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**Think Wrong:  
Ideational Strategies for a Wired  
World**

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## An Introduction to ATINER's Conference Paper Series

ATINER started to publish this conference papers series in 2012. It includes only the papers submitted for publication after they were presented at one of the conferences organized by our Institute every year. The papers published in the series have not been refereed and are published as they were submitted by the author. The series serves two purposes. First, we want to disseminate the information as fast as possible. Second, by doing so, the authors can receive comments useful to revise their papers before they are considered for publication in one of ATINER's books, following our standard procedures of a blind review.

Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos  
President  
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## **Think Wrong: Ideational Strategies for a Wired World**

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### **Abstract**

Project M is a service design organization (*projectmlab.com*) that works to make the world a better place through creative thinking and design. Participants are told not to worry about creating award-winning projects—instead the goal is to have fun, generate fresh ideas and good will.

When presented with a communications problem many designers become too serious—they view creativity as work and end up creating predictable, uninspired solutions. The standard design process taught in colleges, and an overreliance on universal research, e.g. the Google search, reinforces this. Perhaps it is also that our instinct for safety and survival compels us to create tried and true solutions rather than take risks.

Some designers have an uncanny ability to rethink the mundane—no one knows exactly why this is, but M Blitz participants experience one the keys—the ability to disrupt their natural instinct and embrace chaos. By harnessing the concept of *think wrong*, design solutions become rooted in abstraction. Advisors such as myself facilitate this by encouraging random, playful, connections and narratives. The majority of participants have found this to be a methodology they can use to create inspiring, innovative design solutions.

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## **Think Wrong: Ideational Strategies for a Wired World**

*Think Wrong* is a non-linear ideational methodology that is used by an organization called Project M, where creative people work together to make the world a better place through design. It takes participants out of their comfort zones and away from their computers. It interrupts their natural problem solving instincts, encouraging them to embrace chaos by creating random connections and playful narratives. By harnessing these methods design solutions become rooted in abstraction and are therefore more likely to be original. The following is a story of an M Blitz—a charette-like event that has three parts and one purpose. The parts include team building, community immersion, and a community project—the purpose is to equip participants to make a creative impact in the world.

### **Challenge 1: Team Building**

What do pink fuzzy monkeys have to do with team building? How may the term *nervous probandi* help designers generate ideas? Sixteen participants found out when they took part in a Project M Blitz last fall. Leading the session were advisors Bernard Canniffe and Louis Baker.

Excited participants gather in Poetter Hall where they are divided into teams. Professor Baker explains that the purpose of an M Blitz is to get them out of their comfort zones, ‘If you tend to rely on the same ideation method time after time, this event will force you to think differently.’ The first challenge is a team-building exercise. The goals are to choose a team name, designate code names for one another, and create a seal that includes symbols representing each person’s strength. Bernard says, ‘For your presentations to be truly effective, you must make us care!’ Before the teams leave, the advisors throw them a curve by requiring them to add some strange ingredients to their presentations—things such as pink fuzzy monkeys and skunks with zippers. The participants react with nervous laughter.

### *Enhancing Creativity*

To enhance creativity, we must understand the nature of human perception. Edward De Bono, an authority on creative thinking says, ‘whenever we look at the world we are only too ready to see the world in terms of existing patterns,’<sup>1</sup> meaning our understanding of the world is based on the sum total of our life experiences. This forms a dominant thought track or pattern. (Figure 1) The positive side of this is that when encountered with a problem, we generally have an idea of how to solve it. The downside is that it tends to suppress new tracks of thought, which is an impediment to creativity. Conversely, De Bono states, ‘If, however, we were to enter the side-track from

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<sup>1</sup> De Bono, Edward. (1992). *Serious Creativity: Using the Power of Lateral Thinking to Create New Ideas*. New York: Harper Collins, 11.

another point, then we could follow that side-track back to the starting point.’<sup>1</sup> This asymmetrical thought pattern is a classic model of creativity and humor and works like this—our thoughts are taken along the dominant track A towards a given conclusion B. Just before we reach the end, our thoughts suddenly shift to a side-track C where they encounter a unique surprise or insight. (Figure 2) We appreciate the diversion all the more because we understand where the dominant track would have led. So how does one move off of the dominant track and onto a different track in order to find a new idea? This is where lateral thinking can help.

A ship heads out to sea as the advisors arrive at Savannah’s riverfront—there they discuss the difficulty of teaching design students to be original thinkers. Louis feels that this is partially because they have been preconditioned to follow a linear design process to resolve visual problems. This rational approach is also used to persuade clients that what we do is logical and therefore valuable—not simply creative hocus-pocus. This, along with access to universal information—what professor Baker calls ‘Google Research’—tends to impede creativity by leading to unimaginative, universal design concepts and poor media choices. (Figure 3) Search engines are wonderful, but not the paragons of creativity that many have fooled themselves into believing.

#### *Skunks with Zippers*

As we gather for the presentations the following morning, there is palpable electricity in the room. The first team surprises everyone by presenting a large black box resembling a suitcase. It has a white stripe down the center and a luggage tag that reads, *Carry On*, which we’re told is the team’s name. Its members wear similar tags, with code names such as *Jellyfish*, and *Plan Nerd*. They snap their fingers while one member begins to read poetry, beatnik style—the others allow the words of the poem, to fall confetti-like to the floor. At the apex, we hear the words, ‘around the world we like to go, the more we reveal the more you know.’ The suitcase is lifted and its bottom unzipped. As the reader says, ‘Carry on,’ the bottom flaps fall, revealing the words *Go beyond*. A jumble of contents spill downward—it becomes a colorful mobile that includes dangling code names and individual symbols. (Figure 4) The audience is delighted. Explaining their concept, the team says that ‘like skunks, they too feel judged by outside appearances.’ Their name, *Carry On*, alludes to the fact that they all want to move forward in life; *Go Beyond*, means one has to get below the surface to appreciate their individuality. The remaining teams also present their deliverables to surprise, laughter and applause. Emotions were tapped—and yes, we’ve been made to care.

Bernard lauds everyone by saying, ‘Design should always be this engaging and fun.’ Most art students would describe themselves as creative, but generate designs with a high level of predictability. They instinctively gravitate toward tried and true solutions, which is exacerbated by the use of the

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<sup>1</sup> De Bono, Edward. (1992). *Serious Creativity: Using the Power of Lateral Thinking to Create New Ideas*. New York: Harper Collins, 13.

Internet. A participant then asks why some artists seem better able to overcome this nature. They include mavericks such as Stefan Sagmeister and Pablo Picasso, those that possess an uncanny ability to rethink the mundane. Sagmeister is an original thinker, not merely a design services provider. Clients commission designers like him to forge new paths, tell unique stories, and create novel experiences. Bernard adds, ‘Clients will pay you money for not being predictable—period. Originality is a commodity!’ No one knows why some are more inventive than others, but M Blitz participants have just experienced one key—disrupting natural instincts and taking creative chances.

## **Challenge 2: Community Immersion**

For the next challenge, participants are directed to interview local citizens, asking them to relate positive and negative aspects of the city. Louis encourages them by explaining, ‘Experiential research can give you unique ideas and insight.’ When they return, each team will have the remainder of the afternoon to create a visual that expresses their experience. There are no rules other than to avoid using the computer.

### *Creative Pause*

Before the evening’s presentations begin, Bernard reveals a desk bell and explains, ‘When this rings, the current speaker must stop and the person to the right has to continue.’ He then rings the bell—its short, crisp peal breaks the tension. Everyone realizes the presentations are going to be comical—and the joke is on them. The advisors have used this technique in the past. It is a lateral thinking method called *creative pause*. Traditionally, a creative pause is a random yet intentional pause that allows one to give deliberate attention to something, the result being alternative or new ideas. In an M Blitz it forces presenters to pay close attention to one another, and encourages creative attitudes.

### *Experiential Research*

As the first team begins, the bell is rung four times in quick succession—when no one is able to make a clean start the audience erupts in laughter—later they applaud when a clean segue between speakers is made. The next team *4 Cents* went to a local Park where they met Poo, an attractive and optimistic lifeguard who loves Savannah so much that she’s willing to live a few blocks from her detestable ex-husband. She says interesting things such as ‘Savannah has its ugly, but I’m not a part of it!’ Next, they have to walk quickly to catch up to William, a 62 year old retired Army Sergeant Major who hates women—he suggested the guys not get married because ‘Wives cost a lot of money and every kid will cost at least two-million dollars.’ Their visual took the form of graphically illustrated t-shirts that together made a map of the park. (Figure 5) Each team shared compelling visuals that helped tell the stories of the unique individuals they encountered. Before leaving, the participants are asked to



think of ideas to improve or celebrate the community. Louis advises, ‘An idea is not an delivery vehicle—so don’t propose a poster.’

The next morning everyone gathers to share the community project concepts that they care most about. These include initiatives for campus recycling, urban renewal, clean water and more. As the list grows, Bernard discusses the fact that these issues need to be addressed through experiential research and design thinking which is broad and multidisciplinary in nature. Bernard says, ‘We can do great things when we’re not simply service providers, but designers who are social responders, agitators, bridge-builders, and catalyst creators.’

### **Challenge 3: Community Project**

In the final stage of the M Blitz, the teams must condense their favorite community project concept into one word; go through a Think Wrong exercise to help ideate a project theme, and conduct rapid prototyping of it in the community. Team *Lookatar* selects the word *unity*. Next, they are assigned the random word *parrhesia*, which is defined as *freedom of speech*. In this exercise, the word *parrhesia* provides a provocation for the concept of unity. This lateral thinking method is called *random input*. Although simple, it is a powerful way to open up new lines of thinking—‘The history of ideas is full of examples of how important new ideas come about through chance, accident, mistake, or *madness*.’<sup>1</sup> One may point out the illogicality of mixing completely unrelated things and expecting to produce a usable idea, but the brain is very good at making connections—almost any provocation can be of value with any subject.

Each team is given an assortment of colorful markers and a large sheet of paper. The goal is to fuse their project concepts and random words into original project concepts. They create word lists, mind map diagrams, and sketches—all part of the standard ideational process; however, they find that purposely making arbitrary connections increases the number of ideas. After an initial set of concepts is harvested, the advisors push each team to be more inventive by challenging them to make interesting narratives and playful choices. This is what’s known as a *creative challenge*. ‘The creative challenge is not an attack, criticism, or an attempt to show why something is inadequate.’<sup>2</sup> It is a challenge to uniqueness that allows one to escape predetermined choices and boundaries.’ For example:

Advisor: What color is the sky?

Participant: Blue

Advisor: Why blue? Choose another color—blue is much too common.

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<sup>1</sup> De Bono, Edward. (1992). *Serious Creativity: Using the Power of Lateral Thinking to Create New Ideas*. New York: Harper Collins, 47.

<sup>2</sup> De Bono, Edward. (1992). *Serious Creativity: Using the Power of Lateral Thinking to Create New Ideas*. New York: Harper Collins, 314.

Participant: Mustard?

Advisor: Mustard is interesting!

*The Result of Random Input and Creative Challenge*

Within a short period of time each team was confident in the quality and novelty of their ideas. Team *Lookatar* created the concept, *What's Your Tribe?* They explained that when exploring the meaning of the word parrhesia, they had questioned the meaning of freedom; they hypothesized that a community is a like a tribe that has certain rules to follow—in exchange, its members are provided community and protection. At the end of the morning session, all of the teams had produced unique ideas. Before lunch, they are given final instructions—to plan and carry out a rapid prototype of their community project. Professor Baker reminds them, ‘think of your solutions in terms of experiences rather than artifacts.’ Each team is also required to visually document their effort in the field.

That evening, others who have heard of the creativity and active learning have come to see what an M Blitz is all about. The first presentation is titled *No Barriers*. Team *Carry On* explains that they had ventured around town asking people what barriers held them back. Answers included race, age and fear. After writing a symbolic word on a balloon, participants were handed a pin and asked to pop it—the explosion released a tiny white card inside that read, ‘The change is within.’ Team members explain that the majority of barriers in our lives are artificial and self-imposed—we have to choose to overcome them. (Figure 6)

For the final presentation team *Lookatar* gathers at the front of the room. They have a red ball that is covered in questions that is titled, *What's Your Tribe?* They throw it into the audience and begin to chant, ‘What's your tribe? What's your tribe?’ The audience member who catches the ball is instructed to answer the question under his right thumb then throw it to someone else. He reads ‘What's your favorite place?’ and replies, ‘Tybee Island.’ He then throws the ball—other members are asked to ‘Make a silly face’ or answer questions such as, ‘Herbivore or carnivore?’ The audience reacts with enthusiasm and laughter. *Lookatar* then shows a video of their rapid prototype in the community. We see players, young and old, black and white, representing different socio-economic levels—people who would not have spoken to each other minutes before are having fun together—learning about, and relating to each other. (Figure 7)

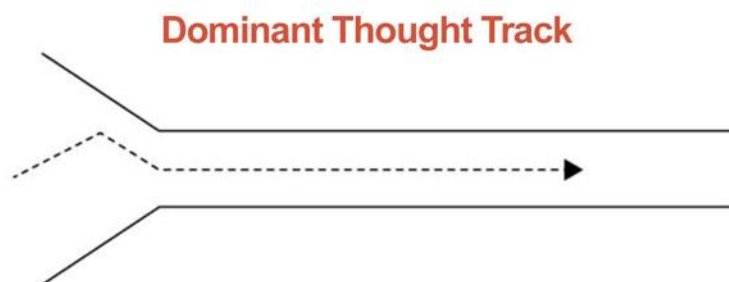
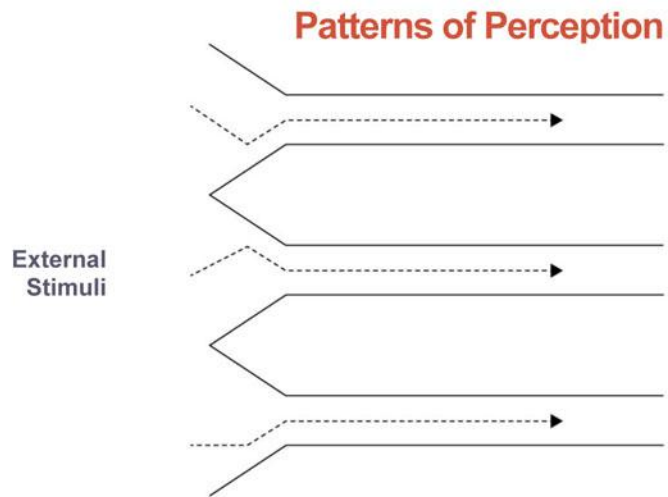
The video ends to further applause. The simplicity and effectiveness of the concept is a success. Commonalities are exposed through something as natural as play. *What's Your Tribe*, while only a prototype, has the potential to be shared with a worldwide audience.

**Final Thoughts**

To wrap up the event, the advisors highlight its accomplishments. These include connecting with each other and the community, and developing

concepts that have the charisma and power to engage the emotion. We also experienced Think Wrong, and how a variety of lateral thinking techniques can be purposely used to enhance ideation. Bernard tells the participants ‘every one of the projects that you presented this evening has the potential to change the world—that is design.’

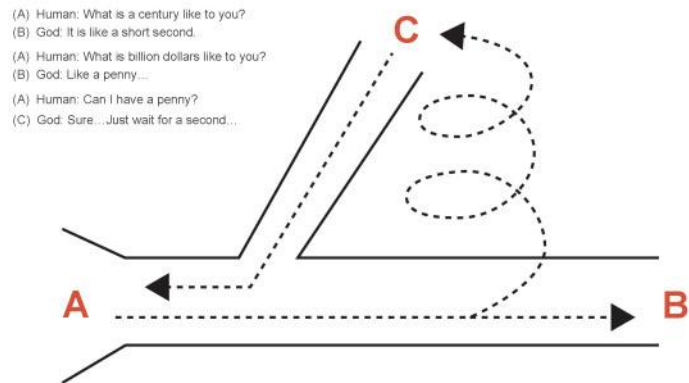
**Figure 1.** *Dominant Thought Track*



**Figure 2.** *Asymmetrical Thought Pattern*

### Asymmetrical Thought Pattern

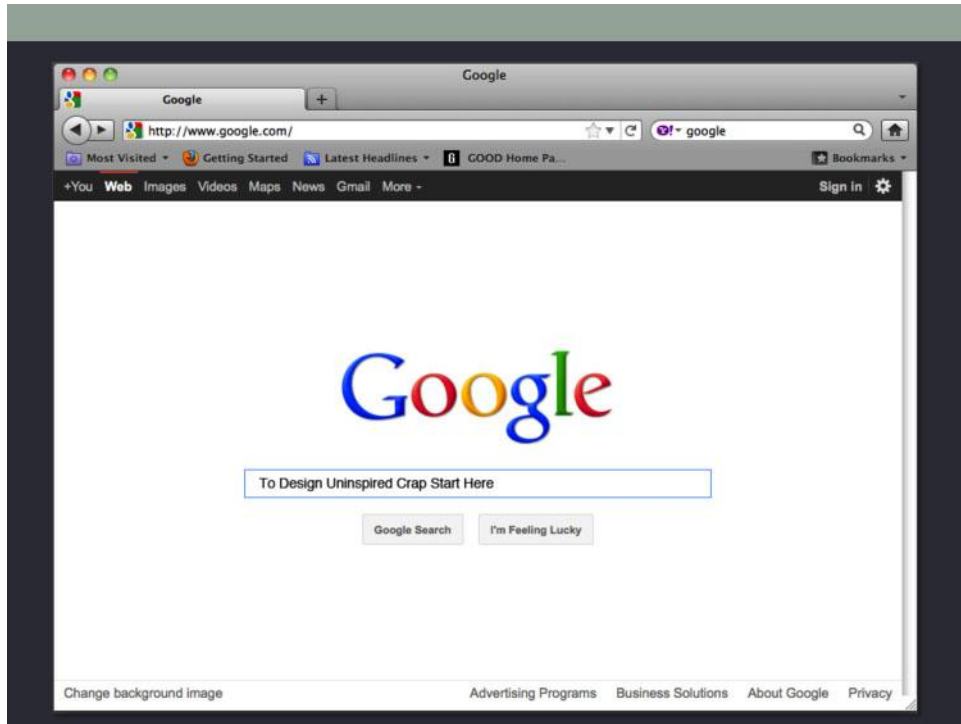
*As seen in creativity and humor*



**Figure 3.** *Standard Linear Design Process*

### Standard Linear Design Process





**Figure 4.** *Challenge 1: Go Beyond*





**Figure 5.** *Challenge 2: T-Shirt Map*





**Figure 6.** Challenge 3: No Barriers



**No Barriers**

**Figure 7.** Challenge 3: *What's Your Tribe?*

