LAB 04

Beyond the Individual: Collective/Community Approaches to Youth Worker Wellbeing

Collaborative Designing for Youth Wellbeing

The Story of Our Design Day

10.29.2016

YOUTHREX
Research &
Evaluation eXchange

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ABSTRACT

The Design Day brought together youth sector stakeholders – youth, youth workers, policy makers, researchers, funders and citizens – to collaboratively tackle four 'thorny' challenges, that youth and youth workers experience. This event was hosted in collaboration with the Youth Opportunities Fund at the Ontario Trillium Foundation. This report is a snapshot of this Design Day and focuses on the Beyond the Individual: Collective/Community Approaches to Youth Worker Wellbeing Lab. It shares the two prototype pitches that participants co-developed in response to the challenges identified in the Lab. It also includes reflections on the collaborative process along with resources and case study examples that can inspire our youth work.

KEYWORDS

innovation, design, idea lab, collaboration, strategic planning, community-based design, participatory process, youth outcomes, youth development, systems change, rural youth, Indigenous youth, racialized LGBTTQQ2SIA youth, youth work, collective self-care

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Foreword

The Youth Opportunities Fund (YOF) at the Ontario Trillium Foundation eagerly accepted YouthREX's invitation to co-host a Design Day on October 29, 2016. Together, we tackled four 'thorny' challenges that Ontario youth and youth workers experience. This report is a snapshot of this Design Day. The report includes the four Idea Lab challenges that the Design Day focused on and the eight prototype pitches that participants co-developed in response to these challenges, along with resources and case study examples that can inspire our youth work.

The **Youth Opportunities Fund** is an annual program of the Government of Ontario, administered by the Ontario Trillium Foundation. YOF provides grants and capacity-building supports to youth-led grassroots groups and collaboratives serving young people. Funded initiatives improve outcomes for youth facing multiple barriers to economic and social wellbeing. Similar to YouthREX, our work is grounded in ***Stepping Up: A Strategic Framework to Help Ontario's Youth Succeed.***

We recognize that in order to do our work effectively and responsively, we must take time to listen to and learn with and from, all youth sector stakeholders including youth, frontline youth workers, researchers, policy-makers and funders across Ontario. So often, we can end up working in silos or in pre-defined structures where engagement is confined to formal roles. YOF was pleased to co-host this Design Day with YouthREX to break down those walls, hear from each other, and connect deeply over what we can all agree we're working towards: improving the lives of youth.

Using design thinking to explore issues that matter: We were also happy to share our own learnings with YouthREX, gleaned from hosting multiple YOF Ideas Lab days, where we welcome youth to use design thinking to explore issues that matter to them and bring their ideas to life, while also learning about the YOF. We find this approach to be engaging and meaningful both for us and the youth. Collaborating with YouthREX on this Design Day was an opportunity to experience the intersection of design thinking with youth sector challenges and wisdom in a nuanced way. It was also an opportunity to explore an issue we are particularly interested in: increasing our understanding and meeting the needs of rural Ontario youth (Lab 03).

As this report shows, very fruitful dialogue and ideas were shared and explored. Like youth work, there were moments of connection and tension, times when some of us broke away from the schedule or planned activities, and many valuable learning moments – both expected and unexpected.

We hope this report continues to breathe life into the important ideas that were seeded at this event. Thank you to everyone who participated or supported the execution of this day! We look forward to collaborating again.

Tabish Surani
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*YouthREX reached out to these individuals to facilitate the discussions in each Idea Lab. They helped to guide conversations and provide contextual information based on their extensive knowledge and experience, whether lived, practice and/or research-based.

YOUTHREX DESIGN DAY ORGANIZERS

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Thank you to everyone who participated in this Design Day. This report captures just a fraction of the wisdom that was shared; we are grateful for everyone who worked through the activities with a spirit of collaboration, patience, and a true commitment to youth wellbeing.

About the Design Day

OVERVIEW

The Design Day brought together youth sector stakeholders – youth, youth workers, policy makers, researchers, funders and citizens – to collaboratively tackle four 'thorny' challenges, or Idea Labs, that youth and youth workers experience. This event was hosted in collaboration with the Youth Opportunities Fund at the Ontario Trillium Foundation. Design Day participants were provided with 'challenge briefs' that provided participants with a summary of the context, key information, and suggested challenge questions to act as prompts for the day. Group of four to six individuals took on one of the Idea Lab challenges (two groups per challenge) and worked together to generate new ideas, or variations on existing innovations for advancing youth wellbeing on these issues. Everyone present was invested in the topic areas and had specific experience and knowledge to bring to the table, whether lived, practice or research-based.

This event was designed to provide participants with an opportunity to collaboratively work with peers from multiple vantage points in the sector to co-create recommendations on each Lab topic. The activities moved participants through developing a common understanding of the issue(s) at hand, ideation and prototyping solutions/ recommendations. At the end of the day, each of the eight groups shared, or 'pitched' their idea/prototype to the larger group.

YouthREX committed to sharing the solutions and recommendations from the Design Day widely within the youth sector through a knowledge mobilization strategy crafted around the contributions and outcomes of each Ideas Lab. This report is part of this strategy.

DESIGN DAY GOALS

- Share knowledge
- Learn from other perspectives
- Collaborate to design uniquely tangible recommendations or solutions for advancing youth wellbeing

PROPOSED OUTCOMES

- Increased collaboration amongst diverse youth sector stakeholders around a 'thorny' issue
- Develop a common understanding of the problem
- Design and prototype solutions

IDEA LAB TOPICS

LAB 01 // Bringing Our Whole Selves: Inclusive Programs With And For Racialized LGBTTQQ2SIA Youth

LAB 02 // Indigenizing Youth Work: Towards A New Relationship

LAB 03 // Far And Farther: Equitable Access To Programs, Services, And Opportunities For Youth Living In Rural And Remote Communities

LAB 04 // Beyond The Individual: Community/ Collective Approaches To Youth Worker Wellbeing

MaRS Solutions Lab facilitated this event, guiding participants through a collaborative process of discovery that included: problem framing, ideation, and prototyping of solutions. This approach, which included issues and stakeholder mapping, enabled participants to identify and design strategies and interventions for change.

Youth Opportunities Fund at the Ontario Trillium Foundation collaborated on this event with YouthREX, co-planning, engaging stakeholders to participate, hosting Idea Lab 03, *Far And Farther: Equitable Access To Programs, Services, And Opportunities For Youth Living In Rural And Remote Communities*, and participating throughout the day.

The Agenda

10 AM

Welcome + Introduction

Welcome by YouthREX and YOF
Introduction: The What & How of Design Jams
by MaRS Solution Lab (MSL)

10:15 AM

Icebreaker

Visualizing the Social Safety Net activity
by Youth Philanthropy Initiative

11:00 AM

Understanding the Problem: Mapping the Challenge

12:45 PM

Networking lunch

1:15 PM

Ideation

Generating ideas for interventions

2:15 PM

Break

2:30 PM

Prototyping

Building the pitches

3:20 PM

Idea Lab Pitches

Each of group had five minutes to present their prototype to the room and answer the following questions: What is the problem? What is the idea? How does your prototype change the user experience of your persona?

3:50 PM

Closing Remarks and Next Steps

4:00 PM

Close

Design Day Activities:

A Step-by-Step Snapshot of the Day

01 // ICEBREAKER

Visualizing the Social Safety Net hosted by Rachel Paris, Youth Philanthropy Initiative (YPI)

To start the day off, everyone gathered in a big circle to participate in an icebreaker called 'Visualizing the Social Safety Net'. Participants were assigned a badge representing one of the following: 1) social institution, 2) type of social service, or 3) marginalized group/ social issue. They took turns tossing a ball of yarn across the circle, identifying relationships between people and parts of the system, while holding their section of yarn to create a visual trail or 'net' to represent those connections.

This activity gave participants a visual, thought-provoking, and hands-on way to explore how the social services system works. It was an interactive way to visually see and reflect on who, why, and how diverse members of the community may be served/underserved/not served by the system, how connections can be built, and where we can support youth to engage within this system.

02 // UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM: MAPPING THE CHALLENGE

Issues Map
Participants brainstormed issues and challenges associated with the challenge outlined in their Idea Lab brief.

The Stakeholder Map
This activity gave participants the opportunity to think through all the stakeholders involved in the issue outlined in the Idea Lab challenge at hand.

Experience Map
This activity had participants focusing on the experience of the key user/stakeholder they were designing for. The activity helped participants empathetically think through the issues and feelings of the user they were designing for, who this user interacts with, and what they experience/do when dealing with the challenge at hand.

03 // IDEATION: GENERATING IDEAS FOR INTERVENTIONS

Prioritizing Ideas
Participants brainstormed ideas for interventions on Post-It Notes and then mapped out all their ideas on a matrix based on feasibility and impact. This allowed them to see what ideas would have high impact and be feasible, versus those that were low impact and not very feasible.

04 // PROTOTYPING: BUILDING YOUR IDEA

The Prototype Idea sheet aided participants in thinking through key elements of the one idea they ended up choosing to prototype. The sheet outlines the idea, the user, the key problem, and how the creators could test the idea out. The second prototype sheet is a feedback sheet that gives space for the creators to write down useful feedback, assumptions, and potential changes to their idea.

Please see the Appendix for all worksheets.

LAB 04

Beyond the Individual: Collective/Community Approaches to Youth Worker Wellbeing

"Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare."

– AUDRE LORDE, A BURST OF LIGHT: ESSAYS (1988)

a. Background

THE CONTEXT

Frontline youth workers and the work they do are critical to the youth sector and the wellbeing of youth in our communities. Their work engages the intersection point between youth and 'the system' – they bear witness to the development, changes and challenges that the young people they support face; they can be the first person these youth connect with in times of need. From providing moral support, to finding pathways to education or employment, mediating between tensions within a youth's life and more, for many frontline youth workers, 'work' is not a 9-5 endeavor, but one that can take up consistent and significant emotional and physical energy.

While frontline youth workers often share a passion for positive social change, common cultural understandings, experiences, and empathy with the youth they work with, they may also face challenges of their own such as precarious work employment and continuously seeing, hearing, and (ironically) personally experiencing the same oppression and trauma that affect the youth they work with. Oftentimes, they are also youth themselves! These elements combined can have negative effects on youth workers: burnout or vicarious trauma are two examples of this.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

In 2009 Frontline Partners with Youth Network (FPYN) did a report called *Frontline Systems of Support*. In this report, they found that 100% of frontline youth worker respondents said they suffer negative health impacts and 96% of respondents stated that they suffer mental health distress as a result of their work. Respondents also identified that changes to organizational practices would help to alleviate the negative impacts of the grief and trauma experienced through their work as frontline youth workers. While it has been seven years since the report was launched, the issues it brings to the forefront related to self-care, burnout and vicarious trauma, are still extremely relevant, and are issues that are still brought up time and again in the youth sector, especially among frontline youth workers and organizers.

"Self-care becomes a radical act when we take the risk and allow ourselves to be truly seen, and taken care of, by others. Let's take risks and take care of each other, honestly and accurately name problems and renew our innate gifts as healers, artists, organizers, creators and maintainers of healthy systems. The term "self-care," as it is currently used by the Non-Profit Industrial Complex, is a continuing tactic to individualize collective problems needing collective solutions and social change."

– JENNY KATZ, FOUNDER OF FPYN

THE CHALLENGE

Support for mental and emotional wellbeing is too often a responsibility left to frontline workers to manage themselves, who may prioritize the wellbeing of others before themselves. While we often think of self-care as an individual responsibility, we know that if we, as a sector, are honest, there is much work to be done in our organizations, in our communities and in our systems to really make frontline work a healthy career path. Further, in order to truly address youth wellbeing, we must also foster the wellbeing of those who often have close relationships and 'access' to youth who may not otherwise engage. What this looks like, is still to be determined. While some organizations may build in mental health supports for workers, others may not; there are some initiatives such as the continuing work of Frontline Partners with Youth Network (FPYN) that also aim support a community of frontline youth workers but these initiatives are not widely acknowledged by stakeholders across the 'system' nor are these policies addressing the wellbeing of youth workers built into funding structures and expectations.

CHALLENGE QUESTIONS

How might we create the conditions for frontline youth work to be a healthy path for those who choose it?

How might be move to a collective, sector-wide approach to ensuring youth worker wellbeing?

How might we cultivate a culture that views youth worker wellbeing as a priority and integral to youth wellbeing?

b. Exploring the Issue

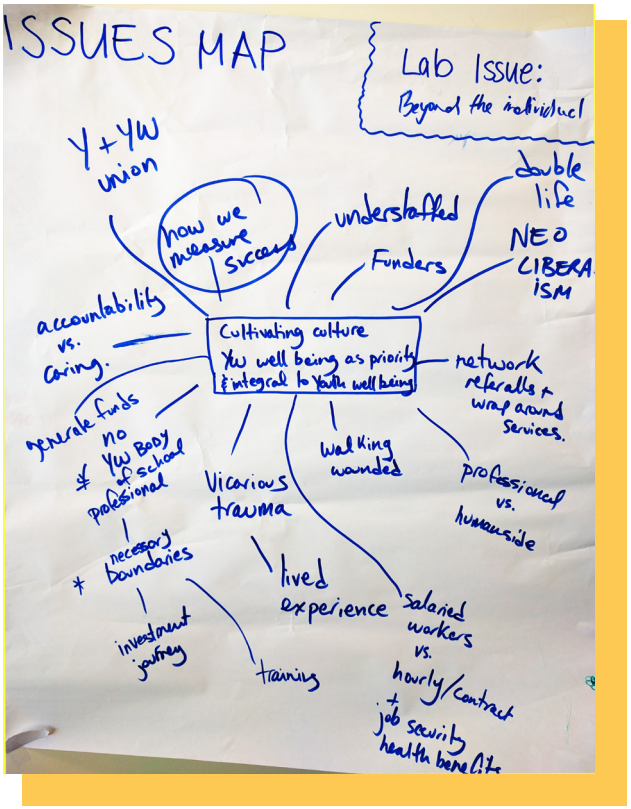
Mapping the Challenge for Interventions

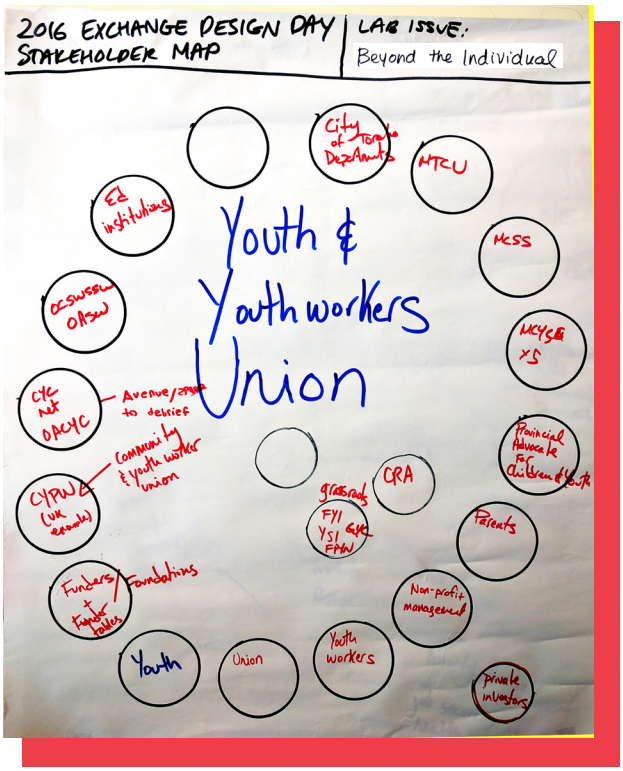
Participants in both groups shared their personal experiences in the field as youth workers, and the challenges and barriers to wellbeing. They spoke to the increasing workloads and frustrations associated with securing funding for their positions. They described the challenges of being advocates for the young people they work with, while also adhering to the bureaucratic structure and rules of the organizations they work for.

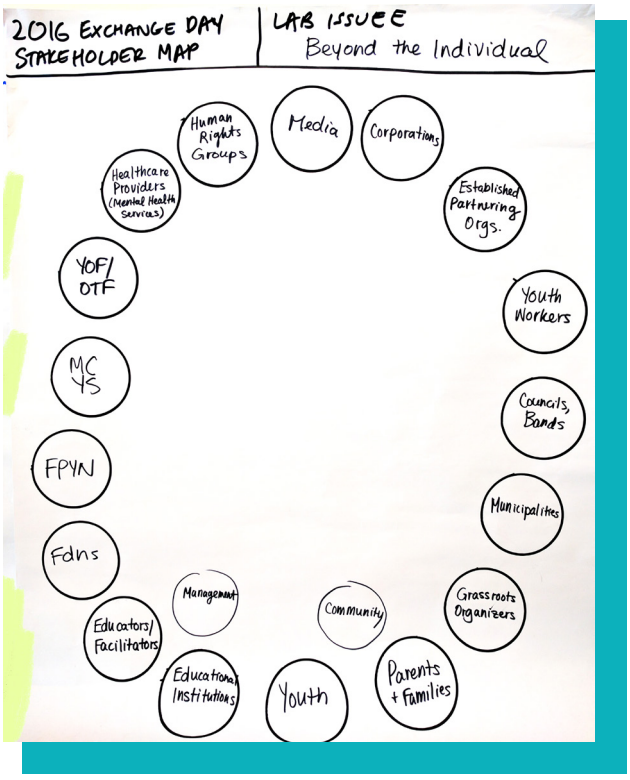
The groups identified several factors contributing to the issue of burnout and compassion fatigue in this field of work, including:

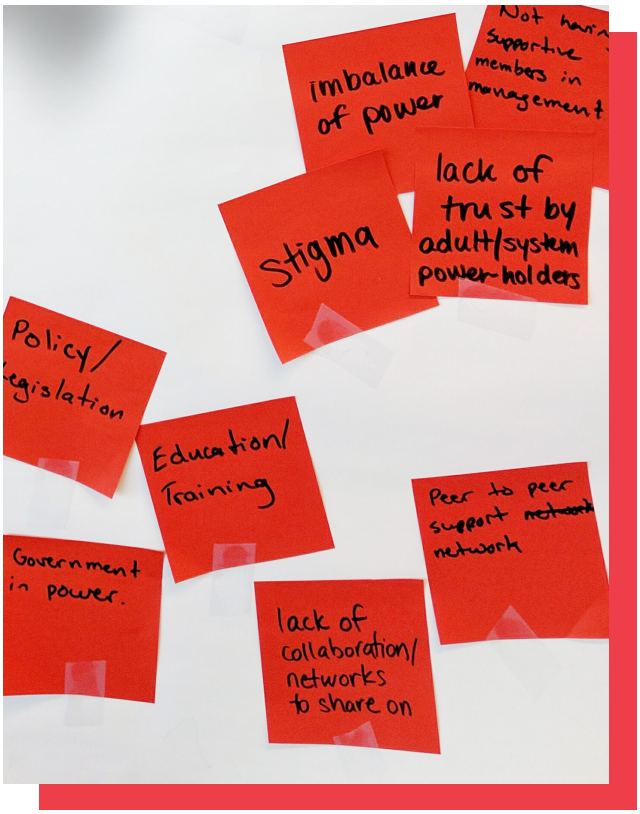
- High turnover rates
- Precarious employment and low pay
- Lack of resources
- Stereotypes and discourses that undervalue the profession
- Vicarious trauma
- Capitalism
- Lack of training and education
- Funding difficulties

Thinking Notes from Lab 04









c. Ideation

ISSUES

Understaffing

Accountability vs. Caring

No youth worker school/ professionalization

Vicarious trauma and lived experience

Salaried workers vs. hourly/contract workers

Lack of job security and health benefits

Funding challenges

How we measure success

Burnout of youth workers

The expense of self-care

Underpaid and undervalued profession

Unrealistic funder expectations

Lack of training and education

Vicarious trauma, personal experience

Not enough time for self-care

Skipping lunch to support youth

Administrative work

\Working against the bureaucracy

Management burn out

Youth needs vs organizational requirements

IDEAS

Organizational practices that nurture self-care

Allies inside and outside of the sector

Decrease isolation

Media coverage on youth work stories

Peer support network

Strategies to address alienation and powerlessness

Permanent youth work jobs

Make private companies accountable

Workplace benefits and access to services

Mandatory training for managers on the importance of wellness

Sector-wide wellness conferences for youth workers

Updating policies and procedures manual in organizations

Scale online for burnout levels

Space for youth workers to honestly share about their experience without consequences to their job

Allocate time for leaders to support team members

Opt-in for insurance coverage for counselling

Wellness plan for staff, developed with supervisors

d. Prototyping & Pitches

PITCH ONE

YOUTH AND YOUTH WORKER UNION

How might we cultivate a culture that views youth worker wellbeing as a priority and integral to youth wellbeing?

THE PROBLEM

The problem is burnout and poor working conditions for youth workers. Many factors contribute to this issue, including precarious and contract work, funding challenges, vicarious trauma, and a lack of job security and benefits.

THE PITCH

A Youth and Youth Worker Union would give youth workers a space and platform from which to advocate collectively for improved working conditions and equity, potentially addressing issues such as precarious work, lack of mental health support, poverty, social, economic and racial injustice etc. The union will address many of the factors contributing to burnout, including low pay and lack of benefits. The union will also reduce isolation and bring youth workers together to advocate for collective change.

PITCH TWO

ONLINE PLATFORM FOR YOUTH WORKERS

How might we move to a collective, sector-wide approach to ensuring youth worker wellbeing?

THE PROBLEM

The problem is the lack of youth worker wellbeing. All of the group members have experience as youth workers in the field and understand burnout and compassion fatigue on a personal level. It is challenging work, and they are often underpaid and feel unsupported in a variety of ways.

THE PITCH

An online platform (website and app) that would be a space for youth workers to connect around advocacy and policy change, expand their networks, and find resources, tips and tools to help inform their work. The three main components of the platform are:

- A chatroom where youth workers can connect with other youth workers, share their experiences, their frustrations and success, and exchange advice and resources.
- Resource sharing platform where youth workers can upload and share resources (for example: new articles on burnout prevention, consent tools, etc.).
- Insurance opt-in for youth workers that will provide them with benefits, including extended support related to wellbeing (counselling services, massage services, etc.)

Community, Youth, and Playworkers in Unite! (CYPW)

http://www.cywu.org.uk | #PayUp4YouthWork

WHAT: CYPW is part of United the Union, the biggest trade union in Europe. It is committed to obtaining high standards of delivery of care in youth work. Their main interest lies in establishing high professional standards, fair treatment of staff, and positive partnerships with employers.

WHERE: Birmingham, UK

WHO: Members of this union work with, or are training to work with, children, young people, and communities.

HOW: CYPW offers a voice to unite playworkers, community workers, youth workers, and other allied fields. They provide professional training and support to members, as well as hold specialized conferences. The core interests of the union are achieving professional standards and fair treatment of staff. The National Committee of CYWP meets several times a year to implement policies, manage sections, and provide policy direction to the movement. They have several items on their current agenda, one of which is increasing pay for youth workers and allied fields. They recently joined Unite the Union, the biggest trade union in Europe. Youth and play work students are also encouraged to join and become involved in the union initiatives, as well as submit articles and resources for the website.

CASE STUDY

The eXchange by YouthREX

exchange.youthrex.com | @REXforYouth

WHAT: The eXchange brings youth development knowledge from research, practice and lived experience together in one online space, in diverse and accessible formats.

WHERE: Online. YouthREX is an Ontario-wide initiative based out of York University in Toronto.

WHO: Youth sector and youth wellbeing stakeholders including: youth, youth workers, researchers, students, government, and funders.

HOW: Launched in March 2016, the eXchange is an online platform connecting shared knowledge to youth wellbeing. There are three main features of the eXchange:

- A searchable Library for Youth work that has hundreds of diverse content types such as research summaries, factsheets, reports and media resources aimed at supporting youth wellbeing;
- An Evaluation Toolkit comprised of step-by-step actions, tools, templates and resources for a youth program evaluation; and
- A growing online Learning Community for the youth sector to stay informed about and engage with current youth related news and issues. This community will be further developed to include a chat function for visitors to connect, share information directly with each other and network.

Visitors are able to sign up for an account so they can save articles and resources to their personal library, and members of the eXchange mailing list receive a monthly newsletter with resources, reflections, tips, and highlights from the eXchange community.

CASE STUDY

> "There is no pressure to be 'innovative', just to meaningfully address the issues at hand."

Conclusion

The Design Day was rich in ideas, connections and learning!

This was the first time YouthREX used design-thinking to frame an event of this kind, and we learned so much from the experience and from all the participants. We would like to conclude by highlighting five of the ideas that stood out to us based on feedback forms completed by designers and our team's experiences of the day:

1. Innovation is not always about the new

At the end of the day, a designer prefaced their group's pitch by saying "there is no pressure to be innovative, just to meaningfully address the issues at hand". This comment resonated with the larger group, with many people nodding their head in agreement and thanking them for making that sentiment explicit. Most of the ideas that were pitched also reflected this notion – we don't need to be inventing completely new programming or ways to support young people for the sake of "the new". Innovation can include returning to models and strategies that already exist, and then designing ways to intentionally leverage and learn from them in order to fine-tune, and/or expand them where appropriate and as needed.

2. Foster connections and support each other

While the issues/challenges that each Idea Lab came up with were specific to the context of their particular topic, there were common issues and challenges across all eight labs such as a sense of isolation, invisibility, and the pressure to bear the burden of external forces – lack of funding, resources, staff and safe spaces. In response to these issues/challenges, the pitches that labs developed focused on facilitating and enhancing connections and communication between and among youth and youth sector stakeholders. Whether online or face-to-face, it is clear that the need for people to feel connected to one another, to be able to ask questions or find/give support and to be part of community, is vital; many do not feel these kinds of opportunities currently exist (in the context of their youth sector work). Designers further expressed a need to more broadly support youth sector work by creating opportunities and conditions for engaging with each other differently, and in a more meaningful way.

3. Engage the power of technology

The pitches also reflect the desire, and perhaps need, for the youth sector to integrate technology more effectively into our work. When designed and used respectfully, groups who prototyped digital spaces such as the Youth Talk App or the Online Platform for Youth Workers cited the importance of hosting a safe space for conversation, for knowledge sharing, for connecting youth and youth stakeholders to resources and support – all in an accessible and efficient way. Digital tools and platforms have the potential of greatly increasing accessibility to information, resources, and of course, the human connections that are so valued. At the same time, technological adoption cannot replace human face-to-face relationships. One designer suggested that we need to also reflect on the effects "technologicalization" can have on change and development work.

4. Leverage what already exists

Implicit throughout all the pitches is that there is valuable knowledge, resources, services and programing that already exists, but often in silos. As such, the pitches focus on creating ways to draw out this information, create conditions that allow for connection and access to information and resources. Designers recognized value in networking their assets to provide enhanced opportunities for youth. This is not to say that new or increased funding/resources are not needed –in order to create these spaces and opportunities for human connection, resources in terms of people, time, money and different skillsets are required.

5. Adapt tools and processes to your context

Youth sector stakeholders, including youth, strongly value building connections and learning through participatory and engaging activities/processes. This is why YouthREX thought that design-thinking processes/activities might be a good way to bring people together to brainstorm and work on ideas to address "thorny" issues. Reflecting on the feedback we received on how people experienced the day, we learned that although design-thinking processes work well at engaging people to focus on the "user experience" and to think through an issue in a focused way that is collaborative and highly generative, these processes might be too focused on moving forward to solutions. This may not align with the complexity of youth wellbeing/youth sector challenges, equity and intersectionality, or the work that stakeholders want or need to do together before arriving at ideas and solutions.

Design-thinking tools and processes clearly need to be better adapted to our youth sector context. We will need ways to create more space for rich, nuanced discussions to unpack the issues and challenges we experience in our sector. Many of the challenges that youth and the youth sector are facing are deeply rooted in complexity. While there is definitely a need to collaboratively search for solutions and new approaches to addressing these challenges, there is also the need to take time to understand the situation, learn more about the system and find ways to create the conditions for change – all within an equity-focused frame of understanding.

As such, we will be asking ourselves:

- How we can use design-thinking tools and processes to support our work, but adapt them and integrate them with other processes that could better reflect and engage the youth sector?
- What kinds of opportunities will allow us to engage with complexity and systems thinking/mapping in a way that is accessible and meaningful to youth sector stakeholders?
- How can we use design thinking and its processes to support engagement with complexity?
- How might we integrate tenants of equity and social justice within all of these processes?

Final Words

We would like to end this recap of the Design Day by expressing our deep gratitude and thanks to all the community designers who came out on a cold Saturday and brought their whole selves to participate and engage in sometimes difficult conversations about how we can tackle issues of importance to youth wellbeing. Although this recap doesn't quite do enough to capture the energy, excitement and tensions of the day, we hope it offers some valuable insights to youth sector stakeholders and affirmation of the work and experiences of our community designers.

YOUTHREX
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This Design Day Report was developed by Youth Research and Evaluation eXchange (YouthREX).
YouthREX is primarily funded by the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services with extensive contributions from York University and the four partner universities: Carleton University; King's College University at Western University; Laurentian University and Lakehead University.

Visit the eXchange for everything about youth work and youth wellbeing!
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