

Setting the playground. Collective creativity in coworking spaces.

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Far from the idealized concept of the lone entrepreneurs working in a garage, the availability of a social creative environment is a key factor for successfully developing a startup project. Highly interactive creative communities composed of self-motivated skilled individuals are the source of disrupting innovations like the micro-computer in Silicon Valley, the molecular gastronomy in Catalonia or the new circus in Québec. These communities emerged in an organic manner based on play and exploration. Nevertheless, there is a lack of understanding how these communities emerge, and how they can be nurtured. So far, research has focused on play and creativity in organizations (Dandridge 1986; Locke 1996; Sutton & Hargadon 1997) but has largely ignored how play is related to creativity in the context of a group of individuals without a common organizational goal.

The aim of this article is to better understand the collective creative dynamics among entrepreneurs, and how creative communities emerge. More specifically, our research question is: which are the characteristics that lead to collective creativity among a colocated group of entrepreneurs?

To answer to this question, our research has focused on the study of coworking spaces, where entrepreneurs, freelancers and self-employed workers share a space to work. Beyond mere shared-offices, coworking is “a global community of people dedicated to the values of Collaboration, Openness, Community, Accessibility, and Sustainability in their workplaces” (Coworking.com n.d.).

The article is based on a multiple-case study of coworking spaces. The research was based on an inductive, qualitative methodology. Qualitative methods are most suitable for phenomena that are novel and that have not been previously theorized (Eisenhardt 1989). The main sources of data were semi-structured interviews. Respondents represented two different groups of actors. The first group consisted in 28 interviews with managers and members of 21 different coworking spaces in Barcelona. As part of a triangulation strategy, a second group of 13 interviews were conducted to managers of similar spaces from other European cities and specialists of the evolution of the creative spaces in the city. The second main source of data was non-participatory observation of the community activities (about 30 hours of formal observation and several more of informal observation). Secondary data like the content of the spaces’ web pages, online forums and discussion mailing lists has also been taken in consideration.

The data analysis lead to a structure of factors enhancing play and creativity around six aspects: selecting players, organizing playtimes and playgrounds, challenging creativity, empowering the community, managing timelessness, and transmitting inspiring vision.

Selecting players

The coworking spaces that showed a higher degree of collective play where the ones doing a more careful selection of the coworkers. The selection was done twofold, 1) organic selection, by the coworkers staying in the spaces where they felt a higher cognitive proximity with peers and 2)

procedural selection, where spaces' managers accepted new coworkers based on preliminary interviews to check the fit with the current community and the predisposition to collaborate.

Organizing playtimes and playgrounds

Depending on the type of play, coworking spaces put in place determined spaces and times. Physical spaces are divided into zones with different uses. Some are dedicated to work in privacy and respected agreed rules (like areas with desks), whereas others are aimed to play. Two types of play areas can be distinguished: 1) areas of "diversional play" (Mainemelis & Ronson 2006) where entrepreneurs engage in informal relaxed interaction with peers (like coffee areas) and where play is fostered in a social context, to enhance psychological safety (Mainemelis & Ronson 2006; Jett & George 2003), and 2) areas dedicated to play in relation with the entrepreneurial project. For instance, some coworking spaces include a makerspace, with tools to prototype and experiment, where members can play individually or collectively (Amabile 1996; Beatty & Torbert 2003).

Challenging creativity

By framing a problem in a unique way, its solutions is more likely to be novel (Getzels & Csikszentmihalyi 1976), especially when the constraints of the framing are internal to the task and dependent on the people participating (Basadur et al. 1990; Runco & Sakamoto 1999). Our findings confirm that in challenges that have been defined by the community members, the search for a creative and novel solution is encouraged. For instance, in one case, the members of a coworking space challenged themselves to develop a mobile phone app in 36 hours. This time-bounded project intrinsically motivated the community and resulted in a successful output. This kind of challenges confirm the literature suggesting that tasks lead to a higher creativity if they have an optimal difficulty, clear goals, quick feedback and time limits (Csikszentmihalyi 1975; Deci & Ryan 1985).

Empowering the community

By being autonomous, individuals are able to manage in a more creative way their tasks (Russ 1993). In some cases, community members are empowered to play by changing their physical environment according to their will (e.g. paint walls, build their own furniture, etc.). This freedom contributes to the appropriation of the space and the consolidation of a community identity.

Managing timelessness

Timelessness plays a key role in the individual and organizational creative processes by providing a feeling of immersion, a recognition of time distortion, a sense of mastery, and a sense of transcendence (Mainemelis 2001). In some spaces the timelessness cognitive state of individuals is facilitated by considering time as unstructured and adaptable (like for instance, by having 24h/7 access and dormitories to rest at any time).

Transmitting inspiring vision

Managers of coworking spaces that focus on developing highly creative communities, develop and communicate a vision of their community. The vision, in the strategic sense, is an ideal and conceptual image that inspires the community. For instance, in a case a manager defined coworking in a community as a way of life and a religion.

Play and work have been generally described in the literature as two different set of activities. The literature on organizational ambidexterity suggests the importance of simultaneously explore new ideas and exploit innovations commercially. In the case of entrepreneurs, work, understood as

activities with a purpose and play understood as creative work where the purpose is discovered through exploration are intertwined and inseparable processes. By analyzing contexts where both work and play are facilitated, this article contributes to the literature on organizational creativity and entrepreneurship by suggesting ways to enhance play and creativity.

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