Project BEING Futures – Process Reflections

## Introduction

This document provides a reflection on the co-design process undertaken by the Inclusive Design Research Centre (IDRC) with BEING Studio, as part of the BEING Futures Project. This project took place between April and November 2021. The goal of this project was to assist BEING Studio in brainstorming and conceptualizing an emerging digital / in person hybrid operating model. This work included needs-gathering through co-design with artist members, with the aim of creatively mapping out design ideas for tools and activities for access and connection.

The practice of inclusive co-design involves many iterations of an idea with community members over time; each iteration informs the next. It is therefore our hope that the outcomes and reflections of the work done in 2021 provides guidance for future collaborative work with and within BEING Studio. In addition, what we have learned from the co-design process with BEING Studio will be included in the IDRC’s ever-growing [Toolkit on Community-Led Co-design](https://co-design.inclusivedesign.ca/), with the goal of sharing these learnings with the global community of Inclusive Design practitioners.

## Co-design Process Summary

The BEING Futures project took place over the course of 8 months, during which time we held a kick-off “Think Tank” session followed by 3 co-design sessions. Ten artists chose to participate in the co-design sessions. The number of artists who attended each co-design workshop varied from eight in the first session to five in the third and two in the final session. The schedule of sessions was as follows:

* Think Tank, April 20, 2021
* Co-design Workshop 1, June 8, 2021
* Co-design Workshop 2, July 6, 2021
* Co-design Workshop 3, September 28, 2021

The co-design activities were aimed at creatively exploring what events, activities and online spaces the artists would like to keep or change and what new things they’d like to try—all with the goal of working towards developing a plan for a future in-person/online hybrid. The activities involved discussions based on BEING in-person, BEING on Zoom, and BEING online (including the BEING Studio and BEING Home website and social media).

When the third workshop took place, the artists had begun to return to the in-person studio, which may have had some influence on the level of enthusiasm for joining the Zoom workshop, which was focused on the topic of BEING Online.

Please see the [BEING Final Report](https://wiki.fluidproject.org/display/fluid/BEING+Futures+Final+Report) for details of each Workshop.

## Community-led Co-design practices

### Collaborating with community facilitators

From the beginning of the process, it was important to collaborate with BEING facilitators in creating a successful co-design plan, since the BEING facilitators are most familiar with the artists and with the culture and context of BEING.

* This collaboration helped the IDRC facilitators to understand if the activities being planned were appropriate and potentially engaging for the BEING artists.
* It also helped the IDRC facilitators to know about specific needs that individual artists might have.
  + For example, for technical reasons some artists needed to stay in the main room rather than be put into a breakout room.
  + In another example, BEING artists have expressed that being muted during a session causes them to feel shut out or like they can’t or shouldn’t participate. At BEING the practice is to let artists keep their mics on if they wish and address any problematic background noise as needed.
* This also helped the IDRC facilitators to get a better understanding of whether the way we were talking about or framing ideas would be familiar to the artists in the context of BEING and their experience and work. One example was how to refer to the regular artists meetings at BEING, in this case “home group meetings''.

### Attending existing community gatherings / events

Joining the Artist Connect sessions prior to planning the co-design workshops was helpful in getting to know the artists and getting a sense of the community, culture, and context of BEING.

* In retrospect it might have been helpful to have an IDRC session at Artist Connect, perhaps as an opportunity to introduce the concepts of Inclusive Design and co-design in more detail (including more time for discussion and questions about these topics), and to have more time dedicated to getting to know each other.
* We also reflected on other creative ways we might have been able to get to know the BEING artists ahead of the co-design sessions. One idea might have been to hold a preliminary co-design workshop where we worked on designing a collaborative piece of art together. In this way we could get to know each other as well as the process of co-design through a lower-stakes and fun activity.

### De-briefing and getting feedback

Through debriefing with the BEING facilitators after the co-design sessions the IDRC team was able to understand what was working and what wasn’t. It allowed for questions and for the adjustment of the co-design plan and activities throughout the process. It also provided an opportunity to hear any feedback from the artists that might have been passed on to the BEING facilitators.

* In retrospect, a more structured feedback-gathering process might have been helpful in order to solicit feedback from the BEING artists after each session. This could have better informed the co-design activity planning from one session to the next.

### Onboarding - The “Think Tank” Event

Having a project kick-off “Think Tank” session provided an opportunity to meet the artists and introduce the co-design process.

* The collaborative “shapes and colours” activity proved to be a fun and successful way to introduce ourselves to each other. A group reflection on the process and final collaborative design (named by one artist as “A Wonderful Pattern of Shapes“) also helped to demonstrate the process of collaboration and co-design.
* In retrospect it might have been better to focus even more time on getting to know each other through talking about our art practices or having a show and tell of our artwork.

## Structuring and planning the co-design activities

During co-design sessions it is important to have structured activities (i.e., those with a clearly structured step by step process) as well as to leave space for spontaneous activities and conversations to evolve. Striking a good balance in this way we can make space for co-designing the process along with participants.

* For structured activities it is important to keep instructions simple and concise
  + For example, it would have been better to provide the artists with a dedicated and clear video instruction for putting together the Planet BEING Futures templates.
* One approach is to use some of the time in a co-design session to introduce preparatory materials and activities or to plan for the next session together — this allows participants to be invested in the process and to inform the facilitators of the best way to present and frame the ideas.
  + This requires balancing the time needed for the co-design session activities with planning activities and may not always be appropriate, depending on the amount of time available and the interest of participants in helping to plan the activities.
  + This works well when paired with post-session debrief sessions with community facilitators, to allow for further refinement of the plan with their input.

## Documenting and communicating ideas

One of the co-design facilitator’s jobs is to make sure co-designer voices, thoughts, ideas, barriers, and concerns are fully synthesized into the "project" or "design". Therefore, facilitators need to be accountable to both keeping participant’s ideas and co-design outcomes untouched by our assumptions, biases, influences and interpretations, as well as being transparent when we are extrapolating and interpreting the ideas and outcomes during synthesis.

* In a project with a longer timeline this might include a second round of co-design in which we could bring the synthesized co-design outcomes back to the artists for further discussion and refinement.
* Re-stating or paraphrasing participant ideas during a co-design session helps participants to feel heard, builds trust and helps to ensure accuracy when documenting ideas.
* Participants can be asked: Is this accurate? Does this make sense?
* Having designated note takers during the session helps facilitators focus on guiding participants through the activities, while providing detailed documentation that can be reviewed after the fact. This is important because with a lot of activity and conversation happening at once, facilitators may miss some information. Having an audio and /or video recording can also be helpful (ensure participants consent to it prior to recording).

### Activity Prompts and Descriptions

It was a new experience for IDRC facilitators to create video prompts for the co-design sessions. We were very inspired by BEING Studio’s and Rachel’s videos which provided an excellent example for us!

* The initial feedback we received on our first video prompt also helped us to adjust our approach including simplifying and being more concise with our instructions, as well as making sure that our tone and framing were appropriate.
* Captions were included for all videos
* When introducing a preparatory activity for Workshop 2, it would have been better to demonstrate the artmaking in more detail, perhaps with a separate video prompt, and showing different examples of artwork.
  + Prompts could be: “Where are you going to start? What is your art going to be?”
  + Feedback from BEING: “The space [created in the Workshop] to share artwork if they had it and answer your prompt questions gave space for people to talk and share ideas they hadn’t expressed before. I do think some kind of introduction to the materials and the art making activity could have been helpful, in the call itself or as a video follow up”.

## Zoom Logistics and Accessibility

### Using the Zoom chat

The chat feature on Zoom can be a great tool for providing an alternative or additional mode of communication during an online gathering. However, it is important to note that not all participants may be familiar with using it or notice when a comment or question has been added to the chat. The following approaches can help to support the use of the chat feature most effectively.

* Accessibility considerations
  + Use of the chat can be a barrier to those using screen readers, since negotiating multiple channels of audio input at once (voice and screen reader) can be difficult. One possibility might be to take a pause to allow for all participants to read what is in the chat panel.
  + It is always good practice to discuss with the group how they prefer to use the chat and other Zoom features and to establish group agreements before beginning the co-design.
* Different ways to use the chat
  + Facilitators can start a conversation in the chat (with questions or comments) and have participants respond in the chat or verbally
  + Copying ideas or questions from a verbal conversation into the chat can be helpful too for those who prefer to read and to respond in the chat
* Having a designated person to keep track of chat content is helpful
  + They can inform the facilitator that there is a question or comment in the chat or read it out themselves
  + It can be challenging for the facilitator to keep track of the chat while listening and watching for hands etc., so it’s helpful to have someone assigned this role.
* Private vs. public chatting
  + Some participants are more comfortable with private chatting (i.e., to a specific individual)
  + In some cases, a participant may contact the facilitator privately, the facilitator can repeat the comment to everyone and/or respond to everyone (without identifying who made the comment or asked the question) which would move the conversation to where everyone can see it and interact
    - The facilitator can also check with the participant to ask if they want to share with the larger group or if they are ok for the facilitator to share their idea or question with the larger group.

### Sharing and participating on Zoom

It is important to have various different ways that participants can indicate that they would like to speak or share an idea when in a group Zoom gathering. This allows participants to share in ways that are most comfortable to them, which helps to support more participation. At the beginning of the co-design session, it is helpful to let participants know of all the different ways they can participate in the discussion, and to establish any agreements within the group about how to proceed.

During the BEING workshops the artists used the following methods to indicate that they wanted to share something with the group:

* Zoom raise hand feature
* Physical raised hand
* Chat question/comment
* Holding up a drawing or writing or art
* Just start speaking
* Note: artists have expressed that being muted during a session causes them to feel shut out or like they can’t or shouldn’t participate. At BEING the practice is to let artists keep their mics on if they wish and address any problematic background noise as needed.