

# Innovation Stories

Cultural Organizations Doing Things Differently



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## The Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts New Dramatists



### The Innovators

Since 1949, when it was founded by a group of Broadway playwrights, **New Dramatists** has been one of the country's leading playwright centers, boasting among its 600 alumni many of the most distinguished playwrights working in the field. Located in the heart of Manhattan's theater district, New Dramatists supports a community of 50 emerging and mid-career playwrights, offering unprecedented seven-year residencies and full access to its facility.

### The Innovation

New Dramatists transformed the role of their resident playwrights from being served by the staff to co-creating their own residency experience.



## Starting Conditions

Artistic Director Todd London says he and others initially resisted the idea of innovation. “We thought we were doing pretty well,” he says, but he admits the organization sometimes had “innovated itself into disjointedness,” developing a patchwork of programs based on available funding. While these programs reflected New Dramatists’ mission, the fragmented nature did not constitute a holistic approach to serving playwrights. London wanted to take a fresh look at everything, and he asked his staff, “How can we explode the potential of the Playwrights Lab, making it fertile, vital, flexible, and fully responsive to the different ways in which our resident playwrights work?” True innovation, he believed, would not mean inventing new programs, but rather expanding the creative impact of New Dramatists’ existing model.

New Dramatists describes itself as “an artistic place defined by playwrights where writers have total freedom.” Yet as staff discussed applying to the Innovation Lab, there was something gnawing at the edges of this commitment. Writer and Board member Gordon Dahlquist observes, “So much of our mindset has always been ‘What can we do for playwrights?’ The formlessness of it meant that staff was always saying, ‘let us know,’ and no one was letting them know.”

This led London to wonder whether there was a downside to the organization’s service culture. Did open-endedness sometimes shut down creativity? Might some structure provide better support and guidance? Would having expectations of writers help them take better advantage of the resources New Dramatists was giving them? And could clearer expectations strengthen playwrights’ participation in and contributions to the New Dramatists community? Hoping to answer these questions, New Dramatists entered the Innovation Lab.

## The Lab

### Transformative Moments

Right away, New Dramatists ran into difficulty, according to EmcArts facilitator John McCann. Skeptical of consultants and concerned about keeping their large community inside the process, just putting together the Innovation Team proved challenging, but with McCann’s help, the organization assembled a representative Team of staff, playwrights, and Board members. In Phase I of the Lab, Team members surveyed and interviewed writers about the value, quality and relative priority of current programs and support structures, and they studied other organizations, such as communal farms, scientific laboratories and artist colonies, to identify successful practices. This work, says McCann, was extremely effective in bringing outside perspective to the Team’s discussions during the subsequent Lab Intensive.

McCann worried, however, about the Team dynamic. Overly dependent on outside facilitation, the Team had trouble sorting out group hierarchies. The Intensive proved to be transformational for individual Team members and

went a long way toward cementing better communication. Playwright Lucy Thurber says their work with EmcArts facilitator Phil McArthur was a defining moment. “I realized there was a way I’ve communicated my whole life that wasn’t for building consensus,” Thurber says. “It was meant to win. I got what I wanted, but it wasn’t good long-term. This was a fundamental moment of change for me as a leader.”

London agrees that MacArthur’s work was powerful. “We have a culture of inquiry at New Dramatists,” he says, “and we are always asking playwrights what they need. Phil taught me the difference between advocacy and inquiry, and I learned there’s a time to ask questions and a time to be an advocate. As staff, we don’t want to lead the writers’ process, but we have professional opinions, and that’s okay.”

### Shifts in Assumptions

The Team made some fundamental changes in the assumptions they brought to the Lab. While they had been talking for some time about setting requirements for playwrights—even incorporating expectations

into the residency agreement—they anticipated resistance from writers who, they believed, valued freedom above all else. The surveys the Team conducted in Phase I of the Lab “blew apart this assumption,” says McCann. Writers said what they wanted most was more time with each other.

As their assumptions about the relative value of freedom began to shift, the Team realized something else: Their nurturing, almost paternalistic, approach to writers—which they assumed was key to enabling creativity and building a strong community—was sometimes actually working against them. “The answer,” says Thurber, “wasn’t to give playwrights more but to ask more of playwrights. This would be a good thing, and playwrights would really respond.” This small shift—from presumed resistance to believing writers would step up if asked—freed the Team to think creatively about what engagement with playwrights might mean.

Another long-held assumption was that conflict was always undesirable. Living with this assumption meant that New

Dramatists as a community often veered away from potential controversy, often speeding too quickly toward agreement, rather than finding ways to work through differences. As a result, the organization had trouble moving beyond the status quo, failed to identify powerful strategic opportunities, and did not use its artistic resources (including playwrights) to maximum advantage. Abandoning the assumption enabled the New Dramatists Team to think about managing resistance and conflict to create break-through thinking. It was a skill they would put to good use when they returned home from the Intensive.

### New Pathways to Mission

Before the Lab, there was little reciprocity between New Dramatists playwrights and staff. Playwrights worked, and staff supported them. Today, that dynamic is changing. With funds from the Lab, New Dramatists made physical changes to its building to improve workshop and performance space, accommodate more playwrights writing onsite, and promote interaction among playwrights and staff.

New Dramatists also changed the way it implements artistic initiatives. Writers, for example are taking over specific projects, and while a staff member is assigned to support them, playwrights take the lead. London says the new structure is working. “Now we don’t just sit around and talk about what we wish. We figure out how to make it work, create a structure for it, and then set certain guideposts to measure progress.”

### The Prototype

During the Lab’s prototyping phase, New Dramatists made a number of changes initiated by playwrights to its writing spaces. A meeting room, previously equipped with a single large table that accommodated only one writer, was outfitted with office furniture to create three new writing spaces. Another room

is being remade into a café-like environment to serve another five writers, with old computers removed to make space for laptops, and three overnight residence rooms have been furnished with writing lamps and desk supplies and made available during the daytime. Finally, New Dramatists created two additional spaces for writers in the library.

In all, New Dramatists created 13 new writing spaces. London says, “This small change cost us almost nothing, but it has changed the way the community interacts. Now we have four or five writers in the building every day. It has never been that way.” Thurber agrees, saying she gets “excited about going in to write.” Dahlquist, too, marvels at the difference. “We were so proud of our writers studio—it was the first thing we renovated 12 years ago—but it never occurred to us that people wouldn’t want to write in there. Now it’s great.”

With funds from the Lab, New Dramatists also reconfigured its performance space to focus on workshop and development rather than presentation. Based on recommendations from a team of staff and playwrights, New Dramatists removed fixed seating to create a larger, more flexible room. Now the space is more utilitarian, and within a year will have retractable seating, lighting, storage and a basic sound system.

### Obstacles and Enablers

While the New Dramatists Team encountered initial obstacles—primarily related to perceived hierarchies (or lack thereof), personalities, and its embedded help-mate, conflict-averse culture—good facilitation helped the Team overcome these challenges. Dahlquist says McCann made the Team “focus, refocus and refocus so that people’s ideas didn’t get lost.” The Team also credits McCann with creating a neutral environment in which hierarchies and individual

personalities did not prevail.

The biggest challenge for New Dramatists was transferring the Team’s work in the Lab to the entire organization, and members wondered how they were going to engage playwrights in “a massive and unruly process.” They started with the Writers Executive Committee, a volunteer guiding group of 20 people. Thurber confesses, “It got a little heated because we were so steeped in it.



We were way ahead of them in the amount of processing we’d done, and we had two hours to catch them up to everything we’d done in a week.” There was vigorous questioning from playwrights about how “giving back” would impinge on their freedom. “But,” Thurber says, “we told them we didn’t want to eliminate their freedom, but put some structure around it to make their experience more valuable.” The Team’s advocacy won over the Executive Committee.

The next hurdle, however, was much bigger—a meeting of all New Dramatists writers. “This was a potentially disastrous situation,” says Dahlquist, “because a lot of Team members couldn’t be at the All Writers Meeting.” In the end, Dahlquist says, the process “gave everybody a second wind. It was amazing how successful we were in passing on ideas to other people so they could become advocates.” A group of playwrights from the Executive Committee volunteered to serve as leaders for topical discussions at the All Writers Meeting. This was extremely powerful, says Thurber.

“Because we were able to talk through everything at the Executive Committee, they could communicate to the All Writers group. That was so much better than us doing it because they had internalized everything. What we hoped would happen actually happened.”

The result was astonishing. According to London, “Everybody blew out of there incredibly energized. We had about 15 writers who volunteered to take charge of specific areas, so all of a sudden we had these teams or pods ready to work. Our only problem was figuring out how to harness all that energy.” Thurber believes they were successful because they used what they learned in the Lab about structure and process. “The questions were really questions we’d posed before, and we’d broken into groups before,” she says, “but this time we came with a framework and structure to enable action.” Dahlquist agrees, saying, “We were able to take the big pie in the sky questions to tangible things you could actually do and then we identified the steps we needed to take.”



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## The Impact

Changing the dynamic between the organization and the playwrights has had immeasurable impact on New Dramatists in terms of the organization’s ability to move discussions from a broad value proposition to concrete action. For Thurber, the difference is her ability to facilitate a process. “The most important thing for me,” she says, “was setting expectations. I was able to say, ‘these are things we want, things we believe, so what is the course of action to match that belief?’ Employing that process was really revolutionary for me.”

Dahlquist notes another subtle impact. “There was something really crucial about the way we reconfigured our community and our empowerment of playwrights in relation to staff. It’s a model for how playwright relationships exist in theater.” Thurber echoes this sentiment, saying the new way of working “changes how we see ourselves as writers—how we work with actors, designers, directors, etc. Coming out of the Lab and watching how the experience genuinely filters through our community has been transformative for me. It’s made me a better collaborator.”

Staff capacity is the biggest challenge for New Dramatists.

“We’ve dedicated ourselves to flexibility, to treating each writer as an individual, to rethinking and redoing this, to rethinking of ourselves as a community based on consenses,” says London, “and that’s really challenging.” But London encourages others to fight the temptation to do things the same way. The easiest way to avoid burnout,” he says, “is to just do what you’ve always done, but that won’t get you anywhere.” Capacity, London adds, is most often defined by how much staff time or money is allocated to a project or goal, but through its Lab experience, New Dramatists succeeded in looking at capacity as “an internal shift in paradigm or perspective.”

This adjustment has had a significant impact on New Dramatists. The Team says, “We pride ourselves on creating a hospitable, welcoming environment for writers, and we have adopted an attitude of service. Responsiveness is a core value. Yet the emphasis on responsiveness can cause everything to have an equal weight, dissipating our focus and making us feel over-extended and unable to meet all demands. Now we are putting greater emphasis on making progress than on being responsive.”

## The Innovation Team

Todd London Artistic Director	John Steber Director of the Playwrights’ Lab	Resident Playwrights: Adam Bock Sharon Bridgforth Dan LeFranc Deborah Stein Andrea Thome Lucy Thurber	EmcArts Facilitator: John McCann
Joel K. Ruark Executive Director	Ron Riley Director of Operations		
Emily Morse Director of Artistic Development	Erin Detrick Artistic Programs Administrator	Board Member: Gordon Dahlquist	
Jennie Greer Director of Advancement			