Innovation in libraries may be as simple as staying on the bus

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Abstract

Innovation is often thought of as doing something completely new. In fact, innovation may also be viewed as an iterative process that builds on existing knowledge and, through trial and error and incremental successes, makes something better. This iterative process is the focus of this paper that expands on our presentation given at the 2016 Conference for Entrepreneurial Librarians.

Using the Helsinki Bus Station Theory and other perspectives as the framework for exploring how innovation and entrepreneurship can be applied to libraries, the authors identified activities that initiate and encourage innovation in library settings. Conference attendees learned techniques for implementing interactive innovation.

Keywords

- Innovation
- Entrepreneurship
- Libraries
- Helsinki Bus Station
- Minkkinen

Introduction

With the value of libraries (and librarians) under intense scrutiny, libraries are looking for new and more creative ways to provide services. In this quest to articulate ongoing relevance, it is easy to keep looking for the "next best thing," trying new initiatives and then abandoning them when they do not show results after a short time.

In his Helsinki Bus Station Theory, Arno Rafael Minkkinen (2013) offers an argument for a different approach, one that values *staying on the bus*; doing the work you know and do best, and continually re-working it along the way; honing, polishing, adapting; not moving to a new bus when faced with criticism, not jumping to a new route because someone said that this new route is faster, and not relinquishing your seat on the bus (or at the table) because there are people already doing it. Librarians need to stay on the bus and recognize innovation as a product of the continuous improvement of existing ideas.

Theoretical Framework

The Helsinki Bus Station Theory (Minkkinen, 2013) encourages artists, specifically photographers, to strive for creative continuity in their work and through that, discover their own vision one day. Although some might argue whether librarians are artists, the concept can be used to describe the innovative process in the library environment. Using the setting of a busy bus station in the middle of Helsinki, Finland, Minkkinen posits that the secret to the creative, innovative life comes from understanding the operations of a bus station (Burkeman, 2013). The key to this theory is that instead of "hopping from one bus to another", artists, aka librarians, can find their creative and innovative paths by staying on their bus.

In essence, the theory states that in your professional life, you can choose to change course when you reach a set-back; taking a new bus each time you hit a roadblock and starting over, thinking that the new bus will be better. Or, you can stay on the first bus, or track, or path and gain the cumulative impact of your work. If you keep switching buses, you will never

see the results of building on the past because you keep trading your history in for a new and different future again and again. To reach your full potential, you need to keep learning and growing AND keep re-working your original design based on your new knowledge, again and again, through the boredom, to hone your art to produce something unique and inspiring (Clear, 2016).

In looking at innovation, it may seem like The Helsinki Bus Station Theory (Minkkinen, 2013) does not address the revolutionary aspect of innovation and in fact, seems to align more closely with the idea of linear innovation as outlined by Govindarajan in his book *The Three Box Solution: Creating the Future, Forgetting the Past and Managing the Present* (2016). *Linear Innovation* is a scientific model of innovation that views innovation as an occurrence that happens in a straight, sequential line of events. This type of innovation does not threaten the status quo and therefore is not viewed as revolutionary. However, a case can be made for linear innovation as being a critical part of the creative process that supports the value of being able to fall in love with the repetitive process and recognizing the often slow, and incremental progress toward success (Clear, 2016). The key is in not just doing the work, but doing the re-work to hone, polish, and perfect your ideas.

Malcolm Gladwell, in his book *Outliers: The Story of Success* (2011), talks about the rule of 10,000 hours; with 10,000 hours of improving practice as the key to success. This logic aligns with the idea of staying on the bus and relentlessly honing your craft toward major breakthroughs and new futures. Whether staying on the (figurative) bus, working through the boredom of slow, incremental improvement, or persisting with 10,000 hours of practice, each of these examples remind us that innovation is a process and success is built on work and continual rework. This is true in libraries as well.

Innovation in the library: What does innovation mean to you?

There are many examples of innovative services and programs in libraries, but the library literature offers little research in the area. Brundy (2015) documented the work that has been done in a literature review characterizing it as "scattered" and noting the "need of additional empirical inquiry" (p. 36). Furthermore, what does exist focuses on organizational approaches to innovation. Rowley (2010) calls for libraries to build a strategy for a holistic approach to innovation. Jantz's (2016) extensive research and proposed model focuses on library leaders and their need to develop an institutional culture of innovation. Its not surprising, then, that Baregheh, Rowley, and Sambrook's (2011) well cited definition for innovation also highlights the central role of the organization or library, "the multi-stage process whereby organizations transform ideas into new/improved products, service or processes, in order to advance, compete and differentiate themselves successfully in their marketplace" (p. 1334).

There is evidence that innovative ideas come from multiple levels (German & Namachchivaya, 2013), so how do individual librarians understand innovation? We started our presentation with a simple activity to see how this group of librarians describe innovation. In one word, we asked them to "tell us what innovation means to you." Attendees wrote their word on a sticky note and posted it before the presentation started.

This is admittedly an extremely small sample of librarians already interested in entrepreneurial themes, but the results are interesting and add some texture to the standard definitions. We received sixteen responses that ultimately could be arranged around three concepts. There is an element of creativity and fun:

- creativity (two responses),
- inspired,
- toys, and
- exciting.

There were a number of responses that looked at innovation as trying or a challenge:

- try (two responses),
- taking-a-chance,
- courage,
- challenge, and
- risk.

The new/improved part of the aforementioned definition also appeared in responses:

- new (two responses),
- change,
- progress, and
- betterment.

While not by plan, the ideas proffered by attendees aligned with the planned activities developed to help jump-start innovation on any level.

Breaking the creative ice: Ice cube tray exercise

To break the *innovation* ice and get attendees to start thinking creatively, we brought in a plastic ice cube tray and asked them to make a list of all the different things they could do with it. While this seems simple, in reality it serves to remind us that "everyone is the creative type" (Kelly & Kelly, 2013, p. 5) and that while we often believe that the word innovation implies newness, it can also be about applying a new idea to an existing situation (Keohane, 2013). According to Simon Sinek in his book *Start with why: How great leaders inspire everyone to take action* (2011), the action around innovation is looking at a problem from a different angle, which could include identifying new ways to use an ice cube tray. This activity got attendees talking and laughing, especially when they reported-out on their ideas, and served to remind them that sometimes the simplest task can spark creativity and get ideas flowing.

Generating innovative uses for an ice cube tray also aligns with the idea that "creativity does not simply involve the intentional discovery of the new but also involves a synthesis with the old" argue Salvato, Styhre, & Witt (as cited in Sorenson & Jones, 2016, n.p.). Staying on the bus creates the space and time to allow for this synthesis which is a critical aspect of innovation.

Theory to Practice: Liberating Structures

Creating the *environment* for innovation is another important aspect in encouraging creativity in the workplace. The very systems put in place to support innovation, like team meetings, and brainstorming sessions could stifle it because these structures can inhibit input from all stakeholders and silence all but the loudest voices. In order to ensure that everyone has a voice, the use of new structures can democratize the innovation process and increase the level of engagement. In fact, we utilized two of these new structures, based on the book *The surprising power of liberating structures: Simple rules to unleash a culture of innovation* (Lipmanowicz & McCandless, 2013).

For the first part of the exercise, we asked each attendee to individually think about where they could be innovative at work. We asked them to think of ideas where they currently had the freedom to act and did not need any additional resources--their 15%. Hence, this exercise is entitled "Your 15%" (Lipmanowicz & McCandless, 2013). Once each person had a chance to think of some ideas, we asked them to pair up with someone and share their ideas and see if they could build on them. After a few minutes, the group of two joined another group of two, and this new group of four discussed all of the ideas and determined the best examples of "Your 15%". These ideas were reported out to the large group for further vetting and discussion. At the end of the process, everyone in the room had been talking to other people and everyone got to share their "15%". This second step utilizes another idea from Lipmanowicz & McCandless (2013) entitled "1-2-4-All". In this liberating structure, everyone is included in the process; no one sits idle, everyone has a chance to share; and everyone in the room benefits from hearing about a number of viable and innovative projects. This is an example of how a simple shift in the innovative structures can allow ideas from all stakeholders.

The importance of feedback: I like/I wish/I will

With a more iterative process, constant feedback is important for continued success. Kelley and Kelley (2013) suggest a "I like/I wish" tool to make it easier to "listen to and absorb feedback without letting our egos and defensiveness distract us from what may be a valuable lesson" (p. 225). Following this framework, we asked attendees to practice giving feedback by sharing what they liked about the presentation and what they wished it would have covered. We took the exercise one step further and asked attendees to consider what actions they would take after the

session. We asked them to phrase it as an "I will" statement. Adding this statement makes the process more solution-oriented, allowing participants to leave with practical actions. Furthermore, all parties are able to participate in the learning process.

Conclusion

While there are many ways to view innovation, the Helsinki Bus Station Theory (Minkkinen, 2013) offers a welcome perspective for librarians and libraries struggling to stand out in a crowded market. The framework focuses on continual improvement of the work you do best, valuing your incremental effort. Staying on the bus does not mean staying still though. Learning and growing is integral to the innovation process.

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