

# In transition with AMED

## Resolution through writing

Bob MacKenzie



### Keywords

change, transitions, legacy, writing, pandemic, voluntarism

*“Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.”*

Søren Kierkegaard, [1843](#)

### Introduction

I've written this piece about AMED and me from the perspective of someone who's been involved with AMED in a variety of roles over the last 20 years or so. Everywhere, change is in the air. Both AMED and I are at our respective crossroads, and – as [Robert Frost](#) (1915) artfully enjoins - we have some choices to make. This is a subjective attempt through writing to look back along our respective journeys, to understand what these choices might be, and how I for one might (or might not) make them. Many different terms – each with a different nuance – are used to describe the process of change. Dictionary.com's [Thesaurus](#) lists 346. However, mirroring the choice of [our current co-inquiry](#), I've adopted Bridges' concept of [Transition](#).

As a device for ordering the chaos and complexity inherent in this discussion, I've arranged what follows in three main sections: AMED and others, AMED and me, and AMED's legacy, although inevitably they overlap.

## AMED AND OTHERS

### The AMED Way: a personal perspective

In my book, AMED occupies a special niche in a crowded market place where various academic, chartered and (semi-)professional networks and consultancies jostle with each other for ascendancy and attention. Amid this clamour, it's been a relief and solace to happen upon a quieter, more thoughtful, modest, friendlier, less self-promotional place. For me, AMED is a space for open, more inclusive interpretations of 'managing'. Here, it's possible for *anyone* – no matter what their walk of life or calling – to come to see themselves as managing in one way or another in the context of their public, private, professional or personal practices.





Brighton, August 2013: Genesis of the Open Source Thinking project

I've not found AMED to be overly insular or hierarchical, and we have little need for designated labels or status. We're a broad church, a grouping formed by the voluntary and willing interaction of multiple perspectives and acts of the imagination. That said, we're united by a sense that we each subscribe to something hard to define that we call 'The AMED Way'. In this community, I feel I can always rely on a quality of relationships characterised by generous and authentic challenge and support (critical friendship), and a willingness to offer and play with an idea or activity with courtesy, consideration and a fair hearing, as circumstances arise.

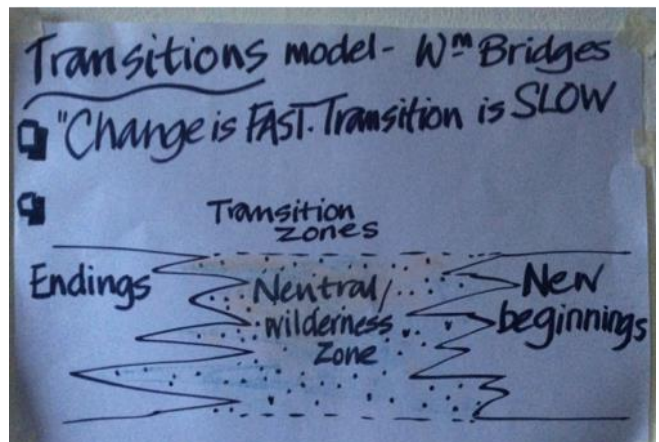
Wherever we can, we seek to bridge any perceived divides within and between academic and other practitioner communities. We uphold an ideal of scholarly practitioners (McClintock 2004) whose work is informed by the interplay of theory, practice and the imagination in service of a better society. Inevitable conflicts are generally addressed with humanity.



Mapping our worlds: an AMED post-AGM workshop facilitated by Roger Niven at Roots and Shoots, 2016: photo by Bob MacKenzie

### AMED's stories of transition

Writing about the future of humanity, Nick Bostrom (2009) considered four possible scenarios: those of extinction, recurrent collapse, plateau and post humanity. Organisational narratives often include stories of genesis or apocalypse, and I guess that the story that I'm seeking to tell here is probably no different. On a far less grand scale than Bostrom's, I wonder if it might even help to re-story (Boje 2009) AMED's microcosmic trajectory in terms of his four scenarios, especially if we were to substitute the term 'post AMED' for 'post humanity'? That might be an interesting next project.



Shelagh Doonan #1 on Bridges' (2004) 'Transition' concept

## Genesis

As I understand it, AMED has its origins the Association of Teachers of Management (ATM) in a time before business schools, chartered institutes (Slater 2019) and MBA programmes became widespread in the UK. Since its emergence as a legal entity in 1995, AMED has been continually negotiating an overlapping series of transitions. Over time, the number of Members paying an annual subscription has shrunk, yet the number of guests and occasional visitors has grown. We've downsized from a large Council meeting face-to-face round a board table with business premises and paid staff in a London Office. We've moved to a virtual office with an excellent, part-time Administrator and Bookkeeper based in Dorset. We now hold much smaller Council meetings conducted primarily via teleconferences, most recently via Zoom. We've graduated from producing expensive if prized commercially printed publications with a fairly large editorial team and a lead editor on a (small) stipend, to publishing online. And we're now offering both digital (free) and print-on-demand (at cost) versions that aim to straddle the worlds of academics and other practitioners in the field.

## A spirit of voluntarism

In both paper-based and digital forms, our publishing enterprise is made possible by a small group of willing and dedicated unpaid volunteers. Whilst our publications (principally, our journal *e-Organisations and People*) are now free, we invite voluntary donations to help fund our development projects. Increasingly, our Special Interest Group meetings and other forms of communication are becoming similarly blended, encompassing a mix of face-to-face and virtual gatherings. The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated this development, which in any case is prompted by an innate urge to experiment, and we take advantage of new technologies and other ways of relating.



## Collaborations

We've been forming temporary alliances with other like-minded networks and individuals, supporting initiatives such as [the Open Source Thinking project](#) and [Humanistic Management UK](#), and collaborating with universities of the more approachable kind, such as the University of Chichester. [Triarchy Press](#) and the OD Innovation Network [ODiN] have been staunch supporters and allies almost since our inception.

## Transitioning as a way of life

In 2008, we were talking of AMED being placed on a life support machine, and yet we're still here, casting around to sense and decide what next. We're not what we were, and that seems OK to me. We accept that endings and beginnings are happening around and within us all the time. We're constantly on the move.

Today, it seems to me that we're simply feeling our way through just another phase of transition. In AMED, transitioning is just something we do. As Bridges (2004: 2019) would have it, we must be prepared to enter a 'neutral or wilderness zone' which is characterised by heart searching, disconcerting uncertainty and not-knowing, if we are to discover emergent, hopeful new beginnings. For this to happen, a degree of trust and reflective introversion is an asset (Wickremasinghe 2020). The writer Ian McEwan (the Today programme, BBC 4, 19 May) encourages us to accept the opportunity for 'subjective time' as a potentially rich resource to contemplate a fresh, post-pandemic 'normality'. This would enable us to engage in quiet, thoughtful introspection to inform our actions about how we might co-create a 'brave new world', and leave behind the world we thought we knew.

## AMED AND ME

At 76, as Diana Athill (2008) put it, I'm somewhere towards the end. I'm therefore immersed in personal transitions, though I'm not yet ready to relinquish agency. For me, mindful of the dangers of lapsing into nostalgia, AMED represents a site of hope, possibilities and resistance, especially in these turbulent times. I see it as 'an outpost of independence' (Billig 2013: 208), not in hock to any vested interest, yet fully engaged in the world. Most recently (before the COVID-19 lockdown) it's afforded me, as an introverted male, a physical, social and virtual space to rehearse and practice the 3Cs of conviviality, creativity and critical friendship in a world of complexity and uncertainty.



image: The Travelling Through bookshop, Lower Marsh, London in its halcyon days, before transitioning: source: <https://secretldn.com/travelling-through-bookshop-london/>, photo: [Nel Espina](#)

Physical spaces - including the Penn Club library in Bloomsbury, the Kennington Coffee Shop, The Ship Inn,

Roots and Shoots, and the now-abandoned Travelling Through bookshop in Lower Marsh – have also been oases of stimulating conversation and refreshment during forays to London. And there have been other such havens, like The Friends Meeting House in Brighton.

### Writing, editing and conversations

I first came to AMED through my growing interest in the significant role that writing, editing and conversations – interacting – can play in personal, management, organisational and societal learning and development. With AMED, I've enjoyed opportunities to share enthusiasms and interests with a delightful and diverse range of curious, principled, independent-minded and creative people from different backgrounds, perspectives and settings. AMED seems to me to rank amongst those sites that acknowledge specifically the contribution that writers, readers and conversationalists can make to human development. And – through an editing process informed by critical friendship ([MacKenzie 2015](#)) – we aim to support authors in articulating, publishing and sharing their ideas, especially if they are initially hesitant.

That marks AMED out as special. For me, the [AMED Writers' Group](#) and our journal *e-Organisations and People* bring together people as authors, guest editors, production team members, readers and other stakeholders who are prepared to engage in serious play in a project that takes us well beyond the realms of what's commonly understood as 'business writing'.

### Collaborating with the AMED2020 Hosting Team



Image: some of the AMED2020 Hosting Team at work at Roots and Shoots, 9 December 2019

In the spirit of 'The AMED Way', I've had the rare privilege of engaging with fellow members of the AMED2020 Hosting Team, trusting each other as we transition through uncertainty, with all the uncomfortable lacunae, changes of direction, twists and turns that we've been experiencing in the process. As with AMED Council, we've had our moments; yet we've surfed the ebbing and flowing. We wrestle with power and powerlessness – our own and other people's. Throughout, we've remained open to surprises and experimentation, offering each other encouragement and support when we've been flagging or entertaining doubts. And we've thrilled at and benefited from the diverse talents we've discovered in each other – and in ourselves.

## AMED's LEGACY

Even in a post-AMED world, there's much we could do to enshrine 'The AMED Way'. Given sufficient resources (especially the advent of fresh blood), we're well placed to offer another home for the likely increase in numbers of freelancers and others working from home in a glorified gig economy once the COVID-19 lockdown is over.

In this regard, three particular sets of issues occur to me as we consider AMED's future: To be or not to be? They concern labels, being in a room together, and transitioning:

- *What's in a name?* Could it be different? Does 'The Association for Management Education and Development (AMED)' still reflect how we've been evolving? In 2020 and beyond, might there be a better name? Might we benefit from a different form of organisation and governance?
- *Re-affirming the human touch.* Is there an opportunity to revive and expand the work of Special Interest and Regional Groups in some kind of blended form? Amongst other possibilities, perhaps they could take the form of Meet Ups, both virtual and face-to-face. I imagine that – coming out of lockdown, and despite the undoubted benefits of virtual forms of communication - many people will feel starved of direct interpersonal, face-to-face engagement, and would welcome an opportunity to meet in person from time to time. With more widespread local opportunities to do so, there would be less time-consuming long-distance travel, less damage to the environment, and fewer clashes with other work commitments.
- *Working through endings, transitions and beginnings.* How do we (and I) know what's worth holding on to? When is time to let some - or all - of it go? Are we talking of metamorphosis, re-incarnation or extinction? Any endings will doubtless entail a mix of personal and group mournings and celebrations, as well as a range of practical arrangements and consideration of fresh opportunities.



Shelagh Doonan #2 on Bridges' (2004) 'Transition' concept

## Envoi

When I began writing this piece, I had little idea what would emerge. In the process – hesitantly at first - I've been able to surface and articulate something of how I'm thinking and feeling about AMED's – and my own - future. Reflecting, I can see that I weave in and out of several different strands, and that I alternate between mourning, excitement and anticipation, though not necessarily in equal measure. For me, working through endings, transitions and beginnings seems to emerge as core.

At times, I touch upon some positive experiences during my association with AMED; at times, I'm inviting others to pick up and run with the baton; and at times, I make more general observations about leadership in the context of strange and difficult transitions. Perhaps AMED has to die in order to be re-born (though I hope it won't). Perhaps it may take another form, but first has to go through another phase of transition at the same time as I'm trying to chart and negotiate transition for myself. In neither case can this be accomplished with any degree of certainty

Whatever answers that emerge from the question of legacy, which will touch upon continuities and discontinuities, I hope that AMED or its subsequent incarnation(s) can continue to uphold a tradition of good writing. I hope AMED will become more fully diverse, in all the possible understandings of diversity, taking account of 'Black Lives Matter', and grow more broadly intergenerational as a force for good in the world.

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The first Open Source Thinking Workshop, Brighton, August 2013: a pause in walking the labyrinth: photo: Bob MacKenzie

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## About the author

**Bob** is commissioning editor of AMED's journal *e-Organisations and People*, convenor of the AMED Writers' Group, one of the Open Source Thinking Hosting Team, a member of the Humanistic Management UK Chapter Steering Group and Visiting Professor at the University of Chichester Business School. E: [bob@amed.org.uk](mailto:bob@amed.org.uk)

# A note about AMED



AMED stands for the Association for Management Education and Development, [www.amed.org.uk](http://www.amed.org.uk). We are a long-established membership organisation and educational charity devoted to developing people and organisations.

Our purpose is to serve as a forum for people who want to share, learn and experiment, and find support, encouragement, and innovative ways of communicating. Our conversations are open, constructive, and facilitated.

Through AMED, we strive to benefit our members and the wider society. Exclusive Member benefits include excellent professional indemnity cover at a significant discount, free copies of the quarterly journal *e-O&P*, and discounted fees for participation in a range of face-to-face events, special interest groups, and our interactive website. We aim to build on our three cornerstones of **knowledge**, **innovation** and **networking** in the digital age. Wherever we can, AMED Members, Networkers and Guests seek to work with likeminded individuals and organisations to generate synergy and critical mass for change. [www.amed.org.uk](http://www.amed.org.uk), or contact **Linda Williams**, our Membership Administrator, E: [amedoffice@amed.org.uk](mailto:amedoffice@amed.org.uk), T: 0300 365 1247