

How Global Rights Connection was developed: 10 ways organizations can innovate during a global pandemic

For more than 40 years, Equitas has hosted the International Human Rights Training Program (IHRTP), the only training in the world specifically dedicated to strengthening the capacity and skills of human rights educators. The IHRTP is a three-week immersive course that applies a participatory approach to human rights education. Close to 100 individuals from dozens of countries around the world gather in Montreal, Canada to explore how concepts like gender equality, inclusion, and participation are central to the practice of human rights education.

Unfortunately, since 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has put a temporary hold on the program.

So how does an organization innovate and design an alternative for a one-of-a-kind, world-class human rights education program while working remotely?

Determined to pivot quickly and thoughtfully, **Equitas was challenged to develop a participatory and transformative training program for human rights educators globally that was accessible to participants online.** We were told to reach for the sky, but to keep our toes on the ground. That is, dream big, but stay connected to the realities of our partners, our team members and our objectives as an organization.

Global Rights Connection emerged from this beautiful challenge. Specifically, Equitas aimed to:

- Create a unique opportunity for human rights educators to build new relationships, acquire practical tools to improve the effectiveness and impact of their work while deepening their understanding of human rights and gender equality.
- Keep our community of human rights educators at the centre of the program design and acknowledge the evolving human rights context as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Prioritize the transformative power of education by leveraging the potential of new technological tools to support connection and learning.
- Contribute to innovation within the field of human rights education.

With that in mind, here are the 10 key factors that enabled Equitas to innovate and design *Global Rights Connection*.

1. ***Equitas embraced a horizontal structure of ideation and decision-making*** to develop the concept for *Global Rights Connection*. Instead of restraining task to the management or the education team, the responsibility was given to six employees with diverse positions, perspectives and years of experiences in human rights education. This shift in power was important because it honored the expertise across team members and contributed to an environment where people were free to share their opinions, foster creativity and fuel innovation.
2. ***We understood what we were getting in to.*** Specifically, terms of reference laid out clear roles and responsibilities of the team, management and other key staff involved. We were given time to question, negotiate and reframe the terms of reference before we started. This contributed to a common understanding of our objectives and made sure we weren't unintentionally being set up for failure.
3. ***We had enough time, but not too much time!*** Innovation requires creativity and creativity requires time. Each team member worked together with their supervisors to make sure that enough time was allocated to participate in the process meaningfully. Work priorities were shifted, deadlines pushed, and there was a collective understanding across the organization that this work would take time and energy. That being said, we also knew that we would eventually have to transfer our ideas to another team to actually develop the program. This kept us motivated to keep moving without dragging the process out.
4. ***We started the ideation process by building empathy.*** At Equitas, using a participatory approach in our human rights education practice is essential to empowerment and transformation. Starting from the experience of participants was essential for coming up with the idea for Global Rights Connection as well. The team used principles of [human-centered design](#) to go through the ideation process. This meant consultation with past and potential partners and participants of the International Human Rights Training program around how they were *feeling*, and what they were *thinking, saying, and doing with regards to their work* as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Understanding their priorities was essential to designing a program that responded to their needs and expectations. Empathy was also important for each other as a team working remotely and experiencing the various impacts of the pandemic ourselves.
5. ***We kept meaningful and voluntary participation at the heart of the process.*** We created a process for the meaningful participation of diverse staff, partners and different stakeholders. With over 40 years of running the IH RTP, anyone who has experienced the program, from staff members, facilitators, alumni, to funders, has an emotional connection to the magic of the program. We wanted to be intentional around creating

opportunities that invited the active engagement of diverse stakeholders in the co-creation of ideas and the validation of needs. We did surveys with past and potential participants, focus groups with facilitators, interviews with other education programs moving online, and lots of discussions with Equitas staff members.

6. ***We trusted the process!*** We let go of our desire to achieve perfection and 100% clarity around every proposed idea. We also let go of expectations for each other based on our job titles and professional backgrounds. We entered into process as equal contributors. We deliberately took time to generate lots of ideas and surface divergent possibilities. This allowed us to recognize patterns and themes that we thought were important to a transformative and participatory human rights education training program before converging on some central ideas for development.
7. ***We leveraged technology to help us ideate.*** Because we were working remotely, using flipchart paper and post-it notes to brainstorm was not an option. Instead, we piloted a digital workspace for visual coloration. [Mural](#) helped free us from the written word. It allowed us to brainstorm hundreds of possibilities and then agree on a handful for the final design. The free monthly trial and reduced non-profit membership were also really helpful given resource constraints.
8. ***We were committed to working together!*** The team was made up of six staff with different experiences of the IH RTP, different roles and expertise within Equitas, different learning styles and personalities. It was the first time we had ever worked together as a group, so getting to know our strengths and expertise, as well as our needs was really important and it helped us recognize the value each member was bringing to the process. We listened to each other and made an effort to understand different perspectives, openly engage in dialogue, enter the space with humility and belief that what we were building together was going to be greater than what we could build alone. Our willingness to step back was just as important as our willingness to step up and contribute.
9. ***We prioritized joy and used a sprinkle of magic!*** Given the challenging context we were all living through, it was important for us to prioritize joy. We liberated ourselves from preconceived notions of right and wrong, fostering a climate where people were motivated to collaborate, express ideas and opinions that were free from judgement. We wore hats, we celebrated personal milestones, we welcomed our children into our process. These little acts of joy helped fuel creativity and innovation.
10. ***We took time to reflect on how we were doing and how we did.*** Evaluation is central to our practice of human rights education. We took time at the end of each session to

debrief how the session went, how we worked as a team, and how we could improve participation and the process overall. Likewise, we gathered after the process to reflect on our lessons learned and to identify what worked well and what could have been done better. For example, we noted that while we engaged our partners directly through surveys and focus groups, we could have done so earlier in the process. We could have also improved the transfer from the ideation phase to the development phase to ensure enough resources were allocated to the *Global Rights Connection* team to get started.

We hope these reflections are not only useful for Equitas as we move forward but for other organizations that are required to ideate and pivot during these unprecedented times.