

Improvising Innovation: A Case Study in the University of Guelph Library

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In January 2010, approximately 30 University of Guelph Library staff attended a recruitment meeting for a new staff development initiative called “Innovation Boot Camp.” Dressed in military camouflage and equipped with authentic army issue kit bags, my colleague, M.J. D’Elia and I looked every bit the part of army recruitment officers. Our mission was to solicit six volunteers from our organization to join us in a 12-week experiment in creativity and innovation training. We had developed a series of activities and improvisational exercises that we hoped would help us and our recruits become more creative problem-solvers and innovative thinkers. We could then apply our skills and practices to improving the quality of our library services for our users.



The military may be one of the last places you might think to look for a metaphor when developing a program on innovation and creativity, but we liked the apparent dissonance. We hypothesized that a structure borrowed from the world of training and discipline would provide the necessary tension and focus to drive the creative process.

As it turns out, training, discipline and practice are key to improvisation too. At the same time as we were running Innovation Boot Camp, I was enrolled in an eight week improvisational theatre class and learning the basic principles of improv. We incorporated some traditional theatre improvisation games into our Boot Camp, but the connection with improvisation ran deeper. We began to see how we intuitively (and inadvertently) had been applying the principles and characteristics of improvisation to our Boot Camp activities and that there are strong links between improvisation and innovation. Fortuitously, I came across a series of articles devoted to improvisation and innovation in organizations in a special issue of the management journal, *Organization Science* which helped me make these connections.

Preparing to be Spontaneous

Paradoxically, improvisation must be learned. It requires practice, training and at least a minimal structure to be performed successfully. Barrett writes about “preparing to be spontaneous” in jazz improvisation: “Learning to play jazz is a matter of learning the theory and rules that govern musical progressions. Once integrated these rules become tacit and amenable to complex variation and transformation, much like learning the rules of grammar and syntax when one learns to speak” (606).

Innovation Boot Camp was an experiment in learning to be spontaneous. We provided the structure and time to practice innovation-generating techniques so that later we might be able to apply these techniques more readily and spontaneously in our everyday work. Each session was structured consistently starting with a reflection on the previous week's activities, followed by an overview of the current session, a "mind stretch" to help us transition out of our regular work routines (this was often an improv game), a main task, and a wrap-up. Each Boot Camp session started and ended precisely on time, and every activity moved at a brisk pace to energize and challenge us and to encourage the intuitive, unchecked flow of ideas.

By revealing the activities to the participants just in time, we ensured that their work was spontaneous and improvisational. We varied the location of activities in the library to prompt different ideas and perspectives. One activity took place in the staff lounge; another had the participants working in public spaces throughout the library. For partner activities, we paired people up at the last minute so they would have to negotiate their working relationship quickly to be productive.

Collaboration among diverse talents

Barrett (605) writes of "jazz improvising as an example of an organization designed for maximizing learning and innovation... (characterized by) a group of diverse specialists living in a chaotic, turbulent environment...highly interdependent on one another to interpret equivocal information, dedicated to innovation and the creation of novelty." The Library is also made up of diverse specialists, all of us working in an environment of rapid change in technology and information delivery. The Innovation Boot Camp participants included a mix of librarians, an administrative assistant, a library associate, the co-ordinator of the Library Centre for Students with Disabilities, and a co-op student. Though the Library is normally a very collaborative workplace, it is rare that such a diverse group of staff would have the opportunity to work as closely as we did over a twelve-week period.

The analogy of a jazz band with its many individual talents also fits the philosophy upon which Boot Camp is based—that teams require diverse skills, expertise, and approaches to innovate successfully. The weekly activities in Innovation Boot Camp were inspired by the ten approaches to innovation outlined in *The Ten Faces of Innovation* by Tom Kelley and Jonathan Littman. Each "face" or role brings a different strength in innovation to the team. Some of the roles focus on learning from other contexts outside the organization, some concentrate on organizing and directing innovation projects, and the rest are responsible for delivering the final product or service innovation in a compelling way. For example, the "Anthropologist" is trained in observing human behaviour and provides vital background research into innovation projects. The "Experimenter" can rapidly produce prototypes of new ideas so the team can better visualize the direction of the innovation. The "Set Designer" pays close attention to the environment in which the team is working and ensures that the right conditions and materials are present to maximize creativity and productivity. The "Storyteller" packages the innovation intriguingly and convincingly. Kelley describes the power of collaboration: "I'm a firm believer in the galvanizing power of personas. Adopting even one new role can bring both cultural and business benefits to your organization. But the real payoff comes when you gather all roles together and blend them into a multidisciplinary team. Innovation is ultimately a team sport. Get all the roles performing on top of their game and you'll generate a positive force for innovation" (Kelley and Littman 264).

"Yes-anding"

The popular perception of theatre improv is of a sport where actors compete for the funniest, cleverest, and most original lines, but this impression couldn't be farther from the heart of improvisation. Instead, the improviser's role is to put her ego aside to serve the scene and to

support her fellow actors in serving the scene. Improv teacher, Patricia Ryan Madson, advises “be average (not clever).” “Striving for an original idea takes us away from our everyday intelligence,” she writes, “and it can actually block access to the creative process. There is a widespread belief that thinking ‘outside the box’ (some call this the goal of creativity) means going for far-out and unusual ideas. A true understanding of this phrase means seeing what is really obvious, but up until then, unseen” (Madson, 2005, p. 52). When the improv artist relinquishes the need to be the star of the show, she creates a space to bring out the best in all. Likewise, the innovator recognizes that one’s clever and original ideas only gain value when they give meaning and worth to other people. Creativity researcher, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, debunks the myth of the lone inventor: “the notion of individual genius inventors comes from our human predilection for stories featuring superheroes” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p. 7). Innovation, like improvisation, is a team sport.

Crossan writes that “...yes-anding is at the heart of improvisation. It means that individuals accept the offer made to them and build on it... individuals do not just survive in the scene, they work actively to build it; and individuals do not put, or leave, one another out on a limb” (596-97).

We observed enthusiastic yes-anding behaviour throughout Innovation Boot Camp. One particular example stands out from our “Set Designer” session. The Set Designer role is to ensure that the physical workspace is optimized for creativity to flourish. For our main activity we offered the participants the following challenge: You will be paired off into teams of architects. Your architectural firm must draft a blueprint for a new addition to the Library. The purpose of this addition is to create an “academic town square” for faculty, graduate students, and international scholars to meet and exchange ideas.

We provided each team with a custom-made logo of their architectural firm name, flip chart paper, markers and black ties and told them to return in thirty minutes to present their design proposals. While they were gone, we quickly transformed the meeting room into the setting for a black tie cocktail party reception. We lit tea-lights and set out hors d’oeuvres and drinks. We draped a black curtain over the whiteboard and erected a podium to set the stage for the presentations.

We didn’t know what to expect. The participants had had little time to prepare their designs, and we had them working in public areas of the Library with many distractions. Would they feel self-conscious about working in these spaces? Would they manage to come up with anything new and creative? As it turned out, they had said “yes-and” to our challenge and played the role of competing architectural firms with alacrity. When they returned, they were carrying their designs and wearing their black ties. The presentations were witty, creative, and inspiring and demonstrated what is possible when colleagues accept our offers and say “yes-and” – accomplishing even more than we had expected.



Teamwork

Vera and Crossan describe effective teams as those that share common goals and a common vocabulary and feel a sense of shared responsibility and trust. Each member plays the role of leader or follower as needed (206). Improvisation subverts the hierarchies found in organizations and promotes the sense that “we’re all in this together.” Our Innovation Boot Camp activities were crafted to build this kind of shared experience. We used our meeting room as if it were a stage, not hesitating to rearrange the furniture and bring in “props” to help participants immerse themselves in the exercises and feel part of a unique community. The cocktail reception scene was but one example. We also held a matinee screening complete with armchairs and popcorn. Another week we transformed the room into a campfire setting with a tent, marshmallows, and campfire circle.

Each week, we awarded participants a “merit badge” marking the completion of a set of innovation training exercises. The badges contributed to a sense of community and shared experience and accomplishment. The group enthusiastically shared a commitment to Innovation Boot Camp by arriving on time, fully participating in the activities, many of which were ‘outside the comfort zone’ and supporting each other’s ideas.



In jazz improvisation, musicians sometimes display their individual talents through soloing, and also support their colleagues through accompaniment. This “egalitarian model assures that each player will get an opportunity to develop a musical idea while others create space for this development to occur” (Barrett 616). We initiated activities where leadership shifted to different team members, sometimes organically, other times deliberately. The session when we explored the “Director” role, we provided the group with plastic recorders and randomly selected someone to take on the role of conductor of the recorder orchestra. Later that session we did a storyboarding activity where we waited for a leader to emerge naturally.

Future directions

Having experimented with improvisation games and innovation techniques within the safe confines of Innovation Boot Camp, we are starting to practice what we’ve learned in our “real” work. We have brought rapid prototyping and anthropological observation methods to our work teams and incorporated theatre sports to our meetings. Some of our colleagues were skeptical at first, but we found that when you shake up conventions, arouse curiosity, awaken all the senses, and invite participation, most people do get engaged and things get done differently. A

five-minute improv game at the start of a meeting pulls us out of our ruts, makes us smile, and changes the tenor of the rest of the meeting.

We are conscious of the fact that the boot camp metaphor does not work for everyone, and may indeed turn some people off. Hatch and Weick acknowledge that “all metaphors imply some form of exclusion because not everyone will resonate with or agree with their implied comparisons” (603). Indeed, “any metaphor, any idea, any knowledge can be and is used to dominate, whether through influence or oppression” (601).

We also understand that incorporating innovative and improvisational approaches in an organization takes time and flexibility: “Organizations are highly interdependent collections of carefully coordinated tasks, like the score for a symphony. One person can't start playing jazz while everyone else is following the score; innovation without understanding and agreement is not tolerable. Changing from an orchestra to a jazz ensemble takes both learning and agreement” (Pasmore 562).

We have learned that improvisation injects playfulness and creativity into our routines. It lightens the mood, and we think it improves the quality and productivity of our work. Barrett puts it beautifully: “...jazz improvisation can be seen as a hopeful activity. It models individual actors as protean agents capable of transforming the direction and flow of events. In that sense, jazz holds an appreciative view of human potential: it represents the belief in the human capacity to think freshly, to generate novel solution, to create something new and interesting, reminding us of John Dewey's contention that we are all natural learners” (620).

We think this applies to our experience with improvisation in Innovation Boot Camp and have certainly found that practising to be spontaneous in the Library is transforming our relationship with work.



More information with stories and pictures can be found on our Innovation Boot Camp blog. <http://innovationbootcamp.wordpress.com/>

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