

The Creativity and Collaboration (C2) Retreat: Participants' Perspectives

by Lynn Baum, Michale Lane, Matt Matcuk,
Ed Rodley, and Maria Mortati

Many of you may know that NAME and AAM hosted a retreat in early summer. C2 was held between May 31 and June 2, 2009 at the Asilomar Conference Grounds and the nearby Monterey Bay Aquarium in California. How did it go? The lucky 100 people who got to attend already know, but what follows is an attempt to capture the spirit of the conference for the many who weren't able to participate.

Designed for all levels of experience, the conference attracted a wide range of attendees from large and small museums in the US and Canada. Despite tough economic times, C2 was oversubscribed at 100 people, including many who paid their own way; many more had to be turned away.

"Outside instigators" included presenters from a variety of fields and organizations: Harley Dubois of Burning Man; Kate Shaw of LucasFilm; Ken Eklund, a game designer; Dr. Tierney Thys, science educator; and Mike Petrich and Karen Wilkenson from the Exploratorium Learning Lab. Leading workshops and conversations were participants Kathy McLean, Maria Mortati, Natasha Fraley, Amy Impellizzeri, Ava Ferguson, Judy Rand, Debbie Palmer, David Bloom, Crimson Rose, Don Hughes, Jaci Tomulonis, and the Exhibits Division of the Monterey Bay Aquarium.

Retreat organizers Darcie Fohrman, Jenny-Sayre Ramberg, Eric Siegel, and Nina Simon send special thanks to all of the above, as well as to AAM's Dean Phelus and Greg Stevens, for a tremendously successful endeavor. An evaluation conducted by AAM immediately after the conference was completed by 78 participants, with 88% indicating that

the retreat either met or exceeded their expectations. To bring the evaluation figures to life, we've included a graphic account created spontaneously by attendee Maria Mortati, and four assessments that were solicited before the conference. The four participants writing below were selected based on the goals and motivations they shared on the C2 website's "Why I'm Coming" section. The words and images that follow explain why discussions are already underway for the next C2 Retreat. The Editor.

Four Participants' Views



Lynn Baum, Senior Exhibit Developer/
Educational Programs, Jan Crocker LLC.

Lynn Baum

On April 9 before coming to the retreat, I wrote: "This retreat comes at a very special time for me. After 30 years at the Museum of Science, Boston I decided it was time to make a change. Although I hope to stay connected to special projects I formally left the museum on April 2nd... An opportunity arose and it seemed

The words and images that follow explain why discussions are already underway for the next C2 Retreat.

In the end I got exactly what I came for.

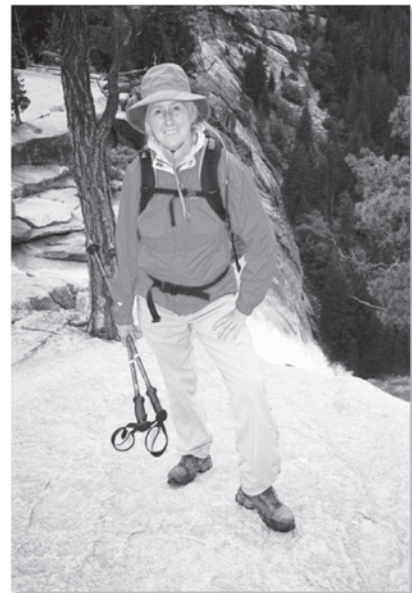
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perfect for this moment in my life. My former museum colleague, Jan Crocker, decided to start her own exhibit development company and invited me to join. So I am embarking on my next new adventure and this is my kick-off! Thank you for timing it so perfectly for my life.”

I think what struck me about the C2 retreat was just how much of a retreat it really was. There was a hunger in our group to get back to the part of our work that we all signed up for—to be creative, to think outside the box and to work with and off of others who also wanted to jump into that pool. Many of us were coming from institutions that were necessarily focused on the bottom line. Many of us had watched as colleagues were laid off – many of us were laid off. I was impressed with the number in the group that paid their own way to be there. The field is hungry and the retreat was a feast.

The range of workshops allowed people to both stay in their zone of comfort as well as explore some different turf. I did step outside my zone of comfort to help create the Shrine to Loss as part of the Burning Man workshop. I recognize that I am terrible at painting, drawing and sketching. I can't build anything three-dimensional, and I have no idea how to put something together after I take it apart. So I was really impressed with the way that Harley created teams: it was by the kind of work that needed to be done. I worked on a team that organized the materials for the builders and then after the work got going, and we could see the pieces of the shrine coming together I was able to help with a bit of the design. It was a very satisfying process. The end result was a stunning, visible testament to collaboration.

In the end I got exactly what I came for. I could not have described what it would be like beforehand but the experience left me with new energy and renewed confidence at a time when both were very much needed.



Michale Lane. Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies.

Michale Lane

In reviewing what I wrote about why I was attending the Creativity and Collaboration Retreat, I reflected on how it met my expectations. Upon returning home, I still believe that museums can kill creativity and I believe that it is because we take ourselves much too seriously. At the retreat, it was wonderful to see museum professionals taking themselves less seriously and simply playing! It becomes increasingly clear that a sense of play is what we need to bring to our work. Opportunities to visit the Monterey Bay Aquarium were both an opportunity to play and an excellent introduction to the impact of creative work.

I participated in two recharge activities, Acroyoga and meditation.

Acroyoga was fun, but it also required hard work and focus to achieve the postures, much like any other creative endeavour. Meditation provided another opportunity to focus and to have some quiet time.

During free time, walking on the beach provided opportunities for reflection, another important aspect of creativity.

It was very helpful to have all the presenters do a short presentation at the beginning of the retreat. It helped me to choose which sessions would be most useful in my practice. It was also good to have presenters who do not work in museums, but whose work is similar because of the creativity it requires.

The working sessions that are most memorable for me were those given by Kate Shaw and Tierny Thys. What struck me about Shaw's presentation was the importance of an organizational structure that separates creativity from execution. She also stressed the value of discipline and introduced the idea of 'communities of practice.' She talked about good working relationships as an essential element of the creative process.

Tierny Thys communicated the significance of story, noting that "Using the narrative structure increases retention seven-fold." She also shared some excellent examples of "storytelling to change the world." The exercise she assigned gave us an opportunity to "practice what she preached." And she made it fun.

I was fortunate to begin a vacation when I finished the retreat, so my experience of the

retreat may have been altered by an extended time away from work. For me, it truly was a retreat. I will, however, bring the principles of hard work, focus and discipline balanced by play and reflection into our planning for the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies' new heritage gallery.



Matt Matcuk. Exhibition Development Director, The Field Museum.

Matt Matcuk

In my "Why I'm coming" blurb I listed four questions, only one of which was answered by the conference. What's more, I had to gulp down my food—lousy food—and run between meals and sessions. And the no-phone-no-pool-no-pets-no-internet thing was a drag.

And it was the best conference I've ever attended.

Maybe because it was the only conference I've ever attended that allowed people to actually confer.

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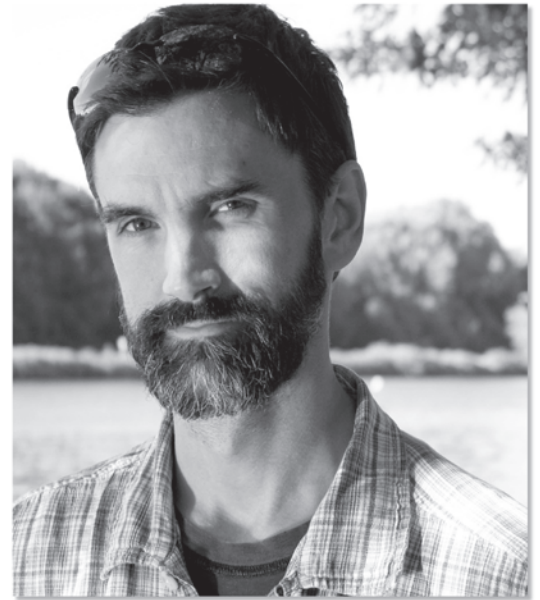
And accompanying it all was this nagging fear that maybe I'd used up my allotment of creativity after twenty years.

But I think the most valuable thing I took away was the realization that creativity does not occur as a natural part of our jobs. It's not like breathing, walking, or talking (which is sometimes pretty uncreative). Creative thinking is more like exercise: it's critical for being fully functional, healthy, and energetic, but it's often ignored, assumed, or delayed.

Exercise—throughout our evolution—enabled our grunting primate existence. But today we don't need to exercise to survive. Fifteen minutes of hunting and gathering in Trader Joe's yields a month's worth of calories (which we consume in a week). To compensate, we have to set aside time to sweat on purpose.

Similarly, if we don't dedicate time for creativity in the exhibition process, it doesn't just happen on its own. We can ignore the time demands of creativity for extended stretches. But we can't just jump up at any given moment and run a 10K, or lift 200 pounds. And we can't assume that creativity will just be an inherent part of the exhibition process that needs no special time devoted to it.

Before coming to C2, I questioned the "creativity as a muscle" metaphor, noting that it seems to snap back quickly, once we use it. Now I feel that the damage done by not exercising the creative muscle isn't just done to ourselves: the process and the product get shortchanged, too. We can regain our creativity quickly, once we set aside time for it: we just need to make sure, consciously and with discipline, to include that time in the processes by which we create exhibitions. Feel the burn.



Ed Rodley, Exhibit Developer, Museum of Science, Boston.

Ed Rodley

Within twenty minutes of arriving at C2, I was standing on the beach with a Frisbee in one hand and a beer in the other, barefoot in the sand. Not your typical professional development event, but a welcome relief after a long car ride down from San Francisco. After months of anticipation, I had arrived and was eager to begin.

My path to C2 was a bumpy one. In the three preceding years, I'd had three major projects in a row fail to get off the ground due to funding. We'd been reorganized a couple of times. Sixty percent of my department had been laid off in one morning. And accompanying it all was this nagging fear that maybe I'd used up my allotment of creativity after twenty years. I was afraid I'd plateaued and there was no way to

move forward. I realized nobody was going to get me out of my funk other than myself, but how? When the announcement for C2 came out, I said “Oh! This is how!” and saved up enough money to get to Asilomar.

I’d hoped to get three things out of the experience; some solid professional development—new experiences I could apply to my work; new insights into creativity and collaboration and how they could be applied to the museum visit; and new sources of inspiration from outside the profession. What I got first and foremost from the workshop was energy. I was unprepared for how energized everybody at the workshop was. From the minute we arrived, there was a palpable sense of readiness, a willingness to see what was going to happen next. Not just the sessions and workshops, but the walks to and from events and the meals were always lively and usually intense.

Build to Burn in particular spoke to me, having spent most of my career working on temporary exhibitions. It was amazing to see how a skillful facilitator could get four dozen highly-skilled creative types to collaboratively build something without a blueprint or a boss. Burning Man’s philosophy of radical inclusion—the notion that everybody should be included unless there is a reason not to—was a real challenge to me. What would our institutions look like if we expected visitors to be part of our creative process instead being an exception? I don’t know, but I’m interested to find out. When I look at social media, that’s one thing they all do very well. They include you at the level you want to be included at. We could and should learn something from that.

This was the only AAM event I’ve been to where people laughed, cried, and danced around a fire in the dark. I hope it’s not my last! ✨

What I got first
and foremost
from the
workshop was
energy.

BROUGHT TO YOU BY THE
A.A.M.'S NATIONAL
ASSOCIATION FOR MUSEUM
EXHIBITION



2009 CREATIVITY & COLLABORATION

RETREAT

AT ASILOMAR, CALIFORNIA



HIGHLIGHTS BY MARIA MORTATI

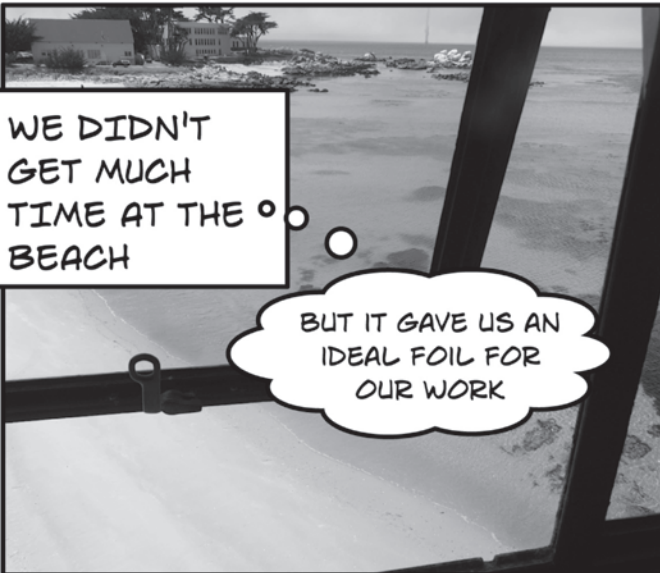
A BRIEF OVERVIEW



ISN'T THAT WE'D LIKE OUR VISITORS TO DO?

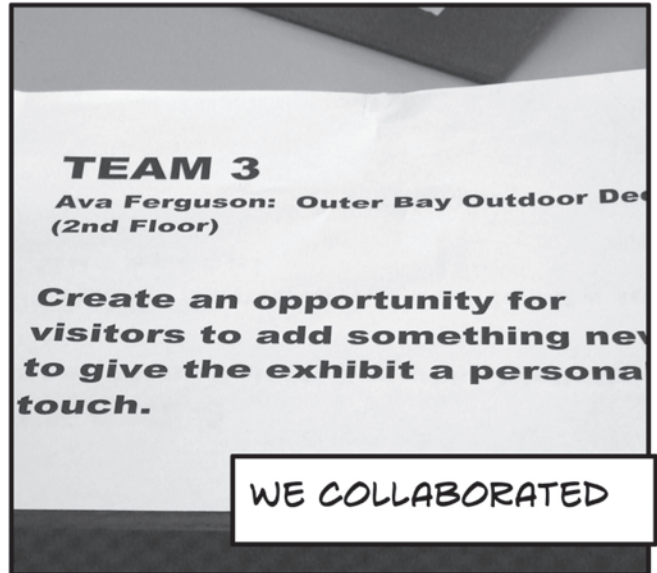
WE LISTENED & REFLECTED ON OUR WORK

WE EXPERIMENTED WITH NEW APPROACHES + IDEAS THROUGH PLAY



WE DIDN'T GET MUCH TIME AT THE BEACH

BUT IT GAVE US AN IDEAL FOIL FOR OUR WORK



WE COLLABORATED



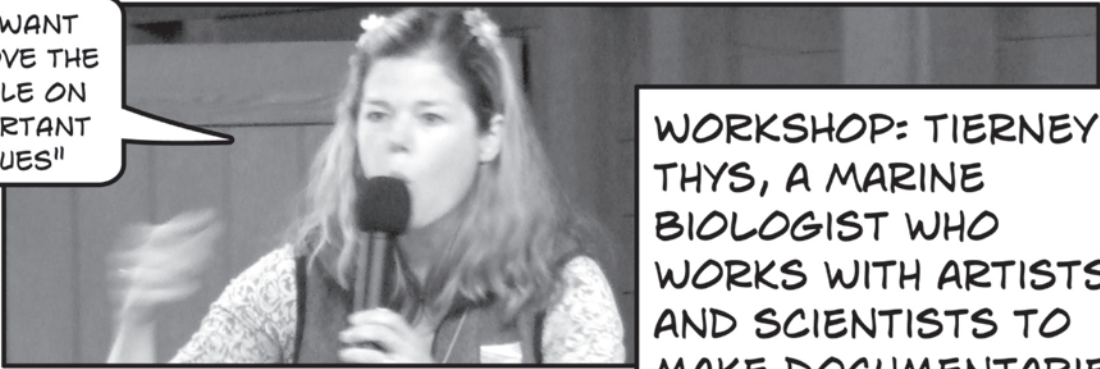
WE CREATED

AND THAT WAS FUN



WE COLLABORATED & CREATED

"WE WANT TO MOVE THE NEEDLE ON IMPORTANT ISSUES"



WORKSHOP: TIERNEY THYS, A MARINE BIOLOGIST WHO WORKS WITH ARTISTS AND SCIENTISTS TO MAKE DOCUMENTARIES

TAKE-AWAYS FROM TIERNEY:

USING FICTIONAL FRAMEWORKS IS A GOOD WAY TO CONVEY LOTS OF COMPLEX INFO

...IN A FICTIONAL FRAMEWORK, PEOPLE ARE MORE OPEN TO IDEAS.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE, & GIVE THEM CHARACTERS TO HELP THEM EMPATHIZE



why should I care?
what can I do??

FOSTER EMPOWERMENT OVER FEAR

why does science matter

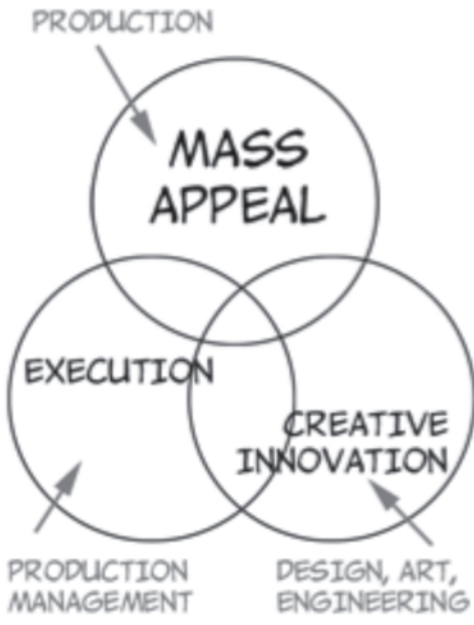


WORKSHOP: KATE SHAW, THE HEAD OF TRAINING FOR LUCASFILM, ON HOW THEY FOSTER THEIR AMAZING CULTURE OF CREATIVITY

2. WEEKLIES: HAVE WEEKLY MEETINGS THAT HIGHLIGHT INFO & INNOVATION ACROSS THE ORGANIZATION.

3. CREATE COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE: AN INFORMAL PLACE (CLUB) FOR PEOPLE TO SHARE & LEARN

1. SEPARATE THE CREATIVE RESPONSIBILITY FROM THE EXECUTION



4. COMMUNICATION: NEVER EVER TAKE ANYTHING FOR GRANTED.

5. INSIGHTS: GET TO KNOW YOURSELF, SO THAT YOU CAN WORK MORE EFFECTIVELY WITH OTHERS.

6. OFFER ENRICHMENT: COURSES WORKING WITH YOUR HANDS, ETC. SO PEOPLE FEEL THAT THEY ARE LEARNING MORE THERE... SO THEY STAY.

10. CREATE A SPACE WHERE YOU CAN UNITE AROUND AN OUTSIDE COMMON CAUSE.

9. DREAM TIME: PENCILS DOWN (FOR 1 WEEK AT LUCAS!). ALLOWS DIFFERENT MEMBERS OF COMPANY TO COLLABORATE, DREAM, PROBLEM SOLVE, ETC.

8. LECTURE SERIES: CHALLENGE PEOPLE TO THINK ABOUT THE BIG PICTURE.

7. GRASSROOTS CLASSES THAT FOSTER CREATIVITY & COLLABORATION SUCH AS IMPROV. SEED YOUR ORGANIZATION FROM THE TOP DOWN AND THE BOTTOM UP WITH INNOVATION, FREEDOM, CREATIVITY.

WORKSHOP: KEN
EKLUND, DESIGNER
OF MASS
COLLABORATION
GAMES LIKE WORLD
WITHOUT OIL



THROUGH ITERATIVE GAME
PLAY, KEN SHOWED US
THAT BY BRINGING AN
INTENTIONALITY TO PLAY,
WE CAN GREATLY
INFLUENCE ATMOSPHERE,
OUTCOME, + OF COURSE,
INTERACTION.

WE PLAYED WITH VARIANTS
SUCH AS:

- TEMPO
- TRUST
- STRATEGY
- COLLABORATION
- RULES
- LEVELING DEVICES



KEN ALSO DEvised AN EXCELLENT GAME/VEHICLE FOR "GETTING TO
KNOW YOU" AT THE RETREAT- GO TO THE C2 SITE TO FIND OUT MORE!



IT WAS A WELL
DESIGNED
EXPERIENCE, +
IT SUCCEEDED IN
BRINGING
MUSEUM
PROFESSIONALS
CLOSER TO
IDEAS...

games that facilitated intermingling
workshop sessions about meaty issues with other like-minded folks
after-hours time to reflect, discuss
closing activity to put theory into practice
wrap-up and debrief sharing



...AND EACH OTHER!



THANK YOU, AAM & NAME
FOR MAKING THIS
POSSIBLE. -MM

