



Design Thinking: A Case Study

By Aimee Close

Like other “legacy institutions,” USCJ has been criticized in recent years for being unable to quickly adapt and respond to the needs of our constituents. This is a story that contradicts that narrative. It is a story about how we listened carefully to our smallest congregations, identified an unmet need, and in a relatively short period of time, designed a low-risk experiment to meet that need, pivoted when the situation changed, and continued to adapt as we received feedback from prospective participants. The result was a successful, low-cost program that met the needs of the participants and will continue to evolve as we receive more feedback and design the next iteration of the program.

If you are familiar with the elements of design thinking, these steps should sound familiar.

- Listen carefully to get a deep understanding of the people you are trying to serve (EMPATHIZE)
- Identify an unmet need
- Explore ways to meet the need (IDEATE)
- Design a low-risk experiment to address the need (PROTOTYPE)
- Get feedback from stakeholders and make changes based on the feedback (ITERATE)

- Run the experiment (TEST)
- Get as much feedback as possible and make more changes (ITERATE)

Listening Deeply and Identifying a Need

Sometime last summer, I received an email from a leader of a small congregation, who wanted to know what had happened to the IMUN program that USCJ ran in the 1990s and early 2000s. She had attended the program and it had been transformative for her. She wanted to know if anything like it still existed.

Having recently acquired the portfolio of liaison to small congregations at USCJ, I was already interviewing leaders of small congregations to find out more about their needs, so I was excited that someone from one of these congregations was reaching out to me unsolicited. We set up a call, and I listened carefully, taking lots of notes, as she described the program she had attended twenty years earlier and the impact it had on her.

As I continued to speak with leaders of small congregations, one theme that came up repeatedly was that these congregations often have limited clergy support, and not enough lay leaders with ritual skills. I began to wonder whether reviving IMUN might be able to help these communities.

I learned that in its day, IMUN was both successful and well-regarded. The annual 9-day retreat took place at Camp Ramah in the Berkshires during the summer, and attracted lay leaders from congregations across North America, teaching them skills such as Torah reading, how to lead services, and how to perform certain life cycle events. During the 1990s and early 2000s, hundreds of lay leaders were trained by IMUN, but as tends to happen, the program ran its course, and it fizzled out over time.

As I continued to speak with more people, I heard from others who recalled IMUN as one of the most valuable programs USCJ had ever offered. I decided it was time to look into the feasibility of reviving IMUN.

Exploring Ideas and Designing a Low-risk Experiment to Meet the Need

It quickly became clear that a 9-day retreat was not going to be practical for many reasons, not the least of which was that very few people would be able to commit that much time. A program of that length would also make the program prohibitively expensive, and one of the things I heard from leaders was that if this was going to meet their needs, it needed to be affordable. I was also highly committed to ensuring that this would be a low-risk experiment that would come at no cost, or very low cost, to USCJ and our partner organizations.

Following many conversations with clergy and lay leaders, as well as former and prospective IMUN participants, I drafted an outline for a 5-day, 4-night retreat, to be preceded by two webinars. The next step was to find a venue, as well as a rabbi and cantor to help me design the program and serve as its faculty.

After calling around to various Jewish summer camps and retreat centers, I found one venue that was both affordable and had space available during the summer. That

was Ramah Darom, one of the premier summer camps of the Conservative Movement, located in beautiful Northern Georgia, in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Based on the number of available rooms, we would be limited to fourteen participants. Since I had already decided that this was going to be a small, low-risk experiment, that was perfect.

Finding the Right Partners

Excited to have secured the perfect venue, I reached out to our Conservative Movement partners, the Rabbinical Assembly and the Cantors Assembly, for their support, and for their assistance in finding a rabbi and cantor.

I soon had my dream team of Rabbi Rob Scheinberg from the United Synagogue of Hoboken, NJ, and Cantor Sarah Levine of West End Synagogue in Nashville, TN. I explained to them that although I would not be able to compensate them for their time, they would at least get to spend five glorious days at beautiful Ramah Darom (or so we thought). From our first planning meeting in December, these two talented and dedicated professionals gave generously of their time as we worked out all the details of recruitment, logistics, content, and methodology.

Quickly to Changing Conditions

Over the next couple of months, we recruited twelve participants from small congregations across North America. They were from cities, small towns, and rural communities; they were Jews by birth and Jews by choice; they were of various ages, gender identities, and sexual orientations; and they had goals ranging from learning to lead *kabbalat shabbat* to learning to officiate at a funeral.

And then, in March, the world changed. As it became clear that COVID-19 was going to prevent us from going to Ramah, our small, nimble team quickly pivoted and moved IMUN to a completely remote format rather than cancel it, which certainly would have been the easier decision to make.

Listening Some More and Making Adjustments

To our surprise, despite the obvious disappointment of not going to Ramah, all twelve of our participants agreed to give the remote version a try. We held two webinars with the group, where we got to know one another and began learning together. Each person had an opportunity to tell their story, and to hear the stories of others. We also

encouraged each participant to schedule a one-on-one Zoom call with a member of the faculty, in order to discuss their learning goals before the “retreat” portion of the program.

As we learned more about the needs of each participant, the three of us were continually making changes to the program in our shared Google doc. This became a living document that continued to develop and change right up until the first day of the “retreat” (and beyond!).

So Nu? How Did it Go?

In the end, nine individuals completed the fully remote program, which included two webinars in the Spring, followed by 23 hours on Zoom over the course of a Thursday, Friday, Sunday, and Monday in July.

Of course, had we been at camp, the centerpiece of the program would have been *shabbat*. We would have had a beautiful, *ruach*-filled outdoor *kabbalat shabbat* service, followed by dinner and lots of singing, a learning session with the camp staff, and beautiful davening on Saturday morning with a chance for our IMUN-niks to show off their new skills. The rest of the day would have included lunch and a relaxing afternoon walking around camp or swimming at the lake, with lots of time to get to know each other.

For various reasons, we decided it was not feasible to have a *shabbat* experience as part of the remote program. So we held *kabbalat shabbat* on Friday afternoon before we ended for the day, and we had a lovely *Havdalah* when we reconvened on Sunday morning.

People were still able to practice the skills they were learning during our weekday morning and afternoon services, and several people gave their very first *d'var torah* at our Sunday night virtual *kumsitz*, which included beautiful singing and guitar playing by our faculty members. One of our participants even “took us out” to an outdoor firepit in their backyard, so that we really felt almost like we were sitting around the fire together.

What Did we Learn?

Even before it morphed into a remote program, we were clear that this was an experiment. We were basing it on a program that had last taken place twenty years

earlier, and we were completely reimagining it to meet today's needs. While the goals may have been similar, the means of accomplishing those goals were different. We had no idea what to expect. We knew that failure was a real possibility, which was why it was critical that we kept costs (and therefore risk) low.

Here are some things we learned:

- Being an organization that is willing to experiment and take risks is critical to success.
- Having a staff team that is highly committed to the program's mission is imperative.
- The pre-retreat webinars were a great way for people to get to know each other and begin to build trust before the more intensive multi-day program began. It also gave us a chance to understand each participant's learning goals.
- It is important to set realistic expectations. Nobody is going to learn to read Torah or lead services from start to finish in four days.
- While we can teach technical skills and do some community-building in a remote format, there is no substitute for an immersive *shabbat* experience.
- When using Zoom for a multi-day program consisting of several hours each day, breakout rooms are essential to keep things interactive.
- Finding creative ways to have informal time together when using a virtual format makes a huge difference. We may not be able to replicate a walk in the woods or a heart-to-heart over dinner, but we can leave the Zoom meeting on during breaks and we can hold a virtual *kumsitz*.

What Was the Impact?

I'll let the participants speak for themselves. Here are some of the comments we received:

"It exceeded my expectations in every way."

"It gave me a chance to step out of my comfort zone."

"I feel like I have more confidence that I can officiate at life cycle events as a lay leader."

"I understand the siddur better."

"My sight reading of Hebrew has vastly improved."

"What a fantastic experience! I know it would be easy to be disappointed that we weren't able to be together in the same physical space, but I have no regrets at all about participating."

"Thank you for helping me develop a new fervor for participation and leadership."

Conclusion

IMUN 2020 was a successful experiment with a small group of participants, and our hope is that it will continue to evolve. I have some ideas as to what that could look like, and look forward to bouncing those ideas around with the staff and participants from this summer, prospective future participants, and other stakeholders so that we can begin designing the next iteration of IMUN.

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<https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/how-uscj-used-design-thinking-to-help-small-congregations>