

Adopt-a-Practitioner Interview with Siri Lynn

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Consultant Siri Lynn has a practice that has taken her from facilitating in boardrooms of Fortune 500 companies to conducting qualitative interviews on basketball courts. The flexibility inherent in such diverse work appeals to her, because she draws creativity from working with others.

Lynn owns Idea Exchange, Inc., a consultancy in Fairfield, CT. She assists corporations in developing new products, advertising, and market positioning. She specializes in teaching leadership development, tools and techniques for deliberate creativity, and teambuilding. With sometime collaborators Jean Bystedt and Deborah Potts, Lynn co-authored the book *Moderating to the Max: A Full-Tilt Guide to Creative, Insightful Focus Groups and Depth Interviews* (2003).

She is affiliated with the RIVA Moderator Training Institute, and is a member of the Qualitative Research Consultants Association and the Creative Education Foundation. She has also taught at the Creative Problem Solving Institute (CPSI) and the European Creativity Conference. In addition, Lynn is on the faculty of Summerstars for the Performing Arts, a Massachusetts-based nonprofit that teaches inner-city children improvisational approaches to music, drama, writing, and dance.

I chose to interview Lynn because of my own experience with qualitative research as a magazine editor. I saw firsthand how helpful it is to have an independent point of view shed light on matters a company should consider, and how a seasoned facilitator makes focus groups most productive. During my interview with Lynn, I asked questions about her work as well as her advice for the novice practitioner. Her verbatim answers follow.

Notes from a Conversation

How she started: “I went to the CPSI more than 20 years ago with the intent of building a toolbox of tools as a facilitator. But by the end of it, I wasn’t sure it taught me what I needed, so I didn’t go the next year. The year after that, my boss decided to go to CPSI and I realized if I went, too, I’d be a year ahead of her. So I returned.

“And when I did, everything clicked for me. I realized you can learn tools that help you become creative as a moderator/facilitator/person. And they have made me a better moderator/facilitator/person.”

What attracts her to qualitative research: “I think it’s great for new product development, especially when the client is not afraid to try to new things. I love the experience of talking to all sorts of different people

about their lives, hearts, needs, dreams. Each one is a surprise, regardless of whether I'm working for a client who makes Champagne, or sells train trips, or detergent.

"I love drawing insights based on talking to people. I work hard not to let my opinion creep into the process, though. That's important. I sometimes think of myself like a chameleon, so I can adapt to any group of people."

What she likes best about her practice: "The independence. I can schedule my life around my projects. I can take it easy, or I can be busy. Working as a freelancer has its advantages.

"The most exotic thing I've done was taught CPS to a group of researchers in Taiwan. It went on for three or four days, and was translated in the moment. It was exciting.

"Most of my clients are open to new thinking, can push boundaries, and learn new things. I sometimes love having a repeating topic, which allows me to explore a world in depth. I had one client who several years ago wanted me to research joint pain and joint supports. I did interviews in gyms, tennis courts, basketball courts, homes. I helped with ideation and more. And over the last eight years, that client has continued to develop new products based on my research. Every time they come out with a new version, I get such a charge from seeing my work come to fruition.

"So often, I do research, make recommendations, and then clients do with it what they will. I don't usually have the completeness I get from the client I just mentioned. That's OK. The beauty is that I get to do all kinds of things, a whole miscellany."

Who she enjoys collaborating with: "I met my two best friends [Bystedt and Potts] at CPSI. Teaching and training with them, I get to mix it up. It keeps you fresh to work with other people. Debra, Jean and I turned a workbook for RIVA into a published book, and established To the Max, a company where we all come together to work. There are times when you need a co-facilitator, and To the Max allows us to reference each other. We share, challenge, and stimulate the other's thinking, and each of us brings something unique. Often in a practice, you need something that'll push your boundaries. Collaboration does that."

Advice to the novice facilitators: "Make your client look good. It may not be the head honcho, but you'll be indispensable if you can make him or her be a hero to the group.

"The other thing is to be flexible. At CPSI, I'm always teaching with someone new, and I tell them this: Spend a lot of time planning so the material gets in your mind. Once that happens, you can be flexible and be in the moment. The ability to be responsive is crucial. But first you've got to be grounded in the tools, and keep them in your back pocket. In the long term, that's really important."

Insights from the Exchange

Lynn's directness made it easy to draw several key lessons from our exchange; that directness must play a role in her success as a creativity facilitator. For example, she cites the flexibility in her career as an as an appealing attribute, and she favorably notes the adaptability in the scope of her work, as well. The diversity of experience and schedule clearly motivates her, though she is careful to keep her own opinions about content hidden.

Her comment about the dual nature of spontaneity echoes my own experience. She said "effortless" moderation actually requires significant preparation. The lesson for me as a beginning facilitator is that the mastery of tools is the cornerstone for a successful practice. The cornerstone in turn supports planning inlaid with contingencies that accommodate the multiple directions a group can take.

Another point Lynn made--remember who you're working for, and make them look good—seems to me to be a corollary of tool mastery. In my recent sessions, I found it helpful to focus on the client, especially at critical convergent junctures. I'm reminded of Ruth Noller's dictum in *Mentoring: A Voiced Scarf* (1997) that a facilitator is "a guide at the side, not a sage on the stage." In other words, the heavy lifting of implementation will fall to the person or group I'm facilitating. Helping them succeed will ultimately help me succeed.

Finally, Lynn's enthusiasm for collaboration resonates with me. In my previous career, I built a cadre of colleagues from various magazines and newspapers. Because of our common experience, we helped each other devise new ideas, commiserate, and celebrate. For me, they were an invaluable personal and professional resource. As I pursue my studies in creativity, my cohort serves the same general purpose, and my sounding board partners in particular spark in me of the joy of working alongside others.



Figure 1. Author, moderator, and creativity consultant Siri Lynn. Photograph courtesy Siri Lynn.