

The Creative Footprint

Tutorial Description

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INTRODUCTION

Ever since Archimedes' moment of insight in his bath, people have sensed the importance of physical space in their creative process. Anecdotally we talk about the three Bs of creativity: bus, bed and bath, where all the best ideas strike. Bus because of the way mechanical transport and physical movement spur our creativity, bed where so many ideas emerge on the cusp of sleep, and bath in honour of Archimedes and also because proximity to water plays a part in many reflective and creativity-spurring activities.

Despite all this the impact that physical space has on creativity has been largely neglected by the creativity research community. Csikszentmihalyi (1996) says: "Unfortunately there is no evidence – and probably never will be – to prove that a delightful setting induces creativity." Moving on from the three Bs of creativity, creativity researchers have identified four Ps of creativity (creative people, creative processes, creative product and the social press within which creativity happens) This tutorial, based on new research findings that move beyond the four Ps, puts forward the concept of the unique *creative footprint*: those elements of physical press or environment uniquely necessary to an individual's ability to stimulate and sustain their workplace creativity, and that of others, in changing circumstances. It gives attendees the opportunity to put the concept into practice, identifying their own unique creative footprint and that of their colleagues, embedding the theoretical understanding through practical critique, and finally using the learning to design a physical press (environment) that maximally supports their own particular creativity and creative needs.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This tutorial presents theory and invites practice in a ratio of one quarter background theory to three quarters active practice. By the completion of the tutorial attendees will be able to explain the concept of the creativity footprint and its derivation, will have identified their own unique creative footprint, and have created preliminary designs for a personal working space that actively supports their own creative footprint and that of colleagues and collaborators.

MATERIAL COVERED

The tutorial will cover a range of material. Firstly, background information that sets the scene for participants concerning a) the type and definition of creativity under consideration; b) the four Ps of creativity that are the continued focus of the creativity research community; and c) a brief overview of the research methodology supporting the findings on which the tutorial is based. At this stage the tutorial becomes interactive, with participants invited to reflect, draw on and share their own creative behaviour. This second tranche of material includes the research's findings: four key propositions; a definition of physical press and how it links to the four Ps of creativity; six categories of creativity-stimulating and sustaining activities with their implicit and explicit physical press; and the concept of the unique creative footprint.

A Brief Overview of the Tutorial's Research Methodology

The findings on which this tutorial is based derive firstly from extensive professional experience in the field of organisational creativity and subsequently from formal doctoral research. Grounded Theory methodology has been employed in the data collection and analysis.

The Creative Footprint

Bringing together the findings, as listed above, on categories of creativity-stimulating and sustaining activities and their implied and explicit spaces with a definition of physical press, it is possible to see the emergence of the concept of the *creative footprint*.

The implied and explicit spaces that people identified as stimulating, nourishing and sustaining their creativity varied greatly within the categories of physical press and of creativity-stimulating activities to the extent that it is not possible to say that one creative space is appropriate for everyone. Although there was a remarkable degree of overall unanimity in the activities that people reported as stimulating and sustaining their workplace creativity, the combination of those activities and the places in which they took place varied from person to person and from situation to situation. The findings also showed that what supported one person's creativity might often be seen differently by another: for example, one interviewee finds that being alone

in a very busy public place helps creative disconnection, while another finds such places full of chance creative connection, and a third finds those places destructive to their creativity; and yet another person may choose to be in such a space not because it helps their creativity, but because they know it works for the person they are meeting. So people use the same spaces in different ways, depending on their preference, and the preference of people they are with. The findings also showed that for creativity stimulating activities people use different spaces at different times depending on the situation and the task. One interviewee who prefers to work in a home office stated that at least once every two weeks he needed to be in the company office to re-stimulate his ideas. Another interviewee will, at different points on her creative process, need her open-plan office to enable her to 'shout across the desks', or quiet reflective one-to-one meetings in a nearby park, or to be at the pub picking the brains of friends and colleagues¹.

Each person could therefore be said to have their own unique *creative footprint*: what works for one person may not work for another, and indeed have a severely negative effect. Identifying their own creativity footprint is, for the participants, at the heart of this tutorial, preparatory to designing a space that is uniquely sustaining to their on-going creativity.

THE TUTORIAL AUDIENCE

Every person attending the conference works in and inhabits an actual physical space, as well as any virtual spaces they may work in. Because this tutorial is concerned with the link between physical space and everyday creativity it is of interest to everyone who wishes to enhance their own creative behaviour. It has especial relevance to the conference topics of a) *democratising creativity* as it empowers each individual to identify what they as an individual and as a collaborator need from the physical environment to be maximally creative, particularly in their work; b) *incubating and supporting creativity* as it brings into sharp focus not just the physical press needed by individuals but also the physical press needed by groups, leading into c) the theme of an *enriched collaborative creativity*.

HOW THE TUTORIAL IS RUN

The tutorial will take place over a half-day of the conference; 3 hours of active learning with a half hour break for coffee. The presenter will draw upon her many years' experience of working with large and small groups, inviting participants to become fully involved with the material, and

contribute their own experience to the process. Having first identified their own unique creative footprint through the author's *Creative Footprint Questionnaire*, participants will apply their learning in groups firstly to critique the conference space in which the tutorial is taking place in terms of the extent to which it actively supports their personal creative footprint, and then will make preliminary designs for their own existing working space. The presenter uses approaches that draw on Weisbord's (1992) and Owen's (1997) processes to gain and sustain maximum audience engagement, participation and learning.

There are no limits on attendance save that of available physical space; the tutorial will be powerful with six or sixty attendees.

THE INSTRUCTOR

Alison L. Williams is an Honorary Lecturer in Creativity at the University of Strathclyde, where she tutors and supports undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. She is currently undertaking a doctorate at SMARTlab, University of East London, UK in the area of creativity and physical space; in February 2009 she presented a paper on the topic at the OnDesign conference in Berlin. Alison has been working in the field of organisational creativity for many years, working with national and international organisations such as Motorola, Siemens Electronics, NCR, Atmel Semiconductors, Grants Whisky and many others. As such she specialises in advanced creative facilitation approaches, which she brings to her work with outstanding results.

REFERENCES

- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1996) *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*. HarperCollins
- Owen, H. (1997) *Open Space Technology: A User's Guide*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler
- Weisbord, M. (1992). *Discovering Common Ground*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

¹ Some interviewees saw the office/work space as 'creativity-neutral' using it for routine work only and doing their creative thinking outside the work environment. This poses an interesting challenge for workplace design.

