

## **Making the Intangible Tangible: Imagination Workshop**

### **Abstract**

There is an increasing need in business schools to augment the often heavily rational curriculum with the development of more intuitive and reflective qualities. This is particularly important when addressing “wicked” problems, or when creativity is needed for a wide variety of purposes. This paper reports on a collaboration between an art/design school and a business school, to evolve an “Imagination Workshop”, which does not involve specialised tools or any special skills by the faculty. It uses an almost primitive method – folding and cutting paper to create what are known as “zines”, which then become a personalised place to reflect and imagine. This method has been successfully deployed across executive and degree management education levels; the specific example highlighted here is for undergraduate business students, in a wholly online context.

**Keywords:** Imagination, making, creativity

## **Introduction**

It is noticeable that business undergraduates generally do not regard themselves as “creative”, due to a perception that creativity is linked either to excellence in the arts, or to not being personally endowed with a quality that is naturally present or not. These are in fact misconceptions, since even finding solutions to everyday problems needs a degree of creativity, and even more so when dealing with wicked problems in a VUCA context.

A core component of creativity is imagination. This exercise, an Imagination Workshop, has been specifically developed for business students lacking confidence in their own creativity. It is designed to encourage them to address ambiguity, to use familiar materials in an unfamiliar way, to make mistakes in a low-stakes context, and to produce something which deploys art-based methods and is artful, even if it is not necessarily artistic.

The method is based on what appears a very simple and indeed almost primitive technology – folding and cutting paper - into a format known as a “zine”, then drawing and writing on that paper. Zines are a multi-page DIY, often hand-drawn paper-folded format (Piepmeier, 2008).

Yet we have found that a workshop using these very simple and modest tools and materials, transforms an everyday piece of copy paper into a personalised platform to support imaginative thinking. It enables the articulation of tacit knowledge and insights in a material form. Though it is essentially a private production, some learners may be willing or even enthusiastic to share their artefact with others.

This format has co-evolved since 2015 through in-depth collaboration between two university disciplines: art/design and business management. The initial starting point of our collaboration was the use of zines to enhance reflective practice, but this has widened considerably, particularly into helping stimulate imagination, which is central to many creative, design and problem-solving processes. Designing learning involved:

- (a) appropriate framing of the issues in business, as opposed to art or craft, terms
- (b) the physical making of simple artful objects, which in turn stimulate mental processes related to imaginative thinking
- (c) review and debriefing



**Zine made in academic conference workshop with each pane relating to each session**

The method combines paper-folding and zines, thus making it widely accessible. It has been evolved in workshops internationally for participants ranging from chief executives to undergraduate students. Up to 2019, the format was wholly centred on

collaborative physical materiality. COVID in 2020 enforced a shift to a shared experience, activated wholly online. It is the online version as developed for undergraduate workshops, that is described here.



**Zine started in one hour executive workshop and completed afterwards**

**Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications.**

Against this backdrop of enhancing business imagination using simple tools, we needed to evolve a practical learning framework in a context where learners often feel they lack skills. To a business learner, even the use of coloured pencils can feel intimidating with memories of perceived failures in art at school. In parallel, they lack confidence in the very playful self-expression which is fundamental to imagination.

We have found it vital to frame our approach in such a way that minimises the apparently deep-seated lack of confidence. We show video interviews we have made, in particular with CEO's, who personally use art-based reflective/imaginative methods. We draw on examples of work by previous students who also had no art background. This is a scaffolding approach, encouraging applying the affordance of the zine as a support for unfolding expression in an iterative methodology. We have also found that using a metaphor, such as a "workshop" can assist when confronted by unsettling unfamiliar territory.

Arts-based methods have a particular value for accessing informal, non-textual, narrative, and emotional elements and making them tangible (Belfiore and Bennett, 2008). This workshop makes use of an arts-based method to help students to access and become aware of the tacit experiential realm and in this way open themselves up to their own imagination. It is essential to frame how thinkers on management and leadership have been inspired by art-based approaches for centuries (Adler, 2006).

There is a current bias towards quantitative forms of collecting and analysing experience in order to make the case for making decisions. This approach tends to omit findings from the informal experiential range, as they are so difficult to quantify. The subtext riding below the surface of this approach is that qualitative forms of analysis, accessing the realm of imagination and tacit experiential knowledge, cannot be trusted to formulate decisions.

Iain McGilchrist (2009) identified a number of current maladies connected to a loss of faith in the role of imagination in decision making. And Michael Polanyi cautioned further, "if we build up a culture recklessly on the assumption that only things are valid which can be broken

into parts – and that the putting together will take care of itself – we may be quite mistaken, and all kinds of things may follow.” (Polanyi, 1989, quoted in (Gill, 2015, np)).

The multi-page format presented here allows for more complex, sometimes contradictory notions to emerge and to be contained holistically in one object whilst retaining the individual character of the elements juxtaposed next to one another. This holistic format is a physical affordance aimed to assist the student to access and retain fragments captured from the imagination without requiring that they be applied necessarily in combination or for a particular function.

As the world of work adjusts to the VUCA framework, it becomes more and more relevant to educate management students in ways to adapt to a dynamically changing work context. For that, Edward T. Hall’s diagram of human activity is highly relevant. He deduced a system of understanding human activity in three porous layers: formal, informal, and technical (Hall, 1959). The formal layer is occupied by expectations, values and structures; those values and structures are shaped into more codified forms in the technical layer; and the informal layer is where shifts can happen and is the terrain of gesture, play, informal learning, and a sense of individual space and beliefs. This activity is situated in the informal layer.

## **Learning Objectives**

### **Learning Objective 1: Self-generated learning**

There are two levels of knowledge change expected from this exercise. The first deals with the making aspects of the exercise. By engaging physically in the process of making their own booklet, participants gain the means to create their own mini publication. They draw,

they fold, they make incisions, and in doing so they mark the territory of their own publication. This pre-making aspect of the session allows for the self-reflection element that follows to gain even more meaning, as they have produced the container of the self-reflection themselves. Even more importantly, they have gained the means to replicate the process by producing more templates in the future.

### **Learning Objective 2: Ability to self-reflect**

The second level of knowledge change expected from this exercise is that related to the self. The ability to look inward and evaluate one's own activity and way of moving through a process is imperative in the VUCA framework, as it is so volatile, so changeable by nature.

Learning how to iteratively check in with one's self through a process is a vital aspect of engaging fully and without hesitation in an uncertain and ambiguous process, such as the one in this activity.

### **Learning Objective 3: Permission to be imaginative**

The concept of an Imagination Workshop is that learners are given permission to return to playful learning often lost in high school. It is expected that the combination of making and self-reflection can release the student from rational thinking processes and allow for a pause or a quiet moment. It is the creation of space in the mind that triggers the mind to wander, and let loose, and allow images and thoughts to flow freely, such as those of the imagination. So many of our public, collaborative and group processes demand rational integration of thinking to be able to participate in them. This one is set apart by the fact that its main aim, its

sole goal, is to release the participant from expected and directed responses and instead demands that they generate their own, through the process of making.

### **Teaching topics relevant to this session**

This workshop approach has been applied in a wide range of modules which encourage the development of practical skills as an integral component in a wider apparently rational formal process., e.g. strategy under ambiguity, design thinking, resilience, creative leadership, reflective leadership and knowledge.

Teaching topics that are relevant in connection with this activity are an explanation of the VUCA framework and a discussion on tacit experiential knowledge, or if that is too high-level for the group, a discussion around intuitive leadership, and what it means to use it and how to recognise it when it emerges.

### **Exercise Overview**

We present here the design and outcome based on several 90 to 120 minutes online undergraduate workshops, with student numbers varying from 20 to 100.

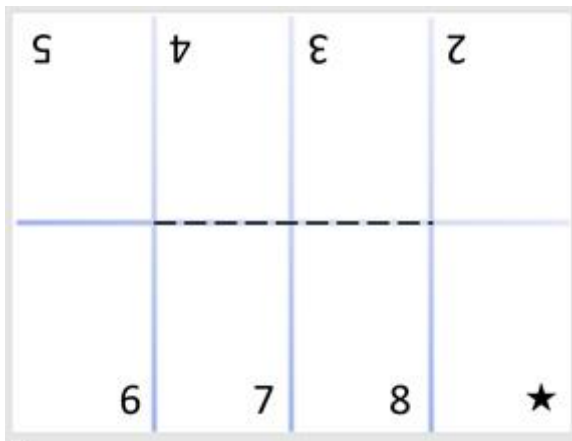
The method involves:

1. Using one page of standard printer copy paper
2. Pre-preparation: Making simple marks or abstract/random designs (drawing, painting) on the page
3. Folding it in a prescribed fashion
4. Making a simple cut
5. Re-folding it to produce an 8 page booklet, what we call a “zine”



6. Using some or all of the 8 pages during the rest of the workshop as a reflective journal to articulate reactions to specific themes, not just text but drawing, collage or even tea-bag mark making.
7. If willing, share individual pages or the whole booklet with others

This is the template needed to explain the folding



In Appendix A is a worked example for a creativity workshop; the images there need to be incorporated into a powerpoint with everyone online folding step by step.

ACTIVITY BRIEFING SCHEDULE (INDICATIVE TIMES)

	Key times	Online Imagination Workshop	Time for activity minutes
1	7 days in advance	The most minimum tools needed are a cutting edge and scissors, and in fact in an emergency, even this can be avoided through neat tearing. We always give one week's notice of the need for paper and simple art materials.	

1 day in advance	Reminder about paper in particular	
-10	Online to deal with queries re paper etc	
0:00	Welcome and check materials	2
	Quick poll	1
	Introduction to Imagination workshop	5
	Start making the zines via slide illustration	5
	Breakout group – use 4 out of 5 senses to imagine uses of zine	10
	Report back to main group – note responses	5
	How making enhances thinking	10
	Art-based, artful, and artistic: discuss	5
	Why drawing matters to leaders	10
1 hour approx	Breakout group: barriers to imagination	5
	Plenary: barriers to imagination	5
	Visual literacy for leaders	10
	Introduction to zines	5
	Individual activity: on one zine page	5
	Volunteers share pages [live and in VLE]	5
	Conclusion and debriefing	15

	1.5-2.0 hours	Close	

**Session Description**

If accepted for a 60 minutes MOBTS session, we would envisage running a stylised and highly compressed version of the Exercise outlined above, with a challenge that can be completed in no more than 15 minutes (including reflection).

<b>Activity -</b>	<b>Mins</b>	<b>Materials</b>	<b>Participant Engagement</b>
Advance Briefing in abstract and ideally via email to named participants	-	1 piece plain printer paper; scissors and simple art supply	
Introductions	5	-	
Briefing	15	PPT	
Intensive collectively-guided individual folding/drawing activity	10	Led step by step via PPT images	Hands-on; some will be willing to share

Reflection	5	5	Done via quiet time in zine
Debrief	10	Emphasis on overcoming problems and taking opportunities	
Q&A	15		Audience-interest driven

Based on our own experience and that of colleagues who have introduced non-standard learning methods, we developed some advice for those considering such methods, summarised in Appendix B.

**References**

Adler, N. J. (2006) The arts and leadership: Now that we can do anything, what will we do? Academy of Management Learning and Education, 5(4): 466-499.

Belfiore, E. and Bennett, O. (2008). The social impact of the arts: an intellectual history. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Dewey, J. (1934). Art as experience. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd.

Gill, S. (2015) Tacit Engagement: Beyond Interaction. London: Springer.

Hall, E. T. (1959) The Silent Language. New York: Doubleday.

McGilchrist, I. (2009) The master and his emissary: The divided brain and the making of the western world. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Piepmeyer, Alison (2008) Why zines matter: materiality and the creation of embodied community, American Periodicals; Volume: 18 Issue: 2; Pages: 213-238;



**APPENDIX A: Example notes for tutors**

**Theme: Creativity**

There are up to 8 planned activities over the two hours. We use the metaphor of an “Imagination Workshop” for the session. The workshop is built around an 8 page “zine”, which is made from a piece of card, folded and cut in a specific way to make a small booklet (no staples needed). The 8 pages of the zine correspond to the 8 possible activities and are a physical place for artful note taking and reflection. Each activity is briefed via Powerpoint.

Please note that copy paper can be used OK instead of card. The photo below shows to some extent that the heavier the card, the more difficult to fold but the more robust the structure.



At the start participants are asked to write their name with suitable embellishment in the front page of the journal, marked with a star.

The underlying theory for the creativity session is David A. Owens 6 reasons creativity is resisted in organisations.

Here are examples of activities

Page	Question	Time
1 *	Name with decoration	
2	What can be done with this small booklet?	
3	Barrier 1	
4	Barrier 2	
5	Barrier 3	
6	Barrier 4	
7	Barrier 5	
8	Barrier 6	

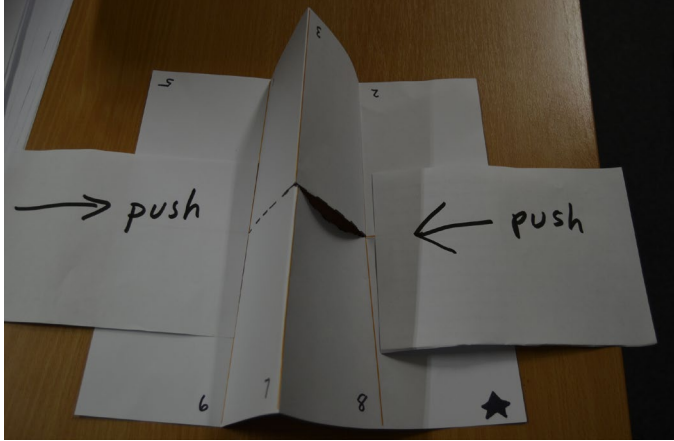
The entire reverse side can be used for final reflection on the overall lessons learned, with strong encouragement to be artful and use art-based methods, even if not aimed to be artistic.

**Zine Making Activity:** Card ready for folding and cutting along the dotted line to make a small zine.

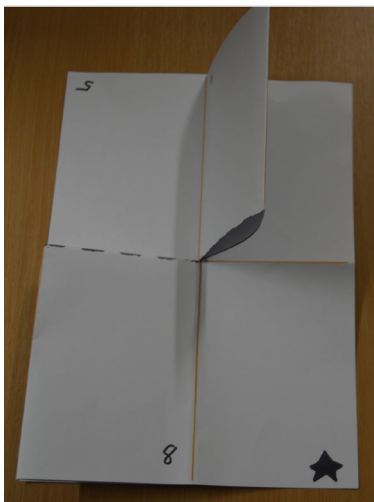
On the front of the zine are the 8 panes, the rear is empty, and can be used for a 9<sup>th</sup> activity.

In terms of the folding/making, this is explained in the Annex. In our experience, the least intuitive are the final steps, which we demonstrate with photos below (embed into Powerpoint).

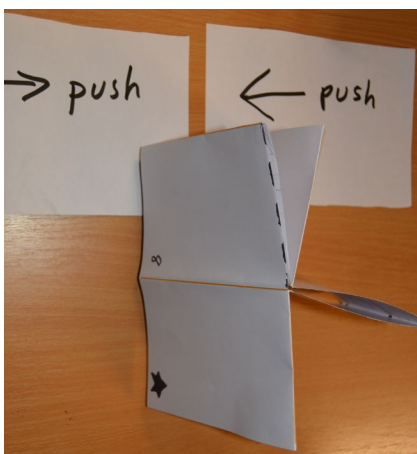
Push the mountain to create the diamond around the cut



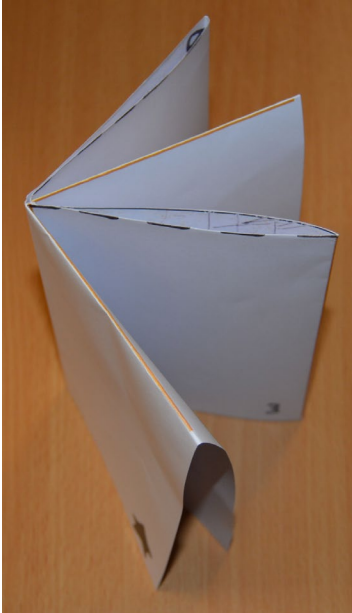
Fold right two columns over to the left



Fold vertically around the middle, making the star the front page



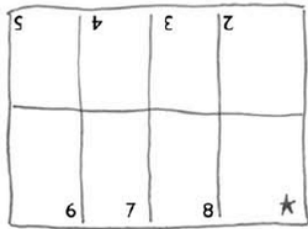
The zine is now ready





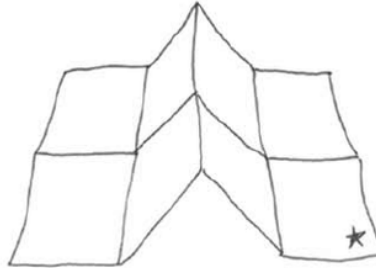
**Annex: Overall instructions**

**1** Fold a standard piece of white copy paper (8.5 x 11 inches) into eight even parts like so:

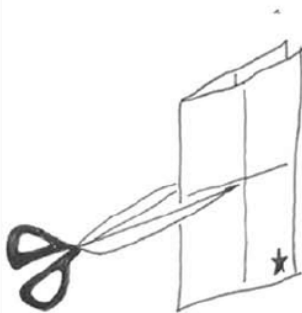


(the little star tells you where you are!)

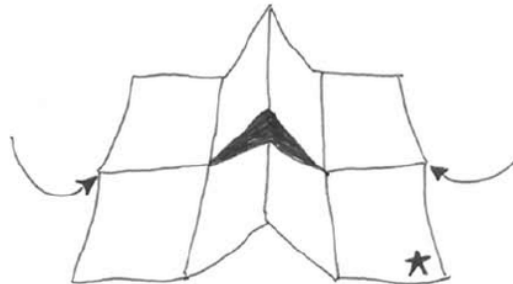
**2** Now crease those folds so the paper rests like this naturally:



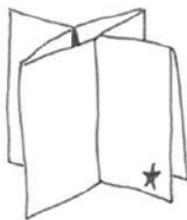
**3** Now fold the paper in half as below and cut it halfway through so it looks like "4"...



**4** Place the paper down like so. Now put your index fingers where the arrows are, lifting up while folding the sheet lengthwise over your index fingers...



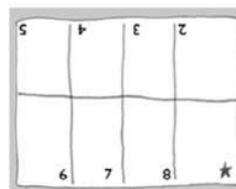
**5** During lengthwise folding in step "4" the middle of the sheet should buckle so that it can fold into this form naturally:



**6** And now you have your eight-page zine! Notice the "starred" page is the front page of the zine. Voila!



Be sure to keep a 5mm / one-fifth of an inch margin (shown in gray) around the *whole piece* of paper to ensure all contents of the zine will photocopy properly.



**Appendix B: Considerations when online**

**Thinking of developing an imagination workshop around the zine method?**

- 1 Make sure you have thoroughly tested eg with family, colleagues or researchers before live use with students.
- 2 When online, it is essential to give one week's notice of needed tools and materials, but also be ready to support those who have not read such instructions
- 3 Resist giving detailed individual feedback online, but do encourage the efforts, risk taking etc of the group as a whole