

Creative collaboration: a new make-over for an ancient concept?

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In this article I articulate my understanding of the concept of creative collaboration. This concept is not new: it exists in nature, it was practised by the first human communities and certainly by ancient civilisations. I have explored the positive changes attributed to shared creativity – political, economic, social and educational. However, I also recognise that there are many examples of its dark, destructive side, as expressed in war, crime and terrorism.

By its very nature creativity implies that the activity has to be free from unnecessary constraints. When trying to examine examples of creative collaboration from business, as well as from personal experiences, I found that working with others, to resolve a problem or to innovate, requires a structured, yet flexible, process – one of questioning, disrupting, reflecting, compromising, achieving. In today's fast-paced business environment, both private and public companies need to involve internal and external 'creatives', as well as use technology, to remain agile in a global economy. The concept of tribes within organisations is appealing; when individuals have a shared vision, there is motivation to succeed. However, we need to be mindful of barriers to creativity, and to manage group behaviours, in order to realise that shared vision. Creative collaborations must also ensure that any shared vision is ethically sound and value creation contributes to a more positive future for all humanity.

Keywords:

divergent thinking; convergent thinking; collective intelligence; creative abrasion; beta creativity; uncreativity; organisational tribes; confirmation bias; the dance of creativity; malevolent creativity; dark leaders; creative abrasion

What is creative collaboration?

Creativity

Creativity is a unique human characteristic. It remains inherent within us in various degrees, depending on opportunities we are given as children to develop it or to be 'educated out of it' (Robinson, 2006, cited in Chase, 2015). I believe that even people in whom creativity was not nurtured, are capable of having 'novel and valuable' ideas (Picciuto and Carruthers, 2014).



Being creative together:
Image by [rawpixel](#) from [Pixabay](#)

As Brandt and Eagleman (2017) state, 'Your brain is running its creative software under the hood all the time'. Every time we come across new information, our brain creates a neural pathway to where other pieces of information are stored, making connections and throwing up new thoughts and ideas. These connections – schema – instigate human creativity.

Collaboration

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, to collaborate is 'to labour together'. Schrage (cited in Hardin, 1998), however, suggests that collaboration happens when individuals are involved in 'shared creation or shared discovery'. Similarly, Sawyer (2007) sees collaboration as translating 'each person's creativity into group genius'. It's the interaction, communication, contribution and cooperation between individuals that can lead to innovation.

Creative Collaboration

When individuals are engaged in applying collective intelligence, the process could be defined as creative collaboration (Dominguez's, 2011). We can even identify this practice in nature.

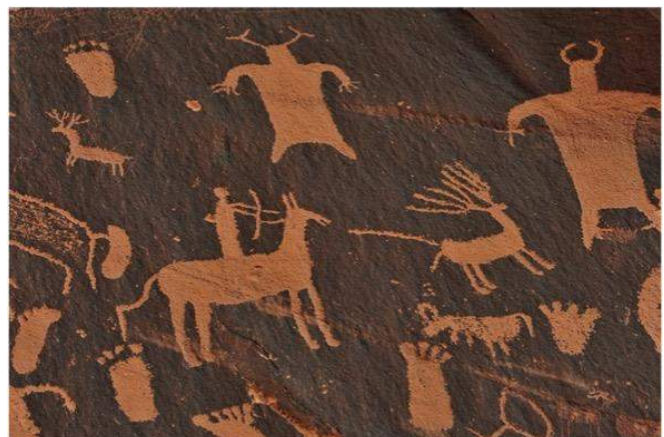


Dancing bees:

[Image](#) by [Patricio Sánchez](#) from [Pixabay](#)

Honey bees, for example, employ a complex, creative and collaborative process when deciding the location of their next hive (Gray, 2009). Scout bees visit different sites, return and report the benefits of each site through a dance. Only when all the bees are doing the same dance is a decision taken on the best site. In a human context, this dance would translate into individuals undertaking together a process of exploring divergent thinking, eventually to converge on an agreed outcome or solution.

Creative collaboration is not a new concept. The activity itself can be traced back to when first humans developed their cognitive ability. Surviving in a wild environment was better achieved through working together – cooperating. Sandstone carvings (petroglyphs) in the 'Newspaper Rock' found in Utah, appear to tell a story of human collective creativity millennia ago (Likens, 2018). The ancient humans may not have known this activity by the term 'Creative Collaboration'.



Petroglyph on Newspaper Rock in Utah, USA

[Image](#) by [Asatira](#) from [Pixabay](#)

However, it appears that they did engage in the process of 'thinking and social learning facilitated by language, creativity and innovation' (Despain, 2010).

Creative collaboration throughout history

Throughout the ages, mankind has created flourishing societies and given the world great art, literature and scientific innovation. Though many of these were inspired by nature, ancient civilizations everywhere were also engaged in activities that resulted in inventions that are a testament to their own creativity.

The wheel is one such example. Apparently, it was originally invented as a potter's wheel in Mesopotamia, around 3500 BC, and later developed to propel wheelbarrows, chariots and water wheels amongst other uses (Dhwty, 2014; Gambino, 2009). Was the wheel the invention of a 'lone genius'? Sawyer (2007) suggests otherwise, that it is 'group genius' that drives innovation, 'because innovation always emerges from a series of sparks - never a single flash of insight'. He also suggests that these sparks fly faster when we collaborate.



Mesopotamian wheel: Image source: [Ebofi](#)

Sawyer (2007) gives some famous examples, which he attributes to 'invisible' creative collaboration between experts in their individual fields: the Wright brothers' first flying machine, Freud's development of the psychoanalytic theory with the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society and the emergence of Impressionist art, a movement led by Parisian artists. These collaborations did not necessarily form a structured working group; their innovations were a result of interaction over time, merging their individual ideas into one cohesive invention.

Collaboration for economic change



Steam locomotive: [Image](#) by [PublicDomainPictures](#) from [Pixabay](#) (Chandler, 1966, cited in Ville, 2011).

Historical periods, such as the 18th century British industrial revolution, saw great innovations in manufacturing and a shift from cottage industry to larger factories (Hudson, 2004, cited in Ville, 2011). Similar progress was made during the second industrial revolution during the two world wars, with the invention of automated vehicles, which were made possible through a blend of creatives, experts from different fields, working in 'multidivisional organisations' (Chandler, 1966, cited in Ville, 2011).

Collaboration for social change

It is recorded that 'seventeen societies in favour of suffrage for women (...) came together in the late 19th century to form the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies' (Myers, 2013). Creative collaborations within the suffragette movement had positive social impact, highlighting the value of women in society. One outstanding non-violent collaboration was led by Mahatma Gandhi, who inspired others to join him in a 'rich social movement ecosystem' (Engler and Engler, 2017), one example of these being the Salt Marches which were a pivotal turning point in the campaign for freedom from British rule (Kurtz, 2009).



Gandhi during the Salt March, March 1930: Image source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Collaboration for educational change

An interesting example of creative collaboration in education is the Black Mountain College, founded in 1933 by John Andrew Rice, who was a progressive educationist (The Art Story Foundation, 2019). Rice was disillusioned by the policies and practices of his educational organisation, where the faculty did not agree with his innovative teaching strategies. He left to establish a learning community that attracted leaders from a range of disciplines, including artists, poets and designers, even attracting the refugee intellectuals and artists from Europe, which was embroiled in World War II. It was run under a flexible leadership, the focus being on creating a collaborative ethos.



Geodesic domes at the Eden Project: [Image](#) by [JürgenMatern](#) from [Wikimedia Commons](#)

The informal environment encouraged creative collaboration through which emerged unusual innovations, such as the 'geodesic' dome, the combined creative work of Buckminster Fuller, an architect/inventor and Kenneth Snelson, a sculptor/photographer. The geodesic domes are now being used within many fields all round the world, Cornwall's Eden Project being such an example. Though the Black Mountain collaboration became defunct due to lack of funds, its legacy of community-centred learning lives on.

The dark side of creative collaboration

Just as history has provided positive examples of creative collaboration, it also reveals a dark side (McLaren 1993, cited in Kapoor, 2019). There are many examples of dark and malevolent collaborations, such as various ingenious terrorist attacks, dubious military campaigns and repressive, manipulative acts by aggressive regimes, the outcomes of which have left a disastrous impact on humanity.

Dark leaders

In the name of change, seeking new environments, new trade, new political or social structures, individuals (dark leaders) collaborate in autocratic, coercive or persuasive, ways to gain a beneficial outcome for themselves. The Christian crusades were fought by a coalition of armies, their shared vision supposedly being the protection of their religion. However, in the process 'dark leaders' emerged, who 'instinctively or cynically tap into human beings' psychological desire to obey and follow' (Browne and Coget, 2017). Undoubtedly, some groups enhanced their lives, gaining political power, at the cost of those who lost theirs. It can be argued that even when the collaborating individuals appear to be following an unethical framework, they could still be considered 'creative'. Similarly, some of the inventions of the industrial revolutions were created to enhance human lives, but there are examples of their use by dark leaders in devastating lives.



Dark Leader? [Image](#) by [ArtTower](#) from [Pixabay](#)

The steam engine, for example, made it possible to establish rail systems, which gave opportunities to connect and explore the world, and for faster transportation of goods. However, we know from history that during World War II the railways were also used for forcible deportation and destruction of lives.

Malevolent creativity

David Cropley's concept of malevolent creativity explains criminal and terrorist collaborations that apply creative ways for the purpose of attack and fear (Whitbourne, 2015), with a disregard to the harm inflicted. The 9/11 attacks, an alleged result of collaboration within an extremist religious group, employed hijacked passenger aeroplanes to perpetrate the terrorist activity. Cropley et al (2013) identify this act 'as testament to the value that the generation of effective novelty – i.e. creativity – offers to terrorists'. The Hatton Garden heist, is an example of criminal collaboration, which impacted many small traders in losing their livelihoods in precious gems and devastated families who lost their legacies. The elderly criminals used their age, audacity and the use of a 'ghost' gang member, an expert in sophisticated technology, to plan the biggest burglary in English legal history (Dodd and Grierson, 2015). Creativity implies deviating from the norm. Terrorists and criminals also engage in 'innovative' action, however it is malevolent when their creativity is deployed for positive, though illegal, gain for themselves and 'negative consequences (...) for the rest of society' (Cropley et al, 2013).

Personal experiences of creative collaboration

As an educator, I can recall a kaleidoscope of personal examples of creative collaborations. All of these were within a professional learning community, based on core principles and accountability.

Community of inquiry

One challenging experience was leading my organisation's teacher education and digital learning teams in a collaborative project that included colleagues from similar teams across seven colleges. The focus was to design and develop blended learning, which would support our increasingly diverse trainee teachers within Adult, Community and Further Education. Our collaboration adopted a non-hierarchical structure, based on the principles of a community of inquiry. There were moments of uncertainty and scepticism. However, the 'conflict' fostered innovation, forcing us to keep assessing our 'approach and decision making' (Tomlinson, 2015). In her evaluation, Rebecca Eliahoo, the then Programme Leader and overall project lead, identified one of the key 'rewards' of the project:

"Collaborative working across Consortium colleges proved extremely valuable, not only in building a community of inquiry across the partner colleges and the University, but in sparking innovation and creativity, as people bounced ideas off each other and provided solutions collaboratively, which they might not have done separately".

Community of practice

I have had the privilege of facilitating the learning of trainee teachers. I have observed how creativity flows on both, face-to-face and online programmes, regardless of group dynamics. My focus was always on fostering a community of practice, with shared goals and passions and regular interaction through the use of creative learning approaches, such as ‘flipped learning’. The experience of creative collaboration, ‘raised their attitude towards the effectiveness of independent and collaborative learning’ (Bhote, 2013).



Co-creative learning Image source: khorshedb.wordpress.com

I was curious to see if the trainee teachers, some of whom had now become managers/leaders, were still engaging in creative collaborations. I reached out to Dale Mineshima, one of my former trainee teachers. She shared her reflections on a recent project which involved working with a team of colleagues to create a multi-disciplinary course, which would engage their learners and also provide her organisation with a new opportunity to retain their competitive edge. I asked Dale what had helped her and her group achieve the intended outcomes of their collaboration. She specifically identified this:

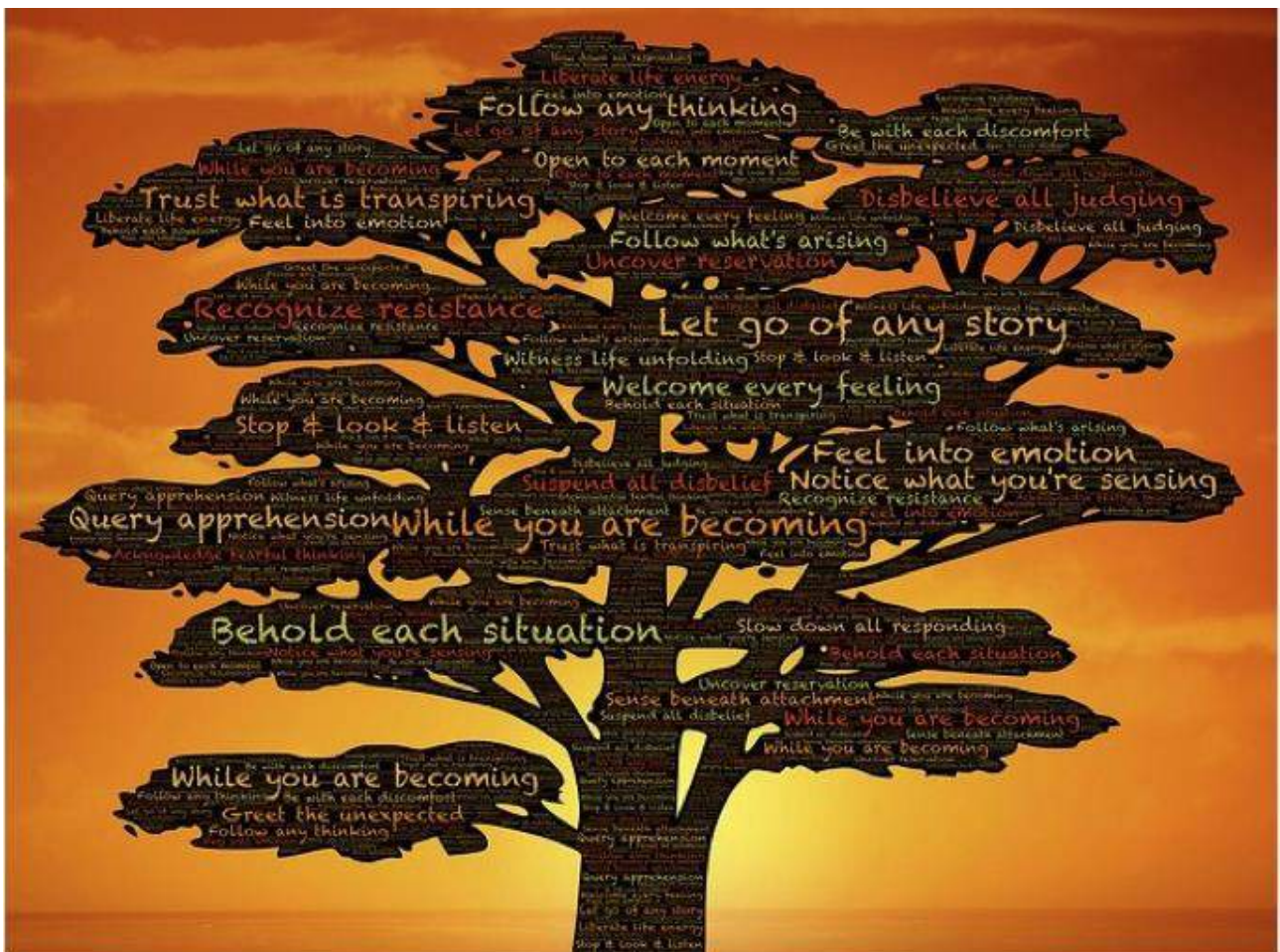
“meeting up for an initial meeting to set-out some basic ideas; going away to solidify these ideas individually; a follow-up meeting to finalise”.

Periods of withdrawal are effective in moving along the creative process. Davis (2018) suggests, 'when people collaborate with one another plus maintain a deep connection with the world around them, they can contribute much more successfully to advancing influential ideas'. I also asked her why she engaged in collaborative projects. Her answer: "an opportunity to open my thinking and just the enjoyment"!

Becoming a creative leader

For me, every experience of creative collaboration has been an opportunity to learn and develop, gaining the attributes and strategies needed to be a creative leader. Two contrasting experiences come to mind, with the leaders being particular influencers of my development.

An earlier experience of collaboration was led by Dawit Asress, my then line manager. He was a transformational leader, whose attributes are 'collaboration, communication, persuasion (Bhote, 2019). We were seeking a creative solution to how best to support a group of migrant teachers who were qualified and experienced in their own countries. The obvious solution would have been to direct them to a college-based teacher education programme. However, our approach was to use the informal environment of a community centre. It offered the migrant teachers a gentle introduction to the UK adult education system and, at the same time, it gave them an opportunity to integrate within their new social environment.



Creative leadership: [Image](#) by [John Hain](#) from [Pixabay](#)

What did I learn from this experience? That ‘transformation can address (...) current needs by establishing a new, experiential strategy that centres on cultivating creativity’ (Livingston, 2010) – a form of outside-the-box thinking. I learned that creative collaborations are great for providing ‘occasions to experiment’ (Brandt and Eagleman, 2017), rather than relying on what is already available. The success of such collaborations needs someone who is able to foster ‘a strong sense of trust, cooperation and sharing’ (Ville 2011), whilst encouraging unorthodox thinking.

The second experience was a collaboration between the IT team, led by a new manager, who had the technical skills, and the trainers, led by myself, who had knowledge of digital pedagogy. Conflict occurred because the IT team had ideas based on pushing forward a quick transformative change using a new online platform, whereas the trainers had ideas based on a more strategic, informal approach, using the existing system. This impasse was seen as blocking creativity. Bilton (2014) calls this ‘uncreativity’ – resistance to new ideas. However, uncreativity can be part of the creative process, and can lead to the desired result. What did I take-away from this experience? That sometimes ‘uncreativity’ – questioning new ideas – provides a check and balance during the creative process. That it keeps a collaborative group focused on solutions that are not change for the sake of change, but rather for creating value and for fitness of purpose. Novel ideas are not always ‘necessarily better ideas’ (Weisberg 1993, cited in Bilton, 2014).

Creative collaboration in the digital age

My research for this article led me to a curious concept – beta creativity. This is the ‘intersection of human artistry and the interconnectivity of digital’ (Coleman, 2016). The best way to explain this concept is to share the thinking of IBM innovation officer, Hugh Pinto (nd, cited in Coleman, 2016):

‘We live in this beta economy where you can have a revolutionary idea and it’s not 100% mature, but you throw it out there and get people using it and their experiences shape a more detailed version. To some extent the evolution of these frameworks, utilising creativity and technology, gives us the capability to be more focused on the human outcome, because it’s giving us the tools to achieve human outcomes quicker and in a more impactful way’.



Creative collaboration – digital: [Image by Gerd Altmann](#) from [Pixabay](#)

Businesses are currently having to prepare for the Fourth industrial revolution. The potential sectoral, political and global impact (Schwab, 2016) of this is yet to be identified. In order to stay at the top of their game and retain market share, businesses need to be kept informed of innovation as it happens, and about changes in consumerism and other aspects of people’s lives. Coleman (2016) suggests that businesses need to co-create innovation with their customers.

According to Keith Weed, Unilever's chief marketing and communications officer, 'it's about ensuring our ideas engage with people in a way that is authentic, relevant and with talkability' (nd, cited in Coleman, 2016). By using a range of media channels, businesses are able to garner support from their customers, to share the content and also create it. This is beta creativity. Some businesses are going beyond the popular media, such as [Pepsi's 'GIF-iti' project](#), which transforms graffiti into GIF images. Insi, the artist responsible for this concept, believes that digital creativity easily merges online and off-line lives, thus ensuring a product or concept's relevance to the wider public. According to Shiv Singh, head of digital for PepsiCo Beverages, America (nd, cited in Preston, 2011), the company wanted to 'build brand awareness and cultivate a long-term relationship with consumers', and this project has helped in improving their 'brand health and sales'.

The dark side of digital collaboration

When exercising creativity, businesses also need to be mindful of the 'dark side of digital'. Mark Carney, current Governor of the Bank of England, states, 'Alongside great benefits, every technological revolution mercilessly destroys jobs & livelihoods well before new ones emerge' (nd, cited in Thorp, 2017). It is never possible to foresee which sectors would be affected more than others, whenever technology replaces humans. Stephen Hawking has predicted that 'the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) is likely to extend job destruction deep into the middle classes, with only the most caring, creative or supervisory roles remaining' (cited in Thorp, 2017). We have seen evidence of the impact on cybersecurity, of data breaches by Cambridge Analytica and Facebook in recent times.

This dark side of digital is the misuse of the invisible AI systems by dark leaders, who have used their power for economic, political and social manipulation. It is essential, therefore, that individuals, groups, businesses, technology developers, social media companies, educational organisations and governments collaborate to ensure the fourth industrial revolution is 'empowering and human-centred, rather than divisive and dehumanising' (Schwab, nd, cited in Thorp, 2017). Such future collaborations will hopefully aspire at least to establish ethical frameworks that will safeguard trust and security and will hold the collaborators accountable for its impact.



Intelligent collaboration between humans and machines: [Image](#) by [Gerd Altmann](#) from [Pixabay](#)

Creating an environment for positive creative collaboration in the workplace

Creative collaborations are not accidental, nor are they based on mere optimism. According to Skilton and Dooley (2010), the creative process requires 'high levels of idea generation, constructive conflict and negotiation', to achieve successful outcomes. It is also a risky process. This requires mindful consideration and management of the individuals who will collaborate, their behaviours and the framework for the creative process.

The stagnation of Sony, once a disruptor of technology, is attributed to rigidly sticking to its historical focus rather than keeping up with innovation and industry changes, dissonance between company strategy, management ability and confused executive responsibility, as well as to infighting between the different divisional executives (Seiichirō, 2014; Steinlage, 2018). Kodak is another example. They continued to keep ideas focused on what worked well for them as a camera film company, which resulted in losing out to their other rivals, such as FujiFilm, who reinvented themselves and managed to succeed in other areas, such as medical imaging technology (Steinlage, 2018).

Since healthy group dynamics are important for successful collaboration, including disruptors within the group can be a very positive strategy. Disruptors are most likely to create conflict, moments of 'Creative abrasion', a term attributed to Jerry Hirshberg, founder and president of Nissan Design International (Tomlinson, 2015).

'Without difference – creative tension – there's no spark. And with no spark, nothing new (is) created'

(Rees, 2018).

In order to remain innovative, strategic management of conflict will ensure that the process remains creative and productive. Steve Jobs's strategy, when creating the Apple computer, was to ensure that diversity was central to the process by deliberately selecting a team with diverging 'talents, viewpoints and cultural differences' (Haykin, 2009). This was a catalyst for creative abrasion that achieved the innovation he had a vision for.

The AISBL Research Business Board report (2012) states, 'when companies and universities work in tandem to push the frontiers of knowledge, they become a powerful engine for innovation and economic growth'.

However, cultural divides – a dichotomy of internal cultures/motivations (scientific research vs profit) – can pose challenges to the collaborative relationship, underlined by a lack of trust. For example, universities may feel their industry funded research has strings attached and industries may feel vulnerable as universities may want exclusive ownership of the intellectual property (Corinium, 2018; Hemmert et al, 2014).



Cultural divide: [Image](#) by [Mohamed Hassan](#) from [Pixabay](#)

For cultural divides to intersect, for self-interest and shared-interest to meet (Siedlecki, 2016), requires communication and consensus to build trust and respect and make the shift towards finding mutually beneficial solutions (Seedsforchange, 2010). The results can be dramatic, as exemplified by the long-standing and strong collaborations between universities and technology industries in the Silicon Valley, which have been mutually beneficial whilst also giving the world significant and valuable innovations.

Conclusion

Baumgartner (2016) rightly identifies that creativity is needed for innovation, for offering new original products, for visualising different options for resolving complex issues and responding to crises, and for making sure that no opportunities are missed. Major inventions, genres in art, literature, music, social change and scientific discoveries may have started off as, or been attributed to, the idea of one creative genius. However, success has often depended on collective intelligence. These ideas were taken on a journey by more than one person, in order to create something new and unique. Today we are more creative when working in evolving communities of practice, within which 'practitioners in the same field or industry can develop a mutually supportive social environment for the flourishing of new ideas' (Wenger, 1998, cited in Ville, 2011).

'As the world becomes more complex, volatile, and uncertain, many leaders are increasingly faced with the stark realisation that their business models and ways of working are outdated' (Austin, 2018). Across all industries and organisations, whether corporate, third-sector or public, staying with the status quo is no longer acceptable. Leaders within organisations are now expected to drive creative collaboration by bringing together people who 'represent a wide range of perspectives and ways of doing things' (Florida, 2013). To make this possible they should recruit creatives and give them a creative environment to flourish. With the use of fast evolving digital innovations, that support social, educational, industrial, political and economic interactions, these creative communities can now collaborate globally, so innovation can be developed and shared beyond organisational and geographic boundaries (Ville, 2011).

So, 'Is creative collaboration a new make-over for an ancient concept?' In my view, which I hope I have outlined persuasively, it is a natural activity developed throughout human history. It is an abstract concept until it is translated into positive value creation that brings benefit to humankind in various aspects of their lives. However, its application does have a dark side. Even though it is clear that we need to become more creative around collaboration, today, we have to be mindful in how we are engaging in the process and of the potential impact our collaboration might have.

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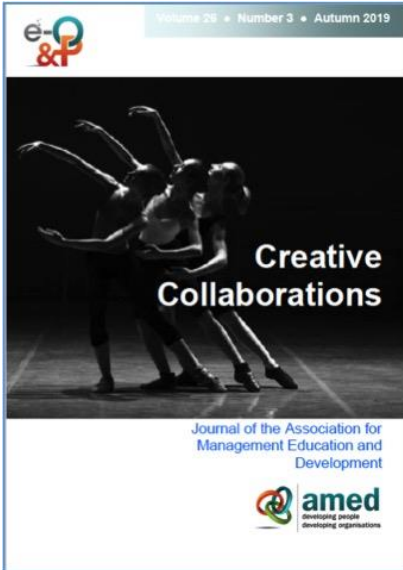
About the author

I have been an educator all my life. My progress in the sector has largely been influenced by those I have worked with, collaborated with and created with. As a Director at **Khorshed Bhote Consulting Ltd**, I collaborate digitally as well as through face-to-face interaction. My consultancy business has created opportunities to collaborate with professionals from across sectors. I have a great curiosity for the unique individuality of people, and I have always used this understanding to foster creativity. Together we empower each other.

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