

Safe Group Practice Write-up

Mary Kay Culpepper

The International Center of Studies in Creativity

Buffalo State College

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A Report from Facilitation and Teaching Practice

As I've made the transition during the last month between teaching myself tools for Creative Problem Solving (CPS) and teaching and facilitating groups, I've made some gratifying discoveries. I'm happy I can draw on my experience as a journalist in interviewing clients and communicating with people. I'm pleased that I've worked with willing collaborators who support my learning. And I have a renewed appreciation for the teachers and facilitators I know who make the work look effortless and spontaneous. I know for a fact it is neither.

Indeed, I've come to anticipate how much hard work is involved in setting the stage for a successful session. I've had flashes of insight that this is psychologically sensitive work involving measures of trust and faith. All in all, I feel I've experienced some real growth in facilitation, and believe that's apparent in the details that follow.

The line between safe practice and a stretch assignment is blurred, and probably only exists in this facilitator's mind. The following cases are related to art and commerce, and involve people who have trusted me with some aspect of their livelihood. I've taken them seriously. Each exercise called for focus of intent and respect for the principals and their problems. In each case, I had to remind myself that my role is to help people find their own solutions—not craft the solutions for them. The payoff for that reminder was rich: Tapping into their own creativity under my facilitation, my clients did invent their own solutions. Watching that in action makes me wonder at the power of the process.

CPS Case Study #1: An Art Brokerage

Katherine, my mentor of long standing, is the co-owner of an art brokerage that caters to the interior design trade. She works with her sister, Jean, who lives in Tennessee. This facilitation required several days to prepare and deliver, and involved about nine hours of my time. Katherine and Jean had a variety of ideas that they wanted to pursue, all of which we discussed in three client interview sessions, totaling about two hours. It took me another hour to refine and debrief the talking points, and another to clarify the topic and procedure with them.

I offered to hold the session at my home, serve dinner to Katherine and her husband and Skype in Jean and her husband. (The spouses served as the resource group.) Not

counting making dinner, the prep for the session—readying tools, and drawing up posters and an agenda—took about an hour and a half.

The session itself lasted about two hours, and we spent a quick 30 minutes debriefing it. A week after the session, Katherine and I met to follow up on the session’s action plan.

Some things I understand better now about using CPS process and tools with this group are that persistence pays off in interviews, that tools like Hits and Highlights are highly intuitive, and that technology has its limits.

For instance, spending so much time on the front end with Katherine and Jean allowed us to come up with an accurate CPS diagnosis. It helped them identify several other issues that they could also work on, and they’ve already asked for another session. As far as the tools are concerned, the group was already well-versed in Brainstorming; but before I could explain Hits and Highlighting to Katherine, I was happy to see she’d begun the process on her own. And regarding technology: This was my first experience with distance facilitation. It is much easier to stay in the moment with the process when everyone is in the room. I’d need many more distance sessions to be completely comfortable with it.

Specifically, the most important lesson for me from this session is this: When I express my confidence in CPS in my own words, particularly during the diagnostic phase, I can have a direct bearing on the client’s conception of the process. That in turn plants the seeds for the client’s confidence. Of course, in this instance it probably helped that I worked with Katherine for several years and we’ve always “spoken the same language,” as it were. But I do think her request for future sessions was predicated on this initial positive experience. And that was clearly rooted in my experience and my expression of it.

CPS Case Study #2: An Art Gallery/Teaching Studio

Dori and Scott, owners of a studio that teaches painting, drawing, and ceramics to adults and children, have a gallery space in the front of their building. I occasionally consult with them on marketing and strategy. They’d been considering changing the way they run the gallery—where they sell artwork—and wanted a facilitation session to help them devise a plan.

Because they’d had facilitation experience with me last summer, they knew what to expect, and understood the commitment involved—about 10 hours altogether this time. The three of us spent an hour and a half in the client interview; like the previous case, there were

several layers of thinking to sift through to arrive at a concise challenge statement. I spent another 90 minutes on the written debrief I gave them. Once they'd incubated on it, the next day we clarified the topic for another 30 minutes, confirming the three resource group members, time, and location. I also clarified my role as a facilitator, rather than as a "friend of the gallery."

We agreed to have the session at the studio, which necessitated more preparation on my behalf—about two and a half hours. In addition to drawing up posters and procuring supplies, I also shopped for snacks for this mid-afternoon facilitation. Moreover, I had to arrange the tables and chairs in the room to accommodate the work ahead.

The facilitation itself lasted two hours, including a short debrief with the entire group. After the session was over, I spent another 30 minutes breaking down the room so it would be ready for the next art class. Dori, Scott and I followed up the next week for about an hour, discussing the flip-chart page with their storyboard action plan.

Some things I understand better now about using CPS process and tools thanks to this group are that the quality of the resource group can make a session work, that being on the group's level can make them open up, and that arriving at a solution statement is habit-forming.

For instance, Dori and Scott chose to have both new colleagues and another small-business owner in the resource group; they brought a good mix of familiarity and fresh ideas to the table, and a willingness to talk that kept the energy level high. As for being on the group's level, I actually experimented with standing and sitting. For this session, the participants were much more voluble when I was sat across from them. And regarding the solution statement: Dori told me it was why she was adamant about CPS. In our session last summer, we devised a solution statement with a timeline that she found especially valuable. She expected a similar outcome this time. While I tried to manage her expectations, we used storyboarding as a wrap-up as she and Scott articulated a panel-by-panel plan of what they saw themselves doing.

Specifically, the most important lesson for me from this turn is this: A facilitator must do whatever it takes to set a session up for success. It isn't all about planning, though that's important. And it isn't all about having the right tools, though that's essential, too. Sometimes you just have to roll your sleeves up and rearrange the room (or try a new-to-the-client tool) because you know it will make a difference in the outcome.

Teaching Session #1: In Painting Class

While I was working on my creativity presentation for CRS 670, I came across a 1987 study by A.D. Jankowicz in *Leonardo* about using evaluation matrixes to help artists move past creative blocks. I thought my drawing/painting classmates at the gallery would be a good audience to try it with, and Dori, our teacher, agreed. Planning and executing the teaching took about an hour and a half.

After my explanation and demonstration, I asked for volunteers to try the tool. What I learned surprised me. The artists were split on whether giving words to what they did had value or not. About half of them could see the value in a somewhat numerical form such as the matrix; the other half felt that giving words and assigning numbers would be counterproductive to making art. Fortunately, Dori actually volunteered to try it, so we demonstrated it for the group. When we were done, I asked my classmates to talk about their reactions.

Some things I understand better now about using CPS process and tools with this group are that not all tools suit everyone, and that a percentage of visual artists are wary of thinking analytically about creativity.

Specifically, the most important lesson for me is that I was wrong to assume that because I tool helpful everyone else would, too. Because making art concerns individual expression, I could acknowledge the validity of those who didn't see it as useful. Obviously, a matrix isn't going to work for all artists all of the time. And for that reason, I will be careful in the future about how I work with other artists in CPS practice. Perhaps a more successful tactic would be to focus on the work—which can indeed be verbally analyzed—rather than the artist.

Teaching Session #2: On the Retail Floor

The same day as the experience I just described, I held a spontaneous teaching session at a clothing store where I sometimes work. Present were the owners, Martha and Steve, and Katie, a fashion designer making an appearance at the store. That episode took about 20 minutes.

In short order, I taught the three of them the PPCo tool using an extravagant coat Katie designed as my example. They then proceeded to elaborate plusses, potentials,

concerns, and how they'd overcome the concerns for several garments on the rack. The result was they all readily learned the tool, and we laughed a lot in the process.

Some things I understand better now about using CPS process and tools with this group are that a teaching opportunity sometimes comes disguised as a trunk show, and that laughter has great power to reinforce.

For example, I didn't leave the studio after class with the intention of teaching CPS tools to my friends at the store. Maybe I was in a teaching frame of mind to begin with, or maybe the moment was ripe. All I know is that it just happened, and it was a blast. And the lesson did stick: I heard from Katie once she was back in New York, and she mentioned PPCo by name. She also wrote about it on her blog.

Specifically, the most important lesson from this session for me is to lighten up. Tools learned in a spirit of fun stick better than those learned by rote. They're much more of a pleasure to teach, too.

Next Steps and Further Directions

Each of my experiences teaching and facilitating with CPS have broadened my understanding of both its broad strokes and its nuances. Every time I work with a group, I learn better how to read them, how to seize the moment, and where I fit in the equation. There's probably no better way to prepare me for the stretch group practices I am planning.

My next steps are: (a) to continue to work with the clients I have developed for the stretch group practices, spending the necessary amount of time with them at the beginning of the process so we've clarified the topic well; (b) to frame the CPS process to my clients positively and in my own terms; and (c) to work so the process can admit a spirit of spontaneity. I see myself continuing to practice a variety of CPS tools, teaching them to others when applicable, and keeping my mind and open to the fact that I learn more about CPS, and myself, every time I engage with it.