



Creative Collaborations

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Edition Editors: Louise Austin and Bob MacKenzie

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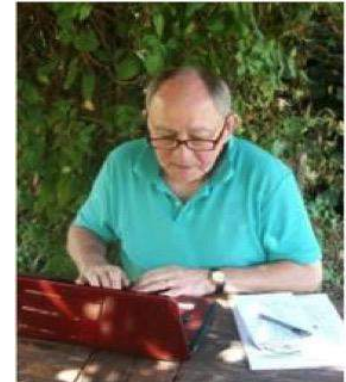
Co-editing as creative collaboration

Louise Austin and Bob MacKenzie



Keywords

creative eco-systems, collaboration, editing, co-editing, writing, critical friendship, the arts, performance, discernment



SOME CONTEXT

This edition of *e-O&P* is devoted to exploring the theme of 'Creative Collaborations', as a contribution towards increasing, deepening and broadening our understanding of this practice. The [World Economic Forum](#) (2018) identified creativity as one of the top three skills for workers to thrive in the future, and a [recent IBM study](#) of 1,500 CEOs (2010) found that creativity is the single most important skill for leaders. But individual creativity is not enough. The idea of the single, solitary genius working in isolation is being challenged by the realisation that 'the biggest breakthroughs happen within networks of people working together in creative collaboration'. So, we (Louise and Bob) invited contributors to join us in an exploration of creative collaboration and what this way of living, creating and working together means to us in the 21st century.

In this introductory article, we explore our understanding of the subject of creative collaboration arising from our co-editing journey. We introduce a thematic overview of each of the articles, and conclude with some insights into what we have gained about co-editing, co-authoring and creative collaborations through working on this edition.

Imagining creative collaboration

Parker J Palmer argues that to 'know' a subject is 'not holding it at arms-length but getting to know it through relationship' (2007, loc 2258). Our contributors have all gathered around the subject of creative collaboration, not at arms-length, but in deep immersion for the last few months, to offer the reader a rich, multi-faceted and thought-provoking special issue.

Creativity and creative collaboration

Louise's perspective.

Creativity is one of those terms that refuses to be pinned down by a set definition. From my perspective, creativity is less about the outcome and more about the process. I resonate with Zinker's (1977, pp. 3-9) premise that engaging in the creative process is an expression of the full range of our experience and uniqueness, and meets our need for a broader and deeper range of living. But where does our creativity come from? In the words of Marcus Aurelius (Aurelius & Staniforth, 1964), 'dig within, there lies the wellspring for good'. The source of my creativity is often drawn from the wellspring of my imagination. The images that arise seem to appear of their own volition and often don't involve the participation of my conscious mind. Jung argued that 'image is psyche' (1929, para 75) and that images, that feed and nurture our imagination and creativity, flow from our unconscious. Inspired by Jung, I view the unconscious, the imagination and creativity as part of a symbiotic whole. To draw upon the 'mighty metaphor' of a tree, creativity is the above world of the trunk, branch, leaves, fruit and blossom, and the roots that lie in the other world below the surface are the imagination. To extend the metaphor further towards creative collaboration, I draw upon the seminal work of [Suzanne Simard](#) on the complex system of the forest and her discovery of how trees 'talk to each other'. The unconscious, I would liken to the fungi that transfer nutrients up the roots and between the roots of the trees.



[Anima Mundi, by Louise Austin]

Like trees in a forest connected through a massive underground network, creative collaboration is a way to connect to our human and planetary root system, described over the centuries as the [Anima Mundi](#) or soul of the world. By creating with others, I have learnt about myself as an interdependent being in participation rather than separate from my world.

Bob's perspective

In my youth, I was a bookish and somewhat solitary child. My imagination was fed by stories, both written and recounted. Perhaps this is little surprise, as Storr (2019) is not alone in proposing that human beings are essentially storytelling creatures. For years, I have felt overawed by others whose creativity is confidently overt, vibrant and readily on display – people like artists, musicians, poets, sculptors, actors, ‘public intellectuals’. To this day, I feel inhibited from enacting many ‘free’ forms of artistic expression, such as dance, drawing, painting, writing poetry and physical performance, though I’m told that I can deliver a good lecture and facilitate a group with some mastery and improvisation. (Is that an expression of creativity?). It was only around 15 years ago that, through the encouragement and support of several outstanding critical friends and scholars, and through composing my doctoral Explication (MacKenzie 2005) I allowed myself finally to be persuaded (though doubts still arise) that I also embody certain creative qualities. If creativity is an ‘act of turning new and imaginative ideas into reality’ (Naiman nd), then it should be possible to find it at work to varying degrees in all walks of life and contexts. My own professional domain essentially ranges over the creative possibilities that arise from interactions between facilitation, writing and conversations. Hence, almost by accident, I have strayed into the arena of editing, which I have come to see as an act of creative collaboration.

EDITING AS CREATIVE COLLABORATION

Creative collaboration is illustrated in the diverse range of contributions in this edition, and in the account of an editorial meeting in the RSA that we (Louise and Bob) had early in the life of this edition.

‘Editing is constantly described as being “the work of many hands”, negotiated rather than arbitrary, carried out by people who work hard to keep their ego in check. Collaboration extends to the reader.’

[Greenberg 2015: 188]

There are many different definitions and assumptions about editing and its contribution to writing and publishing. Not infrequently, it’s largely invisible, and taken to be little more than a technical copy-editing or proofreading function. During our editorial meeting at the RSA (see below) we articulated our roles as far wider and infinitely more creative than that. Essentially, we agreed that it’s one of engaging in critical friendships (MacKenzie 2015) by offering well-intentioned challenge and support as required with a range of different people and networks interacting as a temporary creative eco-system or community of writing practice (MacKenzie 2019). From the outset and throughout, our aim as co-editors has been to support authors and each other in making the text as good as it can be in the circumstances – to help the writing to shine.

Co-editing and co-authoring: our journey

Our editorial collaboration began in earnest some 18 months ago, when Louise contributed an article on ‘The Wounded Facilitator’ (Austin, 2018) in the Spring 2018 edition of this journal (Dilworth and MacKenzie, eds 2018). In ways not dissimilar to those described elsewhere in this edition (Herrera and Dilworth 2019), we were drawn to consider working together as co-editors and co-authors. From this, a shared commitment and a publication schedule emerged as a kind of ‘container’, serving as a necessary grounding and discipline to give our creative collaboration a beginning, a middle and an end. As Tudor Rickards (1997) and others have observed structures or frameworks can liberate.

Little did we know then what we’d let ourselves in for as we embarked on this unfolding journey of exploration and discovery. And what discoveries we’ve made! As with our contributors, we each brought to bear our respective personal, professional, artistic influences and life stories. Some of those elements overlapped and were complementary, and we also made a virtue of our creative differences. We noticed that we - and others - responded positively to generous appreciation of our individual uniqueness. So, we consciously sought to honour each other's autonomy and separateness in a way that would not be lost or overlooked in our sharing. Through our interactions, we discovered experientially a great deal about editing and creative collaborations beyond what the literature was able to tell us.

SOME INSIGHTS

Louise

Embarking on the task of co-editing was like setting off on a journey without a map! I have never edited before and so whilst I initially jumped at the opportunity, once the journey began, I entered the realm of ‘not knowing’. A key insight about myself during the last few months was how I respond to uncertainty. Facing the task of co-editing with someone as experienced as Bob, was surprisingly anxiety-provoking.

When faced with feelings of uncertainty and not knowing, the task in hand grew in size and proportion. What had initially felt like a walk in the park became a slog up the Himalayas! The small ‘e’ became the Capital ‘E’ of Editorship that I felt unequipped for.

A transformative moment in our collaboration between myself and Bob, was meeting at the RSA in London to engage in a dialogue about creative collaboration. It was as if we both gathered around the subject, in a way that connected us with the subject and also with each other.



[The RSA London](#) by [C.G.P.Grey](#), Wikimedia Commons CC 3.0,

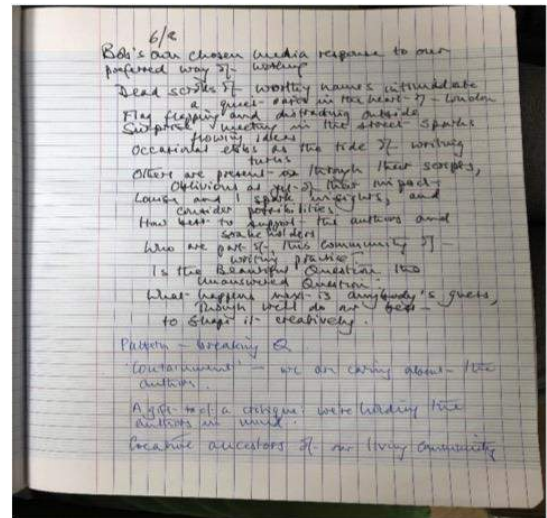
Bob

'It's a mistake to think that writing only takes place on the page. You do a lot of it in your head.'

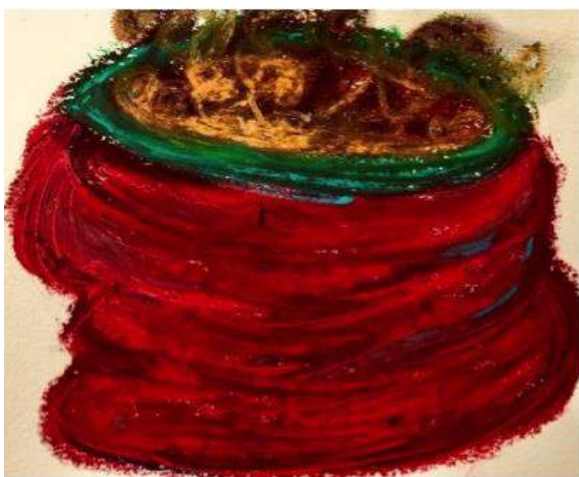
[Patrick Gale, 'Saturday Live', BBC Radio 4, 14 July 2018]

During our RSA dialogue in early August, in a pattern-breaking challenge, Louise suggested that – in addition to speaking about our understanding of our role as co-editors – we might try to articulate its essence in a medium different from that with which we each might normally work. She encouraged me gently to try something different. The setting was an imposing 18th century building designed by the Adams brothers. Louise chose to create a colourful image that soon took shape as what she called 'a malleable pot'. With some trepidation, I elected to write a poem in manuscript.

As Patrick Gale implies in the previous quote, what we write is an almost magical externalisation of inner psychic and imaginative processes. Responding to Louise's invitation, I wrote that 'poem' with some diffidence (initial resistance?) at great speed with whatever writing materials came to hand – a black thin-nibbed fountain pen and a square-ruled notebook. At first glance at least, squares and scribbles did not seem to me to be a particularly creative combination, especially when set alongside Louise's creation. (It also struck me that, in transcribing the text later to make it a little more legible, instinctively I couldn't help beginning to 'edit' it.)



[Bob's RSA 'poem']



Malleable Pot by Louise Austin

Louise

My image was of a malleable pot, that captured a fresh and inspiring understanding of the role of an editor. No longer was I striving up a mountainside dragging my contributors and Bob with me, but I was learning from Bob about the 'invisible hands' of the editor. An editor, I am discovering, is like being a potter, creating a 'holding container' (Winnicott, 1960) for the work of the writers. The editor as potter, not only 'holds' the work by containing the anxiety that can be evoked when facing the daunting task of writing an article, but it is also about 'firing' the work, so the writing holds together and doesn't fragment, and finally it is about 'glazing' the work of the writer, so the gold shines through.



[The 'Potting Hands' of the Editor, by Louise Austin]

CREATIVITY AND WRITING

From time to time, we gently questioned assumptions in ourselves and other contributors. It soon became clear to us that writing and (co-) editing is time-consuming, requiring a judicious blend of encouragement and challenge in a way that doesn't stifle innate creativity. When we felt that the time was ripe, we encouraged contributors to be their own and each other's critical friend.

Louise

We invited authors to read their emerging article with a critical eye, considering the question 'What else needs to be done in editing this draft, so that your unique voice truly reverberates in a published – i.e. public – article of which you can be truly proud?'

Soon, we had arrived at a time when their essential text, which we likened to a provisional piece of sculpture, had now been formed, and was ready to be crafted into its public shape through a process of chiselling, shaping and polishing, enhanced where appropriate by feedback. This is akin to what Amy Whitaker describes in her brilliant book 'Art Thinking' (2016) as '**Discernment**'

'to move forward as the creator of the work yourself, you need the subtler tools of discernment. Where judgment is a fixed, moment-in-time evaluation of success, discernment is a process of figuring out what is working and not working. If judging is a process of labelling, discernment is a process of learning'.

(Whitaker, 2016, p. 75)

Bob

Over time, I've come to realise that creativity in all its forms is an innate human quality. We can't all be outstanding geniuses or artists. But, given the opportunity, we can exercise and express through a chosen medium what our imagination is prompting. Naiman (op cit) and others hold that creativity can be fostered. Given the right conditions, we can all be creative in some way, if we can remove, dismantle or at least reduce barriers. Hence, as co-editors and critical friends, we have sought to encourage contributors to this edition to discover, express and celebrate their creativity in their writing.

A caveat

For the most part, we tend to assume that creative collaborations are 'a good thing'. However, we are careful not to adopt an uncritical stance, and recognise that collaborations may not always work, be appropriate or be regarded as a positive undertaking (see Bhote 2019 in this edition on some possible barriers). Even if creative, collaborations can have negative or dark connotations, such as – in an extreme form - collusion with an occupying enemy. There are also 'creative tensions' that may need to be resolved, including the struggle between editorial and authorial power in deciding on the nature and format of the 'final' text. Who makes the ultimate decisions about who and what does or does not get published, when and in what format? There can be limits to collaboration between editor, author and subject, due to sheer pressure of events or circumstances (e.g. Greenberg, 2015, p. 12). Such limits include time and other resource constraints. (For example, this article alone has gone through some 15 iterations). Needless to say, as editors who are deeply involved in other competing projects, we've experienced our fair share of these constraints, as have other contributors to this edition.

In this edition, some fascinating insights into and examples of creative collaborations have found their way into writing in an interplay of words, images, people and circumstances, as the following section outlines.

OVERVIEW OF THE ARTICLES

Emerging themes

As various drafts began to emerge, we saw some distinct themes emerging relating to the interplay between personal autonomy and group membership, the importance of trust, connection and safety, and the paradoxical need to let go of being the expert while bringing expertise to the table. Curiosity emerged as an essential human quality that allows for us to seek out new ideas, new connections, and new environments. One meta-theme that emerges for us in particular is that of **the interplay of space and movement**: creativity as a dynamic, emergent and ever evolving process. An image that comes to mind here is that of a dance to the music of time.



Nicolas Poussin, 1640: 'A Dance to the Music of Time',
The [Wallace Collection](#), Wikimedia Commons]

Following this introductory article, we have organised contributions under four main themes – those of context and understanding, organisational perspectives, psychological perspectives and environmental influences.

Context and understanding

Khorshed Bhote, in her rich contextual overview, challenges our assumptions about creative collaboration. She traces the historical origins of creative collaboration from ancient times through to our modern digital age. She invites us to have a deeper and more nuanced understanding of creative collaboration by considering both its light and the dark side. **Tan Ling Sian** presents an inspiring account of a project she completed during her training in [Leading Creative Collaboration](#). She argues that the creative process starts with a great or 'beautiful' question, considering 'what it means to be human'. She invites us to consider the differences between creative collaboration, collective creation and collaborative creativity.

Organisational perspectives

Raymond Honings offers a challenging and new perspective on creative collaboration within organisational settings. He argues that creative collaboration is not enough to increase team performance, and that the missing ingredients are human connection and business purpose. Drawing upon personal examples and case studies, he invites us to create the right conditions for creative collaboration. **Mairead O'Siochru's** informative and thought-provoking article explores how the members within the Royal College of Nursing (RCN), a membership organisation, trade union and professional body, can be brought together through creative collaboration. Drawing upon the concepts of Old and New Power, she invites us to consider where power sits when it is generated by a creative collaboration. Her case study of the recent RCN national campaign puts creative collaboration theory into demonstrable practice. **Liz Nottingham** passionately argues for the need for courageous and disruptive creativity within organisations. She challenges the status quo with her call for a movement of a 'new, brave, vulnerable and creative leadership' to lead in the 21st century. She invites the reader to experiment with her unique model of Courageous Creativity inspired by her training in the [Advanced Diploma in Leading Creative Collaboration](#) and by the example of Danny Boyle, who designed [the opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympics](#).

Psychological perspectives

Lynne Irwin offers an authentic and very personal exploration of her own relationship with creative collaboration. She shares how her own resistances prevented her from embracing her creativity, and how she overcame these obstacles. She demonstrates how this engagement with her creativity enabled her to facilitate creative collaborations in an authentic way. She invites us to embrace our own creativity. **Eleonora Herrera and Steve Dilworth** offer a moving and poignant account of their own creative collaboration as they explored together, through movement and dance, their shared and deeply human experience of grief. This creative collaboration was built upon a bedrock of trust. They invite us to open up to the 'mystery' of trusting the process and the imagination, and allowing the work to be steered to an unknown destination. **Marijke**

Dekker shares her lively and engaging personal story of how her professional life transformed from that of a business executive to a Contact Clown after completing her professional training in the [Advanced Diploma in Leading Creative Collaboration](#). She invites us to consider the role of the unconscious and demonstrates how a contact clown is a facilitator of creative collaboration.

Environmental influences

Alison Hodge illustrates how group coaching supervision can be a creative collaboration with her highly innovative approach. This consists of 'talking and walking' across different locations including art galleries and the natural world. She invites us to consider how the co-created learning relationship of coaching supervision can encompass the environment, in a way that creates a visceral experience. **Emer Wynne**, along with her fellow co-inquirers, offers a very 'live' and engaging experience of what creative collaboration means through the lens of Nancy Kline's *Time to Think*. This co-inquiry, within a Thinking Environment, presents creative collaboration as part of the human condition. Her article invites us to 'Live the Question' rather than seek ready answers.

CO-EDITING AS CREATIVE COLLABORATION: SOME PARTING THOUGHTS

Louise

It has been a privilege to work with Bob, and to witness his gift as an editor: his 'invisible hands' made manifest. This has not been simply a process of master and the apprentice, but a creative collaboration. For a relationship to become a creative collaboration, is a process of a mutual sharing of our own unique gifts. This shared endeavour has been one of 'giving and being given to' that psychoanalytic thinker Jessica Benjamin (2018) describes as 'Recognition', which she argues is the building block of all relationships. Recognition is knowing that we affect others and we are affected by others. My experience of co-editorship, as a creative collaboration, revealed to me this new insight about the importance of mutual recognition: appreciating and celebrating each of our unique gifts. Bob has a unique gift of helping budding writers overcome their blocks and find their 'disciplined voice' as writers. Bob really shows a passionate love for the work of editing and has been a true inspiration!

Bob

Working with Louise has been a welcome refreshment. On more than one occasion, she has invited me to reach beyond my comfort zone, and asked fresh questions. Louise has also introduced me to the creative possibilities of technologies such as ZOOM and Microsoft Word online, which I will incorporate into my subsequent editorial practice. Our creative relationship has reinforced in me a belief that, in whatever form, context and degree it happens, collaboration is a process of working together for a common purpose. In our many exchanges over our extended collaboration with our contributors and each other, Louise and I have come to understand a little more about the mysterious and almost alchemical processes through which people collaborate creatively.

Reflecting on the nature of our collaborative relationship, several artistic metaphors come to mind. These include weaving, dancing, choreographing, curating, juggling, and clowning (e.g. Dekker 2019, this edition). We've been constantly exercised by which personal pronouns are appropriate at any particular time. In creative collaborations, when does the 'I' become 'We', and vice versa? These are fundamental questions of individual and collective authorship and creativity which require further engagement.

As co-editors and co-authors, we've done our best to perform our role as a process of creative collaboration, and to reflect the qualities that Greenberg ascribes to editors in general:

'They tend to be people who are able to see things from different points of view and who see editing as an opening up of possibilities, rather than closing things down; a collaborative conversation rather than hierarchical control; judgment as action rather than criticism. They come across as being driven not just by the ulterior motive of meeting a practical target, but also by an ultimate motive, love for the work.'

[Greenberg, 2015, p.185]

We leave it to you, the reader, and to the authors who appear in this edition, to judge how well we've realised our aspirations, and to decide upon the relevance of these contributions to the practice of personal, management or organisational development. We'd be delighted to receive your feedback. For our part, we feel proud and privileged to have collaborated with other stakeholders and with each other on this creative publishing enterprise.

What next?

We plan to host a post-publication Gathering to continue the conversations inspired by the articles you find here. In addition to the online pdf version of this edition, which is freely available on the [AMED website](#), there is the option of purchasing a professionally-printed hard copy at cost. So please feel free to contact the AMED Office for more information, and do watch this space!

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Image credits

- Louise Austin: (a) 'Anima Mundi', page 2; (b) Bob's RSA 'poem', page 5; (c) Louise's RSA 'malleable pot', page 6; and (d) The 'Potting Hands' of the Editor, page 7.
- Nicolas Poussin painting, 1640, page 9: 'A Dance to the Music of Time, The Wallace Collection, Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_dance_to_the_music_of_time_c._1640.jpg
- Image of The RSA London page 5, By www.CGPGrey.com, CC BY 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=294635>

About Louise and Bob

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

Khorshed Bhote



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:

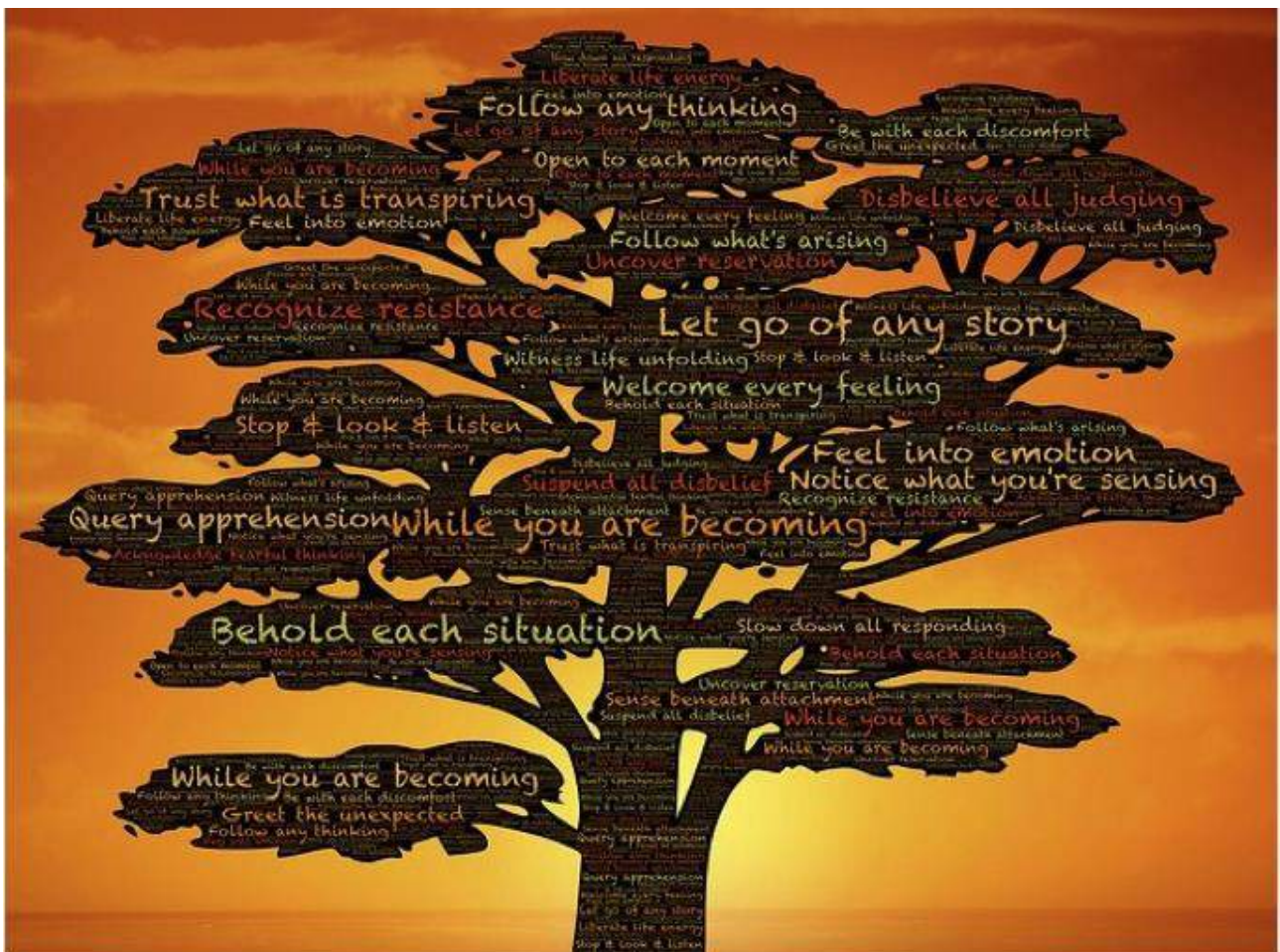
“meeting up for an initial meeting to set-out some basic ideas; going away to solidify these ideas individually; a follow-up meeting to finalise”.

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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A beautiful question to elicit collective creation

Tan Ling Sian



Keywords

creative autonomy, collective creation, collaborative creation, beautiful questions

Introduction

Questions and creativity

"To come to grips with creativity, I must ask creative, adventurous questions - the kind which, in all likelihood, cannot be answered."

- Lukas Foss

One of the methods of forming and developing creativity is to ask good questions. We also have to trust that we are open to being surprised by the outcome of such questions, as Suleimani suggests in the following extract.

"In order to manifest creativity, we have to believe that we are created to play our parts in changing the world around us, then we will see that how that outcome is surprising."

- Suleimani, 2008

David Cooperrider, who developed a theory of appreciative inquiry, asserts:

"We live in the world our questions create".

What we choose to answer will get our attention. Our attention will create our experience. The mere act of asking questions is one of creation.

Stuart Firestein, in his book *Ignorance: How it drives science*, argues to use questions as a means of navigating through its new discoveries.

“One good question can give rise to several layers of answers, can inspire decades-long searches for solutions, can generate whole new fields of inquiry, and can prompt changes in entrenched thinking. Answer, on the other hand, often end the process.”

One of the most powerful forces for tapping and honing your creativity is inquiry. Questions stem from intellectual curiosity, which in turn fuel creativity. Curiosity compels us to intentionally frame questions that lead to more unanswered questions, instead of definitive answers. The creative process starts when there's a great question hanging in the air.

The neurologist and author Ken Heilman, a leading expert on creative activity in the brain, acknowledges that research on what's happening in the brain when we ask questions, has been scant. However, there has been significant neurological study of divergent thinking – the mental process of trying to come up with alternative ideas, a crucial element in the creative process. Heilman notes:

“Since divergent thinking is about saying, ‘Hey, what if I think differently about this?’ it's actually a form of asking questions.”

(Berger, 2014)

Good questioning triggers divergent thinking. It taps imagination and often triggers random association of ideas.

Questions and the examined life

“I want to beg you, as much as I can, dear sir, to be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”

- Maria Rainer Rilke, 1903

Good questions – especially beautiful questions, which I discuss in greater detail shortly - can also serve as an invitation to live an examined life, as Socrates enjoined* and urged by Rilke in the quote above. We are all storytellers – we make stories to make sense of our lives. When we are living an examined life, we live a transparent life. We are allowing ourselves to open up to examination, by understanding their underlying assumptions about ourselves, and about the world around us. When implicit, unstated knowledge becomes explicit (clearly expressed) it can be then be questioned, refined and honed.

What makes a question beautiful?

"Always the beautiful answer who asks a more beautiful question."

- E. E. Cummings

The English poet David Whyte has said that:

"There is an art to asking the beautiful question."

A beautiful question is an ambitious question that triggers potent inquiry and has the power to shift the way we perceive or think about something. It is a question we live and practice every day. It deeply resonates and opens us to new possibilities aligned with our deepest longings and truths.

Beautiful questions are perpetual. Once they are answered, the inquiry remains, as we continue to shape our thinking. They are the very kind of questions that ensure that inquiry remains the focal point. They have no end, only the promise of ongoing possibility. The questions trump the answer.

Beautiful questions shape beautiful minds. They elevate our thinking and knowledge. They make us see in different ways. They make us feel vulnerable and require courage to answer. The beautiful questions are the hard questions many of us are afraid to ask.

"The ability to ask beautiful questions, often in very unbeautiful moments, is one of the great disciplines of a human life. And a beautiful question starts to shape your identity as much by asking it, as it does by having it answered. You just have to keep asking. And before you know it, you will find yourself actually shaping a different life, meeting different people, finding conversations that are leading you in those directions that you wouldn't even have seen before."

-David Whyte

A beautiful question to elicit the act of creation

The question that keeps resurfacing for me – and for humankind -, is 'What does it mean to be human?'

"The question of what it means to be human is always a question of elasticity of being. It's never an arrival point."

- Maria Popova, 2015

I used this question to give purpose to the act of a (collective) creation. As part of an Advanced Diploma in Facilitating Creative Collaboration, I conceived a SELP (Self Expression Leadership Project), where I was to design and facilitate a creative collaboration. In defining my project, I was driven by two considerations.

First, I was taking it as an opportunity to have others join me in my exploration of a beautiful question. I hoped that using a beautiful question would instil a belief with the contributors that all of them have a part to play in making sense and meaning of the world around them.

Second, I wanted to safeguard the uniqueness of multiple perspectives. We each have a unique view on life and a distinctive way of expressing ourselves - how we translate our beliefs, values, thoughts and emotions into communication. In striving to speak a common language to be understood and be inclusive, I feel this multitude of unique perspectives and experiences is overlooked or sometimes even lost on us.

"If you want a beautiful life, start asking beautiful questions."

- David Whyte

With this in mind, the idea for my project took shape: to crowdsource and curate multiple views in answer to a beautiful question – what does it mean to be human - and have people answer the question through the lens of their unique experience, identity or discipline. I named it 'Ecce Homo' ('Behold the man').

"The best art and writing is almost like an assignment; it is so vibrant that you feel compelled to make something in response. Suddenly it is clear what you have to do. For a brief moment it seems wonderfully easy to live and love and create breathtaking things."

- learningtoloveyoumore.com

Centuries worth of scientific thought, artistic tradition and spiritual practice have attempted to answer this most fundamental question about our existence. And yet the diversity of views and opinions is so grand it has made that answer remarkably elusive. (Popova). While I don't necessarily believe such an "answer" — singular and conclusive by definition — even exists, I want to make an effort to understand the wholeness of a human being by bringing together multiple personal points of views and experiences.

How we see ourselves is the foundation for our values, our choices, our relationships with each other, and our relationship with nature. In this age where artificial intelligence is finding its way into our daily lives, the question seems more pertinent than ever.

Ecce Homo

A brief description

My SELP was to crowdsource and curate multiple views in answer to a beautiful question "What it means to be human". People were asked to answer the question through the lens of their unique experience, identity, role or discipline/profession and in a format of their own choice.



PART 1: ANSWER

Individually answer the question "What does it mean to be human?"

- Through the lens of your unique experience, role, identity or profession (*content*)
- In a *format* of your own choice

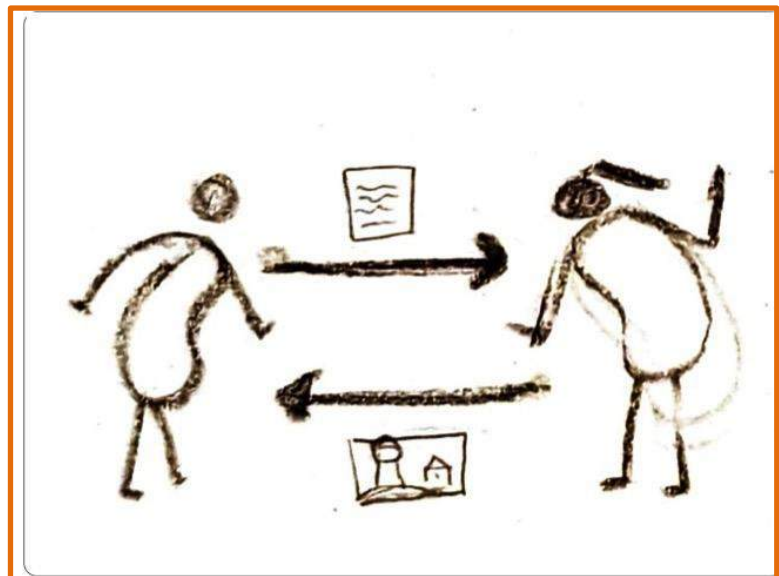
The aim of the project

I wanted to offer people the space to critically examine the assumptions of themselves and others regarding what it means to be human and live the examined life.

PART 2: RESPOND

In pairs, exchange answers and respond to each other's work:

- How does it make you feel?
- What is your body sensing? (physical sensations)
- What are you thinking?
- What did you learn?
- What question(s) come up?



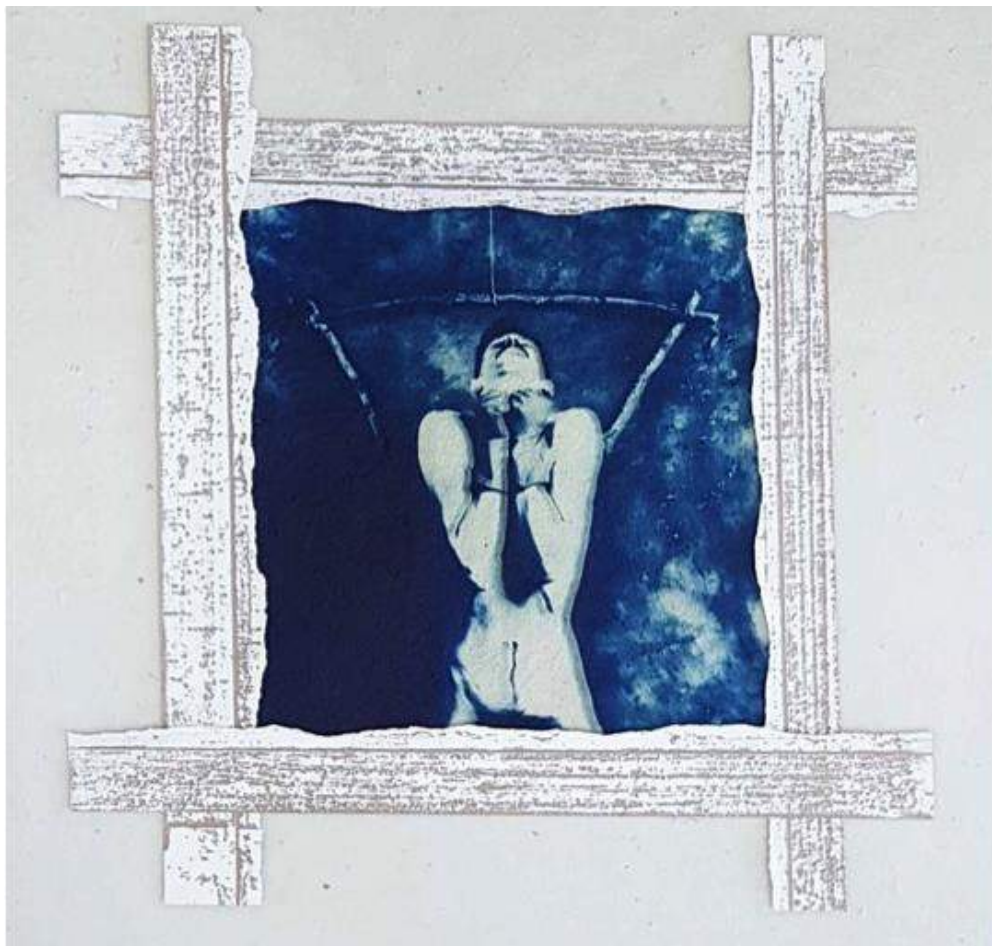
The contributors

In phases 1 and 2, 31 people contributed to the project. They came from various walks of life, spanned 6 continents and 16 nationalities, and ranged in age from 7 to 77. In phase 2, 24 more people got involved: 11 twelve-year olds and 12 fifteen-year olds and their teacher. In total, 55 people were involved.



PHASE 3: SHARE

- Show all the answers to a group of children/teenagers
- Have them identify themes, patterns and come to insights



André Carrens: cyanotype (for Ecce Homo)

Collaborative creation in art

"In a general sense, collaborative creation refers to a creation process within which a plurality of persons engage in the production of intellectual or informational content by sharing and combining their creative and informational resources, skills, and knowledge."

- Camarinha-Matos & Afsarmanesh, 2006

The collaborative creation process holds a position of significance within mankind's cultural creation narrative. It is embedded within our folkloric tradition of storytelling and is also visible in experimental and populist artistic movements. For example, experimental art movements such as Dadaism, Neo-Dadaism, surrealism and more populist movements such as the pop-art movement extensively use the collaborative creation process. What can we learn from the world of art about collaborative creation?

Dadaists, a loose band of avant-garde modernists in the prelude to World War, claimed to believe that the value of art did not lie in the actual work being produced, but in the process and collaboration instead; the idea of collaboration was to create and bring new visions of the world.

One of the most prominent and historical collaborations throughout Dadaism was the creation of [The Cabaret Voltaire](#), a nightclub in Zurich, Switzerland founded by Hugo Ball and his companion Emmy Hennings on February 5, 1916. The nightclub was to act as a cabaret for artistic and political purposes.

The press release on 2 February 1916 announcing the opening of the club reads:

The Cabaret Voltaire. Under this name a group of young artists and writers has formed with the object of becoming a center for artistic entertainment. In principle, the Cabaret will be run by artists, permanent guests, who, following their daily reunions, will give musical or literary performances. Young Zürich artists, of all tendencies, are invited to join us with suggestions and proposals.

There are so many examples throughout art history that show us the uniqueness of collaborative creations that came out from artistic partnerships. Peter Paul Rubens and Jan Breughel the Elder, the two most important painters in Antwerp in the early 17th century, executed about two dozen paintings together between 1598 and Breughel's death in 1625. Gilbert Proesch and George Passmore who consciously decided to become one single artist and went on to create a new type of art. The collaboration between Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg birthed pop-art. Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray published a collaborative work consisting of a photograph of Duchamp's iconic work 'The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors Even or The Large Glass' covered in dust along with a brief poetic text.

A more contemporary example is '[This Exquisite Forest](#)', an online collaborative animation project. From 2012 - 2014, visitors to this site could use an online drawing tool to create a short animation. Other visitors

could then build off of that animation, resulting in branching, ever-evolving narratives resembling trees. The project was conceived by Chris Milk and Aaron Koblin (2012-2014) and produced by the Google Data Arts Team and Tate Modern.

Does artistic collaboration always work? Is creativity nurtured or thwarted when people collaborate?

Jean-Michel Basquiat and Andy Warhol collaborated on a number of paintings between 1983 and 1985. Keith Haring said enthusiastically:

"[The Collaboration Paintings are] a physical conversation happening in paint instead of words. The sense of humor, the snide remarks, the profound realizations, the simple chit-chat all happened with paint and brushes."

Critics, however, were not as enthusiastic about the work. One commentator, after seeing the 1985 show at which the Basquiat-and-Warhol's paintings were publicly exhibited for the first time, griped, "Everything . . . is infused with banality. Who is using whom here?"

A shadow side of creative collaboration?

Susan Cain (2012) writes in her book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*.

"Being around other artists [often] stimulates idea-generation. It's part of the reason Andy Warhol created his Factory."

"However," she continues, "Checking too often with someone else—pausing for feedback with each bit of output—can inhibit or confuse us. We can lose our natural trajectory, intuition, or instinctual aim."

Other people's reactions, if not enthusiastic, can all too easily cause an artist to become inhibited or demoralized. As Cain notes, exposure to other people's reactions can be so obfuscatory that we lose hold of our own convictions and can no longer see our own work clearly.

When we're in a group, inevitably, group dynamics will take over. A few of them can be pretty counterproductive to the end goal of coming up with a bunch of creative ideas.

A series of studies by Professors Michael Diehl, Wolfgang Stroebe (1987), Paul Paus (1993), and others, found that people self-censor many of their most creative ideas in group brainstorming sessions for fear of being judged negatively by others. When the scientists told groups that their ideas would be judged by their peers, they came up with significantly fewer and less novel ideas than groups that were told they would be evaluated by anonymous judges.

We worry about what other people think of us. The theory of evaluation apprehension, proposed by Nickolas B. Cottrell in 1972, suggests that group settings can impair our performance over the fear of being judged. As a result, we can often play too nice to others to avoid being critiqued harshly in return. That makes for nice and polite workplace dynamics but can be a lot less useful when working ideas in a creative session.

Then there is also the phenomenon of production blocking. Group members have to listen attentively to other people's ideas, which leaves them with less mental energy to think of their own ideas. When people work together, their ideas tend to converge. In contrast, when people work alone, they tend to diverge in their thinking, because everyone takes a slightly different path to thinking about the problem.

Another series of studies by Professor Eric Rietzschel and colleagues (2010) show that when groups interactively ranked their "best" ideas, they chose ideas that were less original than the average of the ideas produced, and more feasible than the average of the ideas produced. In other words, people tended to weight "feasible" more highly than "original."

Solitude and creative autonomy

"We overvalue the idea of collaboration," Cain argues. "I call this The New Groupthink—the idea that creativity and productivity come from an oddly gregarious place." She goes on to say, "Solitude is a crucial and underrated ingredient for creativity. From Darwin to Picasso to Dr. Seuss, our greatest thinkers have often worked in solitude." In physics, Albert Einstein, Isaac Newton, and James Clerk Maxwell, three of the greatest creative contributors, worked almost entirely alone. They profited from other people's ideas not in direct collaboration, but by reading research papers and books.

"My feeling is that as far as creativity is concerned, isolation is required...The presence of others can only inhibit this process, since creation is embarrassing. For every new good idea you have, there are a hundred, ten thousand foolish ones, which you naturally do not care to display."

- Isaac Asimov

So why does the idea of collaboration remain so entrenched?

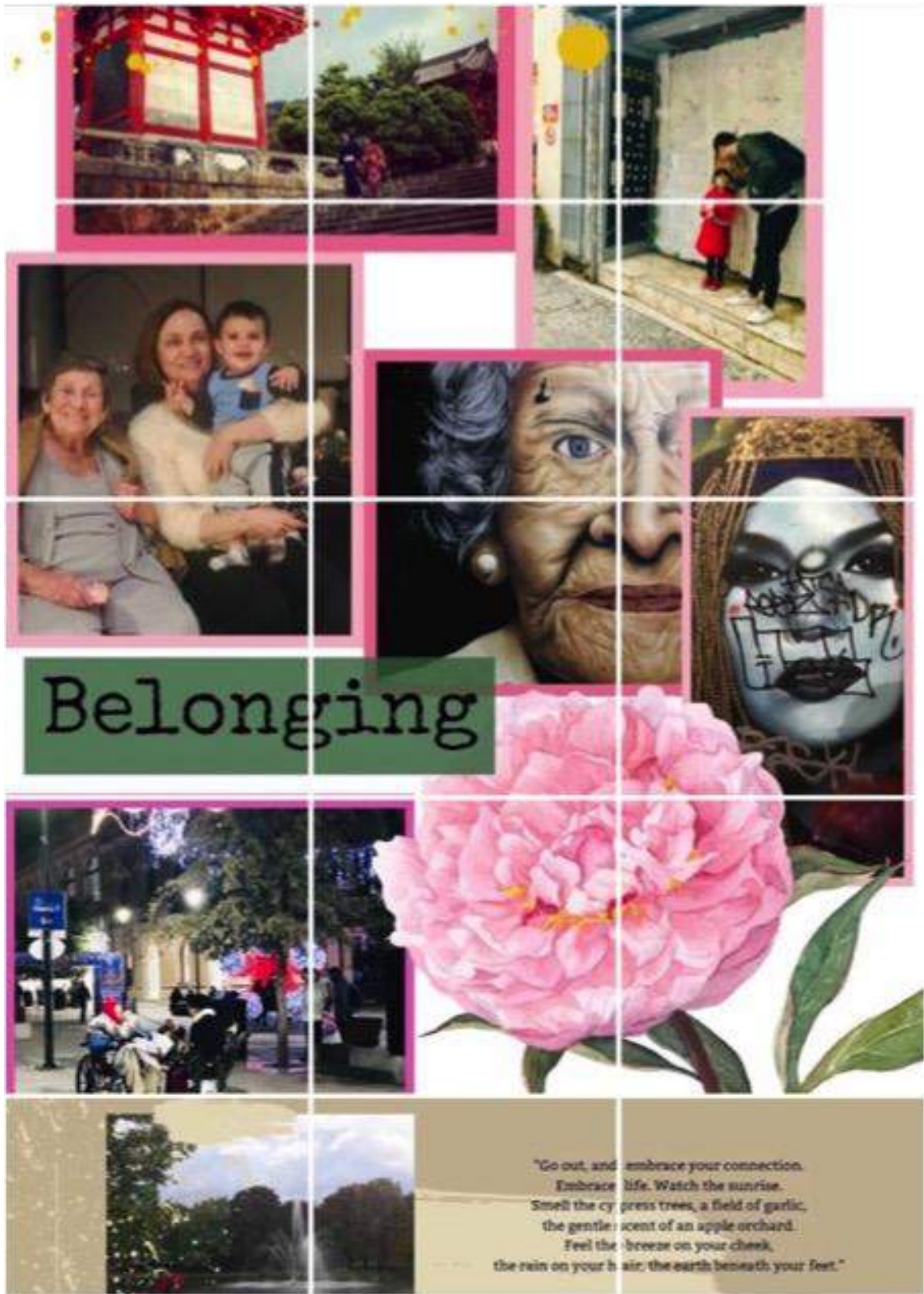
Maybe part of the reason collaboration has gained such prominence is because it can be so germinative in the world of business and commerce. Collaboration is useful because the product develops out of exchange.

The rise of the internet and advancements in digital technology have led to a re-assertion of collaborative creation as a prevalent model in the generation of cultural content. New technologies have allowed for new forms of collaborative creation such as crowd-sourcing, remixing and mash-ups, profiting from the possibilities for remote collaboration, where a plurality of persons interact and react with each other in order to give rise to creative expression.

Collaborative versus collective creation

Sunil Mendis, a researcher in intellectual property law at the Sciences Po Law School in Paris, has done work around collaborative authorship in the context of POCC (Public Open Collaborative Creation). She sees collaborative creation as creation taking place through the contributions of a multiplicity of persons

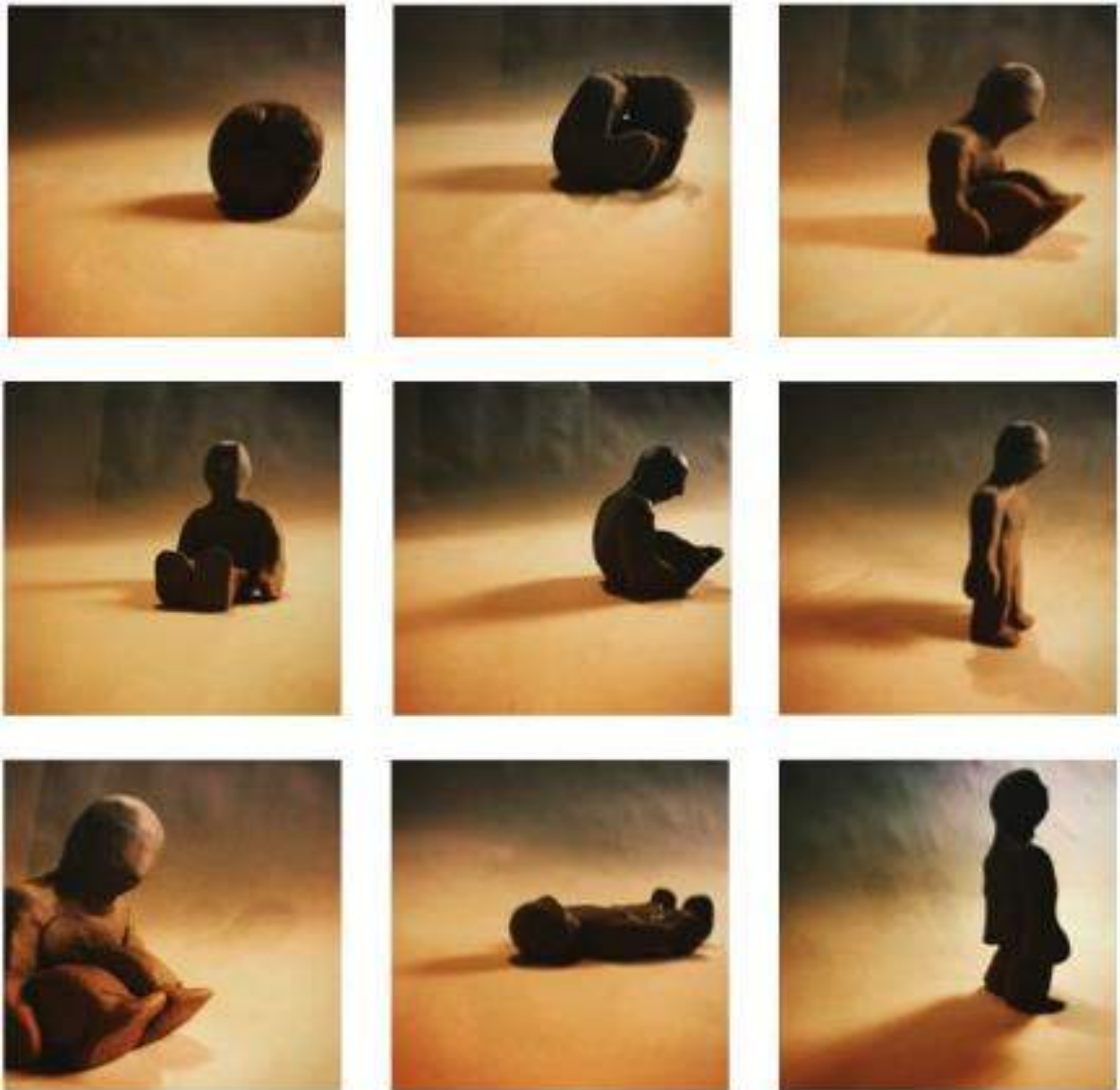
(contributors) under a model of sequential innovation and resulting in the production of a literary, artistic or scientific work which remains in a continuous state of change and development over an undefined period of time (2018). A well-known example of a “Public Open Collaborative Creation” is [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/).



Mayra Hurtado: Instagram posts (for Ecce Homo)

I have used a different process of collaborative creation to construct a cultural artefact. The individual contributions were stand-alone artefacts that would form a new artefact on a higher level, rather than additions or modifications to contributions made by each other within a sequential innovation process resulting (such as a Wikipedia article). My aim was to allow for individual creative expression.

It freed the contributors from the need to agree on and share a common design and a specific pre-determined creation goal or scheme. The fact that the collaborators were distanced both spatially as well as temporally along creation process made it even more difficult for them to share such a common design. They did not relate to the creative decision-making process, nor was there a possibility for discussion.



Sara Scott – clay figurine (for Ecce Homo)

In light of all of this, one could argue whether the Ecce Homo initiative was more a case of collective rather than collaborative creation. The collective creation process envisages the creation of a collective work through the compilation or arrangement of the creative contributions made by a multiplicity of authors, within a logical sequence.

The various contributors did not collaborate with each other within a common creative endeavour, but instead worked independently on their individual contributions. These contributions were later collated together to form a single collective work by a person - in this case, myself - to whom is usually attributed the "ownership" of the collective work (provided that the compilation and/or arrangement of the different contributions display sufficient originality in order to qualify him/her as an author/owner). As such, the absence of collaboration among the different authors within the creation process and the fact that these different contributions usually remain separate and distinct from each other, might prevent the Ecce Homo initiative from being considered a case of collaborative creation.

This resulted in a weak or even non-existent sense of community among contributors. This could be ascribed to the absence of a general discussion forum within which contributors are able to interact with each other outside of the creation process. Thus, interaction between contributors to Ecce Homo was limited to the act of creation itself (i.e., contributing reactive content to someone else's contribution).

"One can speak of a collaborative work if all collaborators work together under a "common inspiration" (also defined as a "spiritual intimacy") which enables them to work toward a common goal by means of a "creative concerted effort".

- Lucas, Lucas, & Lucas-Schloetter, 2012

Participation – which was on a voluntary basis - was not incentivized by any monetary reward, nor by the prospect of gaining peer-recognition, or being a part of a community. At the most the motivation stemmed from engaging in a socially valuable creation activity and/or a desire to live the examined life (an invitation to introspect). And this brings me back to the importance of the beautiful question to inspire and drive the collective creation.

I allowed for a lot of creative autonomy: the contributor's discretion to interpret the assignment freely (content) and choose their own means of expression (format). Each contributor had a high and equal degree of power and authority in determining the direction and outcome of his or her own creative endeavour. This gave them the freedom to exercise a high degree of creative autonomy within the creation process. I did observe that this resulted in a significant variance between contributions in terms of both effort and quality.

The chosen process allowed wide scope for experimentation and organic evolution. The absence of creation hierarchy and the creative autonomy enjoyed by contributors, compelled me to look at the facilitator role as one of a curator.

My experimentation with collective creation

The project was carried out in three phases.

Phase 1: Answering a beautiful question

In phase 1, contributors individually answered the question “What does it mean to be human?”. They were free to choose how (through which lens - content) they were answering the question. It could be within the context of their profession, discipline, “role/identity”, or their unique experience. The answer could be conceptual or grounded in reality.

They could also choose their own means of self-expression (format). This could be the written word in its various forms, a painting, a photograph, a dance choreography, a sculpture, a musical composition, a song, a cartoon, an equation, a movie etc. I encouraged them to be creative and authentic.

“When you put so much of yourself and your time into something, it’s hard to separate it from who you are.”

- Julia Rothman

Phase 2: Responding to another creator’s work

In phase 2, each contributor was asked to respond to someone else’s work. I felt it was important that they not evaluate or judge, but rather share their genuine personal response from three angles: emotion, sensation and cognition.

There were still some instances where judgment came through. I think it was the lack of intimacy in the group – because of the chosen approach - that resulted in incidental absence of empathy.

Phase 3: Sharing with young people and Identifying themes

In phase 3, all the individual artefacts came together. They were shown to groups of children/teens who identified unfolding themes and patterns and captured those through a co-created artwork. In this final stage of the project, there was an element of collaborative creation.

The children also interpreted the question to their own personal context, which resulted in a list of 42 new questions. As an afterthought I decided to pass on these questions to the people who contributed in phases 1 and 2 asking them to pick a question and give an ‘answer’, a personal view, a piece of advice or another question.



In addition, when the project was showcased in London, guests were also invited to pick a question to answer, and many did so. All of the answers were collected and given to the children.

At the end of the project, I asked the original contributors if going through the experience had any (transformational) impact on them. This is an excerpt of one of the answers I received.

My story is not The Life of Neil but is The Varied Tales of Neil in which innumerable narratives are interwoven creating a vibrant tapestry. When viewed as a whole at a distance it is a single work, but when viewed up close the individual threads support each other, they rely on and inform each other while remaining individual threads. Hence my Transformation.

...

To some extent or another, every story in which we are a character results in a change to who we are and who others are. Sometimes it is small - a single tiny thread misplaced in the tapestry of life. Sometimes it is defining - a large swath of color that makes or breaks the entire work. And a myriad of options in between and beyond. The real insight (atonement?)

is coming to realize this and living your life with a profound appreciation for the stiches that weave us together as a human race. Here I am reminded of David Foster Wallace's commencement address. Making the choice to go through life aware of the characters you are in countless stories and to respond to that realization by choosing to live as much as possible a life of giving yourself to those narratives is to live the fullest of lives.

- Neil Watson (contributor Ecce Homo)

Envoi

Looking at all the answers I received to this beautiful question, I cannot help but wonder whether a – subconscious desire to reveal ourselves was at play. The question served as an invitation and triggered an act of creation.

The world presents itself to us as a question. Living the question(s) involves acts of creation. And hence we do, collectively, as a human species.

"It's very likely that the universe is really a kind of a question, rather than the answer to anything."

-Kevin Kelly (2018)

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge **all the contributors to 'Ecce Homo'**. I am grateful for the generosity of their time and the effort they have kindly put into the project.

Footnote

* "The unexamined life is not worth living" is a famous dictum apparently uttered by Socrates at his trial for impiety and corrupting youth, for which he was subsequently sentenced to death, as described in *Plato's Apology* (38a5–6)

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She loves taking long walks with her dog, takes a guilty pleasure in buying more books than she can ever read, and thinks the best way to explore a city is to get lost in its streets.

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Human connection and purpose: the missing links in creative collaboration

Raymond Honings



Keywords

Connection, purpose, compassion, freedom, psychological safety, social, team performance

What is the aim of this article?

Creative Collaboration is often positioned as a means to help increase team or organisational performance. But is this enough? In this article I want to explore the question “Why Creative Collaboration isn’t enough to increase team performance, and what is missing?”. Here I will specifically focus on issues of Human Connection and having a sense of Purpose, and I demonstrate that these are key for any form of team performance improvement. I believe that without these, any concept or model that is supposed to help improve team performance is bound to fail in the long run. I begin by exploring briefly the meaning of creative collaboration, then I illustrate my argument by sharing two short case studies and a few personal examples, as well as referring to some publicly available literature on the subject.

Where does my passion for this perspective come from?

I always find this question very interesting, because passion has its origins in many surprising sources. Our upbringing and family play a big role. Hillman says in his book *The Soul’s Code* (2017) that it is not so much the events in our childhood that shape us but more so the memories we have about these events. I grew up in Amsterdam, where I never felt I really belonged to my family. Yes, it was my family, and no big dramas played out, but I always felt I didn’t fit in.

There was no talk about or sharing of emotions. You were not supposed to stand out or do something different. Something was missing for me that I could not express back then. I remember the mother of my first girlfriend once saying “You are so different compared to the rest of your family”. I guess that is when my strong desire for connection and belonging really took off.

During my career, first as a change consultant at one of the top three international consultancy firms in the Netherlands, and later as a team coach, I developed a sixth sense when it comes to belonging and having a sense of purpose, or the lack of it. But this was still unconscious. When I was thriving and in flow, both of them were present. Usually, this was when I was working closely with people with similar intentions and values.



I know now that things like innovation, creativity, quality and open communication were present in those situations. When these are present, I feel a sense of belonging and that I am in the right place with the right people. For you, the reader, these aspects might be different. When I felt I wasn't too happy, it was usually because I felt left on my own, singled out, or at least that is what I believed to be true back then.

For example, situations when I felt on my own or singled out, my loyalty was questioned, I was denied participation in something that I believed was important or every team member was just doing their own thing. It wasn't until I started to develop my skills as an executive and team coach that I began to understand the power of connection and purpose. Over the years of my coaching, training and facilitation career, I have used these two concepts a lot in order to build foundations to improve team performance.

Creative collaboration – a brief exploration



Every now and then you see new ways popping up to look at team performance. We've seen for example Design Thinking, Team Dynamics, Systems Thinking and now we see Creative Collaboration. When you browse the internet, you will see a lot of articles diving into the benefits of creativity in the workplace and how you can do this together. Most of these articles just stay at a superficial level and talk about work formats or the business benefits.

For this article, I did a little bit of research, and I'd like to invite you to do the same. In one of the change workshops I have led, I asked 20 managers three questions. These managers ranged in gender (60% male, 50% female), age (26-37) and nationality (North America, Europe and Asia). They all worked in an international fast changing environment. It would be great if you would answer them too for yourself. In the following table, I summarise the most common words these managers used in their answers. You might like to compare your responses with theirs.

Table 1: Survey results

Question 1: When you read the word 'creativity', what does it mean to you, and what is the first word that comes to your mind?

Here the most common answers were about: Out-of-the-box thinking, creative work formats, art, doing things differently, lateral thinking, colourful, diversity, drawing.

Question 2: When you read the word 'collaboration', what does it mean to you and what is the first word that comes to your mind?

Here the managers answered: Together, results-oriented, goals, communication, complementary strengths, team, efficiency.

Question 3: What is the essence of a high performing team?

The answers given to this question contained words like: Focus, aligned goal, respect, trust, continuous improvement, understanding, acting as one, success, happy. When you read these answers, you can see that there are preconceived ideas about what creativity and collaboration means when you don't look below the surface. Therefore, as a team leader, coach or facilitator, you run the risk of limiting yourself when you yourself are trying to facilitate creative collaboration within your team, or when you're being forced into a dictated meaning of creative collaboration by an external facilitator. Now, this might be a quick conclusion to draw, but think about it. If this is the perception managers have about creativity and collaboration, what do you think they will ask for when they need help, or what they will do themselves? Unless we look beneath the surface of terms/concept of creative collaboration we run the risk of limiting our range of our interventions as leaders and facilitators of creative collaboration

I am curious what your answers to these questions are and how it colours your perspective and possibly the types of team interventions you are thinking about when facilitating or encouraging Creative Collaboration.

So, what is missing?

Awareness of connections

In her book, *Creative Collaboration*, Vera John-Steiner (2006) asserts that:

'the mind – rather than thriving on solitude – is clearly dependent upon reflection, renewal and trust inherent in sustained human relationships.'

She explores this proposition in a wide range of communities who view learning and thinking as a social process. In other words, human connection is key for them.



For me connection is all about relationships in a broad sense. Connection to self, others, ideas and concepts etc. The concept of connection is not only important when it comes to collaboration, but also when it comes to creativity. Thomas M. Disch (1974) says:

“Creativeness is the ability to see relationships where none exist.”

In other words, seeing connections (relationships) is key to creativity. Building on this creativity for me is the ability to take different perspectives on problems, solutions, concepts in order to find hidden patterns and to make connections between seemingly unrelated things.

And yet, so many times connection is overlooked or hidden between the lines, as is the case with many other concepts. When you look at Lenionci's work on the Five Dysfunctions of Teams (2002), explicit reference to “connection” is missing. Yes, he mentions ‘trust’, but connection goes deeper and precedes trust. What I mean is that in order to trust (or not) someone you need to experience if there is a connection (i.e. we ‘click’). Think about it, when do you start trusting someone? The same absence is found in Tuckman's (1965) work on team development stages. In order to create a high performing team, you need to understand how connection works.

Sense of purpose

It is not only connection that is needed to create a high performing team, there also needs to be a sense of purpose. The sense that there is a bigger driving force, a bigger WHY? and a reason why a company or team exists at all. More on this later.

In the next section, I illustrate my argument with two case studies.

Case study 1

I recently coached a management team who “wanted to inject some creativity” in their team. This team led a global market research company and was spread across the world in order to lead their respective regions. They needed to look for different ways of working to cope with the ever-increasing workload, and find ways for their own direct reports to work together in a better way. The MD had read some articles about Creative Collaboration and thought that would help them a lot. Although I started to help them learn more creative ways to work together, I also introduced a fair share of “connecting”, getting to know each other at deeper and different levels. Some examples of what they did are:

- Exploring personal values
- Exploring their personal history and how it shaped who they are today as individuals and leaders
- Exploring unconscious bias and fears



They found this a bit uncomfortable at the beginning, but followed along quickly. When we evaluated the coaching, the team mentioned that this “connecting” had made the biggest difference and had enabled them to find different ways to work together in a quicker and easier manner, and mostly on their own. They had expected some personal conflict along the way. This did not happen because they were able to connect to each other in a different way than before. They had found a deeper understanding about each other, and had avoided damaging personal conflict without shying away from heated discussions on content.

This is a simple case study showing the importance of human connections. I think a *lack* of connection can have an even more dramatic impact. Research presented by Susan Pinker (2017) concludes that the two most important predictors to a long life are close relationships and social integration. Therefore, not looking to create healthy connections is at the very least a missed opportunity.

Two different perspectives on connection

I want to start to illustrate two different perspectives by sharing a quote from Esther Perel (2018). She works in a different space, but expresses the fundamental power of connection in the following way:

“I live with one perennial truth: the quality of your relationships is what determines the quality of your life. The bonds and the connections we establish with other people give us a greater sense of meaning, happiness and wellbeing than any other human experience.

This is what the best cultures encode. Human connection remains non-negotiable, across the spheres of our lives, for meaning. It’s no different for organisation and team health—and for performance.”

I want to point out two things that I understand she is highlighting. These are:

- Bonds and connections: For me this translates to personal (human) connections
- Greater sense of meaning: For me, this translates as meaning a greater sense of purpose

Knowing this, plotted onto teams, connection can be considered from the following two perspectives:

1. Psychological safety (connecting to people)
2. Purpose (connecting to business)

Psychological safety sits at the level of individual connections, and Purpose is important in how we connect to a specific context, in this case a particular business. Let me explain what I mean by this in a little more detail.

Psychological safety

Research done by Google (2015) shows that psychological safety (evident when team members feel safe to take risks and be vulnerable in front of each other) is the number one element to high performing teams. Research done by Dr Paul Zack, University of Claremont (2017), shows that psychological safety triggers the production of the natural hormone oxytocin. Quite apart from its medical properties, oxytocin signals to our

brain that it is safe to collaborate with a person. It also influences our sense of trust by strengthening our emotional connection with others. Oxytocin helps us to increase levels of trust and empathy, to create more and deeper personal connections, to take risks and to be more creative. When feeling safe, we show more of ourselves, we experience more freedom to express ourselves, and enables us to step outside our comfort zone. In a psychologically safe environment, both creativity and collaboration have a good chance to thrive.



Purpose

Purpose is all about the question “Why do we (as a business) exist?”. If I, as an individual, can relate to the purpose of a business (or work team), I can connect with that business in a deeper and more meaningful way. A well-articulated purpose results in higher engagement and lower staff turnover. This principle also underpins successful innovative companies. Linda Hill says in her Ted Talk (2014):

“Innovation starts at creating a world where people want to belong to”.

In other words, this requires connecting to a (higher) purpose. The consultancy firm EY backs this up with research (2018), and argues that companies with a strong purpose and where people feel connected to that purpose outperform their market by 42% financially. In the same research they also mention that: “companies with a purpose boast a stronger culture than those without and also report greater levels of psychological safety.”

Case study 2

Two years ago, I coached another management team that was looking for ways to operate more as a team in order to help grow the business. This management team was leading the European part of an event management agency. Gender diversity was 50/50, with people from the UK, France and the Netherlands. As a part of my preparation, I interviewed the managers individually. Some of them, 25%, were just in it for the money. Others were afraid to resign because of they thought they would not find another similar job, since they worked in a niche market. In essence, half of the team did not feel a sense of belonging, either to each other and to the business. Beside this, there were no clear agreements on ways of working or ways of communicating. Above all, they did not feel safe. I gave them this feedback as a team. They ignored the feedback, and still wanted to carry on with the coaching. The result was that every intervention stayed at surface level, addressing ways of working and some basic communication techniques. They didn't finish the coaching, and I recently learned that a couple of the team members had left, and that the business is stagnant.

Looking at this short case study, apart from no clear ways of working, for me the most important things that were missing were purpose and psychological safety. People didn't even feel comfortable enough to dive deeper and more creatively into their team problems.

When connection and purpose are in place, you might even discover that creative collaboration comes as a side effect, and you might run the risk to have a lot of fun implementing creative collaboration. People might even tell you what is truly lacking, and even come up with good solutions to increase team performance.

The success of '10 ways to ruin your business'

One great example of this was that of a team who learned to create a safe environment with human connection and a sense of purpose at the heart of it. When developing new ideas for their business, we used an exercise called "10 ways to ruin your business". People would find 10 ideas to ruin their business, then flip the ideas and end up with ideas to help their business thrive. They took control of this working format themselves. They created two teams, one being the villains whose sole purpose was to ruin the business, and the other team were the superheroes whose purpose was twofold. One was to counter the villains and the other purpose was to generate new ideas that were not affected by the villains. You can imagine the fun they had. All the ingredients for a good Hollywood movie production were present. This is how creative collaboration can naturally unfold when you put human connection and sense of purpose first.

Conclusion

When I was growing up no trip to a highly entertaining theme park or pancakes everyday could make up for the sense of belonging and safety that I was missing. Maybe it would have helped in the short term but certainly not in the long term. The same with creative collaboration. It will not solve your problem. *People* do. And in order for these people to feel relatively comfortable with, for them, concepts like creative collaboration, they need to feel a sense of belonging, connecting with each other and with the business purpose. If this is not in place, you can pick any method or concept and it will fail in the long run.

My final message. When you consider looking into creative collaboration in your team or business, please stop and reflect. Why do you think you need this? What is the angle you are taking? What is the core issue that you haven't thought of? Why not start with facilitating the creation of healthy connections between people and how people connect with the business purpose? Take it one step at a time, and you'll be surprised at the creative collaborations that emerge.



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Raymond is an international team coach who believes in the power of human connections in teams. When healthy human relations exist within a team it can be a great force for successful change. In his approach, Raymond combines a creative approach with a practical approach with long lasting result and teams who are able to face future challenges themselves without the need of team coach. Having more than 15 years of experience as a change consultant combined with his 10 years of experience as a team coach, Raymond knows what it is like to face a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world that is rapidly changing and how to navigate it. Raymond holds international certifications in the areas of Organisational Constellations, Team Performance Coaching, ORSC, NLP Trainer and Cultivating Creative Collaboration. Raymond owns two businesses (Seemotion BV and Kick Organisatiegroei BV) with which he hopes to make a difference in the world for multiple international clients.

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Creative collaboration as a bridge between old and new power to achieve social change

Mairead O'Siochru



Keywords

Old power, new power, co-production, facilitator, creative collaboration, campaigning, partnership

Introduction

As a facilitator, working for the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) - a large membership organisation that is both a trade union and a professional body - my role as a social change agent has always been a significant part of who I am. Facilitating others to make real and meaningful change in the experience of nursing staff and the people they care for is very important to me. This feels particularly important at a time when health and social care services are coming under increasing pressure and threat from sources that range from demographic to ideological.

In the summer of 2018, my organisation suffered a very public and uncomfortable disruption when a sizeable number of active members mobilised to express their unhappiness about the implementation of an NHS pay deal that included nursing staff. Details of the outcome and issues involved have been well-documented elsewhere ([Independent](#); [Nursing Notes](#); [Nursing Times](#), 2018), and I am not intending to revisit these here. However, the events of that summer – occurring just after I had completed an [Advanced Diploma in Leading Creative Collaboration](#) – prompted me to think about where power sits within a membership organisation, and about the contribution I can make as a facilitator to bringing people together through creative collaboration.

Here, I argue that creative collaboration provides an approach that brings people together as equal partners working towards a shared goal, providing a safe space for innovative thinking in a spirit of curiosity and mutual respect.

Old power structures and the rise of the new

The [Royal College of Nursing](#) is over 100 years old. We celebrated our centenary in 2016, and are the world's largest nursing union and professional body, with just over 432,000 members working across the health and social care sectors in the UK. We have over 900 staff, working in offices in all four UK countries, with a large headquarters in Oxford Circus in central London. Like many traditional organisations we have a well-established corporate and governance structure, but as a membership organisation and trade union we also have an extremely large and widely distributed membership, many of whom are natural campaigners and activists.

In reflecting on what happened when a group of our active members challenged and brought down our corporate leader and governors – both the Chief Executive and the elected Council of Members – I found recent work around the concepts of old and new power to be very helpful (Heimans 2014 and 2018). This article draws upon my experiences and reflections of that episode, and offers some insights into co-production as a process of creative collaboration in working with different forms of power, distinguishing between old and new forms.

Old power

In their book, Heimans and Timms describe old power as the traditionally understood model of top-down authority, invested in a few senior individuals who make key decisions about the strategic direction of the organisation. Communication with the rest of the organisation is prescriptive and formal, with an expectation that others will co-operate with the vision from the top. Old power is held by those who also have formal or designated authority and seniority within the organisational structure.

'Old power works like a currency. It is held by few. Once gained, it is jealously guarded, and the powerful have a substantial store of it to spend. It is closed, inaccessible, and leader-driven. It downloads, and it captures'. (Heimans 2014)

New power

New power operates very differently. It can be held by individuals who may have little or no formal or designated authority within the organisation, and they may not even be employed there. Those who exercise new power do so informally and through relationship-building. The advent of social media platforms means that they can find one another more easily and combine their activity to develop their influence and reach.

'New power operates differently, like a current. It is made by many. It is open, participatory, and peer-driven. It uploads, and it distributes. Like water or electricity, it's most forceful when it surges. The goal with new power is not to hoard it but to channel it'. (Heimans 2014)

Old and new power working together: a co-production?

Reflecting on the model represented in Figure 1 during and since the challenges of that difficult summer, it seemed to me that more traditional corporate structures will naturally tend towards an 'old power' style of interaction. Formal authority and power sit with a few at the top of the organisation, and is potentially experienced by others as prescriptive, commanding and transactional. In an organisation such as the RCN,

that additionally has its roots in professional membership and trade unionism, it is not surprising that it could be experienced as operating out of the expert position of 'telling', rather than being truly collaborative and 'listening'.

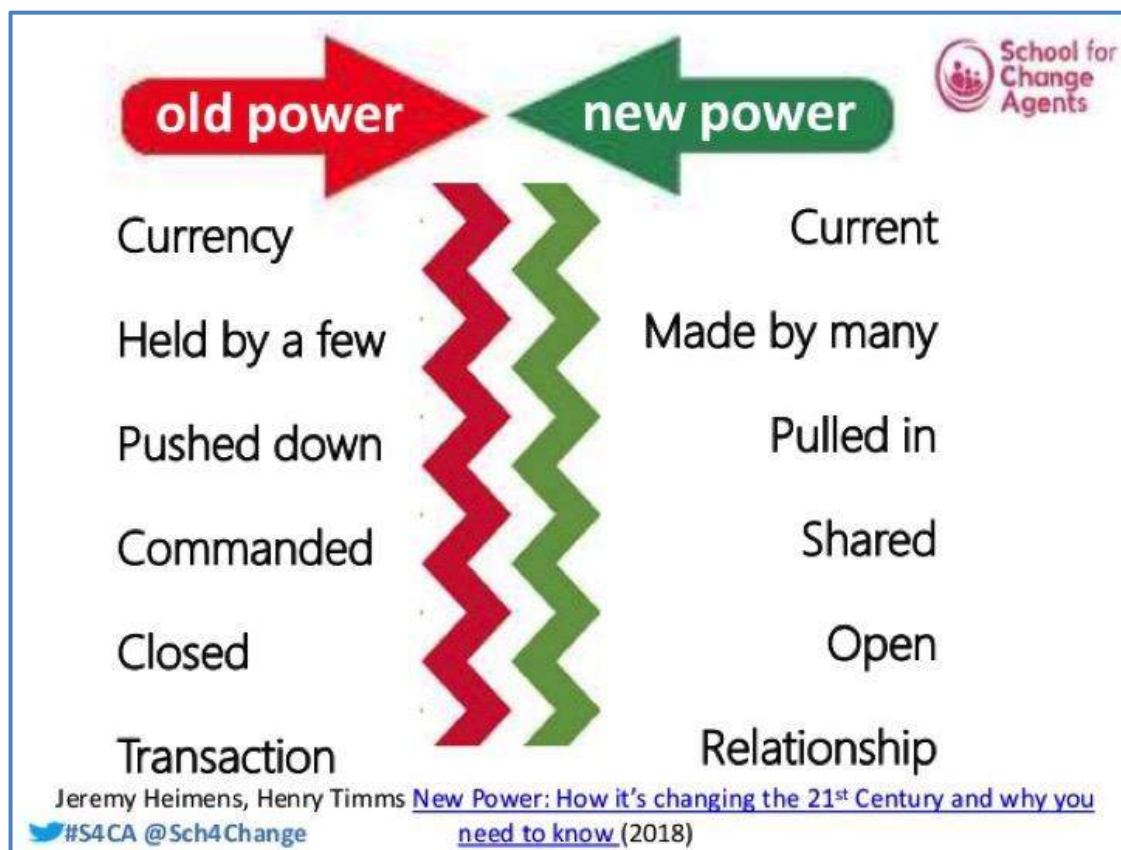


Fig 1: Old power versus new power (reproduced with permission of NHS Horizons)

In contrast, it seemed to me that our activist members operated very much out of a new power base, pulling in and mobilising support from others through the use of social media and practical campaigning tactics to challenge the perceived old power base.

In watching the resulting fall-out - the resignation of elected member leaders and the departure of the corporate leader - I found myself wondering whether old and new power could work together, instead of against one another. Could both parts of the organisation be brought together to build a collective power base in pursuit of a shared purpose around social change? I felt it could be argued that the whole organisation – both members and staff – want the best-possible outcomes for the nursing workforce and the people it cares for. Surely there should be a way of uniting all of us in pursuit of that common goal?

Identifying a shared purpose around social change

Current challenges across the UK in terms of nursing staff shortage – sitting at just over 40,000 vacancies in England alone at the time of writing – are having a strongly negative impact on our members, and on society as a whole. RCN members and staff alike recognise this as a national crisis that needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency by health and social care system decision-makers.

The RCN 'engaging active members' project

Throughout 2018 I was involved in an RCN project that was looking at identifying new and tested ways of engaging more positively with our members. This project preceded the subsequent period of difficulty but proved to be extremely timely in terms of addressing our corporate understanding of how members experienced the organisation and how they did (or didn't) engage with it.

As a baseline for our improvement work, we set out to identify two specific areas of member perception:

1. The issues that they felt strongly enough about to be prepared to be active with us to effect positive change; and
2. How engaged they currently felt with the organisation

Key findings

From this we identified that **staffing levels and the resulting quality of care for patients and clients is the number one issue** that members would like to tackle to improve their working lives. However, when we asked them about the ways in which they were encouraged to work with the RCN to address important issues and bring about positive change, it was clear that **they did not feel empowered or engaged**.

As a way of describing levels of involvement, we used an adapted version of the ladder of participation (NCAG 2018), which was in turn developed from the work of Sherry Arnstein on citizen participation (Arnstein 1969).

Members were asked to describe which of a series of statements best described their relationship with the RCN. (More than one option could be selected)

The results – presented in Figure 2 - show that an overwhelming proportion of our members who took part in the survey felt, at best, informed and educated by their engagement with the RCN. However, only a tiny proportion felt actively engaged and involved with the college in co-production and co-design.

Given that these results come from a group of members who were sufficiently engaged to respond to the on-line survey, it is certainly possible that the wider membership perceptions around how they participate in the activity of the college would be skewed even lower.

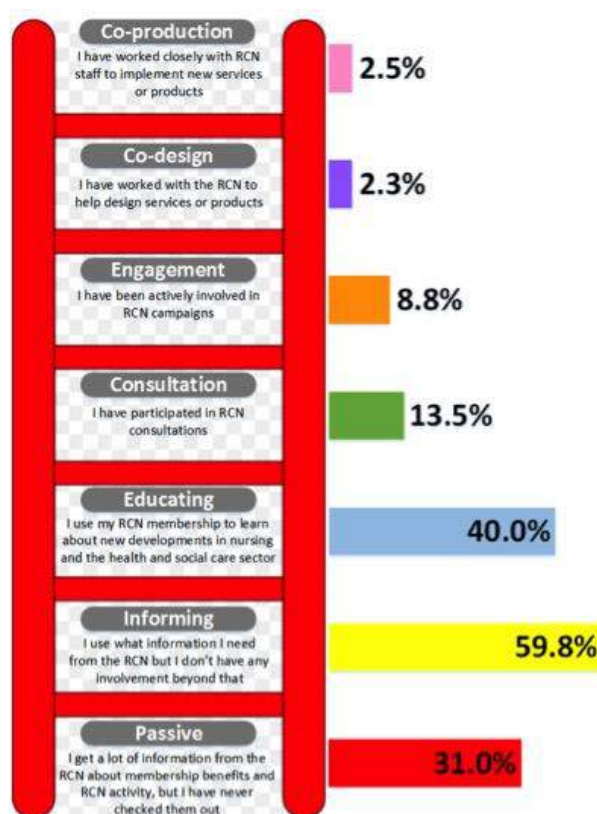


Fig 2: Ladder of participation findings for RCN members (RCN 2019)

Co-owning and co-producing

In their work on old and new power, Heimans and Timms talk about levels of participation.

‘New power gains its force from people’s growing capacity – and desire – to go far beyond passive consumption of ideas and goods’. (Heimans 2014)

This desire to be more than a consumer of services, moving instead to co-owning and co-producing, seems to me to be a key issue particularly for membership organisations like ours. At the time of the difficulty with members it was recognised by the incoming CEO that we needed to move to being more collaborative and collegiate – bringing members right into the heart of the work of the College.

It could be argued that our failure to achieve this shift was a contributory factor in the difficulties and challenges we experienced from our active members. And in addition, it is likely that a continued failure would limit our potential to be a strong, collegiate force for the social change we all want to achieve.

An analysis of a range of successful campaigns, by the Sheila McKechnie Foundation (2018) has shown that positive social change is often achieved as a result of concerted and aligned campaigning activity in four quadrants. They call this the social change grid (Fig 3a).

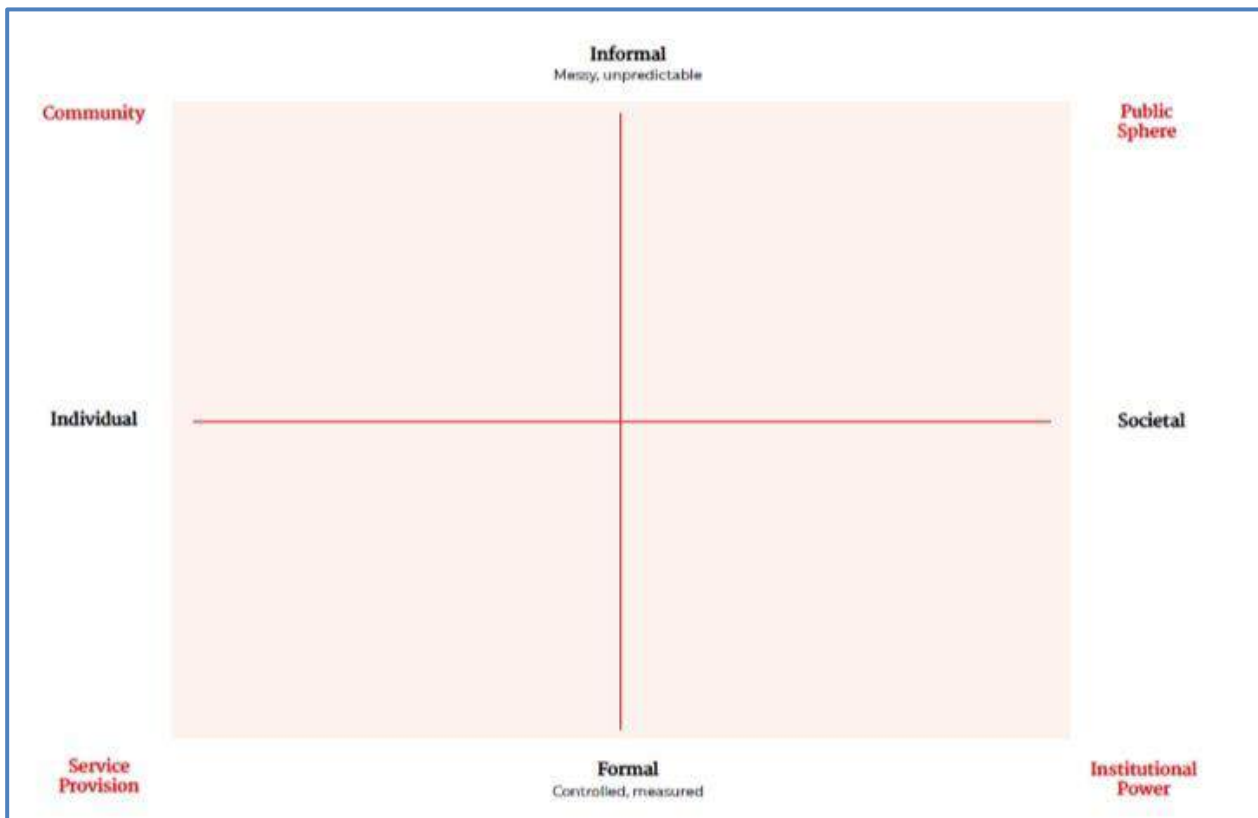


Fig 3a: The Social Change Grid

(Figs 3a and 3b both reproduced with the permission of the Sheila McKechnie Foundation)

The social change grid is made up of four quadrants: the bottom two are relatively formal and controlled, and include traditional power structures from governmental to organisational. The upper two quadrants are messier and less predictable, and include individual communities as well as the wider public sphere. The two right-sided quadrants reflect work on a societal level, whilst the two left-sided quadrants tend to involve individuals or smaller numbers in the relevant activities.

The findings of this analysis suggest that successful campaigning will often require differentiated activity in each of the four quadrants. Figure 3b below shows the range of different types of activity that can be undertaken in each of the quadrants.

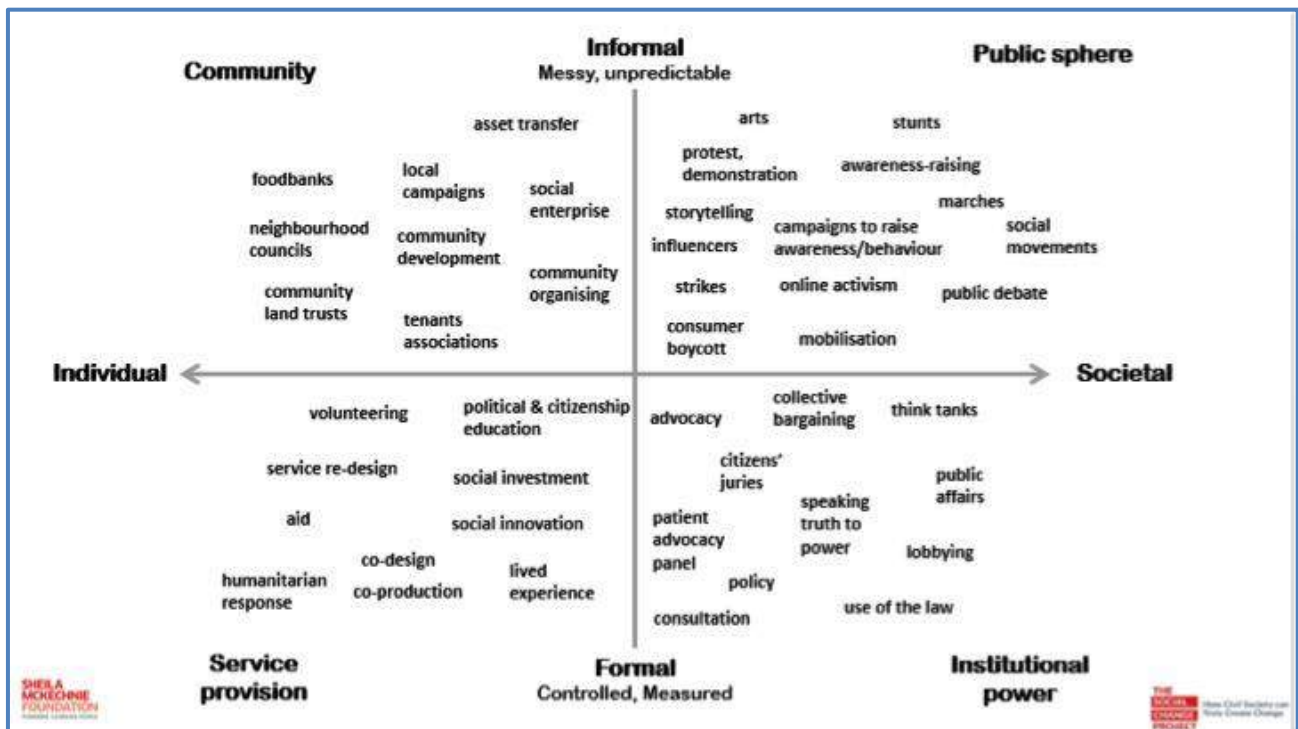


Fig 3b: The Populated Social Change Grid

When the RCN has campaigned to address change within the health and social care sector in the past, its 'old power' activity has tended to be primarily focused on, and most effective in, the formal institutional power quadrant of the grid (bottom right). This makes sense in that many of the decisions that need to be taken to address the issues within the sector will involve government intervention, therefore necessitating work to be done within the corridors of old power to make the case for change. Traditionally this activity has been led by staff with specialised expertise in policy and public affairs who influence through responses to consultations and lobbying around policy and legislative change.

However, the success of this approach also requires a political will to listen and agree to the required interventions. New power can invigorate the work of formal old power by pulling in, and mobilising, activity within the other three quadrants - in workplaces, communities and with the wider public - to build up the 'heat' on institutional power so that the issues that both old and new power care about can no longer be ignored.

In her speech to the RCN Congress in May 2019, incoming CEO Donna Kinnair recognised the approach that was needed and made a commitment to working together to raise our collective voices and influence.

‘The College is changing. And through this, Congress, we are rediscovering our voice. That voice is the member voice. It is you our members leading the campaigns and lobbying. There is a genuine commitment to change’. (Nursing in Practice 2019)

I would add that this approach relies on old and new power working together in collaboration, pulling together in the same direction to contribute to the same goal. And this is where I believe that creative collaboration comes in – providing an approach and safe space for old and new power proponents to come together in a spirit of curiosity and mutual respect.

The power of creative collaboration as a bridge between old and new power

Creative collaboration is an approach that brings people together in an improvisational space that allows room for individuals to share and build on one another’s ideas so that the outputs are more than the sum of all of the parts (Sawyer, 2008).

‘Innovations result from an invisible collaborative web with single sparks gathering together over time, multiple dead ends, and the reinterpretation of previous ideas’ (Sawyer 2008 pg. xi)

The model is one of collaborative members working together as equal partners with hierarchical, formal authority left at the door, and everyone’s contribution being valid and valued. In addition, the use of creative activity as part of the collaborative work allows for all participants to be part of the creative process, moving away from traditional formats and approaches that can favour the input of more senior and experienced group members.

Creative collaboration theory in practice: the RCN national campaign

At the beginning of 2019, the RCN decided to develop and launch a national campaign in England to address the emerging nursing workforce crisis as a known key imperative for our members. This seemed to me to present us with a golden opportunity to respond to the criticisms levelled at the College in the previous year concerning lack of true member-voice and leadership and ways of working that failed to draw in and capitalise on the expertise and experience of our 420,000 plus members.

In the RCN structure, England is divided into nine regions (Fig 4).

Having obtained senior support for the creative collaboration approach to be used in the development and implementation of RCN England’s ‘Staffing for Safe and Effective Care’ campaign, I designed and facilitated a launch collaborative event in February 2019 and nine subsequent regional collaborative events.

We asked each region to nominate four campaign leads for the launch event – an active member, a trade union representative, a student member and a member of staff.



Fig 4: The nine RCN England regions

This approach was designed to ensure that both staff and members were part of the initial creative collaborative. Subsequent regional events broadened out the involvement of both members and staff with senior regional staff and members from across all membership categories coming together to build the campaign from the grassroots up. Invitations to be involved were communicated in a way that ensured all members had an opportunity to express an interest in taking part. This resulted in many people commenting on the high number of members attending who were previously unknown to their regional offices.

Principles

Before the launch event, I developed a set of eight principles that I asked the England Campaign Project Board to sign up to (Figure 5), and then shared with each collaborative so that everyone taking part was aware of the stance being taken. This felt important in the context of the previous summer of crisis, and also in making explicit the intention of the organisation to work with and listen to all members.

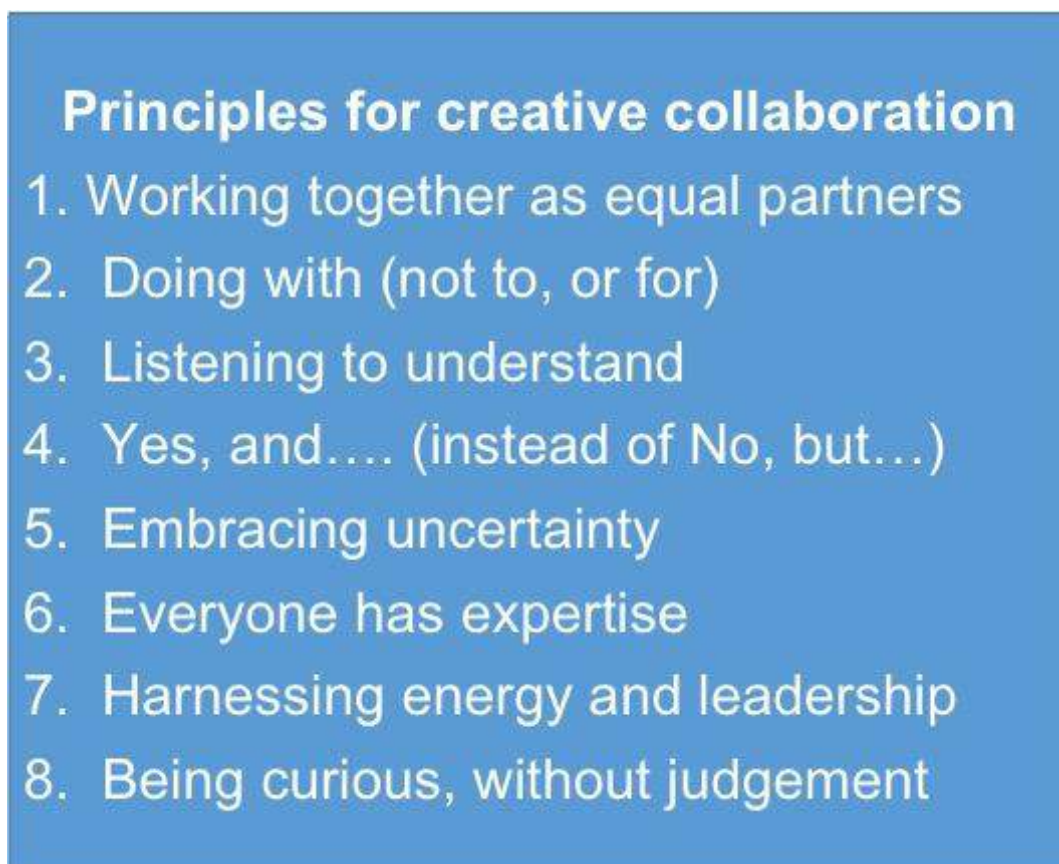


Fig 5: The eight RCN principles for creative collaboration (Source: O'Siochru 2018)

These principles were drawn from a range of models from creative collaboration (Sawyer 2008), community activism (Bolton 2017) and quality improvement (Institute for Healthcare Improvement 2003) through to our own forthcoming report outlining successful approaches to connecting and campaigning with members (RCN 2019).

Some creative approaches and relationships

All events used creative approaches to the generation and development of ideas. We asked participants to work with images, words and creative process to capture the issues and their ideas about what was possible (Figure 6).

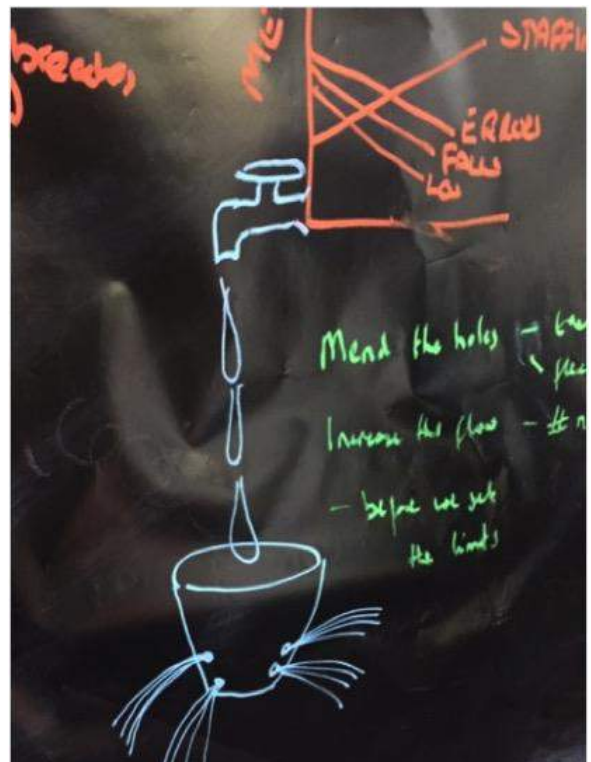


Fig 6: The creative collaborative at work (Images by O'Siochru)

The approaches adopted ranged from drawing and film-making to poetry writing and performance. In designing the events, I realised that it would be essential to create spaces that felt open, accepting and collegiate. Members and staff would be sitting alongside and working with one another, and senior managers who wanted to attend were asked to be there as observers, not leaders, listening carefully to the ideas coming from the room, without judgement or critique.

Practice and outcomes

Setting out expectations in advance, and the use of new and different creative approaches to the generation of ideas, resulted in collaborations that were highly creative, energetic and enthusiastic. Participants enthusiastically embraced the challenge to think differently and creatively with truly innovative results. The range of outputs from images and stories to poems and films was beyond anything we had achieved in the past in working with our members.

‘With visual creativity, researchers have found that groups beat out solo workers. Many innovations depend on visualisation, abstract representation and complex relations’

(Sawyer 2008 pg. 69)

Some of the films that were developed by participants can be seen by clicking on the following links, featuring members speaking passionately and expertly about their own experiences ([Natasha Akbar](#), [Danielle Tiplady](#) and [Michael Lawton](#) 2019). By harnessing the contribution of these ‘new power’ voices to support our shared work as a College, we have been able to build our campaign from the ground up.

Consequences of creative collaboration: a nursing nuclear reaction

It remains to be seen whether the resulting campaign is more successful than our previous experiences (although the signs are good in terms of what is emerging in the co-design of our campaign brand, narrative and plans). But the key point for me is that this bridging approach has clearly delivered on engaging our members, bringing them in to the work and developing a sense of ownership and stewardship over it.

Bringing old power and new power together in a collaborative space has resulted in what our RCN President, Anne-Marie Rafferty, has described as, a ‘*nursing nuclear reaction*’ (Royal College of Nursing Feb, 2019). By creating a space where all participants felt safe to express their contribution in new and varied ways, we released an energy and collective power that has continued to sustain the work of the campaign through the subsequent months.

The resulting outcomes of the collaborative work have more recently been referenced by Ms Rafferty as a social experiment for the College:

‘The collaborative model brings together members, accredited reps and RCN staff from across our nine English regions. But our social experiment isn’t solely a voyage of discovery. It’s to demonstrate how you, our members, are leading change and have the skills to recruit members, patients and the wider public to support our campaigns.

As the public face of our profession and the most trusted of professions, you have the power to amplify our messages and champion our cause. And you have the ability to bring together our trade union and professional work better than anyone else’.

(Royal College of Nursing 2019)

At the time of writing we have just held a lobbying event in July (2019) at the Palace of Westminster, where 70 RCN members and staff jointly hosted a drop-in event for MPs and peers to speak to them about the nursing workforce crisis. 115 MPs turned up to listen to our members speak about the impact of the crisis and the reality of their working lives, making it the most successful lobbying event in the history of the College.

Bringing old power and new power together through creative collaboration has enabled us to come together as an organisation, working together as equal partners – members and staff – to fight for social change. Given where we were this time last year, it feels like an astonishingly powerful positive outcome.

Facilitating a nursing nuclear reaction: personal learning and reflection

I have been asked what it is like being a transformative facilitator using creative collaboration as a bridge between old and new power, and this question has really made me think about how I work and what it feels like to be in the middle of this nursing nuclear reaction (Figure 7).

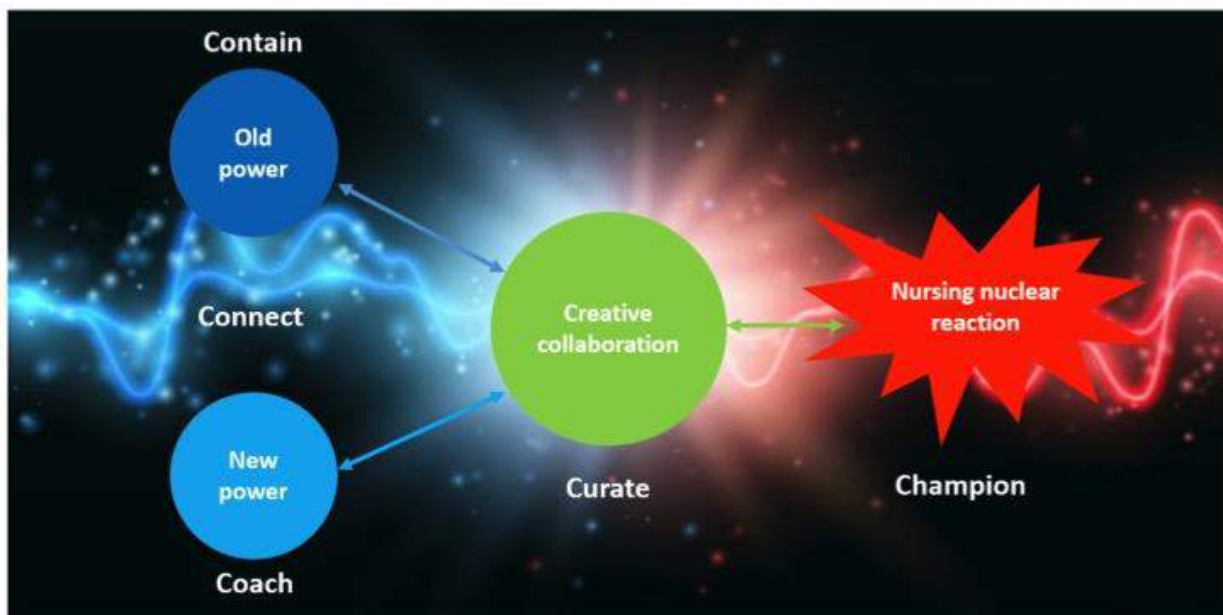


Fig 7: My 5C approach to creative collaboration as a bridge between old and new power (Source: O'Siochru 2019)

In reflecting on the past year, it seems to me that there are five key roles that I have taken on in order to facilitate our new ways of working and the creative collaboration approach.

1. **Connector** – old and new power need help to come together. Some of this help can be practical, such as commissioning, planning, designing and delivering collaborative events that bring both sides together in a safe and creative space. However, there is also something about identifying shared intentions and a sense of purpose and commonality that means that the invitation to come together is one that both sides step in to and embrace.

2. **Container** – working in the ways I have described seem to result in a significant amount of anxiety, particularly in those who hold and exercise old power. It appears to me that much of this anxiety stems from issues of trust and control and, in our case, the added sensitivities resulting from negative or painful past experiences of conflict. I found that I acted as a container for much of this anxiety, enabling individuals to express and acknowledge their concerns, and presenting ways in which they could be managed without compromising the creative collaboration approach. In this, I found the development and sharing of the eight principles (Fig 5 above) was invaluable as an underpinning framework, and I returned time and again to them as an agreed and signed-up-to way of working.
3. **Coach** – many ‘new power’ activists have passion and energy, but may struggle to express their ideas and suggestions in ways that can be embraced and understood by their ‘old power’ partners. In this bridging role, I spent time with our active members helping them to think through how they might engage with the process, and reflecting on how staff and other more experienced members reacted to them. As part of our on-going work on the campaign, I have also arranged for formal opportunities for old and new power proponents to come together to learn and develop their campaigning skills. This partnership approach to developing new skills and knowledge around campaigning for social change means that both old and new power are learning and putting their learning into practice together.
4. **Curator** – when you facilitate a creative collaboration, it generates an astonishing level of innovation and creative ideas. In the middle of this group flow (Sawyer 2008) it can be easy to get caught up in the process and energy, and miss the opportunity to harvest and then curate it. I have found that very often this role has fallen to me as the facilitator, and the prompt turning around of the work of the groups has been an essential part of honouring their creative output and making links across the nine regions. Further curation is also involved in ensuring that the work of the collaboratives informs and drives subsequent work to develop the strategic direction and is visible in the resulting campaign brand, narrative and plan.
5. **Champion** – throughout the whole bridging process, perhaps the key role is that of champion, both of the creative collaborative approach and of the resulting creative outputs. After collaborative events there is a key role for the facilitator to support the subsequent planning activity ensuring that the agreed way forward honours the work of the collaborative. Keeping everyone true to the eight agreed principles, containing anxiety and coaching others to contribute successfully to the collaboratives, capturing and collating the creative outputs, also all play a part in being a champion. For me, a key aspect of this role is delivered in the public arena through the use of my Twitter account. As a membership organisation with a huge membership – the vast majority of whom cannot be directly involved in the initial creative collaboratives – it feels essential to me that I use my role as champion to bring others into the work, so that they understand the approach and feel part of the resulting campaign brand, narrative and activity.

As Sawyer puts it:

‘Making the collaboration visible makes it much easier to talk about’ (Sawyer 2008 pg.177)

And perhaps that, in essence, is the key job of the transformative facilitator - enabling and making visible the work of creative collaboration and building momentum for social change. By building our campaign around the visible outputs of the collaborative, we ensure that all involved can see their contribution and feel a sense of ownership and pride in their shared endeavour. In addition, the wider organisation – both members and staff - can see the hard evidence that speaks to the commitment of both old and new power to working together in service of their shared intention.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank [Helen Bevan](#) from NHS Horizons and [Sue Tibballs](#) from the Sheila McKechnie Foundation for their permission to reproduce images from their work on the [School for Change Agents](#) and the Social Power report (SMK 2018) respectively.

I would also like to pay tribute to two innovative leaders from the Royal College of Nursing: **Sue Antrobus** who has been my line manager and inspiration for over 10 years; and **Patricia Marquis**, England Director, who has had the vision and courage to try out creative approaches to working with new power.

Finally, the work presented in this paper would not have been possible without the help of my colleagues **Catherine Salter** and **Peter Fairbank** and the commitment and growth mindset of **all the RCN members and staff who worked on the Engaging Active Members project** (there are too many of you to mention but you know who you are).

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About the author

Mairead O'Siochru originally qualified as a physiotherapist but is currently a facilitator working in the Royal College of Nursing, based in the Employment Relations Department. In her substantive role she leads on the quality assurance of the RCN's learning and development offer for RCN trade union representatives (reps) and quality improvement initiatives to strengthen and support reps in their role.

More recently, Mairead has been seconded to the England campaign team to work on the Staffing for Safe and Effective Care campaign which is aiming to elevate the known problem of nursing staff shortage to the level of a national crisis that demands urgent action to address the serious consequences for nursing staff, the health and social care system and wider society.

In 2017 Mairead completed an Advanced Diploma in Leading Creative Collaboration and since that time has been bringing her new skills and knowledge to her quality improvement and campaigning work to build bridges between senior management and members and enable meaningful co-production in high profile areas of work for the college. E: mairead.o'siochru@rcn.org.uk, mairead63@hotmail.co.uk.

Tapping into courageous creativity: finding your inner Danny

Liz Nottingham



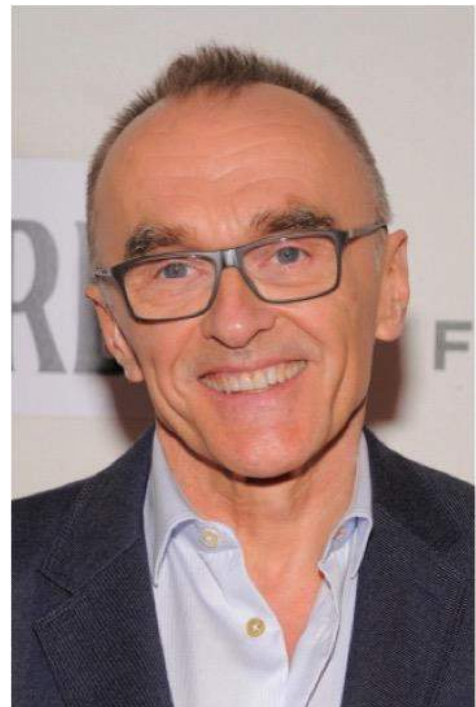
Keywords:

group psychology, change,
creativity, leadership,
collaboration, reflection, disruption

An inspiration for creative disruption: finding my inner Danny Boyle

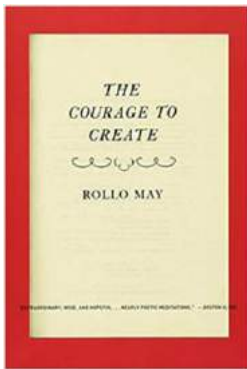
As I set about writing this piece, I was asked, “What is your example of creative collaboration?” I immediately visualized the summer of 2012. I would love to know what happened at the London Olympic Games Committee planning meeting, when Danny Boyle pitched his idea of dropping the Queen from a helicopter into the central stadium, to the delight of the waiting world. (See this short [video #1](#)).

I have often wondered how that conversation played out; who presented the idea, how was it received, who offered to contact the palace and what was the initial response to this highly creative - and daring - concept when it was put to Her Majesty? This was a summer that the UK never wanted to end. (Watch another short [video #2](#) of the opening ceremony).





The London Games created new communities, ignited new collaborations, generated an unprecedented global interest in the Paralympic Games and London felt that every day was sports day. We *inhaled* it. Yet in the build up to the Games, there was a UK element of anxiety and doubt. Some believed that we would be unable to pull it off, terrified that the transport system would not cope and that GB would look ridiculous on a global stage.



This is a great metaphor of creative disruption for me. Perhaps Danny Boyle had already discovered the humanistic psychologist and existentialist philosopher Rollo May:

“To live into the future means to leap into the unknown, and this requires a deep degree of courage for which there is no immediate precedent and which few people realise.”

(May, R. The Courage to Create, 1994.)

What does this have to do with business?

Well, looking at the Olympic balance sheet, quite a bit! Lots of £000000's are on there, [financially](#) and otherwise (Goldhill 2014).

So, where does this leave me? I find myself increasingly curious about the creative opportunity within the global workplace. As a coach, facilitator, creative and HR bod, I have led organisational change programmes and know that nothing much changes as a result of a new organisation chart. I remain perplexed about the curious relationship of organisations and people. A quote that has stayed with me over the years is, “organisations are great, just don't put any people in them.” As a young HR manager at the time, I remember thinking, “how ridiculous!” I eventually got the message. People do not flourish in standard organisational structures and charts as your location in a box does not affect your behaviour, other than to create envy and annoyance when your box is disproportionate to that of your rival's. How many times have I heard leaders say that because someone is sitting next to someone that they will “naturally” engage with other people's work? I've got enough of my own work to do without getting involved in yours!

You can put me in a leadership box, but without support, clarity and training I may well carry on doing only the things I know how to do. But the charts look great along with the all-encompassing circle around them with **COLLABORATION** writ large. Sitting in yet another dull meeting room staring at a white board to solve unprecedented issues does not work, yet still we keep doing it - and foolishly expecting things to change. Margaret Heffernan (www.mheffernan.com) at the HR Changeboard conference in 2016 advocated that businesses need to recruit more designers to help business shape solutions to the questions that have never been asked before. Designers can't stop designing the unknown and the unseen. It is in their DNA.

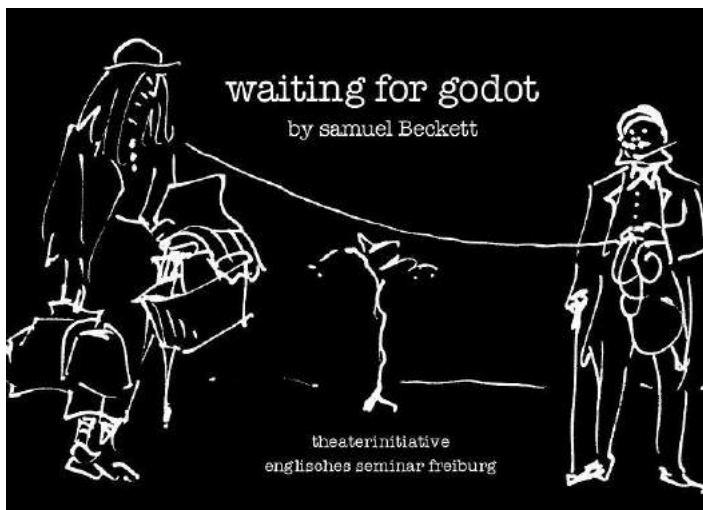
So, I wonder that *if* the only person who likes change truly is a baby with a wet nappy, never before has there been a need for the emergence of new brave, vulnerable and creative leadership.

Starting a new movement to change the conversation

If we can't afford a designer or a creative director in our business, how do we start to change the conversation? The time has come to start a new movement. Just take a look at the basics of where we are in the workplace. Our core working hours framework for most UK offices runs on a 9am - 5pm contract as a remnant of post war Britain. We can surely do better than that!

My premise is that we have worked our way through many iterations of leadership from command and control, to charismatic, authentic and transformational. Recently, in Cannes, the advertising community was talking of "matriarchal leadership." My sense is that we need a creative, human and inclusive leadership style and practice. As May says, we need courage. And to respond to the unknown, we need creativity. I don't see this on most leadership development curricula, and if I do, it seems to be a bedfellow with strategy, and married to the world of digital. Hardly very human.

My own Danny moment



'Waiting for Godot', [theatre poster](#) by [fewskulchor](#), Wikimedia Commons

My intention is to support our current and emerging leaders to find their courageous creativity. In doing so, I explain how I have learned to walk my own walk.

As a newly appointed Human Resources Director, I was once tasked with reducing an eye-watering 60% staff turnover figure.

Feedback from a leadership workshop one day revealed a group of leaders complaining about the shortcomings of the next layer of leadership above them and them bemoaning how the mythical 'they' should do 'x, y and z.'

Their workshop was a disturbing scene from *Waiting for Godot*; a belief that ‘someone’ would turn up and sort it all out for them. They were the transactional analysis victims. ‘Victim’ writ large.

If our leaders are waiting, then who was leading? A radical response was required without a flip chart, standard meeting rooms and a dull diet of leadership theory and content. Urgent disruption with a dose of personal responsibility was needed! This was my moment of transformational learning as I faced a disorienting dilemma as described by Jack Mezirow. Jack states that “disorienting dilemmas are experiences that don’t fit into a person’s current beliefs about the world. When faced with a disorienting dilemma, people are forced to reconsider their beliefs in a way that will fit this new experience into the rest of their worldview. This often happens through ‘critical reflection’ in the context of dialogue with other people.” Jack Mezirow (1923-2014)

My moment of critical reflection - introducing some creative disruption

In 2008, I partnered with a facilitator and ran a proto type two-day residential at a yoga retreat people. We immersed participants in new concepts; silent walks, journaling, exploring who they are and their impact on others. We introduced -allegedly-challenging vegetarian food, candles, cushions and self-reflection. It nearly blew their minds! A few of them demanded to go home, whilst others said that it was the best thing that they had ever experienced! After much inquisition and challenge of my design and methods, and listening to group members’ learning upon their return to the office, I ran this workshop a subsequent 17 times, and participants continue to reference it today.

This first, experimental week was the white knuckle ride of my career! My concept for self-development was so radically different, so brave compared to anything anyone had experienced previously. I was almost throwing myself out of my own helicopter – long before Danny did the same with the Queen!

Changing the status quo isn’t easy

My learning was that, when we disrupt people, they aren’t necessarily happy about that moment of disruption. How do we evaluate this in an organisation? I also notice that those in leadership positions do not always want their people to be transformed beyond the current ways of working, because the current ways of working, at some level, serve those who set the prevailing rules. How often have we heard managers say to the enthusiastic workshop returner; “well that’s all very well, but we don’t do that around here”? For the bold facilitator, the shoots of the results may appear long after the even - after necessary time for reflection, processing, percolating and experimenting. Trust in the process is key and the facilitator needs to hold this space with the anxious client.

Changing one aspect of the system ([Foster 2012](#)), changes everything, in time. And that takes bravery. Relationships are in a state of constant motion on many simultaneous levels. We are in relationship with ourselves, in teams, in groups at work and other situations. We all carry our past with us and any situation or relationship can trigger us at any time. As facilitators, we affect many aspects of the whole system when we work with members of a part of the system. It is inevitable that these interventions create movement in other places and spaces.

Finding Your Inner Danny within The Wheel of Creativity

I have drawn upon my own experiences and reflections, and created a wheel of courageous creativity as an eight-stage conceptual framework, to suggest a way for you to express your own creative leadership.

Having read an ArtGym article on the traits of creative leadership, I decided to create my own visual tool. Creative leadership may be an overwhelming subject for some, with confusion about where to start. This wheel invites the reader to reflect, to listen to their inner wisdom and self-assess how they are in relationship with themselves and others. It can also be used as coaching tool in pairs or as a group.

The plotting of the wheel highlights the areas for potential consideration for your focus and growth; When working 1:1, or facilitating workshops, I am noticing my increased use of this approach. The image helps us to connect and reflect at a deeper level and when complete, reveals interconnections which we may not previously noticed. To be human we need to listen to ourselves, to others, encourage others and make space for their growth. If we enter meetings with a pre-conceived view of the outcome, we have denied other voices being heard and alternative outcomes being explored.

“Innovation is blocked when one (or more) of the participants already has a preconceived idea of how to reach the goal; improvisers frown on this practice, pejoratively calling it ‘writing the script in your head.’ People who listen closely are energising, and people who energise others are proven to be higher performers.”

(Sawyer 2017: 46)

Who you are is how you lead

I offer this wheel of courageous creativity (see Figure 1 below) as the start of a new conversation with ourselves, as we consider that;

“By bringing our whole selves to work, we will be igniting creativity not only in ourselves but also in others.”

(Whitaker 2016)

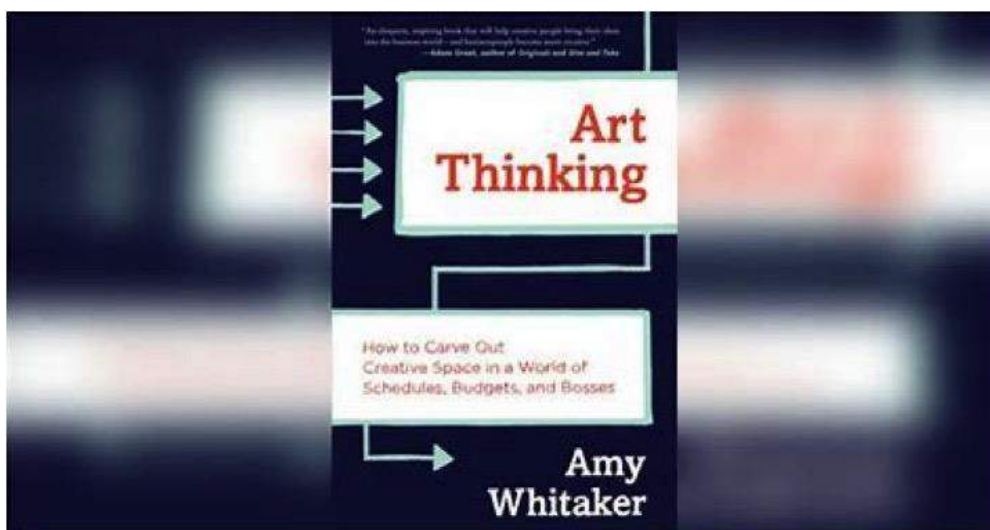
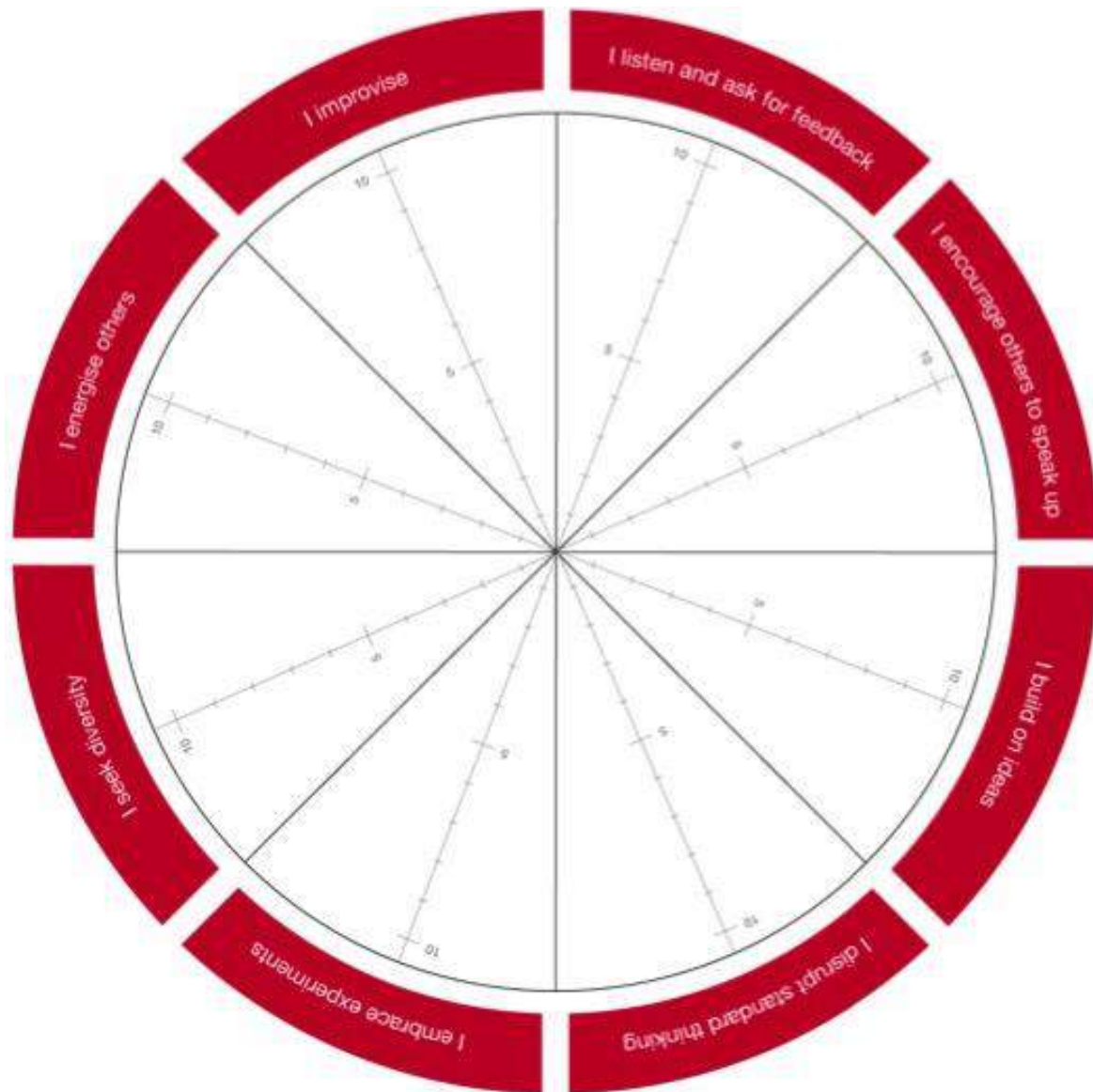


Figure 1: The wheel of courageous creativity



Inspired by ArtGym, and developed by me, Liz Nottingham

How to find *your* Inner Danny

As you explore the wheel, either alone, or in pairs, or groups, reflect on each of the following aspects of the wheel:

1. I encourage others to speak up

Check in how much safety is in the room for people to feel comfortable to speak. A creative leader listens to others and gives space and attention for others to be both heard and be seen. Notice who closes others down in meetings and what happens to them when people are not heard.

Ask lots of open questions; who? what? when? where? how? If you like to talk a lot, count to ten before you speak. If you tend to be quiet, speak by the count of ten.

2. I build on ideas

With creating a safe space comes the golden opportunity to be curious, to grow and develop the shared ideas. In this space there is no ego and no ridicule. Together, we start to co-create and cultivate the greatest possibilities. As the leader, you drop your ego and noise and truly build on these ideas, no matter where they come from.

Respond with “yes ... and” and delete the “no ... but” from your language. Notice how often you say no.

3. I disrupt standard thinking

As creative leaders, we have to go for the bold, the unseen, the unknown and disrupt ourselves and others.

Ask “what is the greatest possible outcome here and who cares?” Check in with yourself about a time when you really pushed the impossible, or did you choose to stay safe? Are you playing big enough?

4. I embrace experiments

You can learn from design thinking and test and learn. Create prototypes, try things out and build out your ideas. Create a group of supporters and dissenters and explore your ideas and approach with them. The worst thing that can happen is you end up with a better outcome! I introduced Mindfulness in the work place 10 years ago by taking this approach.

Ask: “I don’t have all the answers here; let’s try it for a road test and see what happens.” Be curious about others’ experience.

5. I seek diversity

When we pay attention to seeking diversity, we start to actively explore the juicy part in the points of difference. Curiosity and an open heart and mind are key here, as we all like people who are just that little bit like us. Employ a team of people who look nothing like you, walk nothing like you and have experiences that are nothing like yours. Actively invite people from other departments and teams to add another layer of richness to your thinking.

Ask “am I playing safe, again?” and “what am I afraid of?”

6. I energise others

Who we are is how we lead. How much of ourselves we bring to work impacts those around us.

Ask: “How am I showing up as a leader today, do I add to the relationship?” Check in with yourself throughout the day. “How was I in my last meeting? “How is my energy right now?”

7. I improvise

As creative leaders we are co-creating the conditions for group flow. Keith Sawyer says:

“In Group flow, each person’s idea builds on those just contributed by his or her colleagues. The improvisation appears to be guided by an invisible hand towards a peak but small idea build and an innovation emerges.” (Group Genius p.50)

As leaders, we stand on shaky ground. To prepare us to respond to uncertainty in the best way, we can turn to the drama skills of improvisation as we respond in the moment, to the moment.

8. I listen and ask for feedback.

“*There is no failure, only feedback*” is an NLP pre-supposition. When did you last seek out feedback? How might it be a gift for you? What is your relationship with feedback? Check out Liz Lerman and her creative [Critical Review Process](#) for a new approach

Now is the time for a new lens on leadership that extends beyond the company mechanics of finance, as reporting on the past is no longer an accurate barometer of the future. If we choose not to explore our inner Danny, we all run the risk of failure.

Even if we dialled up just one of these areas on the wheel, it would most likely lead to a different result and we may learn something about ourselves on the way. My business experience tells me that in most organisations, there is a great deal of telling going on and not much listening. So next time you are heading into one of many meetings this week, remember the supreme creative power of listening;

“At work, conversation with colleagues is one of the most flow inducing activities; managers, in particular, are most likely to be in flow when they are engaged in conversation. Conversation leads to flow, and flow leads to creativity.”

(Group Genius p.43)

What can group psychology offer organisations?

Developing our creative leadership style also requires us to look at the teams of people in our organisations and respond to them in a new way. My recent creative facilitation studies with the Artgym introduced me to the work of T Martin Ringer and his insightful group work in [Group Action](#).

As a leader, it strikes me that there has been a missing link in the evolution of our business leaders, as the obvious parallel - that has been drawn by very few - is that *organisations are in fact groups*. This is an obvious thing to say when I think about it, yet no one in the businesses I have experienced has paid attention to the unconscious world in the workplace, or attended to this as a strong presence in the office. Group work requires expertise, time and attention.

The following Ringer paragraph changes the organisational dynamic for me and thus confirms the case for a new leadership dialogue:

“Most people prefer to act as if groups are just collections of individuals and the same principles can be applied to managing groups, teams and meetings as can be applied to managing one-to-one conversations. I’m still regularly in contact with otherwise competent professionals who just

do not seem to know how much more effective they could be if they were more effective group leaders.”

(Group Action p. 27)

Being human

In a technological world with reward and recognition for cognitive skills, we need to be human and humane. We need to bring our whole selves when being in relationship with others. We need to know ourselves to be flexible with others. Only when we are in a relationship with ourselves can we better respond to the needs of others with courageous creativity.

As you reflect on your own creative leadership, I close with a final reflection on Danny Boyle;

“Danny Boyle (and all those who helped him) managed to do the impossible. He banished thoughts of cynicism and gave Britain something to be proud of, putting their sports, their music, their film, their literature, and even their healthcare system, front and center. But he also created a vision both personal and deeply weird, yet also universal.”

(Oliver Lyttelton 28 July 2012, IndieWire)

Imagine for a moment the greatest possible outcome for your creative leadership for yourself, your team and the wider system. I wish you well in finding your inner Danny.

Envoi

I would like to point out that I have never met Danny Boyle and am only referencing my experience of his creative output as a source of inspiration for my own.

Acknowledgements

www.artgym.com

www.lizlerman.com

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About the author

Liz is passionate and relentless about exploring creative ways to develop people to be the best they can be. Founder of one of the early initiatives to support returning mums with her Back2BusinessShip programme, Liz is also a campaigner for diversity on the advisory board of Creative Equals, a Trustee for Art Against Knives and the Darjeeling Children's Trust, a coach supervisor and advanced facilitator in creative collaboration.

Liz is recognized for her bold and inspirational approach to the people agenda, shaping culture and disrupting learning and development. She has won many awards for her talent development work and led a business into the Sunday Times Top 100 listing three times.

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Building a dangly relationship with creative collaboration

Lynne Irwin



In this article I explore my own relationship with, and resistance to, creative collaboration. I hold the intention and hope of enabling others to recognise themselves and look their own obstacles in the eye, for the sake of that 'whoosh' moment when whatever emerges from the process of creative collaboration breaks through, and nothing is quite the same again.

Key words

Creative collaboration, resistance, vulnerability, trust, inhibitors, wounded self-concept

A question left dangling

“So, what you’re going to do is create a piece of wearable art to represent your creative self, using these materials.”

Late morning, Friday 10th March 2017. I am frozen in despair, feeling small, incompetent, clumsy and completely and utterly uncreative. I am a participant on the [Advanced Diploma in Leading Creative Collaboration](#) (I guess the clue was in the title) and I feel a complete fraud. Create an image of my Creative Self? I don’t know where to start, or even if I have a creative self. The other participants move (to my mind) confidently and eagerly to the table, which is covered in a glorious array of materials, cardboards, paint guns and other assorted craft materials. There’s even the opportunity to screen print. I’m overwhelmed and still frozen.

The course leader comes over to me and encourages me to make a start. I look at her, feeling like a small child, with tears in my eyes – everyone else knows what they are doing, and I haven’t got a clue. The facilitator says something along the lines of ‘just start and see what happens’. And so, I do start. I pick up materials without any idea of what I’m going to create, and put them together.

I watch as everyone else seems to move with purpose. In the end, I create a dangly article which the co-facilitator enthusiastically suggests I could wear as a dress. She pins it onto me, and her belief in my dangly article transforms it into something which feels slightly creative. I start to feel a little better.





We end the session with a fashion parade where we walk up and down between the participants as if on a catwalk to parade our creative selves with style and pride. I channel my inner jester and do this with a flourish. To my amazement, I am not ridiculed and laughed off the catwalk, but cheered, encouraged and celebrated. It is over. I have survived. I take my article home with me and feel sick every time I look at it. Eventually, I throw it out.



Fake it until you make it!

Maybe it'll look better on?

As a facilitator, I plead 'guilty as charged'. I too have asked participants to express things creatively, perhaps by thinking of a metaphor to capture their development journey or to create a storyboard. I believe in the power of creativity, that through letting images emerge we tap into our subconscious and uncover parts of ourselves that we haven't yet met. And yet, I noticed that when I was asking participants to do that, I felt uncomfortable. At times I was relieved if we didn't have enough time to explore fully. I felt my words were wooden and my instructions were very brief, as if I didn't want to be associated with them.

As a research practitioner, I only facilitate and coach using methods that have worked for me. So, what was getting in my way here? My curiosity about how to be confident and 'me' in this space grew, both intriguing and freezing me at the same time. How could I authentically ask participants to be creative when I recoiled from this very activity myself? My shyness and lack of trust in my relationship with creativity was taking centre stage and blocking my ability to enable creativity (mine and others) to emerge. I felt stuck and wanted to create my own 'whoosh' moment, to let my creativity break through.

So, I followed my curiosity and stepped into exploring my relationship with creativity. What prevented me from embracing my own creativity? What could I do to remove these obstacles so that I could both collaborate with my own creativity and authentically ask others to do the same? So here, I share my thoughts and experience with you, in the hope that you meet yourself in there somewhere, and to encourage you to get up close and personal in your relationship with your own creativity, in whatever form this shows up.

I have realised that the aspect of creativity which scares me, which disconnects me from my sense of who I am, is the unknown. Give me a knitting pattern or a recipe, or even an idea of what you'd like me to draw, and I'll happily step into it. It's the blank page that makes me freeze. This shows up in my work as well – I will make a pre-written event my own, but the pain and angst of designing an event from scratch is immense. I understand that at its base this is about getting it right. Right for others - what is it that I can create that others will approve of? And yet, this narrowness of being and thinking blocks the emergence of what could be.

Creativity

"something is born, comes into being, something that did not exist before"

(Rollo May, 1994, page 78).

The first book I read which helped me on my way was Rollo May's book "The Courage to Create". Reading this was a revelation. I realised it wasn't just me who struggled with creating something. That actually, this discomfort was to be embraced as a sign of creativity occurring. I also learned to take time, to pace myself and to let creativity emerge, perhaps when I'm out walking, sleeping or even going around the supermarket. 'Don't force the process and embrace the discomfort, you are not alone' would be my headline summary of this book. I sow the seed and let it take root, rather than expecting it to be complete in an hour.

When I'm facilitating, I look for this pain and encourage it. Voicing my experience and welcoming the pain into the room makes it a shared experience, and seems to help the participants. I'll encourage people to move around, to break when they need to, to breathe and trust.

"There is a curiously sharp sense of joy – or perhaps better expressed, a sense of mild ecstasy – that comes when you find the particular form required by your creation. Let us say you have been puzzling about it for days when suddenly you get the insight that unlocks the door – you see how to write that line, what combination of colours is needed in your picture, how to form that theme you may be writing for a class."

(May, ibid: 122)

Rollo May's writing also helped me to move forward from the pain of birthing to that place of trust, that moment when everything clicks into place and something new emerges. The job is done. Satisfaction and joy emerge. I know I am finished. Trusting that this moment will arise when it's ready helps my confidence in creating something, and ensures that I keep on making space, rather than narrowing and closing off my creative abilities through the frustration of not delivering.

I recognise that this feeling of being in fellowship with other struggling creators gives me courage. It also helps me build a structure to create. Acknowledging that creativity takes time, I manage my expectations. I do not beat myself up if I've not created an agenda for a teambuilding event in one hour. Instead, if I'm feeling stuck, I'll go for a walk or play with my dogs and see what shifts.



Billie-Jean



Peggy-Sue

I'll play around with ideas when I'm doing other things. I set aside thinking time when I'll sit somewhere and just allow my mind to wander. I accept that what needs to emerge isn't ready to show its face yet, and so I'll purposefully put it to one side and get on with my life. It's those in-the-shower moments when I have the best ideas.

Spotting and dealing with resistance

"It's not the writing part that's hard. What's hard is sitting down to write. What keeps us from sitting down is Resistance."

(Steven Pressfield, 2002).

Steven Pressfield's book, 'The War of Art' has also been instrumental in building my relationship with creativity. I love the author's humour, clarity and vulnerability as he shares what gets in his way of creating. My headline takeaway from this book is what he calls his Rule of Thumb:

"The more scared we are of a work or calling, the more sure we can be that we have to do it."

"So, if you're paralyzed with fear, it's a good thing. It shows you what you have to do."

(ibid)

Resistance shows up for me when I'm designing, when I'm drawing, when I'm asking others to create. It's both a physical and mental block. Accepting this resistance and again knowing it's not just me that feels it, helps me look it in the eye and make the choice that is right for me, to take the first step, to just do it. I'm also a spotter of resistance in others and find that observing and voicing this helps others to make different choices as well.

The thing that I am resisting the most is the thing which is the most beneficial for me to do. I use this to plan my day, asking myself: 'So what is it I'm resisting the most today?'. I will distract myself with work rather than going to a gallery or a garden. I will distract myself by working on spreadsheets and tidying up my accounts, rather than creating space to design a leadership challenge.

Fear of rejection

I also understand that I have deep-seated feelings of humiliation and rejection when it comes to creativity. My worst fear is that I will be laughed at, or that I won't fit in. Knowing this, I choose not to create, to keep myself safe – and therefore small, and stagnant. For me, this is the benefit of resistance. Will Schutz (1958), the creator of FIRO theory, speaks about the three dimensions required to build a relationship – inclusion, control and openness. These dimensions are associated with the fears of rejection, humiliation and being ignored, and with the positive feelings of belonging, competence and acceptance. When I think of myself as a creative being, I fall – or used to fall – into the first camp, with rejection and humiliation looming large.

FIRO is a humanistic psychological theory, and so is based on choice. I choose to resist rather than embrace my creativity. FIRO is also based on the belief that self-concept is at the heart of everything we do and everything we be. Schutz would describe my beliefs in my creativity as having a wounded self-concept, and I agree with him. So, bit by bit, I am choosing to include myself in my own creativity, to control when and what I do, to experience the openness and joy of letting emerge what wants to emerge. I notice when I am creating and accepting myself as a creative being. I pay attention to how I block myself, and instead ask myself what choice I want to make? What needs do I have that are not being met, and what is getting in my way? I am choosing to heal my self-concept and trust myself, to heal my inner creator.

Brené Brown in her audiobook 'The Power of Vulnerability' (2013), talks about the impact of shame on being creative, and describes the immense vulnerability we display when we step into our creativity. She talks about a moment very similar to my experience of being frozen and in tears when being asked to create.

Brown expands further on the struggle to create, by describing the negative impact of comparison. She talks about children stopping being imaginative as they progress through school and start to compare themselves to their classmates and start thinking 'I don't fit in, I'm not good enough anymore'. How many of our participants go through this exact emotion when we ask them to draw something, write a poem or act something out?

"To create, to innovate, to share something that hasn't existed before – to do that is to become incredibly vulnerable. "

(Brené Brown, 2013)

On the same creative collaboration course, I was asked to wander round an exhibition taking photos of exhibits which spoke to me of my creativity. I felt awkward doing this but thought I'd give it a go; after all, I wanted to fit in and please people.



Looking at the photos again now though, I can recognise my creative self in there. Throughout all the photos there is a clear sense of colour and structure. There are lots of angles on many of the photos.



Photos were taken at The Whitechapel Gallery, 77-82 Whitechapel High Street, Shadwell, London E1 7QX

There's something reassuring for me in being able to label something, in making the unknown known, or the implicit explicit. I have a sense of awakening my creativity: there I am, that's how I do it, I feel safe, I feel like I belong – to myself.

Embracing acceptance



For me, building a relationship with creativity is first of all about acceptance. Then it's about walking alongside and giving it a go. It's about accepting and embracing the struggle so that I am comfortable in the struggle and open, rather than alarmed and closed.



First truth first

Will Schutz has a brilliant concept called 'First truth first'. What is the truth I don't acknowledge, or voice (even to myself) that is getting in my way? What is my first truth about being creative – that I'm scared I'll humiliate myself, that I'm anxious that what I create will not be what you want me to create, that I'll get it wrong? By naming my truth I am able to step into my creativity. When I facilitate, I name my truth about creativity when I ask others to do the same, and I encourage others to name theirs. Name it, get it out of the way to enable what wants to emerge to come through.

Making choices: keeping a metaphor diary

Will Shutz talks about choices, choosing the life we lead. I realised that when I was facilitating, I was choosing to skip over the creative parts, briefing instructions rather than telling stories. I would also be frozen in plenary – how on earth would I comment on other peoples' creations?

One of the exercises I found particularly difficult to facilitate was asking participants to draw an image which described their development journey. I realised that I didn't easily think in pictures, and found it a challenge to stimulate their thinking to enable their images to emerge. I felt stuck. So, in true practitioner researcher mode, I decided to take on the challenge myself and to keep a metaphor diary. Every day I draw a metaphor to describe my day, my pictures are getting bolder and bigger. I look forward to doing my drawing, rather than resisting it. When I first started I hadn't a clue what to draw, so I began with drawing a smiley face, or a heart, or sun and cloud. Then I began to experiment with structure, which is part of my creative self, so I'd ask myself: if today was a food, which food would it have been (spaghetti bolognese), or I'd draw highlights of my day and then draw an image of the feeling I was left with. I notice now that walking through my day, I'll start to get images in my head of how I might draw what's happening, what I'm experiencing. My confidence in facilitating this exercise is building as well. I now find myself giving examples and enjoying being in conversation with the participants as their images emerge.

Deepening the bond: embracing the darkness and light

“I have come to believe that creativity is our true nature, that blocks are an unnatural thwarting of a process at once as normal and miraculous as the blossoming of a flower at the end of a slender green stem.”

(Julia Cameron, 2016, page xiii)

To deepen my relationship with creativity, I decided to embark on Julia Cameron's 'The Artist's Way' (2002), which she describes as a 12-week journey to recover creativity. Following this week by week programme, I am meeting different aspects of my creative self, understanding more about what enables blocks me, and learning to take delight in being creative, rather than being scared of it. I am holding my creativity by the hand, saying, 'Come on, take a breath and step forward. I've got this, we can do it'. I'll step into something creative rather than hold back. Going to galleries, drawing, writing poetry, I feel shy, but I'm becoming more comfortable with this new friend. We've met each other, now we are deepening our bond. I am embracing both the darkness and light of creativity, the struggle and the joy, learning to trust my own and other's creativity.

Implications for my facilitation role

So, what does this mean for me as a facilitator? My 'so what'? is that I don't freeze as much, or draw as many blanks when asked for examples. I am able to join my story with those of the participants when we explore what their creative expression means. I am able to enter into conversation with the participants and what is getting in the way of their creativity, rather than what the output should be. I feel like me rather than a fraud.

What does it mean for me as a human being? I have a sense of exploration, of boldly colouring in my own life. I pay more attention to my surroundings. I hear the birds, I wonder at the sunlight dappling the woods, and my phone is now brimming with photos of things which have caught my attention and made me stop and look, rather than just walking by. I have a greater sense of self-acceptance and confidence in who I am and what is within me. As Brené Brown says:

“unused creativity is not benign, it turns into rage, grief, shame, judgment”.

(Brown, op. cit.)

Will Schutz tells me to make the choice, and the choice I make is to trust and welcome my creative self.

I end with the poem that I wrote on that self-same creative collaboration course about my creative self:

I look out through the door at the creative world.

It's my choice to step out and explore, or not.

Balancing risk against desire,

Expression against conformity

and approval.

Come out,
walk alongside me others say,
I'll share with you,
Together, we'll play.

I step out, I pause, I make my way.
My footsteps find their path,
I trust.

I draw a box, I colour it in, I add,
I squiggle, I swirl, I allow.
Losing myself
in what is emerging, I let it be
– acceptance of it, acceptance of me.

My creative self is messy and structured,
colourful and real.
I trust myself,
and others trust me.
Creativity enables what will be to be.

Oh, the wisdom of the subconscious. As I re-read these words, I realise that I now believe the words and meet myself in them. I am starting to like myself as a creative person, and enjoy enabling others to build their own relationship with creativity.

“I learned to get out of the way and let that creative force work through me”

(Cameron, 2016, page xiv)

I hope that my journey in getting to know who I am as a creative being encourages you in your own exploration, and I wish you joy in discovering and deepening your own creative force.

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About the author

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Moving experiences of creative collaboration

Eleonora Ramsby Herrera and Steve Dilworth

Creativity has an emergent quality: we cannot be sure where it will lead. We, Eleonora (ERH) and Steve (SD), are in a process of creative collaboration. We know when we first met, are less sure of when precisely our agreement to collaborate began, and have no fixed idea of our final destination.



Our creative alliance began with a shared hunch that the deepest of human experiences

cannot be expressed in words, yet they demand to be expressed. With this as our starting point, we set out to explore how physical movement could serve as a means to connect with and express grief. We draw on evolving theories and practices from the living fields of dance, somatic movement, yoga, physical theatre and creative writing, along with thanatology, which is the scientific study of death and practices related to it. We also use our own experience of life as a major underlying source of material to fuel our creativity and to galvanise our trust.

We wish to highlight the foundational importance of trust in creative collaborations. For a creative collaboration to evolve, collaborators must have enough trust to begin the process, and develop increasing trust to allow the direction to emerge. This article focuses on the way that we became aware of our foundation of mutual trust and how our trust has developed - in ourselves, in each other and in the creative process.

Given the highly personal nature of our stories, it is perhaps unsurprising that we identify trust as an essential pre-requisite at the heart of our creative collaboration. Whilst the need for trust is obvious in our own particular collaboration, we suspect that trust is essential in any creative collaboration.

We have had destinations on the way, but there is no ultimate arrival point on our horizon. Despite - or maybe because of - our willingness to allow our destination to have an element of mystery, we have, throughout the process, agreed and met a whole series of short-term goals. We explore these throughout

this article, making comparisons with concepts drawn from the study of play and creativity, using selected inspirational thinkers and practitioners such as Vygotsky (1967/2004) and Gray (2008).

In writing this article we are hoping that our words act as a catalyst - an invitation to readers to bring creativity into their own lives and work. In some cases, it might read as a validation of their current practice.

Keywords

Creativity, creative alliance, emergence, trust, grief, loss, curiosity, movement, play, authenticity, dialogue.

The essence of our moving experience: expressing grief

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.

(Extract from Mary Oliver's poem *Wild Geese*)

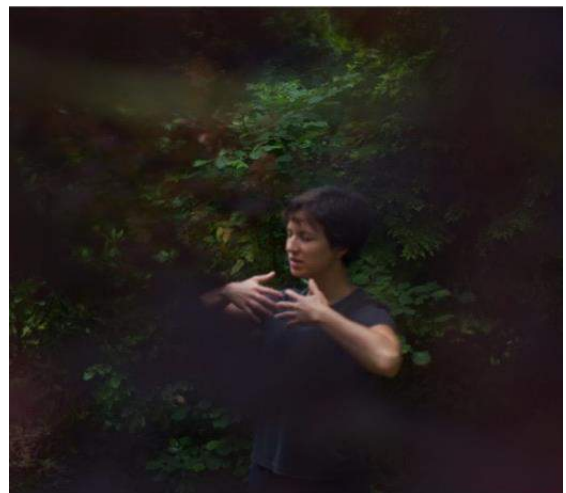
The main starting point for our collaboration was that we wanted to actively explore a mutual curiosity around the possibility that we could connect with and express grief, using physical dance movement. Our own, different yet similar, experiences of grief following the loss of loved ones to death, brought us to this question. To contextualise this further, we offer personal accounts of loss, and of how we each arrived at the decision to use dance movement to express ourselves and to co-create our inquiry.

From Eleonora:

"If I could tell you what it meant, there would be no point in dancing it"

(Isadora Duncan)

The unexpected loss of my father was unlike anything I had ever experienced. The complexity of my response to this life-changing event often left me at the point of frustration and confusion. I did not know how to speak about it, nor could I describe what I felt on the inside, in a way that felt meaningful and did my experience justice. It was a visceral experience that went further than words could reach. Coming from a dance and yoga background, physical movement was the only way that I could personally connect and express, in a genuine and heartfelt way, how I felt 'inside'.



Beyond my relationship with dance and yoga, both as a learner and as a professional, I deeply believe that our body is integral to our lived experience. What happens to us is not only stored as a separate mental construct, but continues to live on, inside our physical bodies (Van der Kolk, 2014). Our body is not separate from ourselves, but part of who we are, and each body carries its own “body narrative”, (Snowber, 2002: 23). The story of our body deserves to be expressed when words are not adequate to capture our internal landscape of felt and lived experiences. In those instances, dance/movement can serve as a creative portal through which the person dancing can express whatever has been left unsaid - that which cannot be articulated in words. This is what I set myself out to explore.

From Steve:

“Having a dialogue with what I cannot understand”

(Crystal Pite)



Losing a child is the worst fear of most parents – until it happens. When reality strikes, fear dissipates, and is replaced by something more nebulous. The deaths of my sons Ian (33) and Martin (30), within a 15-month period, followed the discovery that they harboured mitochondrial disease, a ruthless genetic idiosyncrasy.

As a parent, I managed this reality (what choice did I have?), though I can't describe how. I work in the domain of words, helping colleagues to reflect on their practice, within various health and social care organisations including end of life care. This professional knowledge of the field, that I now found myself personally adrift within, did not help me.

In attempting to express my own experience, I become lost in my head and learned how to sideline my feelings. Like many professional helpers, I do not readily accept help. I avoided counselling, as I knew that I would recognise and guard against the techniques.

I know very little about dance! I dimly recall how my body moved spontaneously to music as a child. My inner Billy Elliott was discouraged at that time. As a young adult/parent, I remember with painful clarity my hapless attempts to dance. After accompanying my small daughter onto the dance-floor, I recall her response to the mocking laughter of her siblings, as she defended me: “*Don't laugh – Dad is trying his best*”. I hung up my dancing shoes on being damned by such faint praise.

Meeting Ellie, in early 2018, was like a door opening. I found a kindred spirit who wanted to experiment with the use of movement as expression. This work has called me to make real contact with a deep part of my being, and to grow through the use of a different approach to engaging with my natural grief.

I am watchful over my use of my personal experience in my work, such as in writing this article. In this respect I was both encouraged and cautioned by the words of artist and writer Jonathan Young when working with the choreographer Crystal Pite:

“How close can I get to turning what happened in my life into art without feeling like I am using it?”

Creativity, imagination and play

Our collaboration can best be described as a series of unfolding events that all spring from the source of creativity and trust. Through our experience of working together, we believe that these two sources go hand in hand. You cannot have one without the other. According to Vygotsky (1967/2004), creativity can be seen as an act of constructing something new that is based on, draws upon, alters or combines already existing realities in order to create new realities. This could take the form of something physical/ material, as well as something within our minds and behaviours.

The creations that unfolded on our journey were at first sparked by our imagination. We planted imaginary seeds of ideas that later grew and manifested into a new reality. This reflects the notion that

at the heart of creativity lies imagination (ibid). As we embarked on our creative collaboration, we quickly discovered a process which naturally motivated us, and also required us to become more receptive to our imagination and to where it may take us. We were able and willing to draw from past experiences, while being open to imagining new possibilities and creating pathways to where we wanted to go and what we wanted to do. We held these ideas softly, to ensure that they remained malleable and open to change and development. Throughout this process of imagination and creation, we were always accompanied by a sense of wonder and curiosity of where this would take us and what would emerge on the way.

Imagination and play

We believe that imagination is something inherent in all human beings. How we choose to convey our imagination and use it as a springboard for creation, is up to each individual's need and unique expression. Our source of imagination is developed and expressed in early childhood through play (Vygotsky, 1967/2004; Ayman-Nolley, 1992). The definition of play, according to the Oxford Dictionary, is to:

“Engage in activity for enjoyment and recreation rather than a serious or practical purpose”

(Lexico Online Dictionary, accessed 30 July 2019).

Additionally, according to Gray (2008), play combines with other motives such as responsibility and collaborative skills. Gray (ibid) identifies the main characteristic of play as an activity that is self-chosen and self-directed, i.e. the player does what they want to do and therefore the player is free to leave anytime. This freedom contributes to a deep sense of play.

Rules

There is a paradox here, in that play still includes rules that have been agreed upon by all the players involved. Thus, there is structure to this play, which requires us to behave in accordance to these self-created and accepted rules, in the context of our environment and relationships. Play includes self-control, agreeing to the guidelines that are deemed appropriate by everyone involved (ibid). For us, this means that play also requires and contributes to building trust, whereby we choose to trust that our playmates, including ourselves, will respect the rules.

Setting goals

Play can also include various forms of setting goals. These develop some sense of organised structure and consequently to the creation of a space to develop whatever it is that we have set out to do. Gray (ibid) refers to this as a form of constructive goal setting which arises from enjoying the process of creating and moving towards the goal. Interestingly the goal remains less important and the motivation that comes with this is intrinsic. Play is thus enjoyable from the inside out, and not solely for the extrinsic rewards that may result from doing it.

Unfolding our imagination

Imagination is something that alters its expression and meaning for us as we grow up, whilst remaining an inherently important activity for expressing and developing our relation to ourselves and the world, no matter what chronological age we happen to be. For example, children who use imagination in play as an informal creative act, do so in more intense and emotional excitable ways than how adults typically do. According to Vygotsky (1967/2004: 34),

“the child can imagine vastly less than the adult, but he [she] has greater faith in the products of his [her] imagination and controls them less, and thus imagination, in the everyday, vulgar sense of this word, that is, what is unreal and made up, is of course greater in the child than in the adult”.

Learning to faithfully trust that our imagination would lead the way has been of central importance to our creative collaboration. An open mind with a healthy dose of courage served as our channels for unfolding our imagination as adults. New pathways can thus be created if we, as adults, can learn to trust our imagination to a greater extent, like we did as children. It is from that trust that creativity can emerge.

Being authentic with the process

To maintain a sustainable and authentic collaboration, we felt, from the start, that the driving force behind our work must stem from our mutual interest in the ‘research question’. We gave ourselves permission to allow our intrinsic motivation and curiosity to bring us closer to understanding, and connecting with, what we are genuinely interested in, and then integrated this into our research.

These words, by Cole & Knowles (2001: 60), eloquently capture our approach:

“If we operate on the principle of authenticity, we cannot follow a recipe or prescription. In saying this we are not suggesting a laissez-faire approach to the conceptualising and planning of a research project; on the contrary, what we are advocating requires a lot of effort, thought, imagination, self-awareness, and disciplinary knowledge”.

And herein lies the assimilation of the principles of creativity, imagination and play into the rigour of inquiry. Furthermore, our integration of these principles with our inquiry was cloaked in the essential blanket of trust. The authenticity of our research design reflects a set of guiding values and assumptions that has to be understood and agreed upon by all the players in our creative collaboration.

Trust: the essential ingredient in creative collaboration

There have been a whole series of steps that we have taken to develop trust. We summarise this process here, drawing from and building on what we have written so far.

At the outset, there was a reason to make contact that sprang from the suggestion, made by a mutual friend, who sensed that an introductory email to us both might be of interest. Goodness she was right!

The introductory email sparked enough curiosity to encourage us to make time to speak, initially on Skype. First contact led very quickly to an agreement for more. At this stage a common starting point emerged, with lots of maybes to consider. Our commitment was low-risk in terms of time and energy. We shared our experience of loss, the deaths of close relatives, in an attentive atmosphere in which speaking, listening, hearing and understanding enveloped our mutually respectful conversation.

We began with our shared interest in expressions of grief, and soon realised that we both wished to explore it more deeply. We thus agreed to make, initially small and then increasing, investments of time and energy that steadily built, without feeling burdensome.

We gradually realised that our conversation was reaching deeper parts of ourselves than either of us had anticipated. We were onto something ... which may be that, in matters of humanity, the deeper we go, the safer it gets. In common with many others who have passed along the road of grief, we knew, and did not have to explain to each other, that we couldn't 'get over' the loss. We increasingly articulated this, sharing a feeling of dissatisfaction with models of grief that suggest, unintentionally we suspect, that there are stages that must be followed, and then grief is done.

Over the next few months, we shared time, in person and through Skype, and allowed our conversations to focus on how we might work creatively together and explore grief through movement of the body. This theme was important; it became the glue that bound our growing collaboration to a shared desire to create something. Nonetheless we remained happy as that 'something' continued to be undefined.



Our increasing, yet manageable, commitment allowed the process time to grow and unfold. What started as conversations over email, Skype and cups of tea, gradually moved into the dance studio, where we explored different movement possibilities and expressive exercises in both dance and physical theatre. We moved to music and to silence – and in between the movement exercises we contemplated either in written or spoken word what our experience was. These contemplations further dovetailed into new dance movement and a felt need to express and explore some more.

Our experience of moving

Bessel Van der Kolk (2014), introduces a whole series of strategies to help people to listen to their body and use what is heard. Commenting on one approach, Albert Pesso's psychomotor therapy, he says that it:

“... allows you to feel what you felt back then, to visualise what you saw, and to say what you could not say when it actually happened.”

Van der Kolk (2014: 299)

This quote rings true with what we both experienced during the movement sessions.

From Steve:

... As a complete dancing novice I was surprised by the freedom that I quickly developed to locate, and then intensify, particular sensations in my body that had a movement attached to them. After taking time to share simple relaxation and breathing exercises, we began with experimenting with movements at different levels. Levels in the sense of laid down, on hands and knees, stooping and eventually fully standing.



We experimented with the use of space, beginning with moving 'on-the-spot' we gradually increased and expanded our movement until we were using the whole of the 'studio space'.

Most importantly, after warming up with the breathing, relaxation and moving we then found a particular movement, emanating from the body, that was linked to a particular part of our emotional story. It was at this point that our moving experience reached a crescendo. I started with a simple movement that seemed to arrive with little prompting. When this movement was established Ellie encouraged me to develop the intensity of that movement. Starting at level one and gradually increasing the intensity to level ten I witnessed and felt myself changing from a fairly static position, for example gently waving an arm to and fro, to something that more resembled an impression of a chaotic, and out of control, windmill. I suspect that I resembled a whirling dervish.

My experience of these moving experiences was a sense of liberation, a connection with feelings that I knew were there but that remained unexpressed and a sense of relief that I am still trying to fully articulate. I now feel more able to talk about and, more importantly, from, my experience. Mine is not a story to tell but an experience that I can, and wish to, share.

From Eleonora:

I wish to highlight two important points. One that considers my role, and the second considers my own experience of exploring dance movement as expression.

Even though our movement sessions often consisted of me guiding Steve through a range of movement tasks, I also, at times, participated in some of the exercises either on my own or side-

by-side with Steve. I never felt as if I was the sole instructor where I was “doing something to” Steve. Although my role was different from his in the dance studio, we still felt equal in our collaboration. After each movement task we would often stop to reflect, talk and ask each other questions about what the experience was like for both Steve and me. More so, our collaboration was not limited to the dance studio, it stretched much further than that. We continuously brought our personal experience to the drawing table and contributed to the collaboration in our own unique ways. My experience of dance and movement became my main contribution to our work. It stemmed from my love for dance, and my desire to utilise dance in a way that is not only performance based.

When I did participate in the exercises as a “moving explorer”, rather than as a guide, it awoke memories and brought forth physical sensations and waves of emotion in me that felt genuine in that present moment. It did not feel staged or forced, nor did I feel like a tape recorder repeating a storyline of events in a dissociated way - instead it felt raw and real. It felt good to cry, it felt good to laugh, it felt good to talk, because it all felt real and natural.

From Steve:

I remember nervously asking Ellie if I should find a dance course to prepare for our work in the studio. Her soothing, humorous, and common-sense reply reminded me of the difference between dance and what we were attempting. She asked, “Do you know how to move?” ... and continued, “Well, that is what we will be doing.”

Involving others

The way in which we co-created ‘playing rules’ was matched by an openness to being flexible enough to change them if we felt the need to do so. Throughout the process we have been willing to engage with whatever arose, regularly bringing ideas to the drawing table and jointly deciding on what was worth keeping. Attention to chance and tangential thinking stimulated our mutual permission to experiment. We often heard ourselves saying, *‘let’s try this and see how it goes’*.

As we progressed within our dyadic conversations, the possibility - and need - to involve others in the



process became clearer. We invited two film-makers to our movement sessions, and later we invited a photographer. One of the film-makers was particularly interested in creating a moving image of what we were doing and he came to a later event, with two colleagues, to do just that. In the event, we had a talented, skilful and responsive film crew working with us.

The photographer was there for part of the filming, and then came along to a later session and took photographs of us working in a friend's garden. We've featured several of these images in this article. When we needed outside help and influence, we followed an instinctive willingness to reach out to our contacts. This instigated a chain of extended trust, *'I trust x, because x was introduced to me by z whom I trust and know'*. Whoever we invited came along as observer participants and collaborators. Their views and insights were welcome and forthcoming. We fully embraced these people as they came alongside, with their trusted, specialist skills. They left their contributions behind for us to decipher and decide how to use. Repeatedly, we've been struck by the importance of trusting relationships in our creative collaboration, and in the next section, we discuss this insight in a little more detail.

Three dimensions of trust

As previously signalled, we want to emphasise the importance of trust in creative collaborations. We remain with this theme here through a deeper explication of three dimensions of trust. These dimensions are:

1. Trust in Self
2. Trust in Other
3. Trust in the Process of Synchronicity

We now explore these dimensions in turn.

1. Trust in Self

Trust in self can be a fragile thing. To have trust in self may mean overcoming some degree of *'impostor syndrome'* (Clance and Imes, 1978), developing an ability to firmly handle one's inner critic and being willing enough to go public with what may feel unique and intimate. On the latter point, we wonder whether the most private is in fact the most universal. Further exploration of this conjecture merits another article.

2. Trust in Other

Trust between people is an intimate thing. It requires a degree of friendship, or at least friendliness - i.e. having a good-natured attitude towards others. In this, there is an implicit element of risk that should not be taken for granted. No-one can be completely trusted; it is too much to handle. High pedestals are for saints; most of us are merely human, and therefore given to errors of understanding and judgement, to vicissitudes of mood change and all manner of psychological and emotional turbulence. Trust needs to be realistic and within sensible boundaries, including attention to respecting privacy.

In our creative collaboration, our attention to each other, as human beings, has been a highlight, manifesting in the way that we have listened to each other with sensitivity. This has been supported by respecting each

other's privacy and not overstepping personal boundaries with intrusive questions. We have maintained our ongoing freedom to leave, and close the process.

In the light of the above, we realised that trust does not need to be constantly tested. Instead, we developed a relaxed acceptance that the other(s) are heading in the same direction – paradoxically even when the direction is not firmly set.

3. Trust in the process of synchronicity

“Synchronicity: the cubic centimetre of chance.”

(Jaworski, 1996:84)

Trusting the process is not simply an arithmetic combination of 1) and 2) to make this 3). Beyond this, the process will develop in unanticipated ways. That is why it is called creative.

We have detected a series of ‘meaningful coincidences’ in our period of collaboration. Writing this article makes us speculate that such synchronicities are typical of creative processes.

External synchronicity

We note how a mutual friend introduced us to each other. Possibly more surprisingly, the fact that we very easily found time to speak, meet and work together came in the context of our equally busy diaries, both us regularly moving across different countries. We also found ready support from colleagues who became our temporary creative partners and were able to find venues to meet, move and be filmed with consummate ease, and within the minimal budget that we set as our investment in the unknown.

Internal synchronicity

Whilst we do not claim to have had the same thoughts, we have noticed how our differences always resonated. Sometimes this was simply that our ideas were complementary, at other times the sum of our separate ideas provided a third, and better option.

From Eleonora:

Steve and I have approached our collaboration in a way that I wish to approach all aspects of my life. From a place of trust and curiosity. This has truly been an inspiring learning experience, not only for me as a researcher, but also as a human being.

Conclusion

Throughout our creative collaboration, we seem to have developed a useful (possibly essential) ability to let go of attachments to a pre-determined, specified outcome, and instead to trust our ability to steer the process towards an unknown place which eventually will show itself in some way or form.

For us, trust is the missing ingredient in letting go of attachment to the outcome of our endeavours. Trust means letting go of our need for control, but it is not about losing control completely. We need to trust that the process of creativity will, eventually, reveal outcomes that we may never have imagined at the outset.

We did not set out to reach a particular goal, yet several tangible artefacts have emerged and continue to show up as possibilities:

A film - as this article goes to print, we are awaiting the outcome of the filming of our moving experience. The final result will be a documentary-type short film

A photography book - that shows a series of stills accompanied by prose and poems; we are in the planning stage for this artefact

This article – through which we wish to offer you some insight into our creative collaboration that we hope may validate your own process, and/or spark some inspiration to how you wish to explore and develop on your own way of working.

Developing and facilitating workshops for groups of people – we have submitted a proposal to a retreat centre that specialises in depth-ful human gatherings.

Moving to becoming a spectator in our creative collaboration

The emergence of these artefacts allows us to move from the role of creator to spectator. We are currently enjoying two particularly obvious examples of this in that the photographs taken in the garden arrived recently, followed closely by the first edit of our eventual film.

The shift to the spectator position is interesting and pleasantly surprising as we begin to see what others may eventually see. Maybe it goes without saying that it is easier for Steve to see images of Ellie and vice versa. On a practical level this has helped us to select the images that we wish to use and those to reject. On an emotional level this part of the process is helping us to prepare for our very personal work to leave the safety of our private collaboration and for us to risk allowing a wider world to see what we have done. After all, our intention in capturing our work on film and photo (and in writing) has been to offer further insight into the work that we have been exploring to both ourselves on replaying and reviewing, and to a larger audience, who could also perhaps find this meaningful for themselves.

We have had feedback as we have gone along in that the film crew and photographer have remarked on their sense of witnessing something authentic, natural and beautiful. This unsolicited feedback has galvanised our intention to take our work as far as we feel that we can. We are doing something that errs towards the poetic and away from a logical thesis. We wonder if it will make sense to any future spectators, and hope that it allows for enough explicitness for them to make their own sense. The process of writing this article which has given us access to the skilled and sensitive editing provided by Louise and Bob has also helped us to navigate this transition.

Our sense of freedom in the process, our enjoyment of working together, and the fact that we are following agreements that we accept as our own, would have been difficult to achieve without trust. Our deep level of trust emanated from the genuine and personal interest in the topic that we are exploring. We did not feel pressure to look at things in the same way or think the same thoughts. Instead our trusting collaboration is

about feeling confident and safe enough. More generally, we believe that each person must give themselves permission to bring different components to the “drawing table”, and then all parties work towards integrating these components in ways that feel coherent for everyone involved.

This ongoing dialogue, checking in with each other, discovering what we want, and mutually designing our research project, is integral to the co-inquiry. Thus, trust lies not only in each other as collaborators, but also in the process of co-creation.

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From Executive to Contact Clown: creative collaboration through dancing between the conscious and unconscious

Marijke Dekker



Key words

Creative collaboration, unconscious, metaphors, psychodynamics, contact clown, quest, calling

Introduction

“Begin with a room...Within this room two people will dance...They will make up the dance as they go along, their steps guided by currents of unconscious thought that ebb and flow between them, moving with faith through the ballroom of the unknown.”

(Knafo 2016, p. 275)

Let me tell you my story about how I transformed from an Executive into a Contact Clown. I would like to share two key learnings based upon my own personal experience. Firstly, the significant role the unconsciousness can play in creative collaboration. Secondly, that I discovered that a Contact Clown belongs to the world of creative collaboration and facilitation. Therefore, my narrative consists of two parts.

Part 1, ‘Finding my Calling’, is about my quest, after a life-changing experience, to find fulfilment in my life again. I open myself up to learn more about creative collaboration, with the aim to make a difference as a facilitator in the corporate world. I am curious to explore the connection between the unconscious and creative processes. Quite unexpected paths appear. Many times, I am lost and several metaphors come up during this *“Dance between the Conscious and Unconscious”* (Ringer 2002, p.82). At first, I have no clue what to do with those images and reject them. Then I remember what Jung proposed (1967, p.75), that *“Image is Psyche”*, and what Ringer describes about ‘learning in the experience’. Ringer explains that we learn through a range of different memory systems, sitting in the unconscious, that are built up since early childhood.

These memory systems work far faster than the consciousness, and produce images that we can only understand in hindsight. Understanding this, I start to embrace unexpected images as part of my learning process. The images from my unconscious, I propose, guided me to find my calling; to become a Contact Clown. I would never have expected this outcome by the start of my quest.

Part 2, 'Being a Contact Clown', tells of my experience once I discovered this new calling. Now, the outcome makes sense to me, as I discover that the work of a Contact Clown it is actually about facilitating creative collaboration. In this part, you will read that a Contact Clown is very different from a Show Clown, and how a Contact Clown brings about creative collaboration in 1-to-1 situations when working with vulnerable people with dementia, (multiple) handicaps and (terminally) ill children. My mission is to bring about a twinkle in their eyes whilst 'dancing with them between the conscious and unconscious' to make connections with their deeper unconscious layers built up since early childhood. This work as a Contact Clown draws upon the world of improvisation and play, of not knowing, of being, and of having an open mind.

I hope to inspire you for your own practice, as I am myself really thrilled that I have learned to be open to the unconscious, in myself, individuals and group processes.



Now I feel free 'to go with the flow' and hope you enjoy flying with me on this journey of discovery!

Part 1: Finding my Calling

Let's deep dive into my quest and explore how I found my calling. It's a narrative that draws upon a psychodynamic perspective. This involves a dynamic interplay of conscious and unconscious factors.

It's about rejecting or embracing the images from my unconscious, I propose, that this process guided me to find my calling - to become a Contact Clown.

My quest

It's the end of November 2013. I am shocked and angry. I have just lost my job as an Executive working in a leading role at the Corporate University of a world-wide international company, due to budget constraints. Then my mother, as well as a very close friend, dies. I am lost.

It's the morning of the 16th of August 2014. I had enrolled on the Artgym '[Lead like a River](#)' program. I am in the Atlas Mountains, Morocco to explore what could bring fulfilment back into my life and how I could contribute differently to the world. That's the quest that brings me here. I am in our last Council - a meeting held every day to exchange insights between fellow participants - looking back at my inner journey of the past week. Here is what I conclude in my journal:

"I was a colorful, passionate dancer, my dance stopped. I danced alone with no connection to the ground. My river was stuck, dead, I lost my self-confidence, trust and hope."



Dancing Carmen, painted by Corry Kooy



Flowering plant on my roof terrace

I know now how it is and feels to be vulnerable, to ask for help. I learnt to let go, to trust others, myself. Feeling vulnerable myself I can now help other vulnerable people. I gained my self-confidence and my river streams again to water others! The plant stands for being grounded, growing, giving beautiful flowers. The flowers are the fruits of my work and will continue to grow even when I am no longer here."

Discovering 'how to dance'

By the end of 2014 I start my own company and chose to work, as a facilitator, only for companies that make a positive difference in the world. I guide Executives, who struggle with persistent change issues, how to tackle these with creative methods. This seems a logical next step; I did this kind of work for many years as a leader in several companies and sectors. Still, I am wandering around knowing that my quest has not yet ended. Inspired by artists and the book "Think Like an Artist" (Gompertz, 2015, p.150):

"It's the artist's job to pay attention to prompts, to trust their feelings and instincts".

I am curious to deep-dive, to 'know' more about unconscious processes as the source of our creativity. When I 'know', I can better manage creative processes and make a difference to the corporate world. However, in July 2016, after embarking on another ArtGym program, [Leading Creative Collaboration](#), I discover that my statement is actually ridiculous, a contradiction in terms, as 'knowing' is in the conscious world.

I rephrase my question, inspired by Ringer (2002, p 82), to 'How to move in a dance between the conscious & unconscious?' He states that exploring your own unconscious enables the facilitator to deeply understand group processes and individual drives and fears. As a consequence, they would be able to lead a group with intent to its purpose.

My dance begins. However, I don't have a clue what to do and am anxious and worried. Yes, I see myself dancing, though not the same way as in the dancing image that I brought to Morocco. What kind of dancer then and what is the dance about? Through sharing my feelings with my fellow students and with Alison Hodge, coach of our Action Learning sets, I recognize that I actually had landed into the darkness of 'Not Knowing' (D'Souza and Renner, 2014, p. 133-134):

"A common contemporary metaphor associates knowledge with light and Not Knowing with darkness. This is illustrated by the phrase "I am in the dark". Paradoxically, Not Knowing often leads to learning and new knowledge.....Admitting that we don't know allows us to learn. The darkness of Not Knowing creates the freedom and space for new sources of illumination".

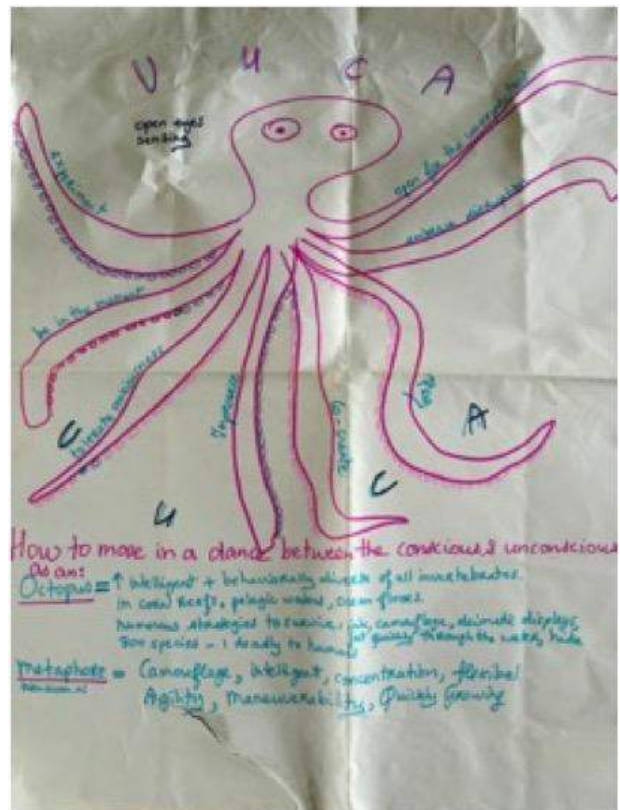
After an improvisation workshop, our Course Director asks us to come up with a metaphor to represent our experience. The image of an 'Octopus' appears to me. My first reaction? Rejection! What to do with an Octopus? Then, I remember what Jung and Ringer expressed about images, as described in my introduction, and I start to explore. An Octopus appears to be a metaphor for excellent camouflage, intelligence, concentration, flexibility, agility and maneuverability. The Octopus is behaviorally very different from other vertebrates; it's eight tentacles sense autonomously and separately from its brain. I realize that in 'sensing with its tentacles' it actually looks like it is dancing! I draw the Octopus and list eight possible characteristics of bringing about creative collaboration and plot them onto the Octopus's tentacles. I am thrilled that such a well fitted metaphor appears to me to strongly support me whilst facilitating creative collaboration.

I conclude in my journal:

“It was like exploring as an Octopus in an intriguing sea having arms everywhere. Experimenting, be in the moment, tolerate anxiousness, improvise, co-create, play, embrace disruption and be open for the unexpected”.

I feel that I actually had moved in a ‘dance between the conscious and unconscious’; a real AHA experience! I agree with Louise Austin, our Course Director, who concludes by the end of this session:

“Working with metaphors, creating stuff allows your conscious mind to catch up with your unconscious. Often, our conscious mind can only understand the message of the unconscious, via images and metaphors, in hindsight.”



Dancing with my octopus

Let me go back in time now, so that you can understand how the dancing Octopus brought me further in my quest. Since my youth, I used a ‘Clown’ as a very powerful defense mechanism in anxious and stressful situations. Not that I was consciously aware of doing this. For example, when something ‘bad’ happened in my family, I intuitively started to show funny faces and to make jokes. Then everybody had to laugh and the tension was broken.

After I left home, I repeated that behavior whenever needed, as everybody loved my clown characteristics, and this helped me survive in anxious situations.

An example of how I used my Clown as a defense mechanism was when, in the Atlas Mountains, I found myself in a dangerous situation sitting on a mule that almost fell off a cliff.

My reaction? I shout out loud: “It looks like I am in a Rodeo!” Everybody is astonished and laughs; the tension is broken again and nobody, including me, is worried anymore.



My mule and me are facing steep rocks

Now we land in the middle of the Advanced Diploma Study in Creative Collaboration again and we are exploring Family Dynamics, led by Eugene Hughes, using a Jungian methodology called [Sandplay](#) (Kalff 1981). During this play, my dancing Octopus discovers the Clown metaphor and its meaning; to take care of others and to walk away from deep emotional feelings myself. Preventing me to “be authentic; to be intimate with myself, others and the world” to quote Eugene. My Clown, as a defense mechanism, has become an obstacle in my development. Ringer (2002, p.105) writes:

”Defenses become a problem in individual functioning when they restrict the range of responses that a person may have...”

At the same time, I am in a dilemma: “Do I really need to get rid of my Clown, as it also has good characteristics like positive energy and brings joy, relativism and a different view angle on situations?”

Working remotely with Trebbe Johnson in the last part of our program, I realize that my Clown has the potential to become ‘My Beloved’ (2005, p.65):

“The Beloved personifies the object of the soul’s longing for union with its highest expression. Elusive and alluring, the Beloved seduces us into our own becoming, compelling us to keep moving through tangled paths, wild deserts, mockery, misunderstanding, and, more often than not, a Vulcan’s forge of yearning love that we discover we cannot bear to live without”.

The birth of clown Papilio

It’s October 2017 and I am a certified facilitator of creative collaboration and quite successful, according to the feedback. Looking back to my quest in Morocco, I wonder “Does this really bring more fulfilment in my life? Is this really my calling? Do I want to stay in the corporate world? How about vulnerable people? How to bring more meaning to the world in a different way?”

It’s January 2018. I am sitting down to create an out-of-the box list of ‘pathways to the future’, sitting next to my Octopus. Suddenly ‘My Beloved’ appears on Stage. Why not utilize the positive qualities of my ‘Beloved Clown’ to become a Contact Clown? I am anxious about going on this Contact Clown journey. It’s an intense profession, because it requires you to deeply connect with others, as I illustrate in Part 2. It’s about authenticity, deep emotional connections to vulnerable people and their grief, coping with being close to mortality, professional distance whilst I am still mourning about my mother, who died with dementia.

But I feel this is my calling, as written in my notebook in Morocco 6 years ago. It really feels like what Trebbe Johnson expresses:

“Our calling is where our gladness and the deep hunger of the world meet.”

In May 2019, I dare to go for my calling. I participate in the action learning training at ‘[Clownschoool](#)’ Esterella under the name Clown ‘Goofy’, choosing a very relaxed cartoon character as a way to cope with my anxiety. A couple of months into my training, I discover that a Contact Clown is actually a facilitator of creative collaboration in 1-to-1 situations, and I decide to find a new name to represent my authentic Clown.

Meeting with my colleague Clown Carola Jehae, the name ‘Butterfly’ comes up, when she sees my butterfly fabric to make new clown trousers. I am in rejection mode, because in my country, somebody is also called ‘a butterfly’ when flirting. But I catch up in hindsight again, and find out that a butterfly is a beautiful symbol for human life. It’s metamorphosis, vulnerability, mortality and beauty. That really expresses how I feel now. Clown ‘Papillio’ is born.

Part 2: Being a Contact Clown

Part 1 was about my quest and how I found my calling to become a Contact Clown. In Part 2, I describe what a Contact Clown is and what the difference is compared to a Show Clown. I illustrate through a real-life example how a Contact Clown works and applies creative collaboration. Finally, you can see me and my fellow Clowns working through the five phases of the contact process, as I’ve inserted a slide show at the end of this article.



What is a Contact Clown?

Probably you have different associations with the term Clown, like a Circus Clown with an ‘act’, who is sad and comic at the same time, a fool at a children’s party or a Clown consulted in ancient times by Kings for their wisdom and witticism. Some people are even afraid of Clowns. In Table 1 I list the differences:

Table 1: Show Clown and Contact Clown compared

Show Clown	Contact Clown
Performance	Being there
Role	Authentic Self
Audience	1-to-1 Contact
Script	Improvisation
Has a Text	Doesn’t speak much
Repeats Act	Plays in the moment
Tricks	Sense & Play
Standardized	Reacts to emotions
Laughter	Connection
Applause	Happy moment in a life

Five key principles that guide Contact Clowns

During my training as a Contact Clown we learn to work with five key principles, which I've summarized below:

1. Improvisation:

Contact Clowns are 'just present in the here and now' without a script to play. We improvise on the spot depending on the situation, the possibilities and emotional state of the other. We touch to get a connection, especially when the other is in a baby phase or seems absent. Sing songs and play music (Scherder 2017), as this results in a direct connection to the brain, where the memories and feelings from childhood sit (remember Jung 1967, Ringer 2002).

2. 1-to-1 contact:

We connect as best possible to one person. Have a blank mind and open heart. We are curious; say 'YES' to the unexpected. Come in still, just look around. Sense the atmosphere and emotions. We don't speak a lot, make no judgements. Go with the flow.

3. Quiet:

We work mostly from still environments. The normal routine goes on in collaboration with the caretakers and/or present family; we don't disturb usual practices. From still environments we slowly build up the contact. We slow down actions; adjust to the pace of the other and improvise on what we see. The interaction can emerge in very joyful and intense connections, because a Contact Clown can be very expressive, but also very modest and quiet.

4. Hold the other centrally:

We always work with the reactions and possibilities of the other and make sure to check that he or she is feeling safe. We don't ask questions, as the other could be embarrassed by not knowing the answers. Whenever we come too close or are asked to leave, we'll always respect that.

5. Heart contact:

We know we are not dealing with roars of laughter; as first and foremost we know we will deal with a smile or a twinkle in somebody's eyes. There can be a joyful contact when the other is glad, but as well when somebody is sad, afraid or angry. The essence is making connections, in whatever way or emotion.

A precious experience

It's January 2019. We are visiting a home for people with dementia. I am sitting on a dinner table and walk away heading to the living room. A woman on the other side of the table is calling me: *"Do you go away? Don't you want to sit with me?"* I feel disrupted, but turn around.

I thought she was not aware of me, as she did not look at me having breakfast, but apparently, she was. I walk to her. She says *“You look so beautiful and colorful, so very different from others. Let me look at your nails, they are so well polished”*. She takes my hands and caresses them. *“When people tell you to remove that nail polish, because it is different from what is accepted [purple], tell them to come to me. I will protect you from them!”* She asks me to show myself even more. I move around and dance a bit. She looks at my outfit and caresses my clothes and my face admiring and loving me. She says *“My nails will be polished too, when I go home again”*. I have a shiver, because I know she will never return home. We play. She is the wise lady and I am a playful child. She expresses her love in a variety of ways and her longing for protecting me.



This play continues a long time, till she expresses that she is tired. That she wants me to come back again another day. We send each other hand-blown kisses, wave and slowly I dance away.

Bringing about creative collaboration

What happened? My interpretation of the situation is as following. In the spirit of Knafo ‘we danced in the ballroom of the unknown’, as I quote in my introduction. I move away, but go back to this lady with an open heart and blank mind. Curious. I am there in the moment without any plan. We improvise, we play creatively together. A connection between the deeper layers of our unconscious unfolds in an unexpected direction for me. She addresses me as my mother protecting me. I really feel safe like a child, her daughter. Delighted to be loved, but also a bit anxious, because she reminds me of my mother and my grief of losing her whilst having dementia. Her eyes twinkle and shine. Mine too. We both have a very precious happy time. I’ll never forget and I am sure she will. That’s what I have to deal with as well.

When I share my experience with the group I am in tears. Later on, whilst writing a reflection report, I articulate that actually ‘transference’ and ‘countertransference’ occurred (Ringer, 2002). That could only happen through letting our unconscious speak with each other during our play.

“Transference is another interpersonal phenomenon where one person transfers expectations derived from his or her past onto a current situation that involves another person”

(p: 138)

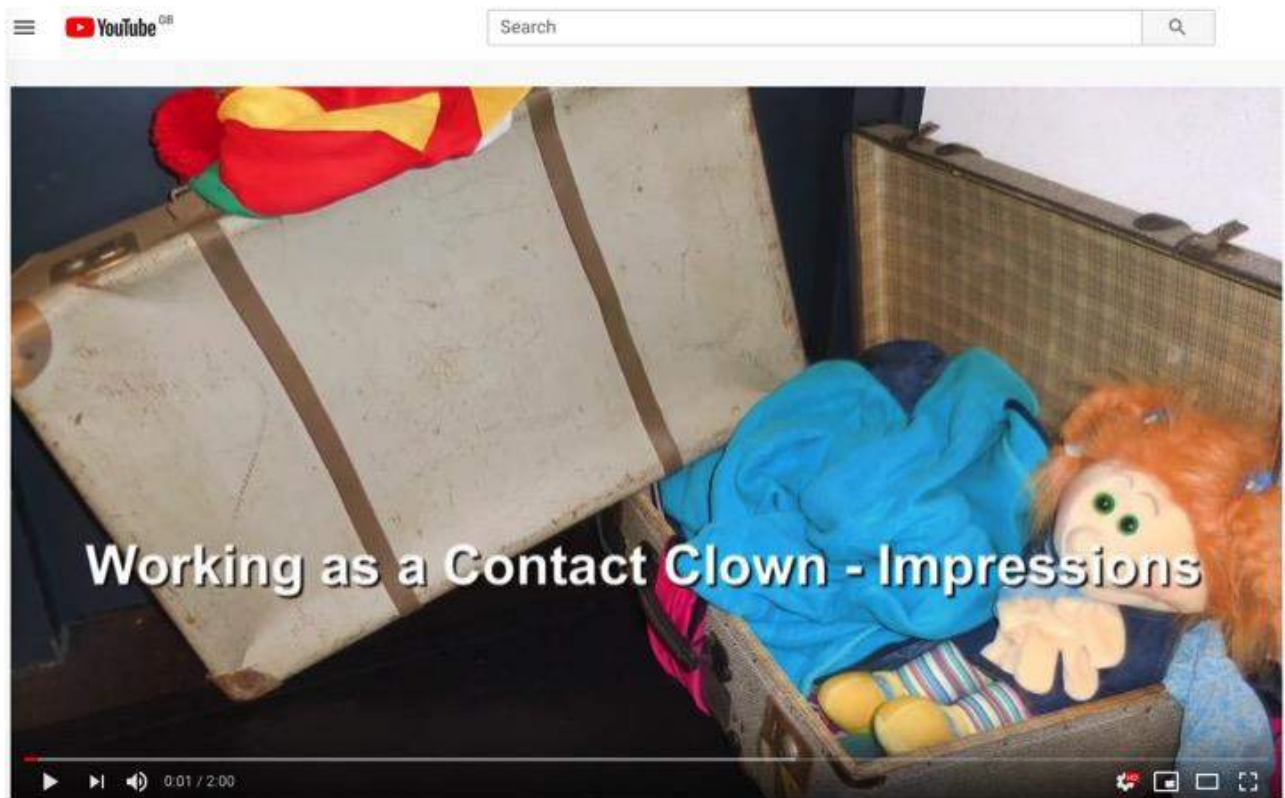
“Countertransference is the sum of the leader’s unconsciously evoked reaction to group experience”.

(p: 141)

In this case it was my unconscious evoked reaction as a Clown in a 1-to-1 contact.

The previous example illustrates how facilitating as a Contact Clown, in a 1-to-1 situation was a creative collaboration and applied the eight creative collaboration principles of my Octopus - experimenting, being in the moment, tolerating anxiousness, improvising, co-creating, playing, embracing disruption and remaining open to the unexpected.

Last, but not least, let me end this article by not writing about, but showing visually in a slide show, the five phases we go through whilst connecting: Let Go, Observe, Link, Align and Play.



Conclusion: creative collaboration brought me a gift for life

I have learned that pathways can appear, in ways never imagined upfront, by allowing the unconscious to speak with myself and others in creative collaboration. I have experienced the power of metaphors, that arose in a 'dance between the conscious and unconscious'. That you can only understand them in hindsight. These metaphors have really made the difference in my quest to find my calling, revealing a pathway, to be a Contact Clown, that my conscious mind would never have come up.

I discovered that a Contact Clown is a facilitator of creative collaboration whose performance is inspired by my Octopus's eight principles. I am thrilled that, as a Contact Clown, I am in a never-ending dance into the unknown with the mission to bring happy moments to lives of other people. My life changing learning experience turned into a gift for life.

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About the author

Marijke is a Dutch Contact Clown & Senior Facilitator, who works to bring about a twinkle in the eyes of people through Creative Collaboration. She writes:

I draw my inspiration from Picasso, who said: "Every Child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once you grow up".

As a leader in business for more than 30 years, I've enjoyed working with teams ranging from 10 - 400 professionals in all HR disciplines, ITC, L&D, Consultancy and Change Management. I've always worked with CEOs and Work Councils, being responsible for budgets from 1 - 40 Million.

I am experienced in many sectors, such as healthcare, banking and insurances, oil and chemicals, energy, transportation, IT, Consultancy and Dutch governmental bodies like the Police, the Ministry of Defense, the city of Rotterdam and Amsterdam.

I really enjoyed as well to keep on developing myself; from a Drama Therapist to an Industrial Psychologist, certified Change Management Master, certified senior Facilitator & Contact Clown Creative Collaboration. My sources of inspiration are artists, theatre, art, nature, animals and the pureness of children and elderly people with dementia. I love to try out new recipes with daring friends, cycling, and sports. I enjoy keeping my child alive (Picasso again) through discovering and learning.

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Taking creativity for a walk:

an action research inquiry into coaching supervision on location

Alison Hodge



In this article I share how I have started working in a new way for me, and some of the key findings from the group work that I am involved in as a coaching supervisor.

I have worked as a coaching supervisor with internal and external executive coaches for 20 years, both 1:1 and in groups. While largely UK-based, I work in person and virtually with clients in five of the seven continents. On this, the fifth anniversary of graduation for my professional doctorate (Hodge 2014), it seems timely also to notice, once again, how my doctoral methodology of action research (Reason & Bradbury 2013) has become embedded in my practice.

The four stages of this approach (plan, act, observe, reflect) consistently permeate and inform how I engage in the task of facilitating reflection in and on practice with executive coaches around the world.

While my experiences of this approach are new to me, many readers will already be familiar with working outside, 'on the move' in their coaching, supervision and facilitation practice. Likewise, I am mindful that, at this stage, I've not explored the theoretical literature in any depth in such areas as eco-therapy, eco-psychology or even perhaps Jungian symbolism and metaphor.

Keywords

Coaching supervision, reflective practice, collaborative groups, learning on the move, eco psychology, action research

Some context

As a recognised practice, coaching supervision started slowly in the UK (around 2000), and there are still some executive coaches who don't see the need of or relevance for supervision. However, for many now it has become integral to their ongoing professional practice, development and wellbeing. For the purpose of this article, I offer this brief definition of coaching supervision:

'A co-created learning relationship that supports the supervisee (coach) both personally and professionally and seeks to support them in providing best practice to their client... Through the relationship and dialogue, the coach can receive feedback, broaden their perspectives, generate new ideas and approaches, and maintain standards of practice' (Hodge 2014).

In the UK there is increasing anecdotal evidence of coaches and supervisors who are taking their clients out of their comfortable or familiar office environments into the open air, into nature, into different locations as I have now started to do. We are walking and talking, exploring, discussing and reflecting. We are **moving** both literally and metaphorically as we explore towards outcomes and goals (e.g. Turner (2017), Ellison (2019), Stockdale (2019), Wingrove (2019), Gorham (2019)). This approach seems to personify the theme of 'creative collaboration' that contributes to and develops our learning and practice.

In my own work as a coaching supervisor, I have now started working in this way with clients, both on a one-to-one basis and with groups.

We are exploring such questions as:

- How does our familiar, regular work location constrain or compound our self-image, purpose and effectiveness as a coach or supervisor?
- How does the environment and physical movement impact on and inform how we engage in our supervision?
- How do different locations surprise and deepen our awareness, our reflection and learning in supervision?

To some, this may seem unusual; to others, it may not be strange at all. For centuries, people have engaged in dialogue and reflection while they're on the move, opening themselves up to be influenced either consciously or unconsciously by the changing environment (Ellison 2019). In changing location and including movement in our work our intention is to:

- Stimulate new and diverse connections.
- Tap into our creativity and imagination differently.
- Perhaps enable greater emotional awareness and insights.
- Inform our intentions, our learning and our practice.

Group supervision provides opportunities

Let's start with some accepted norms about how supervision has been recognized and accepted as a reflective learning space (Hodge 2016). Supervision provides opportunities to:

- reflect on practice, on client work, on the self as practitioner.
- restore and refresh our energies.
- gain insight, awareness, new interpretations, clarity.
- learn new tools or methods.
- gain new understanding, choices, affirmation.

So what did my personal training as group supervisor involve?

For me, in setting up groups, I learned that to create a safe space for personal disclosure and allowing vulnerability especially in a group, we needed a quiet, undisturbed, closed physical space that becomes familiar, and thus safe, to enable continuity and containment for the group. The quiet physical 'container' has been vital (e.g. Proctor 2000).

But we are living in a very different world now: 24/7 accessibility, mobile phones and texting, emails and Instagram, constant streams of social media and webinars. We have groups of co-workers coming together globally, with diverse cultures, faiths, politics and languages, and we are having to adapt and be adaptable.

Working spaces are now more open plan; fewer people have their own offices; meeting rooms may be rare; extensive open space facilities offer little privacy; noise is a constant; people traffic is a constant; seldom are two minutes, let alone two hours, the same. Our senses are potentially stimulated 24/7.

Four key influences on my change of approach

So, what has brought me to work in this creatively collaborative way, that is new for me?

There have been at least four key influences, particularly during the past couple of years:

- At a conference in 2018, Rachel Ellison (2018) shared a case study of a coach/coachee going to different London locations for their coaching sessions, and of the impact that this had.
- A member of one of my groups suggested we go somewhere different for our final group supervision session.
- A supervisee shared the effects of taking their coaching clients walking in their local woods and parks.
- Increasingly, supervisees are sharing my own experience of the necessity and value of regular physical exercise, being outdoors and of the recuperative, inspiring effects this has on our own self-care and well-being.

I will now share some of the experiences that I've participated in as supervisor with three different groups, working in supervision 'on location'. I describe some key elements of what happened with each group, and then finally offer my reflections on this work and how it has informed my practice. While I have referred here to the actual locations that I have been to with the groups, to respect their confidentiality, the participants and any reference to session content are generalized.

First enquiry: a day at Tate Modern

A supervisee suggested we go somewhere different for our final group supervision session. She mentioned Tate Modern in London.

I was out of my comfort zone at this suggestion, as I am not always sure how some visual art impacts me. Equally, I was unsure how it might inform my sense of what might be happening for my clients, their coachees, and the client systems that are at the heart of our supervision.

So, by way of reconnaissance, I went alone to the gallery two weeks before the group day, where I

discovered the Anni Albers tapestry exhibition (image 1).



Image 1: The Anni Albers Exhibition at Tate Modern, London, in 2018/19. (Photo by Simon Jenkins.)

Tapestry has not been something that I have been particularly interested in previously. I didn't really enjoy the exhibition on my own. I was not inspired either by the colours or by the works. I was disappointed by what I would describe as the muted shades of grey, brown and taupe. But I decided that this would be good for the group! Why? As a small exhibition within the gallery, it was bounded, contained, 'controllable' and not too big within the wider gallery. Already I could see how this symbolized in part our work together in supervision, which can sometimes be considered a microcosm of the wider systems in which executive coaches work in with their clients. So this is the location we went to for our final group session (images 2 and 3).



Image 2: Art work at the Anni Albers Exhibition, Tate Modern, London. (Photo by Simon Jenkins.)



Image 3: Intricate stitching at the Anni Albers Exhibition, Tate Modern, London. (Photo by Simon Jenkins.)

When we arrived as a group two weeks later, we each went through the exhibition separately, at our own pace, for one hour. Thus, we each moved on our own path, while members of the group and other visitors were moving on theirs. We were just passing through, pausing, reflecting, and noticing whatever caught our attention.

Clearly we were not in our usual quiet, closed room where we would normally be, physically present and sitting still with each other. Rather, we were in a public venue with constant sounds and people moving in all directions, often physically close to any of us. We met at the end of the exhibition and, sitting in one of the cafes, shared our reflections about the impact of the tapestries. This then provided the platform for us to reflect on our year of being together in group supervision.

Here are a few of the salient observations that emerged:

- Most of the works were framed.
- There was so much intricate detail in each tapestry that clearly involved great skill that had gone into creating them.
- Some had tassels at the ends that almost appeared unfinished or that certainly had the potential to be continued.
- From a distance, it was difficult to see the detail in each piece, but it was possible to grasp the sense of the whole work.
- However, in slowing down and stepping up close to each tapestry, it was possible to see the detail and notice how the different threads made a difference.

- The interwoven threads and knots added to the overall beauty of the piece and created whole works of art.
- Each supervisee was inspired by different tapestries to inform their reflections on their practice and our work together as a group.
- In drawing the threads of our individual experiences together, we could create our collaborative learning together.

The parallels with our work in supervision became so patently obvious.

Second enquiry: by popular request

At the second of five whole-day sessions with a new group, we met at a serviced meeting room in Kensington. Here, I shared my reflections about what was emerging in my practice as supervisor and about the impact of my experience at Tate Modern. Almost with one voice, they asked if we could do something similar too. With such energy and curiosity from them all, and if everyone was agreeable, I proposed that we could approach our work together as an 'experiment' to explore this different way of working. The process of creating this new approach felt highly collaborative.

As there were only three in the group, I invited each one of them to take responsibility for choosing a location, planning the details, and we would follow their lead.



Image 4: Hyde Park, London, in springtime, 2019. (Photo by Alison Hodge.)

Some questions that we held from the start of this inquiry:

- How do we adapt in an environment that is new to us?
- How does this inform how we respond in our practice?
- What can we learn from these experiences both individually and as a group that informs and

changes our practice?

- What is it like when someone chooses a location that we don't know?

The three locations the group members chose were Hyde Park (image 4), Kew Gardens in London, and Eastbourne in Sussex (image 5).



Image 5: The seafront at Eastbourne, where we held our final session. (Photo by Alison Hodge.)

At our second session at Kew Gardens, much to our delight and surprise, we discovered the [Dale Chihuly outdoor exhibition](#). So not only did we have the magnificent spring flowers of magnolia, cherry blossom and tulips, but also the wonderful pieces of art nestling in different parts of the gardens, as we went exploring (video 1).



Video 1: [Follow this link](#) for my video reflection on a supervision visit to Kew Gardens. (Video by Simon Jenkins.)

What was it about being here that struck us, or informed us? It was cold, and it was not quite raining, and we were aware that we walked faster to keep warm. At the same time, we engaged in a conversation without a definitive destination – other than the questions that one of the participants raised when we looked at a particular team coaching assignment, and the challenges it presented (video 2).



Video 2: [Follow this link](#) for my video reflection on a supervision visit to Kew Gardens. (Video by Simon Jenkins.)

One of the really fascinating things about working on location is how we set off on a path, holding the intention of the supervision question. We find we're walking, but we don't know exactly where the path is taking us, and when we come to T-junctions or the path splitting, we trust that whichever direction we choose to go, we will keep discovering what may be around the corner. Out of that come the sort of insights we may not get if we are sitting in a static space – perhaps in a circle in an office, with no external stimuli, such as people walking past, or the birds singing. For each of us, hearing the birds, or being part of a group walking, normalised what we were doing and connected us with the wider world, rather than separating us from it in a closed space.

Third inquiry: a new supervision group

I invited people to join this new group explicitly on the basis of working 'on location', framing it as an experiment, as live action research. The group comprises five supervisees and me. I knew everyone from various sources, but no one else knew each other. Right from the start, the members of the group agreed to take a turn to choose and plan a location for each of our sessions.

As supervisor and 'host', I chose the first venue, the Natural History Museum in London (image 6). As we were all meeting for the first time, we would each be bringing our personal history with us, so the symbol of this location seemed appropriate.



Image 6: The Natural History Museum, London (Photo by [Claudio Testa](#) on [Unsplash](#))

This had seemed like a good location, but as the morning wore on and the crowds grew, so too did the noise and the echoes. However, in spite of what felt like escalating pressure from our environment, we worked with two client situations. What was fascinating was the level and extent of the insights, the creativity, the new angles that people offered. These were fantastically fresh and diverse.

By lunchtime we were 'exhausted', and needed to get out. Everyone agreed that we needed some quiet space where we weren't struggling to hear each other or negotiate the crowds and the exhibits. The sun was shining, it was spring, so we walked up to Hyde Park. And here is what we found (image 7)!



Image 7: Circle of wooden toadstools in Hyde Park, London. (Photo by Alison Hodge.)

The blossom was out, the leaves were coming on the trees, the birds were singing, the sun was shining and

we discovered this circle of wooden toadstools, so it seemed natural to sit here and agree the agenda for the afternoon. Because our time was now limited, we took a 'speed supervision' approach (like speed dating). This involved 20-minute sessions per person, for the remaining three members of the group.

There were several significant and notable elements that emerged from this day:

- The impact of the sound and noise: people, echoes, traffic noise.
- The sun was shining, so we were all keen to work outside.
- The colours, light, flowers, sense of space to think and feel in the park.

I came away wondering how each person felt about sharing their client work in public, either in a building or outside. What I noticed was that even though they had never met before, group members seemed able to disclose, be vulnerable, explore their work with the group whatever the location. So what enabled this? I could have hypothesized about the enabling factors, but was more inclined to hold the question. What became clear was that people also needed time to pause and reflect on their own among the hurly-burly of our environment.

As this is a work in progress, I'm now inviting the group to notice how our shared experiences inform and impact on our relationships and capacity to learn through working together 'on location'. I will also be keen to explore the impact of our changing locations for each of us as well as our group development and our individual learning and change to practice.

Some of my reflections so far

Let me share some of my reflections about working in this way, including both the power and some of the pitfalls (see video 3).



Video 3: [Follow this link](#) for my video reflection on a supervision visit to Kew Gardens. (Video by Simon Jenkins.)

Being curious – One of the things I notice happens with a group when we are outside, and particularly in natural settings, is walking around a corner and seeing something different or unexpected. What it provokes for me is allowing our imagination to wander and just wonder what we are seeing might mean, or how it might represent what is going on for us as practitioners, or in the client system. We can't know until we get there. How do we bring delight, curiosity and surprise, and not predict or presume that we know what's going to happen or what is happening until we get there? As we are collaborating in this inquiry, we are all curious as to how this then informs our practice.

Touching all the senses anew – By changing our environment, we stimulate all our senses anew. The potential for these to be numbed by familiarity and habit may be high for many of us. With all our senses enlivened, we not only have fresh thinking but also our imagination is fired up. The external environment, especially in nature, stimulates and enables us to see our world and thus ourselves and our clients differently.

- Sight – horizons, new perspectives, limitless, anything is possible, the sky, clouds, sun, no sun.
- Smell – flowers, leaves, food, animals, the sea – what associations this may bring up.
- Hearing – new sounds, birds, wind in the trees, shrubbery.
- Taste – maybe chew a leaf, new coffees, new food options.
- Feelings and sensations – temperature, sun, wind, rain, heat, space, the air around us.

Walking and talking – While on the move, we breathe differently from when we are just sitting, thus oxygenating our bodily systems, contributing to a feeling of healthiness and wellbeing.

Particularly when we are outside, there is space that gives a real sense of freedom. This in turn gives an implicit permission to speak more openly, while it's also easier to walk away if a challenge is too potent in that moment. Likewise, there is a greater sense of freedom to engage more fully. People don't feel trapped by the conventions that may be implicit or assumed in an office or closed space.

With each of these three groups I have found that we set off in a general direction, but there is flexibility in how we may reach a destination. We are exploring together, collaborating on where we go rather than treading a pre-determined route or path, and we hold the 'endpoint' or goal lightly. The boundaries tend to be time-based and perhaps weather-based, and these determine how we approach the work at any given stage in our days together.

Trusting we'll find our way – What if we get lost? So far, this has not become an issue. My sense is that we will work with that and notice what happens to us, or our clients, if we feel lost in the work. At the same time, I have a strong sense that with trust, we will find our way. We are in this together, walking alongside each other literally as well as metaphorically,



Video 4: [Follow this link](#) for my video reflection on a supervision visit to Kew Gardens. (Video by Simon Jenkins.)

Walking around Kew Gardens, as we discovered the Chihuly installations, it was a bit like Easter egg hunting (see video 4). We went from one beautiful flower bed of tulips or daffodils and then discovered another beautiful piece of glasswork. Whether or not we consciously connected that with the client, or an aspect of our practice, the pieces of art could personify the complexity and intertwining of the threads or layers of the work we were involved in, and they were all interconnected, differently shaped, and tangled, with ends floating away. They gave us wonderful metaphors for the complexity and messiness of our work, particularly in groups and teams.



Video 5: [Follow this link](#) for my video reflection on a supervision visit to Kew Gardens. (Video by Simon Jenkins.)

When we are sitting in a closed office space, people have their notebooks and they write things down as we go (see video 5). But when we are outside, we don't necessarily write notes as we're walking along. So one of the things I have built into this work is time to stop, in a café or under a tree or sitting on a bench, inviting each person to have some quiet, individual time to think about what's emerging for them in this environment, with the visual impact, the noise and the smells. What does this prompt? What does this inspire in terms of their awareness of who they are in relationship to their environment? How does it inform how they show up with their clients? And potentially, in turn, they may invite their clients to notice what impact the environment has on them, and what helps or hinders the client to be a better leader, or a better manager.

The feedback I often receive is that moving to a new space, often outdoors, gives them an opportunity to realise more of themselves than perhaps they do in their day-to-day, habitual environment. That in turn stimulates fresh thinking, with new perspectives. And that, after all, is how we enable and facilitate change in another.

Conclusion

So how is this approach informing our practice as executive coaches and who we are in this practice? At this stage of what for me is an ongoing creative collaboration with my clients in group coaching supervision, let me offer some reflections prompted by this action research inquiry.

As the supervisees participate in this visceral, yet metaphorical experience, it enables and frees them to find new approaches, new interpretations, and new relationships with their client systems or individuals outside the expected norms, or their original training.

The physicality of walking and talking in different locations, with different physical and mental conditions, gives a freedom to share our thinking and experience in a different way, together. I personally feel a greater sense of freedom in how I engage with the group and the work, inspired and stimulated by what is happening around me/us, and the constantly evolving environment.

- Each person's experience and interpretation is unique.
- We don't have to conform to norms or a specific organizational culture.
- No one has to find the 'right thing to say', or be 'the cleverest' or the 'most intelligent', or come up with the 'best questions or observations'.

In setting the frame for this work as action research, we create an experimental flavour, willing to be curious, to try things out. So far, participants have engaged in our work together with an eager curiosity that enables them to draw fresh insights into how they might change or develop in their practice. This appears to be different from previous groups I have worked with, and I'm sure that the impact on me of working this way has fed into our shared experience. I have a sense that group members are able to bring more of themselves into the space so they are more enlivened in their learning and growth, just as in the natural world around us.



Video 6: [Follow this link](#) for my video reflection on a supervision visit to Kew Gardens. (Video by Simon Jenkins.)

During our visit to Kew Gardens, as we walked through an area where there is no sculpture, I was struck by the completely natural location, with the wonderful, unpredictable randomness of the tulips as they were emerging and growing. The tulips had slightly different colours, and blended with the blossom, but the blossom was going to change, and we could just see the green shoots coming. Change is going to happen, although we're not quite sure when.

Thinking about how change and growth occurs in the natural world, we can learn such a lot as we sit with our clients, and as we engage them to learn, change and grow themselves. We don't know quite what colour they will produce, or when they are going to blossom, or when the leaves will come out, but if we hold the belief that change is possible, who knows what magic might occur?

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank and appreciate all those **clients** who have dared to join me in these inquiries. Out of respect for confidentiality, while you may recognize the places that I have described, you remain nameless here, but you know who you are. Our work together is a joy for me and I trust that our experience together may continue to add to your learning and growth.

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Hyde Park and Eastbourne: Alison Hodge

[Natural History Museum](#): by [Claudio Testa](#) on [Unsplash](#).

Videos by [Simon Jenkins](#).

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Time to Think about creative collaboration: a co-inquiry

Emer Wynne



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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