Open Your Mind, Open Your Library: Creative Thinking at Work

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My Creativity Axioms

1. Everyone is creative
2. Creativity is a mindset (not a skill)
3. Creativity is about communicating ideas (not technical proficiency)
4. Creative confidence grows with practice

Suggested Reading

Gray, D., Brown, S. & Macanufo, J. (2010). *Gamestorming: A playbook for innovators, rulebreakers, and changemakers*. Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly.

Hurson, T. (2008). *Think better: An innovator's guide to productive thinking*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Judkins, R. (2015). *The art of creative thinking*. London: Sceptre.

Kelley, T. & Kelley, D. (2013). *Creative confidence: Unleashing the creative potential within us all*. New York: Crown.

Kelley, T. & Littman, J. (2005). *The ten faces of innovation*. New York: Currency Doubleday.

Michalko, M. (2011). *Creative thinkering: Putting your imagination to work*. Novato, CA: New World Library.

Michalko, M. (2001). *Cracking creativity: The secrets of creative genius*. New York: Ten Speed Press.

Michalko, M. (2006). *Thinkertoys*. 2nd ed. New York: Ten Speed Press.

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Sibbet, D. *Visual meetings*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Three Creative Thinking Strategies for <u>Learning</u>

Know the novice
Think about the last time you were a tourist in a foreign place. Everything was new and different from your normal experience, so you were seeing the environment with "fresh eyes." Sometimes our expertise or knowledge about "the way we do things" gets in the way – cultivating the "beginner's mind" and trying to understand the novice can help.

Try this:
- Play the role of "secret library shopper" in an unfamiliar library and reflect on your experience from the other side of the desk.
- Force yourself to learn an entirely new skill (e.g. ballroom dancing) and remember how frustrating it can be to be a novice learner.

"Sometimes incompetence is useful. It helps you keep an open mind."
- Roberto Cavalli, Italian fashion designer

Observe obsessively
Ingenious solutions are everywhere – the trick is translating insights from other environments into your current context. If we focus too much on our own industry (e.g. libraries) we tend to develop myopic solutions. Nurturing curiosity and exploring adjacent industries enables us to connect cultures and find new insights.

Try this:
- Go to a public space (or sit in the middle of your library) and watch people for 20 minutes. Record at least 20 observations of human behavior.
- Spend 30 minutes browsing through magazines that would not normally interest you and try to identify important themes or issues.

"The cure for boredom is curiosity. There is no cure for curiosity."
- Dorothy Parker, American author and poet

Drown distractions
When we are fully engrossed in something we love, time melts away and we actually enjoy the task in front of us. Unfortunately, our lives are frequently filled with interruptions (emails, text messages, cat videos). Our attempts to multi-task leave us distracted, stressed, and – if we're honest – underperforming. Being present and mindful is one of the secrets of creative thinkers.

Try this:
- Create intentional space for daydreaming, allowing time for novel ideas to bubble to the surface.
- Hold short no-technology meetings (e.g. phones go in a box at the door) enabling participants to attend only to the problem at hand (no distractions!)

"There are always distractions, if you allow them."
- Tony La Russa, American baseball player and manager

Three Creative Thinking Strategies for Building

Make ideas tangible

We love to discuss and debate ideas, but sometimes the best way to communicate an idea is to sketch it out or make a rough prototype. When people have something tangible to respond to real progress can happen. The "thinking with your hands" approach also leads to deeper learning and discovery because the ideas are no longer abstract concepts.

Try this:
- Build out a new service model or product using inexpensive craft materials, then debate the implementation.
- Run a brainstorming meeting where everyone has to draw "napkin solutions" instead simply recording ideas on a flip chart.

> *"Art is not what you see, but what you make others see."*
> - Edgar Degas, Impressionist painter

Go for emotion

Sometimes we get so focused on policies, procedures, and workflows that we overlook how we want people to feel. When we connect with users at a deeper level than mere functionality we surprise them with unforgettable experiences. One of the compelling challenges of creativity is to make the ordinary feel extraordinary.

Try this:
- Find a YouTube video that conveys the kind of emotion you want to emulate and then discuss how to achieve that experience in your library.
- Share personal extraordinary experiences (e.g. exceptional service, moments of wonder, etc.) and reflect on what made them memorable.

> *"Better to be without logic than without feeling."*
> - Charlotte Bronte, English novelist and poet

Flatten the hierarchy

I have a sticker on my office door that says "Ideas over titles." It's a reminder that the best ideas don't come from the person with most seniority or the most responsibility. Insights, solutions, and opportunities can generate and germinate at any level of the organization. The best way to foster creative thinking among a group is to flatten the hierarchy.

Try this:
- Open your project to the rest of the library and invite comments from staff who are not associated with the project.
- Establish a suggestion box with a clear question (e.g. "how might we improve our service?") and encourage all staff to contribute to generating and evaluating ideas.

> *"The world needs dreamers and the world needs doers. But above all, the world needs dreamers who do."* - Sarah Ban Breathnach, American author

Three Creative Thinking Strategies for Practicing

Break routines

The greatest enemy of creativity is complacency. We are creatures of habit who prefer routine. One of the simplest strategies to improve creative thinking is to alter your patterns and habits. Instead of going through your schedule on auto-pilot find a way to disrupt yourself.

Try this:
- Arrange standing or walking meetings instead of holding meetings in a typical conference room.
- Shift your work hours or work place (e.g. start in the afternoon and work into the night; work from a coffee shop) see what opportunities present themselves.

"If you want to change your art, change your habits."
- Clement Greenberg, American essayist and Modern Art critic

Maintain momentum

One of the biggest challenges for creative projects is to maintain momentum. Typically, we get excited about new possibilities at the outset, but get tired during the execution stage when we experience roadblocks. The trick is to find a way to move forward – even in small increments. When projects reach a standstill it is difficult to regroup and muster more creative energy.

Try this:
- Impose micro-deadlines and other constraints that force decisions and progress.
- Frame every obstacle as a new creative challenge and invite people to help you solve the problem.

"You might not write well every day, but you can always edit a bad page. You can't edit a blank page."
- Jodi Picot, American author

Be positive about negatives

Most creative projects will encounter adversity because they challenge the status quo. It can be hard to accept, but sometimes attention – even negative attention – is better than no attention because it means that people care. The trick is to stick to the creative vision and channel the negativity into something more constructive.

Try this:
- Post negative comments and feedback on the wall. Discuss the complaints and issues and use them as motivation to improve.
- Celebrate failures regularly. Invite people to share moments of failure. Learn from those mistakes and keep moving forward.

"Success is the ability to go from failure to failure without losing your enthusiasm."
- Winston Churchill, British politician

Four Simple Creative Thinking Activities to Use with a group

The Free Association Game

Use this activity to get participants to practice their lateral thinking. It forces participants to look for connections or free associations between seemingly unrelated objects.

Instructions
- Begin with the following question: "*How is a library like _____?*"
- Fill in the blanks with one of the following words: Airport, submarine, gas station and garage, spa or salon, hotel, hospital, tattoo parlour, orchestra, research laboratory, ski resort, farmers' market, amusement park, hockey arena, cargo van, police station, farm
- Brainstorm as many similarities between libraries and these objects/places as possible
- Debrief the activity – consider what might be possible from your discussion

Debrief Learning
- Ideas can reveal a more interesting picture of the objects that are being free associated
- Highlights the importance of looking beyond our industry (libraries) for solutions to the problem (too often we focus on what other libraries are doing and we miss broader trends in other industries)
- This activity also highlights (in a light-hearted manner) the stereotypes that exist about libraries and librarians.

The Alternative Use Game

Use this activity to get people thinking differently about common objects. It forces participants to push for novel ideas (and have a lot of fun in the process).

Instructions
- Divide your group into small clusters (2-3 members).
- Distribute one random object to each pair or group (e.g. plunger, fly swatter, stapler, sandal, travel mug, etc.)
- Invite each cluster to come up with a dozen alternative uses for this item (i.e. not for the purpose for which it was designed)
- Have groups share some of their ideas

Debrief Learning
- Encourages people to examine other qualities or attributes of the object (e.g. colour, weight, shape, etc.)
- Demonstrates how looking at traditional objects in less traditional ways opens up new possibilities

The Observation Game

Use this activity to get participants to practice their observational skills. It forces participants to distinguish between facts and interpretations.

Instructions
- Take a bunch of photos (or find some online) of people using a public space (e.g. your library, an airport, a public park, etc.)
- Divide your group into small clusters (2-3 members)
- Ask each group to record at least 10 observations from the photos (groups should focus specifically on what is happening in the photos)

Debrief Learning
- Distinguishes between facts (describing what is happening) and interpretations (adding value judgments to what is happening)
- Encourages paying attention to detail
- Reveals larger patterns about user behavior in a public space

The Organization Game

Use this activity to get people thinking about their role in an organization. It forces people to reflect on the organizational structure and the relationship dynamics.

Instructions
- Give each participant a piece of paper and a pen or marker
- Ask them the following question: "Draw a picture of the library's organization as you see it in your head. Put yourself in the picture."
- Encourage participants to draw bubbles and connecting lines
- Invite them to explain their drawing to the rest of the group (note: you need to create a safe environment in which to share because this activity can be very personal)

Debrief Learning
- Reveals interesting patterns about how people view themselves and their organizations
- Creates opportunities to discuss the factors that contribute to differences in perception

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