

Doing Things Differently

Stories from innovation initiatives in the arts.



The Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts STREB/Ringside, Inc.

The Innovators

Elizabeth Streb is a “choreographer and action architect.” Her unique approach, called POP ACTION, is a fusion of dance, sports, gymnastics and the American circus. Since 2003, her company has been operating the STREB Lab for Action Mechanics (SLAM) in the emerging Williamsburg neighborhood in Brooklyn. SLAM is an open-access venue that functions as a laboratory for the company’s artistic experimentation, a home for its two annual performance seasons, a base for its full schedule of classes and workshops for children and adults, and a site of “neighborhood happenings.” STREB has an annual budget of about \$1.5 million.

STREB

The Innovation

STREB created the Teen Action Club, a new initiative that uses action and movement to engage a diverse group of teens (ages 13-18) in physical, artistic and social interactions that help them achieve their personal best. The Teen Action Club aims to: provide physical and art education, create a positive gathering place for teens, encourage teens to be innovators and inventors, educate teens about action as a performing art, and expand the age range of people STREB serves.



Young people take part in KidAction, part of STREB’s programming for youth.

Starting Conditions

STREB had been working for years with the premise that artists have a civic obligation and cultural imperative to break down barriers of class, culture and ethnicity. When it opened SLAM in a diverse neighborhood in Brooklyn, the Company assumed that simply by being an open access venue with high-quality programming, it could attract a highly diverse audience and cause a vibrant “integration of communities.” Instead, after more than five years of making small inroads, the Company found that its constituents still looked like those of many other arts organizations: white, middle class and well educated.

To change this dynamic, STREB wanted to examine – with currency, sensitivity and integrity – its community’s cultural, social and educational priorities, and the company wanted to think in new ways about how art could be a full partner in community development. STREB began asking itself challenging questions: What populations are being served by each of SLAM’s programs? Whom are we missing, and why are we not serving these communities? What are the barriers to diverse participation, and how can we overcome them? What could we do that would be of sufficient scale to attain measured growth of the organization while maintaining organizational stability?

STREB had many ideas about how the company might redefine its ideas of its public, but it needed help in determining which of those ideas were most viable and which of them would best serve the Company’s mission. For assistance, STREB turned to the *Innovation Lab*, and started working in January 2009.

The Lab

Transformative Moments

In Phase 1 of the Lab, STREB worked with Lab facilitator Melissa Dibble to examine a number of projects the Company thought would help it engage a more diverse audience, including a satellite program in the Bronx, a multi-day think tank and action lab, a city-wide tour of easily transportable shows, and a film/media project. During the Lab Intensive, the Innovation Team debated these and other projects, finally realizing it needed a clearly focused project whose results could be measured and whose scope would be within the company’s tight resource capacity. What could they do, the Team asked itself, to bring

in a more diverse audience, create pathways for these audiences to cross over into other streams of STREB’s work, and spread the concepts of POP ACTION? Working together, the Team determined that there was a visible hole in STREB’s audience: while SLAM was serving many children under the age of 12, as well as families, from its Williamsburg neighborhood, it was attracting almost no teen participants. Thinking this could be the leverage they were looking for, the Team began to design a program that would appeal to teens between the ages of 13 and 18.

According to Dibble, there were two critical moments in the Intensive when the team shifted its thinking in transformational

ways: when the Innovation Team acknowledged it had to be much more intentional in creating the diversity it wanted; and when it realized it needed a carefully managed system for capturing people after their first experiences at SLAM in order to expand and deepen their engagement.

Shifts in Assumptions

The biggest shift for STREB during the Lab was something the Company had already witnessed but not yet fully absorbed: merely opening the doors widely to the community was not enough to achieve the diversity the Company wanted. Nor was the quality of the action programming at SLAM. No matter how positive the public’s experience at SLAM, people were not automatically going to come back. Relying heavily on open access and vigorous, exciting programs, STREB had not thought much about audience retention, assuming it would take care of itself if the programs were of high quality. Once STREB dropped this assumption, the company became more methodical in thinking about how to capture information about its participants. Taking nothing for granted, STREB also stopped seeing its audience as a generic whole and began to ask, “What is the next logical step for each individual who comes through our doors to get him or her more deeply engaged?”

Dibble observed another important shift in the Company: Because Elizabeth Streb and Producing Director Kim Cullen were so present on site and so engaged with audiences, they assumed that the Company’s philosophy and values were deeply understood and felt throughout the rest

of the organization. They learned instead that as the organization had grown and new people had joined, STREB had not been purposeful enough about transferring its philosophy to newcomers. This realization led to a more conscious commitment to embed culture, philosophy and values throughout the organization. Says Cullen, "The Lab process made us acutely aware that we need to make the dissemination of our philosophy as relates to public action an organizational priority."

New Pathways to Mission

STREB's work in the Lab added important programming to the company's mix, and dedicated programming for teens is certainly one more way into STREB's work. Fundamentally, however, the Company learned that its future success could not depend on its traditional circle of friends. Moving forward, it would have to engage parents and families, developing new strategies to keep them interested over time, and investing in the long arc of their potential involvement. This is a huge shift from the transactional relationship reflected in STREB's primary practice of offering classes and selling enrollment.

The Prototype

With funds from the Lab, STREB prototyped the Teen Action Club on four consecutive Fridays in June 2009 from 7-10pm. For \$25, teens could participate in three activities: flying trapeze, trampoline, and POP ACTION. STREB staff gave intermittent demonstrations, the Company served refreshments, and a DJ was on site to give participants an opportunity to mix sound. The Company

also provided digital and video cameras, as well as laptops, for participants' use. Mid-way through the prototyping period, STREB staff and the teens spontaneously devised an obstacle course as an additional activity. During the prototyping period, STREB hoped to engage a diverse group of 13-18-year olds and give them a platform for achieving their personal best. It also aimed to use the Teen Action Club as an entry point for teens who subsequently would migrate to other STREB programs, classes and performances. While attendance grew over the four-week period, overall attendance was 66, short of the 80-120 that the Company had imagined. The age range of participants was younger, with most being between 13 and 16. There was geographic and racial diversity, and an equal mix of boys and girls. A small percentage of participants returned for more than one session.

With Dibble's assistance, the Innovation team met following the prototyping period to evaluate the impact of the program. Participants in the Teen Action Club were diverse, interacted positively, and clearly found each evening engaging, challenging and fun. Nonetheless, STREB identified several important barriers the Company needed to address in order to strengthen the program: the ticket price was too high to attract the audience STREB was targeting; holding the Teen Action Club weekly and on Friday was too demanding, as many participants had conflicting extra-curricular activities and were reluctant to commit to consecutive weeks; June was the end of the school year, making the club compete unnecessarily with a

broad range of other activities; the original targeted age range was too broad to produce appropriate social networking; and marketing was inadequate.

In a second prototyping attempt, STREB reduced ticket prices to \$10 and offered the Teen Action Club on the second Saturday of each month from January through May 2010. The Company narrowed its target audience to teens between the ages of 13 and 16, and it lengthened the advance marketing and outreach period to six weeks prior to the first scheduled Teen Action Club event. Testing of this prototype continued into June 2009, with results yet to be evaluated. In planning for the second prototype, STREB sought support from Dibble and an EmcArts' evaluator, who provided STREB with templates for data collection.



Members of the STREB Company. Photo by Bryan Thatcher, courtesy of Flickr.



STREB SLAM is the company's creative center and laboratory in the Williamsburg neighborhood in Brooklyn.

Obstacles and Enablers

Streb's support and validation of the Lab and the subsequent prototypes were essential. As Dibble says, "Elizabeth was part of every conversation about values and was involved in making sense of what the program should be. She kept the core value system in place and then helped transfer ownership to others." Streb astutely realized that the project resonated with younger members of the Company, and she embraced its potential to generate enthusiasm and leadership from others. Cullen stepped up and took on primary responsibility for managing the second prototype.

The programming of the event was very successful, however the Company's experimentation, in terms of testing the variables, did not always go smoothly. For example, the Company had a difficult time determining which data to collect from the teens to make analysis most effective. Also, due to the fact that the \$25 admission fee proved to be too high, prototyping wasn't as clean as the Innovation Team might have liked as the Company, in its efforts to create a vibrant experience for the teen attendees, offered occasional incentives to the published entrance fee making for comparisons.

The Impact

The Lab was a significant catalyst for helping STREB imagine, refine and evaluate the Teen Action Club, but did it also change organizational knowledge and practice? Dibble says the Lab helped STREB understand that it needed to "up its game" in order to maintain its competitive edge, and the Lab pushed the Company's expectations of what constituted success. As a result, STREB is more strategic in capturing information about SLAM participants and more disciplined about building their commitment by moving them to other programs. While still thwarted by a lack of resources and capacity that sometimes inhibits the Company's ability to follow through in a timely and comprehensive manner, STREB has leveraged the knowledge generated through the Lab – particularly its strategies for developing incremental engagement – to obtain new institutional grants. Its greatest test will come as the organization works to transfer the rigor of its artistic process to other organizational functions.

Cullen says that working with Dibble throughout the Lab, a period which included some staff turnover, led the Company to adopt new concepts to describe both its philosophy and its work, to communicate and discuss these concepts more fully within the entire organization, and created a subtle shift toward a new generation of artists who will carry STREB's agenda forward. STREB says that the process helped the Company more clearly articulate its culture and over arching goals, and that it gave the company important new practices, tools and insights.

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