

UNITED WISDOM

A Small Experiment Instead of a Decision for Life

Freedom and Action

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Epigraph

> *Each cycle informs the subsequent cycle*

Søren Valgreen Knudsen and colleagues, 2019, caption explaining the PDSA cycle in a systematic review of quality-improvement projects. The source concerns successive tests in healthcare organisations. The possibility of arranging a bounded everyday trial is the author's further argument, rather than a life-change programme established by these words. The Russian companion contains a United Wisdom editorial translation.

What this article is about

Marina wants to start teaching drawing to her neighbours. She enjoys the work itself, but opening a studio straight away feels too large: rent, a timetable, advertising, and participants' expectations. She alternates between imagining someone who has finally found her calling and someone who cannot sustain the responsibility. Both pictures belong to an imagined future. She has not yet held a class and does not know whether she enjoys preparing materials, explaining things to different people, and bringing a meeting to an end on time.

Between abandoning the idea and signing up to a new life, there may be a third action: one trial with limits agreed beforehand. It could be a meeting for six people in an available room, with a clear contribution towards materials, a finishing time, and permission not to continue. It will not decide who Marina should become. It can let her encounter a particular part of the work that she currently only imagines. What matters is not simply a small event, but its question, conditions, and observations: what should this meeting help her learn, and what conclusions can it support?

This article concerns how to arrange that kind of trial. The reversibility of an action and the cost of restoring the previous situation are separate issues: even a cancellable booking can use another person's time. Our question is narrower: how to gain a useful basis for the next step without declaring one experience a final answer about yourself. The distinctions and exercise offered here are authorial tools for ordinary situations. They do not replace specialised requirements when a trial affects health, safety, substantial obligations, or people's rights.

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I. Turn the large question into an observable part

A question about your life's work can seem unified while joining several different unknowns. Marina wants to know whether she can explain drawing, manage the preparation, attract people in the evening, and cover costs. One meeting will not answer everything reliably. Unless she separates these questions, any outcome can become a sweeping verdict: feeling tired means this is not her calling; receiving thanks means she can rent a room for a year. The conclusion then extends far beyond the experience that supports it.

It is more useful to choose the unknown that actually affects the next decision. Marina does not yet need to establish demand across the city. She needs to learn whether she can lead an understandable introductory session and fit its preparation into the time available. That is neither a diminished aim nor a rejection of ambition. The next stage currently depends on this part. She can keep the other unknowns on a separate list, so that an unanswered question does not silently become an agreement and one meeting is not burdened with the impossible task of clarifying everything.

An observable part needs a connection with an action. Participants tried the demonstrated technique independently; an explanation had to be repeated; preparation took two evenings rather than one. Such notes need not always be numerical, but someone else can understand which event they describe. A sense that everything went well is also real as an impression. It answers a different question. If mood, time spent, and participants' understanding merge into one result, it becomes harder to decide which specific part to keep or change.

Choosing a narrow question need not impoverish the experience. Marina can notice the group's friendliness, her own enjoyment, awkward lighting, and unexpected help from a neighbour. These observations matter, but not all concern the original trial. The distinction preserves both a living encounter and a clear conclusion. The meeting does not become a laboratory with people as material. It remains a shared action with a limited question that participants understand and that is proportionate to their agreement.

II. State an expectation before the outcome

Before the class, Marina writes that if she prepares two examples and leaves time for independent work, participants should be able to try the technique without constant individual help. The expectation connects an action with an anticipated observation. It does not promise that everyone will enjoy the session or develop a drawing habit. The note is primarily for Marina: afterwards, she can distinguish what she expected from what she discovered along the way. Memory readily builds a sensible original plan around an outcome it already knows.

In chapter six of How We Think, John Dewey considers the movement from a difficulty to a possible explanation and its examination. We can borrow a modest distinction: an idea about an outcome still needs to encounter what happens. This is a historical argument about inquiry, rather than a contemporary evaluation of our exercise. Marina need not reproduce every described stage in a fixed order. It is enough not to present her own expectation as a fact that the class has supposedly already established.

An expectation is particularly useful if an observation can be named that would weaken it. If people cannot understand the example and Marina keeps drawing on their behalf, the original explanation needs revision. If things work only because a neighbour who is a professional artist quietly helps everyone, that is an important condition of the result. Such information does not make the meeting useless. It shows what actually happened. A trial in which every possible outcome counts as confirmation changes little in the basis for a subsequent decision.

The expectation written beforehand need not be perfectly expressed. A first meeting may reveal that the question was too crude: the important issue is not two examples, but differences in participants' previous experience. A truthful result can then be a more precise question. Marina need not retain an awkward hypothesis out of loyalty to her note. She should retain the note itself and identify when the change occurred. That lets her learn without rewriting the original intention as though the new clarity had been available from the beginning.

III. Limit obligations as well as size

A meeting can be short in time and large in consequences. If Marina promised weekly classes, collected payment for three months, and encouraged people to buy expensive materials, calling the first session a trial is no longer enough. Participants acted on a different promise. The boundary is determined by what people agreed to and prepared for, rather than by the organiser's preferred label. Conditions for continuing or finishing therefore need to be communicated before booking, especially when someone rearranges their plans to attend.

Marina invites people to a one-off session. She states the date, duration, materials, room accessibility, and contribution covering supplies. Afterwards, participants can make a separate decision about another meeting. The organiser also leaves herself time to decide. This format lets her try the work without quietly reserving other people's future through an implied promise. A neighbourhood meeting need not require an elaborate contract, but significant expectations deserve ordinary, clear words. Ambiguity does not become freedom simply because the organiser finds it convenient.

Resource limits also apply to preparation. Marina chooses what she can afford to lose without undermining existing obligations: a defined amount of time, materials, and a modest room charge. If preparation begins to displace sleep, paid work, or help already promised, the

experience is no longer the one she agreed to. She can reduce the content, rearrange the date with participants, or withdraw. Permission to stop matters when it can be used before the cost becomes unmanageable, rather than only afterwards.

Not every situation should be explored through a small independent trial. If safety depends on a skill you do not yet have, a smaller scale does not create that skill. Another person's rights cannot be temporarily suspended to find out what you can do. A long-term responsibility towards a child cannot be called an experiment that permits disappearance. These boundaries arise from the situation and its responsibilities, rather than from the PDSA review. For an ordinary class, the acceptability of the trial format needs checking before its informational usefulness.

IV. Prepare a way of observing

Marina chooses a few notes beforehand: how long preparation took, when participants needed a repeated explanation, whether each person could try the technique, and what had to change during the session. She does not design a detailed questionnaire about people's personalities or ask them to confirm her talent. Observations concern the chosen question and remain within what participants can freely share. Collecting information that a decision does not need adds work and can cross a reasonable boundary of a shared class.

Some information comes through action: leave a few minutes for an independent attempt and see whether the first step is clear. Other information comes through a short question afterwards about what was confusing and what helped people begin. Answers will be affected by relationships, politeness, tiredness, and expectations. The absence of criticism does not prove the absence of difficulty. Marina can thank someone for a specific comment without demanding one from everyone. Participants may leave without a detailed report; helping the organiser does not become a condition of being treated respectfully.

There should also be room for Marina's own impressions. Did she enjoy leading the meeting, how did she recover afterwards, and would she like to repeat this particular work? These questions concern her experience, rather than every participant's ability to draw. An unpleasant feeling need not automatically establish failure. A first session may feel tense because it is new, while enjoyment can accompany poorly organised work. Distinguishing feeling from observation lets both retain their significance without one displacing the other in a decision.

A note does not make the experience objective in a strong sense. Marina is not running a controlled study or eliminating every alternative explanation. She needs more definite information than her original imagining. A simple note made soon afterwards can provide a clearer account than a later general impression, but that is the author's practical suggestion,

rather than a methodological effect established here. The more consequential the next step, the less it should depend on a single observation and the more it needs additional, appropriate grounds.

V. Preserve the conditions of success

The session went well: almost everyone tried the technique, the meeting ended on time, and materials lasted. However, the room was free, three participants had drawn before, and a neighbour helped arrange the tables. Recording only a successful outcome would erase these conditions. A session for complete beginners, without an assistant and in another room, may turn out differently. Conditions do not diminish success. They help distinguish what can be transferred, what must be provided again, and what cannot yet be judged.

There is a useful difference between working once and being repeatable. The first statement concerns the meeting that occurred. The second includes an expectation about future conditions. Marina can explore repeatability in another small step if doing so is appropriate and needed. She need not repeat sessions until all uncertainty disappears; ordinary life often offers no such state. She needs proportionate grounds for a particular decision, rather than a certificate that future work is now protected from change and error.

Knudsen and colleagues' systematic review of healthcare quality-improvement projects discusses problems in describing and following PDSA methodology. A positive report does not automatically establish why an improvement occurred or what contribution the method made. That conclusion belongs to the research context read; it does not establish the effectiveness of a neighbourhood class. For our argument, it supports caution about a label: calling an action an experiment is insufficient. Conditions, a record of the process, and limits to a causal explanation still matter.

Sometimes a preserved condition changes the decision itself. Marina finds that she enjoys leading a session, but can currently manage preparation only with help. The next step may be a conversation about working together rather than a promise to run classes alone. Alternatively, she notices that evenings are inconvenient for most of the group: a different time may deserve exploration, rather than a sweeping conclusion about demand. This result refines the action. A first difficulty need not end the whole idea, and a first success need not trigger immediate expansion.

VI. Do not put your worth on trial

A limited trial can easily become an examination of a person. Marina might ask whether she is interesting enough to deserve a studio, rather than whether her explanation was clear. Any difficulty then acquires too much significance. Someone who did not understand the first example seems to witness her inadequacy. Yet the participant is describing an encounter between particular conditions: a way of explaining and their own experience. Those conditions cannot truthfully establish the organiser's overall worth or her right to pursue creative work in the future.

Separating observation from such a verdict does not mean forbidding strong feelings. Marina may feel upset if the technique did not work as intended. She need not immediately call failure a gift or thank it for personal growth. A narrower description is more useful for the next decision: the first demonstration was difficult for people without previous experience. This leaves space for both feeling and change. An action can be examined without requiring unwavering confidence or making dignity a reward for a successful class.

In the context read from book two of the Analects, Confucius also connects knowing with acknowledging what one does not know. The relevant point here is a limit to confidence; historical accounts of roles and hierarchy do not become rules for our group. Marina can acknowledge that she cannot yet explain this technique to beginners. That is clearer than pretending to mastery or giving up the possibility of learning. The source offers a philosophical perspective, rather than evidence of the psychological effect of this suggested wording.

If a trial causes a participant meaningful harm, distinguishing person from action does not remove responsibility for the action. Incorrect information can be acknowledged, unjustified payment returned, room accessibility corrected, and a remedy agreed. Rejecting general self-humiliation does not mean rejecting specific responsibility. A precise account of the problem can make the needed repair easier to identify. An experiment permits a limited question under acceptable conditions; it does not permit consequences for which nobody is answerable.

VII. Allow several honest outcomes beforehand

Before the meeting, Marina can identify three possible decisions: repeat the format, change an important part, or finish the trial. This does not cover every circumstance, but it prevents continuation from becoming the only morally acceptable result. Stopping may be the reasonable outcome: the work is interesting, yet its cost does not fit the resources currently available. An experience has fulfilled its purpose if it helps reveal this before a large commitment. It need not pay for itself through a career story to have meaning.

A second honest result is insufficient information. Perhaps only two experienced acquaintances attended, while the original question concerned beginners. The meeting may have been pleasant and useful for them, yet the initial unknown remains. Marina can hold another trial or decline further costs. Insufficient information does not demand endless repetition. It simply should not be called confirmation or refutation. A decision under uncertainty remains possible when uncertainty is acknowledged and the consequences of the step are proportionate to its grounds.

Another result may clarify a boundary: Marina wants to lead occasional sessions, but does not want to open a permanent studio. The initial idea may have combined work she enjoys with a form of employment that does not suit her. A trial helps separate them. She may instead discover an interest in preparing materials rather than leading a group. That is not yet a proven new calling. It nevertheless permits a next question without requiring the original dream to remain intact. Changing its form need not remove important content.

Allowing several outcomes also protects participants from hidden pressure. If Marina has decided that continuation will prove her courage, a neighbour's refusal can become an obstacle to someone else's development. Yet a person may decline another meeting for reasons of their own. Their answer need not support the organiser's story. Allowing completion makes consent to continue a separate decision. Each further stage needs appropriate conditions again, rather than automatically inheriting approval given for a one-off experience.

VIII. Separate a discovery from confirmation

During the class, Marina unexpectedly notices that people find it easier to begin after discussing the object they will draw. She did not plan this conversation as a method in its own right. The discovery may provide a useful hypothesis for a future session. However, the conversation coincided with other conditions: a small group, people who knew one another, and a neighbour's help. One coincidence cannot establish that discussion improved the drawings. Discovering an interesting connection and confirming its role require different grounds.

Ulrich Dirnagl's methodological article about exploratory research distinguishes finding a possible pattern from subsequent confirmatory examination. This is an authorial perspective in biomedicine, rather than an empirical trial of our everyday exercise. Marina's analogy is limited: she can identify the idea as new, preserve how it arose, and separately decide whether it merits further exploration. A formal scientific experiment is not necessary to avoid presenting a single observation as an established cause.

These steps are especially easy to confuse when a discovery is pleasing. Marina starts retelling the meeting as though she had intended from the beginning to test discussion of the object. Useful information then disappears: the original question concerned explanation of a technique, while the new idea emerged unexpectedly. Both results can be retained. The intended explanation was difficult, and an interesting way to support beginning appeared during the class. One result does not retroactively justify the other or require an unequivocal verdict of success or failure on the whole meeting.

A new hypothesis should not quietly enlarge the promise either. Offering another session to explore discussion before drawing is a separate limited step. Marina can compare observations under different conditions, invite someone to describe their experience, and consider alternative explanations. Even then, the conclusion remains local and provisional. Such care does not prohibit enjoyment of the discovery. It allows the idea to be used without excessive certainty or requiring every future meeting to reproduce the first effect.

IX. Choose the next stage on the grounds obtained

After the first meeting, Marina need not choose between a studio and total abandonment. She could repeat a one-off class with a simpler example, arrange regular help, work with a different group, or set the idea aside. The next step differs from the first because it considers observation as well as hope. It does not guarantee a correct decision. It makes clearer why this scale has been chosen and which remaining unknown it may clarify. The basis can be explained without a story about personal destiny.

Expansion requires a new question about acceptable cost. A successful one-off class does not make a year's rental the same obligation. That commitment requires information about expenditure, time, room rules, and stable demand that the first evening did not provide. The agreement of six neighbours cannot automatically be extended to imagined future customers. Gradual movement is useful because each stage has its own grounds. A small experience does not cancel the work needed before a large step; it helps show which work is now necessary.

Sometimes a conversation, rather than another test, is the next action. If the difficulty concerned responsibilities shared with an assistant, a new class without an agreement merely repeats the unknown. If the price did not suit participants, an honest conversation about cost and possibilities is needed. If Marina has realised that she does not want evening work, further observation of other people's interest need not persuade her otherwise. A trial supports choice; it need not turn every preference into an argument pursued until external proof appears.

A decision to finish deserves as much specificity as a decision to continue. Marina thanks the participants, fulfils remaining promises, explains that she currently plans no further meetings,

and retains her notes. She may return to the idea later, but does not promise that to soften the refusal. Finishing releases attention for other work and closes the group's expectations. A limited trial can produce a way to continue, but also a way to stop without damaging relationships or declaring the time spent meaningless.

X. Keep the experiment at a human scale

The word experiment can offer false reassurance, as though measuring a step will make your relationship with the work simple. Marina may remain uncertain even after a useful session. Work involves wishes, time, relationships, and a picture of the future. A small trial clarifies a limited part of that knot. It need not remove the experience of choosing or supply an identity. Its value lies in understanding its place: it adds grounds that can be used without surrendering the whole question of a life to them.

Every interest need not become a series of trials. Sometimes attending a meeting, drawing with friends, and planning no next step is enough. An inquiry format makes sense when there is an actual decision and an important unknown that can be explored safely. If monitoring starts to displace enjoyment, curiosity, or reciprocity, it is useful to ask why it is needed. People retain the right to act without constant self-measurement. The suggested exercise is an available possibility, rather than a new obligation of a disciplined adult.

The sources approached here illuminate different aspects: inquiry, limits of knowledge, and the distinction between discovery and confirmation. They do not supply one ancient set of PDSA instructions. The contemporary review concerns healthcare projects and acknowledges its data's limitations; philosophical texts offer another kind of grounds. The author's move to a neighbourhood class retains this difference. A small experience can be thoughtfully arranged without claiming that its usefulness has been established by the whole history of thought and contemporary science together.

Instead of a final answer, Marina gains a more precise next question and permission to decide whether she needs to answer it now. She knows the explanation needs simplifying, preparation requires help, and occasional classes interest her. These findings are still insufficient to establish a studio. This clarity does not resemble a solemn decision for life. It enables an action that fits her current grounds, respects participants, and keeps the future open without quietly promising that she must eventually become someone else.

What this means in practice

Begin with an actual next decision. Write down the actions you are choosing between and the unknown that obstructs the choice. If the question is too broad, select a part that can appropriately be observed in a small step. For Marina, this means the introductory session's clarity and manageable preparation. Do not make the aim proving your worth, courage, or belonging to a calling. Such an aim has no honest limited outcome and can turn other people into judges of your person.

Name an expectation and something that could weaken it. Then define conditions: duration, preparation time, resources, people whose separate agreement is necessary, and obligations that arise whatever the result. Check whether the trial can finish without breaking promises already made. If that boundary cannot honestly be provided, reduce the step, change its form, or choose another way to gain information. The label trial does not repair unacceptable conditions.

Choose a few relevant observations before the event. Agree on an appropriate way of receiving feedback; do not gather unnecessary information or demand approval. Afterwards, record separately what happened, what you felt, and which conditions may have contributed. Include help, an unusual group composition, and changes made during the session. These details help understand the result; they are not reasons to deny yourself enjoyment of success.

Compare the notes with the original expectation. Continuing, changing, finishing, and insufficient information are all possible. Identify an unexpected discovery separately without rewriting the original aim. Consider which next step the available grounds support and what new question it requires. Scale does not increase automatically. Where necessary, fulfil remaining promises to people before releasing yourself from further work.

You can pause before deciding if impressions are strong or tiredness makes examination difficult. You can decline further trials if the question no longer matters. You can ask someone to help distinguish observation from conclusion without giving them the right to decide for you. The exercise guarantees no successful project and measures no person's health. Its limited aim is to clarify a next action and its grounds where this format is appropriate.

Key quotation

> *There is no simple answer*

Knudsen and colleagues, 2019, discussion of insufficient methodological adherence in published PDSA projects. This begins an answer to the authors' question about the reasons for that problem. It does not claim that every decision must be complicated. Here it reminds us to

retain conditions and explanatory limits when we want to attribute an outcome immediately to a familiar method. The Russian companion uses a United Wisdom editorial translation.

Connections between traditions

Dewey considers examining a proposed explanation; the Analects passage read connects knowledge with acknowledging what remains unknown. Dirnagl's contemporary methodological perspective distinguishes exploration from confirmation. These perspectives meet in caution about conclusions in our scene, while addressing different tasks: educational inquiry, moral cultivation, and biomedical research. None turns class participants into instruments for an organiser's self-examination.

Knudsen and colleagues' review supplies a separate empirical limit: describing a project and reporting improvement do not ensure a strong causal conclusion. The everyday exercise is the author's proposal and was not tested by that review. Its acceptability also depends on clear promises, people's agreement, and proportionate resources. These conditions cannot be obtained from a research label or replaced by a traditional authority.

Sources

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Tags

experiment, small trial, decision, action, hypothesis, observation, preparation, limits, resources, time, consent, promise, feedback, outcome, conditions, repetition, uncertainty, conclusion, dignity, responsibility, completion, next step, scale, Dewey, Confucius, PDSA, Knudsen, Dirnagl, confirmation, authorship

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