

# Cultivating Not-Knowing: An Integral Approach to Creativity and Problem Solving

*The No-Name Northeast Exposure Pod*

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## Our Big Question

One cannot open a business magazine without hearing about the imperative for organizations to foster creativity and innovation, and this injunction isn't restricted to the business world. This trend has been happening across the public and non-profit sectors as well. There are very few organizations where the issue of collaborative and creative problem-solving isn't part of their regular activities. This was true for most of the members of our pod, so we were excited to explore that domain further. The other common thread was that the groups in which we are involved are often torn or stifled by stress and conflicts. Thus our Big Question:

*How might an integral approach support creative problem solving in situations of conflict?*

Given the importance and commonality of this topic, it is not surprising that there are thousands of research papers around this area. There are many theories on the subject, from Wallas' 1926 model of creative process (JOHNSON, 2014) to the more recent Componential Theory of Creativity by Teresa Amabile (AMABILE, 2012). It is not within our scope to do a comprehensive review of the literature in that domain, but one definitive benefit of the Integral model is that it gives us a clear way to integrate them: the 4-quadrants model.

## Creativity and Problem Solving in the 4 Quadrants

Creativity and problem-solving are interrelated concepts. In a way, we could think of these concepts as different lenses through which to view the same underlying activity: goal-oriented collaboration. Problem-solving can be thought of as exploring the systematic ways in which we can solve problems, whereas the more nebulous "creativity" often points to a more "unknowable spark" that generates novel and new solutions.

<p><b>I</b></p> <p>Wallas' Stages:  2. Incubation  3. Illumination</p> <p>Playfulness  • No self-editing  • Letting go of fear of judgments</p> <p>Components Theory of Creativity:  2.3 Response generation  3. Intrinsic Motivation</p> <p>Self-transforming traits  • Openness to experience  • Tolerance to uncertainty and complexity</p> <p>Embrace challenges  • Limits and constraints  • Loss</p>	<p><b>It</b></p> <p>Wallas' Stages  1. Preparation  4. Verification</p> <p>Components Theory of Creativity:  1. Expertise and domain relevant skills  2. Creative process skills  2.1 Problem identification  2.2 Preparation  2.4 Validation</p> <p>"Thinking with hands"</p>
<p>Components Theory of Creativity:  4. Social Environment  • Innovation culture (vs conservative)  • Collaboration</p> <p>Trust ("Friendship")  • No fear of judgment from peers</p> <p>Free exchange of information</p> <p>Playfulness</p> <p><b>We</b></p>	<p>Components Theory of Creativity  4. Social Environment  • Autonomy  • Removing Time pressure  • Recognition</p> <p>Brainstorm techniques  • Quantity  • Building on top of other ideas</p> <p>Role Plays</p> <p><b>System</b></p>

## Subjective Individual Dimensions (I)

The first quadrant holds many of the keys to creativity and successful problem solving. Two of the four stages of Wallas' model live here: Incubation and Illumination. Incubation is the activity of relaxing and letting all the data, facts, and other things known about the problem or task "simmer" in the periphery of consciousness (or even unconscious processing). That stage comes before the "Aha" aspect of the Illumination stage, where the novel idea pops into consciousness.

In the Components Theory of Creativity, we'll find here the "Response generation" step of the component called Creative process skills. Another key component from that model which is

“Intrinsic motivation” lives here. Research supports that creativity is supported by intrinsic motivation: that is, individuals who are interested in the task or problem for its own sake tends to be more creative.

Other traits favorable to creativity are the openness to experience, tolerance to uncertainty and complexity, and the willingness to embrace challenges. It is interesting to note that these are all traits that are fully developed in the Self-Transforming Mind stage of development. (MCNAMARA, 2016)

Another subjective aspect here is an attitude of playfulness, which supports the exploration of the problem to be solved and lets creativity emerge. That attitude of playfulness requires letting go of the fear of judgements, both of others and of self. This enables the free exploration of ideas that could look “ridiculous” at first, but might be just what was called for in the end.

## Objective Individual Dimensions (It)

The first quadrant holds many of the “creativity techniques.” That is, all the behaviors and skills that support creativity. The first and final stages of Wallas’ model live here: Preparation and Verification. In the preparation stage, one reads and learn about the task or problem. In the verification stage, one verifies that the “Aha” idea found in the “Illumination” stage is actually an adequate response to the problem.

Two of Amabile’s components also live here: the Expertise component and the Creative process skills. The expertise component is all the knowledge and skills that the individual has related to the problem domain. The creative process skills are mainly a superset of Wallas’ model. It does add the step of defining and identifying the problem. Better framing of the problem acts like a focus for creativity.

Another quadrant technique is what the Design approach calls “thinking with hands” (BROWN, 2008). That is the activity of using physical props (post-it, clay, etc.) to play, and explore potential solutions to the problem.

## Subjective Collective Dimensions (We)

The third quadrant holds the cultural aspects that support creativity. In the Components Theory, part of the fourth component “Social Environment” lives here. That component covers both culture and system aspects and so lives across the 3rd and 4th quadrant. On the cultural side, it won’t be surprising that a culture of innovation (that tends to value new ideas and embraces difference in perspectives and friction in process) will be more favorable to foster creativity. The other important cultural aspect is a focus on collaboration, where a group of people can work together openly instead of being in competition with each other. Closely related: a free exchange of information between the participants will be favorable.

Playfulness also belongs in that quadrant. That requires what is now commonly called “Psychological safety”, where one doesn’t fear judgments from their peer.

These key aspects of the We-quadrant (collaboration, free exchange of information, psychological safety) are what enables all the diversity present in the group to increase the creativity of the group.

## Objective Collective Dimensions (System)

We find in the fourth quadrant the institutionalized aspects of the social systems supporting creativity. This is where we find the rest of the “Social Environment” component. That model stresses the importance of giving autonomy to individuals, removing time constraints (hard to create on a schedule and under stress),, and also the recognitions given to creative work within the organisation.

That quadrant can also hold the collective brainstorm techniques. Another common design technique living here are the “Role plays”. Through the use of role playing, one can experience and explore potential solutions to test them out and empathize with the intended audience.

## The Fruits of an Integral Approach

As we see by mapping all of these perspectives on problem-solving and creativity on the four quadrants, an integral approach to facilitation has a lot to offer in this space. By thinking holistically and addressing all of the quadrants, we can offer a complete facilitation in this domain.

The mapping of the quadrants can allow us to apply other knowledge and techniques based on the quadrant correlation. For example, there are multiple “We-quadrant” techniques to build psychological safety or work on sameness and difference, which would probably be relevant to creating the space conducive to creativity; similarly, for the “First-person” intervention related to cultivating openness to experience and “not-knowing” (or tolerance to ambiguity).

## The Experience

For our experience, given the time constraint, we went for a design that could give participants a taste of the importance of aspects of the first (I) and third (We) quadrants on creativity: trust and openness to not-knowing. We’ll be giving the participants a divisive creative task. There will be a high-level of stress because of the potential internal and social conflict around the task subject, and the time pressure imposed to complete the task. The experience is designed to reflect real-world situations of creative problem-solving where groups typically have little time to solve difficult problems for which there is little group alignment on the scope of the problem or buy-in to potential solutions. In our experience, we’ll present a scenario and task that raise internal and collective disharmony. Groups will have a period of time to engage the task before we introduce a social meditation intervention. After the social meditation, groups will resume work on their

tasks. Our hypothesis is that groups will be high-energy and full of difference (and discomfort) prior to the social meditation exercise. Following the social meditation, the chaos will be calmed and groups can more soberly and playfully complete the task and come up with unique and creative solutions.

An overview of our experience is as follows:

**Big question:** How might an integral approach support creative problem-solving in situations of conflict?

**Experience provocation:** In what ways is Trump healthy and good for the US and the world?

**Experience task:** In small groups, create a campaign platform to position Trump as the preferred candidate to progressive communities in the 2020 election.

**High-level agenda:**

- 0-5 Overview + Intention
- 5-15 Small groups work on task
- 15-20 Social meditation
- 20-25 Small groups complete task
- 25-30 Small groups share their solutions

## References

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