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The impact of contemporary dance methods on innovative competence development

Nina Bozic Yams

School of Innovation, Design and Engineering, Mälardalen University, Smedjegatan 37, Eskilstuna, Sweden

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ABSTRACT

The article presents a case of Swedish municipality to demonstrate how principles from contemporary dance and choreography can be used to design and implement long-term artistic interventions on strategic level and enable employees' innovative competence development. The study described is a 2-year participatory action research project with practice-based training for 22 innovation leaders from different parts of organization. The results show that dance-based methods enabled participants to develop different innovative skills and strengthened their innovative competence. Unique contributions of dance methods are highlighted with the focus on providing a more humanistic and bottom-up approach to enabling innovation, balancing external organizational goals with the needs and drives of each individual. Choreographic tools provided an innovative frame of thinking about using body, movement, space and time in new ways in everyday work to enable individuals to feel better, develop their personal innovative practice and create conditions they need to be innovative.

1. Introduction

In the beginning of 2000, there was a lot of enthusiasm and high expectations about the new field of arts-in-business that was developing with fast pace (Darsø, 2016). The more traditional forms of using art as decoration, status symbol or entertainment in organizations were being replaced by starting to use artistic knowledge in more tactic and strategic ways. On one hand to develop skills and competences in specific areas, such as teambuilding, communication and leadership, and on the other hand to reach long-term strategic transformation in terms of organizational development, innovation and cultural change (Darsø, 2004). Even though long-term artistic interventions on strategic level were rare, there was hope that they would increase in the future. But then the financial crisis came and all investments that were not contributing directly to the bottom line were cut back, including many artistic interventions (Darsø, 2016). Maybe another reason why the use of art-based methods in organizations has not developed in accordance with expectations is that they are often not able to clearly show how they will generate value and contribute to the overall strategy and goals of organization. The first research question explored in this article is thus: *How can we design long-term art-based initiatives in organizations that have an impact on strategic level?* A two-year art-based initiative in a Swedish municipality is presented as an example of how such projects can be implemented with the goal of contributing to strategic goals of organizations. In this case the mid-term strategic goal was to strengthen the innovative competence among municipality employees and the

longer-term goal was to create an innovative culture that would enable continuous renewal and organizational development.

Research shows that innovation plays a central role in organizational competitiveness (Reuvers, van Engen, Vinkenburg, & Wilson-Evered, 2008; Shalley, Gilson, & Blum, 2009) and that in the fast changing environment organization's high innovation performance cannot rely anymore on a few select people working in R & D, but rather depends on engagement of everyone in organization across disciplines, functions, and levels (Abstein & Spieth, 2014; Trokhan, 2007). This means that innovative competence has become a core competence that is generic by nature and shall be integrated in everyday practice of employees. The increased importance of innovation was something that also the top management of the municipality discussed in this article realized due to the fact that on one hand the municipality was facing cuts in the budget and on the other hand challenges, such as unemployment, immigration, financial difficulties of citizens, and demand for new apartments were increasing. This forced the municipality to think how they could find innovative solutions to their present and future challenges within the frame of limited resources that were available. They realized they needed to engage the innovative talent and ideas of all their employees to ensure that the organization could respond in-time to continuous inflow of new challenges the municipality was facing.

Several researchers have suggested that using knowledge, principles and methods from arts stimulates creativity and innovation in organizations (Adler, 2006; Austin & Devin, 2003; Barry & Meisiek, 2010;

E-mail address: nina.bozic@mdh.se.

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Berthoin Antal & Strauß, 2013; Buswick, Creamer, & Pinard, 2004; Darsø, 2004; Guillet de Monthoux, 2004; Ladkin & Taylor, 2010; Schiuma, 2009). Berthoin Antal and Strauß (2013), who performed one of the largest studies about the impacts of artistic interventions in organizations, identified various key impact categories, many of which can be related to innovation. For example, the most common effect of artistic interventions in their study was that participants experienced “seeing more and differently”, which meant that the artistic intervention helped them become more aware of things around them through reflection, making them question taken-for-granted routines, and enabling them to get new perspectives or widen existing ones. These are all important abilities one needs to use in innovation processes. The current literature thus provides support for suggesting that artistic methods could be used in organizations to help employees develop their innovative competence.

The use of dance-based knowledge and methods in organizational context is a relatively new field of practice and research, but with a growing interest, especially in Europe (Biehl-Missal & Springborg, 2015; Johansson Sköldberg, Woodilla, & Berthoin Antal, 2016). Previous studies have suggested how knowledge from contemporary dance practice could be used to support innovation processes and development of innovative culture in organizations (Bozic & Köping Olsson, 2013; Bozic Yams, 2016). On the other hand, the research on competence development (Illeris, 2013) underlines the importance of holistic approach to competence development, engaging both cognitive and emotional capacities and emphasizing that being competent in any field of work today demands to be able to act in both known and unknown situations. Dance-based methods have shown both positive effects on encouraging people to embrace ambiguity and exploring the unknown (Hujala et al., 2015; Ludevig, 2015), and on enabling individuals to explore different types of knowledge, including the more tacit and embodied forms of knowing and development of emotional capacities (Ludevig, 2015; Zeitner, 2016). All these things motivated the exploration of the second research question in this article: *How can knowledge and methods from contemporary dance support employees to develop their innovative competence?*

The study presented in the article was designed as a 2-year participatory action research project in a Swedish municipality that was centred around a practice-based training program for 22 innovation leaders from different parts of organization who got the mission to support other colleagues in their innovative competence development. The empirical data collected and analysed in the article are 67 personal reflection stories written by participants during different phases of the research process.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Innovative competence

There are many different views on what the key elements defining innovative competence are (Zhang, Kolmos, & de Graaf, 2013). This is not surprising as innovation is an interdisciplinary field of study on the crossroads between psychology, sociology, economics, engineering, and organizational theory (Ford, 1996) where many different perspectives meet. The innovation management field has developed in time and similarly to studies of leadership, ideas around innovative competence have changed from focusing on the individual psychological traits and attitudes of innovators (Amabile, 1983; Cerinšek & Dolinšek, 2009; Nanda & Singh, 2009) towards looking more at the functional skills for innovation (du Chatenier, Versteegen, Biemans, et al., 2010; Dyer, Gregersen, & Christensen, 2011; McGourty, Tarshis, & Dominick, 1996), and recently starting to pay more attention to the interactive skills needed to practice innovation in teams and in more complex collaborative networks (Bissola, Imperatori, & Colonel, 2014; Darsø, 2012; Hargadon & Bechky, 2006).

In this article the focus will be on the functional skills needed to

develop innovative competence. First, because psychological traits and attitudes that can influence innovative competence are hard to change and out of the scope of the study presented in this article. On the other hand, if the aim was to look at the interactive skills needed to practice innovation in teams, the study would need to include some sort of observation or data collection on the group level, while the empirical data analysed in this article is limited to individual reflection stories of participants.

Dyer et al. (2011) developed a framework of functional skills connected to innovative competence through an eight-year collaborative study in which they tried to find out what cognitive and behavioural skills separate innovators from non-innovators. They first performed nearly hundred interviews with founders and executives of most innovative global companies and based on the surfacing patterns of action of these individuals developed a survey about innovative skills that was answered by over five hundred innovators and five thousand managers in more than seventy-five countries (Dyer et al., 2011). The scale and length of the study, its global orientation and publication of results in top journals (such as Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal and Harvard Business Review) motivated the choice of using their framework when analysing how dance-based methods could influence the development of innovative competence.

The reappearing pattern of skills that separates innovators from non-innovators according to Dyer et al. (2011), and thus influences individual's innovative competence, includes:

- *questioning*,
- *observing*,
- *networking*,
- *experimenting and*
- *associational thinking*.

The *questioning* skill means that one often poses questions, especially the type of questions that challenge the status quo and the underlying assumptions about individual, team, organization and society. Typically, these would be the “why” and “what if” questions or challenging questions that people would not expect to get and have no clear answers (Dyer et al., 2011, pp. 65–89). The second behaviour skill of innovators is *observation*. This includes both intense observation in novel situations as well as ordinary encounters and it often engages multiple senses. It is about actively observing the world around, listening, seeing and noticing what is different and surprising. It could mean observing customers, market trends or society in general (Dyer et al., 2011, pp. 89–113).

The third skill is related to *experimenting* and includes both mental and physical exploration. Mental exploration could be for example related to research and reading information from different kinds of sources, while the physical exploration is related to taking things apart and testing new things in practice. It is about making continuous experiments, like building fast prototypes, and learning through trial and error (Dyer et al., 2011, pp. 133–157). The fourth behavioural skill of innovators is the *idea networking*, which happens through building and maintaining diverse social networks. It is important that the focus is on creating networks of people with diverse ideas and perspectives that one can tap into for new ideas and insights. Innovators often share their ideas with different profiles of people to get their feedback and further develop their ideas through networking. This is quite different from the networking of traditional managers, which is often focused on using networks for friendships and career progression (Dyer et al., 2011, pp. 113–133).

The last skill of innovators is the cognitive skill of *associational thinking*, which is strengthened by practicing all the other four innovative behavioural skills. Associating is connected to the “ability to make surprising connections across areas of knowledge, industries, and even geographies” (Dyer et al., 2011, p. 41). Fig. 1 summarizes how innovators use their innovative competence by first having the courage

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