

## Innovation-for-the-rest-of-us

Talk by Les Robinson at the New Zealand Association of Environmental Education conference, Hamilton, January 2012

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I was sitting in the sun at the Berry Charity Chook Auction earlier this year, next to a chook fancier named Julia and we were talking about how important it is to let children take risks and have accidents, because each bruise and scratch and bump is a lesson that they can't get any other way. And by bonking their little skulls, and scraping their foreheads and dinging their little knees and elbows, they learn how to handle themselves and avoid far bigger and dangerous accidents later in life.

When, suddenly, she said "To increase the success rate you have to increase the failure rate."

Awed, I said "Did you just think of that?" She said "yes".

I said "Just then?" She said "Yes."

I said "Do you mind if I use it?" She said "Yes."

*To increase the success rate you have to increase the failure rate.*

Sir James Dyson, who invented the Dyson vacuum cleaner, said

"I made 5,127 prototypes of my vacuum before I got it right. There were 5,126 failures. But I learned from each one. That's how I came up with a solution. So I don't mind failure. I've always thought that schoolchildren should be marked by the number of failures they've had. The child who tries strange things and experiences lots of failures to get there is probably more creative.

"We're taught to do things the right way. But if you want to discover something that other people haven't, you need to do things the wrong way. Initiate a failure by doing something that's very silly, unthinkable, naughty, dangerous. Watching why that fails can take you on a completely different path. It's exciting, actually."<sup>1</sup>

Or Jamie Oliver failing his way to remarkable successes on *Jamie's School Dinners*.

Considering that we're engaged in a difficult enterprise - influencing the behaviour of populations - the idea that we need to fail a lot makes sense...because that's how we learn and there's a lot of learning to do.

I want to share an innovation story.

The march of innovation thinking into the social change field in the past few years is really exciting, and healthy. It used to be that designers stuck with designing kettles, chairs and cubicles. Now they're designing solutions to social problems. And they're giving us some practices that allow us to be intentionally innovative.

To see how it works, have a look at OpenIDEO.

<http://www.openideo.com/>

Design professionals have a practice (that seems to be called "design thinking") that we can learn a lot from:

- 1) Immersion – carry out thorough desk research, social research and field observation.
- 2) Inspiration – get excited by unconventional ideas and possibilities.
- 3) Identify challenging themes – what are our criteria for success?
- 4) Concepting – brainstorming solutions.
- 5) Evaluation – reworking ideas into a prototype.
- 6) Fast prototyping – field test the prototype(s) to quickly learn what works and what doesn't.

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<sup>1</sup> Failure doesn't suck, *Fast Company* May 1 2007  
[http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/115/open\\_next-design.html](http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/115/open_next-design.html)

7) Improvise, reinvent and reiterate.

I want to share an example of applying these principles in a local government behaviour change project.

The cycling team at the City of Sydney is working hard on the historic transformation of Sydney into a cycle-friendly city, joining the ranks of other car-centred cities that have made the same transformation. (It's almost forgotten, for example, that Copenhagen and Dublin were once NOT cycling-friendly cities.)

Fiona Campbell and her team recognise that there's more to becoming cycle-friendly than building a great network of separated cycleways.

Most cycle routes continue to be shared paths and, as more people cycle, we're going to need shared protocols or norms of courteous behaviour. And one of norms, inevitably, is that cyclists are going to have to use their bells or otherwise signal to pedestrians and others when they are overtaking them. It's courtesy. And it's safety. Sharing is more than just occupying the same space. It's about how we cooperate, interact and communicate with each other as human beings in the public realm. Pedestrians, in particular, need to feel safe on shared paths.

The City started with a measurable indicator and a target.

70% of pedestrians to feel very safe or extremely safe on shared paths by 2013 (80% by 2016).

(As a baseline, the average figure for five City of Sydney shared paths in 2009 was 53%.)

The City's team wanted to get cracking, so, automatically, they organised a brainstorm.

Now the thing about a brainstorm is, unless you're thoughtful about how you set it up, a brainstorm pretty much guarantees you'll end up with a slogan. It's an example of why process matters. If the process is an ordinary brainstorm then you can pretty much predict what you're going to get, and it's probably going to be a PR campaign with a slogan. But do PR campaigns change behaviour? No. So a brainstorm is no way to develop a behaviour change effort.

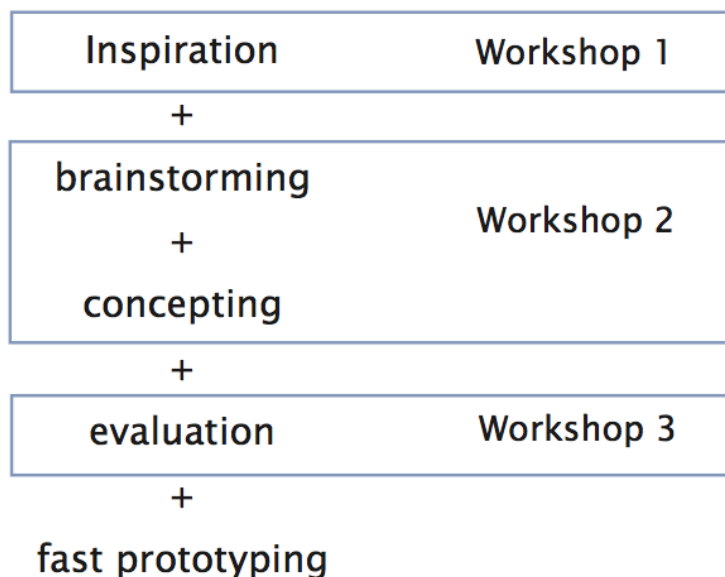
What a love about Fiona Campbell and her team is that they're open to innovation.

I've been thinking about what makes a really creative and productive brainstorm. Here's what you need:

- 1) participants from diverse backgrounds and life experiences;
- 2) who are inspired and informed about the issue and about left-field solutions;
- 3) enjoyment (it's the vital pre-condition for creativity); plus
- 4) an engaging process that gives people the time and stimulation to be creative.

Instead of one 2-hour brainstorm, they set aside three mornings, a week apart. They invited a diversity of people to be co-designers, 19 in all, including council staff, shared path users, interested players and experts.

Here's the process:



Here's the invitation they received:

Dear creative partner

Thanks for joining the creative team that will be developing the future award-winning coexistence campaign for the City of Sydney.

Our goal is to create a different, inspiring campaign to encourage cyclists to ring their bells, considerately, when using shared paths with pedestrians. Although it's got a behavioural outcome, this campaign will inevitably be about creating new kinds of relationships.

Instead of a run-of-the-mill brainstorm, you'll be engaging in an enjoyable, stimulating "innovation lab". Over two mornings you'll release your inner kook to cook up a very different kind of campaign.

On Day 1 we'll imagine the desired future, get acquainted with the global and local social research, get inspired about different ways to influence behaviour, and get in the mood for imaginative thinking.

On Day 2, we'll work in small teams, through a series of stimulating brainstorms to generate a host of ideas and then assemble them into workable concepts. These concepts will form the palette of options which will be evaluated by a panel at a subsequent workshop.

We look forward to seeing you there.

One of the reasons to do good preliminary research is to generate a provisional theory of change. (A theory of change is a hypothesis about what you think might cause the change to happen. It lets you be a scientist.)

"If cyclists believe bell use is expected by other shared path users, then bell use will increase".

In other words, it was about creating social norms.

Norms, however, can't be imposed. They emerge out of social interactions, conversations and people's day-to-day observations.

This led to some challenging themes, that the solutions should be:

- Noticeable, delightful, buzz-worthy.
- Sociable, creating relationships
- Demonstrative: allowing learning by seeing.

So here's the main question the cycling team put to our 19 co-designers:

- How could pedestrians express their needs to cyclists, and vice versa?

All this, and more, was put into a briefing to inform and inspire the participants. You can see the full briefing at <http://enablingchange.posterous.com/what-could-innovation-for-the-rest-of-us-look>

It included some fascinating work by public artist Candy Chang which focuses on how communities can use public spaces to have conversations with themselves. <http://candychang.com>

A note: Although this paper is about doing things quickly, and improvising on the fly, the preparation of this initial briefing paper is the one step that should never be compromised. Time spent gathering inspiring ideas from around the world and informing the participants of the best available knowledge and social research is the foundation of a great project.

**Morning 1** was the briefing and an initial brainstorm to get everyone in the mood.

**Morning 2** was dedicated to brainstorming and concepting. In four teams, with the theory of change in mind, they went through a series of interesting brainstorms that generated 12 different concepts for the campaign.

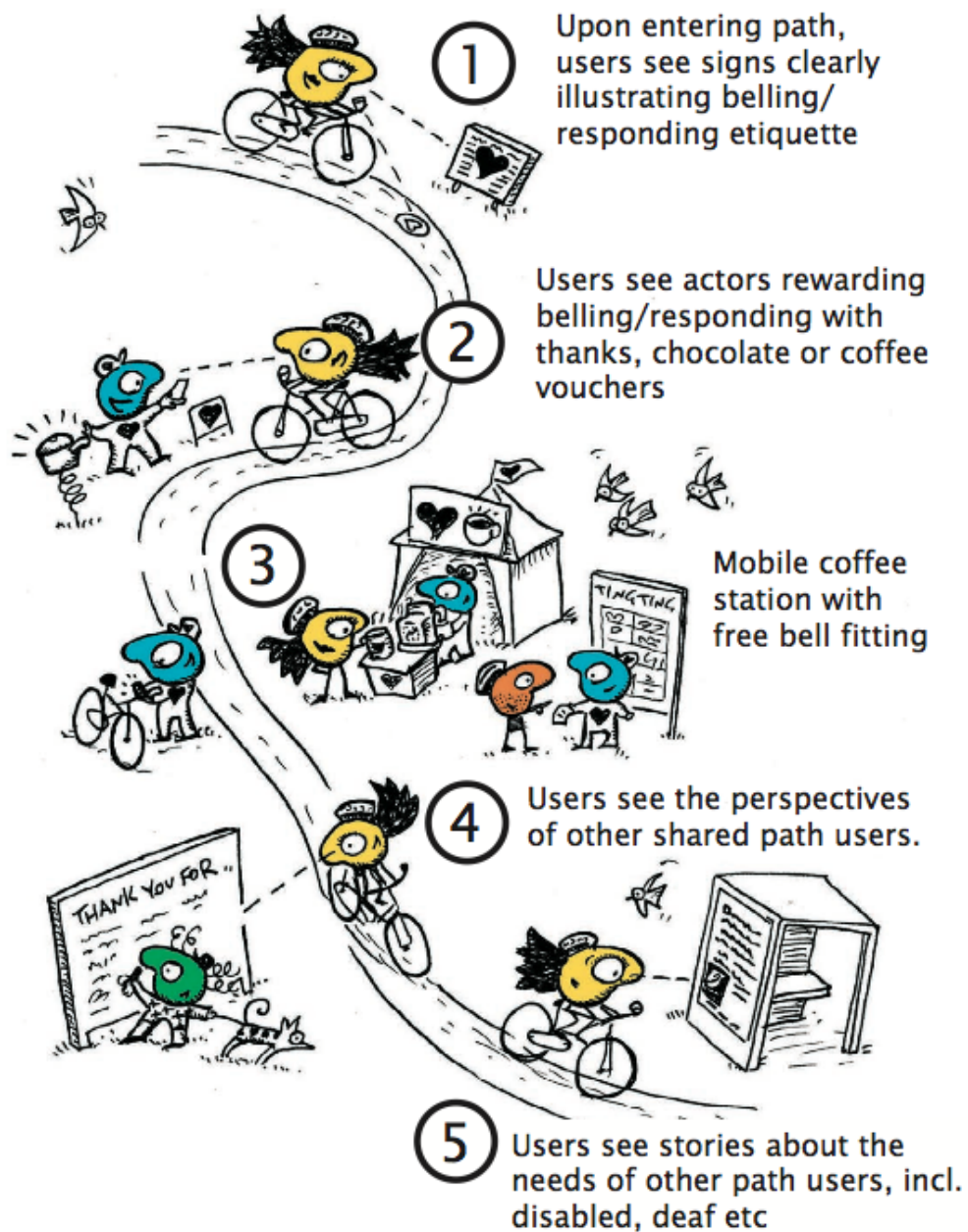
Here's how the workshop looked:



On **Morning 3**, a smaller team met to sift through the concepts and assemble a program capable of being implemented.

Here's how the final prototype campaign looked, as a 'touch points' sketch:

## Coordinated campaign activities





**Fast prototyping** followed. On the principle of “fail early” they asked “What can we put in the field next week, even if we have to draw it by hand?”

Here’s what the fast prototyping looked like:



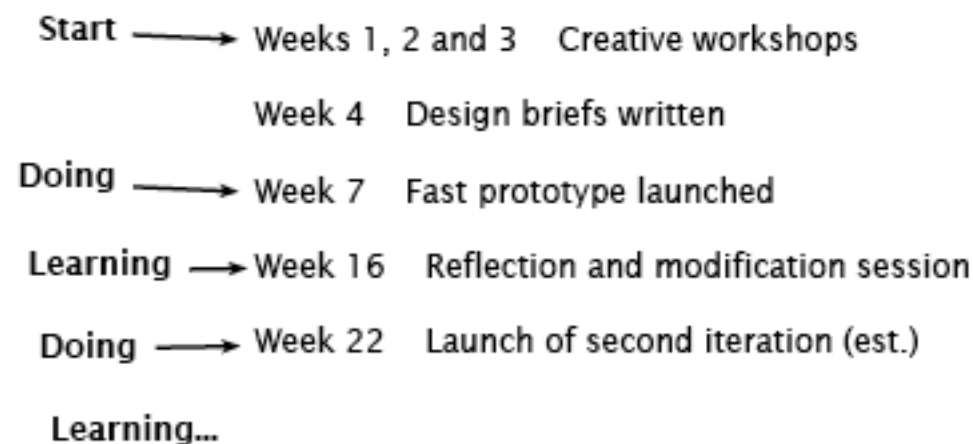


I thought the idea behind fast prototyping was to “fail quickly”. But that’s not what happened at all. Instead what happened was that the campaign team learned quickly and improvised magnificently.

The team were able to sit down at the start of September and looked at the lessons – objective and subjective – from 2 months of fast prototyping, and decide how to modify the campaign for the next iteration (due next month).

This approach enabled the project to field in record time:

### **Actual project timeline**



Considering that (in my experience) it can take 26 weeks just to design a logo, this is lightning fast.

It’s no accident by the way that all this happened without either a slogan or a logo! (Demonstrating how unnecessary they are).

Fast prototyping enabled risk taking because not much was at stake. It enabled learning and improvisation because nothing was set in stone.

And what I love is that it enabled something I’ve heard about for years but never really knew how to do – action learning!

The City of Sydney team learnt some great lessons:

- The actors, who we thought would be performing, quickly figured out what it was about and transformed into engagers who came up with their own ways of interacting with people.

- The pavement mural, which everyone at council was so excited about beforehand, turned out to mystify people, so they got dropped.
- The big blackboard idea (borrowed from artist Candy Chang) was just too big to organise, so micro-blackboarding was improvised on the day...and it was a surprising hit. Staff were "surprised at how many people busily cycling to work would stop for a coffee and write on a blackboard."

These little blackboards have generated a marvellous set of images that can be leveraged in all sorts of ways later in the campaign.



*Micro-blackboarding was improvised on the day.*

### **In conclusion:**

Bumping into reality is how we learn. In the unpredictable business of social change reality testing the only kind of learning that counts. And, obviously, the faster we can do it the better.

Although some people aim to "fail fast", that's a negative slant doesn't really capture the spirit of what happens, which is that we get the chance to learn quickly and improvise, maybe coming up with approaches and solutions that we would never have come up with otherwise.

Most campaign design is like laboriously building a truck, pushing it into traffic and hoping for the best. Fast prototyping and reflection, by comparison, is doing much the same thing, but with our hands on the wheel and much less at stake.

My conclusions:

1) Innovative results depend on innovative processes.

2 I used to say “The time spent planning is worth it.” But now, to my surprise, I’m now saying “Plan less, bump with reality quickly and learn a we go.”

Grateful thanks to the City of Sydney’s cycling team for permission to reproduce images in this paper.