

# **The Creative Collaboration Craze: Best (or Worst) Practices for Innovation in Academic Libraries**

## **EMERSON SLIDE**

1

It is a truth universally acknowledged that librarians are rarely happy unless they are citing someone. Conferences, committee meetings, emails, scholarly papers—they seldom feel quite right without a polite nod to another who, at a desk somewhere, or a grocery store, or a porta-potty, or dangling upside-down from a mountain outcrop, stumbled on a striking thought someone else could acknowledge. Bear in mind I don't scorn the urge to cite; I believe like most of my bookish kind in giving proper credit. That's one advantage of being a librarian: each day you swim among others' thoughts bobbing up and down like little plastic boats, and you can see they don't belong to you. Maybe there is some value, however, in stating that all the ideas in this paper so far are mine. No teamwork, no collaboration, no call for feedback, and no deference to the profession or to academia have seeded or stained the lines you have been hearing and, most important, no references have distracted you from my own deliberate sentences to those of others. These observations are perhaps not very interesting. Yet they should make sense by and by.

The librarian, faced with a challenge, instinctively looks outside themselves for answers. He seeks best practices because they are others' practices; she sets aside her private yearning for exploration, adventure, and creation, and attunes instead to *external* verifiable evidence. This attunement makes sense. A librarian's work isn't about the librarian. It's about students, learning, research, faculty, and the value of sources, a commitment admirable for winnowing out egotism and self-interest. But the instinct to look outside may have drawbacks. This instinct, I suggest, has less to do with individual librarians than with the profession itself.

Think back, for a moment, to Ancient Egyptians slotting scrolls in crannies at the Alexandria Library; think of the medieval monk-librarians who stored, chained, and preserved books in monasteries and often, as scribes, painstakingly copied them. The modern library we all know sprouted from a combined urge to learn, record, enquire, and preserve; it stands and thrives on millennia of *reverence*. The patient preservation and organization of documents, manuscripts, and books, along with the precise, bespectacled, adherence to this organization, encourages not just humility but also a consequent gravity in connection with information. You can see why. Belief that the book is important—that your job is to protect it with the severity of a presidential bodyguard—instils a curious imbalance.

## **EDIFICE SLIDE**

For a book is not just an object for a librarian; it's an edifice. While professors have the task of challenging and questioning ideas, librarians have the task of organizing and shelving them. This maintenance, like a well-oiled machine, clicks and hums with economy and regularity. Firm rules keep our cogs interlocking and our crankshafts clunking. These rules are unavoidable; without them libraries couldn't function. Yet this underlying modesty in connection with information may influence how we see ourselves and feel about what we do.

A brief aside. I do not mean librarians are uncritical of information—quite the opposite. With our perspicacious attention to detail, to following up, comparing, and evaluating, along with our subject knowledge and mastery of research, librarians are nowhere more at home than with an attentive mind—like a banker's lamp—directed carefully upon the material before them. My point is that it is this external material, the source, that arrests our attention. The librarian's inner self, the originator of new ideas, suffers neglect. And an offshoot of this inner neglect is a deeply embedded cultural moral: *that it is more virtuous to work with others than by yourself.*

## **HORSES TEAMWORK SLIDE**

## **TIGER SLIDE**

Grumpily staring down this *let's-work-together* vibe is a bedrock of Western civilization: me-first individualism. And of course, that has its problems. Yet *group is good* is a

familiar moral in the corporate world, where statements like this beauty are not uncommon . . .

## **TEAMWORK SLIDE**

There's cultural discouragement, not of capitalist greed, but of going solo, of non-conformity—and this suspicion of individualism has infected libraries too. Faculty create information; we find it. Authors write books; we classify them. The thought is inescapable: on our own, we are nothing.

## **THUNDER / LIGHTNING SLIDE**

2

## **CRISIS SLIDE**

Here's my take on our profession's identity crisis: Now that information is easy for people to find, where do *we* fit in? Library conferences and scholarship have been exploring answers to this question ever since the Internet appeared. And since then, I suggest, two answers have emerged: (1) we need creativity and innovation to reinvent, invigorate, clarify, and cement our identity and value; and (2) we need collaboration to reach out—to faculty, to other educators, to administrators, to students, to the public, and to one another—to create, promote, develop, and earn support for what we do.

Evidence for these attributes—innovation and collaboration—lie strewn throughout the library world, often together. Take the University of Arizona Libraries.

According to their website, the libraries “embrace creativity, risk-taking, and collaboration. We foster a culture of innovation.”<sup>1</sup> The Toronto Public Library’s 2015-2016 Strategic Plan asserts:

Toronto's innovators, entrepreneurs and creators of today and tomorrow are participants in a global creative and knowledge economy. To succeed, they need . . . creative and collaborative spaces that encourage conversations, support co-working and co-creation, and stimulate and spark ideas.<sup>2</sup>

## LIBQUAL SLIDE

Here’s an excerpt from a recent UofT Libraries’ LibQual Survey.

My point is not that an emphasis on collaboration and innovation is wrong, but that it is trendy—and trend, by nature, promotes one thing at the expense of another, not always for good reason. As you can see, the words are often found near one another—so, while there is not always an *explicit* connection made between innovation and collaboration, there is an *implicit* assumption they’re the best of friends.

Partnering, partnerships, collaborations; creativity, creation, innovation: these terms stroll together down the aisle of the modern library. A quick Google search of major university library websites illustrates this ubiquity:

## GOOGLE SEARCH SLIDE

I’ve attempted to search just the *library* websites and for the most part weeded out results from catalogues and digital repositories. Based on this chart, the UBC Library

is about 5 times more innovative and collaborative than the Cambridge University Library, and Michigan State about 10 times more. Ah, Cambridge, you stick-in-the-mud . . . You could argue this survey is hardly scientific. But I think it fairly demonstrates how fashionable collaboration and innovation have become in academic libraries these days. The words have snuggled so deeply into the information-professional's subconscious that they sometimes mean little more than “good” or “progressive”. Let us then focus on meaning for a moment. Collaborative—working together—is fairly clear, but creativity and innovation: what do *they* mean?

According to the OED, while creativity denotes “the ability or power to create”<sup>3</sup>, and creation means “an original production”<sup>4</sup>, innovation refers to “the alteration of what is established by the introduction of new elements or forms.”<sup>5</sup> Innovation is kinetic and practical—novelty with socio-economic punch, like the electric light bulb, the Dewey Decimal system, or the personal computer; creativity, by contrast, is potential—the idea for creating something new, or the process of doing so, but not the new thing itself.

Creativity isn't a prerequisite for all innovation. Libraries rightly copy ideas from one another all the time and the University of Minnesota's Assignment Calculator—an innovation borrowed by many university libraries—is an apt example. Many ideas exist. Carry out enough research, tweak enough planning, conduct enough user testing, and you can implement some successfully. You can copy and paste

innovations across university libraries everywhere. But without creativity, without a *source for new ideas*, innovation will eventually dry up.

3

The creative-club phenomenon may be widespread in libraries, but the source of this zest is big business. Richard Florida is an urban studies theorist at UofT. He has written at length about the economic dependence on innovation and creativity in the last few decades. In his book *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Florida argues human creativity is not only “the key factor” in modern economics but is also “the decisive source of competitive advantage” (6).

Businesses understandably think of employees as members of teams. Workers don’t arrive each morning to pursue private interests but to enrich corporate products, services, and—ultimately—balance-sheets. Working together to achieve these makes sense. What has happened, however, is that companies have taken this cooperation a step further and concluded that it is chiefly by being immersed among others—on teams with others, brainstorming with others, socializing with others, in an open-floor-concept hubbub with others—that creativity, like bubbles from a stinking hot spring, will burst forth and vitalize the arid corporate desert. Malcolm Gladwell praises this trend in *The New Yorker*. “The hush of the traditional office,” he writes, “has been supplanted by something much closer to the noisy, bustling ballet of

Hudson Street” (par. 5). Innovation, he argues, “the heart of the knowledge economy, is fundamentally social”<sup>6</sup> :

Innovation comes from the interactions of people . . . Another way to increase communication is to have as few private offices as possible. The idea is to exchange private space for public space, just as in the West Village, where residents agree to live in tiny apartments in exchange for a wealth of nearby cafés and stores and bars and parks.<sup>7</sup>

You can see the influence of this kind of thinking in libraries. Consider 2 scenarios:

**SLIDE SCENARIO 1:**

Students quietly reading by a range of books; or

**SLIDE SCENARIO 2:**

an invigorated group of students, connected to an LCD monitor and laptop, debating a project. The first looks dowdy, the second hip; the first a cemetery, the second a nightclub. A library can hardly be called a library anymore. Luckily, there are plenty of alternatives bucketing down the pipe, either for libraries or for spaces within them, including Collaboratory (York), Learning Centre (UBC), Scholarly Commons (University of Illinois), Academic Learning Centre (UTM), Learning Zone (OCAD), The Edge (Duke University), and Collaborative Learning Hub (George Mason University). The more bustle, the better; the more chatter, the better; the more interaction, the better; the more collaboration, the better. Adherents of this kind of thinking see creativity as a kind of thick stew—and the more ingredients you dump in



the boiling pot, the more spices you sprinkle in and stir, and the more people contributing to this selecting, dumping, sprinkling, and stirring, the more the mixture will froth and metamorphose into a marvelous, life-affirming original dish.

I know. It's frightful. But this development is no surprise. Libraries are in transition and the modern academic library, distrusting itself, has reached its hand into the business-world's grab-bag of innovative solutions and hoicked out the least library-like of choices: the social butterfly.

4

Corporations love the idea of creativity at close quarters. Author Susan Cain, in her book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking*, calls this group phenomenon The New Groupthink.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, it's in a company's interest to believe its employees are more creative together because a firm is a big group by extension anyway, and it wants its workers to unite in achieving its goals. Jeff DeGraff, a self-described innovation expert, summarizes this view:

Collaboration has recently emerged as the defining characteristic of creativity and growth in nearly all sectors and industries. The singular genius who works alone is a myth of yesterday. Today, the biggest breakthroughs happen when networks of self-motivated people with a collective vision join together and share ideas, information, and work.<sup>9</sup>

DeGraff declares the "singular genius" a myth and announces that the "biggest breakthroughs" happen in groups.<sup>10</sup> David Burkus, author of *The Myths of Creativity*, would agree with him. Burkus sets out in his 2014 book to expose the truth about

“how innovative companies and people generate great ideas”. One of the myths he uncovers is the “lone creator” myth.<sup>11</sup> Burkhus writes, “We love to imagine the starving poet slaving away in his sparse apartment, the genius painter who keeps her artwork so closely guarded that it rarely makes it into shows before her death, or the heroic inventor working with nothing but his intelligence and a pile of junk.”<sup>12</sup> When most people think of geniuses, these images may indeed come to mind; but I think it is David Burkhus, and business innovation experts like him, who “love to imagine” these images the most. That’s because extreme creative efforts like these are so far removed from the work most of us do in libraries and other organizations that they appear curiosities, like old radios in junk shops.

Rejecting extremes is easy. It’s a lot harder recognizing that regular Joe invention works the same way fancy-pants invention does—in an individual brain, charged with individual gusto, and implemented often with individual effort. Burkhus offers examples of lone geniuses who were members of creative teams and ended up ‘unfairly’ with the credit. Thomas Edison, for example, relied on a team of workers to develop the perfect light bulb,<sup>13</sup> while Michaelangelo depended on a team of painters to create the Sistine Chapel.<sup>14</sup> What Burkhus doesn’t say is that Edison and Michaelangelo likely directed their teams,<sup>15</sup> relying on them for labour not creativity.<sup>16</sup>

Burkhus’s insistence on the ‘lone creator’ myth is echoed in the work of Warren Bennis, an organizational consultant and author of *Organizing Genius: The*

*Secrets of Creative Collaboration*, from 1997. Entitling his first chapter ‘The End of the Great Man’, Bennis argues that “the myth of the triumphant individual is deeply ingrained in the American psyche”, yet in “a society as complex and technologically sophisticated as ours, the most urgent projects require the coordinated contributions of many talented people.”<sup>17</sup>

## **2 GREAT MAN SLIDES**

Like Burkhus, Bennis likes extremes: since most of us aren’t great men, and great men are triumphant individuals, we cannot be triumphant individuals; therefore, we must collaborate.

### **FIRST 2 SUPERHERO SLIDES**

You could just as easily say: since none of us are superheroes, and superheroes help millions of people by thumping bad guys over Manhattan, we cannot help millions of people; therefore, instead of accepting we can succeed at helping fewer people (albeit wearing a less impressive costume), we must do the opposite . . .

### **DARTH VADER SLIDE**

Few would disagree that big projects “require the coordinated contributions of many talented people”.<sup>18</sup> But here lies the main problem for organizations and creators alike. Creativity feeds on freedom. A scientist wants to solve a problem, an artist to express a feeling, an inventor to complete a machine: pursuing these may not fit in

with any strategic plan or corporate goal. Declaring creativity or innovation a group activity, then, is a cunning solution. It allows corporations to make a show of being cutting edge while clamping down on individual whimsy; it allows them to believe what they want to—that you can spawn innovation in a controlled group environment that shapes what the results will be. Even better, you can promulgate a new myth: *The Myth of the Myth of the Lone Creator*.

5

Group creativity can work beautifully. Psychologist Keith Sawyer uses the example of a jazz band.<sup>19</sup> Yes, a solo is individual; but when coaxed and prompted by one another, the band members make *collective* music.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, some studies do suggest social interaction can trigger fresh thinking. Jonah Lehrer is the author of *Imagine: How Creativity Works*. He cites MIT professor Tom Allen, who watched engineers at a corporation.<sup>21</sup> Allen noticed that the engineers who talked to co-workers most came up with the most useful ideas.<sup>22</sup> These conversational engineers may have offered the most useful ideas because, being talkers, they expressed themselves more often. They may also—despite their gregarious inclinations—have developed their ideas alone. But social interaction clearly helps some people create. What's more, sometimes, you do need help. In science, especially, a breakthrough often requires so much in-depth knowledge that one person truly cannot put all the pieces together herself: she must collaborate.<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless, findings in psychology show creativity and company rarely hit it off.<sup>24</sup> One reason for this uneasiness, according to psychologist Mark Runco, is motivation.<sup>25</sup> He argues creators are usually intrinsically-motivated:<sup>26</sup> they get satisfaction from creating for its own sake, without caring much for reward. Gokhan Oztunc, citing studies by Ann Roe and Teresa Amabile, agrees: creators tend to create for the fun of it because, Oztunc says, “they are more *internally oriented* than less creative people.”<sup>27</sup> Robert Sternberg theorizes that defiance may be a key motivation in much creativity—defying the crowd, cultural assumptions, and even oneself.<sup>28</sup> Whether for the joy of making something, or the sweet satisfaction of sticking it to the system, creators take their work *personally*. And that makes groupwork a challenge.

Motivation, then, is one factor. Personality is another. Carl Jung coined terms for 2 opposing personality types. *Extroverts* thrive on stimulation; for them, the more interaction and social energy they experience, the more creative they will be.<sup>29</sup> *Introverts*, by contrast, wilt with too much stimulation; for them, the more silence and isolation they experience, the more creative they will be.<sup>30</sup> Psychology research is fairly consistent in pinpointing the most common characteristics of creative people, whether they are geniuses or, like many of us, only moderately creative. For one thing, they are often—but not always—introverts.<sup>31</sup> Gregory Feist, for instance, studied creativity among artists, scientists, and the general public. He found creative people

tend to be more egotistic, arrogant, introverted, non-conformist, and self-sufficient than their less creative but much easier-to-work-with comrades.<sup>32</sup>

Being asocial is a key part of this sketch. Avoiding social situations is common among creative people, Feist concludes, because “one overarching principle of creative thought and behaviour is its relatively asocial or even antisocial orientation. To be creative, one must be able to spend time alone and away from others.”<sup>33</sup> Two recent studies provide evidence of solitude’s role in cultivating new ideas. One, by Atchley et al. in 2012, divided people into 2 groups.<sup>34</sup> Both groups lived in the wilderness for 4-6 days—and though they were together, they were forbidden from collaborating with one another or using electronics.<sup>35</sup> Group 1 took a creativity test the morning before they ventured into the bush; group 2 took the same test on the morning of the 4<sup>th</sup> day in the wild.<sup>36</sup> The second group, forced to be inventive alone in the woods, *tested 50% higher on creativity* than the first group.<sup>37</sup> The researchers concluded that solitude, particularly in natural settings, fostered creativity.<sup>38</sup> In a 2017 study, Bowker et al. tested about 300 socially-withdrawn young adults.<sup>39</sup> Results showed: those who shunned company out of dislike or anxiety scored low on creativity; but those who simply prefer solitude—without actively disliking or fearing social interaction—scored *not just average but high* on creativity.<sup>40</sup> In short, this evidence suggests some asocial people are naturally inclined to be creative—energy that won’t be tapped in open offices or by collaborative brainstorming. Christopher Long and

James Averill paraphrase Philip Koch, who says just being around other people “obliges us to coordinate our experience with theirs, thereby diminishing the scope of our actions.”<sup>41</sup> Solitude unshackles us from social constraints and, in doing so, opens possibilities. While asserting the value of groups for teambuilding and cooperation, Mark Runco concludes that, “in a real-world setting where actual creative solutions are needed, groups are not as likely as individuals to succeed.”<sup>42</sup>

6

No one can wake up in the morning knowing what new thoughts they are going to have—and no social scientist or pundit like me can tell you. But perhaps what the studies I’ve mentioned do show is that different approaches are needed if creativity’s a serious goal in libraries. Richard Florida argues organizations need flexibility to get the best out of their employees. Creative people, he says,

come in many different forms. Some are mercurial and intuitive in their work habits, others methodical. Some prefer to channel their energies into big, radical ideas; others are tinkerers and improvers. Some like to move from job to job, whereas others prefer the security of a large organization. Some are at their best when they work in groups; others like nothing better than to be left alone. Moreover, many people don’t fall at the extremes.<sup>43</sup>

Why have libraries hopped on the business bandwagon? We may distrust our inner resources; but we’re also drawn to what we know, and corporate folk work for organizations too. When your job is to manage access to books—not just to think, research, write, and teach—you’re obliged to bond; and when your task is to churn our products for profit, you’ve got to pull together. But what about our fixation with

innovation? Creativity and innovation are library buzzwords nowadays, and surely one of our innovations over the past two decades was nicking these terms from business marketing and refashioning them for libraries. Neil Anderson, Kristina Potochnik, and Jing Zhou point out in a 2014 issue of the *Journal of Management* that people suffer nowadays from an *innovation maximization fallacy*—an assumption that “all creativity and innovation is good; and the more, the better”<sup>44</sup>. In truth, they say, creativity and innovation are troublemakers: they disrupt workflow, they help some but not others, and they sometimes bring so few benefits that the stress they create isn’t worth it.<sup>45</sup> The economist Theodore Levitt points out that healthy organizations depend on rules, procedures, and conformity, not just to survive but to thrive.<sup>46</sup> Libraries are like that too. As subject headings, evidence-based practice, policies, and services all show, structures, standards, and procedures can set the stage for freedom in research, thought, and action, just as a stable chord progression frees the instinct of an improvising pianist. No profession, however, can grow without a few seeds rooting in wayward brains. If creativity does matter for libraries, perhaps we need to cheerfully allow more explicitly for *failure*: for the unplanned, for the indulgent, for the crazy, and—yes—for the solitary.



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- <sup>4</sup> "Creation," *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- <sup>5</sup> "Innovation," *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- <sup>6</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, "Designs for Working: Why your bosses want to turn your new office into Greenwich Village," *New Yorker*, (11 December 2000).
- <sup>7</sup> IBID
- <sup>8</sup> Susan Cain, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2012), 75.
- <sup>9</sup> Jeff DeGraff, "The Good, the Bad, and the Future of Creative Collaboration," *HuffPost Business* (13 May 2015), par. 1.
- <sup>10</sup> IBID
- <sup>11</sup> David Burkus, *The Myths of Creativity: The Truth about how Innovative Companies and People Generate Great Ideas*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2014), 105.
- <sup>12</sup> IBID
- <sup>13</sup> IBID, 106-110.
- <sup>14</sup> IBID, 110.
- <sup>15</sup> David Hochfelder, "Chapter 25: Edison and the Age of Invention," *A Companion to the Reconstruction Presidents 1865-1881*, (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2014), 513.
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- <sup>17</sup> Warren G. Bennis, *Organizing Genius: The Secrets of Creative Collaboration*, edited by Patricia Ward Biederman (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1997), 1-2.
- <sup>18</sup> IBID
- <sup>19</sup> Keith Sawyer, *Explaining Creativity: The Science of Human Innovation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 236.
- <sup>20</sup> IBID, 236-237.
- <sup>21</sup> Jonah Lehrer, *Imagine: How Creativity Works* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2012), 152.
- <sup>22</sup> IBID, 153.
- <sup>23</sup> Jennfer Lamberts, "Two Heads are Better than One: The Importance of Collaboration in Research," *Huffington Post*, (23 October 2013).
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- <sup>25</sup> Mark A. Runco, *Creativity: Theories and Themes: Research, Development, and Practice*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2014), 300.
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- <sup>30</sup> IBID
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- <sup>35</sup> IBID
- <sup>36</sup> IBID
- <sup>37</sup> IBID
- <sup>38</sup> IBID, 3.
- <sup>39</sup> Julia C. Bowker, Miriam T. Stotsky, and Rebecca G. Etkin, "How BIS/BAS and Psycho-behavioral Variables Distinguish between Social Withdrawal Subtypes during Emerging Adulthood," *Personality and Individual Differences*, vol. 119 (2017), 284.
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<sup>44</sup> Neil Anderson, Kristina Potočník, and Jing Zhou, “Innovation and Creativity in Organizations: A State-of-the-Science Review, Prospective Commentary, and Guiding Framework,” *Journal of Management*, 40 no. 5 (July 2014): 1320.

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