

Time to Think about creative collaboration: a co-inquiry

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Keywords

co-inquiry, Thinking Environment Council, Time to Think, generative thinking, equality, intimacy, listening, creative collaboration.

Introduction

This article critically and creatively explores a co-inquiry question about Creative Collaboration through the lens of Nancy Kline's (1999) [Time to Think](#) framework and philosophy, adopting the 10 Components of Time to Think practice. I share how two Time to Think practitioners and I explored this question, and include some salient personal insights, stories, experiences, and final reflections. The first part of this article is essentially in the form of a recorded dialogue; the second part consists of subsequent reflections on these conversations.

I chose the Thinking Environment to explore this topic, which is a co-inquiry form of research, as Rowan and Heron define it:

'A way of working with other people who have similar concerns and interests to yourself, in order to:

- Understand your world, make sense of your life and develop new and creative ways of looking at things
- Learn how to act to change things you may want to change and find out how to do things better.'

On reflection I've noticed an element of heuristic inquiry, which could be a useful lens for further research. Heuristic inquiry is a unique research method that places human experiences above numbers and is deeply rooted in tacit knowledge that leads to a deeply subjective and creative connection between the researcher and phenomenon (Sela-Smith, 2002).

The co-inquiry question:

‘What is my experience of creative collaboration, as perceived through the lens of the Thinking Environment?’

Katie, Sian and I, three Thinking Environment (TE) practitioners, sat on Richmond Green, London, one Saturday in June 2019. Sian and Katie both share a curiosity about life and how it seems to work. They are always keen to explore and ask, what sometimes feels like, transformational questions. We've met regularly to explore our practice, following a Thinking Environment for Groups course. I notice how safe our group has become, beginning with questions about our Time to Think (TTT) practice and now sharing quite intimate questions and thoughts. Is this part of the Thinking Environment development journey, the holy grail of team development I wonder? Is intimacy a pre-requisite for creative collaboration, or a product of it? It's a helpful observation at least.



Richmond Green, London. Photo by [Friends of Richmond Green](#)

Our Thinking Environment exploration process

On inviting my Thinking Environment colleagues, Katie and Sian, to explore this question in our session, we agreed on the Thinking Environment Council (TEC) approach. Here we agree a question, then own it for ourselves and take turns to explore by thinking aloud with the undivided attention of and no interruption from the others. The cycle continues until each member feels fully heard, and has benefitted from the true listening and reflections of the others.

Our sessions are based on the Ten Components of Thinking Environment and define the quality of our experience. These components are: Attention, Equality, Ease, Appreciation, Encouragement, Place, Incisive Questions, Diversity, Information and Feelings. [Kline (1999). Time to Think].

Our reflections

'What is my experience of creative collaboration, through the lens of the Thinking Environment?'

Emer:

'For me, Time to Think helps me to explore different questions, curiosities and challenges. I leave these sessions with a richer and deeper perspective. I notice the quality of the listening and responding; my own response to being listened to and the holding of the space. The 'response' is a sense of building thoughts and observations, which forms a type of iteration. The moving forward; leaving in a very different psychological state to before; how we've collaborated around a challenge and moved me forward. For example, I have brought a work challenge, feeling stuck, defensive, alone, without options or confidence to solve the problem. I have left ... feeling a sense of release of pent up energy, with new thoughts about the problem and way to navigate myself through it. In summary the Thinking Environment sessions' characteristics for me are:

- Being listened to
- Being able to think out loud
- Having time to hear others' considered thoughts, and noticing how our conversations evolve until we are satisfied.

Sian:

'Right now, I'm interested in the words 'Creative Collaboration'. I love the alliteration. Recalling a recent conversation regarding hobbies with a friend I notice that, whilst I don't have a hobby that has an output or produces something, nonetheless, over years I have been creating the environment where I have been collaborating and creating a shared understanding of the world we live in. I realise I have been using Time to Think instinctively most of my life, and bring this in into all aspects of my life. In my life it's an integrative intuitive bit and is quite significant, I realise.

I have had some Thinking partnership work sessions with a colleague. The creative bit was the generative thinking she did over a period of weeks. In four or five sessions she found a way to create her middle-aged self, something she had been struggling with for five-and-a-half years. Using the Thinking Environment, she seemed to blossom into a powerful woman who, for the first time, was able to be comfortable with herself. She continues to take this forward in different ways. The Creative Collaboration bit is about thinking, and how this translates into behaviour, the generative stuff. Really powerful.'

Katie:

'I feel like two people answer, I'll let both answer. I'm worried about Creative Collaboration words. I'm sitting with the assumption or belief of 'How on earth can you collaborate without being creative? ... Why are we saying 'Creative'? What do we mean? I believe that everyone... is creative.'

The other person/half of me is excited about Collaboration, because it's just people doing stuff together. More than one, could it be two or more that is what the whole world does all the time. It's the human condition. Why is this relevant? As a coach it feels like my purpose.... whether (as) a coach, or mother, daughter, or friend. What's then the difference when talking about the Thinking Environment?

Listening, attention being the powerful bit. I love, now, the idea of the Thinking Partner (see Glossary at the end), collaborative thinking partner. One thing about coaching is that you're working together on something. (What) a beautiful word 'Collaborative' is, (it) fits neatly with my day job.'

Emer

'What resonates with me is the idea of having a Thinking Environment relationship (where) ... in a few TE sessions your work colleague seems to have grown and blossomed into a different form of herself. I wonder what would have happened had she not embarked upon a TE partnership with you Sian. Also, (I like) the idea that the thinking is 'generative'. I love the word 'generative'... The idea of Collaboration to generate strikes me.

How to Collaborate without creating? I am not sure of the answer. It's a great question.

I like the challenge that you can collaborate with another aspect of yourself. I practice The Artists Way (Cameron 1994) 'Morning Pages', writing three pages of A4 daily. I believe this allows my insights to come off page, and dramas to be left on the page. Is the Morning Pages a Thinking Environment creative collaboration with myself, or accessing a higher level of consciousness?

How narrow I think my enquiry is. Sian - talking about friend and how she has blossomed - feels so expansive.'

Sian

'One of the Time to Think components is 'Equality'. Appreciating the equality of thinking. Is there something to explore here about this and collaboration? What makes it different is the equality of the people involved, not always assumed in other collaborations. It plays into power, hierarchy. It feels difficult and complex to negotiation in the work place.'

Katie

Collaboration is not the same as doing what you're told. The minute you collaborate you have choice. (It is) my philosophy about why you're in this world. I fundamentally believe that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Equality doesn't matter.

I love idea of multiple people or perspectives in myself. It plays to different strengths and skills. Allowing me to answer the questions of both halves. Allowing both halves I sensed different halves giving attention to the other half. How that builds the thinking of each half.'

Emer

'I don't remember the content but do remember how I felt (in one of our sessions). The process brought us to a (psychological) place ... that felt very human, connected, and emotional. I wonder if when people regularly work together in a Thinking Environment way.... whether a greater intimacy evolves, and... what that does from a creative collaborative perspective?

Katie

'The experience of bringing the human person into the room this week (an example of using the Thinking Environment at a Trustee meeting) transformed the atmosphere, which probably did support collaboration... We use the TE to be more collaborative or vice versa. All business and no humanity does not work.'



Emer Wynne, Katie Hodgson and Sian McClure, Time to Think practitioners and collaborators. Richmond Green September 2019. Photo by Emer Wynne

My later reflections on this TE Council

[Wednesday, 10th July 2018 on the 08.13 train to Waterloo]:

As a Thinking Partner myself, with time and attention, listening to myself, what's emerging?

Expressing a creative purpose

Reflecting on Katie's more metaphysical thoughts. Creativity and collaboration are part of the human condition. We are naturally creative and collaborative, even when alone. These feel really big statements. ...This is how Katie lives her life. Her purpose is to be collaborative in any of her roles - mother, coach, daughter etc. She implied that TTT facilitates this. Has she, in this TE session, uncovered or declared her purpose?

The importance of appreciation

I regret not recording our round of appreciation at the end of the session. It's a TE practice to offer and receive appreciation of an aspect of who we are. This practice enables intimacy and is validating. It helps me, at least, to think honestly and more deeply about my thinking partners.

Taking time to collaborate

Time to Think takes time and deepens over time.

[Thursday, 11th July on the 08.30 train to Waterloo]

The power of loving

I feel this article is simmering in my subconscious. It feels like my reflections are settling, the flavours are emerging now they've intertwined with each other. My split self recognised the expansiveness of the Time to Think and creative collaboration linking to the realm of the spiritual and power of love – both self-love and love with others. I'm surprised at how this has emerged during my reflections on the session with Katie and Sian. I feel drawn towards exploring more, but hesitate I feel I'm diving into a deep blue, universal sea. My heart is drawn in nonetheless.

Consequences

Another, critical thinking aspect is viewing Time to Think and Creative Collaboration from an output perspective. Time to Think as a discipline, which matures over time, enabling a nurturing, enriching, empowering interchange that helps, in a short session, to release blocks in a challenge, shift energy, create new thoughts or options. Also, that it can - over a few sessions - sow the seeds that can be hugely transformative, as in the case of Sian's Thinking Partner. Creating a beautiful, powerful middle-aged woman.

Living the Question

Being listened to helps me to think from a self-resourcing, autonomous, centred place. An example of 'Living the Question'. I refer to a creative collaboration with Louise Austin to address leading in increasingly unknown and complex environments. We co-created a leadership programme where

participants could, over three days, explore their own complex questions through a series of creative and energy-based practice, e.g., art making, storytelling, metaphor, Reiki and meditation. We noticed how participants emerged with a different relationship to their complex questions and had some tangible hypotheses, ideas or propositions to test. They also reported how much better and different they felt. For me, Time to Think is another great way to facilitate this form of creative collaboration, specifically in addressing the complex and ambiguous nature of our working environment. (See Acknowledgements)

[Tuesday, 23rd July 2019 at Airport Flight Departures]

More on generative thinking

Ward and Sifons (2011) describe Generative thinking as follows: 'Generative thinking can be characterized as the development of novel instantiations of existing concepts.' The operative words for me are 'novel' and 'existing'. Simply put, creating new instances of something we already know about hence something novel, or new perspectives on a known idea or question. How does this relate to the notion of iteration?

Listening as honouring

The role of the listener - seemingly doing 'nothing' but actively paying attention to and honouring the speaker. My senses are heightened to the significant and empowering characteristics of this role as it applies to the TE and also in my role as a coach, co-worker, leader, mother, wife, friend and sibling.

Feeling empowered through being heard

The role of the experience of being heard and its impact on our personal creative process.

The iterative nature of Creative Collaboration

The iterative nature of the process of exploring the question - the feeling of collaboration and generation of new and different ideas.

[Tuesday, 30th July, upon waking]

Levels of consciousness beyond ego, creativity or collaboration

Reflecting on Dr. Sam Watts' webinar on The Empowered Mind, focusing on detaching from the ego to manage daily stress and anxiety. He suggests a Kriya meditation, based on Ayurveda philosophy. Kriya Mantra on the inhalation 'I am not the body' on exhalation 'I'm not even the mind'. Practicing this, I became aware of another level of consciousness; more peaceful, spiritual. This might be the same, psychological space we occupy in our creative collaborations. What is the relationship between levels of consciousness, beyond the ego and creativity or collaboration? Also, what is the potential role of the collective unconscious if this present during our TE sessions?

Further reflections from Sian

'I'm still reflecting on the relationship of the ego in creativity and in the TE. While many creators – artists, musicians are reported as having large egos, there is a paradox in the TE – in giving beautiful attention and

being fascinated by the thinker's thinking, the Thinking Partner's ego is contained – while it needs to be present in order to give attention, the thinker is likely to feel as though the TP wasn't there. I think this is really interesting.

Reflecting on creative collaboration and the TE, it's the generative thinking that the TE facilitates that seems to me to be the creation. The collaboration is the Thinking Partnership or Council. Thinking about it this way, the assumption of creation is implicit in the TE philosophy.'

Unanswered questions

If I were to explore my understanding of the relationship between TTT and creative collaboration more, what questions would I like to ask? Some that occur to me in the moment include:

1. What is the role of appreciation and acknowledgment in creative collaboration?
2. What is the relationship between appreciation and intimacy?
3. What part does intimacy play in creative collaboration - as a person, in a pair, in a group?
4. What is the nature and role of the collective conscious and unconscious in the Thinking Environment work and how might this relate to a sense of spirituality?
5. How does the environment created by the Time to Think 10 components compare to the creative development approach of Julia Cameron, who focuses on personally recovering the following senses: Safety, Identity, Power, Integrity, Possibility, Abundance, Connection, Strength, Compassion, Self-Protection, Autonomy and Faith? (Cameron 1994)
6. What's the link or relationship between generative thinking, creative thinking, and behavioural transformation?

I will continue to explore these and other questions and reflections about Creative Collaboration and Time To Think with myself and other Thinking Partners.

Conclusions

What might we have collaboratively created in our TE session? Some considerations are:

- A better shared understanding of how we experience the Thinking Environment.
- Surfacing the notion of creative output – from creating an environment for even better collaborative conversations, which, in turn, facilitates generative thinking that can lead to action that might feel quite innovative or courageous.
- Some thoughts and questions that deserve further thinking to build our understanding of the many aspects of the creative and collaborative.
- The core content for this article.

How collaborative was this piece of work? The Thinking Environment session with Katie, Sian and myself was creative and collaborative, where we each had the opportunity to contribute, learn, and develop our

thoughts on this topic. Although the writing of the article and later reflections was more individually led by me, Sian was able to read a version and offered insightful feedback. Whilst writing I felt the spirit of my fellow contributors in my writing and had a strong duty to represent their thoughts accurately.

Glossary

Iteration: [Cambridge English Dictionary defines Iteration](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/iteration) as ‘the process of doing something again and again, usually to improve it, or one of those times you do it.’ It fits well with TTT as the iteration, either as individuals refine their own thinking or benefit from thoughts of others are generally reported as an improvement and can lead to action. (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/iteration>)

1. *Morning Pages*: The Artists Way morning practice of writing three pages of A4 of any and every thought that comes into their head. Also known as ‘automatic writing’.
2. *Reiki*: “A healing technique based on the principle that the therapist can channel energy into the patient by means of touch, to activate the natural healing processes of the patient’s body and restore physical and emotional well-being”. [Oxford English Dictionary quoted by UK Reiki Federation](https://www.reikifed.co.uk/reiki-healing/) (<https://www.reikifed.co.uk/reiki-healing/>). Accessed 3rd September 2019
3. *Ten Components of the Thinking Environment*: These are: Attention, Equality, Ease, Appreciation Encouragement, Place, Incisive Questions, Diversity, Information and Feelings. [Kline (1999) Time to Think].
4. *The Artists Way*: A programme designed by Julia Cameron to help individuals to access their creativity, in whatever guise is theirs. Also considered a spiritual journey.
5. *Thinking Environment*: An environment where the Ten Components of the Thinking Environment are present and are being applied.
6. *Thinking Environment Council (TEC)*: This is a way to solve a problem or curiosity. It allows for the wisdom of the group to make its way unobtrusively into the problem or enquiry of one person. When asked and listened to in this way each member of the group has something valuable to offer. The person presenting the enquiry or problem formulates a question. Each group member responds to the question and everyone gives generative Attention to the person speaking. The essential points are recorded (scribed or aurally). At the end the person with the enquiry is asked what their freshest thinking now is. ([Fiona Dawe](#) - charity leader and accredited TTT teacher.) <http://www.vitalspace.org.uk/about> Accessed 30th July 2019.
7. *Thinking Pairs*: when two individuals embark upon a Thinking Session involving two individuals working within the Thinking Environment principles and components.
8. *Thinking Partner*: One member of a Thinking Pair
9. *Time to Think*: A behavioural framework and philosophy created by Nancy Kline (1999) for ‘Time to Think’.

Note: The Time to Think session notes is a transcript from a recording. I have lifted the main points, without losing any meaning.

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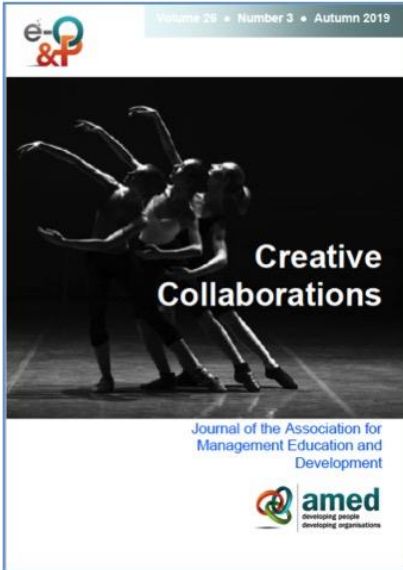
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