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Starting with "Yes, and...": Collaborative Instructional Design in Digital Scholarship

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INTRODUCTION

Collaboration and *interdisciplinary work* have lately become watchwords for higher education, often becoming institutionalized as mandates or initiatives in university and college libraries. Libraries and their professional staff are often called upon to put these ideas into practice, perhaps concretely in partnerships with other divisions and units, or by reaching out across campuses or consortia. In our experience, collaboration as mandate will always have a low threshold of success if it is presented merely as a directive; partnership cannot succeed merely as an afterthought in the service of a vague objective. However, collaborative success may not always look like a straightforward “win,” which can be a source of frustration and resentment for those involved as well as administrators.

More specifically, partnerships within the library will often draw upon the hidden functional and technological expertise of others, such as staff from information technology, metadata, special collections, digital services, and scholarly communications. This represents a critical first step for collaborating, especially in the co-teaching of library instruction sessions, orientations, specialized workshops, and other forms of programming. From our perspectives as a public-facing teaching and research librarian and a digital initiatives librarian, we have found that many professional librarians and functional staff are confused about their roles, especially when they are partnered arbitrarily. Who is responsible for outreach, instruction, or follow-up? Who should be the contact person for faculty and students for interdisciplinary projects or course assignments? And at the end of the day, whose department gets to claim the statistic of “courses taught”?

USING IMPROV IN COLLABORATIVE ENVIRONMENTS

Why improv? While we are not in a position to answer structural questions about territory and siloes, we have gleaned useful lessons from the world of improvisational and sketch comedy that have helped us to be better collaborators in our day-to-day work. Sharing these with a wide audience of teaching librarians brought both of us to our first LOEX conference, in the form of a short, improv starter workshop. It is our assertion that the “work” of improv strips away the trappings of ego, role, and expertise. In doing so, it lays bare the fundamental tenets of collaboration. As such, improv is an eminently flexible pedagogical tool because it relies solely on the work done in a limited amount of time, in a confined space, with only a few participants. At the end of an hour, our forty plus attendees had experimented with creating a common language, establishing trust, and making their collaborators shine.

Improv crucially provides the interpersonal tools that collaborative environments demand, because it necessitates subsuming one’s ego in the service of a greater objective. At the same time, improv can allow its practitioners to develop concrete skills in active listening, affirmation, spontaneity, and flexibility. Our workshop has been structured around a handful of thematic principles in support of these goals, with a set of exercises designed to quickly take participants through different stages of analysis and self-reflection. The five thematic principles are as follows:

1. *De-Centering*
2. *Building Ensemble*

3. *Affirmation*
4. *Communication*
5. *Co-Creation*

Each theme is introduced in the next section with a quotation from Libera's (2004) *Second City Almanac of Improvisation*. This book is highly recommended for its fluid and novel approach to improv as collaboration, and as a source of potentially transformative pedagogy.

NARRATIVE WORKSHOP SUMMARY

We opened our session with a general brainstorming question about common issues faced in co-teaching, to better gauge the concerns and questions of participants before the session gets underway. Each workshop session is inherently unique, and every follow-up discussion yields novel ideas. A roomful of teaching and instruction librarians has a different slant than one of digital library specialists, and yet these very different audiences often end up in a similar place. At LOEX, the concerns tended to coalesce around interpersonal communication, broadly defined. Attendees' concerns included: the ability to reconcile competing instructional styles and goals, ways of negotiating authority and territory, the anxiety around conflicting expectations and diminished mutual understanding, and the perennial concerns of "too much to do and not enough time." With these concerns in mind, we began to take participants through the first thematic section.

Theme 1: De-Centering

"Be alert. Listen very hard to everything outside yourself."

Our initial set of activities were designed to reduce internal sites of resistance such as self-consciousness, social anxiety, and fear of failure. In order to accomplish this, our exercises stress *shifting focus* from internal, self-centric concerns to external points of focus. We asked participants to keep up with a fast-paced, unpredictable environment, designed so that there are no stakes to either failure or success. In true improvisational fashion, participants were asked only to say "yes" to whatever was asked of them. Reflection is minimal, and critique is removed from the equation.

From these exercises, we explored strategies which our participants used to focus, such as what actions they took to follow what was happening in the room, and how they reacted to unpredictability. Several participants reported their ability to "go with the flow" essentially on autopilot, but experienced confusion and frustration when another participant made an unexpected pattern change. Some players spoke to the idea of individual choice, whether exercising power, or not, in service of the activity. More discussion centered on how those choices had ramifications within the group overall. Many individuals began to connect those concepts to the challenges faced in their individual institutions or roles, sharing the challenges of bringing unpredictable or uncooperative students and peers into a collaborative project.

Theme 2: Building Ensemble

"Accept what your partner does or says as a gift, not as a challenge."

Once focus and presence were established with participants, we shifted to exploring techniques for developing relationships. Our primary focus was on creating horizontal relationship among peers, with exercises that drew attention to the tactics required to maintain continuous understanding and joint attention. At this juncture, we split the attendees into smaller groups of 8-10 individuals, with some partner work added as well. These initial small groups were maintained throughout the rest of the workshop. Participants were then asked to lead, follow, choose leaders, and even act without leaders in their activities, all of which required keen focus on others in the workshop.

This set of exercises began to introduce players to the concept of working towards what may seem like a simple shared goal, such as picking a leader, or following physical movements. The deeper underpinnings of the exercises can point up ways in which collaborative goals may shift in unexpected ways, especially depending on the input of the group members. Discussion questions here examined pre-existing strategies to determine who leads and who follows in small groups. More conversation raised the questions about how shifting away from the dyad of leader and follower might open up new avenues for creativity or other unexpected developments.

Theme 3: Affirmation

“Yes, and’ is always better than ‘No, but’ or ‘No, and’ or ‘Yes, but.’”

One of the best-known tenets of improv is the concept of affirmation. More than just saying “yes” without any kind of internal examination, affirmation implies both the acknowledgement of an idea or concept, and the commitment to building upon it. Simply saying “yes” in an improvisational setting does not further the action, scene, or story. Hence the “yes, and…” of our title, which reflects the ethos of active affirmation that serves professional and amateur improvisers alike. Every participant in the scene must be willing to not only accept the groundwork laid out by their partners, but to expand upon it by making active choices.

At this phase of the workshop, participants began to explore the basics of scene work in their small groups, throwing out and committing to ideas with wild abandon. In doing so, they worked from a place of *empathy* for others in their group. They were asked to be mindful of the abilities, preexisting knowledge, and comfort level of others within the group. From here, we asked participants to reflect upon the strategies used to ensure that all members of the group were successful. The goal is not one of ego, but to make the entire team look good, and to take note of the ways in which observation, focus, and assertion all contribute to it.

The next questions posed to players honed in on the process of creating safe environments. By this we mean environments that enable ideas to flourish based on the input and participation of *everyone* in the room, not merely those who are designated as leaders or happen to speak with the loudest voices. If one person is controlling the scene at the expense of the other participants, then they are denying the reality of the group by refusing to cede control. Other questions drew out discussion of what it would take to foster a sense of total safety in each individual, internally and externally. At this point we began analyzing the concept of momentum: how to determine if momentum is waning, what its loss does to the group, and what individual group members may do to regain it. From there, we translated these ideas to concrete experiences in working on projects. Many participants agreed that we often see energy and enthusiasm for a project drain away in the face of competing priorities and limited time.

Theme 4: Communication

“Invest a great deal of importance in what you are doing, saying, and reacting to.”

With the previous thematic lessons in mind, workshop participants then shifted to completing narrative exercises in their groups. The intent behind these activities was to explore the communicative concepts of abstraction, active listening, narrative control, and supporting. Participants within their small groups were asked to define simple, but abstract concepts in a collaborative exercise. At the end, players were asked how well the group’s definitions matched the pre-existing internal definitions of each individual. They then assessed the merits of the collaborative definition with regard to the whole that was created in the moment. They determined that the measurement is not necessarily one of “correct or incorrect” when working towards abstract goals, but the extent to which the product is the end result of a collaborative process. Several of our participants connected strongly to the idea that group work in any setting may not yield perfect results, but instead delivers value as the product of diverse voices sharing responsibility and ownership.

Building upon earlier lessons, participants were asked to think about the concepts of communicative control and support. Again, we considered the possible outcomes where a group lacks a designated leader, but all players are striving within the same framework to accomplish a common goal. Some participants reported back on their strategies for ensuring the success of their colleagues. These included gestures, eye contact, and signals of openness, which are non-verbal cues that are useful in any instance of collaborative teaching or co-presenting. Many participants wrestled with the implications of discarding ego as professional expertise. Our session instead asked them to support their partners wholly and without reservations. Focus shifted to deliberative decision making that would help the person standing next to them succeed.

Theme 5: Co-Creation

“Playful, direct, co-developed ideas will always outshine one person's alone.”

The last exercise of the session drew upon every previous thematic section to enable the co-creation of knowledge. Players were asked to tell a well-known story as a group in a conducted exercise, drawing again upon varying levels of prior knowledge, active focus, affirmation, making choices in support of the common goal, and reacting to unexpected changes to the narrative. Discussion questions asked participants to examine *inherent value*, especially whether all contributions have value and how might be assessed.

By this stage of the workshop, our participants had rapidly built an ensemble and gained trust with the other members of their groups. They had developed the focus and communication skills to rapidly accept the contributions of others, take it in a different direction, and develop a coherent narrative—though it may differ from a preconceived result. We asked players to tell us

how this could be helpful in teaching and co-teaching, and participants explored questions of empathy and understanding, and internalizing comfort with the unpredictable nature of the classroom. One of the discussions initiated by the attendees wrestled with arriving at a place where everyone in the room speaks a common language, and if not, how can we engage in the act of translation from a place of acceptance and empathy?

CONCLUSION

At the end of our workshop, participants were asked to think critically about the implications of the lessons learned in the session, and identify some of the potential risks associated with this collaborative approach. A number of participants expressed a concern that “going with the flow” may ultimately lead to a sub-par end result. It can also contribute to groupthink, rather than ameliorate it. One workshop attendee mentioned that another risk may be the bleed between the *creative* space, that is, a space for ideas to flow freely and without organizational constraints, and the *implementation* space, which out of necessity must function within constraints.

Participants then took the discussion to examining the concept of personal risk-taking, and how that can often be the most challenging thing to overcome. Even teaching and learning librarians struggle with the demands made on their comfort levels, and adding other collaborators into the mix can unduly complicate the situation still further. Taking a risk, particularly with strangers, can be a frightening proposition. However, by starting from a place of consensus and continual, productive affirmation (“yes, and”) can mitigate those anxieties in very quick time.

That being said, our session at LOEX, though one of the shorter workshops we have conducted, was immediately pegged by the participants as being about interpersonal communication. Those who are public-facing are well accustomed to forging immediate connections as efficiently as possible with individuals, quickly assessing their needs, comprehension, and information-seeking objectives. Many of the session attendees gained a sense of expanding their interpersonal toolkits to forming the same rapid connections with a group, regardless of varying levels of expertise and needs, by unifying collaborators around a single intention and reacting positively to the input of any individual.

Our workshop is not simply about playing improv games in meetings or in the classroom, or developing more and more “edutainment” tricks to engage with students in the one-shot setting. Ultimately, “forced collaboration” will put librarians into the room with a wide array of individuals; messy, difficult-to-compartmentalize domain experts with their own motivations and internal stresses. These projects, within and outside of the classroom, will always be challenging to navigate, and will be intrinsically unpredictable. Our workshop is designed to support the emotional intelligence required to keep projects moving towards their ultimate ends, by leveraging the best of each individual to create something greater than its discrete parts.

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