

# Connecting the Dots: On Becoming *Wickedly* Innovative

by Katherine Rosback

**W**e often hear that brainstorming is a wonderful way to create new ideas and generate innovation. You almost certainly have used this technique and possibly use it frequently. It turns out, however, that it's a poor route to new ideas.

Studies show that individuals come up with as many as two times the number of new ideas as brainstorming groups. Other surprising studies show that groups that debate (a big no-no in typical brainstorming) generate more ideas than those who simply list their ideas without debate. And a third surprise: That free-association part of brainstorming? Well, humans are just not very good at it, ironically. Our brains function much better at tasks that are essentially the *opposite* of brainstorming.

As the late creativity guru, Dr. Edward de Bono, repeatedly emphasized, "The mind is a pattern-making system. The mind creates patterns out of the environment and then recognizes and uses such patterns." Think about your training, whether it was

for your education, profession or trade, or personal development. It all had a foundation in pattern recognition. See the way thin slice of rock diffracts polarized light? That means its quartz. Hear that funky sound from the motor of your customer's truck? That means his timing chain is about to go. See the way your friend is avoiding eye contact? That means there's something they don't want to tell you. We learn to recognize patterns, and we use that recognition to create a richer picture of what's before us.

When, on the other hand, we search for transformative solutions ("What are your new ideas?") our pattern-making brains struggle. So what do we do?

Leverage the excellence of the brain instead of fighting it. The brain is brilliant—marvelous!—at connecting dots. That's why storytelling is so fundamental to culture. If I give you two events and tell you to create a story to connect them, your brain came pre-wired to rise to this challenge.

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One of my favorite examples of how great we are at connecting the dots is L. Frank Baum's classic, *The Wizard of Oz*. For our entire lives, we've watched that movie with the evil, green-skinned witch and her nasty gang of flying monkeys, the good witch named Glinda, and the congenial wizard who ruled the land called Oz.

Then a wildly popular Broadway show called *Wicked* comes along and takes those same cues—a green-skinned witch, a beautiful blond witch, a wizard, and a squadron of flying monkeys—and turns it into a story about friendship; a misunderstood, green-skinned woman who happens to be an animal-rights activist; a blond concerned about her popularity; and government corruption. Brilliant!

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So, click those ruby slippers and let's leave Oz and head back to your organization. This wonderful ability to connect dots is why techniques such as backcasting work so well. For those of you unfamiliar with that routine, it involves reframing the familiar, open-ended question of "What might go wrong with this?" and instead asks the pointed question, "Why did this fail so miserably?"

To the brain, that's like giving a well-trained bloodhound the scent of a dirty sock and telling it to go find the matching human. It's off like a shot and on its quarry's trail. With backcasting, you don't force your brain to imagine a something that *might* be somewhere out there. You're telling your brain that something *is* out there—go find it.

This orientation is the premise for all the tools that de Bono uses for lateral thinking: random word, the concept fan, and po are all dot-connecting exercises. Your current state defines one dot and those tools create subsequent dots. Your task? Find a way to connect them. In doing so, the new idea or insight emerges.

Consider random word stimulation. As its name suggests, the technique begins with a noun chosen at random from a list, dictionary, or blog. Let's say you chose the word "squirrel." With your current state (first dot) in mind, you ask, "What are the characteristics of a squirrel (the next dot)?" You then ask, "How do those characteristics apply to my current state?"

In your next innovation session—whether to identify a new opportunity, develop an alternative method to deliver a product, or choose a new career—instead of asking, "What can I do differently?" project a dot into the future and then write a story that connects that dot to where you are.

**Katherine Rosback** is a recognized expert in the science and practice of helping leaders ask better questions and has extensive experience facilitating teams facing complex challenges. She has a BS in Chemical Engineering and an M.A in Organizational Communication. She is the author of *Asking is Better Than Telling*. View more of her work and experience at [katherinerosback.com](http://katherinerosback.com)