

A photograph of three young women of diverse backgrounds (one Black, one White, one Asian) looking at a tablet together. They are smiling and appear to be in a collaborative learning or work environment. The background is blurred, showing what might be a classroom or office setting with windows and plants.

Young Adult Talent Development: Meeting the Reinvention Challenge

AT A GLANCE

Community-based organizations that serve young adults with barriers to education and employment are experiencing myriad new challenges and opportunities as they navigate the triple threat of a global pandemic, economic and employment volatility, and a resurgence of concern about racism. This issue brief shares insights gleaned from three virtual “reinvention” sessions with young adult leaders and leaders of community-based organizations in JFF’s Young Adult Talent Development Network. We find that using human-centered design processes can help CBOs draw on their existing resources, creativity, and partnerships to develop innovative solutions to tough challenges at an uncertain time.

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About JFF

JFF is a national nonprofit that drives transformation in the American workforce and education systems. For more than 35 years, JFF has led the way in designing innovative and scalable solutions that create access to economic advancement for all. www.jff.org

Introduction

As coronavirus infections surge again across the United States, young adults living in low-income communities are experiencing a tremendous loss of educational and economic opportunity. The pandemic continues to undermine their efforts to gain the knowledge, skills, credentials, and connections to position themselves for employment.

As many high schools and colleges respond to reports of new infections by moving back and forth between in-person and virtual learning, the lack of consistency is loosening the critical bonds that link educators to young adults. Students are also connecting less with school counselors and the support programs that help them access college and persist to earn a credential. At the same time, layoffs, business shutdowns, and changes in demand for a range of occupations resulting from economic uncertainty have made it increasingly difficult for young people to find steady employment and to secure the springboard jobs that lead to family-supporting careers.

In the face of these challenges, community-based organizations that serve young adults facing barriers to education and employment are more important than ever. Since the first stay-at-home orders went into effect in March 2020, these nonprofits quickly shifted their delivery models and intensified their efforts to assist the growing number of young adults seeking training and employment.

This nimbleness is exemplified by members of JFF's Young Adult Talent Development (YATD) Network, a group that brings together leaders of over 35 organizations that help low-income young adults gain the skills, credentials, and connections necessary for economic mobility (*see Appendix for a list of member organizations*). YATD members share strategies and influence the field in other ways, such as developing [field standards](#).

In the spring of 2020, YATD Network members quickly pivoted to virtual delivery models—trading ideas on how to do so while still developing or maintaining strong relationships with participants as well as employer partners. By mid-summer, it was clear that the pandemic and its attendant economic uncertainties would persist. At the same time, a renewed reckoning with longstanding issues of racial injustice was gathering national momentum.

As the convener of the YATD Network, JFF has sought ways to build on the entrepreneurial work of this developing field and to honor the desire of leaders of community-based organizations to come together and pool their knowledge of how best to balance the needs of their young adult clients, their business partners, and their own staffs.

This issue brief shares insights gleaned from three virtual “reinvention” sessions with young adult leaders and leaders of community-based organizations involved in the network. During these gatherings, participants experienced first-hand how human-centered design processes could help them draw on their existing resources, creativity, and partnerships to continue to develop innovative solutions to tough challenges at an uncertain time. Human-centered design seeks out the perspectives, needs, and pain points of the people experiencing a problem, then devises solutions based on that understanding (*see Figure 1, “What Is Human-Centered Design?”*).

Participants in the sessions have been facing myriad new challenges and opportunities as they try to navigate the triple threat of a global pandemic, economic and employment volatility, and a resurgence of concern about racism.

We hope that this brief inspires other organizations and practitioners to use similar creative processes to help their young clients navigate a rapidly evolving world.

“These sessions asked us to think about designing (programs) with young people in the center as the customer and listening to their voices. A year into this pandemic, we should be saying, how is this working for you? What are models we can use so you are co-leading, building on your expertise, so it becomes more of a partnership?”

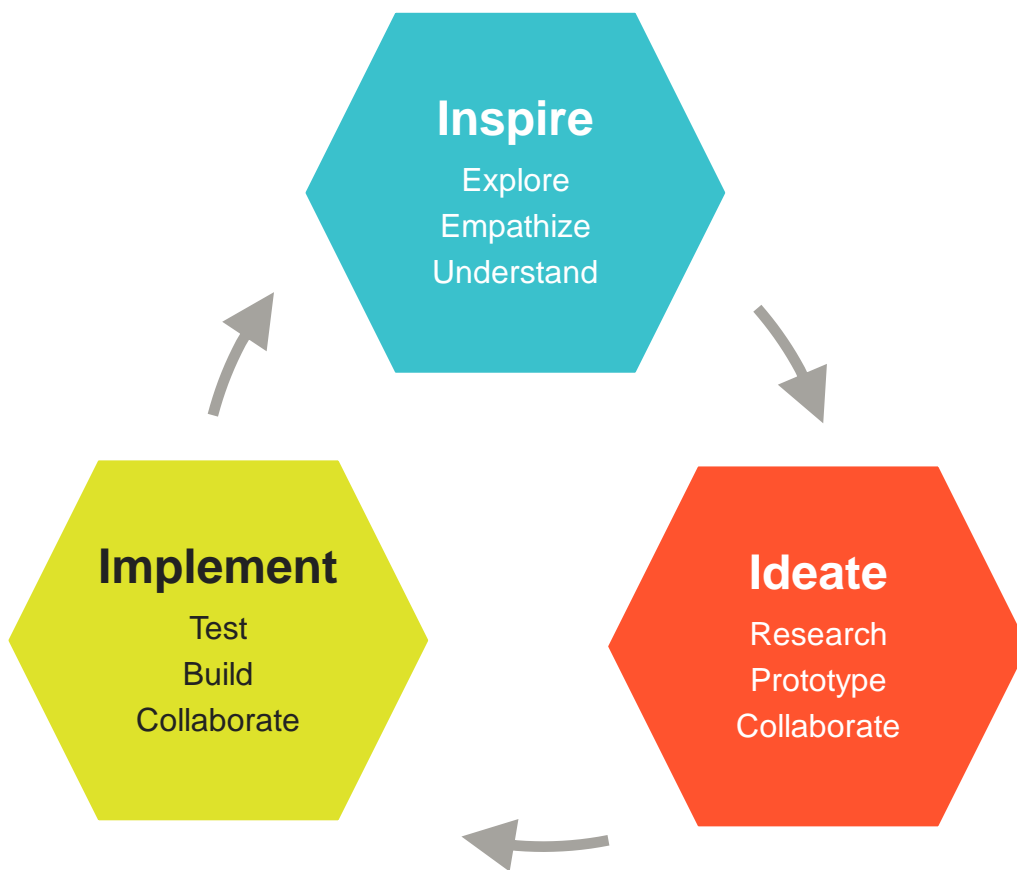
***Edison Freire, Director of Gateway Initiatives,
JEVS Human Services, Philadelphia***

What Is Human-Centered Design?

In the past two decades, nonprofits, businesses, and governments have increasingly leveraged human-centered design (HCD) as an approach to problem-solving. In human-centered design, the perspectives of the end-users are embedded throughout the three-step process of [inspiration, ideation, and implementation](#) (*see Figure 1, “Human-Centered Design”*). The process involves brainstorming, reframing challenges as opportunities, and prototyping ideas. Underlying this approach is the premise that solutions must have a [long-term positive impact on the people they are created for](#).

The collaborative, user-centric nature of human-centered design offered a promising approach for the reinvention sessions that would offer tools that organizational leaders could take back into their daily work. Each session focused on one step of the process.

Figure 1: Human Centered Design



Source: Audrey Waggoner, Emergent Media Center, Champlain College

The Reinvention Sessions

The goal of the reinvention sessions was to give participants the time and tools to respond to one or more calls to action and to test the ideas before moving to implementation (see “*Three Calls to Action Guide the Sessions*”). Despite the many pressures on their time, a critical mass of network members attended one or more sessions. JFF also invited young leaders of the YATD network, to ensure young people’s voices would be central to the process. Three 90-minute sessions took place over two weeks (see “Virtual Collaboration”).

The Reinvention Sessions allowed leaders to move beyond crisis mode for a few hours and brainstorm, or in HCD parlance, “ideate,” a range of possibilities to take back to their programs and test. The young adult participants offered the critical perspectives of those affected by the design of the solutions. They were active participants in the sessions, adding valuable insights throughout.

Virtual Collaboration

Because the pandemic has made in-person gatherings dangerous, the reinvention sessions were the perfect test for virtual collaboration: participants utilized [Zoom](#), [Mural](#), [Google Workspace](#), and [Spotify](#) to facilitate conversations and create an engaging design experience. When selecting the platforms, JFF facilitators considered the accessibility of the platforms via mobile devices, favoring platforms that were already widely used by YATD members. JFF also leveraged features such as polling and virtual breakout rooms to allow for an immersive experience. Mural, which functions as a virtual whiteboard, allowed participants to easily review content, sketch ideas, and build on each other’s work.

Three Calls to Action Guide the Sessions

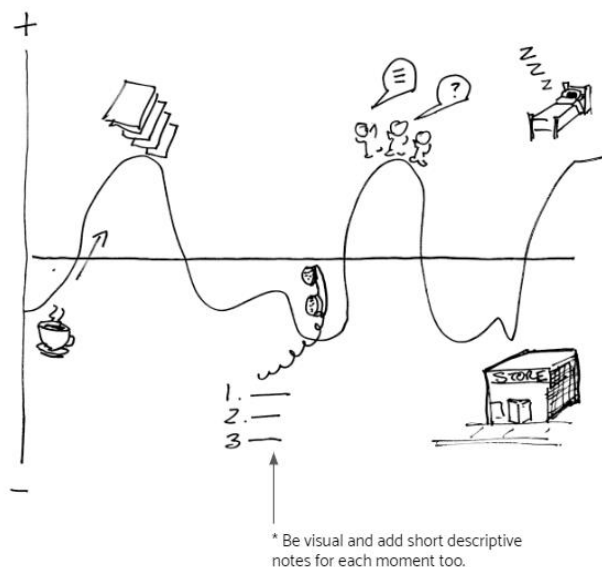
JFF framed the reinvention sessions around three calls to action:

- 1. Resiliency and reinvention in the face of the pandemic:** Our central task is not just to identify and preserve the purpose of our work, but also to rise to the challenges posed by a rapidly changing landscape for our work and our field. It is a time for reaffirming our values while reimagining our strategies.
- 2. Equitable economic recovery:** It is more important than ever to promote economic and social mobility for young people who are often left out, even in times of prosperity. We must devise bold strategies that provide access to training and career pathways—even in a time of social distancing—and co-create with employers safe and equitable workplaces.
- 3. Racial Justice:** We stand in solidarity with the movement to end racial inequality and to examine the systems and institutions that perpetuate it. It is critical that our work in this area put the experience of young adults of color at the center, empower them to lead, and mobilize allies to help.

Session 1: Inspiration

The objective of session one was to help participants examine and empathize with the lived experiences of young adults and practitioners during this difficult time. During the session participants first reviewed anecdotes from network members drawn from the results of the various surveys and focus groups that took place in preparation for the sessions. JFF facilitators then used human-centered design exercises (*see Figures 2-7*) to help participants recount pivotal moments during the pandemic in their professional and personal lives and reflect on their emotional impact. One activity dubbed “A week in uncertain times” (adapted from the Stanford University d.school's "A day in the life" exercise) kicked off conversations about participants’ emotional highs and lows, challenges, and needs during the pandemic.

Figure 2. Example: HCD Emotional Experience Timeline



[Source:](#) *Stanford University d. School Starter Kit*

Here’s how the exercise worked:

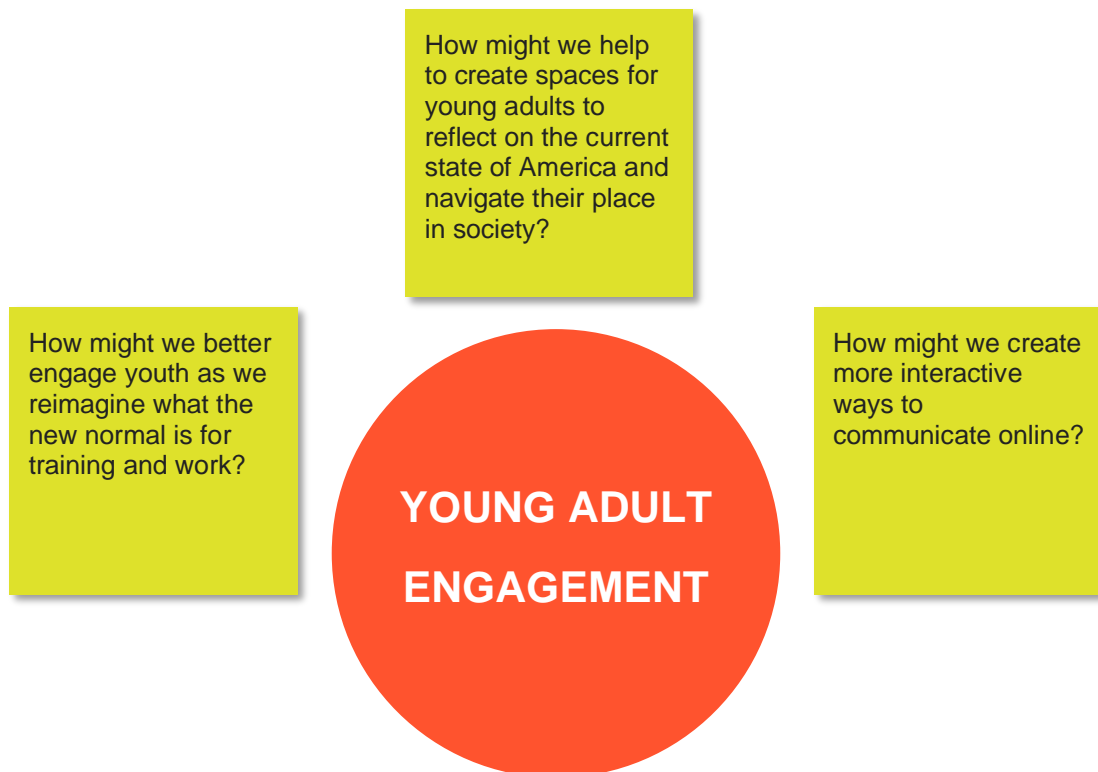
1. Facilitators asked participants to think over their work and lives since the beginning of the pandemic and to identify a week or cluster of moments that define their experiences during this time.
2. Facilitators asked participants to think about how each experience made them feel.

3. Facilitators invited participants to create an emotional experience timeline of the period they were thinking about, with peaks representing moments with positive emotions and valleys representing low emotions. Participants were asked to mark each peak or valley with an image representing what was going on and a brief description if needed (see above).
4. Facilitators invited participants to discuss specific events on their timelines with the group.

Session one culminated with participants drawing inspirations from the discussions about their experiences and their underlying needs to develop “How might we...” statements—or guiding questions—that reframed challenges explored during the session into opportunities for design. These statements were carried over into session two to support the next phase of the design process.

Participants posted “How might we . . .” statements on digital sticky notes (yellow boxes), which facilitators then grouped by theme (red circles). Below is a sampling of the statements on the themes of young adult engagement, equity/social justice, and training/employment innovation.

Figure 3. ‘How Might We . . .’ Statements





Session 2: Ideation

The second session focused on brainstorming responses to selected “How might we . . .” statements participants explored during session one. To create structure for the process, facilitators offered constraints that would limit the solutions to those that could realistically be carried out and create impact. The constraints called for ideas that:

- Utilize existing organizational funding
- Leverage existing talent development partnerships
- Incorporate resources young adults and practitioners found useful this year
- Leverage the voices and leadership of young people.

After creating a broad range of ideas guided by the ideation constraints, participants worked through a process to reach consensus on a subset of ideas they wanted to develop further (see *Figure 3*). Participants concluded session two by working in small groups to complete idea summaries that asked them to consider how the ideas would work in the context of implementation in the field and how the ideas would serve the needs of young people and practitioners (see *Figure 4, next page*).

Figure 4. Brainstorming Within Constraints

After creating a broad range of ideas guided by the constraints and “How might we . . .” prompts, participants grouped together similar ideas (purple, pink, and yellow boxes) that were generated during the brainstorm and named emerging solution themes (red boxes). Participants then voted on solution ideas they wanted to develop further (red stars).

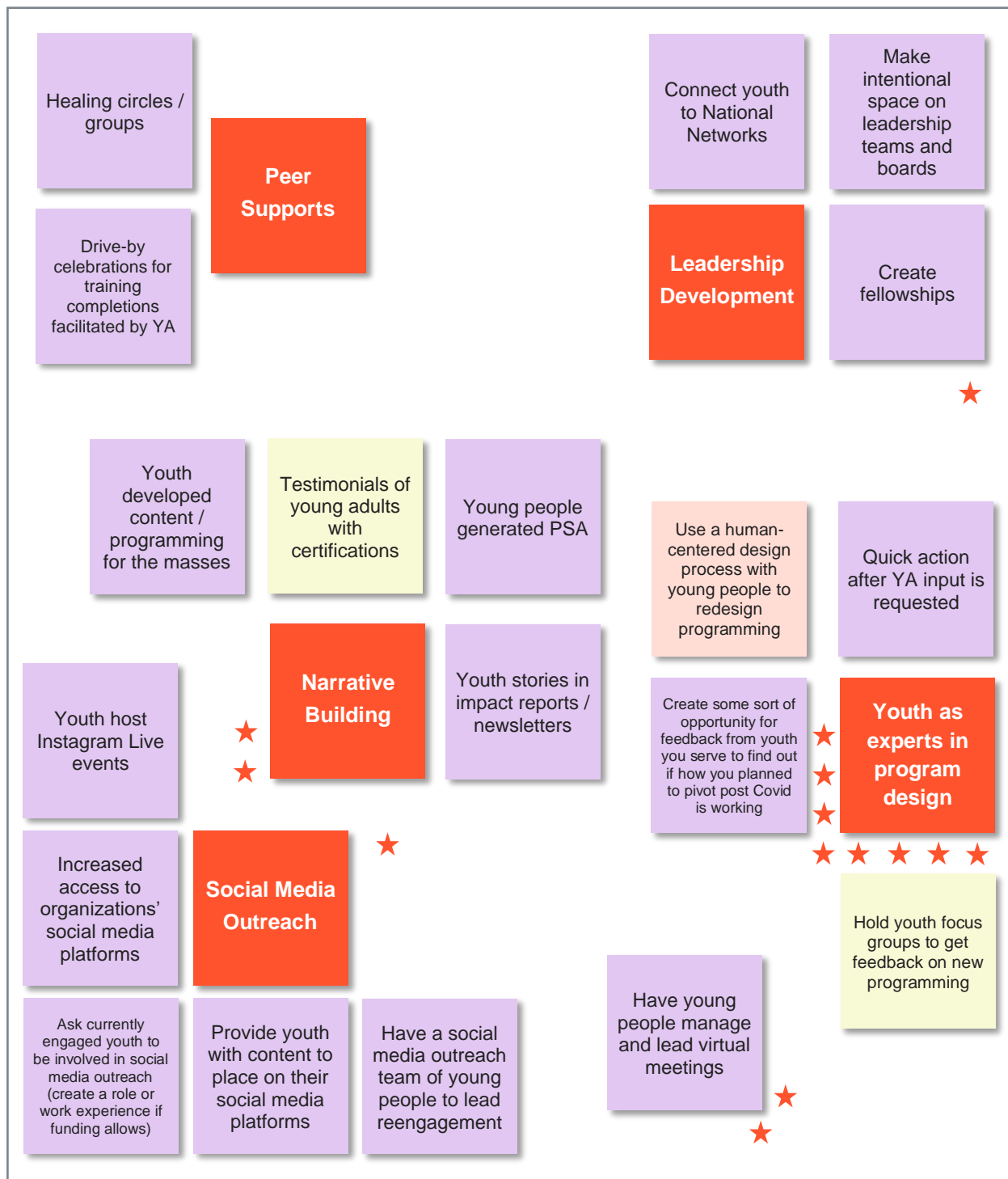
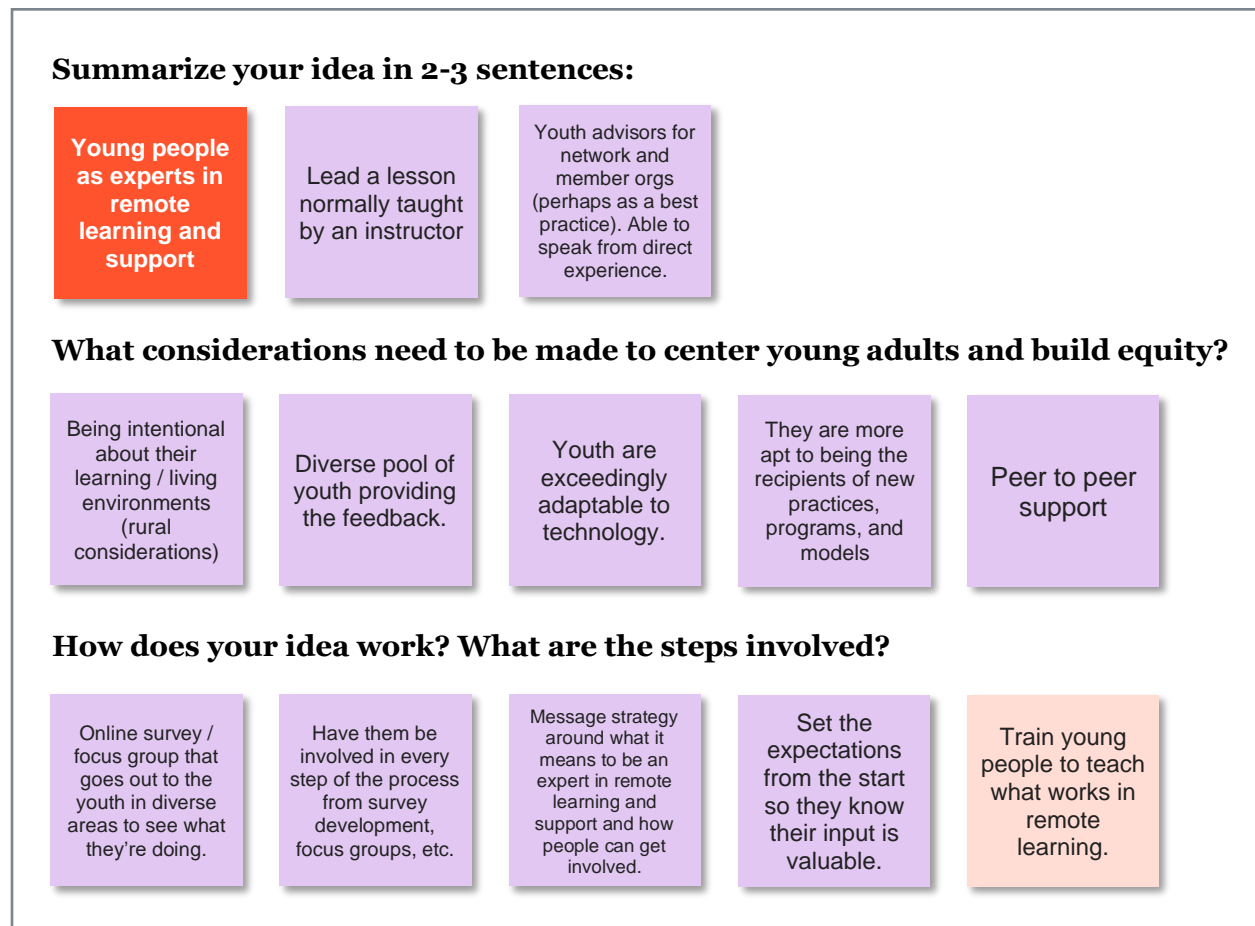


Figure 5. Idea Summary

Participants began the process of transitioning fledgling ideas into actionable solutions by answering questions that called on them to center young adults in solution design and define how the idea would work in practice.



The sessions helped to name some of the challenges and think about them in light of our new strategy of preparing young people for a variety of occupations. Perhaps most importantly, we are thinking about how to get information from young people about how to improve our programming.

Dennis Bagneris, CEO
Liberty's Kitchen, New Orleans

Session 3: Implementation

A critical aspect of the human-centered design process is moving forward viable ideas for implementation and creating prototypes to test them. The last session introduced YATD members to design methods that evaluate ideas and lay the groundwork to launch new interventions.

Participants did a storyboarding activity, first identifying the who, what, where, when, and why for a scenario inspired by the young adult-centered themes that emerged during session two (see Figure 6). They then moved on to creating a graphic narrative illustrating how they imagined the scenario would unfold, step by step.

To draw the series to a close, facilitators invited YATD Network members to discuss how their organizations might implement the ideas that emerged during the series. Participants engaged in a final activity to identify challenges that impede implementation and opportunities within the young adult talent development field to increase innovation (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Scenario Planning Using Storyboarding

Like any good story outline, participants identified the who, what, when, where, and why of the scenario “youth-led narrative change using social media” before creating a visual narrative.

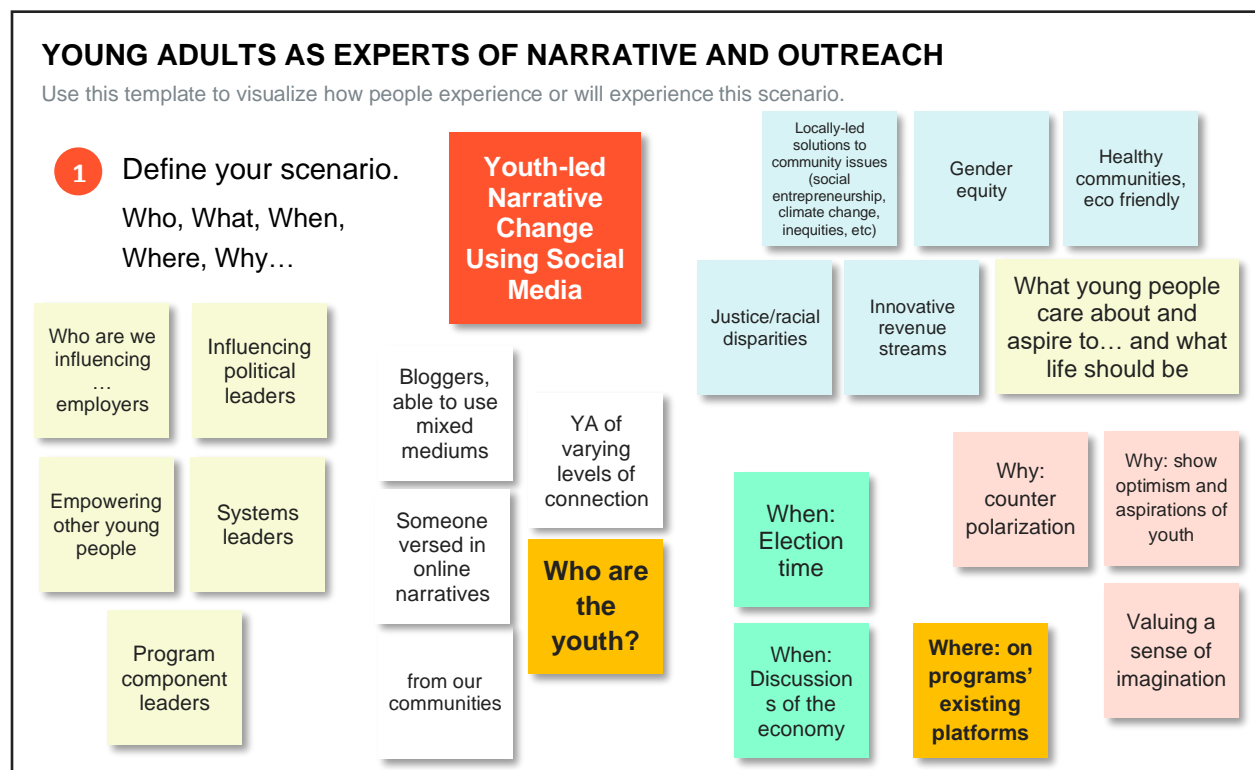
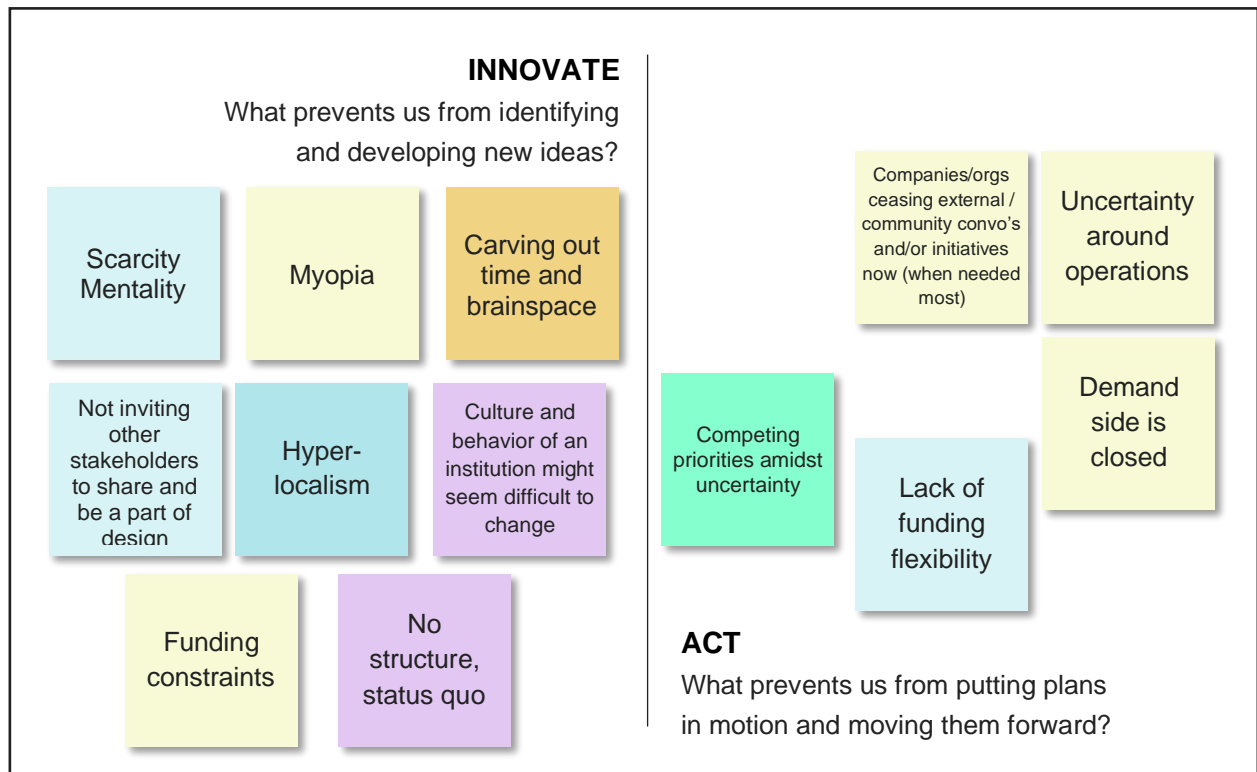


Figure 7. Assessing Implementation Challenges and Opportunities

Participants discussed how decision-making, innovations, and implementation were shaped by new challenges and mindsets resulting from the pandemic. Below are participant responses to questions posted in Mural during session three.



Opportunities in Young-Adult-Centered Design

In moments of crisis, it is hard to take the time for activities that do not lead to immediate solutions. Yet the YATD field understands the importance of acquiring new tools—in this case, ones informed by human-centered design—to develop solutions to problems that have emerged and will continue to emerge during these extremely challenging times—and to do so in a way that offers young adults a leading role in thinking through new interventions and services that would impact outcomes in their lives.

The hands-on nature of the HCD activities allowed participants to practice skills that will serve them well in many contexts during these trying times (see box). Participants valued learning how to use the technology tools to capture ideas, come up with themes of interest, and develop scenarios to test. Most importantly, they were able to collaborate creatively in a virtual format, a critical skill during the pandemic.

Skills That Human-Centered Design Practices Develop in Participants

- Empathy building
- Active listening
- Abstract thinking
- Conducting inquiries
- Capturing ideas in graphic/pictorial form
- Storytelling and narrative building
- Consensus building
- Group facilitation
- Root cause analysis
- Decision making

As the country continues to struggle to control the pandemic, reopen the economy, and reckon with racial justice, the work of entrepreneurial community-based organizations and the skills reinforced by human-centered design will become more important than ever. It's likely that in the coming year, the labor market and the economy overall will continue in a state of upheaval, with calls for racial justice continuing unabated. Human-centered design processes offer young adult talent developers a set of tools to rapidly design solutions to the new challenges ahead, with the assets and needs of young people at the center.

APPENDIX: Young Adult Talent Development Network, Member Organizations

Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions	NAF (formerly National Academy Foundation)
Bay Area Community Resources	National Youth Employment Coalition
Boys and Girls Club of America	NPower
Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program	Opportunities for a Better Tomorrow
Catalyst Kitchens	Per Scholas
Center for Employment Opportunities	Resilient Coders
Cowen Institute	Safer Foundation
Cristo Rey Network	Seedco
District 1199C Training & Upgrading Fund	Skills for Chicagoland's Future
FareStart	STRIVE
Goodwill Industries International, Inc.	The Center for Law and Social Policy
Grads of Life	The Door
Hope Builders	Think Make Live
Hopeworks Camden	Urban Alliance
International Youth Foundation	Year Up
JEVS Human Services	Youth Empowerment Project
Jobs for America's Graduates	YouthBuild USA
Juma Ventures	
Liberty's Kitchen	