

**Editor's Column**

**Desperate Times Call for...Playfulness?**

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Most weeks, I have a meeting with the other faculty department heads at my Library – the dean, assistant dean, and the technical services head. We discuss issues, problems, challenges, and concerns that affect the Library, both within the confines of the Library itself as well as campus circumstances which may affect the Library. Most weeks, the news from the home front isn't bad, especially of late – we have an exciting project in the works – but the fact remains that as a library at a public institution of higher learning in the state of Louisiana, we seem to face budgetary crises constantly. Libraries in particular, as I have observed in the past (Lowe, 2012a), are often the first place on campus to feel the squeeze of budget cuts. One of my colleagues feels the need to emphasize the necessity of putting on brave smiles and soldiering on. It does seem to settle into the bones after all, the stress of budgetary restraint that handicaps the library's ability to engage with new resources, new technologies, new initiatives, and innovation in general. Faces grow more serious; smiles seem tight and forced. We pursue cost-effective solutions more out of desperate necessity than out of a sense of experimental challenge.

This state of being is not viable in the long-term. This is the kind of stress and pressure that is cited as the reason for high turnover amongst nurses. This is the kind of environment that engenders professional boredom and burnout (Lowe, 2012b). Just when we think we've finally reached the far shore, another storm appears, and we are once again tossed about by administrative expectations which are well-intended but unrealistic,

meeting the needs of our campus communities, and satisfying our own professional needs and expectations in terms of job responsibilities, research, and scholarship. We find ourselves not walking the soft sand of a welcome shore; rather, we find ourselves pinned between storm and rocky cliff face.

I was mulling over the current state of affairs in higher ed in Louisiana and feeling a certain kind of bitterness brewing - a familiar bitterness – when I found myself watching a video on playfulness on TED’s Creative Spark channel on YouTube. This particular talk was presented in 2008 at the Serious Play Conference in Pasadena, CA. It was given by Tim Brown, CEO and President of IDEO, and is entitled “Tales of Creativity and Play.” I must admit a certain cynicism attended my selection of this particular vid to watch, but I felt the need for some creative inspiration, and TED never fails to provide something that will spark the mind. I was looking for my own personal reasons, not professional ones, but Brown’s (2008) presentation galvanized the professional in me, especially when he said, “You can be a serious professional and, at times, be playful.”

It had never occurred to me, honestly, to actively incorporate *playfulness* into my career or my job practices. Humor, yes – it’s hard to conduct meaningful one-shot instructional sessions and hold on to the students’ attention without a couple of (bad) jokes. But humor, as I learned from watching Brown’s presentation, is not the same thing as playfulness, and playfulness can be much more meaningful than I ever imagined. It can also bring so much more to the problem-solving process, as well as innovation, than I ever imagined as well. My cynicism melted as I watched the video, and I found myself actively taking notes and getting excited about ways to integrate playfulness into

everyday tasks, as well as into instructional sessions.

I am still chewing on ways to integrate playfulness into instruction in a meaningful way that can potentially incorporate elements of active learning without eating up all the time I have with students. I've done some research on the creative process since watching the video, and that alone has inspired me to go farther – to seek out creative ways of presenting information literacy, reaching out to faculty for collaboration, addressing problems I face daily as a department head, and bringing solutions and meaningful information to committees on which I serve.

So, what did Tim Brown say that had such an impact? Well, he addressed three big elements which I'd like to share here. For him, there are three ways in which play functions and can apply to professional life: exploration, building, and role-play. True to his topic, Brown incorporated several playful activities which helped demonstrate the points he was making, and these activities underlined his points. Some of these activities I would like to incorporate into instruction, if I can. But on to the elements!

Exploration was the first aspect of playfulness Brown addressed. As adults, Brown (2008) observed, we are quick to categorize things quickly, to settle on answers. However, children are not; children are open to possibilities. Children ask, not what a thing is, but “what can I do with it?” (Brown, 2008). Exploratory play pursues and identifies choices or options; it's the pursuit of quantity *not* quality; unfortunately, as adults, we edit things – “we stop ourselves from doing things” (Brown, 2008). We may often miss viable options or solutions because we edit, which “isn't necessarily really playful” (Brown, 2008). In other words, we cut ourselves off from options in an effort to appear serious and professional. This even emerges in our desperate desire to be original

(Brown, 2008).

Brown (2008) related an experiment conducted by Dr. Bob McKim in the 1960s in which McKim invited 27 professionals from different walks of life to bring current problems they were working on. Once gathered, McKim gave these professionals the psychedelic drug mescaline and played them relaxing music. McKim wanted to study the effects of psychedelic drugs on creativity. He administered the Purdue Drug Test both before and after the consumption of the drugs. He hoped that the mescaline would promote innovation, that the drugs “would help shock people out of their normal way of thinking and getting them to forget the adults behaviors that were getting in the way of their ideas” (Brown, 2008). Brown (2008) relates that many, if not all, of the participants solved the problems they brought after taking the mescaline. It wasn’t about the drugs, per se; it was about changing how the professionals thought about things and engendering a sense of exploration.

Building was the second aspect of playfulness addressed in the video. Building is, essentially, construction play. Like many forms of play, during construction play “learning is happening as a byproduct of play,” wherein one is learning by doing (Brown, 2008). Brown (2008) related how former IDEO CEO David Kelley called building “thinking with your hands.” Brown (2008) defines it broadly, from a design perspective, as “making multiple, low-resolution prototypes very quickly, often by bringing lots of found elements together in order to get a solution.” Even if these prototypes are low-res, their very tangibility – the ability to see a visualization of an idea, to hold it in your hands – “advances your thinking” (Brown, 2008).

Brown (2008) discussed how in preschool, the freedom and tools (the found

elements) for building are readily at hand, but as children advance through the school system, these elements are taken away. By the time these graduate from high school and get ready to attend college, they've lost that freedom, and those tools – construction paper, Play-Doh, crayons, markers, etc. – are long gone. In the vast wastelands of cube farms, in the average workplace, Brown (2008) observes that the most 'creative' tool to be found are Post-It notes – that the adult workplace is “pretty barren” of those creative elements.

The final aspect of playfulness Brown discusses in the video is role-play. Brown (2008) is quick to point out that many people do not consider role-play to be a useful tool; they don't think that “what emerges is necessarily valid.” However, as Brown (2008) observes, role-play allows children to practice social scripts they observe in adults – the children learn the rules for social interactions. This, Brown (2008) argues, is good for using one's intuition, exploring authenticity, and thinking about experiences, especially in terms of services. Role-play allows us to “project ourselves into an experience,” to feel the uncertainty and develop empathy from the analogous experiment (Brown, 2008). Role-play, he continues, allows an individual to try on identities, to essentially prototype experiences.

All of these elements have a place in one's everyday professional life, regardless of one's chosen field. They can be used to problem-solve, to innovate, to develop, and to adapt in response to challenges and issues that inevitably arise. These elements can be employed for issues big and small, short- and long-term. They can be used by individuals as well as groups; collaboration benefits from the use of play as much as problem-solving does. However, Brown (2008) notes, “play is not anarchy” – there are rules, and these are

especially important in code negotiation and the observation of social rules and scripts.

In order for playfulness to work, environments which foster trust and security are necessary. We need trust and security in order to be truly creative (Brown, 2008). As adults, we don't often feel that trust and security. We fear the judgment of our peers, we fear embarrassment, and we fear making mistakes. This results in conservatism in our thinking which hinders our ability to think creatively.

If this is what we as librarians and library staff are experiencing, think about how that influences or affects our patrons. If our work environments – not just the libraries themselves but also our office spaces – lack trust, security, and the *freedom* to ask questions and explore, we have to anticipate that our students will sense that and have those same experiences. So, how do we foster environments which foster trust, security, and freedom? Brown (2008) describes the playful environments of several design firms, including his own IDEO, but the one that stood out to me was Google Sweden's office which features a fireman's pole and a slide for employees to use. In these environments, Brown (2008) states, there are symbols and reminders of playfulness. The environments are relaxed and comfortable. The employees feel free to explore, to build, and to role-play.

Now, I'm not advocating that we put in slides and fireman's poles in libraries (...though I'm certainly not opposed to the idea). What I am advocating is applying the principles that Brown outlines in his video to problem-solving and innovation in the library. Undoubtedly others have already jumped on this fun bandwagon (which I like to imagine is simply FULL to BURSTING with markers and colored pencils and Play-Doh and construction paper), but I wanted to add my 2¢. I think encouraging and

incorporating playfulness in the library profession – which, in my opinion, is already pretty full of fun, open-minded, innovative people – is an excellent way to meet the challenges and problems and issues we frequently face. By using playfulness, we will find more laughter. We will find ways to make the best of what we’ve got, and potentially to do more with less (as gut-wrenching as that is). But more than that: I think we will find ways to combat burnout and turnover, to engage with each other more meaningfully, to engage with our patrons – colleagues and students alike – more meaningfully, and to find in ourselves more creativity than ever before and ways to challenge and channel that creativity.

So let me encourage you, my colleagues and brothers-in-arms: give Tim Brown’s vid a watch (the URL is in the References section). Give it a think, and then give it a go. See what you can do with his ideas. See if you agree with him – or disagree. What do you have to lose? Nothing. In fact, you may find sparks, solutions, and so much more!

## References

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