

Julia Winston:

Take a look around. You'll notice them everywhere. Facilitators. People who guide other people, create connection and make tough things easier. This is Facilitator Forum, where we meet a magical mix of people who offer us insights and inspiration through the stories of their work in the world. I'm your host, Julia Winston. Welcome.

Hello, my friends. Welcome back. This is the second episode and very first interview here on Facilitator Forum. Our guest today is not only an awesome thought leader in the space of experience design, human connection and facilitation, but a person who is near and dear to my heart on a personal level. I'm so excited to introduce you guys to Jenny Sauer-Klein.

Jenny is the founder and CEO of the Scaling Intimacy School of Experience Design, which trains event leaders to strategically weave connection into the fabric of their events. She created Play on Purpose, a video tutorial library with over 80 virtual and in-person team building games. And, I cannot recommend Play on Purpose highly enough. I use it all the time when I'm designing events and gatherings. In her previous career, as the co-founder of acroyoga, Jenny's successfully scaled an international brand, community and organization with millions of practitioners.

She regularly consults for organizations like Google, Airbnb, Dropbox, and the Berkeley Haas School of Business. And, she's a frequent presenter at international conferences and has been featured in the New York Times, Forbes, Fast Company and Inc, as well as Tim Ferris's book, Tools of Titans. I heard of Jenny through acroyoga many years ago, as a yogi. But, when I met her a handful of years ago at her transformative event, the Culture Conference, and I got to experience her interactive engaging style, I knew I had met someone very special.

Since then, she's become a teacher, mentor, colleague, and dear friend. I learn something new from Jenny pretty much every time we interact and this conversation was no different. I hope you take away as much from this conversation as I did. Okay. Let's dive in.

Jenny, how are you doing?

Jenny Sauer-Klein:

I'm doing great. I'm so stoked to be having this conversation with you.

Julia Winston:

I'm so stoked that you're here. I would love to spend just a few minutes going back in time and just getting to know you a little bit. And so, why don't you tell us a little about the journey that led you to this work? Where did it begin and what are some of the turning points that led you to do what it is that you do, today?

Jenny Sauer-Klein:

I grew up in New York city, in Manhattan. I was an only child and I felt very isolated growing up. And, I got into theater very, very early and it just lit my heart on fire. And, I was very lucky to be able to go to see lots of Broadway shows. And, I remember at the end of every show, whether it was terrible or wonderful, I would just be bawling. Crying in the seats because I was so moved by this live theater experience with an audience. And, it just felt so poignant to me. And, I was like, "I want to do that." And so, I spent my whole young adulthood and early adulthood studying theater.

And then, I went to college for a musical theater degree. Fun fact is I went to high school with Lin-Manuel Miranda, who wrote Hamilton, and we did a bunch of theater together. So, that's just a fun

thing. And, I have to do the name drop, okay. Now, I'm done and moving on. So, anyway [crosstalk 00:03:37] it has to be said. Anyway.

So, in that high school we went to, it was all student run theater. So, I got to choreograph and direct and act and costume design and be a playwright. So, I got such a jump on that, having agency and being able to create experiences. And then, I got a degree, a BFA in musical theater from Emerson College. And, that whole experience for me was really about, as I look back on it now, of course, influencing and impacting people, having live experiences, group dynamics, project management, improvisation, thinking on your feet. So many critical skills that come into play when you're teaching, when you're leading, when you're in front of a room, that I didn't realize at the time.

But, by the time I graduated college, I felt like theater was actually too constrictive. I wanted to do other things. And, I made a decision in that moment that I wanted to dedicate my life to experiences rather than things. I didn't want to make things or sell things. I wanted to create experiences.

I ended up going into being a yoga teacher, which I thought I would do part-time. Lo and behold, I end up co-founding this practice called acroyoga. And, it's a combination of yoga and acrobatics Thai massage. I moved to the West Coast. It totally blows up. We tour for 10 years. We create teacher trainings, immersion programs, conferences, festivals. I got to teach all around on the world to tens of thousands of people and learned so much in that process. And then, after 10 years, I decided to leave that practice because I felt that I was being called somewhere else.

And, I wanted to make those principles of acroyoga, which was trust, connection, and playfulness, accessible to people who might not have access to it or might not be in those environments where they were ever going to ever do a handstand or ever want to step into a yoga studio. And so, I got really excited about being in the corporate world and how could I make this work accessible to them? And, how could I take what I'd learned from acroyoga, take the yoga and the acrobatics, the Thai massage out of it, create something that would work for anyone in any context.

So, fast forward many years and many projects later. A practice called Play on Purpose about bringing play into work, a project called the Culture Conference for organizational leaders. And then, where I am right now, which is the Scaling Intimacy School of Experience Design, where we use this dramatic arc template.

So, I've taken what I learned from theater, and we're taking that dramatic arc from theater, and we're applying it to an events context. And, we're building up to a cathartic pinnacle, climax moment, integrating people on the way down. And, we're really focused on prioritizing connection over content, and creating communities and interactive engaging experiences in our events and our gatherings, trainings, programs, whatever it is that you do.

So, of course, hindsight's 2020. You look back and you see how all of these touchpoints made this now possible. And so, I just love this work that we're doing with coaches, consultants, educators, people inside companies and helping them to transform the way we gather and learn.

Julia Winston:

Yes, Jenny. And, just being on the the front lines with you at Scaling Intimacy, I've seen the power of what you've created. And, it is pretty amazing to look back at just the connection points between all of the chapters on your journey and how they're culminating in this body of work that's touching so many lives.

One of the key themes that has come up all along the way in your journey, is playfulness. I heard you say it with acroyoga. You talked about Play on Purpose. So, playfulness. This is just such a... It's an important quality to bring into the world, especially nowadays. Because, there's so much serious stuff

going on. And, I think you have a really special way of blending playfulness with depth, with intimacy. This is a rare balance to strike in group work. So, what do you do to invite playfulness into the mix when you're guiding groups?

Jenny Sauer-Klein:

Mm, yeah. Playfulness for me, I'll say personally is also the canary in the coal mine. When I'm not feeling playful, I know that something's off. And, when I do have access to play for myself, I know that I'm in my best state. So, for me, it's always that litmus test of, okay, do I have access to play.

And, I was thinking of talking about play is not an activity. We always think about to play a game is to be playful. And, that's an access point. But, really, play is a mindset. It's the way you approach something. So, it's really about coming into whatever endeavor, whether it's washing the dishes or doing a project or negotiating a contract. Whatever it is, with that sense of awe and wonder, and curiosity, and really being in for the joy of the journey rather than a goal oriented destination.

And so, what I find is, oftentimes, people get in a dichotomy of it either is light and playful or deep and serious. And, I think you can absolutely have both. And, that when you integrate both, they actually catalyze each other. The deep feels deeper and the light feels lighter. And, they support one another in that process.

So, I often like to start on a playful note because my experience is that when you invoke play, it actually is one of the most transformative tools that we have because it disarms people. So, to laugh with someone, they say the shortest distance between two people is laughter. And so, when you can invoke laughter it's like, "Oh, I feel this instant rapport, this instant connection with you." We're smiling, we're relaxed. It's releasing endorphins. There's all these great chemicals that are going on that make me feel bonded to you.

And, it's like when a dog rolls over and reveals its belly, it's soft underside. That's a real sign of safety and surrender and openness. And, that's what play is on a human level in so many ways. So, when we get people starting by playing, then they're like, "Oh, I can be relaxed here. It's safe to be myself and to be authentic. And, to let go and get out of my head and not be in control." Especially in environments in a company, say where there's bureaucracy or hierarchies, power dynamics. You just dismantle all of that right away.

And then, the deep things become available so much faster and easier because our guard is down. And, you do it in a way that it's not hard. I'm not having to chip away at someone's armor. It's like they've just released their armor to the floor without even realizing that they've done it. And, that's what I love about it. It's this kind of subversive tool. You're transforming people through joy and through connection. And, I think that's really the power of what play is.

Julia Winston:

I wonder how do you guide people there in a way that feels playful and not forced. We all know about the dreaded icebreaker where it feels like, "Oh, forced fun. Now we're going to have a good time." How do you do that? How do you guide people to play where they don't even know that it's happening?

Jenny Sauer-Klein:

That's a great question. I think that is why people have that bitter taste in their mouth. And, oftentimes, in our programs, as you know, we ask people, what's your association with the word icebreaker. There's some people who are like, "Fun, awesome. Get to know you." And, at least half the people there are like, "Oh, the panic. Get me out of here. Run away."

Julia Winston:

Eye roll.

Jenny Sauer-Klein:

Eye roll. And, that's real. And, that's because when it feels forced, fun is not fun, if it feels forced. So, how do you get people to volunteer and to feel good about it? I think part of it is creating levels of opt-in. So, if you're asking someone to come in at a 10 out of 10 of super high party energy, and that's just not where they're at, you're going to be working against yourself and instead of having people open, you're going to have them close.

So, if you think about the emotional scale, zero would be depressed and 10 would be ecstatic. How are you creating opportunities for people to meet this activity or this moment, wherever they are, and to open towards it. So, that's one thing I would consider. The second thing that's really helpful is to create a balance of structure and spontaneity. And, I know that we are really both into those concepts, how they work together.

So, for something to feel like a game, it has to have a structure to make adults feel safe. Adults need structure for safety. And, to compliment that, you need a certain degree of freedom and autonomy and spontaneity in order for it to feel fun. Because, fun generally has some elements of the unknown. And, that's what makes it exciting and interesting. It's like, "Oh, oh, oh, what's going to happen? What's going to happen?"

If it's too structured, then we don't have that space for sparkly, new fun, cool things to happen. So, you want to create just enough structure that people feel safe. But, a lot of freedom for people to paint the picture and feel their way through things. So, that's one of the big things that I always think about, is you need to have rules of a game, but have as few rules as possible.

Julia Winston:

Wow. You're really touching on something now that I think a lot of professional facilitators in the group guiding worlds struggle with. Which is that balancing act of making decisions in the moment and being spontaneous, versus having a plan, having a structure. It's really tough to let go of your structure. You've put together a plan and then you show up the day of, and then, oh my gosh, the group wants to do something else or it doesn't really jive anymore. What do you do to let that go without getting in your own head? I found that this usually involves a relationship with intuition. What's your relationship to your intuition?

Jenny Sauer-Klein:

Yeah. I think it's something that develops over time and practice. I always suggest for people, especially if any of you who are listening are newer to this field, I suggest structure to start. I think of it as first you play classical and then you play jazz. You learn all your chords, you learn your scales, you've gotten that dialed. And, when that's in you, and it feels really ingrained and embedded and natural and fluid, that's when you have the ability to be spontaneous without disrupting the structures that you've set up.

So, I think it's really good to have a plan. And, for the most part, to follow that plan, especially as you're getting started. And then, once you say you have that workshop or that class or that program, and you've done it say eight to 10 times, and each time then you just start making these small iterative changes and you see what's the impact and what's the effect of that, as you go over time. And so, then, when you're in the moment and you think you're going one way and the group's like, "What?" Wants to go another way, you can start to feel into what the impact that's going to be, and you know how to

modify and redirect in the moment, so that you can still deliver on your promise. And, you still make sure you can hit all the major points you're supposed to.

And, the reality is that I think once you've started to trust yourself in that way, what starts to come through you in the moment is actually far better than what you could imagine ahead of time. And then, you start to trust that more and more. So, when I was first teaching yoga in New York City, this was just right after 9/11, it was a very tender time. And, I would literally go to teach these yoga classes and I would on purpose create zero plan so that I would have to land on my feet.

I would literally jump off the cliff and be like, "Okay, where am I going to land?" And, by doing that to myself so many times, I found this place where I could really trust my intuition. So, there's many ways to get there. One is the super structure. And then, I just gave the example of no structure at all. Although I had an embedded structure that was there, I was pulling off of.

But, it is a process of trusting. Trusting yourself and also trusting the room and trusting that, as you said, the wisdom is in the room and that we're essentially holding a container or a framework, and we're letting the participants paint the picture. And so, if they want to paint with more blues and reds and you were going purples and oranges, well then, it's going to go blues and reds. If you want it to be fulfilling for them, ultimately, they are the main characters in our story. And so, we're here to really serve them and their experience.

Julia Winston:

Yeah. There is so much about trust in what you're saying. It's a key theme that's coming up here. And, another one is intimacy. And, I know this is a huge part of your work, and this is a big word in your work. The Scaling Intimacy School of Experience Design. Intimacy is at the core. How do you define intimacy? What does that word mean to you?

Jenny Sauer-Klein:

Yeah, I think it's an edgy word. And, I remember when I decided to call my first program Scaling Intimacy, it felt really scary. It was like, "Oh, that feels edgy. And, I'm not sure. And, how's that going to go over?" Because, I think most people will raise their hand for connection or community. Those are safer words that most people would ordinarily say that they want in their lives.

But, intimacies is a few degrees further. It's like, oh, there's vulnerability. There's tenderness. There's being revealed in that, in your humanity. That could feel a little scary. So, I think that intimacy is actually a deeper need that we all want, but some of us are more ready or willing than others. And so, by calling it out, I think it does galvanize people to say like, "Yes, I'm ready to take that further step."

And, when I think about intimacy, you talk to most people, they have a concept of when you say the word intimate. There's certain assumptions that are built in. Especially when you talk about an intimate gathering, an intimate workshop, an intimate conference. And, when I ask people like, "What do you really mean when you say intimacy?" They say like, "Close, personal, authentic," but what comes up a lot is small. This small number.

And then, I'll ask them, "Okay, well, what is the maximum number you can imagine being intimate?" And, people will say 5, 10, 20, 30. The outliers will maybe say 50 or a hundred. But, the reality is when you look at the dictionary definition of intimacy, there's no numbers associated with it whatsoever. And, it's really defined as a feeling of closeness or familiarity. And, that's what I love, is really just we have these mental obstacles of you can't feel intimate with a stranger. You can't feel intimate in a group of 5,000 people.

But, that's just a story we've told ourselves. The reality is you can create a feeling of closeness or familiarity with any group of any size, in any amount of time, as long as that's your priority. Most of the time, we're so obsessed over content and information transmission that we don't have time to focus on intimacy. But, if that's really something that you want, I think it's absolutely doable. As long as that is something that you're designing around as a center point. And so, I think that intimacy is one of the most powerful things we can create in any kind of group gathering. And, it's ultimately a lot of what draws people to events, is to make a new friend. So, how do we create environments that support that?

Julia Winston:

It strikes me that so much of what you're facilitating is comfort with humanity. These are the different parts of our humanity. We are playful. We are intimate. We generate trust. We play with trust. We explore the ways that we can be with ourselves and each other in ways that feel authentic. That feel real for us. So, I'm sure you've had a lot of observations about people along the way through the work that you do. What are some of the things you've learned or observed about humanity through your work, as a facilitator? How have you seen people or groups transform?

Jenny Sauer-Klein:

Mm, yeah. I think part of that job that we have as facilitators is to give people what they want. And, sometimes, that's... People can show up to your program. They could have paid money. They could have flown across the world and they could be there and still be in a state of resistance. And, usually, that resistance has to do with, yeah, there could be skepticism, something informed by past experiences. It could be fear to get the thing that they actually really want. Like, "I really want it, but oh my gosh, what's going to happen if I actually get that."

And so, our job, a lot of the time, I think, is just overcoming resistance. How do we support our participants to overcome resistance? Whether that's fear, whether that's skepticism, whether that's anger. Who knows? We don't know. And, it's also honoring what each person has come into the room, virtual or physical, with a lifetime of experiences.

And, we're not privy to what those are. We just know who we see in the moment in front of us. And, to really have compassion for them and to try to meet them where they are. So, my experience has been, and we hear this term a lot, but it is very powerful when we can create environments of psychological safety. So, meaning people feel safe to take a risk without being judged or criticized.

So, people feel free to be themselves. Everybody wants connection. Everyone wants a deep sense of belonging, of intimacy. And so, when you create those safe containers, people open up. And, I find so much of the time people say to me, "I met the most amazing people at your programs. How do you find these people?" And, I'm like, "These are great people. Yes. But, I believe that every person is a great person, just waiting for the right context to bring that out of them."

So, there's the analogy of having a beautiful Coastal Redwood in a desert, and in a desert that Coastal Redwood is not going to flourish. But, put it in the right environment and that Coastal Redwood's going to grow up to be a hundred feet tall. So, how do you create the proper environment for people to feel safe, to open up, to be themselves. And then, we get to play, as you said, with the whole range of the human experience, and create environments where that's not only safe, but celebrated.

Julia Winston:

Oof. Yeah. If you could give us one insight about how we could create ideal environments to help people flourish through the range of their human experience, what tip do you have for us?

Jenny Sauer-Klein:

As you know, I'm a big fan of what I call guidelines. They are like group agreements, norms, rules of conduct. I like guidelines because I think they're more invitational. And, it's really thinking of about how to guide the banks of a river that is the group energy. That group energy is there. It's flowing. It's looking for a place to go. And, as you create these guidelines in the beginning of your session, you are creating the culture of your event.

So, I wouldn't underestimate the power that you have there. And, some of the ones that I use often are full participation. So, getting people to be all in, playful out, however you want to think about that. One of the main ones we use to create intimacy is a stranger is a friend you haven't met yet. So, getting people into that mindset. Guidelines are mindsets. It's the hats that they can try on to get the most out of their experience while they're there.

So, if I'm wanting to create intimacy, then having people look through the lens of, "Wow, a stranger is a friend I haven't met yet. All these people that are new to me could become friends, allies, collaborators, mentors, clients." How do you set your participants up for success through these mindsets you're asking them to put on during your event? And then, coming back to them and reinforcing those mindsets throughout your experience.

Julia Winston:

Jenny, I could talk to you forever. You have so many fabulous insights for us about facilitation and just humanity. Just inviting people to be freaking human beings. Thank you for the work that you do. And, I have to ask you, what's something you would want someone else to facilitate for you to make your life easier?

Jenny Sauer-Klein:

Mm, well, I just became a mom six months ago. And so, that has been, I'm a transformation junk. And, so much of my work is about transformation and change. And, I will say that has, hands down, been the most transformative experience in my life thus far. And, I think, you have doulas out there and other midwives, other people that are helping you transition, literally, through the birth portal.

And, I wish someone could help me facilitate my new identity as a mom and how to both embrace this amazing role I find myself in, and to grieve and let go of and bless and give gratitude for the life that I've led. Because, it literally feels like I'm a new person. And, even integrating with my family is challenging. Because I'm like, "Well, you're a grandparent now, and I'm a parent now."

But there's this being. And, I just, especially after COVID not having seen them, and then I just feel like I have shifted so much. I'm having to get to know people from this new stance. So, it would be really cool to have someone who's maybe like an identity doula who just helps me to transform. To go through the portal of this identity transformation and to both let go of and honor, and to celebrate what all of those changes are bringing. And then, help me of course, figure out my life. How to work breastfeeding.

Julia Winston:

[crosstalk 00:25:23] We all had that [crosstalk 00:25:25].

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Jenny Sauer-Klein:

Podcast recording. Yes, exactly. So, yeah, that would be [crosstalk 00:25:28]

Julia Winston:

As a new mom. And, I'm sure there are so many other women out there who feel the way you do. So, it's really powerful to hear you say that because I don't think you're alone. But, that's a great idea.

Jenny Sauer-Klein:

I know. Somebody take that. Somebody run with it. I'll hire you. Contact me.

Julia Winston:

Well, Jenny, thank you so much for being here with us today and for being the very first guest on Facilitator Forum. I'll never forget this conversation. I appreciate you so much.

Jenny Sauer-Klein:

You too, girl. You're going to rock it and you're going to be super famous and I'll be like, "I knew her when... We did the first episode together." Because, it takes one to know one. You've got to be a facilitation genius to be able to pull all of these threads together and interview the best folks in the industry. So, I'm stoked to see how this evolves and where it goes for you and all the people it's going to serve.

Julia Winston:

Aw, thank you, Jenny. Well, we're on this journey together, so we'll see.

Jenny Sauer-Klein:

That's for sure.

Julia Winston:

Thank you.

Jenny Sauer-Klein:

Thank you

Julia Winston:

God, isn't she awesome? I love Jenny. I'm so glad you got to be here with me for that conversation. Thank you. Definitely check out scalingintimacy.com to learn more about the amazing programs jenny leads through the Scaling Intimacy School of Experience Design. Visit playonpurpose.com for access to that library of 80 virtual and in person team building games. And, of course, if you haven't already, subscribe to Facilitator Forum. Visit our website facilitatorforum.com for show notes on today's episode, as well as our latest blog post. And, join us in two weeks for another illuminating conversation about facilitation. Today was the first in a series of three conversations about facilitating human connection. Special thanks to Adam Rosendahl for creating our artwork, and Gasoline Tequila for our original music. Caleb Spalding on percussion and Massimo Lusardi on the guitar. Stay tuned you guys. See you soon.