

# Introduction to Self-Directed Facilitation

Wanda McGee

*Complex adaptive systems have an inherent order that is simply waiting to be unfolded through the experience of the system, but no one can know what that order is until, in fact, it does unfold in real time.*

—Ralph D. Stacey, Author, *Complexity and Creativity in Organizations*

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## Abstract

Frequently, facilitators are called upon to do two things at once—deliver content and support a group as it practices group skills. This can be chaotic. For example, if a community organization where lots of people are learning how to effectively work together in groups decides it wants to know how to be more creative and innovative, that presents one challenge. It's a different challenge when the group is small, members are subject matter experts, and they are simultaneously learning and practicing the skills of facilitation. In either instance, self-directed facilitation can be used to organize some of the chaos. It isn't easier than straight facilitation, it's just different—kind of like facilitation and training rolled into one. This article defines terms; briefly discusses the history of self-directed learning and how it is similar to and different from self-directed facilitation; and provides an example of how self-directed facilitation can be used.

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## Definitions to Consider

**Facilitator**—a person who helps a group improve its processes (either temporarily or permanently) and has some responsibility (either primary or shared) for managing the group's process. Essentially, the facilitator's role is to help the group improve its process in a manner consistent with these core values: valid information, free and informed choice, and internal commitment to the choices. (Schwarz 1994)

**Group facilitation**—a process in which a person who is acceptable to all members of the group, substantively neutral, and has no decision-making authority intervenes to help a group improve the way it identifies and solves problems and makes decisions in order to increase the group's effectiveness. (Schwarz 1994)

**Self-directed learning**—generally refers to activities where primary responsibility for planning, carrying out, and evaluating a learning endeavor is assumed by the individual learner. An education agent or resource often plays a facilitating role in this process. (Brockett and Hiemstra 1991)

**Self-directed facilitation**—a technique to use when a group's goal is to learn content while reinforcing group skills. It is most likely to be successful when a group has established core values and group norms, has at least minimal knowledge of group processes, and wishes to practice, or become more aware of, group skills as part of a learning experience. (McGee 2001).

# Where did *self-directed facilitation* come from?

## Research in Self-Directed Learning

There is a body of research and practice to support a self-directed facilitation approach. Some of the research comes from the field of adult education, which took fire in the 1970s after a study by Alan Tough at the University of Chicago. He studied people engaged in a self-teaching project. He found that the learning usually involves assistance from others, such as librarians, subject-matter experts, friends and relatives, and other people who are interested in a particular topic (Brockett and Hiemstra, 1993).

In their book, *Self-Direction in Adult Learning: Perspectives on Theory, Research, and Practice* Brockett and Hiemstra synthesize major developments, trends, issues, and practices relative to self-direction and adult education up to the 1990s. The book includes summaries from the work of such notables as Malcolm Knowles, commonly credited as being the father of adult education.

For me, the idea of self-directed facilitation evolved from my education and experience in the human development field. This has included work in both facilitation and training. It was reinforced when I worked on a project funded by the U.S. Center for Substance Abuse Prevention.

## Meeting the Needs of Community Partnerships

The company I worked for at the time (Macro International), designed an Institute for Partnership Development for groups that had been working together for about a year. The groups were asked to determine what their partnerships needed to know or be able to do in order to move forward in their work of substance abuse prevention. Based on the responses, a sizable toolbox of activities in three *tracks* (100 activities in the organization development track alone) was developed to meet those needs.

When the Institutes were held around the U.S., partnerships came with learning plans they had developed. The Institutes were attended by teams of people from several partnerships and averaged 50-60 people. Some partnerships had been working well together; others were in a state of conflict or disarray. During the 5-day Institute, teams had a sizeable amount of time to explore the available resources, decide how to make the best use of their time, and implement their learning plans.

Much of the work was done in track sessions using the toolbox activities. Partnership members shared leadership by rotating the roles of group facilitator, recorder, timekeeper, etc. They requested help when they felt like they needed it. Sometimes they asked an Institute facilitator to be their group facilitator when they were involved in a tough organizational issue. Other times they asked an Institute facilitator to be a process observer. Frequently our role was to manage track resources and answer questions. The process of getting started in the track sessions was typically chaotic. Each Institute was a complex adaptive system waiting to unfold through the experience of the system.

A similar toolbox approach has also been used to support the development of facilitators in State government agencies and to prepare facilitators for their work at a White House Conference on the Aging.

### **How is the ‘facilitator role’ in self-directed facilitation different or the same as in self-directed learning?**

There is much similarity between the two. Both are interactive processes in which the facilitator serves as a resource person and those involved assume personal responsibility for their own achievements. However, here are a few distinctions I have noticed:

—Facilitating self-directed learning	—Facilitating self-directed facilitation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acquisition of content is of primary concern</li> <li>• Focused more on individual</li> <li>• Comes from an instructional or training orientation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Growth in group skills is as important as (or more important than) acquisition of content</li> <li>• Focused more on group</li> <li>• Comes from a facilitation orientation and adds components of training</li> </ul>

### **When Can Self-Directed Facilitation Be Used?**

It can be used in one form or another at almost every stage of group development. As mentioned earlier, it seems to work best when basic group structures are in place. To decide whether to use self-directed facilitation, you might consider such questions as the following:

- Where is the group in its development?
- Has the group done the "big picture" work—values, vision, mission?
- Does it already operate by group-established norms?
- What challenges does the group face?
- Is the group at a point where it wants to "try its wings" by rotating roles, such as facilitator, recorder, timekeeper, process observer?
- Does the group want to learn something new as well as increase its group skills?
- What does the group want to accomplish (objectives)?
- Is there agreement that self-directed facilitation meets the needs of the group?

### **An Example of Self-Directed Facilitation**

Included is an outline of a simple self-directed facilitation activity. It is designed to provide content and practice in the group skill of dialogue while at the same time exploring the issue of group decision making. Read it over and study its components; then select your own content and design something that works for your group. Self-directed facilitation activities can be designed to carry all kinds of content. (Creativity and innovation was the content for the 2001 International Association of Facilitators Conference where the concept of self-directed facilitation was introduced.)

# Self-Directed Facilitation Activity: Creating Shared Meaning with Dialogue

**Learning Objective:** To experience the use of dialogue as a way of creating shared meaning around the issue of decision making.

**Assumptions:** Verify that the following assumptions are accurate:

- The group has some history of working together and has agreed on its core values.
- The group has agreed-upon norms.
- The group wants to learn about and practice the basics of dialogue.
- The group is currently considering its decision-making processes.

## What's Needed:

- *Reading: Creating Shared Meaning with Dialogue* (Available at [www.natureofheart.com](http://www.natureofheart.com). Click on "Resources" then "Dialogue.")
- *Anecdote and Questions for Group Dialogue: "Choices"* (Can be found in *Invisible Currents – Nature Lessons for the Mind and Heart* by Wanda McGee. Although *Invisible Currents* is out of print, copies are still available from the Nature of Heart Store, [www.natureofheart.com](http://www.natureofheart.com).)
- *Conversation Sheet*, see below.

**Approximate Time:** 1 ½ hours, although time is flexible

**Group Size:** 3-10 people

## Overview of Activity:

Introduction . . . . .	10 minutes
Review dialogue basics . . . . .	10 minutes
Group dialogue . . . . .	30 minutes
Closing conversation . . . . .	30 minutes

## Instructions

### I. Introduction

Take a few minutes to do a group check-in and study the following directions.

- A. Select, at a minimum, a group facilitator and timekeeper.
- B. Make sure each person has access to the following:

- *Reading: Creating Shared Meaning*. Feel free to use content from the [www.natureofheart.com](http://www.natureofheart.com) website.
- *Group Dialogue: "Choices"* (See *Invisible Currents*, pages 24-25.)
- *Conversation Sheet*

## II. Review Dialogue Basics

- A. If you wish to refresh your memory concerning the topic of dialogue, you may want to look over the *Reading* or ask a knowledgeable group member to review the basics of dialogue. (A reading is a short article that greatly condenses a topic. The main points are covered in just a few pages.)
- B. Review group norms and decide whether something more needs to be added to support the dialogue experience. (Information on group norms can be found at [www.natureofheart.com](http://www.natureofheart.com), under Dialogue/Group.)

## III. Group Dialogue - "Choices"

- A. As a group, look at the image on page 24 of *Invisible Currents*. Then have one person read the text on the top of page 25.
- B. The time for the dialogue can be flexible. Decide as a group how much time you want to spend in dialogue and have the timekeeper alert you at specified intervals.
- C. Using the questions on page 25 as a guide, engage in a group dialogue.

## IV. Closing Conversation

After the dialogue, use the *Conversation Sheet* (or your own questions) as a way of processing the activity.

## References and Resources

- Brockett, Ralph G. and Roger Hiemstra. *Self-Direction in Adult Learning: Perspectives on Theory, Research, and Practice*. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Luft, Joseph. *Group Processes: An Introduction to Group Dynamics*. San Francisco State College, 1970.
- McGee, Wanda. *Invisible Currents: Nature's Lessons for the Mind and Heart*. Alexandria, VA: Miles River Press (2000).
- Schein, Edgar, Warren Bennis, and Richard Beckhard. *Process Consultation; Its Role in Organization Development*. Addison-Wesley, 1969.
- Schwarz, Roger M. *The Skilled Facilitator: Practical Wisdom for Developing Effective Groups*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994.
- Stacey, Ralph D. *Complexity and Creativity in Organizations*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1996.

For a short bibliography on the subject of dialogue, see [www.natureofheart.com](http://www.natureofheart.com). Click "Resources," then "Bibliographies"

## Creating Shared Meaning with Dialogue

# Conversation Sheet

(An additional opportunity for dialogue)

### About the issue

- What images, words, or other sensory information do you especially remember from the dialogue?
- At what point in the dialogue were you most involved? Least involved or bored?
- How did using an anecdote from nature to explore an organizational issue open your mind and heart to new possibilities?
- If you were to "name" the issue we dialogued about, what would you call it?
- What are the consequences to organizational life when this issue is not attended to?
- What are our next steps?

### About the process

- Describe in a factual way, what happened during the dialogue.
- What did you find most challenging about using dialogue to talk about an organizational issue? What was difficult about it?
- Where did we lapse into a discussion mode?
- How did we get back on track?
- If we used dialogue in our decision-making processes, how could this transform our daily interactions?
- What do we want to do with what we have discovered?

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**Note:** The above article is a bite-sized piece from the 2001 International Association of Facilitators (IAF) Conference. The conference theme was Navigating the Future. Below are

- A participant handout that introduced the session
- Charts summarizing some of the questions the session addressed, and resources available to answer them. The first chart is an overview of the session. The second deals with resources that were made available on tables. An internet computer would make a good addition.

The following is intended only as an example of how self-directed facilitation might be used. The content is determined by the occasion.

# Self-Directed Facilitation

## Start with Chaos, End with Meaning

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*Complex adaptive systems have an inherent order that is simply waiting to be unfolded through the experience of the system, but no one can know what that order is until, in fact, it does unfold in real time.*

—Ralph D. Stacey, Author, *Complexity and Creativity in Organizations*

### Introduction

During this session, you will have an opportunity to choose what you want to learn about organizational creativity and innovation in the context of a self-directed and self-facilitated learning environment. It will provide you an opportunity to follow your interests as you

- (1) Learn more about creativity and innovation.
- (2) Look at ways to simultaneously deliver content and increase group skills.
- (3) Have fun jump-starting your brain.

What you learn from this session is up to you—that's part of the chaos. It's an opportunity for you to decide what will add value to your life and then explore it. You'll assess the resources in the room, decide what you're interested in, and engage in self-directed learning (either in groups or by yourself). We'll close the session with a dialogue to explore how the session relates to our facilitation and our lives.

### Possible Learning Objectives (pick some or set your own)

1. Explore the meaning of innovation & creativity and why they are critical to personal and organizational success in today's marketplace.
2. Identify the barriers to innovation and creativity, and ways to move through those barriers.
3. Review self-facilitated activities that community groups have used to do two things at once: (1) build group skills and (2) increase innovation and creativity in their organizations.
4. Assess your brain organization profile and how it relates to creativity, especially in times of chaos.
5. Engage in simple movement activities that reduce stress (and jump-start creativity) and support a whole-brain approach to problem solving
6. Explore creative ways to break out of limiting perceptions.
7. Participate in self-facilitated "toolbox" activities to explore in-depth one or more aspects of innovation/creativity.

8. Determine useful resources by reviewing available books, articles, and online resources on the subjects of innovation and creativity.
9. Evaluate self-directed facilitation as a tool for your own use.
10. Other (you decide)

## General Outline of Session

- Welcome and setting of context
- Deciding what you want to learn and how you want to learn it
- Participating in self-facilitating activities
- Focused conversation (ORID-style )

## References (References not available on the resource table, are annotated.)

Black, Robert Alan. *Broken Crayons: Break your crayons and draw outside the lines*. Athens, GA: Cre8ng Places Press, 1995.

Biech, Elaine. *The ASTSD Trainer's Sourcebook: Creativity & Innovation*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996.

Blohowiak, Donald W. *Mavericks!: How to Lead Your Staff to Think Like Einstein, Create Like Da Vinci, and Invent Like Edison*. Homewood, IL: Business One Irwin, 1992.

Defines mavericks, describes why they are important to business success, how to manage them, how to encourage a maverick culture, and how to think more like a maverick. Four pages of maverick resources and 25 pages of notes and references.

Brockett, Ralph G. and Roger Hiemstra. *Self-Direction in Adult Learning: Perspectives on theory, research, and practice*. New York: Routledge, 1993.

A collection of studies by adult education specialists on various aspects of adult education. Synthesizes major developments, trends, issues, and practices relative to self-direction and adult education up to the 1990s. A personal favorite on the topic.

Dennison, Gail E., Paul Dennison, and Jerry Teplitz. *Brain Gym for Business: Instant brain boosters for on-the-job success*. Ventura, CA: Edu-Kinesthetics, 1994.

Grow, Gerald. *Teaching Learners to be Self Directed*.

<http://www.longleaf.net/ggrow/SSDL/SSDLIndex.html#Contents> presents a "Staged Self-Directed Learning Model" from a teaching perspective. Connections to Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Leadership model.

Grudin, Robert. *The Grace of Great Things: Creativity and innovation*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1990.

Hall, Doug. *Jump Start Your Brain*. New York: Warner Books, 1995.

An informally written book with a wealth of ideas for stimulating creative thought. Set in the framework of an overall creative process called "Eureka! Stimulus Response." Gives

lots of examples of how techniques in the book were used to solve real-world problems. Fun to read.

Hannaford, Carla. *The Dominance Factor: How knowing your dominant eye, ear, brain, hand, and foot can improve your learning*. Atlanta, GA: Great Ocean Publishers, 1997

McGee, Wanda. "Self-directed Facilitation: Start with chaos, end with meaning." [www.iaf-world.com](http://www.iaf-world.com), 2001 Conference Proceedings.

McGee, Wanda. *Invisible Currents: Nature's Lessons for the Mind and Heart*. Alexandria, VA: Miles River Press (2000).

Michalko, Michael. *Thinkertoys: A handbook of business creativity*. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 1991.

Peters, Tom. *The Circle of Innovation* (1997). New York: Alfred A. Knopf.  
A collection of overhead transparencies from author's presentations, with additional commentary. The author considers each of the 15 chapters in the book to be a circle within the main "circle of innovation." Easy to read, has lots of interesting quotes, and constantly summarizes "big ideas." If expletives bother you, this may not be a book for you.

Plsek, Paul E. *Creativity, Innovation, and Quality*. Milwaukee, WI: ASQ Quality Press, 1997.

Schwarz, Roger M. *The Skilled Facilitator: Practical wisdom for developing effective groups*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994.

Stacey, Ralph D. *Complexity and Creativity in Organizations*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1996.

Stewart, Thomas A. *Intellectual Capital: The new wealth of organizations*. New York: Doubleday/Currency, 1997.

Defines intellectual capital. Introduces the information age in the context of the knowledge economy, the knowledge company, and the knowledge worker. Discusses intellectual capital in terms of human capital, structural capital, and customer capital. A section is devoted to the economics of the information age and career implications. A 24-page appendix contains tools for measuring and managing intellectual capital, followed by 14 pages of notes and references. Thought provoking.

Vance, Mike and Diane Deacon. *Think Out of the Box* (1995). Franklin Lakes, NJ: Career Press.

Taken largely from the experiences of Mike Vance during his Disney University years. "Think out of the box" is used as a metaphor for successful creative thinking. Explores how "boxes" are created and ways to open them using a variety of tools. Provides ideas for designing creative environments, a seven-step format for the creative phases of project development; and techniques for breaking (not just thinking) out of the box.

Von Oech, Roger. *Creative Whack Pack*. Menlo Stamford, CT: U.S. Games Systems, Inc., 1992. 1992.

Von Oech, Roger. *A Whack on the Side of the Head* (Creative Whack Pack Edition). Menlo Park, CA: Creative Think, 1983.

Williams, Alan. *Creativity, Invention, & Innovation*. St. Leonards, NSW, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1999

**Self-Directed Facilitation—Start with Chaos, End with Meaning**  
Possible Questions to Explore During the Session

<b>Questions</b>	<b>Resources for finding answers</b> (plus the people in the room, an excellent resource)
<p>What do these terms mean?</p> <p>—Creativity, Innovation</p> <p>—Self-Directed Facilitation</p>	<p><b>Activity</b>—Creativity &amp; Innovation—Key Concepts (in blue folder on resources table)</p> <p><b>Books:</b> 1) <i>Creativity, Invention, &amp; Innovation</i>—pgs. 3-15 2) <i>Creativity, Innovation, and Quality</i>, pgs. 28-31</p> <p><b>Experiencing</b> one of the self-directed facilitation group activities <b>Reading</b> “Introduction to Self-Directed Facilitation” at <a href="http://www.natureofheart.com">www.natureofheart.com</a>. Look for the article under Resources/For Facilitators.</p>
<p>Why are innovation and creativity critical to personal &amp; organizational success?</p>	<p><b>Activity</b>—Creativity &amp; Innovation—Key Concepts (in blue folder on resources table)</p> <p><b>Books:</b> 1) <i>Creativity, Invention, &amp; Innovation</i>—pgs. 22-44 2) <i>Creativity, Innovation, and Quality</i>, pgs. 11, 20</p>
<p>What are barriers to innovation &amp; creativity? What are ways to move through those barriers?</p>	<p><b>Activity</b>—Barriers to Creativity &amp; Innovation (in blue folder on resources table)</p> <p><b>Books:</b> (1) <i>The ASTD Trainer's Sourcebook: Creativity &amp; Innovation</i>, pgs. 142-147; also, 206-207; (2) <i>Creativity, Innovation, and Quality</i>, pgs. 251, 254, 257, 260, 263-265; (3) <i>Broken Crayons</i>, pgs. 36-42 and 94-98</p> <p><b>Activities in Blue Folders:</b> The following activities may provide useful ideas concerning barriers to creativity &amp; innovation. Examples of toolbox activities: <b>Activity</b>—Suspending Assumptions <b>Activity</b>—It'll Never Fly</p>
<p>What are examples of self-facilitated activities? What have they been used for?</p>	<p><b>Activities in Blue Folders:</b> Most of these were developed by Macro International as part of a learning project sponsored by the U.S. Center for Substance Abuse Prevention in the mid-1990s. Community partnerships involved in substance abuse prevention</p>

	<p>identified learning needs, then a toolbox of learning activities was developed to meet those needs. Partnerships from around the country came together in a series of Institutes to simultaneously increase their knowledge in specific areas and increase their level of group functioning.</p>
<p>What is my personal brain profile?</p> <p>How does it relate to creativity, especially in times of chaos.</p>	<p><b>Activity:</b> Activity in one of yellow folders—Brain Organization and Creativity, on resources table</p> <p><b>Book:</b> <i>The Dominance Factor</i>, pgs. 37-39</p> <p><b>Book:</b> <i>The Dominance Factor</i>, pgs. 15, 19-34. Also, identify your profile on page 51, then find your 2-page profile (pgs. 52-114) and read about it.</p>
<p>What are simple movement activities that I can use to reduce stress and jump-start creativity?</p>	<p><b>Handout:</b> Brain Gym® (PACE) activities</p> <p><b>Book:</b> <i>Brain Gym® for Business</i>, pgs. vi-vii</p> <p><b>Wall Charts:</b> Accessing Creativity</p>
<p>What are some creative ways to break out of limiting perceptions?</p>	<p><b>Visit the toy table</b></p> <p><b>Visit the resources table</b></p> <p><b>Books:</b> (1) <i>Thinkertoys</i>, pgs 42-199 for linear ideas and pgs 202-315 for ideas that use a more intuitive approach. Or, just open the book and use what comes up. (2) <i>The ASTD Trainer's Sourcebook: Creativity &amp; Innovation</i>, pgs 150-162; also, pgs. 219-222; (3) <i>Creativity, Innovation, &amp; Quality</i>, pgs. 52, 54; (4) Broken Crayons, pgs. 55-75; (5) <i>The Creative Whack Pack</i> (book &amp; deck of cards)</p>
<p>How can I participate in self-facilitated "toolbox" activities to explore in-depth one or more aspects of innovation/creativity?</p>	<p><b>Form small groups</b> with other like-minded people and explore the <b>toolbox activities in the blue folders</b> on the resources table.</p>

## Possible Questions to Explore Using the Resources Table

<b>Questions</b>	<b>Resources for finding answers</b> (also, the people in the room— which may be the best resource of all)
Where can I find a simple overview of creativity?	<b>Book:</b> <i>The ASTD Trainer's Sourcebook: Creativity &amp; Innovation</i> , pgs. 1-11
Is there such thing as a "creative personality?"	<b>Book:</b> <i>Creativity, Invention, &amp; Innovation</i> , pgs 46-49; <i>Broken Crayons</i> , pgs. 2-11
What are different types of innovations?	<b>Book:</b> <i>Creativity, Invention, &amp; Innovation</i> , pgs. 57-72
Where & how can I find creative ideas and start to develop my creativity?	<b>Books:</b> (1) <i>Creativity, Invention, &amp; Innovation</i> , pgs. 81-101; (2) <i>Broken Crayons</i> , pgs. 77-89; <i>The ASTD Trainer's Sourcebook: Creativity &amp; Innovation</i> , pgs. 152-162, 219-222
How can a business encourage creativity?	<b>Books:</b> <i>Creativity, Invention, &amp; Innovation</i> , pgs. 116-139; <i>The ASTD Trainer's Sourcebook: Creativity &amp; Innovation</i> , pgs. 163-168
What would a step-by-step model for the process of innovation look like?	<b>Book:</b> <i>Creativity, Invention, &amp; Innovation</i> , pgs. 143-180
How can I gauge the creativity of myself? My organization?	<b>Books:</b> <i>Creativity, Invention, &amp; Innovation</i> , pgs. 221-230; <i>The ASTD Trainer's Sourcebook: Creativity &amp; Innovation</i> , pgs. 251-259
What would a model for the creative process look like?	<b>Book:</b> <i>Creativity, Innovation, and Quality</i> , p. 74
What tools are available to support creativity?	<b>Books:</b> <i>Creativity, Innovation, and Quality</i> , pgs 78-83 Also, pgs. 91-116 for tools that prepare the mind for creative thought; pgs. 119-155 for tools that stimulate the imagination of new ideas; pgs. 279-281 for lists of words to spark creative thought
Where would I find additional resources having to do with creativity & innovation?	<b>Session Handout:</b> References <b>Books:</b> <i>Creativity, Innovation, and Quality</i> , pgs. 282-286; <i>The ASTD Trainer's Sourcebook:</i>

	<i>Creativity &amp; Innovation</i> , pgs. 291-297; <i>Creativity, Invention, &amp; Innovation</i> —pgs. 256-265 (in Australia)
Is there a simple way to find out how people with different approaches to creativity might work together?	<b>Book:</b> <i>Broken Crayons</i> (Mind Design insert) and pgs. 47-54
Where can I find insights on the philosophical underpinnings of creativity and innovation?	<b>Book:</b> <i>The Grace of Great Things—Creativity and Innovation</i>