

CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT TO MITIGATE SOCIAL ISOLATION: Six Design Principles for Kick-Starting New Programming in Cultural and Performing Arts Organizations During the COVID-19 Crisis

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Overview

If you work for an organization that wants to develop new digital offerings or programming to better serve your community during the COVID-19 crisis, this guide is for you. This document contains six design principles for engaging teams in creative problem-solving, sense-making, and change-making.

COVID-19 has presented GLAMs (Galleries, Libraries, Archives, and Museums) and performing arts organizations with urgent demands to create new programs and services that mitigate the effects of social isolation. But while many organizations want to accelerate their digital programming during this time of social distancing and shuttered physical institutions, many are constrained by reduced staffing capacities, newly remote and distributed teams, and struggles to maintain team cohesion and morale.

This guide grew out of our work with 10 cultural and performing arts organizations in the spring of 2020, funded by the Aspen Tech Policy Hub. While this document was written with the specific needs and circumstances of GLAMs and performing arts organizations in mind, the principles are broadly applicable in any public-serving, mission-driven organization.

To learn more about the project, titled *Cultural Engagement to Mitigate Social Isolation*, please visit: www.aspentechpolicyhub.org/project/cultural-engagement-to-mitigate-social-isolation/



Making Change Happen

Change is hard, and even more so inside resource-challenged institutions, especially during the COVID-19 crisis. If you have ever tried to get your colleagues to embrace new and innovative ways of working, collaborating, and solving problems, you know that it can be an uphill battle. Even when there is a desire to launch new programming or initiatives to better serve the community, it's hard to get groups to think clearly, take action, and move forward.

But while change is hard, teams can get things started by adopting what we call a *think big, start small, move fast* mindset. By breaking down large challenges into small, achievable steps, you can have a big impact and gain momentum on larger, more complex challenges.

The Design Principles

In our work, we have observed the importance of the following six principles in helping teams move forward with new programming and digital experiments during complex and challenging times.

- 1. Start with capturing assumptions.**
- 2. Incorporate physical and mental warm-ups.**
- 3. Make time and space for reflection.**
- 4. Don't try to serve "everyone," especially in a time of crisis.**
- 2. Foster collegiality, connection, and a sense of community.**
- 6. Build to think.**



The Design Principles

1. Start with capturing assumptions.

When kicking off a new program or digital experiment, take a moment to capture everyone's assumptions and review the ones that could be holding you back. For example, a team in our group was bogged down with the assumption that everything they produced had to meet the highest standard of "museum perfection" at all times. When they surfaced this assumption, it allowed them to recognize that their rapid experiments during the COVID-19 crisis did not have to be perfect and fully polished, and this freed them to move quickly.

TIP: Give everyone 10 minutes in your first meeting to think quietly and write down their assumptions. Then, in small groups or as a team, review the assumptions, grouping them and looking for patterns. You can use a virtual whiteboard, such as Mural.co or Google Jamboard, or paper sticky notes.

2. Incorporate physical and mental warm-ups.

Simple but intentional activities and games provide a break from the monotony of endless Zoom calls, and put participants into a creative and energetic mindset. Even in virtual meetings, teams can connect through simple activities that remind us of our humanity. In all of our agendas for this project, we were mindful about including warm-ups that would infuse energy and connection into the Zoom room. We felt this was essential for a group that would never convene in-person.

TIP: Try kicking off your next meeting with a quick activity called "Stretch and Share." Each person takes a turn sharing a physical stretch that everyone copies, and then invites someone else in the group to share a stretch. Be sure to stand up and get physical, even if you are meeting over video. For more games like this, visit <http://www.designinginsights.com/improv>.

3. Make time and space for reflection.

It is critical to provide time and space for colleagues and peers to reflect on and normalize their experiences during times of rapid change and stress. Getting new projects going is as much about the needs and emotions of the team members as it is about end-users. Before people can think strategically and look outward, they must first take care of themselves. Any new initiative must retain a focus on the people *doing the work* and what is happening in their lives. For example, the day before our project kicked-off, George Floyd was murdered in Minneapolis, so in our first convening, and all our subsequent gatherings, we made time for check-in's that acknowledged what was happening in the world outside.

TIP: At the start of each meeting, invite each person to take a turn "checking in" and responding to a prompt. You can have everyone go around and say, "I'm [name], I'm checking in, and today what is on my mind is ____." It's also important to close your meetings with a short reflection, even if it's as simple as asking everyone to share one word that sums up the meeting.



The Design Principles

4. Don't try to serve "everyone," especially in a time of crisis.

A common assumption we encounter in our work with cultural organizations is that they think they must serve "everyone." Instead of trying to serve the "general public" or "all patrons," prioritize one to two specific personas or archetypes that you can focus on *now*. For example, one of the organizations in our project decided to focus in on the needs of a 9-year-old Spanish-speaking student who was at home doing distance learning. This laser focus helped the team ask better questions about who they were serving and why, and led them to develop new distance-learning programs that would, ironically, meet the needs of *more* audience members.

TIP: Create a list of specific personas or archetypes you might focus on. Try to be as detailed as possible. Consider "extreme users"—those who may be on the "edges" of what you consider to be your core audiences. Then, prioritize the list and focus on one to two. Often, in designing for someone very specific, you end up meeting the needs of *more* people.

5. Foster collegiality, connection, and a sense of community.

Collegiality and authentic connections between team members are as important as the content of the discussions about new programs or initiatives. Especially now, with so many people working from home, practitioners need more opportunities to collaborate, reflect, and problem-solve in non-transactional, non-rivalrous environments. For example, in our project, we created numerous and varied opportunities for paired and small-group activities and discussions.

TIP: Instead of defaulting to open, group conversations in every meeting, try adopting interaction structures that allow all voices to be heard. One example is called "1-2-4-All." Pose a prompt or question to the group, and start with silent self-reflection. Then have people share and generate ideas in pairs, then in foursomes, and then as a whole group. For more ideas of ways to structure group interactions to promote greater connection, visit <http://www.liberatingstructures.com>.

6. Build to think.

Lastly, dedicate time in your gatherings in which you build, create, and make—as opposed to just talking and planning. Exploring ideas through the act of building and making can open up new possibilities. Experiment with hands-on activities from LEGO Serious Play® and Design Thinking to explore ideas. For example, of the first activities we asked the participants in our project to undertake was to build a model of an audience or community member using LEGOs®.

TIP: Set aside 15 minutes in every meeting to "build" an idea in tangible form, as opposed to just talking about it. Participants can use paper, pen, fabric, LEGOs®, or any arts and crafts materials they have at home.



Conclusion

Starting new initiatives is hard, even in the best of times. COVID-19 and other economic, social, and societal challenges have significantly increased the difficulty level, and the stakes, for cultural institutions and their teams. Taking these six design principles into consideration can help teams work in a more human-centered way to create new projects—and new value—with and for their communities.

Resources

<https://www.aspentechpolicyhub.org/project/cultural-engagement-to-mitigate-social-isolation/>

<http://www.designthinkingformuseums.net>

<https://www.usingdata.com/>

<https://www.slideshare.net/edsonm/think-big-start-small-move-fast>

<http://www.liberatingstructures.com>

<https://dschool.stanford.edu/resources>

<https://www.lego.com/en-us/seriousplay>

About the Project

To learn more about *Cultural Engagement to Mitigate Social Isolation*, please visit:
www.aspentechpolicyhub.org/project/cultural-engagement-to-mitigate-social-isolation/

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