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Teaching Creativity: A 21st Century Reentry Skill

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Teaching Creativity: A 21st Century Reentry Skill

by

Cynthia M. Sepulveda

An Abstract of a Project
in
Creative Studies

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Science

May 2021

Buffalo State
The State University of New York, Buffalo
Department of Creative Studies

ABSTRACT OF PROJECT

Teaching Creativity: A 21st Century Reentry Skill

This project reflects a search to identify the creativity tools that will enable returning citizens to solve problems and make better decisions so that they can live satisfying and productive lives outside of prison walls. My personal creative journey through this process contributed to the content, highlighting the necessity of resiliency as an important skill for returning citizens who have spent large amounts of time incarcerated. Improv theater was identified as a useful tool to encourage resiliency in a fun, non-threatening way.

Keywords: creativity, reentry, improv, inmate, prison, CPS



Cynthia Sepulveda

5/19/2021

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Dates of Approval:

5/19/2021

Susan Keller-Mathers

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5/19/2021


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Student

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Jeanne McGough, the second keeper of my sanity, I am so grateful to have you in my life, dear friend. Your ability to calm me in times of crisis and talk me off the ledge is a testament to the serenity you live every day. I aspire to get there someday.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT TITLE PAGE	I
ABSTRACT OF THE PROJECT	II
TITLE PAGE	III
SIGNATORY PAGE	IV
COPYRIGHT NOTICE	V
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	VI
TABLE OF CONTENTS	VII
SECTION ONE: BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT	1
PURPOSE AND DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT	1
OUTCOME	2
PERSONAL LEARNING GOALS	2
RATIONALE FOR SELECTION	3
SECTION TWO: PERTINENT LITERATURE & RESOURCES	5
INTRODUCTION	5
ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY	5
OTHER RESOURCES	12
SECTION THREE: PROCESS PLAN	13
PLAN TO ACHIEVE GOALS AND OUTCOMES	13
EVALUATION PLAN	14
SECTION FOUR: OUTCOMES	15
GOALS OF THE COURSE	20
LIST OF CLASSES	20
<i>Lesson One – Intro to Creativity and an Exercise in Visualization</i>	21
<i>Lesson Two - Reframing Failure and Intro to Improv</i>	21
<i>Lesson Three – Generating Alternatives</i>	22
<i>Lesson Four – Challenging Assumptions</i>	23
<i>Lesson Five – Intro to Creative Problem Solving and Clarifying</i>	24
<i>Lesson Six – Brainstorming and Supporting Tools</i>	24
<i>Lesson Seven – Converging Tools</i>	25
<i>Lesson Eight – CPS Facilitation Practice</i>	25
<i>Lesson Nine - Crash Course in CPS Tools</i>	25
<i>Lesson Ten - Putting it All Together</i>	26
SECTION FIVE: CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS	28
REFERENCES	29

SECTION ONE: BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

Purpose and Description of Project

Ninety-five percent of inmates will eventually be released from prison (Hughes & Wilson, 2002). If current trends continue then within 3 years an estimated 68% of released prisoners will be rearrested, 79% will be rearrested within 6 years, and 83% within 9 years (Alper et al., 2018, p. 1). Unemployment, housing instability, mental illness and substance abuse are all contributing factors to recidivism, which is the likelihood of a criminal to reoffend (Zamble & Quinsey, 2001).

The purpose of my project is to examine the ways to prepare inmates for reentry into society by teaching them how to think creatively in order to solve problems and make better decisions. The training will first focus on helping inmates create a vision for their desired future state and eventually a developed plan which does not involve crime. Training in de Bono's Lateral Thinking technique (1970) will help overcome the cognitive inflexibility that plagues so many, by restructuring criminal patterns of thinking. New thinking coupled with a vision and plan for the future will hopefully lead to better employment outcomes and a long happy life outside of prison walls.

There has been little research done on creativity or creative problem solving training in prison or in reentry programs and none of it was performed here in the United States that I could find. Thinking for a Change, a popular cognitive behavioral program designed by the National Institute of Justice, dedicates five classes to problem solving. The recidivism rate for those who went through the program was 23% compared to the control group of 36% (Lowenkamp et al., 2009, p. 142), which isn't extremely effective considering the depth and breadth of the program as a whole. The program consists of 25 lessons given in 1-2 hour sessions (Bush et al., 2011).

Research has shown that teaching creative problem solving (CPS) tools to truant youth resulted in lowering truancy scores (Animasahun 2013), reduced criminal behavior scores of inmates on assessment (Animasahun, 2014) (lower score indicates less likely to reoffend in each case) and reduced recidivism when taught as part of a life-skills training course in an offender reentry program (McCluskey et al, 1995; Place et al, 2000). An increase in resilience should lead to improved coping skills.

Outcome

Informing my thinking and formulating aspects of a series of workshops which will be designed using the Torrance Incubation Model (TIM), (Torrance & Safter, 1990) and the SAVI (Somatic, Auditory, Visual, Intellectual) approach to learning (Meier, 2000) to teach the Thinking Skills Model of creative problem solving (Puccio, Murdock & Mance, 2005), in a fun, engaging way. Traditional CPS tools will be taught supplemented by improv exercises in an effort to encourage fluency and build resiliency. The major goals of this project are to build problem solving skills and thereby creative self-efficacy, and to increase resilience and improve decision making skills. The workshops will be based on the research results of creativity training with at-risk and justice involved individuals as well as information obtained from interviews I conducted with people who work with inmates and returning citizens.

Personal Learning Goals

My personal learning goals are pretty simple in their description but incredibly difficult for me in practice.

Keeping open and resisting premature closure are always a challenge for me because as a perfectionist I love templates and things already worked out for me so that I can create the “perfect product” guaranteed to do *everything* I’m intending for it to do in its first iteration. This

is impossible of course, unless I use every lesson and technique, as designed by the original creators of the content. While the workshops will be based on the sound research and products created by these seminal scholars, I need to strive to not always take the easy way out.

On that note, it is difficult to create something original when you're accustomed to following the path set by someone else. I'm hoping to stretch myself in order to come up with meaningful ways to deliver my training.

I'm hoping to learn to "elaborate, but not excessively" by "highlighting the essence" so that my workshops will not a play by play, word for word account of how each class should go. That is my default state and doing that at this time would make it impossible for me to complete this assignment in the allotted time.

I want to have fun doing this. I want to really enjoy the learning and creating aspects of developing this project. Last but not least, I'm hoping to make it through this entire process with some remainder of a sense of humor and my wits intact.

Rationale for Selection

Beginning with personal reasons, there are many, and it difficult to list them in an order of importance but the themes seem to boil down to justice and equity, or injustice and inequity I should say. First off, I'm a champion of the underdog who has always walked to the beat of my own drummer. Most people don't know, but also don't care that our justice system is unjust because they have no personal involvement. When I see injustice anywhere it infuriates me and saddens me at the same time. Those of us who advocate for prison reform are met with commentary such as, "Don't do the crime if you can't do the time" or, "Well at least they got three hots and a cot for free while I have to work for those things."

Justice is not blind. How else do you explain holding Kalief Browder, a 16-year-old black teen for *three years* for an allegedly stolen backpack, before dropping the charges (Gonnerman, 2014), but giving Brock Turner, a 20-year-old white Stanford University student and unanimously convicted rapist a prison sentence of just six *months*, only three of which he actually served (Grinberg & Shoichet, 2016).

Cash bail set at \$3,000, an amount unattainable for Browder's family is what allowed Kalief to be detained in Rikers Island in New York City, considered to be one of the *worst prisons in the world* (Despres, 2017; Lee, 2019), while Brock Turner was released the same day after posting \$150,000 cash bail (Associated Press, 2016).

In 2016 after my second layoff and fifth job in less than five years, I made a decision that I was going to begin the next stage of my life. My son had become a self-sufficient adult and I no longer had to worry about providing for him so I decided I was going to seek a new path that would satisfy my soul. I had just returned to school and while I didn't know how I was going to do it, I knew that I would be pursuing my passion, which is helping justice involved individuals. I dyed my hair purple as a symbol of this new direction, and to ensure that I would not return to the bank or any other corporate job.

Many incarcerated people come from impoverished neighborhoods where crime is rampant and dealing drugs or robbery can seem the only means of getting ahead. Creativity training can help inmates generate more options and make better decisions for their release as well as arm them with a 21st century skill, which was deemed one of the most difficult to find by human resource professionals (Gray, 2016). Since I cannot overhaul our entire criminal justice system by myself, I'm hoping that this training helps to give justice involved individuals hope for a future and an edge in the workplace.

SECTION TWO: PERTINENT LITERATURE & RESOURCES

Introduction

A search for a mix of the terms creativity, creative problem solving, inmates and prison returns very little related to CPS and justice involved individuals. Animasahun's studies of SCAMPER training with Nigerian inmates (2014) and lateral thinking training with truant youths (2013) offer promising theoretical results with reductions in criminal behavior and truancy scores, but did not go as far as to report if those scores resulted in changes in behavior. The only study that I could find that provided real world results with this population was Place, McCluskey, McCluskey & Treffinger's (2011) study of the Second Chance Project where native Canadian inmates received CPS training in addition to other reentry assistance. Additional services consisted of counseling, job readiness skills and on the job work experience. Of the 31 inmates who received the intervention treatment, only 12 reoffended compared to 28 of the 31 in the control group, suggesting that a comprehensive program that includes CPS training will reduce recidivism.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

The Actors' Gang. (2019, November 25). *Prison project*. Retrieved February 21, 2021, from

<https://theactorsgang.com/theprisonproject/>

Alper, M., Derose, M. R., & Markman, J. (2018). *2018 Update on prisoner recidivism: A 9-year follow-up period (2005-2014)* (NCJ 250975). U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Bureau of Justice Statistics is the government agency tasked with the principal federal agency responsible for all statistics related to criminal activity including measuring crime, criminal victimization, criminal offenders, victims of crime, correlates of crime,

and the operation of criminal and civil justice systems at the federal, state, tribal, and local levels. This report examines the recidivism patterns of former prisoners during a 9-year follow-up period.

Animasahun, R. (2013). Teaching thinking: Using a creativity technique for the eradication of truancy among students to enhance the success of universal basic education in Nigeria.

British Journal of Education, Society & Behavioural Science, 3, 560-573.

<https://doi.org/10.9734/bjesbs/2013/4399>

Lateral thinking creativity training was taught to truant youth in the hopes that it would result in better thinking and decision making and therefore reduced recidivism. Results indicated a reduced tendency towards truancy as indicated by a reduction in truancy scores upon assessment.

Animasahun, R. A. (2014). Effects of SCAMPER creativity training in the prevention of social problems among selected inmates in Nigeria prisons. *Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies*, 5(3), 301 - 305.

Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies, 5(3), 301 - 305.

https://journals.co.za/content/sl_jeteraps/5/3/EJC155553#abstract_content

Inmates in a Nigeria prison were taught SCAMPER creativity technique to study effects in the prevention of social problems. The training resulted in a reduction of criminal behavior scores for the experimental group as indicated on the Crime Behavior Factor-Battery (CBFB). The author suggests inmates should be subject to creativity training in order to reduce criminal tendencies.

Associated Press. (2016, June 11). *Timeline of significant dates in the life of Brock Turner*.

Yahoo.com. Retrieved May 16, 2021, from

https://web.archive.org/web/20160612134717if_/https://www.yahoo.com/news/timeline-significant-dates-life-brock-turner-181952384.html

Bush, J., Glick, B., Taymans, J., & Guevara, M. (2011). *Thinking for a change: Integrated cognitive behavior change program* (3.1st ed.). U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections.

Cognitive behavior change program provided in prison. Twenty five lessons are focused on cognitive self-change, social skills, and problem solving skills.

CGTN America. (2015, April 25). *Tim Robbins' actors' gang helps prison inmates* [Video].

YouTube. <https://youtu.be/UJfnLPWdWuA>

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2009). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. HarperCollins.

De Bono, E. (1970). *Lateral thinking: Creativity step by step*. Harper & Row.

Lateral thinking is a manner of problem-solving intended to break traditional patterns of thinking. It encourages the seeking of new ideas for the sake of new ideas, even in the face of a promising one. It is "the process of using information to bring about creativity and insight restructuring" (p. 7).

Despres, R. (2017, January 25). *10 of the worst prisons in the world*. Goliath.

<https://www.goliath.com/random/10-of-the-worst-prisons-in-the-world/>

Durose, M. R., Cooper, A. D., & Snyder, H. N. (2014). *Recidivism of prisoners released in 30 states in 2005: Patterns from 2005 to 2010* (NCJ24405). U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

<https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/rprts05p0510.pdf>

Edland, A., & Svenson, O. (1993). Judgment and decision making under time pressure: Studies and findings. In O. Svenson & A. J. Maule (Eds.), *Time pressure and stress in human*

judgment and decision making (pp. 27-40). Springer Science & Business Media, LLC.

Studies show that time pressure increased the tendency to lock into one problem solving strategy and decreased the likelihood that alternative solutions would be sought.

Gonnerman, J. (2014, October 6). *Before the law*. The New Yorker.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/10/06/before-the-law>

Gray, A. (2016, January 19). *The 10 skills you need to thrive in the fourth Industrial Revolution*.

World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/the-10-skills-you-need-to-thrive-in-the-fourth-industrial-revolution/>

Lists complex problem solving, critical thinking and creativity as the top 3 skills in 2020.

Grinberg, E., & Shoichet, C. E. (2016, September 2). *Brock Turner released after 3 months in jail*. CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2016/09/02/us/brock-turner-release-jail/index.html>

Haney, C. (2001, March 23). *The psychological impact of incarceration: Implications for post-prison adjustment*. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. <https://aspe.hhs.gov/basic-report/psychological-impact-incarceration-implications-post-prison-adjustment#II>

Describes the impact of incarceration on decision-making due to the reliance on structure.

Diminished self-worth and personal value and social withdrawal and isolation are also issues to be dealt with by any reentry program.

Hoomans, J. (2015, March 20). 35,000 decisions: The great choices of strategic leaders. *Roberts Wesleyan College*. <https://go.roberts.edu/leadingedge/the-great-choices-of-strategic-leaders>

Describes the difference in the number of decisions an adult makes in comparison to a child. The discrepancy in typical adult and incarcerated adult ability to make decisions

was mentioned by many people I interviewed who work in reentry programs. Although the exact figures cited by individual, the fact that the difference is about a hundredfold is what was exemplified.

Hughes, T. A., & Wilson, D. J. (2003). *Reentry trends in the United States*. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

<https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/reentry.pdf>

Isaksen, S. G., Dorval, K. B., & Treffinger, D. J. (1994). *Creative approaches to problem solving*. Kendall/Hunt.

Isaksen, S. G., Dorval, K. B., & Treffinger, D. J. (1998). *Creative problem solver's toolbox: Basic tools and resources*. Creative Problem Solving Group.

Kegan, R., & Lahey, L. L. (2009). *Immunity to change: How to overcome it and unlock the potential in yourself and your organization*. Harvard Business Press.

In this book the authors help us to identify our hidden competing commitments which lead to our big assumptions that keep us from our goals. By identifying our big assumptions and challenging them, we are able to overcome our hidden commitments and unlock our full potential.

Kung, V. (2019, October 1). *7 powerful life lessons from improv that changed my life*.

Under30Experiences. <https://www.under30experiences.com/blog/7-powerful-life-lessons-from-improv-that-changed-my-life>

Kurtzberg, T. R. (1998). Creative thinking, a cognitive aptitude, and integrative joint gain: A study of negotiator creativity. *Creativity Research Journal*, 11(4), 283-293.

https://doi.org/10.1207/s15326934crj1104_2

Modified tasks from the Thinking Creatively with Words section of the Torrance Test for

Creative Thinking (Torrance, 1966/1990) were used to measure fluency, flexibility, originality of pairs. High scores predicted joint gain in negotiation. The higher creativity score variable was an even higher predictor of joint gain than the combined score of both parties suggesting that just one creative person can maximize the gain for both parties.

Lee, A. (2020, February 16). *The 20 worst prisons in the world in 2019*. Money Inc. Retrieved May 16, 2021, from <https://moneyinc.com/worst-prisons-in-the-world/>

Lowenkamp, C. T., Hubbard, D., Makarios, M. D., & Latessa, E. J. (2009). A quasi-experimental evaluation of thinking for a change. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 36(2), 137-146. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854808328230>

Results of study indicate that participants in Thinking for a Change had significantly lower recidivism than those not exposed to the program.

Meier, D. (2000). *The accelerated learning handbook: A creative guide to designing and delivering faster, more effective training programs*. McGraw-Hill.

Miller, B., Vehar, J., Firestien, R., Thurber, S., & Nielsen, D. (2011). *Creativity unbound: An introduction to creative process* (5th ed.). Foursight, LLC.

Parnes, S. J., & Noller, R. B. (1972). Applied creativity: The creative studies project: Part II-- Results of the two-year program. *The Journal of Creative Behavior*, 6(1), 11-22. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2162-6057.1972.tb00903.x>

Seminal article proving that creativity skills can be taught. The article cites student feedback as to the many ways that the training impacted their lives outside of the classroom.

Patel, A. (2017, October 27). *9 life lessons I learnt from doing improv*. Medium. https://medium.com/@Asis_Patel/9-life-lessons-improv-taught-me-93937bce217b

Place, D. J., McCluskey, A. L., McCluskey, K. W., & Treffinger, D. J. (2000). The second chance project: Creative approaches to developing the talents of at-risk native inmates.

The Journal of Creative Behavior, 34(3), 165-174. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2162-6057.2000.tb01209.x>

Puccio, G. J., & Avarello, L. (1995). Exploring the connections between creativity and students at-risk: Implications for intervention programs. In K. W. McCluskey, P. A. Baker, S. C. O'Hagan, & D. J. Treffinger (Eds.), *Lost prizes: Development and problem solving with at-risk students*. Center for Creative Learning.

A chapter of this book is dedicated to the Second Chance Project, a Canadian program in which native Canadian inmates received training in CPS as part of a comprehensive reentry program. The treatment group recidivated at a lower rate than the control group.

Puccio, G. J., Firestien, R. L., Coyle, C., & Masucci, C. (2006). A review of the effectiveness of CPS training: A focus on workplace issues. *Creativity and Innovation Management*, 15, 19-33. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8691.2006.00366.x>

Synthesizes research literature that reports on the impact of CPS training programs that involved professionals or students working on real business challenges.

Puccio, G. J., Murdock, M. C., & Mance, M. (2005). Current developments in creative problem solving for organizations: A focus on thinking skills and styles. *The Korean Journal of Thinking & Problem Solving*, 15, 43-76.

Explains the Thinking Skills Model of Creative Problem Solving as a teaching, training and learning model of CPS.

Rapkin, M. (2016, November). *Tim Robbins's prison improv classes make inmates less likely to re-offend*. New York Magazine. <https://nymag.com/vindicated/2016/11/tim-robbins-proves-acting-classes-for-inmates-work.html>

Rhodes, M. (1961). An analysis of creativity. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 42, 305-310.

Seminal article defining the four P's of creativity, person, process, product and press.

Stark Insider. (2014, January 24). *The art of improv - acting techniques & improv games* [Video]. YouTube.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IBV8oVxXUM8&ab_channel=StarkInsider

Host Loni Stark participates in a series of improv acting games with the cast at BATS Improv in San Francisco where failure is celebrated as part of the process.

Thurber, S., & Schoen, R. (2016). *FourSight tool cards: Catalysts for clarifying, ideating, developing and implementing*. FourSight Group LLC.

Torrance, E. P., & Safter, H. T. (1990). *The incubation model of teaching: Getting beyond the aha!* Bearly, Ltd.

Treffinger, D. J., Isaksen, S. G., & Dorval, K. B. (1994). *Creative problem solving: An introduction* (2nd ed.). Center For Creative Learning.

Zamble, E., & Quinsey, V. L. (2001). *The criminal recidivism process*. Cambridge University Press. <https://b-ok.cc/book/860430/57943c>

Other Resources

I will review personal communications with interviewees from my Creativity in Reentry independent study for information regarding delivery of an education program to an audience in prison and those preparing for release.

SECTION THREE: PROCESS PLAN

Plan to Achieve Goals and Outcomes

- Review de Bono's Lateral Thinking techniques and Six Thinking Hats as possible supplemental learning to TSM
- Create learning outcomes
- Choose which tools should be taught for the desired results.
- Read more on general curriculum design
- Consult with Mayo re: Lego play, improv
- Review previous eight interviews for insight on what might help me construct my curriculum taking the prison experience into consideration.
- Create Curriculum Outline
- Create Curriculum

Project Timeline

Week	Dates	Goal	Due Date
3	2/15-2/21	Submit concept paper draft Begin review of interviews and other literature	2/15/2021
4	2/22-2/28	Complete review of de Bono Continue interview reviews	
5	3/1 - 3/7	Consult with Mayo re: improv exercises	
6	3/8 - 3/14	Identify learning goals and tools to be taught	
7	3/15 - 3/21	Rough outline of Curriculum	
8	3/22 - 3/28	Sections 1-3 complete	3/22/2021
9	3/29 - 4/4	Work on curriculum	

10	4/5 - 4/11	Continue work on curriculum	
11	4/12 - 4/18	Draft to class	4/12/2021
12	4/19 - 4/25	Sections 4-6 due to Sue Curriculum Complete	4/19/2021 4/25/2021
13	4/26 - 5/2	Entire draft for Zoom	
14	5/3 - 5/9	Complete document due Submit to Digital Commons	5/3/2021 5/9/2021
15	5/10 - 5/16	Visual Presentation	5/10/2021

Evaluation Plan

The completed curriculum will be submitted to three experts in the field of creativity for feedback on content and method of instruction as well as two people who teach incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people for feedback on teaching this non-traditional student population.

SECTION FOUR: OUTCOMES

The intent of my project was to create a curriculum but life doesn't always go according to plan. During my creative journey I spent a lot of time exploring the literature and talking with both returning citizens and the people who teach inmates and returning citizens. Each time that I sat down to work on the curriculum, I would reflect on what I learned and play with the pieces but that always seemed to lead me to new directions to explore. Eventually, with the help of Professor Keller-Mathers, I came to the realization that I still have so much to explore in order to put together the type of training that I intend to create, but what follows is a description of the journey thus far, the lessons learned and a description of the skills and tools I believe will be most beneficial to those reentering society after release from prison.

As I worked on this project, the culmination of my education at the International Center for Studies in Creativity, I had a tremendous amount of difficulty. My desire to work with justice-involved individuals stems from my belief that everyone deserves a second chance and the realization that some people did not even have an actual first chance. I believe in the capacity for individual change where it is wanted. I believed that creative problem solving training would give returning citizens the tools that they need to solve the problems they encounter upon release from prison and so I reviewed the literature to see what has worked before. I consulted with people who work with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals in a variety of capacities so that I might put together the best possible training to achieve my desired results. What I hadn't considered at the beginning of all of this, but came to realize somewhat first-hand during my creative journey, is what a frightening experience reentry can be.

I am friends with a man who served 30 years in prison on a wrongful conviction before he was granted parole and eventually exonerated. I met him the day that he was released into the

halfway house where I was working at the time, and for the last three years I have watched him struggle to gain footing in a world that had become mostly foreign to him. In September, I became friends with another man who just returned from five years in prison, but who throughout his 53 years on this planet, has spent over 20 of them incarcerated. A majority of the time that he was not incarcerated, he was often in substance abuse treatment or other mental health facilities. My first friend struggled stoically, but my other friend admitted his fears of living in the free world outright.

Since what was my third layoff from JPMorgan Chase in 2016, I've held 10 months of conventional employment, which was working the overnight shift at a halfway house here in Connecticut. I did some gig work caring for animals, and for the last couple of years I worked mostly part time as a delivery driver in an effort to minimize stress and other demands, in order to focus my attention on my education and my lofty goal of saving the world. With my educational experience about to come to an end, I'm going to have to use all of my new skills to get busy on that "saving-the-world thing" and that realization has taken its toll on me this entire academic year. I know what needs to be done, and yet, it has more often than not, been very difficult to do it.

There were times when I sat down to work and I would just get "in flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009), but a majority of the time, sitting down to do homework filled me with utter dread and anxiety, if not the symptoms of a full on panic attack. I engaged in many procrastination behaviors in order to avoid those feelings, berated myself for wasting time that I really needed in order to get work done, which in turn would make me feel worse - making it even *more* difficult to get started on work again. I'm dealing with the challenge of the next step of my life while still living out in the real world. I have the security of a roof over my head, food

in the fridge, money in the bank, a job and a car and yet the anxiety that I have been feeling has been oftentimes debilitating. Imagine dealing with the challenge of the next step of your life with none of that in place. Then add to it the feeling of being dropped onto another planet after surviving years in a war zone and the outcome of how well you handle that challenge will dictate whether you go back to the war zone.

Creative problem solving tools can help returning citizens navigate these challenges but I can see now that they come up somewhat short in mentally preparing people for the myriad of challenges they're about to face. I think I found a solution to bridge that gap.

I was introduced to improv during my first summer at ICSC by one of my cohort members who is an improv teacher in the Netherlands. It was fun, but for a perfectionist, also terrifying. Although my experience was extremely limited, I imagined the ways that it appeared it could be useful for lubing up the brain to generate many ideas and for this reason I decided I wanted to incorporate a few improv exercises into my training to keep things fun while promoting my goals of increasing fluency, flexibility, originality and elaboration in furtherance of the ultimate goals of being able to solve problems and make better decisions. What I ultimately learned though, is that taught in the right way, the benefits go far beyond the ability to generate ideas. Not only does it aid in idea generation, but it fosters resilience and encourages growth and healing.

One of the first videos I found in my quest to learn about improv, showed people waving their arms in the air and yelling, "I FAILED!" in a celebratory manner (Stark Insider, 2014). This apparent radical acceptance of failure made improv appear to be elemental to building resiliency and so I dug deeper.

In an article called *7 Powerful Life Lessons from Improv that Changed my Life*, author Victor Kung (2019) explains how the concept of “yes and...” encourages us to see where another person is coming from and how we can use this to build on the work of others. He discusses how he was able to get “comfortable with the uncomfortable” and if that doesn’t sound like reason enough to embrace the use of improv, he concludes, “Improv has taught me to embrace failure, be a better listener, live in the present, go with the flow and more.”

Asis Patel, in his article *9 Life Lessons I Learnt from Doing Improv* (2017), lists “don’t let slipups stop you” and “don’t worry about messing up” as two of his life lessons bolstering my theory about how improv can increase resiliency. While his lesson “shut the fuck up and listen” sounds like sage relationship advice, it’s actually about the importance of really staying in the moment so you know when, and how, to jump into a scene so that it works. The ability to be mindful in daily life will no doubt have a positive impact on relationships.

The benefits seemed to go on and on so I thought I was a genius to come up with the idea of training inmates in improv in order to build creative skills and resiliency. This was actually my second genius concept – the first being to train inmates to become entrepreneurs - and just as it happened those many years ago, I found out that someone else had my brilliant idea first, and was doing it really, *really* well.

The Actors’ Gang Prison Project is the brainchild of Sabra Williams, a British actress who cofounded the Prison Project with Tim Robbins (Rapkin, 2016). The Prison Project teaches improv at a number of California prisons with some amazing results. It boasts a recidivism rate of just 10.6% and has resulted in an 89% decrease in disciplinary reports for participants who have completed the program (The Actors’ Gang, 2019).

The success of the program is unrelated to my theory of how improv would improve fluency, flexibility, originality and elaboration resulting in more ideas and increased problem solving and decision making skills. It is instead rooted in the program's focus of teaching participants to express all of their emotions, including fear and sadness. In an interview, Robbins said that a warden, and correctional officers at one of their program locations, indicated that the program actually changed the culture of the prison (CGTN America, 2015).

I had the opportunity to interview John Dich, a graduate of the Actors' Gang Prison Project who explained how improv exercises taught him to be less impulsive by learning to stop, breathe, and think about what he was going to say (personal communication, March 10, 2021). This was not surprising to learn after my deep dive study of improv but when he went on to emphasize the power of vulnerability, that was unexpected. I asked him to explain how being vulnerable helps inmates.

He stated that prior to taking the class, he was afraid to look at his past to discover what went wrong with his childhood, but the class allowed him to begin dealing with those traumas. He stated that he was able to stop blaming others, take responsibility for his own actions, and finally forgive himself. His ability to articulate working through these traumas and accepting responsibility for his criminal behavior impressed the parole board resulting in his eventual release.

All of this made clear that improv has the power to do so much more than just lube the gears of ideation. I thought that by teaching inmates to "look at things another way" they might apply that outside of a brainstorming session to improve their relationships, but the ability to take responsibility for one's actions will also go a long way towards repairing relationships damaged

by incarceration. Therefore, it's my intention to learn more about improv and work to incorporate it in a much more prominent way than I had originally intended.

My original intention was to use improv exercises for fun and raising energy with the benefit of building skills in fluency, flexibility, originality, elaboration and resilience but now I will seek out exercises and scenarios designed to foster the emotional growth evident in the Actors' Gang Prison Project. Improv work will begin most, if not all of the classes each day, before we proceed with CPS tool training. Based on my informed thinking regarding what is central to an effective training program for this population, I've set forth the goals for the course and the content to be taught below.

Goals of the Course

1. Create a vision for the future which does not involve crime
2. Break patterns of thinking, letting go of self-imposed constraints and limiting beliefs
3. Increase problem solving skills
4. Build resiliency
5. Improve decision making skills
6. Improve the creativity skills of fluency, flexibility, originality and elaboration
7. Build creative self-efficacy
8. Additionally, the following byproducts are important - improved communication skills and improved relationships

List of Classes

1. Intro to Creativity and an Exercise in Visualization
2. Reframing Failure and Intro to Improv
3. Generating Alternatives

4. Challenging Assumptions
5. Intro to Creative Problem Solving and Clarifying
6. Brainstorming and Supporting Tools
7. Converging Tools
8. CPS Facilitation Practice
9. Crash Course in CPS Tools
10. Putting it all Together

Lesson One – Intro to Creativity and an Exercise in Visualization

I will give some background as to how I got on this path myself in order to begin building trust. This first class will use an improv exercise called Alliteration Introduction for everyone to introduce themselves. I will discuss creativity as a life skill and explain its usefulness in reentry. Creativity concepts will be introduced including definitions for the four P's of creativity - person, process, product and press, (Rhodes, 1961), creative personality traits and the difference between divergent and convergent thinking.

Research shows that at-risk populations have a difficult time imagining achieving success in the dominant culture (Puccio & Avarello, 1995) therefore helping inmates to create a vision for their future in the free world is crucial. A clear vision creates the motivation to pursue those goals so that “the creative person becomes his or her vision” (Puccio & Avarello, 1995, p. 67), Students will participate in a visualization exercise and will complete a storyboard based on that vision.

Lesson Two - Reframing Failure and Intro to Improv

This class will discuss failure as part of the creative process and will focus on the importance of learning from mistakes. Thomas Edison's quote, "I have not failed. I have found

10,000 ways that don't work" is a perfect example of the "trial and learn" attitude that creative people must have. Michael Jordan's "I've missed more than 9000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. 26 times, I've been trusted to take the game-winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed," will be used as examples of the resiliency required in order to achieve their goals in the face of multiple obstacles.

The rules of improv will be introduced here and exercises intended to induce some frustration and error will be used to drive the intended lesson home. There will be a discussion about what students observed in the process and what they believe can be learned from improv.

Lesson Three – Generating Alternatives

The pressure to meet all of the demands of probation/parole can be extremely stressful for returning citizens. According to Edland & Ola (1993), when stress is high we are unlikely to resist premature closure, instead latching on to one problem solving strategy. For justice-involved individuals, the consequences of poor decision-making can be life-altering making the generation of alternatives imperative.

In this class, Lateral Thinking will be introduced as a technique for breaking out of rigid patterns of thinking. De Bono explains in *Lateral Thinking: Creativity Step by Step* (1970) that often we generate alternatives in order to identify the best solutions but lateral thinking encourages generating alternatives simply to identify alternatives.

De Bono has an interesting way of facilitating the generation of alternative ideas in the book and I will use some of these exercises in class. Examples of exercises consist of presenting pictures to students and asking them to generate three possible descriptions of what is happening

in the picture. A variety of these exercises will make up the activities for the first iteration of the course and I will challenge my students to come up with new challenges for future classes to solve.

Lesson Four – Challenging Assumptions

We are all guilty of making assumptions which then lead us to limiting beliefs. Many people with criminal histories act from a perceived lack of options. I know of a man who got arrested for shoplifting shampoo, but because he was carrying pepper spray (which he did not use), he was charged with armed robbery. Some people shoplift food, but both of these crimes are unnecessary with the availability of foodbanks and other community resources for the impoverished.

Many people who deal drugs were recruited at a young age because they saw that many people who had risen above poverty did so by dealing drugs. There's a widely held belief in these types of neighborhoods that this is the only path to success. Lateral thinking tasks us with challenging our assumptions in order to restructure patterns.

De Bono has a number of thought exercises in to achieve this end. There are some exercises that work with geometric shapes and some that work with items in the physical realm. Thought provoking brain teasers such as the following scenario are used.

A man worked in a tall office building. Each morning he got in the lift on the ground floor, pressed the lift button to the tenth floor, got out of the lift and walked up to the fifteenth floor. At night he would get into the lift on the fifteenth floor and get out again on the ground floor. What was the man up to? (de Bono, 1970, p. 95).

I will leave you to challenge your assumptions to figure that out.

In this class, I will guide students to complete an Immunity to Change Map. In Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey's book *Immunity to Change: How to Overcome It and Unlock Potential in Yourself and Your Organization* (2009), the authors describe an interesting (and dangerous) phenomenon in the study of heart patients. They found that despite knowing the dangers of not following their medication regimen, only one in seven heart patients actually took their medication as prescribed.

The reason for this behavior is that our immunity to change is rooted in big assumptions based on hidden competing commitments. The immunity to change map creates a path to discover unconscious competing commitments and big assumptions. Completing this exercise will liberate students from these largely inaccurate assumptions so that they can begin the work of making change.

Lesson Five – Intro to Creative Problem Solving and Clarifying

In this class students will continue their learning using a challenge from their storyboard. The Thinking Skills Model of creative problem solving (Puccio, Murdock & Mance, 2005) will be introduced with a focus on the clarifying stage of CPS and its steps (assessing the situation, exploring the vision and formulating challenges). Statement starters will be taught and Why What's Stopping You? will be introduced as a clarifying tool to be completed in class.

Lesson Six – Brainstorming and Supporting Tools

This class will focus on the exploring ideas stage of the TSM of creative problem solving. Students will use a challenge identified in Why What's Stopping You? to learn Brainstorming and Stick 'em Up Brainstorming. The rules for diverging and converging will be introduced and the following tools will be taught in support of a brainstorming session: Brainwriting, Forced Connections (including attribute listing and calling upon memories and emotions), Excursions

(including visualization, role-playing, character and personal analogies), and Visual Connections.

Lesson Seven – Converging Tools

In this class, students will continue with the challenge from their brainstorming session. Highlighting, Restating Clusters, and PPCo tools will be taught. The importance of PPCo will be stressed. because the ability to properly identify concerns and figure out ways to overcome them in a constructive manner will be crucial to make choices which will keep them out of prison.

Students will chart a plan of action using the Implementation Worksheet (Miller, Vehar, Firestien, Thurber, Nielsen, 2011, p 75). Students will brainstorm all the actions required to make their identified solution a reality as well as the people they can enlist to assist them in meeting their goals, such as asking a family member to type a resume. The importance of getting help where it's needed, setting goals and creating deadlines will be discussed as a means to the achievement of their goals.

Lesson Eight – CPS Facilitation Practice

In this class, students will practice the facilitative behaviors they have learned by facilitating each other through the CPS process. Depending on the size of the class, additional classes may be required for each student to be able to practice their skills.

Lesson Nine - Crash Course in CPS Tools

A variety of tools will be taught in this class exemplifying the flexibility of the TSM by allowing students to see how they are able to continuously assess the situation and move between stages as necessary.

The divergent tool SCAMPER will be taught as a group exercise using a challenge that will apply to many students such as using SCAMPER for their job search. Using job search as an exercise will also allow students to flex their creative muscles to find ways to stand out in a competitive job market. It will also allow me to introduce ways that job searching has changed for those who have had limited access to technology over many years.

Additional tools such as Mind Mapping, Paired Comparison Analysis, Evaluation Matrix and Assisters and Resisters will be taught in the same way as SCAMPER - using a challenge reached by consensus of the group. A handout explaining Power Mapping will be given as homework to supplement Assisters and Resisters.

Lesson Ten - Putting it All Together

In this final lesson, we will discuss how students can apply the tenets of CPS to improve their personal and professional lives.

Imagine a father whose son indicates he wants to drive for NASCAR. I haven't done any research on the subject but I suspect that the idea would be instantly shot down by most fathers as a pipe dream, and a conflict would ensue. Now imagine that same father deferring judgment and gathering data in order to find out why his son has chosen that path. Imagine the father saying, "It seems to me that you want to drive for NASCAR because you want..." fill in the blank here. He can ask his son, "What might be all the ways that you can meet those needs outside of driving for NASCAR?"

Perhaps the son is adamant that this is the *only* path he wants to pursue. At this point the father can do a PPCo so that his son can get a more complete picture of all the obstacles he will face. If overcoming the identified obstacles seems to be too much, Dad can once again proceed

with WMBAT or some other creative question and his son will feel heard and validated, which may be a welcome change to previous father/son interactions.

Students will be encouraged to be on the lookout for potential problems and to always seek to provide three potential solutions when reporting them to an employer. They will learn that by exercising this ability, and making their employer aware that they have a tool box that they can reach into at any time, they will have a skill that will make them an asset in a competitive job market.

SECTION FIVE: CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

I know that at this time my ideas are only half-conceived and the path I've identified to teach the creative content isn't clear, but my training will be a living class, and in the process of teaching what I know, I will learn so much more about the myriad of challenges that returning citizens face. This new knowledge, as well as feedback received from program participants, will enable me to continuously improve it. I will be able to come up with more relevant scenarios to use as examples to show the versatility of the tools' abilities to solve reentry challenges. My lesson in resiliency will begin here, as the concept of "trial and learn" that I preach, will become a reality.

What I see myself doing next is completing the curriculum. I intend to take an improv class to learn more about it. I can certainly use a lesson in resiliency and a class would allow me to build a network in the hopes of finding a like-minded soul with a passion for social justice, who is experienced in improv. It is my hope that a collaborator will help me weave improv exercises into my training in a way that bolsters the effectiveness of the CPS content I'm trying to teach. Regardless of how long it takes to find this kindred spirit, I'm intending to begin delivering my trainings early next year which should give me enough time to create a well-designed program and navigate the hurdles involved in delivering programs to the Department of Corrections.

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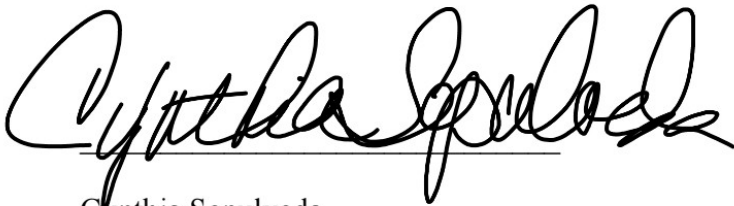
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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Cynthia Sepulveda', written over a horizontal line.

Cynthia Sepulveda

05/19/2021

Date