

Smarter Innovation: Sitting in the white space (*Abstract*)

Editor's note: Madelyn Blair describes those who find the ambiguity of white space of great ease and creativity. She then presents a practical technique called "essays in two voices" to help teams safely step into such a space.

-- Katrina Pugh, Columbia University

The white space is that open, sometimes spacious, often ambiguous place where the mind must grapple with issues from another perspective.

That other perspective can come from, for example, looking at a management issue from the discipline of gardening. Suddenly what appears to be a personality clash is in fact more clearly understood from the perspective of "the right soil conditions." What appears to be a lack of new ideas is better seen as just a lack of fertilizer. Thinking this way begins to show why adding an anthropologist to a team of engineers can be a rich source of inspiration for all.

The root of the word ambiguity means to "wander about and around." In my research on learning, I stumbled upon an insight about those people who actually like being in ambiguous places, love wandering around in them, and even thrive in such places. Having interviewed people from around the world, across socio-economic levels and ages, I discovered that only about 10% of those I interviewed fell into this group. Their common qualities and skills are:

1. Each had a deep understanding of some field of knowledge. In other words, they knew a great deal of something;
2. Each knew who they were: a sense of confidence in his or herself seemed to emanate from them;
3. Each felt compelled to explore the unknown possibilities for a reason that was almost like a calling;
4. Each embraced ambiguity as a necessary and potent source of possibility.

These characteristics taken together appear to provide a tether to which the individual holds on as they wander about knowing if they feel lost, they know they won't really *get* lost as long as they hold on to who they are and what they know. This is essential as they push further and further, exploring the unknown possibilities.

Imagine if such talent were on your innovation team.

If your team does not possess these qualities, then a process called "Essays in two voices" can help. Designed to help individuals explore a topic together without any restrictions on what is said, or with the pressure of in-your-face debate, it gently holds participants within structural bounds so that no one gets lost. The steps are laid out in detail in the chapter. Few rules govern the process but include no discussion during the writing. This is a discipline that keeps each voice clear and separate – a prime objective of essays in two voices. Used on four continents, graduate students have used it to explore their research questions, a conference convener used it as an opening exercise to ensure attendees understood and engaged, and others have found uses in product and process design.

Innovation demands having new insights. It demands going against the grain at times. Not everyone is comfortable. By salting the team with those who thrive in these places or by using a process that can draw out the quietest person, teams can explore the white space and never get lost.

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