

Introduction

“Group Genius” by Keith Sawyer was one of a number of books that emerged from a publishing trend in the early 2000s that sought to steer corporate culture away from the ‘lone genius’ myth that innovation and creativity arise from individuals experiencing sudden breakthroughs. Instead, these books such as: ***The Wisdom of Crowds***, James Surowiecki (2004), ***Creativity, Inc.*** (Edwin Catmull, Amy Wallace (2014) and ***The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*** by Patrick Lencioni (2002) explored how the collective intelligence of groups, when properly managed, consistently exceeds the decision-making capabilities of individuals operating alone.

In the Arts Division, collaboration is a critical part of the group work that we do as a department and is also a fundamental component of how we prepare our students for work in the field once they graduate. Our department works well as a group and we spontaneously find ways to dovetail our coursework and skill-sets to bring cohesion to the way we work as a department as well as how we individually teach our classes. Our hope was that this FIG would give us insights and skills to be able to do this more strategically and intentionally. In addition, we sought to develop concrete methodology to enable us to incorporate collaboration into the classroom setting.

The way we approached this FIG was modeled on a FIG that some of us participated in last Spring around the book “Creativity INC.”. We assigned members of the group specific chapters and those individuals led the discussion for each meeting. We met for 5 weeks and had some very engaging and thought-provoking discussions which I will attempt to summarize here. Most of us were initially put off by the corporate view of linear creativity in this book, as well as the glaring lack of representation of women and their contributions in the examples given. (It was not until page 132 that a women researcher was named!) But we found that the concepts introduced were springboards to engaging discussions where we were able to frame these concepts in a meaningful context to us as Instructors and as creatives in various disciplines within the Arts Division.

Group Flow

What we seek in group collaboration is to reach a state of “group flow” - the peak experience of a group performing at its top level of ability. According to the author of *Group Genius*, group flow can happen when 10 key conditions occur:

- **The Group’s Goal:** Having a shared specific goal
- **Close Listening:** Everyone is fully engaged, not planning ahead what they will say
- **Complete Concentration:** Drawing a boundary between group activity, and everything else
- **Being in Control:** Each member has full agency but also remain flexible
- **Blending Egos:** Building idea upon idea with no individual ownership

- **Equal Participation:** All participate equally and have comparable skill levels
- **Familiarity:** Having a common language and unspoken understanding (*tacit knowledge*)
- **Communication:** Constant communication outside of the “conference room”
- **Moving it Forward:** Keep conversation moving forward: listen, accept, extend and build on ideas
- **The Potential for Failure:** We don’t get many opportunities to “rehearse” in education in order to minimize risk so we need to remember that the “twin sibling of innovation is frequent failure” (pg. 55)

While all of us felt we had experienced a state of “group flow” before or understood the concept, we realized that unpacking that goal meant taking many steps back. It is something to build up to, not something that comes easily. So we started asking questions. Questions like:

- What needs to be present for collaboration to happen?
- What does it take to create a level of trust in a group so people feel safe contributing?
- How can people feel accountability to each other in a group setting?
- Can collaboration happen in a group of vastly different skill levels?
- How to foster leadership without a hierarchy?
- Can collaboration happen spontaneously?
- What is the role of play?
- How can we lock in as a group?

We used the readings, as well as our classroom experience to guide an exploration of possible answers to these questions.

Trust

One of the first realizations to emerge as we discussed our experiences working with students at Lane Community was the necessity to build a certain level of trust in the classroom before asking students to work collaboratively. And, that one of the main keys to doing this happens on a somatic level.

Some of us in Media Arts have incorporated some form of group syncing techniques: clapping on a certain beat in a song, doing breathing exercises, stretching - something physical to start class and we have seen really positive results. Students now ask to do these exercises. So many of the classes taught in Media Arts happen in computer labs where each student is isolated behind a large monitor. We talked about options we have incorporated that break out of that modality: sitting in a circle, at tables together, lab activities that happen outside of the classroom. Also making time for play and exploration helps prime students for the process of creative brainstorming through shared experience.

We realized that all of these components: somatic syncing, creative meeting spaces/formations and incorporating spontaneous play and exploration in a group setting help build trust in the group that allows for positive future group experiences.

Another component of trust is feeling heard, which can result from what the book calls “**close listening**”. It is good to remind ourselves of the importance of close listening, whether we are in a meeting with colleagues, in our classroom or with our families. The simple act of listening without holding an opinion or preparing a response is an important building block of trust.

A lack of hierarchy also breeds trust. There is **equal participation** among the group. There is a clear distinction between leadership and hierarchical position. They are two different things. Collaboration does require leadership but roles can and should be dynamic and shared which helps avoid inertia but requires that group members have similar skill levels. A challenge arises when there is a range of skill levels among students in the same class. We felt that students were able to collaborate more successfully over time as they move through the Media Arts program, developing their hard and soft skills within a cohort and forming connections with their classmates. **Familiarity** fosters collaboration.

Moving it Forward

Once there is trust between group members, it becomes possible to share ideas without fear of judgment or rejection in brainstorming sessions without constraints. At that point, if “group flow” kicks in, collaboration will take the form of ideas sparking other ideas in the direction of a breakthrough. The movement is towards something better and better.

This is where our group and the book diverged. The book seemed to exclusively frame this movement towards something better as financial success whereas we, as Instructors, are seeking a measure of something more elusive. We are helping our students develop into artists, designers, storytellers. How do you measure the success of a story or a piece of art? We got into a discussion about capitalism and the creator economy. While there is more and more content being produced and consumed, it is not necessarily “better” content and in fact, as a whole could be moving towards a lower standard. We discussed the role of AI, creative commons, social media and if these things help or hinder creativity and collaboration. We came to the conclusion that algorithms stifle collaboration by directing the narrative and isolating people into ideological silos.

Stardust

True group genius is born from authentic human connection. We are all made from the same stardust. While the book *Group Genius* tried to prove that the results of collaboration outperform those of working independently by using statistics and research, I think our FIG group was able

to prove it using experience. We practiced collaboration every time we met and I believe we reached group flow multiple times. We built relationships. We shared roles. We listened deeply and closely. We often went off on tangents that were dead ends but lots of laughs. No one person felt a sense of ownership over any idea. Any ideas that rose to the top will be carried forward as a shared creation. I think we will be able to more consciously incorporate some of the identified markers of successful collaboration into our classrooms and our department as a result of this Faculty Inquiry Group.