

The Mouse in the Room: Fearless Improvisation for Facilitators



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The Lion and the Mouse

Once, as a lion lay sleeping in his den, a naughty little mouse ran up his tail, and onto his back and up his mane and danced and jumped on his head so that the lion woke up.

The lion grabbed the mouse and, holding him in his large claws, roared in anger. 'How dare you wake me up! Don't you know that I am King of the Beasts? Anyone who disturbs my rest deserves to die! I shall kill you and eat you!'

The terrified mouse, shaking and trembling, begged the lion to let him go. 'Please don't eat me Your Majesty! I did not mean to wake you, it was a mistake. I was only playing. Please let me go - and I promise I will be your friend forever. Who knows but one day I could save your life?'

The lion looked at the tiny mouse and laughed. 'You save my life? What an absurd idea!' he said scornfully. 'But you have made me laugh, and put me into a good mood again, so I shall let you go.' And the lion opened his claws and let the mouse go free.

'Oh thank you, your majesty,' squeaked the mouse, and scurried away as fast as he could.

A few days later the lion was caught in a hunter's snare. Struggle as he might, he couldn't break free and became even more entangled in the net of ropes. He let out a roar of anger that shook the forest. Every animal heard it, including the tiny mouse.

'My friend the lion is in trouble,' cried the mouse. He ran as fast as he could in the direction of the lion's roar, and soon found the lion trapped in the hunter's snare. 'Hold still, Your Majesty,' squeaked the mouse. 'I'll have you out of there in a jiffy!' And without further delay, the mouse began nibbling through the ropes with his sharp little teeth. Very soon the lion was free.

'I did not believe that you could be of use to me, little mouse, but today you saved my life,' said the lion humbly.

'It was my turn to help you, Sire,' answered the mouse.

Moral: Even the weak and small may be of help to those much mightier than themselves.

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Purpose of this eBook

This little eBook has been written with the purpose of helping to provide the reader with something of a warm-up to the spontaneity and Improvisational spirit that lurks within. And in particular, there is a focus on bringing a connection between the journey of learning facilitation skills and that of learning about Improvisation.

For the last 5 years I have had the opportunity to expand and continue my own learnings and practices around Improvisation thanks to people like Viv McWaters, Paul Z. Jackson, Izzy Gessell, Ian David and Andrew Gray of Melbourne Playback Theatre, Hilde Knottenbelt and her amazing Creative Voice workshops, the Applied Improv Network (AIN) Conference held in Banff in 2007, and the ANZPA Psychodrama conferences. My local toastmasters club has also been a great, if not sometimes wary, ground for cultivating and sharing the spirit of Improv and the simplicity of just “Showing Up”.

Maybe, like the mouse in the Aesop Fable, you will gain an appreciation for the powerful qualities of being courageous, light and nimble.

And yes.... No elephant will ever be safe once you've taken Improv to heart!



On Learning Facilitation

There are many different forms of knowing. Many different forms of intelligences. IQ. EQ. Social. Practical¹. Working with groups and learning facilitation skills provides the practitioner a great opportunity to travel through the lands of different ways of knowing.

Donald Schon- an influential thinker in developing the theory and practice of reflective professional learning- once described a concept of “Knowing-in-action” where not all practice can be justified or described through verbal description. This has a clear connection with complexity theory and the principle of complex systems being irreducible, that is- the smallest description of a thing is the thing itself!

Facilitator education is often viewed through an onion model with the levels being:

- Skills and Techniques at the surface
- Intentionality and Grounded Theory (Espoused Theory) in between
- Person centered – Values, attitudes and Presence (Theories-in-Use) at the centre

Roger Schwarz known for *The Skilled Facilitator* approach, suggests that a facilitator’s effectiveness or ineffectiveness stems from the core values that they hold. For many, it is in ‘the heat of the moment’ and when we are in ‘the thick of it’ that our decisions demonstrate and question the depth of learning and intentionality that lies present within our practice of facilitation.

Some research has identified that facilitator educators struggle with helping new facilitators to learn and develop intentionality in their facilitator practice. Maybe somewhat controversially, Roger Schwarz has been the only educator who recommends that new facilitators adopt the core values of the Skilled Facilitator approach.

I wonder whether it is here that Improvisational activities, structures and games may provide facilitators with a powerful, fun and experiential way to learn, adopt and become aware of core values. Core values which can also lie at the heart of effective facilitation. Values such as:

- Show up – Be present
- Accepting all Offers
- Look after your partner

¹ See the book [“Practical Intelligence: The art and science of common sense”](#) written by Karl Albrecht for more...

Appearing in Stephen Hawking's 1988 book "A Brief History of Time" there is a great story:

"A well-known scientist (some say it was Bertrand Russell) once gave a public lecture on astronomy. He described how the earth orbits around the sun and how the sun, in turn, orbits around the center of a vast collection of stars called our galaxy. At the end of the lecture, a little old lady at the back of the room got up and said: "What you have told us is rubbish. The world is really a flat plate supported on the back of a giant tortoise." The scientist gave a superior smile before replying, "What is the tortoise standing on?" "You're very clever, young man, very clever," said the old lady. "But it's turtles all the way down!"

Similarly, the common solar system model for learning the skills of facilitation is that there are skills, which are informed by theories which are impacted in-the-moment by the values that you as a facilitator have. And if the word "values" troubles you...What if, in a somewhat counter view, we believe that there are skills and models which inform the learning, doing and being of facilitation? And that these skills and models go all the way down....? What are some of the skills or models that you already are aware of?



Facilitator Roles

As described in our paper [“Exploring the Language of Facilitation”](#) the following metaphors were shared by facilitators in a worldwide survey asking them to reflect and tell of a metaphor that describes their style.

Think about your facilitation experience and practice. Your style. The roles you find yourself playing. Which of these metaphors do you relate to? What others would you suggest?

 <p>A Sailor</p>	 <p>A Conductor</p>
 <p>A Chameleon</p>	 <p>A Traffic Cop</p>
 <p>A Guide</p>	

On Designing

Being prepared is part of everything, facilitation included.

Even as an Improviser you will need to consider and put thought into design.

Here are three areas of tension that can impact the design and facilitation of group work.

Balancing the Design



Based on your experience and facilitation style, what choices in design (and action) do you tend to make? How would you decide on adaptation based on the group, project and client? What other design elements can you think of?

The Importance of Aimless Wandering

Once, a good friend and very experienced facilitator said to me something that I found both challenging and intriguing: “You need to play more games”. My first reaction was, hang on, you want me to do what? Play more games? Do something that (looks) totally irrelevant to the “work” at hand? Not to mention the language... what self-respecting facilitator/consultant would use the language “play” and “games” in the same sentence? This has got me thinking about the nature of creative problem solving...

The story of Archimedes

Working for the king, Archimedes was tasked to determine whether a crown given as a gift to the king was pure gold or a fake. Archimedes contemplated the problem. He cursed the irregularity of the crown. He knew that if it were a simple spherical shape he could easily work out the weight-to-volume ratio and determine the authenticity of the crown. Archimedes struggled for weeks on end without any movement or progress on the problem. Finally, Archimedes ran a bath, and in a state of relaxed concentration, noticed that as he slid into the bath the water level raised. The Eureka moment came and the rest is history with Archimedes principle.

What can we learn from this story?

Imagine how Archimedes would have responded if someone came up to him during his struggle and said, look, what you need to do is simply go and run yourself a bath, forget all about the problem, let it slip away as you slide into the bath, and guess what, there you'll have it – there will be your answer!

Speaking for myself, I could totally understand if Archimedes thought this person totally crazy. Because, of course, what relationship does running a bath have at all to the presenting problem? Sure, you might think, aha, there's a learning, we know that sometimes we need to try something completely different and see where we end-up, but now there's another dilemma. Even if Archimedes follows his advice, there is the (very likely) chance that the answer won't emerge. Why? Because he is now looking for it!

The need for relaxed concentration...

It isn't by chance that the answer emerges for Archimedes once he has found himself in a state of relaxed concentration. Mihály Csikszentmihályi author of "[Flow: The psychology of Optimal experience](#)" discusses the value of flow or being in the zone and the creative outcomes that emerge when one is in flow. Whilst there are conditions for flow to emerge, you can't predict how or when getting in the zone will happen. It just does.

Which brings me finally to Wu Wei, or otherwise known as "Aimless Wandering". It is said to be like when you are playing an instrument and if you start thinking about playing the instrument, then you will get in your own way and interfere with your own playing. There is a story of a master archer who didn't have anything to aim at. When there was nothing to aim at he was happy and content with his being. But, then he set up a target and "got in his own way".

So what does this all mean for creative problem solving? And what's the relevance of "play" and "games"? Could there actually be some merit in "Aimless wandering"?

As drawn from a personal sailing story shared in my book "[Opening Up: Creative Storying at Work](#)": Sometimes when we are so focussed on getting somewhere we might miss an obvious and helpful alternative. And even more than that, sometimes to get to where we need to go we need to sail in a different direction. And worse still, sometimes to get to where we need to go we need to sail towards the thing we don't want to hit!

Feeling the need for some "aimless wandering" yet?



Be Prepared to be Spontaneous

There are so many group facilitation techniques and methods around these days. Examples include [focus groups](#), [the six action shoes](#), Appreciative Inquiry, [Open Space Technology](#), World cafe, future search, [Story and narrative approaches](#) just to name a few.

Whilst many of the facilitation techniques mentioned provide an entry point for helping to realise [value](#), what is often missing is how to be provocative and really bring opportunities to life. I would like to share one (deceptively) simple principle that might help: Be prepared to be spontaneous.

The need for preparation

The first ironic and maybe even paradoxical element to being spontaneous, is the need to be prepared. For some reason there often is a strange belief that being spontaneous means that there is no foundation or preparation involved before-hand. And, worse, that being spontaneous is being wishy-washy. But, like the saying “the mind needs to be charged for genius, if it strikes, to ignite” - preparation helps to charge the mind for the opportunities that spontaneity brings.

Why is it so hard to be spontaneous?

Apart from the problems of letting go associated with planning and preparation, Jacob Moreno (founder of a science of spontaneity) has said:

“An individual may begin any specific activity with improvisation. But the more and more often improvisations around that complex are produced, the more the tendency develops in the individual to pick out from past efforts, the best actions, gestures, thoughts and phrases, in other words, to improvise less and less and to develop more and more safe and organized anchorage.”

Along with individual impedances to spontaneity, there are also group effects. Moreno has discussed how spontaneity is inversely proportional to group size. Improvising and being spontaneous alone or with a small group is a whole different story to that with a larger audience of 20 or more. What’s happened? Now there are cultural, societal and group

norms that are at play. Moreno called this the Cultural conserve. Something sticky...

But we are destined to be spontaneous...

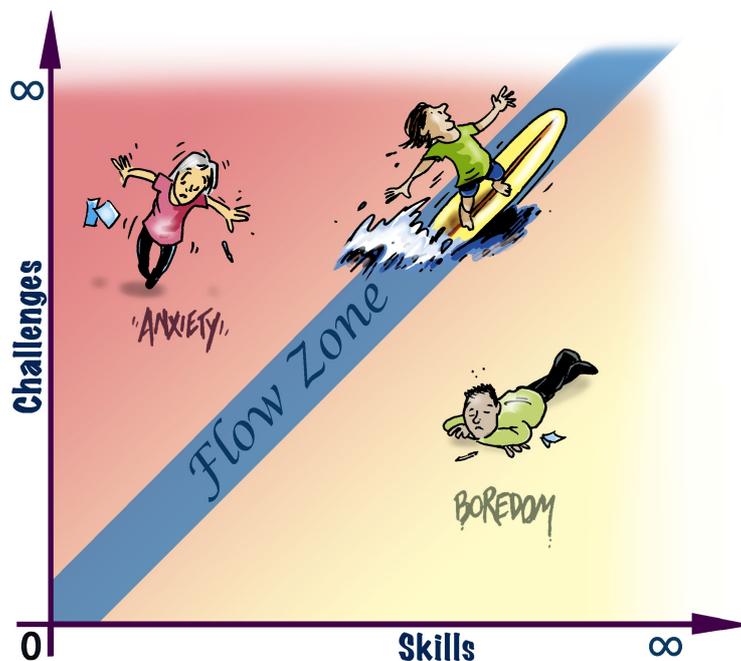
By now, you might be wondering how it is that we can be spontaneous at all, with both individual and group effects working against spontaneity. Ironically, as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's work has shown, it is the positive and constructive value of the states of anxiety and boredom that help us to reconnect with flow experiences and ultimately spontaneity.

So what does any of this have to do with being more provocative?

Maybe some of these questions might spark some opportunities for your own provocative facilitation. How well do you balance the need to prepare with the ability to adapt, change and improvise? Having developed a style of facilitation, what are your "safe anchorages"? What issues or opportunities lay in going against-the-grain of a group's norms and culture? How might you leverage the states of anxiety or boredom to create movement and flow?

And after all this, it could be that Harrison Owen's principle of "Doing one less thing" might be all you need to really be provocative...

Where would you start?



The Babel Fish Way to Better Meetings

Ever experienced or participated in a meeting which you felt could have been better?

With the [story of our name](#) being partly inspired by a reference to Douglas Adam's *Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*, I thought it could be a bit of fun to take a look at [three phrases that are found within](#) and see how they might provide some insight into facilitating better meetings. After all, not unlike a group facilitator, being a galactic hitchhiker will see you needing to be crafty, resourceful, nimble and travelling light!

The Answer's 42

In the first novel and radio series, a group of hyper-intelligent pan-dimensional beings demand to learn the Ultimate Answer to the Ultimate Question of Life, The Universe, and Everything from the supercomputer, Deep Thought, specially built for this purpose. It takes Deep Thought 7½ million years to compute and check the answer, which turns out to be 42. Unfortunately, The Ultimate Question itself is unknown.

How often have you been in a meeting where people are focussing on jumping to answers, regardless of what the problem or question actually is? It's interesting to notice how quickly people sometimes want to jump into action, but at the cost of not laying the groundwork for what's needed in making these actions sustainable. Like, for instance, building relationships.

Thinking there's one right answer and it's 42 is a whole other problem for meetings. This manifests itself by way of pre-determined outcomes and an inability to accept emergent outcomes. For a tool to help you through this one go [here](#).

This leads us naturally on to the next principle.

DON'T PANIC

In the series, DON'T PANIC (always upper-case) is a phrase written on the cover of The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. The novel explains that this was partly because the device "looked insanely complicated" to operate, and partly to keep intergalactic travelers from panicking. It is said that despite its many glaring (and occasionally fatal) inaccuracies, the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy itself has outsold the Encyclopedia Galactica because it is slightly cheaper, and because it has the words "Don't Panic" in large, friendly letters on the cover. Arthur C. Clarke said Douglas Adams' use of "don't panic" was perhaps the best advice that could be given to humanity.

I remember a session ran at the [Australian facilitators conference](#) several years ago which was titled "Don't freak out – Doing your best facilitation". With the wisdom of moving beyond the answer's 42 comes the hair raising truth of getting to know all about emergent outcomes first hand. Not to mention experiencing the emotions and reactions of groups working their way through [the four rooms of change](#).

It's deceptively simple, but "don't panic" means breathe..... In..... Out.....

Knowing where one's towel is

Somebody who can stay in control of virtually any situation is somebody who is said to know where his or her towel is. The logic behind this statement is presented in chapter 3 of The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy thus:

"...a towel has immense psychological value. For some reason, if a strag (strag: nonhitchhiker) discovers that a hitchhiker has his towel with him, he will automatically assume that he is also in possession of a toothbrush, washcloth, soap, tin of biscuits, flask, compass, map, ball of string, gnat spray, wet-weather gear, space suit etc., etc. Furthermore, the strag will then happily lend the hitchhiker any of these or a dozen other items that the hitchhiker might accidentally have "lost". What the strag will think is that any man who can hitch the length and breadth of the galaxy, rough it, slum it, struggle against terrible odds, win through, and still knows where his towel is, is clearly a man to be reckoned with. "

Personally, I think knowing where one's towel is, as a group facilitator, is about knowing what the purpose is for bringing the group together. Understanding at a deep level what the meeting is *really* about. All the other things (processes, flipcharts, marker pens and sticky dots) can be like the toothbrush, washcloth, soap and biscuits. But to understand the purpose and what is bringing the group together will, like the towel, provide immense psychological value. Further helping you with the previous principle "Don't panic".

Bringing it all together. Here are some questions to reflect on:

How have you seen the Answer's 42 manifest in meetings you've been part of? How can *noticing more* help?

What are your Panic buttons? In what scenario's or interactions would it be helpful for you to have your own sign "Don't Panic" ready and available?

Reflecting on your own experience of working with groups, how often have you lost or misplaced your towel? Or maybe never had it to begin with?

What stands out most for you?



Life is not a script

There are many ways that a group facilitator may find themselves nervously anticipating the need to Improvise, such as:

- How to **actually** start, given the reality of the group present and the current atmosphere...
- Having started, you find yourself in the middle of a planned process that's **not working**...
- Or...Looking at your prepared set of questions, you realise the action has **moved** way beyond anything planned for...
- Someone says or does something that takes **you** by surprise
- Any time a script or plan has been **prepared**

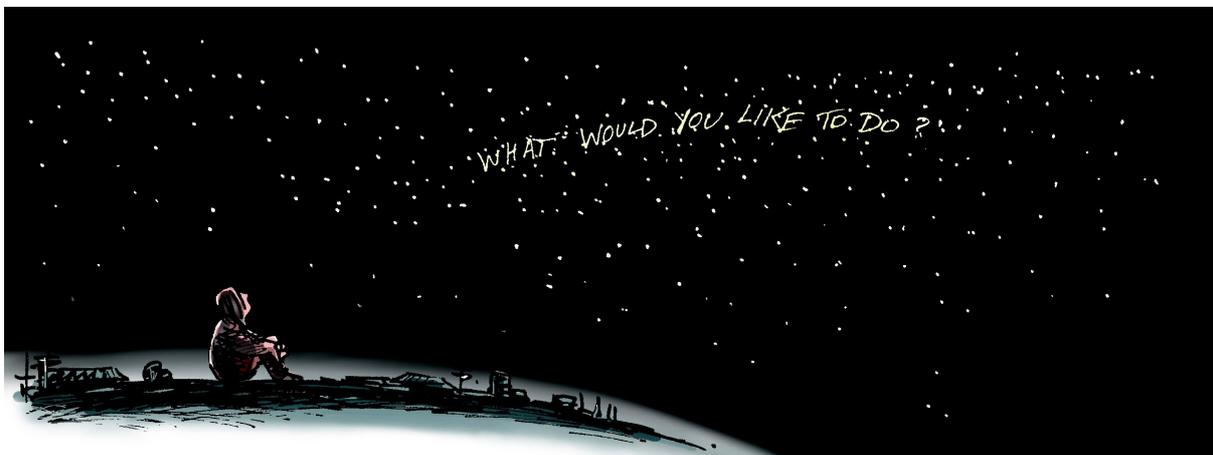
Yes... The need for improvisation emerges naturally within facilitation.

And Improvisation, like all skills, can be learnt.

Don't forget...

As Izzy Gesell loves to say in his book "[Playing Along –37 Group Learning Activities Borrowed from Improvisational Theatre](#)":

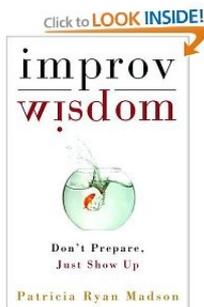
"The skills of improvisers can help us all be more successful."



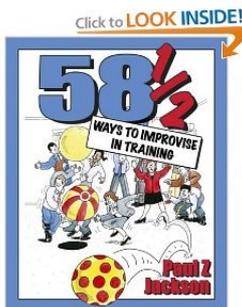
Further Reading

This eBook is just a starter. As they say in Martial Arts, it is only when you get to being a Black Belt that you know you're really a serious student. Then the real learning begins.

Here are some books you might enjoy to continue further with:



[“Improv Wisdom: Don't Prepare, Just Show-up”](#) by Patricia Madsen



[“58 1/2 Ways to Improvise in Training: Improvisation Games and Activities for Workshops, Courses and Team Meetings”](#) by Paul Z. Jackson



[“Everything's An Offer: How to do more with less”](#) by Robert Poynton

About the Author



Andrew first discovered the power of improvisation and storytelling at the age of 14 when, during a classical guitar lesson, his teacher – having heard him just play something quite mechanically – said, ‘You’ve got to tell a story. What can you picture?’

With one of the first PhDs in Complex Systems and Complexity Science from the University of Queensland completed in June 1999, Andrew had the opportunity to move to Boston and work for a management think tank applying complexity insights to the world of organisations.

The founder and director of the boutique management consulting company Babel Fish Group, Andrew works as a professional facilitator, change consultant and leadership coach, and has experience in working with organisations both within Australia and internationally, in the USA, the Netherlands and the UK.

Andrew brings a spirited dynamic presence as a professional speaker, change consultant and workshop leader. Principled, innovative and resourceful, Andrew enjoys living in Melbourne with his wife Sascha and dog George. Andrew can be contacted by email at andrew@babelfishgroup.com.