Surprisingly Open or Openly Surprised? That Is the Question; Using Surprise Experiences to Increase Openness to Experience and Tolerance of Ambiguity

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Recommended Citation
http://digitalcommons.buffalostate.edu/creativeprojects/282
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by

Anneke Veenendaal-de Kort

An Abstract of a Project
in
Creative Studies

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Science

May 12, 2018

Buffalo State
State University of New York
Department of Creative Studies
Abstract

Using Surprise Experiences to Increase Openness to Experience and Tolerance of Ambiguity

In the fast-changing world in which we are currently living, we constantly come across situations and problems that we have not encountered before. An open mind and the ability to tolerate ambiguity are important skills in uncertain times. People who embrace the unpredictable can develop their resilience and flexibility. Surprisologists Luna and Renninger (2015) have discovered that a great way of dipping into unpredictability is through surprise. For my Master’s Project, I designed experiences that transform people’s openness and tolerance for ambiguity through surprise. This paper begins with an extensive literature review on the three aspects that form the basis of my Master’s Project: openness to experience, tolerance of ambiguity, and surprise. It further describes the foundation and three different surprise concepts that I developed based on insights from relevant literature: diverse faces of surprise, a 30-day surprise challenge, and business surprise events. During the process of studying and developing my Master’s Project, I have deliberately immersed myself in unpredictability as a test case. I describe how I experienced the effects (positive and negative) and my learnings around being open to experience and tolerating ambiguity during the process.

Keywords: surprise, openness to experience, tolerance of ambiguity.
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Spring, 2018

Dates of Approval:

May 12, 2018
Dr. Cynthia Burnett
Associate Professor
International Center for Studies in Creativity

May 12, 2018
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Acknowledgements

When I had fully written out my first surprise concept and shared it with my friend Saskia Maas to review, I was in for an unpleasant surprise. She told me very bluntly that she did not like it. Too scientific, incomprehensible, unappealing. Unamused, I took her feedback and sat behind my computer to redo the work. Within five minutes tears rolled down my cheeks. There it was. The personal story that I needed to include to bring my surprise concepts to life – for it to touch me and others. There and then I realized how blessed I am with such wonderful people around me who are always there and love me enough to be honest and challenge me to be my best, to stop hiding behind knowledge of others, and to show the best I have to offer. This time it was Saskia; oftentimes it has been my lifeline Conny van der Wouw. Thank you Saskia and Conny for being that friend. I want to thank the people in my cohort, Abutuba, who have become my buddies, my motivators, and my friends. Most of all I want to thank the two most important men in my life, Chris and Sil, who always give me the playtime I need to experiment and learn. Not every woman has two such great men behind her. I am so lucky that I do. During this Master’s Project everything has come together. Thanks to all the wonderful professors that have all taken a step at a time with me to lead me to the road I want to take into my future. A special thanks to Dr. Gerard Puccio, who triggered my curiosity for this Master’s program years ago, and to my academic advisor Dr. Cyndi Burnett, who has been open to all my emotions, frustrations, ups, and downs, and always found the best way to lead me to the next step. And last but not least I want to thank everybody who has helped me create this Master’s Project. Thanks for reading, ideating, questioning, and adding focus. If anyone needs the ideas of others to make their work better, I will send them to you, Peter Ros, Machiel Wetselaar, Paul Peter Fransen, Newell Eaton, Beate Wörl, Hans Verrijcken, Ana Matec, and Jake Packham.
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SECTION ONE: BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

Purpose and Description of Project

The purpose of this Master’s Project is to design experiences that transform people’s openness and tolerance for ambiguity through surprise. I believe a lot of attention for the development of creativity is focused on facilitating creative processes and the development of cognitive thinking skills, yet I see too little sustainable adoption of creativity in organizations and/or individuals for which product development is not their core business. A creative mindset will help leaders and employees to embrace creativity within their organizations. And I believe that staying open is the key to the development of a creative mindset.

Staying open to novelty, new ideas, and experiences is the foundation for building creative thinking skills, such as curiosity and tolerance for ambiguity. I want to design experiences to help people develop their openness and tolerance for ambiguity, two core skills that are necessary for those who wish to adapt to the exponential change we are facing in our time. I placed surprise at the center of my project, because using surprise is an inspiring way to help people to open up. In addition, having to tolerate ambiguity is an important aspect of surprise. Therefore, engaging in surprise often is a great way to deliberately practice openness and tolerating ambiguity.

Luna and Renninger (2015) discussed two important types of surprise: positive surprise that can delight you, and negative surprise that can overwhelm you. We all deal with positive and negative surprises in our lives. Some people dislike both negative and positive surprises. Others love positive surprises. And there are even those who are able to see the upsides of negative surprises. The last is the mindset that I wish to help people transform into.
The scope of my project is to develop an informational foundation for surprise concepts that can be used to encourage and inspire creativity in individuals as well as groups. Part of this project is made up of defining several categories for different target audiences and/or specific needs. The exact content of each program will remain a surprise. The foundation is built on relevant scientific research outcomes around surprise, tolerance for ambiguity, and openness to experience. And a couple of concrete examples of surprise experiences will be delivered.

The personal goals that guided my learning during this project were:

**KNOW**

- I want to deepen my knowledge about openness and surprise, and I want to make the scientific knowledge I have learned from others my own by creating a concept that fits my personality and energy, so that I can become a leading expert in this area of creativity development.

**FEEL**

- I want to design a concept that I fall in love with, so I will continue to develop the concept as my daily job.

- I want to feel how a delineated topic can offer me a strong foundation on which I can continue building new things over and over again, making the foundation stronger every step of the way.

**DO**

- I want to just go out and do it with a strong focus, and not be stopped by the fear of not knowing if it will be successful.

- I want to share it with potential audiences and get their feedback, to make sure I design surprising experiences that cater to their needs.
Rationale for Selection

Wouldn’t it be great if experiencing exciting surprises could lead people to more openness, which would lead to a more creative mindset and allow them to be prepared for the fast pace of change we’re facing in our 21st century?

In the past ten years, I have learned so much about creativity. It all started when I found a specific course in The Netherlands on creative thinking tools. It was there that I first learned about the toolset for creative thinking skills. I collected all the creativity tools I could find and used them to engage people in new thinking and in coming up with many new ideas. But I soon discovered that this would never result in lasting creativity if those in leadership roles did not actively focus on engaging the organization in creative skillset building.

So I continued my learning and gained a deeper knowledge on creativity, and I learned more about creative leadership, which helped me bring creativity to the leadership in my client organizations. When I decided to continue learning about this topic, I signed up for the Master’s program where in the first year I learned all about the creative skillset. I learned how to facilitate Creative Problem Solving (CPS; Osborn, 1953) and to develop my own creative skills. My work really improved with all that I learned. But still, the services I provided didn’t feel like the solutions I believed my clients required in terms of becoming more creative themselves. I continued to work hard to encourage organizations to act creatively, but I didn’t see any of them adopt creativity. And I know that when something is not adopted by an organization, it will not sustain.

And then I met scholars in the field – Amabile, Csikszentmihalyi, our own Cyndi Burnett, and others – who inspired me and reminded me of the importance of the creative
mindset. I was sold on the topic and knew I wanted to inspire others to change their mindsets. But how does one do that? I was at a loss.

It wasn’t until last year that I experienced the solution, and the enormous impact of experiential learning. In deep personal development sessions, I found the way from my head to my gut feelings, and it all fell into place. I am great at coming up with and designing experiences that motivate and actuate people. I love the concept of surprise. In my 15 years of marriage, my husband and I have never given each other practical gifts. Instead we always go out of our way to surprise each other. Surprise is at my core. Add this to my 25 years of communications experience in small and large corporations and 10 years of creativity study, and we have a winner! I will be the most surprising creativity expert in the world, who will help people open up to make room for creativity in their minds, hands, and hearts. Because I can!
SECTION TWO: PERTINENT LITERATURE

Introduction

As part of this literature review, there were three topics I studied to gain broader insight and a solid foundation to build surprising experiences: openness, tolerance for ambiguity, and surprise. First, I took a closer look at the skills openness and tolerance for ambiguity. I wanted to understand what each skill was and how it could be developed. Second, I looked at how surprise can serve as vehicles to develop these skills. Questions I asked myself when doing the literature review were: What are the benefits of surprise in developing openness and tolerance for ambiguity? What are the best ways to design surprising experiences? What are the do’s and don’ts in setting up for surprise and in giving people surprising experiences they will remember and be able to use in other areas of their lives?

When I manage to answer these questions, I will have the building blocks that can be used as the foundation for the surprising experiences that I will design to increase people’s openness and tolerance to ambiguity.

Openness

The first questions I needed to answer for myself were: What is the scope of openness I want to focus on? Do I want people to be open to novelty? Open to experience? Open to new ideas? Wired to Create (Kaufman & Gregoire, 2015) led me to focus on openness to experience. According to the authors, openness to experience is one of the big five personality traits: “it’s what disrupts the familiar that triggers the new ways of seeing things” (Chapter 6, section 4, para. 1). It’s about seeing things in a new light. Kaufman and Gregoire (2015) believed that “any life experience – whether traumatic or ecstatic – that diversifies our repertoire of experiences and pushes us outside of habitual thought patterns can lead to enhanced cognitive flexibility and
creativity” (Chapter 6, section 4, para. 2). This links seamlessly to positive and negative surprise, as referred to by Luna and Renninger (2015). And this is exactly why I chose this focus area. I do not want to design surprise experiences just to have people experience the positive effects of openness and tolerance of ambiguity. Openness and tolerance of ambiguity are not goals in and of themselves. The reason I want to help people develop these skills is because it will enhance their cognitive flexibility and creativity, life skills that will help people stand strong and stand out in the dynamic 21st century. These are life skills that can improve people’s lives, both professionally and personally.

Another important aspect of openness to experience is that it typically precedes inspiration, and inspiration is very useful and pleasurable. Kaufman and Gregoire (2015) linked different important characteristics to inspiration; they said that inspired people have a stronger drive to master their work, and that they tend to be more intrinsically motivated by the love of their activity. Inspired people are more optimistic and better at trusting their own capabilities. This leads to more self-determination and higher self-esteem. Where inspiration might for many people be linked to the arts, Kaufman and Gregoire (2015) stated that it is also important in science and business, as people who feel inspired more often have been shown to obtain more patents than those less inspired.

I see plenty of important arguments that support the need for openness to experience. The next question is: How can people open up to experience? One answer to that question is: through curiosity. Curious people take risks to acquire new experiences (Zuckerman, 1994), and persist on challenging tasks (Sansone & Smith, 2000). Curious people seek out, explore, and immerse themselves in situations with potential for new experiences (Kashdan et al., 2018).

Two habits of curious people that are relevant here are (1) asking lots of questions and (2)
seeking surprise (Vozza, 2015). These habits are important not only for people to open up to experience, but they also bridge tolerance for ambiguity and surprise. Curious people do not often let themselves be surprised, because they are ahead of the game. They ask questions all the time to feed their curiosity. The more questions you ask, the further ahead you are, the less you get surprised, and the less ambiguity there will be in your life, because you are on top of things and you have clarity. So being curious sounds like a great way to (1) decrease the chances of being surprised, due to said preparation and clarity, and (2) have a healthy surprise balance, because people who feel secure on the one hand, through knowledge and competencies, are more capable of letting go on the other hand (Luna & Renninger, 2015).

The next skill I want people to develop through surprise experience is tolerance of ambiguity.

**Tolerance of Ambiguity**

Back in 1962, Budner wrote about tolerance for ambiguity being the tendency to look at the unknown as desirable, while on the other hand those intolerant of ambiguity look at ambiguous situations as threatening. If you perceive threat in ambiguous situations, the times we are living in, with the fast pace of change, are going to be challenging. For me, it’s not a matter of whether or not we should be tolerant of ambiguity; clearly, we must be when ambiguity is all around us. The question is: how can we learn this skill to survive the uncertain times ahead, and better yet, enjoy them? A good starting point is to look at people who practice the skill of tolerating ambiguity. What makes them different from those who don’t?

To find the answer, I studied literature on people and organizations that are good at tolerating ambiguity. What do they do differently from those who are not so skilled in this? Luna and Renninger (2015) stated, “without fear or negative evaluation (from others) we are more
inclined to let ourselves be surprised” (p. 71). Clearly, trust – and specifically trust in oneself – is an important aspect of tolerating ambiguity.

Gelb (1998) discussed some characteristics of Leonardo da Vinci that demonstrated his openness and tolerance of ambiguity. As it turns out, da Vinci had the ability to hold on to the tension of contrasts and to embrace the ambiguity. In fact, these qualities in particular are considered essential characteristics of his genius. Gelb (1998) stressed the need for tolerating ambiguity and stated that finding an attitude against a paradox is key. Gelb (1998) believed in tolerating ambiguity so strongly that he considered it to be necessary not just for being effective, but to cope mentally in our fast changing world.

Butler, Guis, and Jappelli (2014) stated that intuitive thinkers are better at tolerating ambiguity than those they called ‘effortful reasoners’. The authors had lab and field evidence that intuitive thinkers outperform others in uncertain environments.

We’re not all self-confident, intuitive da Vincis. So how can we develop this skill when it doesn’t come naturally?

Murdock, Burnett, and Mance (2008) listed very practical activities that people can engage in to increase their tolerance of ambiguity. A couple of the activities relate to my experience in yoga and meditation. Think of focusing on the present moment, using breathing techniques as slow-down strategies, relying on all your senses and allowing yourself to stay in the unknown. This last aspect relates to a strategy that the company IDEO refers to as ‘staying in the fog’ (Luna & Renninger, 2015). The advice is to allow oneself not to know and not to draw conclusions for a set period of time (e.g., a week). The idea behind this is that allowing this period of not-knowing will offer the opportunity to generate and elaborate on more options before selecting one. This ‘buying time’ is an important factor in tolerating ambiguity, and it
supports Puccio, Mance, and Murdock’s (2011) claim that tolerance of ambiguity is one of the three most important affective skills in the Creative Problem Solving model. They defined tolerance of ambiguity as “being able to deal with uncertainty and to avoid leaping to conclusions” (p. 64).

Murdock et al. (2008) introduced cognitive activities to help develop one’s tolerance of ambiguity, such as seeking out complex issues, exploring the known and the unknown, and finding out more about the unknown. They suggested appreciating ambiguity by thinking back on how ambiguity has been helpful in the past. And to learn how to tolerate ambiguity, the authors encouraged asking others for feedback when leaping to conclusions too quickly. Murdock et al. (2008) also supported mindfulness activities, such as slowing down before responding and allowing for curiosity.

Tolerating ambiguity is helpful and necessary for individuals’ personal and professional lives. Different scholars have concluded that tolerance for ambiguity is very important in different business aspects (Banning, 2003), such as decision-making (Dollinger, Saxton, & Golden, 1995), entrepreneurship (Schere, 1982), negotiating (Ghosh, 1994), coping with change (Judge, Thoresen, Pucik, & Wellbourne, 1999), and complexity (Gupta & Fogarty, 1993).

Cooper, McCrea, and Backhaus (2005) described three main approaches to interpret ambiguous situations. These were loosely based on the three types of sense-making described by Weick (1995), who researched and described how individuals and organizations deal with the unknown. Cooper et al.’s (2005) summary of human approaches to ambiguity were: (1) analytical, by analyzing data and logically interpreting the situation (inspired by Weick’s (1995) generic sense-making); (2) interactive, by gathering the people involved and together working towards a commonly shared interpretation of the situation (inspired by Weick’s intersubjective
sense-making); or (3) intuitive, through the gut-feeling of individuals (inspired by Weick’s intrasubjective sense-making).

All of the above can serve well as building blocks for the set-up of surprise experiences for individuals hoping to develop their tolerance of ambiguity for personal and/or professional purposes. So having gained more insight in the skills to be developed in the surprising experiences, it is time to move on to an examination of surprise and experience.

**Surprise**

“Surprise intensifies our emotions by at least 400%” (Luna & Renninger, 2015, p. 16). The more we can predict and control through the use of big data, like the weather and elections, the less we leave to coincidence. That decreases our anxiety, which will feel like a positive thing to many people, but it also decreases our delight, excitement, adventure, curiosity, wonder, and serendipity (Luna & Renninger, 2015). “Too much surprise (change, uncertainty, ambiguity), triggers anxiety (a mix of fear and threat). Too little surprise (routine, structure and comfort), triggers hypostress (stress of under-stimulation) and leads to boredom” (Luna & Renninger, 2015, p. 23). And boredom is much more than simply an unpleasant experience: it is dangerous to your health, because it can lead to hopelessness and depression (Luna & Renninger, 2015).

It is actually odd that people tend to shy away from the unknown and surprises, because scientists have found that surprise is addictive. It’s like crack for your brain. Scientists at Emory and Baylor used MRIs to measure changes in human brain activity in response to predictable and unpredictable stimuli (Berns, McClure, Pagnoni, & Montague, 2001). Contrary to the researchers’ expectations, the brain responded most strongly to the unpredictable stimuli: the brain’s pleasure center “lights up like a Christmas tree on the MRI. That suggests people are designed to crave the unexpected” (Redick, 2013, para 5). The researchers also discovered that
surprise changes behavior. When we are introduced to new stimuli, we need to adapt to the new, which changes our beliefs and behaviors (Berns et al., 2001). In short, unexpected events drive learning. These are all great cases in favor of embracing surprise for anybody who wishes to learn and develop.

So why do we shy away from surprise? The problem for many adults is that we stop being curious about new experiences and are instead focused on understanding what we’ve already been through (Luna & Renninger, 2015). We are trained to not be surprised, particularly in business, where it is a common goal to have control and stay away from surprise (Pina e Cuna, Clegg, & Kamoche, 2006).

This motivated me even more to realize one particular idea that I have. I want to create an “out-of-control” module to include in trainings, like management programs, that focus a great deal on having as much control as possible. I believe that these programs can benefit greatly from a surprise/out-of-control-module that will prepare people for the real world they will re-enter when they leave the training-room. It is in that unpredictable world where those who handle surprise best will be most successful. With this goal in mind, you can imagine how great is was to read the following scientific support for the usefulness of my idea: “I suggest that developing the capacity for attending to surprise, as a means of ‘decolonising the imagination’ should form a significant element of management education for both teacher and student” (Schwabenland, 2010, p. 138).

So, we understand now that our fear of surprise is not neurological, and that there are several advantages for it in terms of delight, learning, and success. We learned that people tend to stay away from surprise because they are trained that way. But there’s another reason: we have a biological fear of being eaten by tigers or being killed by poisonous berries. This
prehistoric fear has no use protecting us from such things anymore. Instead it is keeping us from excitement and innovations (Luna & Renninger, 2015).

So, what contra-strategies can we apply to let the excitement back into our lives? Resilience is a topic I found as a common answer to that question. Several scientists have depicted resilience in organizations (Langer, 1989; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 1999). There it is seen as a mindful way of acting, during which you make room for looking at details of a situation. It asks for improvisation that leads to learning, problem solving, and change (Barrett, 1998; Brown & Eisenhardt, 1998; Weick, 1998). This is especially important for organizations that want to innovate.

Luna and Renninger (2015) gave a more personal view on building resilience through embracing negative surprise. We have all experienced negative surprise, which can lead to disappointment and sometimes even to sadness. That makes it hard to embrace the unpredictable. The way to do that anyway, according to Luna and Renninger (2015), is by realizing that bad surprises don’t usually end in despair; most end in discovery. One often doesn’t just bounce back, but bounces forward. Individuals or organizations that can handle negative surprise are resilient, and “resilient people are, like trees in a storm, not the biggest, but the most flexible” (Luna & Renninger, 2015, p. 44). So, the first step to being open to surprise is to build resilience. Gregoire (2014) noted that humans build resilience by falling and falling often: “The better you become at falling and getting up, the faster you can learn how to skate” (p. 47).

Balancing the unknown with the familiar is another strategy for enjoying surprise. It is described as the ‘surprise seesaw’ by Luna and Renninger (2015) and is one of the most important aspects to successfully handle surprise. “When there is plenty of certainty on a surprise seesaw, we welcome dipping into unpredictability. Traditions, habits, rituals, routines can do the
trick” (Luna & Renninger, 2015, p. 48). Think of wearing the same clothes every day to keep room for surprise in other areas, like Steve Jobs did with his black turtlenecks.

Another strategy Luna and Renninger (2015) described is reframing. That is about finding new, surprising ways to perceive situations. Shifting to seeing something in a positive light allows us to see value in negative surprise. Bad surprises lose their negativity, and it becomes easier to embrace unpredictability. “When you reframe a situation, your brain processes it differently. One of the best benefits of negative surprise is personal development and it strengthens social ties” (Luna & Renninger, 2015, p. 53).

And last but not least, here, too, curiosity pops up as a strategy for success. “Curious people welcome surprise in their lives. They try new foods, talk to a stranger, or ask a question they’ve never asked before. Welcoming surprise is just asking yourself: How alive do I want to feel?” (Vozza, 2015, para. 7). So clearly there are different strategies to increase dipping into the unpredictable. Now let’s see what it takes to make people experience the benefits of it.

**Designing Surprising Experiences**

When I was researching tolerance of ambiguity, I read a very inspiring article that looks at this topic from the perspective of off-road motorcycling:

Riding on dirt is a dance with the machine, and relaxing into the ambiguity of the dance is key to staying upright. Holding on too tightly can end badly. Uncertainty can induce fear, causing us to hunker down, shudder with every bump, and hold on more tightly to what we think we know. Compare riding a motorcycle on dirt to skiing. There is only the loosest relationship that keeps skis on snow and tires (even knobby tires) on dirt. It’s a profoundly disturbing feeling, at first, this sense that the bike has only a passing connection with pebbles or sand as it more or less skates across the surface. The
relationship is not one that breeds trust or comfort. But relaxing and becoming
comfortable with this ambiguous situation is the only thing that can help make the ride
safe and enjoyable. (Arlitsch, 2016, p. 76)

For me this passage demonstrates the importance of learning through experience. Instead
of explaining tolerance of ambiguity through the mind, I believe that it takes the experience of
feeling it to truly understand it. When I read this, I realized how holding on tightly is having the
opposite effect of what I want. Letting go and going with the flow is a safer and more effective
option. Not just on a motorcycle. This is an association that I strongly relate to. Others will relate
to other experiences. Each individual learns from their own experience.

In my twenty-five years of work as a communications expert in organizations going
through change, I have found experience to be more effective and more inspiring than having
someone else making a case for change. But don’t take it from me. Take it from scientists who
have researched the effect of experience. Kolb (1984) performed a lot of research on experiential
learning, and suggested that learners expand their knowledge by experiencing their environment
through discovery. Surprise is an experience in itself. In order to design surprises to help people
better understand openness to experience and tolerance for ambiguity, I want to learn what it
takes to design surprise experiences that people will remember, and that will change their lives.

So how do you make a surprise experience memorable? This question led me to The
Power of Moments (Heath & Heath, 2017), in which the authors explored why certain
experiences have extraordinary impacts. While I was reading it I had no idea how it would help
me; it was simply a great book to read. It was inspiring, light, and fun. The reading experience
itself gave me an important insight about the power of experience, namely that fun, lightness,
and ease increases the willingness to make the investment.
For this project, I drew from four important factors for designing memorable experiences: (1) elevation, (2) insight, (3) pride, and (4) connection (Heath & Heath, 2017).

Elevation can be explained through two important aspects: building peaks and breaking the script. Building peaks is an especially important aspect in designing surprise experiences. “A peak means something special is happening; it should look different” (Heath & Heath, 2017, Chapter 3, Section 3, para. 3). This linked to one of the ideas I have been toying around with in order to create a location that surprises time after time: designing impressive projections on walls, floors, and ceilings to immerse participants in the experience.

Another important aspect of building peaks is to raise the stakes (Heath & Heath, 2017), or add an element of productive pressure: a competition, a game. This concept will be a beautiful contributing element when designing my experiences. And it is important to be aware of the negative effect that the lack of productive pressure may bring: “What lessens a moment are the opposite instincts: diminishing the sensory appeal or lowering the stakes. Beware the soul-sucking force of ‘reasonableness.’ Otherwise you risk deflating your peaks. Speed bumps are reasonable. Mount Everest is not reasonable” (Heath & Heath, 2017, Chapter 3, Section 3, para. 7).

The second aspect of elevation is breaking the script, because disrupting routines creates more peaks. Of course, in order to ensure surprise, I will need to break the script of whatever people might be expecting. And in fact, it’s just as simple as giving people a “first time” experience. The most important and most impressive events in our lives tend to be those that happened between the ages of 15 and 30, because that is the time frame when we tend to experience our first times: the first time in love, first job, etc. (Heath & Heath, 2017).

Which brings us to gaining insights. Self-insight rarely comes from staying in our own
heads. It is better to try something, take risks, and attempt to get the answer from experience (Heath & Heath, 2017). This information acted as another great motivation to design experiences that help people gain insights.

Can you remember a time when you won a prize, or were recognized for something you did? It is moments like that that stay with you. Moments of pride partly come from rolling up your sleeves and starting to do something, getting better at it through practice, and suddenly discovering that you have developed a skill you did not have before. But more often, moments of pride come from recognition, from being noticed for your skills (Heath & Heath, 2017). So recognition should be an important part of the design of surprise experiences. Wouldn’t it be great if you could get help in surprising your employees with recognition that feels special and individualized? Personalized surprise may be helpful here.

Another aspect around the topic of pride is courage, which itself is related to surprise in some ways:

Moments that demand courage often arrive unexpectedly. They’re fleeting, and we can be caught off guard. Too often the moment passes and we find ourselves wishing later that we’d spoken up or done something. Successful practice of courageous performance leads to a reduction in fear and a bolstering of confidence. (Heath & Heath, 2017, Chapter 9, Section 2, para. 8)

By engaging in surprise, we practice dealing with the unexpected. Skills developed through one area, like surprise, become truly powerful when we can use them in other areas, like necessity when speaking up to a boss to get an important point across.

I wanted to develop experiences for teams, so it was important to look at group dynamics in experience. How might experience help groups connect? Heath and Heath (2017) gave three
strategies: creating a synchronized moment, inviting shared struggle, and connecting to meaning.

These topics relate to the concept of the struggle sandwich that Luna and Renninger (2015) used. “Fuel for resilience is neither success, nor failure alone, but the struggle sandwich – success followed by the struggle, followed by success” (Luna & Renninger, 2015, p. 55). Knowing that you can be successful at something gives you the trust in yourself to be able to repeat your success after struggle. The brain learns to associate effort and frustration with success. The creation of the synchronized moment can be a collective surprise experience, in which a team struggles together and collaborates to achieve success (Heath & Heath, 2017; Luna & Renninger, 2015).

Connecting an experience to meaning for the target audience may sound like an obvious course of action, but it was an important point to take into deliberate consideration in every surprise I designed.

If a group of people develops a bond quickly, chances are its members have been struggling together (Luna & Renninger, 2015). One of the aspects I want to make part of all business surprise experiences is bonding. “If you want to be part of a group that bonds like cement, take on a really demanding task that’s deeply meaningful. All of you will remember it for the rest of your lives” (Heath & Heath, 2017, Chapter 10, Section 3, para. 9).

A Solid Set-Up

After reading all the knowledge gained by others, I realized that it would be good to follow some design principles to set up a solid program. And with that in place it was just as important to let go of a little control to give serendipity a chance to happen.

The literature review taught me more about what it takes to develop openness and tolerance of ambiguity. And I learned how to use and balance surprising experiences to get
people to learn.

The final aspect that I focused on in my research was developing a better understanding of how to design a solid set-up for a surprise experience that would assure the best learning conditions. The model that kept coming to my mind when reading and thinking of how to design the important aspects of a surprise in an effective and inspiring way of learning was the Torrance Incubation Model (TIM; Torrance, 1979). TIM can be seen as a meta-cognitive framework for facilitating incubation and continued learning (Murdock & Keller-Mathers, 2008). Before creative thinking can occur, something has to be done to heighten anticipation and expectation, and to prepare the learner to see clear connections between what he is expected to learn and his future life (the next minute or hour, the next day, the next year, or 25 years from now). After this arousal, it is then necessary to help the learner dig into the problem, acquire more information, encounter the unexpected, and continue deepening the learning. Finally, there must be practice in doing something with the new information, immediately or later (Murdock & Keller-Mathers, 2008; Torrance, 1979).

TIM links beautifully to the set-up that Luna and Renninger (2015) concluded as being a good way to design surprises for their clients. Their opening is to introduce a red thread – “an idea that runs across the experience to pull it all together” (p. 159), make a safe space, and spark wonder. The center of their surprises focuses on activating the senses, co-creating with the participants, and stirring surprise and suspense. Their exit strategy is to leave open ends: reflect on the experience and let one question linger.

This is the simple, three-step approach I used in the design of the surprise events for business teams.
Bringing it All Together

Surprise is a vehicle for openness and tolerance for ambiguity (Luna & Renninger, 2015). A surprising experience brings a deeper understanding and a longer lasting memory. So if I manage to design surprises that allow people to experience the effects that openness and tolerance of ambiguity (or the lack thereof) bring, I can open people’s minds. It is not my intention to push skill development on any person or organization. It is my desire to give people options to pick and choose from as they wish: experience what openness or tolerance has to offer, and experience what happens when you act closed or intolerant, and chose what best suits your purpose.

I truly feel that this is the way to get people to change. A person will not want to change simply because someone else tells them to. No matter how inspiring the stories and examples, as long as a person doesn’t experience an effect on their own personal goals, chances are that they will not buy in.

Conclusion of My Literature Study

My most important learning from this literature research was the power of letting my curiosity lead the way. As soon as I noticed that a topic or question wouldn’t leave my head, I would look for literature around it and pick out the books or articles that best answered my curiosity. Those pieces of literature led to new curiosities and questions for which I looked for answers. In all my years of literature study I have never experienced it this mindfully. It was relaxing, because I was looking for one answer at a time. In previous research, I’ve fallen into the trap of wanting to understand it all and trying to oversee it all. And I can’t. I get to my destination one step at a time and do not know what to expect along the way. That’s the core of what it takes to open up to surprise and tolerate ambiguity.
SECTION THREE: PROCESS PLAN

Plan to Achieve Goals

My Master’s Project consisted of five phases.

1: First, I did a deep dive into literature to get a broad understanding of the science around surprise, openness, and tolerance for ambiguity. **20 hours.**

2: Then, I analyzed and selected the literature that I used as a basis for the foundation for the surprise experiences I designed. Based on that, I created a foundation that I will use to build the surprise experiences. **30 hours.**

3: Next, I developed a couple of examples of the product, which I validated with different audiences in five interviews. Based on the feedback I fine-tuned the examples. **50 hours.**

4: With all the new insights and extra time I spent on product development, I finalized the product. **20 hours.**

5: The last phase I finalized the project. **10 hours.**
Evaluation Plan

I included two evaluations in the development of my Master’s Project. The first was when I developed the foundation and three concrete examples, which I validated with representatives of my different target groups in five interviews. I refined the plans based on their feedback and took the refined versions to CREA in Italy, where I validated the last versions with five creativity experts in different fields. In both cases I evaluated how users rated the product in terms of added value and effectiveness in creating more openness and tolerance for ambiguity, and I explicitly asked if they would buy the service. This second round of evaluation led to finalizing the product.
SECTION FOUR: OUTCOMES

Introduction

For this Master’s Project, I designed and delivered concrete surprise concepts as outcomes, including (1) a foundation for the setup of surprise concepts and events, (2) a trigger campaign on diverse faces of surprise, (3) a 30-day surprise challenge, and (4) a set-up and several examples of surprising business team off-site.

On top of these deliverables, there were important outcomes of the aforementioned projects that helped me deliver on my more personal goals of what I wanted to know, feel, and do during the course of this Master’s Project. As I have learned from Puccio, Mance, and Murdock (2011), cognitive and affective skills must align in order to make something happen. If something doesn’t feel right, one will be less likely to follow through on it, regardless of how ‘reasonable’ it may seem. For me this is particularly true. I have experienced in the past – and specifically during the course of the Master’s program – that I can sense when I’m on the right track. When I started designing different possible surprise concepts for my Master’s Project, I clearly felt where my energy was flowing. When the energy was right, the design would write itself. When I had writers block I knew I was on the wrong path. I have tolerated ambiguity and I have kept an open mind, and before I discuss my products and personal outcomes, I will share how I view the need for surprise. Understanding why surprise matters is the first step toward embracing it. For me to be able to share my view on surprise is the first step to engaging others in opening up to this topic.

Matter of Surprise

I believe surprise - which brings curiosity, wonder, and amazement - is crucial when people want to continue learning and growing. Surprise can create a new environment that
ignites and develops qualities like resilience, flexibility, and creativity. These skills are necessary to keep up with our fast changing world, and embracing the unknown is vital. People will benefit from feeling confident and comfortable with not knowing. They will need to trust that they are flexible and resilient enough to deal with whatever is coming their way. I am convinced, in my heart and through my extensive literature research, that nothing is more powerful in the creation of creative and resilient people, teams, and organizations than the expediency of the element of surprise.

Adding surprise to an experience offers people the opportunity to respond differently to situations than they otherwise might. Surprising experiences help people further open their mindsets, and they create innovative perspectives on problems that need to be solved. This project was never about making surprise the ultimate goal; it was about the expediency of the element of surprise to encourage people, teams, and organizations to step out of their ordinary ways of looking at things, so that they can create new perspectives, insights, actions, and results.

**Putting Surprise to Work**

If you do not have the guts to adapt in our fast-changing world as an entrepreneur or as an organization, you will soon find yourself following your competition, instead of being the frontrunner that stands out. I hear the buzzword ‘innovation’ being used in many organizations, but much less often do I see the investment in the creative mindset that is needed to support it. The element of surprise pushes you out of your usual thinking and acting and makes you look at things from new perspectives. This offers valuable insights and experiences that you can apply in different areas and situations in which you want to step out of your comfort zone, where you know the drill. Because when you do things on autopilot (as is often the case when humans operate solely within their comfort zones), chances are that you will make mistakes.
To be able to deal flexibly with new problems or challenges, it is important to be open to change and to embrace the unknown. Surprise helps people open up and helps increase tolerance for different perspectives and new realities. Through the experience of surprise, you can get to the core of problems and find solutions through new insights. Engaging in surprise experiences can teach you to tap into your creativity and ingenuity at any moment, creating feelings of freedom, leadership, and trust. This can lead to a change in mindset and behaviors with entrepreneurs and employees, so that they can contribute to the growth of the organization.

When people are prepared for and open to change, this allows for trust and the creativity to find solutions when they are needed. This makes us (as employees, entrepreneurs, or organizations) independent of the circumstances, offering us the opportunity to make our own choices and anticipate, deal with, and grow from authenticity.

**Surprise Concepts**

I had lots of ideas about how to get people to experience surprise and help them embrace the unknown and become more open to experience. For the purposes of this project, I decided to focus on three different areas of developing surprise experiences. First, I wanted to create a simple foundation for all the surprise experiences to come. I believe that a solid foundation is necessary to build a suite of concepts that spring from the same source. Like in physical exercise, a strong core is what you build on. From there you have the flexibility to develop different strengths in different areas at different times.

**Foundation**

Every surprise is built for a specific target audience and a different goal. Therefore, I always start each surprise experience with a customized introduction on surprise and why it matters in this particular case. Every surprise has four levels: (1) AIM, (2) Type, (3) Journey, and
(4) Destination. I first focus on the AIM to create clarity on what a client wants to achieve. Together with the client I describe what a surprise needs to include to be Authentic, to Inspire, and to truly Matter to the participants or the organization. It’s also important to consider the intensity of each surprise. This will depend on how open a group or individual is to surprise.

The second deciding factor in each surprise is the type. What surprise will be appreciated best by the group or will be most appropriate for the organization? Think of adventurous-type events outdoors versus high-end surprises with champagne and oysters.

In each surprise journey that I design, I use Luna and Renninger’s (2015) experience-making tools (create a red thread, activate the senses, co-create, map the journey) and I draw from Heath & Heath’s (2017) four important factors for designing memorable experiences (elevation, insight, pride, connection).

To make sure we arrive at the desired destination, I design each surprise based on a Definition of Success (DoS) for the client. When will they feel it has been successful? What do they want to know, feel, and be able to do after the surprise event is over that they currently don’t know, feel, or have mastered?

**Diverse Faces of Surprise**

I’ve learned a lot from scientific literature, and I’ve done a lot of self-reflection. In addition to that, I want to learn from others. I want to gain and share insight into what surprise is for people from across the globe. I want to hear diverse stories and experiences around surprise. For this reason, I have designed the concept *Diverse Faces of Surprise*. I will collect different stories from different people on surprise. What does it mean to them? How do they experience it? How do they summarize it? I will share the diverse faces of surprise through an online campaign.
I aim to achieve different goals with this campaign. First, using interviews and questionnaires to collect input from people across the globe will help me gain a better understanding of the different aspects of surprise. Second, I aim to get in touch with a diverse group of people who are interested in and open to sharing their experiences and insights around surprise, openness, and tolerance for ambiguity. To continue the sharing, I will set up a surprise community online.

The online campaign will be set-up as follows:

Step 1: INSPIRE: Towards the end of 2018, I will introduce Diverse Faces of Surprise in a trigger campaign. I will put one person in the spotlight every day until December 31, 2018. The campaign will share one digital postcard per day that includes a picture of a participant with an inspiring quote on surprise by the same person. By sharing diverse examples, I will show the power of surprise from different angles. The goal of this first step is to inspire people who see this campaign and trigger them to want to know more. In fact, this is an exercise in embracing the unknown. In this phase, campaign viewers will not have all the information they need to make sense of it.

Step 2: ENGAGE: On January 1, 2019, a special website or social media channel will be launched. On this site or page, visitors will find out more about surprise and get more information on the people who shared their surprise quotes earlier in the campaign. Visitors can learn more about how different people from different parts of the world with different backgrounds deal with surprise and how it helps them open up and tolerate ambiguity.

Over the 2019 summer I will analyze the content from the questionnaires of the people who joined the campaign. I will categorize the information given in the questionnaires into a few hot topics. The site or page will show the full interviews and more explanations of how surprise
has enriched the lives of the participants. Participants will not be presented in the same order as how they were introduced in the trigger campaign. Instead, I will create separate categories based on the stories. These categories will form the “Benefit Gallery” of surprise. I will continue building these categories with examples and I will share knowledge, like relevant literature and YouTube videos, after the site or page goes live.

I have written out the different steps of setting up Diverse Faces of Surprise, which can be found in Appendix A.

**30-Day Surprise Challenge**

Changing your mindset or changing your behavior takes time and effort. It’s more than just putting your mind to it. Changing your mindset or behavior requires training in order for it to be internalized. My solution for this is a daily dose of surprise for one month. I will invite people to take up the challenge to engage in 30 days of surprise in order to get better at being open to experience and embracing the unknown. You don’t need life-changing events to practice this. A baby step will help you improve just a little bit every day.

The 30-day surprise challenge will give a small assignment each day. These assignments will range from taking a different seat at the office or meeting from the one you always choose, to watching a video about breaking habits and reflecting on which of your automatisms could be traded in for new ways of acting that can delight you. All assignments are designed to help participants experience the unknown and reflect on a daily basis. When participants reflect on the whole challenge after a month, they will notice that they have become better at being open to experience and tolerating ambiguity.

When people are ready to join the 30-day challenge, they can sign up and will receive a personal email from me each day. Participants will be getting lots of small insights and
experiences, which I will invite them to note in the digital notebook provided. They will be able to choose to keep the reflections to themselves, to share them with me, or to share them for everybody in the community to see.

Taking notice of the good things that are happening due to engaging in the surprises will contribute to a happier life. We tend to focus on what’s going wrong, while in fact we become so much happier when we stop and pay attention to what successes (small or big) we have achieved in our lives – what’s going right. This challenge aims to not only help participants engage in surprise, but will likely also bring them excitement each day, because they will experience something new, surprise themselves, surprise others, challenge themselves, and celebrate victories. I will invite participants to reflect on these experiences and write them down to revisit and relive, and as a reminder to themselves for later times when it might be helpful to recall such experiences.

To not spoil the surprise, I have not included the 30 assignments in this paper. Instead I invite those who want to join in the 30-day challenge themselves for free (starting January 2019) to reach out to me and I will get you signed up.

A Surprising Business Team Offsite…

An important starting point I took from Luna and Renninger (2015) is the fact that organizations need to be stable in order to be able to engage in surprise. They must first create clarity, process, rituals, trust, and skills. In other words, they need to reduce surprise to produce surprise. It is important for organizations to balance surprise and stability. I will need to focus on this point every step of the way to manage expectations and to decide if surprise is a smart choice. If yes, I will set the business surprises up as follows:

(1) I will choose 3 to 5 aspects that lead to more openness and tolerance of ambiguity,
particularly for the specified goals of the business/client.

(2) I will design strategies that help increase openness and tolerance of ambiguity that will be effective for the specific group of participants.

(3) I will create a set of questions that must be answered in the briefing phase of an event to determine what is important in each case.

(4) I will design a customized business surprise on a case-by-case basis.

(5) I will “TIM” (Torrance Incubation Model) each business surprise, meaning I’ll design every event in three phases: heightening anticipation - deepening expectations - extending the learning.

Luna and Renninger (2015) described strategies that fit beautifully in these three stages, so I will use their strategies when setting up an event as well:

Heightening anticipation: Create red thread - Make a safe space - Spark wonder. I will make sure that the start of each event is surprising and intriguing, yet feels safe enough to dive into.

Deepening expectations: Activate the senses - Co-create - Stir surprise and suspense.

Each event will lead from one surprise to the next. Participants will need to work closely with one another to make it through the goals of the event as a team. Because of the unknown inherent in surprise, people will take up their natural strengths and roles and collaborate differently than what they are likely used to in the office. This will create a different, more natural connection between colleagues.

Extending the learning: Close open ends - Reflect on experience - Let one question linger. Each event will be debriefed to allow participants to make sense of what happened, and to understand the benefits of whatever they have done and experienced.
Understanding what has worked in one place will help people to apply their learning in different areas of their lives. At the same time, I will not overwhelm people with information or take away all the mystery. I will leave room for wondering, incubating, and using the experience in ways that are relevant for each individual. I will reach out to the participants 3 to 5 times in the weeks after the event to trigger them to reflect on important aspects of the experience. I will do so by sending them a picture of one aspect of the event and asking them to think back to it. I will then give more background information of why this was part of the event. With this awareness and knowledge, I will invite them to reflect on where else this can be of use in other aspects of their personal and professional lives.

I have created two examples of business surprises, but to make sure I do not unravel the mystery and to engage you in embracing the unknown, I will not share them in this paper. I will, however, give you a taste:

“You arrive at the location that was sent to you as a GPS code. You found it – congratulations! You are almost there. On the floor is a balancing stick. On the one end is written Stability. The other end of the stick reads Surprise. You see a tree over the water and the assignment to pick up the balancing stick and cross the water via the tree. When you arrive at the other end of the water you see....”

Personal Outcomes

As mentioned in the beginning of this section, the personal outcomes that have resulted from investing in my Master’s Project in the past three months are just as important as the client-facing outcomes for realizing my ambitions. I started this project with five personal goals around knowing, feeling, and doing different things. I will share the outcomes of each of these goals:
Know

“I want to deepen my knowledge about openness and surprise, and I want to make the scientific knowledge I have learned from others my own by creating a concept that fits my personality and energy, so that I can become a leading expert in this area of creativity development.”

I can definitely attest to that. With a crystal-clear focus on what I wanted to achieve with my Master’s Project, I packed a suitcase and a laptop stocked with relevant books and articles and went into isolation on a deserted island up north in The Netherlands, where I read for two weeks straight. At that point, I was not yet looking for answers. I was just collecting knowledge. Very unlike me, I created an Excel sheet in which I collected all the information that triggered me - information that I assumed might become relevant later on or that just made me curious. I recorded 376 fragments from 6 books and over 40 scientific articles. I recorded 224 random surprise ideas, 17 ideas for business concepts, and 12 different surprise concepts, and I included a tab for tolerating ambiguity and one for openness to sketch out any ideas that were relevant for these topics. This incredibly rich document has led me to the surprise concepts I designed and developed for this Master’s Project.

But it is much more. It is a rich collection of ideas and sources for me to draw from in the future as I continue to develop surprise concepts. I have continued adding new ideas to this spreadsheet, and I added a new tab for literature I want to read. This Excel sheet has proven to be my gateway to more openness and tolerance for ambiguity. Everything that triggers me around the topics of surprise can be put in there for me to review when I feel the need for it. I do not have to worry about forgetting it. I do not need to know or understand what I need it for. I write it down and I will know when to draw from it.
Feel

“I want to design a concept that I fall in love with, so I will continue to develop the concept as my daily job.”

I have definitely achieved this goal. I am so in love with my surprise concepts that I want to get as many people to engage in them as I can. I am in the process of finalizing a brand guide that I am creating together with a branding expert. This guide consists of four aspects. First, is the target audience I want to focus on. I aim to help entrepreneurs with the power of surprise for their products and services. How can they surprise and delight their customers? I aim to engage these entrepreneurs themselves in surprise to get them to open their mindsets and embrace the unknown in order to stand strong as entrepreneurs in the fast-changing world. The brand guide further consists of the brand base, which is the authenticity of my brand, and the brand core, which is the “why” behind my surprise brand. And it includes my brand personality, which is closely related to me as the entrepreneur who will be bringing this brand to life.

“I want to feel how a delineated topic can offer me a strong foundation on which I can continue building new things over and over again, making the foundation stronger every step of the way.”

Now here’s a challenge: I feel the topic of surprise is definitely exciting and broad enough that I can keep coming back to it and deepening the experience. But so far, I see myself diverging on the topic. I’ve discovered that what can rescue me from drifting away from ‘surprise’ when I’m jumping from one idea to the next is constantly coming back to the four-layer foundation that I designed. This foundation is my starting point for each custom-designed experience. I hope this will lead to as solid set of experiences.

Another way I see myself sticking with the topic of surprise is by coaching entrepreneur
clients on the topic. I took a two-day coaching session at CREA where I created a personal goal of coaching on the power of surprise. I feel the individual attention needed, and the diversity of topics coming from different entrepreneurs, will keep me from getting bored and from wanting to run off to something new.

Lastly, surprise is a rather new topic for my audiences, so I plan to learn all there is to know about the topic and blogging about it to keep me busy.

Do

“I want to just go out and do it with a strong focus, and not be stopped by the fear of not knowing if it will be successful.”

During the course of the Master’s Project I have struggled with this. I have discovered that I am at my best when creating concepts. When I had decided on the different concepts and took time out to write them into briefing documents, campaigns, and written-out events, I was filled with energy. I know I was using one of my strengths.

When I was validating my concepts with potential clients, the reactions depended on the types people I was talking to. I see two distinct audiences. The more mature and at the same time innovative-savvy business audience fully understands the need and power of surprise, openness, and tolerance for ambiguity. A younger, less corporate audience has more trouble grasping their importance. I realize that I need to combine my knowledge and experience in marketing and communications with these topics to build a strong story for a larger audience to buy into. However, it was important for me to admit to myself that I do not yet feel strong enough in my own entrepreneurship.

One of the outcomes here is that I have signed up for a coaching series with a business coach with a focus on bringing my new brand to life and overcoming my personal obstacles and
fears that might stand in the way of making this dream a reality.

“I want to share it with potential audiences and get their feedback, so I make sure I design surprising experiences that cater to their needs.”

During the course of this Master’s Project, I have involved some business partners and clients in the set-up and development of my surprise concepts. This has worked very well, because I got to share what I was working on and I could engage others in the topics I am so passionate about. And it helped my clients and business partners to think of the benefits for their organizations and what would and would not work in their personal and professional environments. In the upcoming months, I will involve business partners and clients in testing out the concepts that I designed for the Master’s Project.
SECTION FIVE: KEY LEARNINGS

Introduction

Over the course of my Master’s Project I have kept a weekly blog, some of which I even published on social media to share important insights with others. Revisiting these blogs led me to my key learnings: finding my path, staying in the fog, incubation, sensing, the importance of looking at things with fresh eyes, and bringing it to life.

Finding My Path

When I first started thinking about my Master’s Project, I had several topics I was very passionate about. I wanted to work with the importance of falling in love with something, happiness, and surprise in order to tolerate ambiguity. I had also experienced the power of experiential learning and wanted to use that, too. I was thrilled about all of this and had one idea after another. That kept me from finding my path. I kept going in circles.

Interacting with others turned out to be a great way for me to get clarification on my goal. When I explained my ideas to others I could openly see which ones I told passionately and clearly, and which were vague and less inspirational. I realized in one of the early discussions with my advisor, Dr. Cyndi Burnett, that in the clarifying phase it was very helpful for me to talk and talk and talk and have her summarize the things that stood out for her. In our first conversation, I remember Cyndi summarizing all I was thinking in 4 simple words. She connected them in one clear sentence, which became the guide to keep me on my path and to keep me from getting lost on the way: “The purpose of this Master’s Project is to design experiences that transform people’s openness and tolerance for ambiguity through surprise.”

The main learning for me is to include such interactions deliberately in future projects. Instead of struggling by myself, I will interact with others and explicitly ask them to help me
define my path.

**Staying in the Fog**

Once I had a clear topic for my Master’s Project I took a couple of weeks to dig deep into scientific literature. This time I chose to do it differently than I always had. I usually work hard for it to all link together. I struggle to make connections and it all has to fit just right. This time, I chose to stay in the fog. I read that it is good to give yourself a certain time (at least one week) to stay in the fog, where everything is still vague (Luna & Renninger, 2015). The trick is not to draw any conclusions yet. So, I did not.

I pushed the control-freak in me to the background for a time, during which I enjoyed the fog. It was special to realize that letting go produced many more ideas than racking my brain very hard. Usually I work hard, not wanting to miss any opportunities and wanting to make good use of every minute. This time I cut myself some slack. I read a lot, but did it more openly. After a couple of hours of reading I would take a walk on the beach each day, and during these walks I realized the power of letting go. Ideas would flow. And I would let them go, knowing that the ones that were important enough to remember would stick in my brain or come back.

Being the living example of what staying open has to offer might just be the most important learning I had during this entire Master’s Project.

**Incubation**

Being an entrepreneur, I had to divide my time between my Master’s Project and a large assignment for a client. To be able to focus properly on all my tasks, I decided to do one thing at a time, fully dedicated. So, during the semester of the Master’s Project I took a few weeks out of other work at the beginning, the middle, and the end of the project.

Without realizing it, this turned out to be a great chance for incubation. After my two-week
dedicated literature study at the beginning of the Master’s Project, I turned my attention fully to the work for my client. During that time I realized the ideas were incubating. When I was not actively thinking about my Master’s Project, ideas kept popping up. All I did was note the ideas down in short sentences, and sometimes in the evening I would do some more extensive note-taking. Normally I would run with each idea. Now I did not have time for that. And that has turned out to be a good way to let ideas come and go.

By the time I got to my second study break I knew which ideas I wanted to work on, because those were the ideas that kept coming back to me. Just like staying in the fog felt like more result with less effort, so did this incubation. Without having the struggle of dealing with all of the potential ideas, I knew which ones to focus on and could get to work with the natural selection.

**Sensing**

Experiencing the positive effects of incubation time was not the only learning from my approach. I also discovered the importance of sensing. I usually tend to put myself in a pressure cooker and don’t let myself out until the work is done. Because of the way I divided my time during the Master’s Project, I had weeks outside of the pressure cooker – or at least outside of the Master’s Project pressure cooker. This “away-time” brought me closer to sensing what was the right thing to do. I tend to search for answers in my head, and that’s not always where they are. During the time, I was not working on my project I felt where my energy was flowing. I felt three ideas coming back to me over and over again, and I clearly felt those were the ideas I wanted to work on. My most important learning here was that feeling is not something that comes naturally, because my cognition keeps standing in the way. The best way to give room for feeling is to literally give room in terms of time. Breaking a project into pieces and sometimes
not working on it turned out to be the best way for me to sense the ideal way to move forward.

**Fresh Eyes**

In my last study break, I wrote the details for the surprise concepts that I had designed. After I was done describing every detail of every concept, I took them with me to the CREA conference, where I validated the concepts with different creativity professionals. I realized during the first two days that opening up to others makes me a bit nervous, and I asked myself why. I learned there are a few things stopping me from letting others influence me and my ideas and concepts.

First of all, I find it difficult to ask for the investment of other people’s time. I feel they already have enough to do, and I do not want to burden them with my requests. Second, I find it scary to hear people’s feedback. What if they don’t like it? What if people don’t get it? What if people don’t see a need for it? And third, I had created so much that I didn’t know how to make it easy to digest. I decided to put my concerns to the side and just go with the flow.

On the first evening of CREA I reconnected with someone I had met the year before and he asked me what I was working on. We became engaged in a very good conversation where he gave me two things: reassurance that I was designing great concepts, and the warning that focus would make things better.

During the workshops at CREA I got to talk spontaneously to different people from different backgrounds (culturally as well as professionally), and I got so much diverse feedback that helped me make my concepts better. When one of the participants in a course asked me if she could read my paper when I was done, I asked her if she would help me shape it while I was still creating it and she told me she was honored to do so. She has given me many ideas and much inspiration and concrete feedback. More interviews took place spontaneously, and I
learned that going into these meetings as openly as possible creates opportunities for actual conversations. As it turned out, not bringing the PowerPoint presentation that I had prepared for the feedback created more openness for conversations to flow naturally, and offered other opportunities to answer questions I did not even know I had.

**Bringing It to Life**

Next, I had to take all of those ideas, the detailed scripts of the surprise concepts, the knowledge and insights from all the literature and reviewers, and bring them together in a paper. This has always been a challenge for me, because I feel caged in a way. But in fact, I learned that bringing it all together is what is needed to bring a project to life. I will need to make my project even more concise in the upcoming period to get people to buy into it. I plan to inspire them with a simple concept around surprise that will sweep them off their feet as it did me.
SECTION SIX: CONCLUSION

Conclusion

I had big ambitions for my Master’s Project. During the course of this Master’s program, it had become so clear to me what my role will be in igniting creativity into the world: I will use my energy and experience to build concepts that will help people grow their creative mindsets. Openness and tolerance for ambiguity have been my main focus points. Surprise was the playful, inspirational way to get people to engage in these skills, and I saw experiential learning as the method to make them stick.

I can handle big and compelling ambitions. In fact, Big and Compelling are my middle names. But when I started this project, I was afraid it was too big to handle. I was afraid I could not make this work. And now I know I can, by taking it one step at a time. I took the first important steps to learn more about the different topics. I have gained a better understanding of how to apply surprise in a smart way, so that it feels safe and can be effective depending on individual backgrounds and preferences. I am better aware of what openness to experience and tolerance for ambiguity mean for different people in different situations, and I have discovered many different ways to ignite them. The solid foundation that I have built is something for me to return to in every next step I take. And I can continue building on it.

The second major step I took during this Master’s Project was to pick and choose and not to confuse the world with too many ideas at the same time. I chose to set up a few surprise concepts that are close to my heart. The best compliment I got from reviewers was that the concepts I built are really ME. That’s all I have to offer: my energy, my ideas, and the beautiful knowledge and insights I have gained and want to share. And that’s a whole lot. I feel I have found my path and I want to discover what’s out there. I have a few concrete next steps lined up,
and on top of that I will let myself be surprised by the many opportunities that I don’t know exist yet.

**Next Steps**

**Products**

First, I will roll out the concepts that I have developed for this Master’s Project. I will recruit people to join in Diverse Faces of Surprise before the summer and design and fill the campaign over the summer, so that the online campaign can start running in the last quarter of 2018 until December 31, 2018. I will roll out the website or Facebook page on January 1, 2019. On this site, I will also offer the 30-day surprise challenge, for which people will be able to apply from that moment on.

I will start testing the business team events that I have designed. When these are solid enough, I will roll them out into the corporate world. And there are more ideas, which I have left out of the Master’s Project, but which I want to further develop. One is a coaching program for entrepreneurs to help them welcome surprise into their products and services, and let surprise into their personal development in order to become flexible and resilient entrepreneurs who not only tolerate ambiguity, but are delighted by it. I want to include exciting, surprising ways of coaching, like personal training. I want to work outside on body and mind connections, triggering all the senses.

I also have a desire to design an ‘out-of-control’ or ‘surprise’ educational module to balance curricula that I believe are too focused on control. I would love to come up with ways to let students experience the positive effects of opening up to the unknown.

When I started my Master’s Project, it first revolved around an ‘experience farm’ that I wanted to set up, where I would live a surprising life with my husband and son, where I would
have room to welcome individuals and teams to engage in surprise experiences on my land, and where I would have entrepreneurs’ stables in which I’d work together with other professionals to continuously work on bringing surprise into the world. Making a location the core of my Master’s Project did not work well as the springboard for ideas, so I put the location aside to instead focus on the types of activities that would take place. Now that the content is becoming concrete, I will keep my eyes open for appropriate farms that offer the opportunities to house my surprise experiences.

**Person**

After I graduate with a Master of Science in Creativity and Change Leadership, I will start working together with my business coach to redesign my business model to combine my communications business with surprise experiences and coaching, perfectly balancing the known and the new into my surprise seesaw. And as Torrance (2002) advised in his Manifesto, “Find a great teacher or mentor who will help you” (p. 11). That is exactly what I intend to do.
References


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Appendix A: DIVERSE FACES OF SURPRISE

In order to create Diverse Faces of Surprise, I will set up a social campaign for getting people to participate. I am asking people in my own network to participate via one or more Facebook posts. To make sure I get a good variety of people across the globe and to not leave the success of this campaign to coincidence, I also ask others to share this post for me. For this I will reach out to some people before my first posting, to include them in my plan and ask for their buy-in to share my post with a personal note.

Step 1: Recruit Diverse Faces of Surprise Participants on Facebook and LinkedIn

Dear friends,

I want to invite you on a surprise journey with me!

As most of you will know by now, I am working on my Master’s Project. The topic of my Master’s Project is surprise. Why? During the course of my studies in creativity and change leadership I have come to the conclusion that an open mindset and the ability to tolerate not knowing what is coming are vital in our lives these days. We live in times where the pace of change is higher than ever, and where we have to deal with new problems for which old solutions may no longer work. So we need to be creative and flexible in whatever we do and we need to stay open. I look at it like a tree in the storm: the rigid old branch that has a greater chance of cracking than the flexible twig that moves with the wind. Moving with the wind can be a very smart choice when flexibility is your way of surviving or winning. That’s the same with
us at work, at school, and in our private lives. When we manage to stay open and tolerate the unknown, we will be flexible and succeed.

I have many great colleagues who teach people creative thinking skills. There are informative websites and books where you can find a wide range of tools to ignite your creativity and the creativity of others. But there’s another inspiring, fun way to develop creative thinking skills like an open mindset and tolerance for not knowing: through surprise.

We all deal with positive and negative surprises in our lives. Some people hate negative as well as positive surprise. Others love positive surprises. And there are even people who are able to see the upside of negative surprise. People who appreciate positive and negative surprise are resilient, flexible, and open.

It’s been almost three years since I started working on my Master’s degree. Since then I have experienced many surprises, from fun weekends away for a birthday, to hearing my dad was terminally ill and his subsequent dying. I also experienced positive and negative surprise before beginning this journey, some big, some small. Experiencing these surprises while engaging in the science behind creativity and working on my own creative mindset has made a world of difference. Because I was writing heavy academic papers on related topics, I gave these events in my life more and different attention than I might normally. I experienced more productivity in times of positive surprise. I managed to see the upside of losing one of the most important men in my life, because I learned about the power of resilience. Knowing about the benefits of being open to both positive as negative surprise and changing your mindset are two different things. I
decided to dedicate my Master’s Project to surprise, because I want to learn how it can help people open up and tolerate the unknown better, so that I can engage in it and engage others in it. My aim is to bring inspiring, surprising experiences to the world for people to have fun with while learning some of the most important skills in life.

I’ve learned a lot from scientific literature. I’ve done a lot of self-reflection. Now it is time to learn from you, work with you, and take this surprise journey with you. I want to gain and share a good insight in what surprise is for people across the globe. I want to hear YOUR stories and experiences around surprise. You will benefit from thinking about it and deliberately engaging in surprise, as it will help you open up, and collecting the stories will help me gain a better understanding of the different aspects of surprise. I want to set up a surprise community where we feature stories and share insights.

My idea is the following: Towards the end of this year I will present Diverse Faces of Surprise, where I will feature one person – a picture and a quote from them on surprise – every day until December 31. On January 1, more of these people’s stories will be revealed on a special website or social media channel, where we will create a community of people across the globe who want to deliberately engage in surprise.

Do you want to join me in his exciting journey and be one of the Faces of Surprise? Send me a PM on Facebook or an email (anneke@zincommunicatie.com) and I’ll tell you more.
Step 2: Briefing the Participants

Dear…,

You’re already my surprise hero, signing up with so little background information! Not knowing what is expected of you is what my favorite surprisologists, Luna and Renninger, call “dipping into the unpredictable.” The concept is simple: starting around the end of 2018 I will put one Face of Surprise in the spotlight on Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Instagram per day. All that will be revealed will be the faces and respective quotes on surprise.

On January 1, I launch a new website or Facebook page on surprise where visitors (and you!) will find out more on surprise. The full stories from the Diverse Faces of Surprise series will be there, too, so people can learn more about how different people from around the world with different backgrounds deal with surprise, and how it helps them open up and tolerate ambiguity. Over the summer I will have analyzed the content from the attached questionnaire, and I will have categorized your responses into a few hot topic areas.

The first step is to get your stories on surprise. I have created a small questionnaire for you to fill out, and I invite you to please look and get started. I also included a briefing for how to take a picture of yourself, so that I can make it fit the campaign look and feel. The deadline for sending in your answers and pictures is Monday, June 25.

I am really looking forward to hearing your surprising stories and am happy that you are joining me on my surprise journey!

Love, Anneke
Step 3: Questionnaire to Be Filled Out by Participants

Dear ….

Thank you for sharing your surprise experience. Please answer the following questions and send them in no later than June 25 to anneke@zincommunicatie.com. I invite you to really go back in time and consider the role surprise has played in different parts of your life. I would suggest you go to a silent place where you will not be disturbed.

First read the questions. Then close your eyes for as long as you need to bring yourself back in time to moments where surprise (positive and negative) has impacted your life. Then go back to the questionnaire and answer the questions. I would challenge you to make it personal, while at the same time being aware that the intention is to share these stories with a wider audience. So share only what you feel comfortable with being brought to the world.

Surprise can be big or small. Choose what you want to focus on. The little things in life, like seeing the first flower come up in spring, can be just as elevating as a big surprise party for your 16th birthday. The disappointment of not getting the job you were hoping for can be just as devastating as losing a loved one.

1: Choose the statement that best applies to you. Write below A, B, C or D.

A: I hate surprises; good as well as bad surprises.

B: I love good surprises, but want to stay away from bad surprise as much as possible.
C: I can deal with good as well as bad surprises

D: I LOVE surprises, good as well as bad.

2: Can you elaborate on your choice in question 1? Can you explain why you have these emotions towards surprise?

3: What is surprise for you?

4: What is your personal take on surprise to share with the world?

**Step 4: Social Media Campaign Live**
Together with a designer, I will design a template and a briefing for the participants to be portrayed in a way that fits the concept. Instead of me having to go across the globe to photograph each individual or just use the people around me, I want to have a concept in which people can create their own picture, following a clear briefing, and send it over to me so I can make Diverse Faces of Surprise that all fit a theme.

I will post the Faces in the last days of 2018 as a trigger campaign for Surprise, running up to the roll-out of my new surprise company on January 1, 2019.
I hereby grant permission to the International Center for Studies in Creativity at Buffalo State College to place a digital copy of this Master’s Project, Surprisingly open or openly surprised? That is the question! Using surprise experiences to increase openness to experience and tolerance for ambiguity, as an online resource.

Anneke Veenendaal-de Kort

May 12, 2018