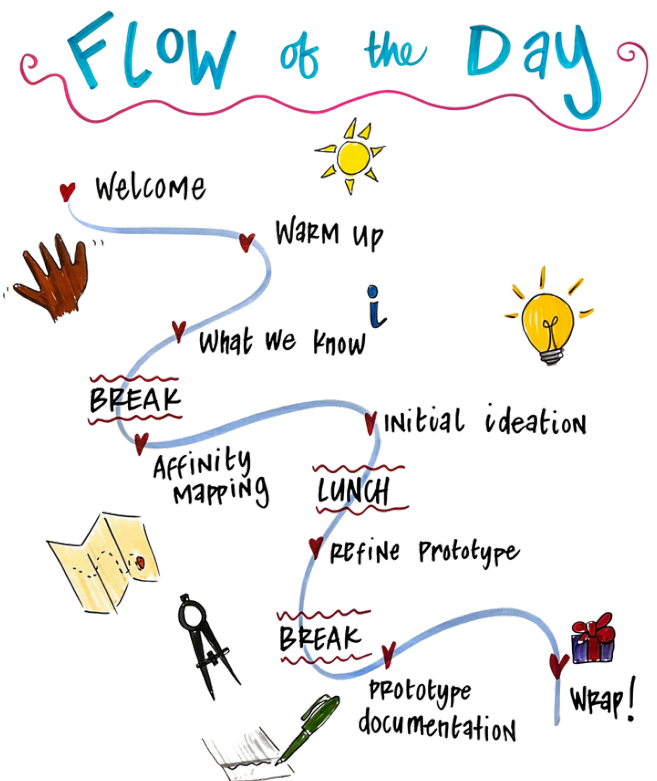
Key co-design principles presented:

- **Share power:** Create a platform for power sharing in research, decision-making, design, delivery, and evaluation.

- **Prioritize relationships:** Co-design is only possible with relationships and trust.

- **Use participatory means:** Co-design provides ways for people to take part and express themselves as they actively shape the work.

- Build capability: Celebrate each person's ability to teach and learn from other group members.

Visual Notes from Virtual Engagement

How did having a theme support our work?

The concept of a "gift" connected diverse elements and was employed in multiple ways, including how we spoke, the activities we selected, and how we set up the room to create a sense of consistency and comfort. This light-touch branding also provided continuity throughout.

Flow of the Day
Welcome
Warm Up
What we know
BREAK
Affinity Mapping
Initial ideation
LUNCH
Refine Prototype
BREAK
Prototype documentation
Wrap!

FULL-DAY WORKSHOP

Core activities

- **Structured brainstorming:** We broke into smaller groups and were asked to consider the current status of working with their communities, guided by a process referred to as "downloading."

- **Affinity mapping:** We moved into an exercise to identify patterns, themes, and connections among the ideas, allowing teams to gain deeper insights and make informed decisions.

- **Ideation and prototyping:** With three themes identified, participants broke into groups to transform their selected theme into a concept in the physical world.

- **Creating a pitch:** Once each prototype was developed, participants delivered a pitch to the whole group!

What drove the approach?

We started the day with exercises to build community and get our creative juices flowing. Throughout the day, we used a structured approach to idea generation and decision-making that can be summarized as "diverge then converge."

In the divergent phase, teams explored various possibilities by generating multiple ideas, perspectives, and solutions without judgment or evaluation. Following the exploration, the convergent phase focused on reinterpreting and synthesizing the generated ideas, selecting the most promising ones, and consolidating them into coherent concepts or solutions.

By alternating between divergent and convergent modes of thinking, participants balanced exploration and focus, allowing creativity and practicality in developing innovative solutions to complex problems.

FROM VIRTUAL SPARK TO IN-PERSON BRILLIANCE

Establish safety, encourage engagement

We intentionally incorporated elements to build a space of safety, joy, creativity, and togetherness. Below are some examples of how and why we fostered this.

We carved out time and resources to establish safety and self-care as a priority for the day, such as ground rules, meditation, plenty of snacks/food, and chair massage.

We engaged in an improvisation activity to foster creativity, encourage flexible thinking, and stimulate idea generation. Creative materials were also available.

We used an accessible space that was centrally located in Boston. It was bright and had areas for large group discussions and more intimate conversations.

GROUND **RULES**

- THIS IS A SAFE PLACE
- THINK OUTSIDE of the BOX
- LISTEN as ACTIVELY as WE PARTICIPATE
- BE PRESENT
- TREAT PEOPLE LIKE THEY'RE SURVIVORS
- POPULATIONS are PEOPLE
- AVOID JUDGEMENT of YOURSELF - BE EASY ON YOURSELF
- CONFIRM YOU UNDERSTOOD
- PACE OURSELVES
- ALLOW SPACE for DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES
- IT'S OK to MOVE AROUND

Ground rules co-created by facilitators and participants

First diverge, then converge

In the structured brainstorming activity, we focused on broad ideation. This activity emphasized four categories to structure the conversation:

KNOW	ASSUME	DON'T KNOW	POWERFUL QUESTIONS
Facts, read, heard from the source	Gut feelings, interpretations, instincts	Example: Impact on a person's social life	Is tech the answer to it all?

Brainstorming intentionally creates divergence, and once this was done, participants moved toward the first stages of convergence via an exercise called "affinity mapping." Broad themes identified in this process included:

- The need for and value of intergenerational spaces
- The critical necessity of acknowledging lived experience and celebrating the diversity amongst LGBTQ populations
- The opportunity afforded by bringing funding decision-makers and those impacted by this funding into closer proximity

ONE GOAL, THREE PATHS

With three themes identified, participants broke into groups for ideation and prototyping. A prototype can be anything that helps build structure around the idea - a wall of Post-it notes, a role-playing activity, or even a storyboard. Once prototypes were developed, participants delivered a pitch (as a compelling, brief story) to the whole group.

Guidelines to help develop the pitch included:
- What is the need?
- What is your proposed solution? How is it different from what's currently out there?
- What all is included, and how does it work? How would someone use it in practice or the community?
- What impact does it have on end users?
- Could this be scaled up? How?
- What comes next with this idea?

Visual notes summarizing paths forward
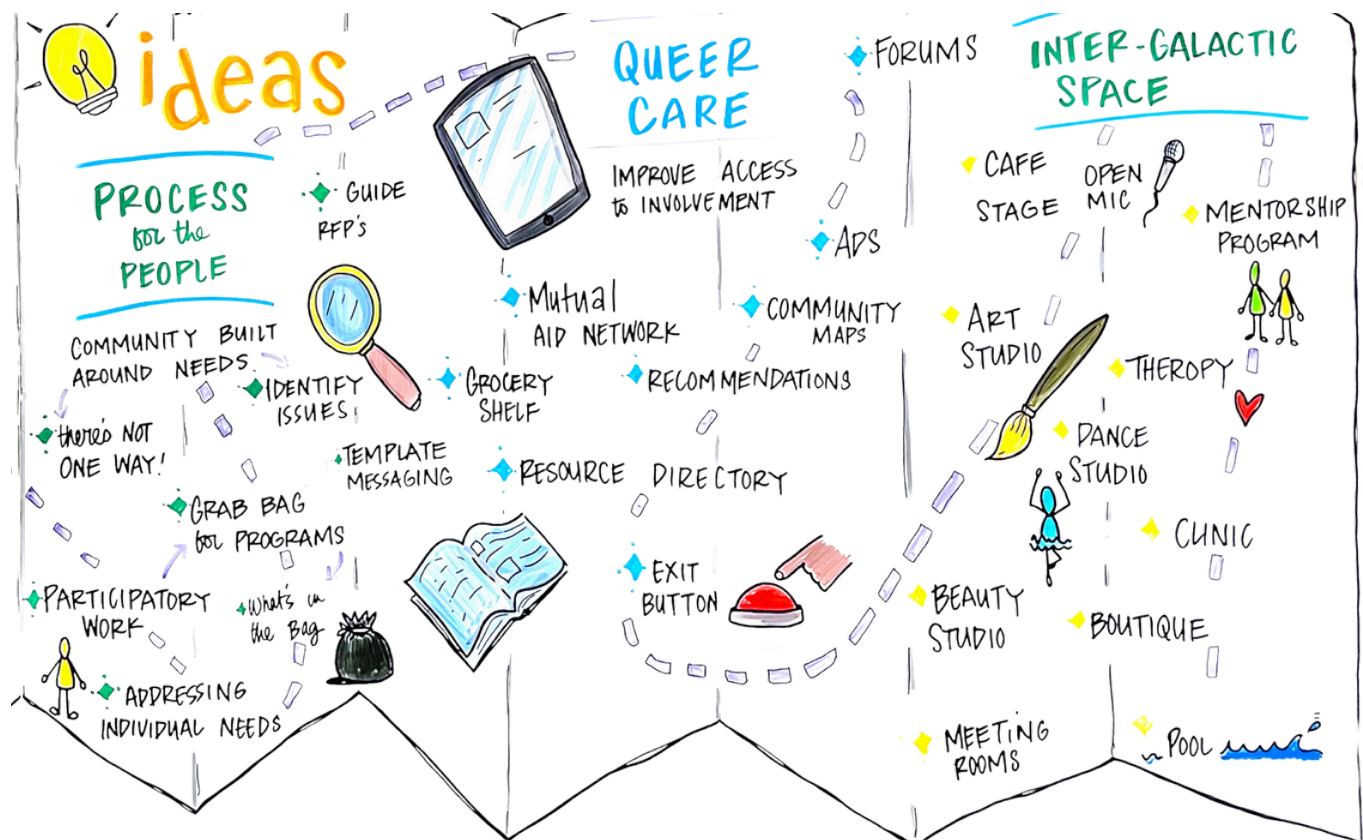
Why visual notetaking? This captures participants' ideas in a live record as the workshop unfolds. It offers a great way to demonstrate the value placed on contributions made.

CONCEPT DETAILS

Concept 1- Process for the People:
- Goal: Better connecting funders and implementers
- This group created a framework to "flip the script" on the funding process. The emphasis would be on building community around priority issues and then finding agreed-upon solutions, recognizing that there is not only one way to achieve success. This approach would also put power in the hands of community organization staff to make decisions about health programs based on their knowledge of the community.

Concept 2 - Queer Care Mobile App:
- Goal: Celebrating diversity (of identities and paths) among LGBTQ community members
- This group designed a mobile app to facilitate connection, resource sharing, community building, and mutual aid. The approach emphasized engaging community members, providers, and allies.

Concept 3 - The Intergalactic Space:
- Goal: Building on the strengths of the community and supporting intergenerational connections
- The team proposed a brick-and-mortar community center that would host a wide variety of services and features, such as a pool, a stage with open mic, a mentorship program, and a salon.
- The space was designed to center joy, celebration, education, inter-generational connection, and creativity.

Visual notes from the workshop showing what has been, what is, and what can be
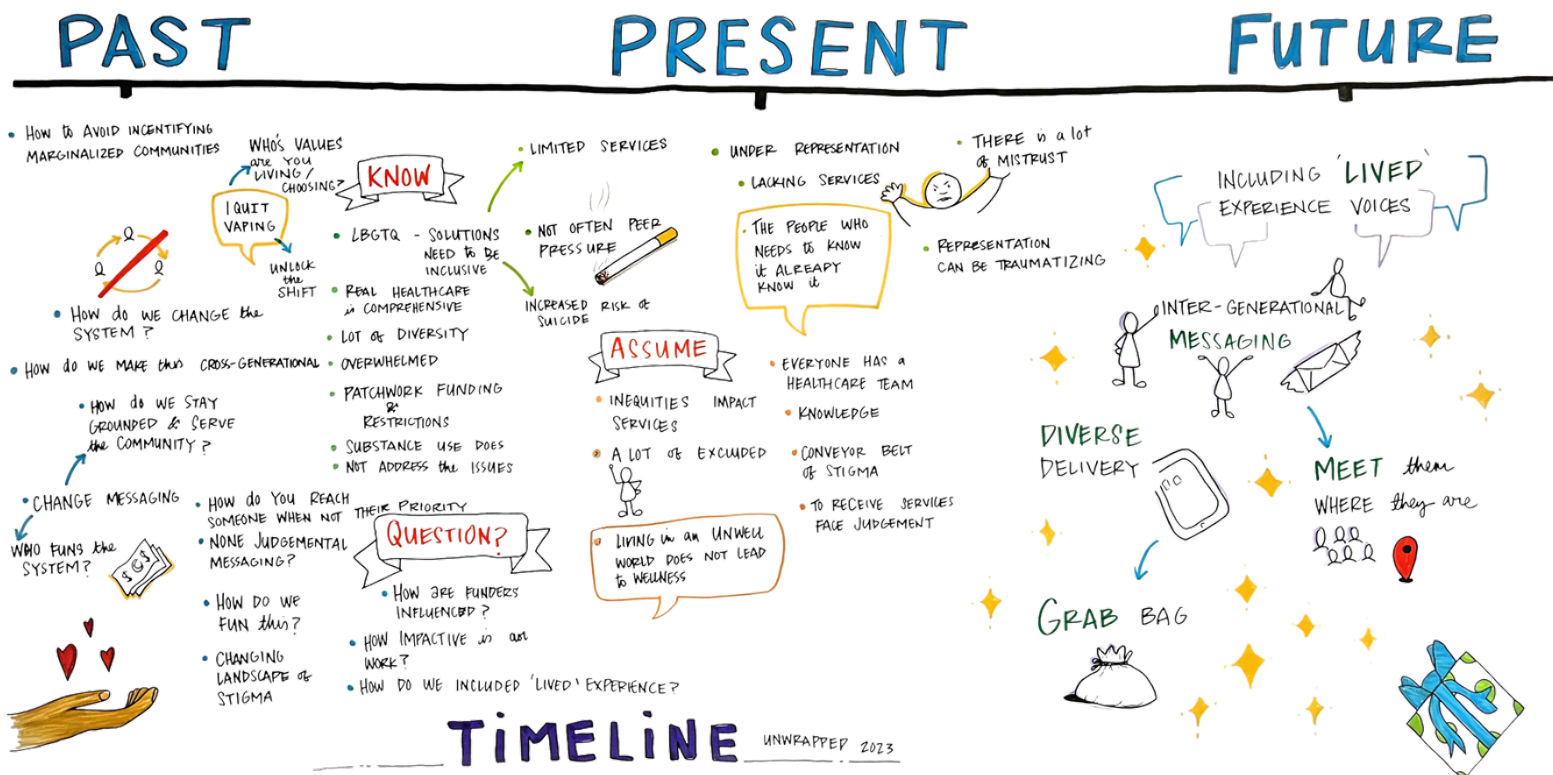
RESOURCES & NEXT STEPS

Co-Design

These resources are helpful for new and experienced practitioners, offering a guide to mindsets, methods, and movements of co-design, which is the approach we used for December's workshop. The author also identifies as LGBTQ+.

- Beyond Sticky Notes: Doing Co-design for Real by KA McKercher [Book]
- Beyond Sticky Notes, What is co-design?

Design Thinking

These resources provide background on design thinking and specific approaches, such as human-centered design and liberatory design.

- Interaction Design Foundation: Design Thinking
- IBM, Design Thinking Field Guide
- IDEO, The Field Guide to Human-Centered Design
- IDEO, Practice Your Prototyping Skills with These 4 Resources
- Design Sprints, Design Sprints Methodology

Let's stay connected!

This is just the first step! To get/stay connected, please get in touch with Shoba Ramanadhan (sramanadhan@hsph.harvard.edu) or Morgan Mulhern Lopez (morganmulhern@hsph.harvard.edu). You can also connect with us here:

- Shoba: LinkedIn, Harvard Profile
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