

The Terror of the Blank Page

AUTHOR(S): Erica Goldman

SUMMARY: In this session we will explore how structure can unlock creativity and provide the comfort we need in order to create and play.

GOALS:

- Participants will have a new understanding of how to use structure to lower the bar for entry to a new activity
- Participants will be able to use “limits” or parameters to spark creativity
- Participants will know a few activities helpful in making explicit the connections between constraints and creativity

AUDIENCE: Size: 10-40 participants. Ages: 10+

TIMING: 75 minutes

MATERIALS:

- 30 Circles handout included at the end of this document (1/person)
- Colored pencils
- Writing paper
- Pens
- Time keeping device

SET-UP: Place signs around the room with the list of phrases from the “origins of creativity” section; optionally put a strip of masking tape on the ground, long enough that everyone could stand on it; have an area where folks are comfortable sitting and writing and discussing.

SESSION TIMELINE

- 00:00-00:15 – *Introductions via 6-word stories*
- 00:15-00:30 – *How creative are you?/Origin of Creativity*
- 00:30-00:50 – *Creativity and Boundaries/30 Circles*
- 00:50-00:60 – *Comfort to Create*
- 00:60-00:75 – *Judaism/Creativity at Camp*

SESSION OUTLINE

00:00-00:15 – Introductions via 6-word stories

Welcome participants and tell them that to introduce themselves, they should take 5 minutes to compose a summary of who they are, kind of a biography, but in exactly six words: they are going to write “Six-word Bios,” (sometimes called Six-word Memoirs). Have writing materials ready; give them silence or quiet background music for 5 minutes while they write.

Have each person introduce themselves by saying their name, their camp, and their six words – and nothing else! You can note it is hard not to preamble or otherwise use filler like “ok, here is my bio, I actually wrote three and it was hard to choose...” etc. Just say: name, camp, six-word bio. Facilitator can go first but, if possible, it’s better to go last when the circle has come back around to you.

Now open the conversation for reflections by reflecting on something about that experience that *you* felt:

- “We had such a wide range of responses.”
- “It was hard for me to decide how to summarize my life in six words.”
- “I found it interesting that some of those felt like conversations and some felt like stories.”

If discussion doesn’t flow from that, you can of course ask questions:

- How did that feel?
- What did you notice?

You will often get more discussion by not asking questions but by making statements, surprisingly!

If the conversation becomes about creativity and boundaries, fine; if not, also fine.

You may want to mention the most famous “six-word story” that is apocryphally attributed to Ernest Hemingway: “For Sale: Baby shoes; never worn.” There is a legend that he won a bet that he couldn’t write a novel in six words with this story (but it’s not true!).

(Make sure the six-word stories are kept handy; you’ll return to them later.)

00:15-00:30 – How creative are you?/Origin of Creativity

Everybody up! You’re going to do two very short activities moving around the room:

First, acknowledge that we have not defined “creativity” or “creative.” Then invite participants to stand on a spectrum of where they would place themselves (nice if you have placed a piece of masking tape along the floor in advance, but not necessary) from “Very creative” to “Not creative” (it’s helpful to point out the middle-point or have a marker there as well). After they have found their spaces, ask some to share why they have chosen what they have chosen. *Note if different definitions of creativity emerge from their answers.*

Now direct participants to notice that you have placed around the room a number of signs (can just be marker on taped-up paper!) that include the following options:

- Gift from God/the “muses”
- From within
- It’s a skillset
- It’s a mindset
- It’s innate
- It’s the result of experience/s
- Magic
- Something else
- Madness

Invite them to think about the origin of creativity. Ask them to stand by the sign that best answers “where does creativity come from?” for them. After they have situated themselves, again ask some folks to share why they chose what they did or note what is interesting about what you see (if many are clustered at one answer, or none, for example).

00:30-00:50 – Creativity and Boundaries/30 Circles

Let’s start to bring the theme into focus. Open a conversation about what creativity is. You can share that general society’s understanding of or belief about creativity has changed over time: it was once thought to be a “gift from God” or the muses, an external event that happened to you, like a visitation.

Then during the Renaissance there was a shift to thinking it was something inside of you and either you had it or you didn’t, and those that did were the lucky ones, the geniuses. Modern psychology in the early 20th century started to conceive of it as a potentiality, something that could be nurtured or encouraged.

But how?

Give each participant one “30 Circles” sheet of paper and something to draw with. Ask them to turn as many of the blank circles as possible into recognizable objects in three minutes.

After three minutes, compare results and discuss (*Note that many people don’t finish*). Things to look for:

- Similarities? Differences?
- Are the ideas derivative (a basketball, a baseball, a volleyball) or distinct (a planet, a cookie, a happy face)?
- Did anyone “break the rules” and combine two or more (a snowman or a traffic light)?
- Were the rules explicit, or just assumed? If anyone asked about rules, how did it feel to not have them?

Ask participants to reflect on the six-word bio they wrote, what they did with their 30 circles, and where they placed themselves on the creativity spectrum. Does anyone who placed themselves on the “not creative” side feel that they managed to be creative in these activities?

Make it explicit: we sometimes think of creativity only as the ability to create something from nothing. However, it is often much more generative and freeing to think about creating something from *something*. Research actually suggests that innovation can be driven by embracing constraints (although of course when the constraints become too high, creativity is stifled).

[See “Why Constraints Are Good for Innovation” by Oguz A. Acar, Murat Tarakci, and Daan van Knippenberg, November 22, 2019, <https://hbr.org/2019/11/why-constraints-are-good-for-innovation> for more.]

Constraints can also push for more and better output. Given a lot of freedom and a prompt to create something, people generally go with the first idea they have (and stop there). With more constraints, they come up with multiple ideas/solutions/etc. The six-word story is powerful and fun and interesting *because* it is deeply constrained; if the prompt was just to write a bio or summarize your life any way you want, the results would be entirely different, probably less interesting in a lot of ways, and the thought of doing it potentially totally paralyzing to many people: Where to start? What to leave in or out? How to make it creative? The rules/boundaries/constraints allow the creativity to flow in that case... and sometimes it can be as simple as a little tweak to make that happen as well.

For example:

Have everyone return to their six-word stories and go around reading them again, but this time, backward (word by word). Interesting? Creative? Funny? Nonsensical? Profound? Allow for conversation about what happened with that new “rule.”

You may pose the thought that most everyone loves games, and certainly games play a big role at camp. But what is a game, other than reality constrained by wild and various rules?

00:50-00:60 – Comfort to Create

Return to the topic of constraints being more freeing than the potential paralysis caused by the blank page or absolute freedom. For whom does this resonate? What helps each of us feel safe or comfortable enough to be creative? Trying new things involves risk; what allows us to take risks? How much is trust involved? What changes the stakes? Invite everyone to share what they might need to be creative; invite everyone to share what they might give to allow others to be creative.

00:60-00:75 – Judaism/Creativity at Camp

Ask who thinks Judaism is creative and who thinks it is constrained, and examples of why folks respond the way they do. Allow for an open conversation; a direction that might emerge is the way that ritual plays a tremendous role in many actualizations of Judaism (blessings! Shabbat! Prayer! The calendar!) and yet it’s enormously creative within those rituals. Some might feel Judaism is really all about constraints (kashrut!) but also about the ways these constraints are freeing.

Now: what does this have to do with camp?

One goal of camp is often to allow campers to try new things, including encouraging them to be creative in how they think of themselves. How does [your] camp do this? Are campers given what they need to feel safe and comfortable in being creative? How are boundaries used to foster creativity? How can a counselor use boundaries to foster creativity, lower the bar to entry for a new activity or idea, and encourage a camper to be creative? Discuss!

BRINGING IT TO YOUR CAMP

For variations on these activities, think again about how games are basically just life with intense constraints, and make some up. Make bunk cleanup fun by inventing the morning creativity challenge: every day, a different camper must impose a different “rule” – everyone can only pick up items using two fingers on each hand; each camper is responsible for the items that start with the same letter as their first name; they must speak in rhyming couplets while cleaning; etc. Rules for the game itself: everyone must be able to participate, and the bunk must get cleaned in a certain amount of time. Explicitly make the connection between “constraints” and creativity to allow campers to recognize their creativity even when they are better at making “something from something” rather than “something from nothing.”

Here's one more related activity that could be used on this same theme:

Divide campers into small groups of 3-4 people.

- **Step 1:** Ask the groups to take 5 minutes to define the term CAMP. Encourage them to compare ideas and create a definition that the whole group agrees upon.
- **Step 2:** Give each group a post-it note. Then explain they will have 2 minutes to narrow down their definition of camp into a tweet of 140 characters or fewer (or 40 words) and it must fit on the post-it note.
- **Step 3:** For the final round, the group now has 1 minute to transform their Camp tweet definition into a work of art. It can be in any domain – such as a dance, a rap, or a drawing. But it must be completed and ready to perform or share in 1 minute or less.

Explore how the deeply constrained rules and timeframe actually allowed wide variety and creativity to emerge.

30 Circles Challenge

