

Reciprocity in Organisational Life

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Edition Editors: Anna Fairtlough and Erica Piasecka

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Cover image: Kaki fruit from La Burra Verde. Photo: Anna Fairtlough

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Editorial: Reciprocity in organisational life

How this edition came about

Anna Fairtlough and Erica Piasecka



Keywords

reciprocity, the Solihull Approach, Open Source Thinking, host, guest, commonalities, differences



Reciprocity in writing and editing

The 'dance of reciprocity' is a concept developed by Brazelton, T. et al (1974). Based on observations between infants and carers, it proposes that human interactions typically involve stages of initiation, orientation, attention, acceleration, a peak of excitement, deceleration and withdrawal or turning away (see Figure 1 below). **Anna Fairtlough** introduced the model at the Open Source Thinking (OST) 2016 Gathering ('Healing for a Fragmenting World') in Tostat, France (see MacKenzie et al, 2017, this edition). Previous workshops, and two issues of e-Organisations and People (e-O&P Spring 2013 and Spring 2016) have explored the concepts and practices underpinning the Open Source Thinking Project, which is supported by AMED.

Anna had learned about the dance of reciprocity through attending training for practitioners working with parents and children and undertaking qualitative research on the usefulness of the way of working (the 'Solihull Approach') that was being taught. One of these trainers, Dawn Cutler, explains more about reciprocity and its place within the Solihull Approach in the first article of this edition (Cutler 2017). What Anna had learned while doing the research and listening to practitioners, people receiving services and managers, was that this model, and the idea of reciprocity more generally, can help us make sense of interactions not only in families but also between individuals and groups of adults in organisations and communities. Through the dance of reciprocity, trust, attachment and learning are fostered. Moreover, getting out of step in this dance, which is common, is not a disaster: it enables us to understand important things about ourselves and others, and to gain skills in repairing these ruptures.

Given the focus on connection and community in the OST2016 Gathering in Tostat, Anna thought that it would be a valuable tool for participants to use in thinking about how they wanted to be with each other and

what they wanted to do together during the event. And so it proved. The image here reflects many of the qualities embodied in the event. It is homemade and improvised. As it hangs on a washing line it reminds us of the everyday actions, such as washing, that we need to do to care for ourselves and others in our communities. The arc evokes the rhythms of daily life, of breath and of sleep and wakefulness. The processes depicted in the arc represent those that were used in collaboratively designing the event, of coming to various 'peaks of excitement' and then withdrawing from each other at the end. It is in two languages, French and English. It also contains mistakes: minor ruptures in communicating across difference. For instance, Anna has misspelled 'reculer', which means 'to retreat' in French.



An Anglo-French representation of 'The dance of reciprocity', *al fresco* flipchart, Tostat 2016. Photo: Bob MacKenzie

Bob MacKenzie, commissioning editor of e-O&P and one of the curators of the event, suggested that reciprocity might be a fruitful theme for further exploration of OST/praxis in the journal, and invited Anna to lead as guest editor. Together, Anna and Bob drafted the Call for Papers. A while later, **Erica Piasecka** agreed to join the editing team. Erica is a student in her final year of a liberal arts degree in Maastricht. Her impending graduation in the summer of this year brought with it questions of career prospects and, most of all, a desire to gain that most elusive of qualities for young graduates: experience. She has been interested in literature and writing from a young age, and publishing/editing is one possible path for her. So when the opportunity appeared to join the editing team of this journal, she jumped at it, reasoning that it would both allow her to develop her skillset and broaden her understanding of personal and organisational development.

The editorial process itself requires its own dance of reciprocity as the editorial team concerts with each other and with the writers in a spirit of critical friendship (MacKenzie 2015) so that both sides can coax the best finished articles out of those early drafts. Anna had previous experience of writing and reviewing for academic journals, but the intricacies of editing were new to her. She has much appreciated Bob's wisdom and critical friendship in negotiating the multiple roles, relationships and perspectives involved. She has learned to stand aside to allow Erica's youthful energy, assurance and insight to shine. From Erica's point of view, years in top-down education systems and misguided University feedback sessions had perhaps led her to think that what was required was a kind of 'fixing'. What she – indeed all three of us have - found was that editing is less about "fixing" (i.e. changing) and more about nurturing.

Overview of the articles

As indicated above, **Dawn Cutler** introduces the psychological concept of reciprocity as a useful theoretical framework for professionals working with children and families. She shows us that research on reciprocity suggests that there will always be 'ruptures' in reciprocal interactions between carers and children, but that learning that ruptures can be repaired is crucial for the growing child. She argues that this way of understanding reciprocity may also be applied to a

professional training context. Dawn's experience of training 'reciprocally' has focused on adapting this process to fit trainer-participant interactions in order to promote mutual understanding and create meaningful change. Her article details some of the challenges involved in this approach and discusses her experiences of its implementation.

From this foundation, we can move to thinking about the benefits of reciprocity for working collaboratively and the challenges this involves. **Tony Page** reflects on a particular instance of his facilitation practice when what appeared to him at the time to be narcissistic behaviour threatened to derail the process. Looking at manifestations of narcissism in recent history as well as in his own life and work experience, Tony considers the balance between 'self' and 'other', and recognises that although we might stumble in the dance of reciprocity, we can also recover. It is in these moments that there is sometimes the greatest potential for our leadership and teamwork to be transformed.

In her account of her travels in Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras with the [Norwegian Solidarity Committee for Latin America](#), **Veera Mo** stresses the need for solidarity -- as opposed to aid -- if we are to come to terms with divisive social structures and histories. Veera argues that solidarity is vital in promoting reciprocal relationships on an equal basis; before joining the dance we must first be open to it. She discusses some of the challenges involved in international cooperation projects, but mostly focuses on the optimism and creativity she encountered during her time with various local grassroots movements working to create positive change.

This quest for a balance between the local and global carries through to the article by the OST curating team. This piece, written by **Bob MacKenzie, Rosemary Cairns, Alison Piasecka and Andy Piasecki**, embodies the very principle of reciprocity that this edition explores. Employing the metaphor of a dance, the article is based on their experiences of curating and hosting three workshops in Brighton and Tostat in southwest France, and two themed editions of e-O&P, and explores how they have come to understand the central place of reciprocity in OST and praxis. A carefully choreographed, collaboration-based piece, it traces their efforts to create a framework for enabling cooperative thinking and action that embraces the values of sharing, generosity, and reciprocity. They discuss the need to promote sustainability and to bridge divides in an increasingly polarised world by focusing on local projects whilst retaining a global outlook. They end with a glance at some of the challenges to come and an invitation to join the next event in Andalucia in 2018.

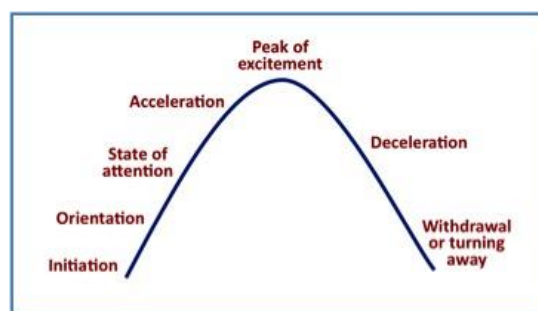


Fig 1: Stages of reciprocity. Taken from the Solihull Approach Training Materials (Douglas, 2009)
© Solihull Approach

Moving from the experiences of being a host to those of being a guest, in the next article **Beth Davis** recounts her experience of living with a Palestinian host family in Nablus, the West Bank, as part of her study abroad as a student of Arabic. Through stories of her experiences with food, clothing, and language, Beth navigates the themes of integration, adaptation, and cultural sensitivity, and makes a case for the primacy of reciprocity in cultural exchange. She addresses the challenges of learning how to 'be' in a foreign environment and stresses the importance of conscious communication in building meaningful relationships. Urging us to let go of preconceived notions of culture, Beth discusses her individual learning journey and the evolution of her relationship with her hosts in a compelling account of cross-cultural friendship.



Resident and visitor in accord: Tostat's Maire (left) and Bob celebrate the re-planting of the bibliothèque garden.
Photo: Hyacinthe Garcia

The concept of biological symbiosis as a metaphor for reciprocal interaction in human systems is introduced by **Shelagh Doonan**, who has written an intriguing article recalling some key moments of reciprocity in her own professional life. From her doctoral studies in marine biology to working in adult education, and then to inter-agency and whole systems facilitation, Shelagh points to the links in the chain (or chains) as she reflects on her own varied experiences and uncovers some of the essential conditions for real cooperation and transformative learning. An exploratory piece that presents the reader with a series of vignettes, Shelagh's article shows the connections and relationships that connect what could be seen as isolated events, and hints at the importance of allowing time when coming to important realisations and developing meaningful and long-lasting relations of reciprocity.

In a conversation with her sister **Kate Fairtlough**, **Anna Fairtlough** asks how reciprocity is rooted in the running of La Burra Verde, Kate's organic olive farm and the association of the same name in Andalusia, Spain. As an organisation committed to "developing models of sustainable and cooperative living and working", La Burra Verde takes in volunteers who live and work on the farm, as well as participants who attend courses and workshops, and guests for eco-holidays. As in Shelagh Doonan's article, Kate's understanding of reciprocity stems from the idea of symbiosis. Her approach to La Burra Verde focuses on fostering relationships of mutual benefit and understanding on many levels: between herself and the volunteers and other guests; amongst the volunteers; and between La Burra Verde and the local community and environment. The desire to combine practical, local models of sustainability with strengthening ties with other similar organisations elsewhere, echoes aspirations to act 'glocally' articulated in the article in this edition by the OST curating team. This makes La Burra Verde an ideal location for the further experimentations in OST and practice that are being planned for May 2018.

Controversy, connection and difference

The [Call for Papers](#) generated some controversy; in particular the question that asked: “how might Brexit, and the seeming epidemic of populisms, nationalisms, terrorisms, inter-state aggressions and voluntary and involuntary migrations, affect our resources, abilities and willingness to reciprocate?” In a series of e-mails with Bob, and later with Anna, **Chris Rodgers** questioned whether this implied that the journal had an official ‘anti-Brexit’ position, and challenged us about the immediate juxtaposition of terrorism and Brexit in this sentence. Chris suggests that institutionalising social and economic relationships in the EU, and thus centrally determining what it means to be European, could in fact “undermine the motivation and capacity for reciprocity to thrive in its ‘natural’, human relationship form”. Chris goes on to say that the use of the word ‘populist’ has the potential to polarise debate, stoking division between those (perhaps like us in the editorial team?) who could be seen as occupying “an intellectually superior, politically correct, rational and socially elitist...moral high ground...versus the ill-educated, prejudiced, irrational, socially challenged others, who are easily swayed by ‘populist’ rhetoric”.

At the end of the email exchange, which we’ve reproduced as [an appendix to this editorial](#), Anna mentions a project she had heard about that brought together people from two areas of Britain with very different voting patterns about whether to leave or remain in the EU. Chris thought this sounded: “Spot-on. Spontaneous and emergent (i.e. non-institutionalised) reciprocity in action, perhaps?”

From rupture to repair?

Using the model of the ‘dance of reciprocity’ to analyse this exchange, we seem to have inadvertently launched straight into ‘the peak of excitement’ without the necessary initiation, orientation, attention and acceleration phases that the dance of reciprocity ([Cutler](#), this edition) would suggest are vital for reciprocal communication. Hence our communication with Chris began with a rupture that needed to be repaired. Perhaps the words that we used are always likely to trigger this. Thankfully (and as envisaged in the Figure 1 above) it seems that, by the end, we had reached a point of repair, and had begun to tune into each other’s perspectives more effectively, thus enabling us to decelerate and turn away from each other with reciprocity intact.

Within this particular exchange we did not explicitly respond to some of challenges that Chris posed to us. We had not intended for our question to imply an equivalence between all the different divisions that we listed. Neither did we mean to imply that there was - or ought to be - an AMED ‘position’ on Brexit. Nonetheless, as Chris had rightly intuited, the two of us writing the Call for Papers did, personally, support Britain remaining in the EU. The puzzlement and regret of our French hosts in Tostat about Brexit was foremost in our minds as we wrote the call. It is possibly true that we had unconsciously assumed that other AMED readers would be likely to share this perspective. We certainly could have been more aware that listing these politically and socially divisive and highly emotive topics in such a way could have come over like that. So thank you, Chris, for encouraging us to challenge our own implicit assumptions.

If you’d like to join in this discussion, you are welcome to visit the Discussion Forum that we’ve created on the AMED website [here](#).

Healing for a fragmenting world?

Highlighted through this exchange with Chris, the project, funded by the Jo Cox Foundation, has reinforced to us the wisdom and benefits of bringing together people from two initially polarised communities (Bowden 2016). Here, rather than beginning with political differences and divisions, the conversations focused on what people in the two communities have in common. Some quotes from participants illustrate how the Foundation is helping to support 'healing for a fragmenting world', just as our OST event in Tostat aspired to do, albeit on a smaller scale:

"We didn't talk about politics at first, we just talked about our experiences of living in towns."

"We had lots to laugh about and we talked about the weather and lack of affordable housing. We have lots in common."

The weekend of the 17/18 June 2017 saw over 100,000 events in the UK for the 'Great-Get-Together' that celebrated togetherness and community in memory of Jo Cox (The Guardian, 2017). The OST project has 'lots in common' with the aims of the Jo Cox Foundation; perhaps there may be opportunities to forge closer links in the future?

Commonalities across difference

The articles in this edition are rich and varied. They are varied in place: spanning India, Latin America, Palestine, Spain, France and the UK. They are varied in style: they use different genres combining memoir, reflection on practice, conversations and imagery with more traditional academic discussion. They are varied in the types and contexts of experiences written about. Finally, they are varied in terms of the age and development stage of the contributors: some are in the midst of their professional 'careers', some at the beginning and others towards the end. Nonetheless, some common threads are interwoven, relating to reciprocity and facilitation practice, reciprocity across difference and inequality, reciprocity in relationships between hosts and guests, and reciprocity within and between the human and non-human worlds. Such threads weave connections across these differences. However, there are still gaps: none relates to larger scale commercial organisations or attempts to assess Chris Rodgers' conjecture that institutionalising reciprocity in, for instance, the form of the EU, may inhibit the kinds of 'spontaneous, emergent instances of reciprocity-in-action' that are much in evidence in the articles. We need to discover more about the potential 'shadow side' of reciprocity. However, we hope that readers will find the articles to have the lively, engaging and real qualities that the journal aspires to embody, and we look forward to further reciprocal dialogues about the ideas and practices.

Our co-enquiry continues ... [click here to join in.](#)

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Acknowledgements

One of the challenges inherent in reciprocal OST practice is how best to remain aware of and acknowledge the potentially multiple contributions to the development of an idea or practice, whilst giving due credit to their originators. These contributions can emerge in varying degrees of significance, subtly or indirectly as well as obviously and overtly. We recognise that many people have contributed and are contributing in various ways to our project. Inevitably, some contributions will be more visible than others, such as those of the **authors of the articles** which appear in this edition, as well as those in the references we cite above. Others are more subtle, invisible, less obvious. Nevertheless, in their various ways, taken together they are an essential part of the evolving creative process of publication. In that vein, we must thank **David McAra** for his excellent formatting and design work behind the scenes for this edition. The editorial support team of **Linda Williams, Julia Goga-Cooke** and **Ned Seabrook** have also played their largely unseen part. As have all the participants in our various Gatherings and exchanges so far. To everyone who has contributed wittingly or unwittingly to our co-inquiry we offer our grateful acknowledgements, and invite your continuing participation.

About the guest editors

Anna Fairtlough

Anna is a registered social worker with over thirty years' experience of social work practice, management and education. Her research and publications are in the fields of professional leadership and organisational development, equalities and social work, and work with parents in different contexts. As a practitioner, front line manager and trainer she has developed policy, practice and training in the areas of child sexual abuse, domestic violence, supervision and practice education. Anna has wide experience of developing and teaching on qualifying and post-qualifying social work programmes. She is interested in exploring how ideas about reciprocity, containment, distributed leadership and open source thinking can be embodied in progressive social work, educational and organisational development practice. Her current book (Fairtlough 2017) addresses these issues. You can contact Anna by e-mail at a.fairtlough@gold.ac.uk.

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Erica Piasecka

Erica is a student of Arts and Culture at Maastricht University, the Netherlands. Having moved from Scotland to France at a young age, and later to Spain and the Netherlands for her studies, Erica has substantial experience of living and studying in reciprocally cross-cultural environments. She has professional experience in translation and language teaching and an interest in literature and gender studies. She has found the experience of helping to edit this journal to be hugely rewarding and looks forward to future collaborations.

You can contact Erica by email at erica.piasecka@gmail.com

Appendix

Not so much an article ...

A compilation by Chris Rodgers

The following records an email exchange between Bob MacKenzie, Anna Fairtlough, and Chris Rodgers, triggered by the reference to Brexit in the initial invitation to contribute to the current edition of e-O&P (Summer 2017).

Extract from the Bob MacKenzie's original request for contributions to the journal...

The Summer 2017 edition of e-O&P will take reciprocity in organisational life as its theme...

To help prime your thinking, some issues you might consider include:

How relevant is the notion of reciprocity to organisational life today and tomorrow?

How might Brexit, and the seeming epidemic of populisms, nationalisms, terrorisms, inter-state aggressions and voluntary and involuntary migrations, affect our resources, abilities and willingness to reciprocate?

Under what conditions might reciprocity best flourish?

How can we as private citizens and practitioners help to nurture reciprocity within our social networks and communities of practice, on behalf of our clients, or for the benefit of society at large?

What can we do when reciprocal relationships become ruptured or seem inappropriate, or to address the shadow side of reciprocity?

Initial response from Chris Rodgers to Bob...

I'm curious as to whether the anti-Brexit reference ("populist epidemic") reflects the official 'policy position' of AMED or if it's simply a taken-for-granted assumption that members share that viewpoint. Perhaps the list of -isms that relate to the current state of affairs could equally have included, for example, elitism, intellectualism, and cronyism.

In the context of the e-O&P theme, one might argue that the attempt to institutionalise intra-European reciprocity, in the form of the EU, actually undermines the motivation and capacity for reciprocity to thrive in its 'natural', human-relationship form. Some might say that, instead of encouraging and enabling reciprocity to become a natural behavioural response between people of diverse backgrounds, nationalities, job roles, and so on, the centralised EU 'model' rejects this in favour of a centrally determined and identikit version of what it means to be European, ruled on by a privileged and bureaucratic elite. It is a version in which the stated goal is one of

progressively eliminating the rich diversity and differences within and between the people of Europe in pursuit of "ever closer union". Differences that provide the very rationale for reciprocity and, dare I say, informal coalition building around mutually beneficial themes.

It seems to me, then, that it is perfectly possible to be fervently pro-European and an advocate of reciprocal relationships between people whilst, at the same time, being unapologetically anti-EU and its one-size-fits-all, we-know-best approach to relations between the citizens and nations of Europe.

Just a thought!

Bob's response to Chris ...

Great thought(s)! Thank you.

Is there the germ here of a short piece from you along these lines for the journal, perhaps?

Chris's holding reply to Bob ...

I'll have to think whether or not to offer a piece for e-O&P on the topic. My email was simply a reaction to the implication that Brexit was (a) obviously bad - as signalled by the pejorative use of the term "populism"; and (b) on par with terrorism!

Anna's reaction to Bob and Chris ...

I would be more than happy to consider a piece along these lines. Good to have a challenge to any assumptions. Perhaps it relates to the theme around the 'shadow' side to reciprocity.

Chris's belated reply to Anna ...

Our previous email exchange, via Bob, has certainly led to my thinking further about the notion of reciprocity and the various ways in which it might be exercised. At the same time, I don't think that I'll be able to produce anything worthwhile for e-O&P based on my earlier response to Bob's initial email.

My comments were more of a gut reaction to the anti-Brexit theme in the invitation and its bracketing with, amongst other things, acts of terrorism!

It seems to me that, amongst those who might think of themselves as well educated, deep thinking, and socially progressive, there is a taken-for-granted-ness about the anti-Brexit stance of others of the same ilk. Incorporating the term "populism" in commentaries on the current state of affairs across the globe seems to have become the essential code for signalling one's affiliation with this particular in-group.

Somewhat ironically, this tends to stoke, rather than quell, the politics of inclusion-exclusion that those of such a position would ordinarily claim to eschew: In this case, the intellectually superior, politically correct, rational, and socially elite insiders, who inhabit the moral high ground, versus the ill-educated, prejudiced, irrational, and socially challenged rest, who are easily swayed by 'populist' rhetoric.

One consequence of this is that it polarises the debate; preventing genuine progress and rapprochement. Another is that it makes open challenge to this position less likely by others who would similarly see themselves as well-educated, deep-thinking, and socially progressive!

and some afterthoughts ...

I just wanted to clarify that my 'ranting on' about the response to Brexit related to the general level of commentary on this and other challenges to the established order, which has built up over some time. It was not directed specifically at your e-O&P invitation!

Apologies if it read that way. But thanks also for providing an outlet for my frustrations, which are not so much about the substantive issue (Brexit, in this case) but rather about the underlying, political (with a little 'p') dynamics.

Anna's conclusion ...

I didn't take offence. I thought you made some important points about not taking certain perspectives for granted. So hard in these deeply divided times to find a way to listen to each other/ practice reciprocal attention. I heard about a project between Boston Lincs (75% leave) and Brixton (majority remain) to visit each other and understand each other's perspectives. Sounded a good thing.

And Chris's ...

I have to confess that I hadn't heard of the Boston-Brixton initiative. Sounds spot-on. Spontaneous and emergent (i.e. non-institutionalised) reciprocity in action, perhaps?

Reciprocity in the training relationship

Adapting the Solihull Approach to training and consultation

Dawn Cutler



The concept of reciprocity was used by Brazelton (1974) to describe the second-by-second patterns of interaction he found when looking at parent-infant relationships. This article explores how my colleagues and I have used the idea to think about the process of offering training in the Solihull Approach and the relationship that is set up between the facilitators and the participants of that training.

Keywords:

Reciprocity; Solihull Approach; Training; Consultation

Introduction

This article considers how the idea of reciprocity, which was developed in thinking about parent-child relationships, has been extended to help us think about our broader relationships and communications with people. After a brief example and a discussion of the theoretical foundations of reciprocity, I will share my experiences of using the concept of reciprocity in the particular context of offering training to professionals.

When working well, reciprocity is a rhythm in our interactions which we take for granted. Counter-intuitively, it is sometimes easier to understand the idea of reciprocity when it is *not* working so well. One parent described a time to me when her nine-year-old son had 'lost it'. Looking back at the events, we could see how they had got suddenly out of step in their interaction. She talked about how she and her son had been sitting on the sofa, and had started to play a game. Her son had caught her eye, and then given her a gentle tickle-poke in the ribs. She had turned to look at him, laughed, smiled and given him a tickle back. This game continued for a bit, both laughing and smiling at each other, both in tune with the other's intentions and the pace of the game. Her son had then pushed her in a way that really hurt, accidentally. Without thinking, she found herself cross and shouting at him. He tried to apologise, she remained cross as he had hurt her. She reports that he then 'lost it'; having been unable to make things OK with her again, he became angry and upset, running away from her. In this example, we can see the interaction began as reciprocal, with both Mum and son involved in the pacing and the escalation. It then became 'out of step' and non-reciprocal, with neither party able to find a way to repair the rupture and make it OK again. This kind of accidental disruption in interactions happens to all of us much of the time. Part of my work with this family was to think with this parent about how she could find a way to help things get back on track more quickly when they occasionally went wrong, and also help her son learn that things could be made OK again, even when someone had become angry.

The Solihull Approach

My introduction as a psychologist to the word 'reciprocity' was via a theoretical framework called the Solihull Approach. The Solihull Approach was developed by health visitors working in Solihull in the UK in the late nineties. As part of their work they met regularly with child psychotherapists and psychologists for consultation. They found as a consultation group that there were key concepts they kept returning to which helped them to think about and reflect on their work. These key concepts were drawn from diverse fields of psychology, psychoanalysis and child development. These three core conceptual elements in the Solihull Approach are *containment* (Bion, 1959), *reciprocity* (Brazelton, 1974) and *behaviour management*. Dr Hazel Douglas (2010), the psychotherapist working with the team, began to draw these key ideas together into an 'approach'. The two-day Solihull Approach incorporates these concepts alongside infant brain development, with many reflective exercises alongside the theoretical content. Information about this course is available at <https://solihullapproachparenting.com/>. Reciprocity is the theme of both this edition of the journal and this article, but I will briefly describe the ideas of containment and behavioural management before going on to a fuller description of reciprocity, as the Solihull Approach would always consider all three ideas when thinking about relationships.

Containment

Hazel Douglas (2012) developed the concept of containment first described by Bion (1959) and now widely used in psychodynamic and psychoanalytic theory. She defines it in the context of the Solihull Approach as

"where a person receives and understands the emotional communication of another without being overwhelmed by it and communicates this back to the other person. This process can restore the individual's capacity to think and the ability to process their emotions."

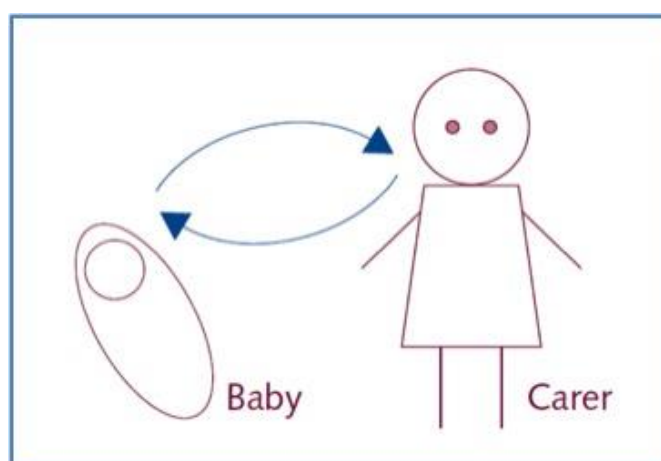
The Solihull team draw a diagram to explain this process – that of a baby passing overwhelming feelings to their parent, who thinks about them, tries to make sense of them, and then lets their child know that they understand that they understand their distress.

Diagram 1: Containment as the communication of feelings

This diagram shows containment as the communication of feelings by the baby to their carer, the carer understanding these feelings and letting the baby know that they have understood

Behaviour management

Behaviour management ideas in the Solihull Approach are drawn from the traditions of behaviourism and consider how to teach children self-control by placing appropriate boundaries around their behaviour.



Taken from the Solihull Approach training materials (Douglas, 2009) -
©Solihull Approach

Reciprocity

Reciprocity is the third concept at the core of the Solihull Approach. Reciprocity describes the idea of tuning in to the communications of others and altering our communications in response to these - of finding

ways to co-create our interactions. The work of Brazelton (1974) has developed this idea of reciprocity and it is used in a particular way in the context of child development. He describes his work in a clip produced by Mind in the Making (2012). Brazelton reminded us that even newborn babies are active participants in relationships, and that no party in a relationship is a passive recipient of attention from another. There are some examples of this in the video material of 'The Social Baby' produced by NSPCC (2004). Brazelton and colleagues identified key stages common to all interactions by looking at videos of babies interacting with their caregivers and analysing what happens at the second by second level. There is an arc that is found in all interactions - a beginning, a peak of engagement, and an ending or turning away (Diagram 2).

Diagram 2 – Stages in the dance of reciprocity



Taken from the Solihull Approach training materials (Douglas, 2009) - ©Solihull Approach

Looking back to the story told to me that I cited at the beginning of this article, we can see that this parent and her child had managed the stages of initiation, orientation, acceleration and were at the peak of their interaction. They experienced a sudden ending, without mutual deceleration; in reciprocity, we would consider this a 'rupture'. Research on reciprocity tells us that there are ruptures in many of our cycles of interaction. In considering parent-child relationships, the parent often intuitively finds ways to repair a rupture, for example waiting for child to catch up if they are slow to understand or join the game the parent is suggesting. The process of repair is important for emotional development as it contributes to a child's resilience in managing problems, their sense that things can be made better, and their sense of their own value and self-worth. 'Good' reciprocity would not imply that we are always perfectly attuned, but would imply that on the many occasions we fall out of step, we make efforts to repair those disruptions.

Training reciprocally

Holding reciprocity in mind suggests that in our working relationships we need to consider whether we have heard the communications and understood the positions of those we are working with, and whether we are travelling at the same pace along a similar enough arc of interaction as our colleagues.

I would hope to offer training and consultation that is consistent with the principles on which it is based. This means I would hope to be using the ideas of reciprocity when initiating, developing and ending training cycles. Training 'reciprocally' has presented some dilemmas in the organisational context. I think these are not unique to offering training in the Solihull Approach, but extend to many times when we are 'commissioned' to offer training or to create change in teams.

Some reflections that trying to offer training 'reciprocally' has left me with are:

1. Beginnings: are there ways in which we can enable a dance of reciprocity with those people attending the training e.g. allowing space for needs analysis and consultation before starting?
2. During training: can we carefully watch communications during the day to adjust the content and discussion?
3. Attunement in systems: are there ways to help teams and their managers stay in step before and after the training e.g. considering who to train first?

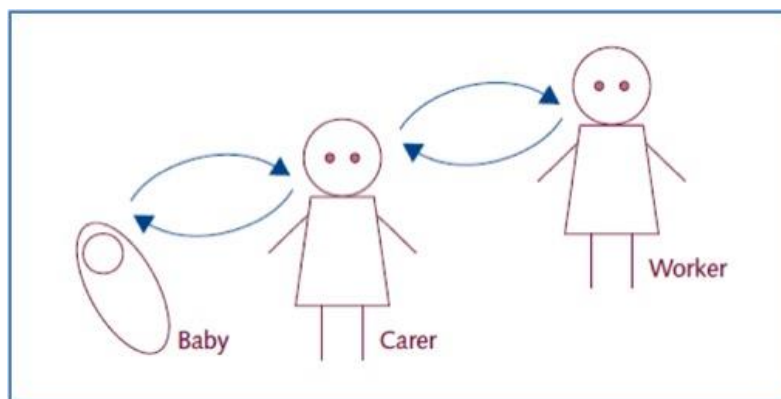
I will now talk about each of these three areas in turn and give some examples.

1. Beginnings

It is important to consider the context of the commissioning, to understand who is asking for what for whom. In the contexts in which I have worked (the NHS and the public sector) managers hold training budgets for their teams. I have been offering training to teams which has been commissioned by and agreed with their manager in the first instance. Sometimes this is due to a request from the team, but it also reflects the needs that the manager perceives in the team. Depending on how reciprocal the relationship between the manager and the team is, this may or may not reflect the team's perception of helpful developments.

There are many levels of parallel process at work in these training systems. A parallel process is where the same themes and emotional processes are represented in different layers of a system. For example, with containment, a parent contains a baby's overwhelming feelings. This is manageable once or twice but when a parent or caregiver does this all day, they too end up with a head full of overwhelming feelings. They need help to manage these feelings and may like to communicate them to a partner, friend or professional who then contains them and lets them know that they have understood. This process of two relationships nested in parallel represents similar patterns of interaction and emotion (Diagram 3).

Diagram 3 - Containment as a parallel process



Taken from Solihull Approach training materials (Douglas, 2009) - ©Solihull Approach

As I reflect on my work, it seems that there are some parallels in the process of managers seeking help for their teams to the process of parents seeking help for their children. I do not mean to suggest that practitioners are children, but it is important to acknowledge the power dynamics of some relationships between practitioners and their managers and to hold in mind that some voices may be harder to hear and harder to get in step with. It is often the person with power and agency (the manager or parent) who decides that there is a need for change and seeks out the help that they believe will be most useful for their

team or child. When coming to me as a psychologist, they may be seeking for the team or child to be changed by an external agent. This means that there can be a pressure to 'do', and this presents a dilemma in how to initiate and orient to a cycle of training with a team. Reciprocity (and experience) would tell us that a trainer cannot 'do change' to a team; the team needs to choose to 'dance' and engage with the ideas. This implies that the trainer needs to find ways to get 'in step' with team.

Illustrating this pressure, Anna Fairtlough (2015) has worked to research and evaluate work in the City of London to run the Solihull Approach training and implement the ideas in practice. She interviewed both trainers and managers and notes that:

"Both managers and trainers thought that more time could have been spent on consulting with and describing the possible benefits of the SA for different groups of practitioners, before introducing the training. The trainers described the pressures on them not to do any unfunded, non-clinical work, which meant that the time for pre-contract consultation work is reduced."
(Fairtlough, 2016)

Sometimes there are ruptures in the trainer-participant relationship - it is important to know about these and take the opportunity to repair them. At a minimum, this means that the training days need time at the beginning to get 'in step', especially if you don't know the participants. It is not unusual for participants to have no idea what the training is they have turned up for, or to have done the same training in a previous job and only realise this when they arrive and see the title slide.

2. During Training

Reciprocity during training is helped in the Solihull Approach model by having two facilitators, so that when one is working actively with the group the other can be watching for the group's communications. There are also exercises to explicitly check where the group is at with their understanding of the ideas, and we can then adjust the content to fit with this.

We also watch the emotional tone in the room. There are points at which the ideas mean people connect to their own experiences of parenting and childhood, and we pay attention to how this section feels and adjust as needed. Colleagues have also introduced exercises which respond to the energy level of participants - when we feel that they are ready to 'turn away' we find a way to allow this e.g. move a break forward, or trying a physical re-energiser.

The City of London evaluation carried out by Anna Fairtlough (2015) provides some examples of participants' feedback which illustrate that they have experienced a reciprocal training in the way that we would have hoped:

"We have two really great facilitators anyway. That does help. It is really good, listening to my colleagues, we all chip in our ideas to move it on, having the psychologist there to facilitate it. Everybody has a different idea how to contain things, everyone has different ways of learning. In that respect, I am learning.'
(Individual interviewee 1, March 2016)"

3. Reciprocity and attunement in systems

If the team changes due to learning and development during and after the training, their relationships will change with the system around them, creating a need for reciprocal change in the management system around them.

In my own experience of training and that of my colleagues, we have found that it is hard for teams to develop their practice and hold onto ideas unless the systems around them change in response to them. Sometimes the training can create a rupture in the relationship between the team and the system around them. For example, when health visitors begin to think about the idea of reciprocity and listening to the parents they work with, taking time to create an attuned interaction with them, they realised that the system they were working within was struggling to hear their communications and adjust its relationship with them as needed. We tried to support them in mending this rupture, by helping them to communicate their position to their management team. My former colleagues Virginia Lumsden and Mandy Sarankin (2014) have written more about this process of offering consultations to health visitors in the increasingly pressurised context in which they work.

In retrospect, our experience has been that reciprocity is best enabled when it is possible to initiate the training by either training managers and teams together, or by training those commissioning the training first. The hope of this would be that the system around the team moves position and is ready to receive the communications of the team.

Conclusions

It is all too easy to lose sight of the reciprocity in relationships, even when offering training in reciprocity in relationships. In particular, the concept of training has an implicit idea of giving something to someone - we talk about 'delivering training' and how it will 'create meaningful change in the participants'. What is less often acknowledged is that as a 'trainer' you are given many things by the people you spend time with, that co-creating a context and making sense of ideas means your own understanding of those concepts shifts each time they are talked about in directions you never expected. For example, when training teachers in the ideas, I learnt how the routine and pattern of the day in the classroom helps children and their teachers remain in step.

In thinking back over experiences of training (I think I may have facilitated this two-day Solihull Approach foundation training perhaps 15 times now) I realise how, when offering training to teams, it is easy to become caught up in the content, in what you will say, and in the organisation - "Is the projector working?" "Do we have enough handouts?". But on reflection, these elements are not what enables reciprocity and a meaningful two days of development. It is more important to take time to set up and understand the system in which you will be working, so that you can find ways to make the ideas fit. Paying attention to the initiation and orientation, and getting 'in step', allows you to accelerate away in the limited time you have together with the participants. You also need to make time to find out when it's gone wrong, to check with participants whether you are in tune, and be open to acknowledging that you've made a mistake, gone too quickly, or misunderstood a comment.

In conclusion, enabling reciprocity is in part about working hard to stay 'in step' with your partner/s. Equally significant is watching closely for times when you get 'out of step', as it is these small ruptures and their repair which strengthen a relationship and our understanding of our partner/s in the dance of reciprocity. It provides us with a powerful model and metaphor for

noticing our interactions with others and reflecting on our relationships in our personal and organisational lives.

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Sustaining reciprocity in an era of narcissism ...

... or bringing it back to 'us'

Tony Page



Reciprocity provides a way to understand how a recent workshop was derailed and sent hurtling towards a precipice. I wanted to find out how can a facilitator sustain the to-and-fro of reciprocity in an era when egotistical, narcissistic behaviour seems so prevalent and infectious. I began to discover what actually goes on inside me and others, while a team is refreshing its leadership. Now I feel better equipped to intervene in the high stakes moments in a meeting, when we risk stumbling. Once we know how deeply the dance of reciprocity is ingrained in all of us, facilitators can trust that when a rupture occurs, others will soon join them in the repair.

I have organised this story around five main observations: something doesn't feel right; we can stumble; we can recover; we can widen the lens; bringing it back to 'us'.

Keywords

narcissism, altruism, facilitation, leadership, reflection, dialogue

1. Something doesn't feel right.

Why when this invitation to write about reciprocity arrived was I so captivated? I checked the dictionary: 'Reciprocity is the practice of exchanging things with others for mutual benefit'. Apparently, studies with mothers and infants (Brazelton et al, 1974) highlight a reciprocity that is universal and permeates all human experience. This set me noticing how we all tune in, actively engage, and 'co-produce' two-way exchanges, creating what appear to be imperfect dances that include stumbles and misunderstandings, ruptures and repairs.

Interesting? Yes, but my interest was rather more specific. When I work as a facilitator with leaders and teams there are tricky moments when unfortunately, just when there is all to be gained, the risk of stumbling increases hugely. This was a compelling question: how might a consciously 'reciprocal' approach stabilise everyone, including me personally, to keep the dance going when we are about to topple?

Primed by this question, I became sensitised to some everyday exchanges that missed the requisite to-and-fro. How irritated I was when I read the claim in a best-selling book ("Against Empathy", Bloom 2016), that 'empathy', meaning when we share the feelings of others, 'butters no parsnips'. It claimed empathy was over-rated because it causes us to ignore stakeholders outside the spotlight, thus obstructing good governance. I wanted to argue.

But how startled I was at the vicious hostility of that book's reviewers on Amazon. I found their comments at odds with their avowed interest in empathy:

- "Ridiculousness masquerading as substantive."
- "Sloppy lazy arguments from someone who should know better."
- "This leads to FAR WORSE effects. I'm not sure WHAT he is talking about."
- "Has the author a weak mind or is he pulling a Trumpian ruse?"



This online 'conversation' was neither rational nor respectful. Where was the dance of reciprocity? The insight and mutual benefit? Tightness came to my stomach, as if, unbidden, my body was preparing for war. I wanted to say: "Whoa, time out chaps!" Why such nastiness, seemingly so everyday and so contagious? The word 'narcissism' sprang to mind and I looked up the hallmarks: grandiosity, lack of empathy for others, a craving for admiration (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Yes, perhaps this nastiness was narcissistic.

I ranted inwardly towards politicians, recent election results, fake news, glossed-up Facebook profiles, social media storms and this fractious, egotistical world. But the cooler, half-waking moments brought a deeper curiosity: How does 'self' running amok blind us to 'other'? When is it legitimate to speak up for 'self', asserting our needs and interests, or those of a minority? How confident can we be that reciprocity, being so universally and deeply ingrained since infancy, will protect us from the breaking waves of egotism, narcissism, and anger?

A recent book describes today's 'age of anger' growing slowly from the [Enlightenment](#) and the upheavals of the Industrial Revolution. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 unleashed into previously communist or less developed countries the full force of a triumphant market economy, releasing powerful counter-currents of resentment amongst those who were gaining little from it (Mishra, 2017).

With this wider canvass, I'm drawn to the sad conclusion that over recent centuries, countless good-hearted people like us, were waking up every single day horrified at some recent turn of events. They will have screamed in outrage "Who did this to us?" They will have hit upon – and blamed - a convenient 'other': the far right or far left, the West or the Middle East, terrorists, men or women, management or workers. And some days most of us will have taken a deep breath and counted to ten, only to be left in despair, at the leaders, 'other people' and our poisonous world.

But is this the best we can do? As facilitators, developers and leaders, are we not especially well equipped to see what is actually occurring? One day I took a stab in my journal:

No one else did 'this' to 'us', because we are all part of a 'greater us', and 'this' is the sum total of the actions and inactions of seven and a half billion people on planet earth. This is us. If we want 'this' to be different, we know where to start: with ourselves.

Perhaps the magic of reciprocity was rubbing off, and that day, instead of being overwhelmed, I became unusually optimistic. Somehow heartened, I moved on to my real interest: a certain recent experience.

2. We can stumble

On the third and final day in a Delhi-based workshop. I am the facilitator introducing the agenda, when a participant, let's call him X, who last night was lobbying for support in the bar, leaps up red-faced and proposes a new topic - Funding – which I estimate will take at least half the morning.

The group responds with a tense silence. These forty-five leaders of a global NGO, from 20 different countries in Africa, Asia and Europe, rarely meet, and their agenda so carefully co-designed in advance, addresses their biggest challenges.

I could have said no, but I am not their boss and not their trainer either: they are the organisation's leaders, responsible for creating their strategy. As facilitator, I treat them as adults, re-stating the two options (stick to the agenda or squeeze in the new topic), and highlighting the dangers of inflexibility or impulsiveness.

When someone shouts "Stick!", X only fights harder, with eyes darting madly and words inflammatory. A voice from the back of the room mutters: "Read your emails!" Another says: "We're wasting time". Then: "If it's got to be Funding, let's get on with it", and someone stands up spontaneously to lead a discussion of the topic. No one opposes.

Momentarily stunned, I allocate the next ninety minutes to Funding, while inwardly asking how has one person beaten forty-four into submission?

Mid-morning, time runs out and I call a break, during which frustrations pour out: "What did we actually achieve?" "Is this how we collaborate?" "How did we let this happen?" "What have we squeezed out?" My bones tell me the team is falling apart, and I don't know what to do next.

Quickly I mentally replay the workshop so far to cast light on how the railroading occurred.

In the beginning ...

These forty-five people are so passionate to save the world their way, when they talk they can forget to listen to each other. We begin on day one with two framing questions to encourage give-and-take:

- If this team is a village, what kind of village are we being?
- How are we each taking up our roles in this village?

I promise to serve the group with challenge and support, then ask for volunteers to co-facilitate sessions. After self-introductions and sharing expectations, we build a common purpose: to bring this team's collaboration to the NGO's top challenges, towards greater flexibility and global impact.

Then we get down to work, building on their successes since I first worked with them two years ago. I try to ask good questions and draw out what might be unsaid, towards insights and decisions from the group as a whole.

After lunch, we stand up for Tai Chi, rubbing our tummies, taking deep breaths, and swinging our arms. With arms behind like ski sticks, we rise up, throwing down the toxic energies that hold us back. Finally, we balance on a cloud, breathing while gently swaying left and right.

This energiser produces happy chatter as we move to a circle of chairs for a reflective dialogue. I give a briefing:

- We are taking this chance to explore our 'village'
- How are we taking up our roles?
- What are our feelings and needs?
- Through careful listening, we can extend our awareness.



Figure 1: A Tai Chi energiser

My heart is thumping, because there is no Plan B. I hand over and they begin. Gently. Carefully. During the next ninety minutes, every single person speaks. The conversation builds, insights are shared, perspectives challenged and stretched. I learn that their 'village' has tidy little front gardens on public view, which are criticised as inadequate, and there is a yearning to speak of remarkable but 'illegal' things happening in their huge and bustling back gardens.

At the end, we have a richer picture and, when I'm told such an open session never happened before, I glow with satisfaction, until someone whispers that certain issues are not being raised.

The afternoon continues with 'Discovery Calls' using Skype, to staff and partners in three continents, finding out issues we give to our working groups on the second morning.

Then on the second afternoon we close our eyes and breathe while planting our feet firmly, scanning through the ankles, legs, torso, hands, arms, shoulders, neck and face, to let go of tension. Re-balanced, we continue in our 'village' circle with the question:

- How are we actually working together here in Delhi?

Issues emerge.....

Someone says: "Are we afraid to raise the deeper issues?" Denials follow, along with attempts to dig deeper. "Who decides the agenda?" "How do we make decisions?" "What is our role?" Questions are blurted then left hanging, and the tone is challenging, the atmosphere raw, like grazed flesh. Returning to the working groups someone grabs me: "Why didn't you round things off?" I reply: "Because these sessions open up possibility, but no one knows yet what the difference will be".

3. We can recover

This last exchange rang in my ears during day three's morning break. Perhaps the previous day's dialogue contributed to today's railroading of the agenda.

After the break, everyone is seated and many are frustrated. No one knows what's coming next. I don't want us to punish X for what happened, but we mustn't brush it under the carpet either. I'm panicked about the acute lack of time. For calm, I visualise my feet planted like tree trunks. I take deep breaths and stretch my spine towards the roof. Then remarkably I know what to do next.

I acknowledge that “one of you” proposed the diversion and the group went with it. I continue: “Some are asking how we arrive at decisions”. There are nods and other questions lobbed in: “Are we decision-makers?” “Are we supposed to be a team?” “Who are we anyway?”

No proper answers arrive until the Chief Executive finally wades in: “Let me say why I invited you here”. The room breathes a sigh of relief and he continues: “You are not an extra layer of hierarchy. You are the organisation’s leaders with something to offer one another. Together we can be a resource to each other, towards the greater impact”.

Next small groups come up with examples of what has enabled and blocked them as resources to one another, and X is fully involved. Teamwork is so obviously happening that I shelve a ‘contracting with each other’ session planned for the afternoon. And with that, time is no longer a concern. We return to the NGO’s challenges, and in self-selected groups identify the needed follow-up actions.

Just before lunch, I see X heading for the door saying he has to catch an earlier flight and I feel an inner thud of disappointment. I’m suspicious. Is he running away? If so, why?

After lunch, the rest of us re-trace our steps over the three workshop days, and finally standing in a circle, each individual states the single follow-up action s/he will take afterwards. The energy level is high with a note of celebration, and everything feels OK again.

4. We can widen the lens

Second thoughts began to arrive late that afternoon on my way back to Delhi airport. The railroading and subsequent events had unsettled me. In the following weeks while chatting with colleagues I began expanding my viewpoint and the Delhi workshop began to appear as a facilitator’s failed attempt at reciprocity. I wrote up these notes (in italics).

We were like the crew of Apollo 8 gasping as our blue and white planet reappears from behind the grey, lifeless desert of the moon. We are alone in the vastness, and everything is clearly up to us. (Connor, 2009).

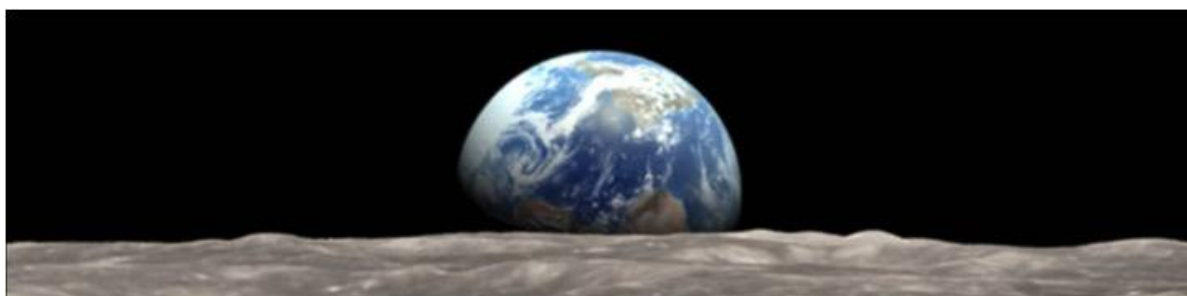


Figure 2: Earthrise revisited - NASA

With a magical lens, we can track through history to flare-ups that shaped who we are today, zooming in on regions, rooms, and moments.

In winter 1916, with World War One raging, a sixty-year-old cocaine-addicted Sigmund Freud is lecturing at the University of Vienna on the little-known subject of Narcissism, that ‘natural self-love in babies that can become distorted in the adult’. Scepticism greets his preposterous theory but, one hundred years later, Narcissism helpfully illuminates our flare-ups.

Narcissism animates the baby screaming for food, drink and comfort. It commands the carers and produces miracles. When carers and baby attune, they co-produce a dance of reciprocity, giving and taking turns, until narcissism recedes. But a mad potential lurks deep in us, to take control whenever our needs are ignored. This inflated self is a ferocious, scary egotist, a dictator or control freak boss, an enraged teacher or a parent striking out. (Vernon, 2012.)

After World War One survivors maimed and traumatised, return to revolutions and reforms at home. The new League of Nations engages former enemies in a reciprocal dance towards disarmament. But narcissism is on the menu too, as fascist dictators arise in Spain, Italy, Russia and German. The League falls silent in the face of Hitler's advance on Rhineland, Sudetenland and Austria, making further flare-ups inevitable.

After World War Two, the new United Nations in New York issues a declaration of human rights, and brings former colonies to independence. US Psychology professors research the grotesque wartime behaviour, loss of moral qualms, mass hysteria and brutality. Reciprocity is set to return.

I am the teenager in 1969 who watches a first moon-walk during the terrifying Cold War and violence in Vietnam. Our family house in Kent rings to arguments about Dad falling under the spell of Narcissist movements: the evangelist Billy Graham, Jo Grimond and his Liberal Revival, and the Human Potential Movement. Mum says each 'bliss' precedes his predictable disillusionment until Dad wipes the slate clean, and chases the next one. My aunt calls it foolish self-gratification. Dad says no, these 'missions' are God's will, spreading peace to all faiths, industry and young people. Is this narcissism? Or altruism?

Altruism was named a century ago, by Sociologist Auguste Comte. It wrongly placed selflessness ('altruism') in opposition to selfishness, and failed to acknowledge the 'good self-love' without which we stumble. Excess altruism stops the reciprocity, just as narcissism does, because reciprocity depends on us balancing 'self' and 'other'. (Vernon, 2012).

How do we recover when intoxicated in a fit of narcissism? Uncle advises Mum to hit Dad over the head with a frying pan. Instead Mum fires words: grandiose, foolish and cruel. She says Dad's seduced by utopian dreams, and crowd hysteria, but his chosen means will fail to reach the ends he seeks: after all, the wars taught us that.

Narcissistic Personality Disorder is officially recognised in 1980. The hallmarks include grandiosity, lack of empathy, arrogance, a sense of entitlement and a need for admiration. Narcissists consider themselves superior, special and uniquely gifted but are actually fragile, having difficulty accepting criticism while pre-occupied with fantasies of their own success. Who knows if it's nature or nurture, but it's difficult to treat; and up to 75% of cases are male. (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

Before people are six, they become pre-disposed either to an inflated sense of 'self', typical amongst boys, or to an exaggerated sense of 'other', typical amongst girls. Both are problematic: the self-centred behave as if entitled to dominate, while the other-centred yield too easily (Bian, Leslie & Cimpian, 2017).

What we put our attention on grows, and certain practices can nourish our reciprocity: gratitude, modesty, compassion (self and other), mindfulness and community. These produce dopamine and serotonin, the brain's natural anti-depressants. (Emmons and McCulloch, 2003). We can dance the reciprocity dance by stepping into the shoes of another, then standing back to view the larger system.

When we step back to view the earth in 2017, elites with smartphones make almost four billion points of light, and we don't see the blank spots where other lights ought to be. For 100 years every person on earth, with or without smartphones, has been in countless reciprocal conversations, pulling and pulled in each moment between other and self, altruism and narcissism.

Today's new era sees cosy democracies wobbling, as youth and 'have-nots' find their voice. New voices can seem foolish, petulant, like badly behaved children refusing the sober choices that parents consider sensible. We see shock election results with Brexit in the UK, Trump in the US, humbled losers, and an untested French President with an entirely new party. Recalcitrant troublemakers are granted unearned posts in government. No one knows what's coming next. It's a wake-up moment. Like being at a party when the fire alarm goes off. Is it really a fire? Or was there just too much rum in the punch?

Meanwhile back in Delhi, how was the new era playing out in the meeting room as we took the diversion from the agenda? Was the previously docile team of forty-five at last waking up, trying something out, testing their power? Certainly I was wrong-footed but it wasn't comfortable for any of us. You could say we stumbled then recovered.

5. Bringing it back to 'us'

We came to this with a question:

How might a consciously reciprocal approach help us make better choices in our high stakes moments?

Now, after wide-ranging reflections, we draw together what this means for our practice as facilitators and leaders.

We can always choose to hold onto what works well for us, rather than be haunted by our mistakes, and we will keep in mind the wise man who told his apprentice "nothing you did was unnecessary". With this spirit of generosity, we can reconsider the events at Delhi.

X's proposal to spend half the morning on Funding was a need, genuinely felt, and by raising it he faced the risk of rejection by 44 colleagues, for being selfish or wrong. But his action also brought gifts to others in the NGO, and this is evidence of his contribution to reciprocity that pacifies my suspicions of narcissism.

When **team members** yielded to X's proposal, they also took risks and gained benefits. They suspended their agenda, gave up control and rewarded a maverick, but the inconvenient need of their colleague brought them the opportunity to exorcise their own haunting fears about Funding, and to manifest their capacity to make a fast and unified team response.

The **CEO** after what he considered a 'pointless' session on Funding, saw his team make a swift re-clarification of purpose that helped take up their leadership, and fortuitously delivered the CEO's main objectives for the meeting.

When as **facilitator** I gave the group a choice, their acceptance of X's proposal was a shock to me. Then mid-morning, their evident frustration showed me where to go next. I used their questions ("who are we, and how do we arrive at decisions?") and in doing so called them back to the 'greater us'. In the ensuing exchange, they made an active repair towards being better resources to one another, and to the NGO.

What of the **narcissism**? Symbolically, as in Dali's famous painting, the morning's story was ego flaring up, then receding, until narcissism was transformed. Specifically, X's needy moment, rubbing on a raw spot of my personal history, threw me. But the disrupted morning also brought benefits to the whole team, and with hindsight the 'catastrophe' of X's walking out was no such thing. The repair so dramatically achieved, brought a troublesome but memorable lesson in reciprocity.



Figure 3: Dali's Metamorphosis of Narcissus

Returning from narcissism to the 'greater us' through reciprocity

There may be forty-five other versions of that difficult morning, giving further proof - if needed - that this work is messy. I've seen that our residual narcissistic pain is constantly ready to disrupt the balanced adult dance of reciprocity, but the stumbles when we embrace them, are keys to our greater mutual success.

We take people first as they are. Any team's array of dedicated members, pre-disposed as they are to 'self' and to 'other', ensures that under duress there will be a characteristic team-sabotage. To some, the reciprocal approach is hardly relevant then. After all, this is not how our organisations are governed, how our leaders conduct themselves, or how the media beams back to us the atomised world we inhabit. Reciprocity is not reality.

To others, the principle of reciprocity is real, and necessary if we want many minds and hands to produce good solutions. They turn a blind eye to the 'age of anger' and swim along on the unstoppable wave towards ever-greater equality, openness, compassion and reason. They say "yes we can" and reach toward gains that are mutual. They say "yes you did" and share the fruits even with the sceptics. The evidence of increasing trouble in the world is only further justification for their bone-deep belief in working together: only reciprocity holds open the chance for others to rise to the occasion.

As facilitators, our job is to hold open that chance. Reciprocity inspires us towards the active participation of everyone, in all conversations and exchanges. We seek to balance and combine 'self' with 'others'. We set the example: listening before we speak, never content until we've heard from 'you'. Even when it is messy or uncomfortable, we do not rant or run away. When others stumble, we help, and trust that they'll do the same for us.

Our unstated assumption is that healthy and resilient people working together will more responsive, flexible, productive and fulfilled. When others are out of step with this approach, we can quietly note that they are stumbling and be confident they can get over themselves. We invite their colleagues to extend a helping hand, thus re-blending 'self' with 'other'. After each rupture happens and each repair is made, reciprocity continues all the more strongly.

So how, in a world that needs reciprocity like never before, do we make its shrouded choreography more widely accessible?

Firstly, we can remember that 'reciprocity' is universal since infancy, and as deeply ingrained in all of us as our 'narcissism'. Both are in place and ready to go.

Secondly, with larger groups of confident leaders, facilitators are the needed stewards of reciprocity, offering a 'containing presence' that mostly holds the incipient narcissism at bay. Towards this we bring co-designed agendas, framing questions and suitable groundrules. We stay vigilant, attending to the bodily energy with breaks, refreshment, breathing and movement. We hold reflective sessions allowing buried issues to be raised and bonds to deepen, enriching the mutual understanding so that working sessions can be focused, energetic and productive.

Thirdly, we must expect wild waves of narcissism sometimes to knock us over, and me-me questions to strike us forcibly when we least expect them. If we are armed with an unshakable trust in the inevitability of reciprocity and repair, these crises become opportunities for a team to re-discover 'Who We Are' and 'How We Will Lead'.

There is hope, because - despite our inbuilt vulnerability to narcissism - we can draw from the universal pool of reciprocity and keep returning confidently to the 'greater us'.

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Images

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Figure 3: Metamorphosis of Narcissus by Salvador Dali (1937). Source: CEA+. Licence: Creative Commons (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>).

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An experienced facilitator, executive coach, Chartered Psychologist and author, Tony works with leaders and teams internationally. He is curious about the hidden influences from society, history and family, which shape the facilitator's response. His reflections, moving between a sharp focus on a specific event, and a much wider lens, help to inform where to go next. Meditation, co-coaching and dialogue help Tony capture the stories he shares with others. Tony's third book, *Opening Dad's Secret Box*, shines more light on our hidden potentials and the choices available to us. It will be published in summer 2017.

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Solidarity and reciprocity in practice

Equality in spite of difference

Veera Mo



Solidarity can change cross-border interaction both between and within countries, in organisations and among people. It can be a useful conceptual tool in the promotion of constructive and reciprocal relationships. By establishing our equality despite our differences, and through the conscious practice of solidarity, we can prefigure the relationships we seek to create.

Keywords

solidarity, equality, reciprocity, roles, aid, assumptions, power imbalances, civil society

Introduction

Last autumn, I travelled to Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras with the Norwegian Solidarity Committee for Latin America. The Solidarity Committee emphasises the importance of a 'knowledge-based, balanced dissemination of information' on contemporary dynamics in Latin America to support civil society in specific struggles against oppressive regimes towards 'the establishment of a real and participatory democracy' (Latin-Amerikagruppene 2016a). In particular, the organisation has an international outlook, emphasising connections and impacts, and therefore hopes both to hold international actors to account and to raise awareness of these interconnected relationships. Having recently completed my undergraduate degree in International Relations, I was keen to meet people and see the nuances of stories I had read about at university. I had never visited this part of the world, and was fascinated to be part of such an immersive learning experience. Roughly, we would spend a month in Mexico, three months in Guatemala, and one week in Honduras, learning with a variety of civil society actors both in urban and rural areas. The weeks prior to starting our journey had been filled with information, workshops and reading, history, language and news. We particularly engaged in conceptual discussions and confronted practical challenges: issues I would later be thankful to have raised.



Map of Central America: We began our journey in Mexico, ending four months later in Guatemala. (<https://goo.gl/Zr3Hxg>)

The Norwegian Committee for Solidarity with Latin America (LAG hereafter) has worked with several organisations in a variety of countries in the region since the late 1970s. Currently, the countries involved are Guatemala, Brazil and Colombia in addition to Norway. We work together to learn and stand in solidarity for autonomy, democracy, justice and indigenous rights (Latin-Amerikagruppene 2016b). The project I participated in in Guatemala is part of a biannual exchange that sends teams of around 10 young adults to work in solidarity with and learn from civil society organisations in Latin America. Upon returning to Norway, the group is expected to disseminate the information they acquired abroad to raise awareness, encourage debate and inspire activism in the wider population. In addition to this North-South exchange, South-South and South-North exchanges are also organised. In this way, learning experiences transcend established norms of international exchange, while encouraging egalitarianism and reciprocity. The conscious use of solidarity as a principle in organisational practice is intended to encourage an undoing of structures and histories that impact interpersonal and international relations from below.



Our group, pictured with activists at La Puya, Guatemala: a peaceful resistance movement working against gold mining near their homes. Photo: Veera Mo

Addressing power imbalances

During our exchange, we rooted our interactions in solidarity to enable mutual benefit from our interactions. We sought to participate equally without any presumptions of who should take on which role, and build reciprocal relationships based on respect and positivity. The goal was not to preclude active participation on either side of the interaction. We wanted to engage in dialogue with the intention of understanding, for each of us to be able to communicate our opinions, needs and difficulties effectively. Yet, *the key challenge was creating equal and reciprocal relationships between individuals and organisations* in order to create bonds of solidarity when there remained obvious social, economic and political power imbalances. If one part of the interaction assumes or sees itself as superior, reciprocity becomes difficult. Hence, in order to engage with mutuality, positivity and respect we had to be aware of any assumptions and never stop asking questions. Were we assuming our experiences and realities as the point of reference and truth in our interactions? Did we speak more than we listened? It was imperative that we acknowledged systemic factors causing the difference we felt, listened to our partners and harnessed our power to affect these relationships considering our relative privilege in the global system. If nothing else, we brought what we had learned back to Norway to raise awareness of injustice. Indeed, as members of a Norwegian civil society and advocacy organisation, solidarity and connections are important to us not only at the level of government, but also in civil society organisations, protest groups and among individuals.

The concept of solidarity

Solidarity: “unity (as of a group or class) that produces or is based on community of interests, objectives, and standards” (Merriam Webster 2017)

Solidarity was a key concept in our work for LAG. The concept may seem a display of vague political altruism, and may bring to mind anything from traditional socialist class notions of solidarity: “workers of the world unite”, or Christian cosmopolitan conceptions of solidarity: “we are all children of God”, or perhaps even ideas from the French enlightenment: “liberté, égalité, fraternité” (Guigni 2001). In this article, solidarity takes on a broader meaning, drawing on *unity derived from a conception of a common humanity* that has only increased through the rhetoric of globalisation since the end of the Cold War. Today, recognition of a shared humanity is evident everywhere: from social media to United Nations statements. Nevertheless, divisive rhetoric and political projects are on the rise, with far-right politics gaining ground across the globe. Perhaps unveiling global webs of impact and indeed, our shared humanity enables learning and understanding that can help create empathy, thereby countering these divisive international developments.

Challenging our assumptions

Yet, the idea of solidarity that we discussed and employed as organisational practice drew more on a recognition of global interconnections. We emphasised the power of international learning and awareness to support change, particularly at the grassroots level, as most of our work entailed cooperation with partner organisations. In Guatemala, our main partner organisations were CONAVIGUA, the National Coordination of Widows of Guatemala; and Comité de Unidad Campesina, the Peasant Unity Committee. We met community leaders, political analysts and other activists. We accompanied them to marches, meetings and ceremonies, and listened to their stories from the civil war and beyond. The basis of our efforts was a recognition of *equality despite difference*. Building on this, it was important to stay aware of relative histories,

possible power imbalances and positions in wider global in our interactions. Hence, for me, solidarity in practice became a conscious effort to undo assumptions.



One of our partner organisations represented at the March for land and water in Guatemala City, October 2016.
Photo: Thomas Birkeland

We came to listen and share, not to teach or impose. In Central America, a region where missionaries, militaries and politicians have historically come from abroad to implement their agendas, this was particularly important. The central conceptual distinction between aid and solidarity was clear, as the overarching answers remained undefined and were not held by a single actor. It seemed that our explicitly stated refusal of these presumed roles changed the way we were treated by the people we met. It was made clear that we intended the interaction to be for mutual benefit and learning, while acknowledging that this might not happen in the same way or in exactly the same measure at the same time for everyone. It was of utmost importance to our coordinators and partner organisations that the people we interacted with were informed of our purpose beforehand. Solidarity became useful to us in forming our relationships and interactions in a reciprocal and fruitful manner.

Solidarity in Practice: Mexico

I learned and experienced more than I could have imagined during and after my exchange to Central America. Sometimes the experience was hectic, other times it was slow. At times, 'solidarity in practice' was clear, at others it was challenging. Take, for example, our visit to the rural school of Ayotzinapa in the southern state of Guerrero, Mexico. The Ayotzinapa Rural Teacher College aims to educate indigenous local teachers for their own communities. On the 26th of September 2014, 43 teacher students from this school

were victims of *desaparicion forzada*, or enforced disappearance. An event is defined as an enforced disappearance when individuals are:

“deprived of their liberty by officials (...) of Government, or by organized groups or private individuals acting on behalf of, or with the support, direct or indirect, consent or acquiescence of the Government, followed by a refusal to disclose the fate or whereabouts of the persons concerned or a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of their liberty, which places such persons outside the protection of the law.” (United Nations, 2011).

Enforced disappearance is a major problem in Mexico in general, and the case of the 43 disappeared has become emblematic. We visited the school two years later, in solidarity with the parents of the disappeared and those affected by the disappearance.



The basketball court at La Escuela Normal Rural Raúl Isidro Burgos, Ayotzinapa. Photo: Veera Mo

To this day, the basketball court is filled with 43 empty chairs adorned with photographs of the kidnapped. I cannot begin to explain how heavy the air felt that day, neither can I begin to understand the pain felt by a parent tortured in the search for their child. Nevertheless, I understood that it was important to raise awareness about what had happened, and to show that we were paying attention to their struggle. A student interviewed for our short film about Ayotzinapa put it this way: “The fact that there are marches and protests in other countries to support Ayotzinapa strengthens our movement. Because we are showing the Mexican state, the Mexican federation and principally Enrique Peña Nieto that this will not be forgotten.” Enrique Peña Nieto has been president of Mexico since 2012, and continues to be deeply criticised for his response to the 2014 disappearance. Our actions are thereby in the hopes of supporting the fight for a solution, and accountability, in Ayotzinapa.



Graffiti on the streets of San Cristóbal de las Casas, two years after the enforced disappearance in Guerrero.
Photo: Veera Mo

Practising alternatives: Zapatismo

Solidarity in practice also took different forms in Mexico. We spent the better part of our month in the southernmost mountains at an autonomous language school with the Zapatistas. This is a long-lasting autonomous movement in Chiapas that acts separately from and in resistance to contemporary politics and world dynamics. They are organised in self-governed *caracoles*, or 'snail-houses' that continuously work to improve their democratic and organisational practice. As I understood it, one of the goals was to undo histories and the *colonisation of the mind* that had historically exploited, undermined and supplanted indigenous life with a wider neoliberal logic and organisation.

Whilst in the mountains, we listened to their stories and learnt about their guiding principles:

1. To obey and not to command.
2. To represent and not to supplant.
3. To move down and not upwards (in the sense of denying power-over).
4. To serve and not to be served.
5. To construct and not to destroy.
6. To suggest and not to impose.
7. To convince and not to conquer.

(Oikonomakis)

The Zapatista principles challenged me. I was inspired by their confidence in stating that another world is possible. To me, it was an important antidote to the frequent cynicism I heard at home. They encouraged critical reflection and self-questioning about the most fundamental assumptions. They put thoughts into practice, making their alternative plausible, especially in their emphasis on *caminar preguntando*, or going forth while continuously asking questions and adapting their actions. Their ideology wasn't so much focused on an end goal, but rather a long process in which life was reclaimed and alternatives were constructed collectively and continuously.



Mural in southern Mexico, reading "A world that accommodates many worlds". Photo: Veera Mo

By listening, I learned from Zapatismo, without feeling that I had to claim their stories as my own. The key learning outcomes were understanding and critical reflection. I was prompted to reflect upon the basis of interactions and the presumptions we carry with us, and perhaps unconsciously apply in our interpersonal interactions. For example, we are often presented with the idea that global development should follow one particular trajectory – that there is one answer. The Zapatista approach showed us that there is not necessarily any self-evident and overarching truth. I am not claiming that their project was without faults. Neither are they. Yet, the Zapatistas show us possibilities, by transforming ideas and words into practice. They emphasise our equality as people without negating our differences. Acknowledging equality in this way is core to the practice of solidarity, especially between people with vastly different lived experiences.

The challenges of solidarity: Guatemala



Listening to harrowing stories from the genocide in Guatemala at the Historical Centre in Río Negro.
Photo: Hannah Pauline Eick Menes:

In the months that followed in Guatemala, the ramifications of solidarity were clear at some times, whilst not at others. We spent a total of seven weeks in the countryside in small groups, working with partner organisations, an experience that contextualised our solidarity work whilst challenging the straight forward idea of employing the concept. When accompanying our host to hand out invitations for a meeting about violence against women in the town hall of Santa María Chiquimula, we were mistaken as the leaders and financiers of the projects that my talented host and her organisation were, in fact, responsible for. They were used to western financiers accompanying indigenous women and civil society groups, and found it difficult to grasp the fact that we were there to learn from their organisation. It was empowering to challenge this assumption, but difficult to see it reflected in others we met throughout our time in Guatemala. I believe this started an important reflection and consciousness of the deeper structures that need undoing. It prompted the realisation that our roles are not given, and can be transformed.



A forum-series on violence against women organised by CONAVIGUA in Santa María Chiquimula, Guatemala. Photo: Veera Mo

Reflections from Norway

The work we have completed, and are completing upon our return to Norway has shown us another value of solidarity. As a group, we continue to reflect on how to make our part of the relationship as mutually beneficial as possible to our partners. We see our role as disseminating information, creating both awareness and engagement of issues, while sharing what we have learned. We write articles and make short films to raise awareness and keep alive the discussions, reflections and learning we already started. We aim to create discussion, and are organising a three-part debate series raising issues we encountered last autumn. Respectively, these themes are development finance, green energy and human rights. We connect the experiences from abroad with stories from home, encouraging critical thought and reflection. For instance, we organised a debate in the town of Trondheim, to discuss the conflict between energy projects and indigenous rights both at home and abroad. Indeed, the indigenous Sami population across the fjord in Fosen are concerned about the plans to build a large-scale windmill park in Southern-Sami reindeer territories. It is important to ask questions and encourage open discussions with respect and reciprocity despite difference, wherever that difference might be found.



From the debate 'Let's talk about human rights and green energy' in Trondheim, Norway. Photo: Veera Mo

When discussing my experience in Central America, I want to share more than the stories of difficulty we encountered. We have a lot to learn from many of the ideas, hopes and practices of partner organisations, communities and families. They might think in a different way, organise in a different way, see a different path to a different future. Regardless, their diversity reveals possibilities and potential – not necessarily to be replicated, but to be understood and reflected on. Both in Mexico and Guatemala we met several inspiring groups of people who believed that a different world is possible. I hold on to this statement every day.

Solidarity and reciprocity

I have reflected on the idea of solidarity in practice throughout my time in Central America and beyond. It is a challenging concept that encompasses a variety of actions – from international pressure and awareness, to cooperation and construction of something new. The basic premise of solidarity remains an acknowledgment of equality in spite of difference. One must establish commonality in order to fully harness the potential to act in the spirit of solidarity, towards changing the structures that divide us. Moreover, it is important to become conscious of structures and divisions that may sometimes have become internalised assumptions. By questioning ourselves continuously we can correctly identify the barriers to equality, starting with ourselves to gradually change our approach to others. *Practicing solidarity can thereby enable reciprocal interaction*: that is, one in which each party somehow emerges positively, although perhaps not simultaneously or in the same way.

Reciprocal relationships require an undoing of structural difference, and thereby also an identification of assumptions that create unequal approaches and interactions. For instance, this article prompted me to reflect upon which experiences and examples of 'solidarity in practice' I could use while maintaining principles of solidarity and reciprocity. I could for example have written extensively about personal conversations I had with my host about our differences in experience and privilege. Yet, I question whether it is my right to exemplify her reflections in an article, especially considering that our conversations were held in confidence. I realised that it is often far too easy to assume that any interaction between such different people can be used and reflected upon freely.

Through the conscious practice of solidarity our ideals can be realised. We can support one another to transcend assumptions and work towards bridging structural divisions. The bonds we create through thoughts, words and actions, with solidarity in mind, enable feelings of unity and trust that in turn, allow for possibly thriving reciprocal relationships. These relationships can stretch from interpersonal ties into wider networks of solidarity. They are not limited by difference as long as core human commonality is recognised. To reach this goal, it is necessary to reflect upon the concepts of solidarity, equality and reciprocity. We need to consciously rethink and question ourselves in order to implement our ideas. Attempts to prefigure, or practice, our ideals makes them plausible. In this way, small changes can end up building something grand. The practice of solidarity can thereby lay the grounds for both interpersonal and collective action for change: from personal relationships to organisations and management. We can shake the foundations of the deeply unequal world we live in as long as we believe it is possible to make a change. There is hope, after all.

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Reciprocity in OST praxis: an invitation to the dance

Bob MacKenzie, Rosemary Cairns, Alison Piasecka and Andy Piasecki



Keywords

Reciprocity, embodiment, emergence, hosting, critical friendship, community, cross-cultural relating, curating, translating

Introduction

'a sense of community in the context of difference' (CLHLWR 2017)

'hopeful conversations for a troubled world' (e-O&P Spring 2016)

Collectively, we four (Rosemary, Bob, Alison and Andy) are the curating team for what since 2013 we have been calling an [Open Source Thinking \(OST\) Project](#). Working together, we're trying, with like-minded others, to find ways of connecting different people, places and cultures in a VUCA world that seems shot through with volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. We're seeking to create opportunities for people who could not otherwise do so to be with each other harmoniously and usefully. As such, we have come to treasure reciprocity (Brazelton et al 1974; Fairtlough 2016) as a process which brings different people together as partners, sharing giving and taking together.

We have, between us, edited two editions of AMED's journal [e-Organisations and People](#) (e-O&P), and curated three residential workshops – one in Brighton, England and two in Tostat. Our aim is to explore our continually evolving understanding of various core concepts and practices of Open Source Thinking / praxis, and the conditions under which they might have the greatest chance of success. It's becoming increasingly apparent to us that one of these is reciprocity. In collaborating on writing this article, we have endeavoured to embody and exemplify what we have come to understand these concepts, practices and conditions to be. Here, following some general context-setting, each of us in turn offers some personal insights, and we end by extending an invitation for others to join us in this dance of reciprocity.

Community in the context of difference

As co-hosts and co-authors with different personalities, we each approach our project from a different perspective and perform different roles. Yet we have overlapping interests and values that connect us firmly to each other in a reciprocal, almost dance-like relationship. Initially developing OST within a small scale, microcosmic context, we are hopeful of discovering ways in which it might be enabled to play a more central role on a larger stage.

All four of us are living all or part of our lives in places that are quite different from where we were raised. Bob is an expat Scot who spent the early part of his adult life working on development projects in Africa and India, and who is now living in England. Rosemary, a Canadian who was born in Ireland, spends half of her year living in Serbia. Andy and Alison, of Scottish-Polish descent, emigrated to Tostat, France, 13 years ago and have built new lives there. For each of us being part of, and also not being a part of the communities we live in, has interested and concerned us. Events in 2016 in particular raised sometimes painful questions of identity. What happens when the country you thought you knew slips its moorings and sets off down radically different pathways in front of your eyes? How do you integrate aspects of a new culture into your life without erasing the culture and identity you were raised within?

Last year, when the political right seemed to be invincibly on the rise, and erecting walls and barriers between people seemed to be at the top of many national to-do lists, we wanted to be together with people who did not buy into those ambitions. This year, as climate change takes a battering, we want to embrace sustainability and local environmental action as ways in which people can work and live together differently. An exciting moment in Tostat 2016 was meeting via Skype a Palestinian family living and working in Nablus, passing on our expressions of support to them in their work within their own community ([see Beth Davis' article in this edition](#)). The world can shrink when meaningful connections like these can be made.

Reciprocity, OST and Tostat: our emergent understanding

From such small beginnings in 2013, there's been a major shift in both the context and development of our thinking about the process and practice of reciprocity within OST. We have come to realise that, in the right circumstances, OST and reciprocity can help individuals to take affirmative action on many issues, and the emphasis is shifting to environmental, social and political imperatives, be their scale large or small. Thus, in 2017, an important question for us has been what can we do help a small place such as Tostat village to take action for change by themselves?

Facilitating OST and reciprocity

Whilst other aspects of OST are gaining greater traction, as we suggest below, reciprocity is emerging as an essential feature of embodying OST praxis as a 'felt experience'.

Holding up a blank canvas

Another key element, which perhaps makes what we do stand aside from many group events, is that we four are evolving our own practice in 'holding a blank canvas' on which the group as a whole, including us, take an equal share in shaping the themes that we work on each time. This requires us as a hosting team to take responsibility for leading the 'spirit' of how we are together, but we lay down a foundation of reciprocity between us all. This guides the way that contributions emerge and are recognised between us, including how we have collaborated on writing this article. This requires of us that we are able whole-heartedly to stand to the side or at the back in the encounters that take place between us. And we work very hard to ensure that supporting requirements like food, drink, materials are ready to create a generous climate for being together, which sustains us all.



The dance of reciprocity' flipchart from Tostat 2016, with Molly the dog and swimming stuff drying off.
Photo: Bob MacKenzie

Connecting across cultures and languages: the importance of embodied communication

We have recognised the necessity of persevering to understand and share with each other, even if we don't have the precise spoken or written language to describe what we mean. (In Tostat 2015, the principal languages were French and English; in Andalucia 2018, Spanish will be added to the mix). So finding ways to connect across cultures and languages is an important consideration. For example, last year, a group of us intentionally spent part of our walk in the foothills of the Pyrenees communing in silence, pointing out striking features of the environment, or sharing food or water with appreciative gestures alone. We walked together as a community, but didn't seek to explain this.



Sharing a meal *al fresco*. Photo: Bob MacKenzie

This year, as four co-authors, we experimented by taking turns to read aloud to each other and to Anna, Shelagh, Beth and Veera, a previous draft of this article. We were amazed at how this visceral experience of speaking and hearing the written text in a group setting, further enriched by the ensuing conversations, lent greater force to the ideas we were attempting to express. This enabled fresh insights to emerge,

which we have incorporated into this version. As Anna remarked in a subsequent e-mail, ‘... *the process of reading aloud and talking together was rich and enjoyable.*’ And Alison, as a co-author, expressed at the time how she now felt more ‘grounded’, having experienced the text differently through both hearing it read and reading parts of it aloud. So we now know with a greater degree of confidence that, somehow, we can find effective ways of communicating, working and sharing with each other, even whilst living in a temporary community for four or five days. Whilst learning each other’s languages reasonably proficiently may be the ideal, we have discovered that connections can often be made without much *spoken* language. Equally important, it seems, is to engage through *embodied communication*.



Getting ready for Tostat 2016.
Photo: Bob MacKenzie

Personal perspectives

In the sections that follow, each of us in turn offers a personal perspective on OST in a context of reciprocity, generosity and sharing.

Rosemary

(visiting host, facilitator, teacher, peace-builder)

I have never come up with a concise explanation of ‘Open Source Thinking’. I tend to talk about ‘[Society 3.0](#)’, and how sharing information and ideas is moving us from industrial-era organisations (factories, schools, department stores, even governments) towards something new. Once, people talked about the ‘information age’ but, with the advent of social media that lets us link up with others all over the world and work together on everything from petitions to businesses, that phrase seems far too limited. The internet is a new kind of commons - not a place, not fixed, but global and virtual, and not owned by anyone - which everyone with an internet connection can share.

In this kind of world, ownership and structure does not mean what it did in the industrial era. You can own something, and still share it freely - which is why [Creative Commons](#) licensing was created. It is the basic idea behind new business models like Airbnb, Uber, Task Rabbit, and many others (even if they have their dark sides as well), or the idea that in a neighbourhood, each household doesn’t need its own lawnmower, or rototiller, or even its own car. It is about use, not ownership - and it is already changing our world in remarkable ways that we rarely have a chance to discuss thoughtfully in community.

When we first began talking about what became ‘Tostat 2016’, we were looking at trends, trying to tease out the evolving shape of Society 3.0. ‘Open source’ - the idea that a code is shared and anyone is free to use or adapt or add to it - seemed to be a key concept behind the trends. Realising the transformative power of the idea, we coined the phrase ‘[open source thinking](#)’ (OST).

Our first ideas for a workshop were more traditional – let’s put together a programme that would illuminate some of the exciting thinking that is going on in this area. But then we realised that being true to the principles of ‘open source thinking’ meant operating differently. Reflecting on those discussions and on Tostat 2016, I began to reflect on how those principles shape Open Source Thinking events.

Emerging ideas about OST and reciprocity: seven principles

Questioning taken-for-granted assumptions

While it is rooted firmly in a local setting, OST explores ideas that are global in nature - but the local setting keeps the discussions grounded. Thus it is ‘glocal’ - local and global at the same time. Our event was uniquely shaped by being held in Tostat village, with visiting participants staying in village homes, having a chance to explore the village and its history, and an opportunity to walk in the Pyrenees. While many of us as participants from ‘away’ were used to facilitative techniques, Tostat residents were not. So having to explain what we were doing and trying to do, and why, especially for the Tostat residents who took part, meant explaining things we take for granted. This required us to look closely at both our ways of doing things and at our cultural assumptions.

Self-organisation needs a framework, within which people can contribute as they wish.

The framework encompasses food, lodging, meeting space, meeting structure, and translation/interpretation, and is created and curated by the hosting team. The programme contents are brought by the participants. Like Open Space Technology (see below), we four members of the hosting team created the overarching programme outline, and the participants filled it in as they chose



Creating our emerging ‘programme’.
Photo: Hyacinthe Garcia

Sharing practical tasks helps to create community

Unlike traditional workshops in which the bulk of the arrangements are done *for* participants, OST creates community by deliberately sharing the work - cooking, cleaning, and gardening, as well as offering to facilitate and taking part in sessions. Doing this requires a lot of pre-planning, of course - Alison, for example, prepared meal instructions and ingredients in advance. For several months beforehand, the hosting team engaged in countless conversations via Skype and e-mail (as well as in a f2f residential session in Tostat in 2015). This is part of creating the framework for self-management. Sharing tasks offers a wider range of possibilities for conversation than can be offered within specific workshop sessions.

Emergent properties

The offerings that people bring create a far wider range of possibilities than would a programme that had been fixed in advance. (This is, in fact, the insight that led Harrison Owen to create Open Space Technology decades ago. He had spent several years planning a conference, and then realised that delegates were most engaged, and the conversations were most passionate, during the coffee

breaks. So he set out to create a model for a meeting that would be, in essence, all coffee breaks). At Tostat 2016, for example, a Constellations session brought unexpected insights as we explored future possibilities for OST. In recent years, [Constellations](#) as a process has been developed from family therapy, especially – but by no means exclusively - by the Art of Hosting community (e.g. Adkins 2009).



A Constellations enactment. Photo: Bob MacKenzie

The role of a hosting team

A hosting team, especially one that has spent much time exploring and debating ideas, offers possibilities for ‘managing’ the event that go far beyond most traditional facilitation – what we have called ‘holding up a blank canvas’. (This is the insight that the Art of Hosting community grew from more than a decade ago.) A hosting team allows its members to draw on the skills and interests of each member, to hand off tasks to one another smoothly and effortlessly, and to review each day’s events and make changes if needed. The team ‘hosts’ the participants, but does not direct them.



The hosting team at work – or play?

Ceremony is important.

At Tostat 2016, the mayor opened the event - and it turned out that he had grown up in the house now owned by Alison and Andy, where our gathering was centred. One day was set aside for walking in the Pyrenees, enjoying the magnificent scenery. We had, as in Open Space Technology, the 'morning news' over coffee and the 'evening news' over dinner. And we ended with a ceremony, in which each person talked about their experience, rang the old school bell in the hallway, then walked out one door and came back into the room. We also recorded a number of highlights during our time together - in text, film and sound - and subsequently made these openly available via the internet.

Link: opensource thinking.org.uk.

Each event is uniquely shaped by those who choose to come, and by what they bring.

Without doubt, Tostat 2017, while sharing many features of Tostat 2016, will be a different experience - as will each and every OST event that grows from it



Starting the day together, Tostat 2016. Photo: Bob MacKenzie

Alison

(chatelaine, resident host, horticulturalist, labyrinth-walking exponent)

Our OST work began with engagement, and is now travelling with reciprocity. At the beginning, Rosemary and Bob edited an edition of 'e-O&P' which opened up the idea of noticing and celebrating the search for difference, and through working together, building trust and a willingness to find common meaning. They called it 'Open Source Thinking'. From there, we have worked together to support and organise the Brighton and Tostat gatherings.



Tostat 2016 participants outside the chateau. Photo: Hyacinthe Garcia

OST 2016 and ‘The Dance of Reciprocity’

So, last year, when we worked on the foundations of the 2016 OST Tostat three-day gathering, it was crucial to me that generating compassion and trust in dialogue, learning to work with, not against, other cultures and ways of seeing, was part of what framed OST. The first morning of OST2016 Anna Fairtlough walked us through the ‘Dance of Reciprocity’ which, by itself, rested on the idea of living and breathing what we do, using practical sensations of emotion and movement. And that was when Reciprocity dropped into place as a key piece of the OST jigsaw completely for me.

In labyrinth work and yoga, we try to open ourselves up to what is happening in our bodies. Appreciating the way that the surface of the floor feels to our feet, noticing again what walking barefoot includes in terms of bodily sensations - all of these areas of noticing help to turn our brains away from intellectual processes to the actual physical experience of living. This sensory approach rebuilds the significance of the world as filled to cramming with physical sensations and awareness, and in doing this, we can enter our own world, which takes us to back to basic and primordial human existence. We can find simpler ways to be together and engage with each other in these moments.

Personal experience of reciprocity

With our 2016 Tostat Gathering, we set out to try and make a sort of Reciprocity-fest. Reciprocity is a key theme for me in OST, because with the sense of acceptance that reciprocity brings, comes confidence in self and others, and a willingness to reach out and explore. But, for me, what happened many times then was an

almost physical experience of reciprocity. As a resident host, and particularly as the Gathering centred on our house, reciprocity was originally rooted in more obvious things, encouraging and embracing the involvement of other people in the essentials of sharing a space together - clearing, making, tidying, preparing - and I did, of course, have more than the odd twinge of 'is the place clean enough?' in which I could have sworn I heard my mother's voice.

But, as time passed - and I do think that the passing of time is an essential ingredient of a formative learning experience - some other things happened. A sense of calm and low-key preparedness for what would take place, and a willingness to 'stop and be' overtook the more obvious aspects of reciprocity. I could feel this physically. I could feel it in not needing to speak, in not needing to find answers, and I could feel it in a willingness to allow my emotions and my physical self to speak. These moments were not present all the time, but were noticeable because, at those moments, time seemed to slow down and be quiet. I did feel exhausted at the end of the Gathering, but also sustained and grown; some personal issues had shifted and it felt very powerful to be in the presence of other people willing to fully reciprocate with me. It resulted in strength.

Connecting global and local issues

Simpler ways of being with each other create other echoes for me. Parallel with our political, economic and social worlds being in turmoil, we are also grappling with what we are doing to the planet we live on. Climate change, sustainability, changing personal habits of consumption from food to consumer items, finding other ways to live and exist with different social, economic and community models- all of these crucial issues in our lives sit well with the reciprocity and open generosity of Open Source Thinking to my mind. Helping to create confidence in action - locally based actions that work for people where they are - is also a big part of what OST includes for me. We can work together to find new ways to be on a planet challenged and exhausted by our old ways of being.

Andy

(resident host, professional translator, interpreter, hill-walking guide)

Strangely, the experience of Tostat 2016, though intense, was very quickly swept up by our subsequent trips to Bordeaux and then to Ethiopia. Looking back, I find that I am very occupied by the relationship between reciprocity and interpreting.

Interpreting rules and roles

Usually in interpreting contexts the rules are fairly clear and the process is generally a very formal one. However, in this case we shared out the interpreting role spontaneously and by improvisation.

If this was a dance, it was one where I was not always sure of the steps and, to be honest, sometimes I needed the music to stop, just for a moment to give me time to get back my breath and rest. One of the greatest challenges was deciding when to interpret and when not to interpret. Sometimes saying nothing is more helpful and generous than talking, especially when people's understanding of the general drift of a conversation is good enough. The problem is in deciding what exactly is "good enough". When the dance goes well as an interpreter, there is emotional satisfaction to be derived from bringing the parties together in some way, not only in terms of understanding but also in terms of developing relationships.

Lost – and found – in translation

At Tostat 2016, there was, I think, a need from the French perspective for a precision in terms of defining concepts whenever conversations encroached on the territory of the theoretical. I was in sympathy with this strong cultural need, but felt also that it was something of a blind alley where language could not provide the answers. I was very conscious of a tension here and, at certain points during the weekend, there was a reciprocal anxiety in terms of how Hyacinthe and Martine and Frédéric (three of our local French participants)



Andy translating the Maire's welcome address, Tostat 2016
Photo: Hyacinthe Garcia

were responding to events. Consequently, the times when we were involved in non-verbal activities were much more enjoyable: eating, drinking, walking around the village together and taking a short trek in the mountains etc. In these contexts, relationships developed spontaneously.

Many good things came out of our conclusions, prompted by Heather's Constellations session: these included the desire for practical activity; a real willingness to turn the tables and give the local hosts and participants a more dominant role. I am thinking now that this will be quite a challenge for Tostat 2017, and an interesting one. We agreed that, as a hosting team, we brought (unthinkingly) a dominant *modus operandi* based on a particular tradition for running group events. Afterwards, we agreed that this way of interacting has not strongly permeated French culture. Therefore, our French participants were sometimes ill at ease. I think we are very courageous and right to agree that we should be prepared to change the rules of the game. But to do so is sure to raise some issues, I think. Let's see what changes emerge in Tostat 2017. A final thought about open space thinking as a methodology for groups. *Perhaps one can become too caught up with the **thinking** part?* Open Space Doing doesn't quite have the same ring. What about Open Space Action? In the end, for me, the words and concepts are not as important as the principles of:

- bringing people together for a creative purpose
- allowing for self-organisation within and beyond the constraints of cultural norms
- avoiding the prediction of specific outcomes.

Bob

(visiting host, editor, action learning facilitator, critical friend)

Elsewhere, I've written about the practice of 'critical friendship' (e.g. MacKenzie 2015) – a subtle process of mutual and nuanced challenge and support which implicitly entail acts of reciprocity. It seems to me that, in many ways, reciprocal acts have a dance-like quality. In the right conditions (the right mood music and a conducive environment), they can happen spontaneously. At other times, perhaps, they can be facilitated, e.g. by the exchange or offering of acts, gifts, tokens or other intimations of friendly intentions. However, OST and reciprocity are not panaceas, and may not always be possible. For example, the notion of spontaneously self-managing collaborations can seem counter-cultural and counter-intuitive in some parts of

France, and hence may evoke uncomfortable feelings and initial resistance. This is an area that we'd like to explore and understand further.

Spontaneity and choreography

In some ways, I have interpreted my role throughout this exploration as that of choreographer, often taking a back seat to reflect and make notes. Choreography has been defined as:

'the art of creating and arranging dances. The word derives from the Greek for "dance" and for "write." ... The only absolute rules in choreography today are that it should impose order upon dance beyond the level of pure improvisation and that it should shape dance in the three dimensions of space and the fourth dimension of time, as well as according to the potential of the human body.'

(Encyclopaedia Britannica: <https://www.britannica.com/art/choreography>, accessed 1.6.17)

In choreographing our writing of this article, I have tried to be mindful of the need to strike a balance between creating and holding a coherent space in which everyone can express themselves in their unique voice and anticipating and respecting spontaneous creativity, emergence and generosity. There is an assumption of mutually affirming and appreciative interaction, and I have noticed the constantly shifting relationships in choreography between order, improvisation, chaos and writing.

Reciprocally critical friendships

I am particularly interested in how reciprocity has been manifest in our interactions as a hosting team when facilitating our various OST gatherings, as well as when collaborating on writing this article. After many conversations and exchanges of e-mails and drafts – both bilaterally and as a foursome – it became apparent to me that we had each instinctively adopted primary 'lead' roles (as illustrated above), whilst simultaneously supporting and challenging each other generously as critical friends. Thus, as a hosting team, we've sought to embody and illustrate aspects of reciprocity both in our writing and in our f2f engagements.

Canvas or screen?

At the beginning of this article, we introduced the metaphor of – as hosts - holding up a blank canvas. I'm now beginning to wonder whether it might be equally appropriate to think of ourselves as holding up a blank screen, onto which we and others can project our different ways of embodying OST and reciprocity. Yet another fruitful exploration?

Your invitation to the dance

We are gradually creating a loose and flexible community of people who are 'up' for the evolving challenge of being with difference and for finding ways to communicate what matters to us through positive action as well as words. So far, nearly sixty people have engaged with us at our events and there are also many interested onlookers, including AMED members.

You are welcome to express an interest in joining us in Andalucia in 2018 to explore other ways of being in a turbulent world that is challenged by developments such as Brexit, climate change, and the effects of globalisation. For more information, please visit our website www.opensourcethinking.org.uk.

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About the OST curating team

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Norwich to Nablus

an experience of reciprocity in cultural exchange

Elizabeth Davis



In this piece, I discuss the importance of reciprocity in cultural exchange, drawing on my experience as a young British woman of living with a Palestinian host family in Nablus, the West Bank. I attempt to explain how this experience contributed to the development of a more defined personal attitude towards travel and adaptation in foreign cultures.

Keywords

adaptation, integration, intercultural communication, international friendships, language study, Palestine, privilege, travel, West Bank

If you've never been to the Palestinian Territories, it can be difficult to imagine what it is like. Certainly the word 'occupied' threw me off-course: how could 'normal' life be led in an area saturated by military presence, cut off from the rest of the world by a wall?

But the global economy is king, capitalism the victor: the convenient line between 'developed' and 'developing' blurred by brand names impervious to guns and politics. The successes of the Samsung washing machine, the iPhone and the Skoda Fabia may at first glance hide the pressures and restrictions felt by those who call Palestine home. Freedom is not material, even physical, as 'the Palestinian issue' shows too well.

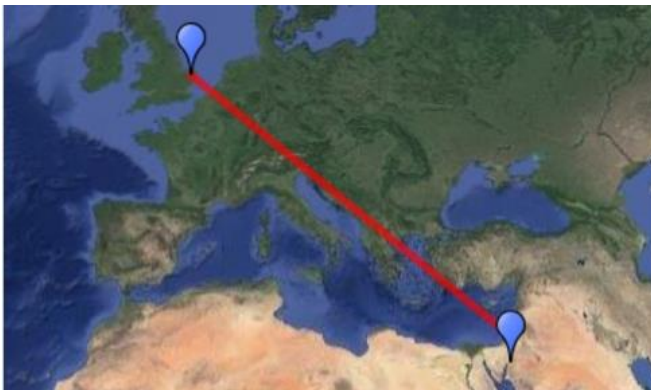


Figure 1 Norwich to Nablus as the crow flies, 3543 km / 2202 miles.
Source: scribblemaps.com .

I will not go into detail here about the effects of policy, history and restrictions with which Palestinians live. Indeed, I am probably not the best person to do so: a Palestinian with their lived experience would be a much better source. However, I hope to be able to show some of the factors, not least of those, my incredible good fortune, that contributed to mutually beneficial cultural exchange and the foundation for valued cross-border friendships.

Studying Arabic language for my Bachelors' degree, I chose to spend part of my study abroad year at university in Nablus. My first time living in an Arab-Muslim culture, I had to learn how I wanted to 'be' in that environment. We all have a personal choice in the way we decide to adapt in each new social environment, albeit influenced by various parties around us. Much discussion about Muslim societies in the West, for

example, focusses on how *they* would like *us* to act. To what extent do you become 'like them' or remain 'like you'? How to find the balance between acceptance and individuality? Often, in new social settings, we do it subconsciously, used to analysing a situation and adapting our mannerisms accordingly. But for me, this situation required a steep learning curve.

Food is a central part of any culture, often used to signify adherence to a place. In Palestinian culture mealtimes are of great significance partly, I think, because recognisable traditional dishes are still widespread and food is most often freshly prepared. I had been a vegetarian for most of my life but, weighing up the value of my vegetarianism with the option of living with a Palestinian family, I jumped at the chance of being hosted and seemingly discarded my vegetarian principles. On reflection, perhaps it is bizarre that I never even attempted to convey my dietary preferences - but I didn't want any such detail get in the way of the hosting experience.



Figure 2 View to the west of Nablus from my room.



Figure 3 For a better and more appetising review of *mansaf*, visit: <https://migrationology.com/mansaf-jordan/>

Mansaf is a Palestinian-Jordanian dish comprising of rice, lamb and a creamy soup. It is regarded as a luxurious dish, a celebration of plentiful food (and the money to provide it), and it's an honour to be served it as a guest. A giant platter of this dish was presented to me on my first day in the family flat, accompanied by a mound of rice which to my surprise was meant for a single person – myself - to eat. Although I was able to appreciate the quality of the meat, making my way through the meal without causing offence became increasingly uncomfortable as I tackled meat off the bone,

dairy and carbs. My vague attempts to explain my normal vegetarian diet were waved away, my hosts enjoying my consumption of their homemade food and seeing it as validation of their good hospitality. The amount of food eaten also seemed to be taken into account - the more consumed by the guest, the more successful the host's event. I soon learnt to never leave an empty plate in Palestine, unlike my habit at home, for fear it would soon be full again.

Fortunately, they turned out to be fabulous hosts, always encouraging me to 'be free' in my activities and decisions. It became much easier to eat legs of meat, piles of rice and previously unknown dairy foods as my body and mind grew accustomed to the new food concepts presented to me. Yoghurt (*Jaban*) with rice? At first a doubter, I now can't do without. I got on with fully participating in family meals, actually finding myself unthinkingly enjoying meat.

By giving up something of my habit and immersing myself through means of a key cultural signifier, I learnt a lot - that although I wasn't a committed vegetarian in the first place, in the end my experience as a significant meat-eater put me off meat for life! However, the value of accepting and sharing food went further than that, as I gained a closeness and friendship with the family due to the ease with which I settled. It could be argued that we should demand reciprocity in respect of diet, in the way that Muslims require *halal* catering in the UK. This was to some degree understood, in relation to religion, when I was implored to eat with the children rather than fast with the adults as I had intended the day before [Eid Al-Adha](#). In any case, utilising the interrelationship of food, hospitality and identity worked to form a strong bond between us and a common basis for friendship.



Figure 4 I'm sure for many readers it would not have been a difficulty to polish off this lot!

Another key aspect of adaptation to a new culture is clothing - the topic at the forefront of many people's minds when they learn of a Western woman travelling in the Middle East. You'll have to cover your hair, then? Will you have to wear a black robe?

Neither is obligatory in the West Bank, and knowing this much I packed items which I thought were suitable – button-up shirts, high-neckline tops, a long skirt and long trousers ranging from corduroy to light 'travel' material. But it wasn't quite so simple as throwing garments in a suitcase, and I had to trial and adjust my clothing choices over time.

What surprised me initially was how difficult it was to 'blend-in': foreigners would always be obvious, the covering of shoulders and knees as per the general guideline more a nod of recognition towards local culture rather than a style tip. I quickly learnt that the 'foreigner look' was amplified the more one tried to significantly alter a habitual dress style in order to dress appropriately. Take, for example, the long floaty skirts and 'hippy pants' which are particularly common amongst tourist groups in areas with a more conservative dress code.

I had tried too hard to dress differently by bringing clothes which I did not normally wear at home and didn't particularly like, and I was unprepared for a warmer (hot!) climate. It had not been enough to simply check the tick-boxes of 'shoulders and knees': I realised the importance of clothing to self-esteem. I needed to wear clothes I was comfortable in, in terms of culture as well as material, to be confident in my interactions with people whose society I was only just starting to learn about.

Some may say that clothing should not be an issue when travelling to new places, choice of dress being an expression of individual identity. For me, in wanting to be socially sensitive to my new environment and the way I wished to be perceived, it was important to find a style which projected the way I wanted to 'be' in that community: engaged, participative and approachable, acknowledging my position as an outsider but respecting local norms. I now tend to find myself most comfortable in simple, western-style pieces down to ankles and wrists.

I was more recently told a story of a young British traveller in Oman, who every weekend would don Omani traditional dress - a floor length starched-white smock (*dishdasha*) and embroidered cap (*kumma*) - and sit at the roadside until a family would pick him up and host him for the weekend. But is this the best way to integrate? I'm not convinced.

One of the very first things we were told when we sat down to begin our Arabic studies at university has stuck with me over the years, repeating itself and informing my personal development ever since. Our Syrian lecturer emphasised to us, in a practiced phrase he most probably repeated every September:

'Remember! You are not learning Arabic to become Arabs. You are Arabists'.

You will become Arabists. At first, I disliked this phrase, the title 'Arabist' highly unappealing to me. I did not want to become someone who was defined by studying other people. I like to think that hasn't happened, choosing instead to pursue happy and meaningful friendships around the world. But I have come to recognise not only that I *am* an Arabist, as a student of the Arabic language; but also the importance of my lecturer's words.

Attempts to 'become' an Arab mean having to choose an image of 'being' in that community. The personality chosen is often constructed of stereotypes. In trying to be 'like them' through that particular image, you deny others of that culture who do not fit this stereotype (out of individual choice or personal circumstances) of inclusion to this particular group - in your eyes, at least. It reinforces stereotypes rather than breaking down barriers to understanding the complexities of a culture. It is true that hosts often enjoy instances where a guest tries on a piece of typical clothing, or joins in with traditional activities. But this is possible as part of a reciprocal exchange, a balance of sharing and learning.

Reciprocal cultural exchange is not 'blending in' with locals, i.e. copying. Social sensitivity, practiced in

domestic as well as foreign cultural environments, can achieve what cultural replication attempts: a closeness based on human feelings and relationships rather than image. This may involve participating in local habits and customs, but not exclusively so.



Figure 5 Department of Arabic Language for Non-Native Speakers at An-Najah National University, Nablus

Language, of course, played a significant role in developing close relationships. Through studying Arabic, I was making an active contribution to the nature of my interaction with others. I was very surprised to find out that the first time my hostess held a conversation in English was when we first met, as she seemed far more competent than a beginner to me. This actually meant that, linguistically, we were beginning our relationship on a relatively even footing and with a similar learning journey ahead of us, putting into practice orally the written languages we had studied for so long.

An existing base knowledge of each other's native language facilitated my introduction to and settling into home and family life. The endeavour to learn another language, no matter how small, brought about a never-ending topic of conversation and a driving purpose to the stay. That hosting was also a mutually beneficial exchange of mother tongues certainly enriched the experience and gave us all, adults and children, a sense of achievement alongside our day-to-day routine.

However, the closeness that this fostered brought to the fore the issue of evident **privileges**. In the spirit of cultural exchange, I shared aspects of my home culture and upbringing but soon became more sensitive to my context in discussion. I often caught myself critiquing politics and trends from the UK as I would habitually do at home, but learnt to check myself as I took time to appreciate the privileges those systems had given me (whether right or wrong) in comparison to the freedoms and services available to Palestinian citizens. Of course, this is no reason to avoid talking about personal life experiences, and conversations about these differences were often the most eye-opening and gave an insight into peoples' hopes, dreams and aspirations.

Developing a reciprocal relationship in cultural exchange requires learning when to share aspects of home life and culture, and when to give up ideas brought from home. I believe this flexibility allowed me as an incomer to be best placed to learn from the new social environments I found myself in.

Sharing daily life with a host family; studying and participating in their language; taking on their eating habits and attempting to adapt my dress code facilitated a wonderful closeness - including with the extended family, and particularly with the women and children (who also happened to be girls). I had dedicated time to learning about their life, their family, and their culture, and they welcomed me in and helped me to learn. In return, their English improved and their knowledge of my country grew, especially through sharing interactive activities such as art, music and games. Both cultures are often represented on TV and in books but

relatively few people have the opportunity to travel in either direction, so many discussions were had putting assumed knowledge from both perspectives to rights. For me, this exchange epitomised the idea that to practice reciprocity 'we are active participants in our interactions with others' (Brazelton 1974 via Anna Fairtlough).

For all the things I 'gave up' - private space, usual diet, daily habits - I discovered new aspects of my personality and new things I was capable of. The challenge taught me my needs, limits and principles; and yet, to my surprise even now, at no point did I consider this challenge a difficulty. It was never a fight or struggle, but an interaction, and for this I have a lot to thank my hosts for.



Figure 6 Paper art proved to be a hit with the children in the household and this creative activity helped foster a strong relationship between us. It doesn't require mutual language knowledge, uses commonly available materials and is relatively simple to create.

Going to meet my prospective hosts, I remember walking into a freshly painted room with children playing around me. It was like the first day of school. I saw someone who would be my new friend and she smiled shyly at me, curious as to who I was but holding herself back. We sat down together, and found a few words. I can't remember if we spoke Arabic or English - probably a mixture of both, grasping at words through smiles. I sounded like a child, playing an adult's game of conversation: your walls, they are my favourite colour. A vibrant, bold, beaming orange. **Back to basics** - but it was the truth.



Later we would have a conversation about that first meeting. I would find out that upon hearing my favourite colour matched her own, my hostess was satisfied with the pairing and confident that we would be friends. So, like children, we set off on our gentle rollercoaster of cultural exchange; punctuated by snapshots of unforgettable moments, both joyous and embarrassing.

Figure 7 Smiles after struggling to produce a Victoria Sponge without whipping cream nor butter... an embarrassing event for my cooking skills, but a memorable moment none the less.

On reflection, it is clear this happy relationship was one of reciprocity from the beginning. Early on, I sent an email to my parents introducing them to my 'host Mum & Dad.' My hostess certainly had something to say about this. "Not Mother!" she cried. "Sister!" This helped me change my perception of myself: a personal paradigm shift of sorts, graduating from a competent pupil to a participatory adult in a respectful relationship of peers. It is a fitting coincidence that my hostess' name translates as 'guidance', reflecting her great capacity for providing support and direction despite having had limited experience of travel herself. In fact, I believe that it was this specific mixture of hugely differing life experiences with correlating ethical principles which fostered a productive and transformative period of exchange for the both of us.

In the end, as the 'Dance of Reciprocity' predicts (Brazelton et al, 1974), we began to draw away from each other, searching for some space to be able to reflect on everything that had happened during our three-

month journey together. It was quite challenging to remember where we had begun. This withdrawal was not bitter, but recognised that we had experienced our own individual learning journeys despite sharing so many experiences over a short space of time. I was happy to show my quiet anticipation about my imminent move to another country. My hostess felt able to admit that we were nearing the end of a comfortable hosting period. Looking back, it was a complete gamble for the family to agree to host a stranger in their small three-bedroom flat, but with a bit of good luck and social sensibility it paid off for both parties (I have been assured - they have also gone on to host several others since).



Figure 8 The ancient amphitheatre at Sebastia, near Nablus. Once a major city, ruins and evidence of Israelite, Canaanite, Iron Age, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, Byzantine, Islamic and Crusader rule can be found on this village hilltop. See: <http://www.timesofisrael.com/stuck-between-israel-and-pa-key-archaeological-site-neglected/> <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2017/02/west-bank-historic-sebastia-israel-settlements.html>



Figure 9 View over Jericho and the Jordan Valley towards Jordan from the Mount of Temptation, where Jesus is said to have been tempted by the devil during his 40-day fast. See: <http://www.seetheholyland.net/mount-of-temptation/>

For me, it was a wonderful experience of reciprocal relations; indeed, reciprocity proved essential to forging trusting and mutually beneficial relationships across our cultures. I was able to go back home, tell everyone that the fear associated with the word 'Palestine' (often confused with 'Pakistan') was unrealistic, and that its people survive with hope and in joy. This is the pleasant surprise of a visit to Palestine, and one well worth a trip.

Since then, I have been able to travel to various other countries and compare my

experiences in them all. I have been able to share my views on Palestine, the people there, and set some myths to rights. I have been able to give back, say thank you in a small way to the family and society which hosted me, by giving English language lessons over Skype and on a return trip.

However, physical, reciprocal exchange in the other direction could not occur: to travel from Nablus to Norwich is unrealistic for many of the Palestinians I met. Inaccessible too are the circumstances for transformation and learning that travel entails. Where my privilege has taken me, others are hindered by restrictions on movement and the lack of economics. It must not be forgotten that there are separation walls surrounding the Occupied Palestinian Territories, physical and political. There are many unsurpassable walls within them, and barriers of official papers, visas and travel permits where the concrete has not yet reached.

For all the joy Palestine showed me, and the hope, integrity and innovation apparent amongst its citizens, universal recognition of its collective suffering is the most important 'gift' we can give in reciprocity. And the world will benefit when, upon gaining the respected equal voice Palestine is due, the institutional, legalised discrimination from which it suffers is lifted from the heavy weight of the global conscience.

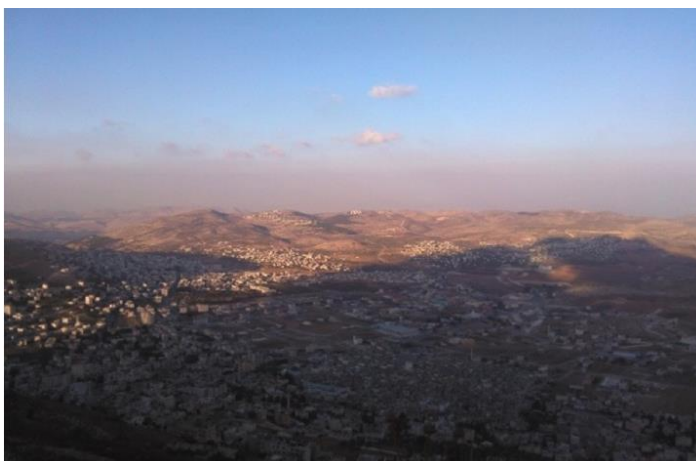


Figure 10 View over Balata refugee camp to the east of Nablus from the Samaritan village on Mount Gerizim. Most of its 27,000 residents (making it the largest camp in the West Bank) have never known life without refugee status. See: <https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/west-bank/balata-camp>

Images

Figure 1 (map): Made with <www.scribblemaps.com> Accessed 22.04.17

Figure 3 (picture): Mark Wiens, Migrationology. <<https://migrationology.com/mansaf-jordan>> Accessed 22.04.17

All images other than figures 1 & 2 are the author's own photos, taken autumn/winter 2014.

Permission granted for use of Figure 6.

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About the author

Beth is a British student of the French and Arabic languages from Norwich, Norfolk. After graduating in 2016 from UCL & SOAS (University of London), she returned to the West Bank for a month to visit the family mentioned in this article, and tutored English in their newly-established cultural centre. She has recently completed a placement working as a school assistant in Muscat, sponsored by the Anglo-Omani Society. In the coming academic year, she will be on a European Voluntary Service placement in Belgium working at a residential centre for asylum seekers. Her professional interests include global citizenship education and social work.

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From symbiosis to whole systems working

Reflections on exchange and reciprocity in nature and organisational life

Shelagh Doonan



"The interaction between experience, thought and practice lies at the heart of our humanity. Learning from collaborative experiences is, in large part, dependent on a process of attending to and learning from those you collaborate with; a process which is likely to be educational for them as well."

Beresford and Trevillion (1995)

Keywords

symbiosis, reciprocity, co-production, adult education, interagency working and learning, whole systems working.

Introduction

I am slightly alarmed to see that, at the age of 65, I am now entering the last of Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, i.e. "Maturity", where the main task is to navigate the terrain between "Integrity and Despair" (Erikson & Erikson, 1998). So, I am spurred to look back and reflect. Using some key moments, I will trace some themes of connection, exchange and reciprocity in the range of work I have done over the past nearly forty years. The work falls into three main areas: biological partnership; reciprocity in education and adult learning; and reciprocity (and its challenges) in interagency working and learning. To me, my research into symbiotic relationships in the natural world stands out as an initial "eureka moment" when thinking about the intrinsic nature of reciprocity, and this is where I shall start. During my second section, I recall some compelling moments from my time in adult education, where my colleagues and I persevered with a learner-centred approach – with some promising results. My final section describes a few examples from my time in interagency work which for me illustrate the value, possibilities and challenges of a consciously reciprocal approach to organisational development. For me, the article is part memoir, part sense-making, and part marking a key life stage, all with some celebration. I hope it also serves as a helpful think-piece for others.

A biological partnership

September, 1976. Herm, Channel Islands: an early insight into biological partnerships and dilemmas.

The mid-morning tide was ebbing. Exquisite shells brought by the Gulf Stream lay along the tide line. Soon, dark green patches began to appear on the wet sand, shiny and bottle green. At first glance, the patches looked like some kind of seaweed. But if you looked closer, you would see that each patch was made up of thousands of tiny moving green worm-like creatures, each about half a centimetre long. If you disturbed one of the patches with your foot, the worms would quickly disappear down into the sand. You might also have noticed a faint smell coming from the colonies of worms: a cross between ammonia and rust.

These are symbiotic worms called *Convoluta roscoffensis*, found on some beaches on the Atlantic coasts of southern U.K., the Channel Islands, France, Spain and Portugal ("roscoffensis" after Roscoff in Brittany). It is also called "the mint sauce worm" in the Channel Islands (see images 1a and 1b below).

They are green because inside them live their green algal partners (*Platymonas convolutae*), and their symbiotic relationship was the focus of my PhD (Doonan, 1979). The worm is a herbivore, *with its food already inside it*- a 'hybrid' creature that does not have to expend energy searching for its food. The worm colonies bask in the sun between tides, the algae photosynthesise and pass sugars to the worms, which in turn pass nitrates and other nutrients to the algae, as well as offering shelter against predation. The partnership represents a 'solar powered unit' of exchange for the mutual benefit of the symbiotic partners.

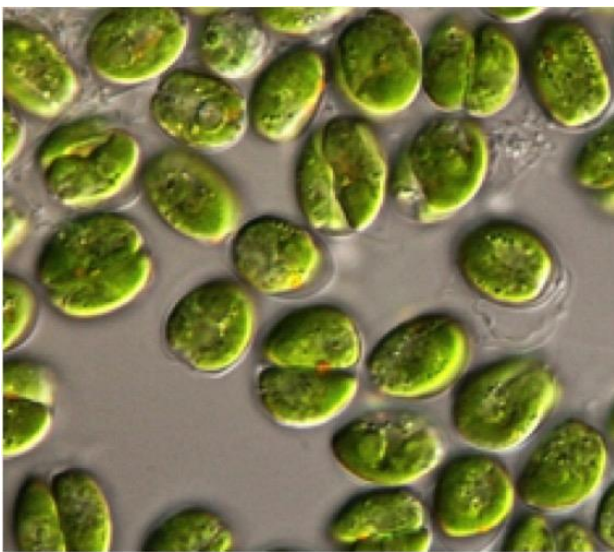


Figure 1a. Free-living algae



Figure 1b. Algae inside symbiotic host. The algae (in green) have lost their rigid cell wall and are in close contact with host tissues, to enhance exchange of nutrients.

Although the algae can also live freely without the worm, the worm cannot survive without the algae. The symbiotic algae can also photosynthesise at a significantly higher rate than their free-living relatives, at levels comparable with the world's most productive ecosystems such as coral reefs and rain forests (Gooday and Doonan, 1980).

There were a few other people on the beach that day. A woman approached me, curious to know what I was doing with a number of plastic buckets and a grid marked out on the sand. I showed her the colonies of *Convoluta* and started to say a bit about the partnership going on inside the worm. She said that she had thought the green patches were some kind of slime, and had never really looked closely at them. Then she

looked at me accusingly: "Well, I hope they're of benefit to Man ...". I could hear the capital M in her voice, and took her to mean that she hoped that not only did the worms benefit humans in some way, but also that whoever was funding whatever I was doing on this beach was getting their money's worth.

The woman's words stayed with me. At the same time as beginning this PhD, I had also become a volunteer in the local adult literacy scheme, working with adults who were struggling with reading and writing. As well as enjoying the one-to-one work with a number of individuals, I was troubled by the disparities between the world of the lab and the world of local adult education provision. The cost of an hour of electron microscope time would have funded many hours of adult literacy provision and the service was experiencing budget cuts.

Reciprocity in education and adult learning

July, 1982. Community room, Adult Learning Project (ALP), Gorgie Dalry, Edinburgh.

Having moved into work as an adult education tutor, I was keen to do a good job on making course content that I thought was relevant to the needs of students.

But at the Adult Learning Project (ALP) in Edinburgh, I was to learn about this in a much deeper way. ALP was set up to provide community education opportunities for adults, particularly those who had had poor experiences of learning at school. It was based on the approaches of Paulo Freire, (1970/2000) which are critical of tutor-centred "banking education", which regards learners as empty vessels. Instead, tutor/facilitators work *with* learners to generate content and learning that is grounded in learners' own concerns, questions and experience.

Working alongside a group of tutors and participants from the ALP, one of the ALP coordinators took us through the "Freirian" decoding" process, asking open questions, using a series of photos taken by ALP participants. One photo in particular stays with me: women waiting for their children to come out of school. They were standing, not in the playground but outside the school, beyond the railings. There was a visible distance between the women and the school. Many of the women in the photo had themselves been at that school, and still carried memories of strict teachers and corporal punishment. The use of the "tawse" in Scottish schools continued until the early 1980's. The group's discussion ranged widely about school, authority, learning and what was the purpose of exams: "Oh yes, you need exams, otherwise you don't know if you're a failure or not," one woman said. My learning at ALP would come into play four years later when developing courses with women who were returning to learning.

September 1986. Games room, Brighton Centre for Unemployed People: learning the power of co-creation

We were sitting round a table-tennis table (rooms were in short supply that day). A group of eight women had come to a course I was facilitating with my co-tutor Flis. Their kids were in the crèche, they were sipping coffee and beginning to relax. This was day one of a two-term course called "Women, science and technology - what's it all about?", funded jointly by the local Workers' Educational Association (WEA) and the University of Sussex Centre for Continuing Education. Our (slightly ungrammatically named) course had arisen by request from a series of taster workshops ("Carry on Learning") for women returning to learning and work after having their children.

After introductions and connections, we began the process of working out the course content with the learners: what were their questions and concerns? What were they curious to learn more about? Flis and I had many of our own ideas, but we were keen that content and process was grounded with and empowering for the learners. We offered them a series of unfinished sentences to trigger their ideas. Apprehension turned to active and enthusiastic involvement, as the learners began to participate in the process they were part of directing, making course content relevant to their daily lives and concerns. This exercise and some of their responses are detailed below.

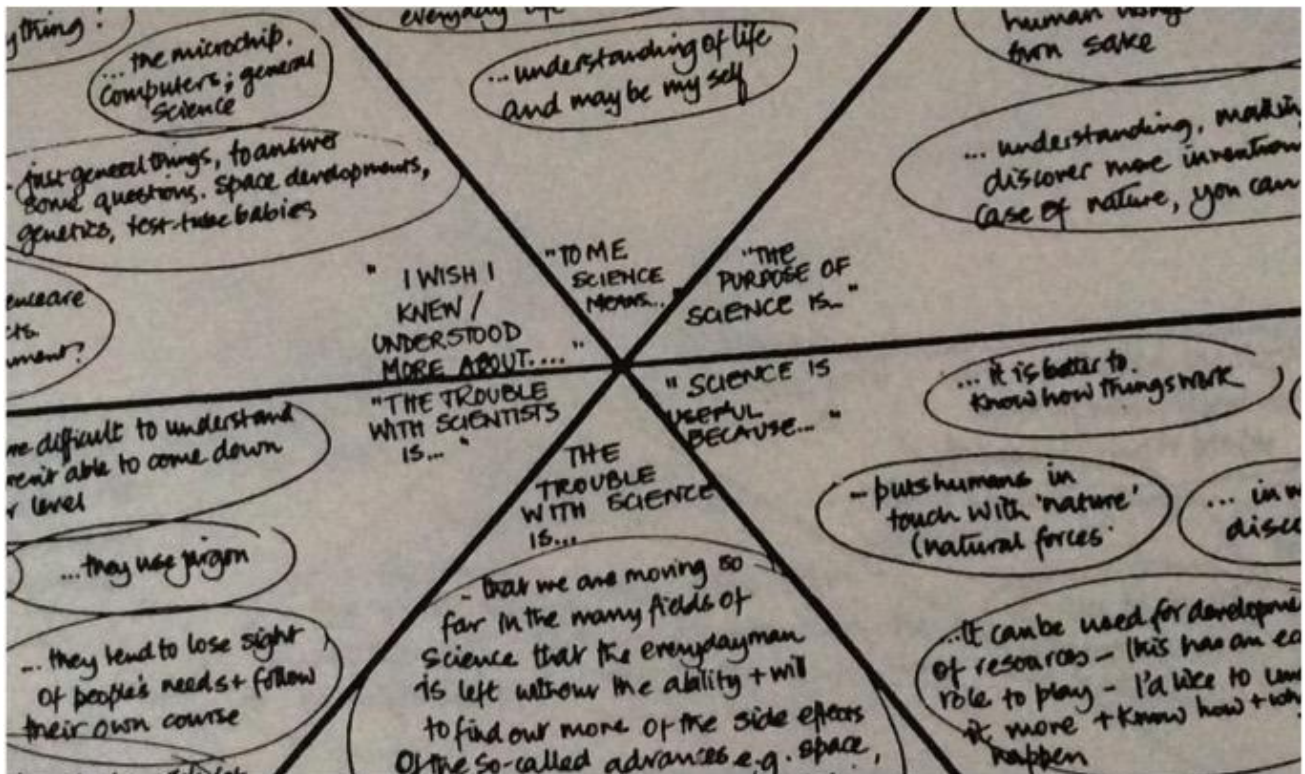


Figure 2. Negotiating course content

Course content negotiation exercise and output

We also repeated the same process, with the questions focused on "technology/technologists"

It was nearly six months since the Chernobyl disaster, and the women were expressing concerns about the possible effects of the radiation "cloud" on their, and especially on their children's, health. Among other things, they wanted to understand more about "...the side-effects of the so-called advances...", "... space, nuclear weapons, atomic power," and "what is being taught to our children."

The story of the course is written up in Doonan and Henwood (1989). It was thrilling to work with these women, with their initial trepidation, then their excitement and curiosity, recorded in the course diary:

"Our heads were buzzing with ideas; I felt something stirring which I hadn't known since I was a child - wonder, eager excitement for discovery ..."

"Our visit to the labs at Southern Water made a great impression on me because at last I was seeing science in action."

"Who pays for science? Who decides what technology we get?"

Together we navigated the contradictory thoughts and feelings the group brought to the course: that science and technology can be both useful and dangerous; that science ... "gives us more knowledge and understanding of life" but also feels "removed", "faceless", "a different language".

At the end of the course, feedback included:

"Now I feel I can cope with not knowing. Before the course, I would have left myself in the dark thinking '...oh God, I haven't got many O levels.' Now I can do something about it. I can now change a plug, and I understand more about the world."

"I like knowing about the politics behind it. It gives me strength, knowing what's happening. But that doesn't stop you thinking it's amazing how things grow, evolve."

This way of co-creating course content with learners is in marked contrast to the prevailing one-way "conduit" approach to increasing scientific literacy (see Doonan, 1987).

Summer, 1991. Supervision session with new manager: When reciprocity breaks down...

My new manager was looking at the list of projects making up my current workload, and shaking her head. "At the moment, Shelagh, you're only jumping this many hurdles", she said, pointing at my list. "You've got to start jumping this many", and pointed towards the bottom of the page.

Our previous manager's style could not have been more different. She was collaborative, supportive and her office was next door. She had been replaced by someone who now managed both our London office, and an office in the West country. The friendly memos, regular supervision, two-way conversations and negotiating training requests in the team, had been replaced by a high volume of requests via urgent faxes with crazy deadlines. "Sheep-dip", didactic training was replacing the more learner-centred kind. The team had lost two members, but the volume of work had increased, fuelled by the apparent need for our training unit to become self-financing. It was my first real taste of not trusting the people in charge, and what it is like when there is a breakdown of reciprocity at work; a rupture in the psychological contract between staff and manager, employee and organisation.

As the volume and pace of the work increased, so did my anxiety levels. What helped to save my sanity during this time was setting up an alternative source of reciprocity outside of work. A former colleague and I arranged a weekly check-in with each other by phone or face-to-face. We used a simple, reliable and reassuring structure: five minutes each way on "What's good, what's tough, what's next". These exchanges were my solid ground in a stormy sea; equal, honest and direct mutually beneficial exchanges. Nearly 30 years on, we are still in close touch, with regular check-ins.

Reciprocity in interagency working and learning

Summer, 1996. Piloting inter-agency Action Learning

In 1993, I became one of two interagency training and development officers recruited in a local authority, to support the implementation of the NHS and Community Care Act 1990. The two posts of the Joint Training Initiative were 50:50 joint-funded by the local NHS health authority and the social services department (SSD), with the aim of developing joint learning approaches to support community care joint working, principally between staff from NHS, SSD and housing departments. Staff in these organisations were now formally required to work together, as joint working was now set in an explicit legal framework, or - put simply: "Collaboration is now mandatory" (Higgins et al., 1994).

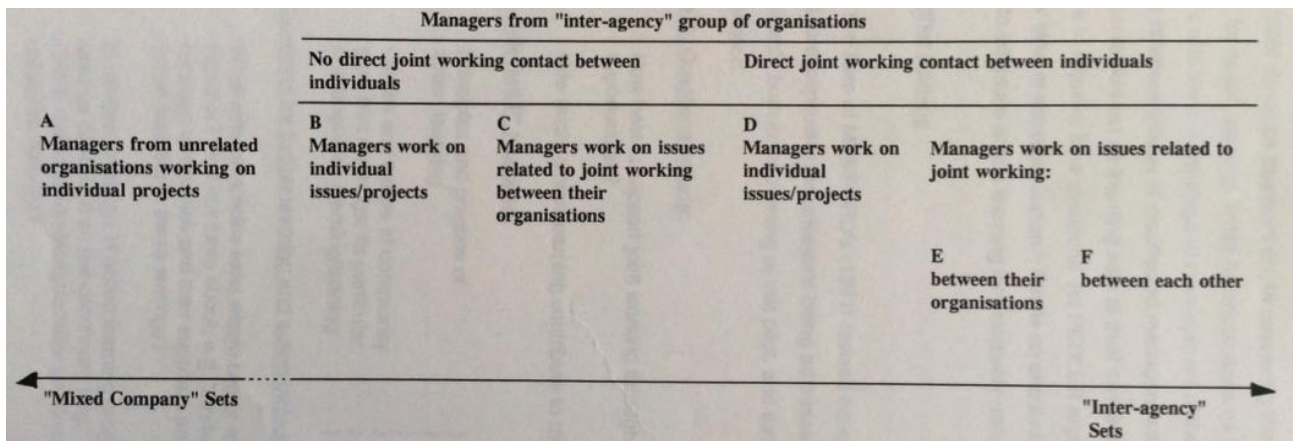


Figure 3. Continuum of mixed agency and interagency action learning, from Doonan (1996),

Besides organising joint training workshops and networking conferences, my colleague and I also piloted **interagency action learning sets** for managers from social services, health and housing departments, working with managers from points C, D and E, on the continuum in Fig. 3.

Although on the face of it, action learning would seem to be a highly suitable approach for enhancing interagency working, I could find surprisingly little evidence in the U.K. and beyond of action learning programmes in interagency settings (Doonan, 1996).

As practitioners of action learning know, it is a labour-intensive method to set up, deliver and evaluate. Since managers will almost always prioritise operational issues over their own development, action learning set members were sometimes absent due to operational pressures within their own organisation. But this also mirrored real life in interagency working; joint forums are often fragile and transient. The learning sets also served as an important symbol of willingness to be open about what it takes to collaborate with people from other organisations with different aims and cultures. The participants reported some learning gains, from both the process and content points of view:

- *"I've learned there's more than one way to ask a question."*
- *"In my recent change of role, in meetings I now have some ways of dealing with my own blocks."*
- *"It's reinforced my belief that other agencies' priorities are different from mine ..."*
- *"I'm more open to learning and new ways of doing things ..."*

Autumn 1998. Ward manager's office, acute hospital. Social worker - Nurse "Learning Pairs", developing "hybrid" knowledge and questioning the sustainability of learning and change.

A social worker and a staff nurse were preparing to become a "learning pair" as part of a work shadowing programme we set up in a number of acute hospitals across the county where I worked. The purpose was to support interprofessional working across the 'hot' interface of hospital discharge, by enabling staff to more clearly understand each other's roles and responsibilities. I met with each pair before and after shadowing, to encourage them to clearly identify what they needed to be clearer about/ had learned about their partner's role. By stepping into each other's shoes, they could gain some insights about each other's world and pressures, as well as what information they needed to exchange. This served to strengthen working relationships between the social workers and nurses, and meant that they could see themselves as a pair, developing a kind of 'hybrid' knowledge, as well as separate professionals.

Course feedback

At the end of the programme, I asked them:

"As a result of shadowing/learning/working together- what did you learn that was new to you? Any Surprises?"

Responses included:

"I feel nurses tell people what's going to happen, whereas the social worker gives people choices" (Nurse)

"Patients attitudes towards the nurses are different to me as a social worker- more passive, expecting things to be done?" (Social worker)

"I'm now clearer about what information they (the social workers) need, their approach to patients and their families, their role once person is discharged from hospital." (Nurse)

"I now see the number of different tasks the staff nurse has to do! She helps to provide very personal care to confused and very poorly patients: sensitivity, gentleness and an unhurried air, even though she's under pressure." (Social worker)

Like the action learning pilots, the work shadowing programmes raised questions for me about how sustainable the learning gains were; about effects of a learning intervention in a turbulent complex system. It is salutary to keep in mind Senge's (1994) message that "70% of change efforts fail." These questions of non-linear cause-and-effect are explored in Fairtlough, (2017), and the sustainability or not of learning/change is the focus of the Spring 2017 issue of *e-Organisations and People* on the theme of "[Conversations about change](#)".

Spring 2002. Carers' "Conversation Days": Managers' and carers' insights into each other's worlds and pressures

Since the 1990s, the perspectives of service users and carers in health and social care have increasingly played a role in informing training, practice, theory and service development. We have moved from "involving service users and carers" to co-production (Fairtlough, 2017). Following a conference organised by the county-wide Carers' Forum, our Joint Training Initiative received a request from the Forum that carers' perspectives should be included more explicitly in the training of social care and health staff. Working with local carers' groups, a colleague and I set up a programme to equip carers with training skills to enable them to participate in and eventually run their own sessions in staff training workshops. The range of people who participated included people caring for family members with mental illness, dementia, stroke and other physical impairments.

A key method we used in the training programme was regular "Conversation Days": working one-to-one, a carer and a practitioner or manager would sit down together and have a semi-structured conversation about their roles, following our set guidelines.

Our guidelines:

My role is ...

As understand it, your role is ...

Something I've always wondered about what you do ...

My typical day ...

What's good about what I do ...

When I'm under pressure ...

If we worked more closely together, we could ...

This was a deliberately countercultural approach. A frequent comment on these occasions, from both carers and staff, was "We are moving from 'us and them' to WE". This work confirmed my continuing belief in the central importance of *conversations* for connection and change in social and organisational life.

2000-2010. Adult safeguarding - working whole systems

During my time as an interagency trainer-developer, thanks to an inspiring workshop in 2000 on large scale engagement, I discovered the wonderful world of [whole systems thinking and working](#), or ways of understanding change in complex multiagency settings, and the developmental methods that can help. These include: Future Search, Real Time Strategic Change, World Cafe, and Open Space (see Pratt et al., 1999). These approaches are ideally suited to the world of adult safeguarding, involving as it does people at all levels in social services, health, police, housing, service user and carer groups, the voluntary sector, banks etc.

It still seems almost miraculous to me that given the right conditions, people representing a microcosm of the wider system gathered together in a room, can achieve in *one day* what would take months of separate meetings. The task for the county-wide system at this time was to develop and implement multiagency policies and procedures designed to protect vulnerable adults from abuse and neglect in response to a national government mandate called "No Secrets" (see Doonan, 2002).

Working with an external consultant, we used large scale intervention four times over a period of ten years: to build relationships and test out draft procedures, to identify perceptions and misconceptions of roles and responsibilities, and evaluate progress so far. In 2009 and 2010, we designed a two-stage intervention specifically to spread awareness of abuse or neglect of vulnerable adults and how to respond, in the wider public (beyond the 7,000 + staff we had already trained in identifying, reporting, investigating and managing safeguarding cases.) As lead interagency trainer-developer for adult safeguarding, my role was to co-ordinate participation of stakeholders in both planning and on the day.

The wider system was also to be represented at the round tables (see figure 3)

I can still remember some key micro-moments from those events. For instance:

- the direct conversation between a service user who had experienced abuse and one of the county councillors on the community safety working group
- a conversation between a social worker and community nurse about the realities of joint working between their agencies being witnessed by the CEO of the Health Authority;
- a group of nearly 100 people together constructing an evaluation tool in real time

Although there was initial scepticism about using a whole system approach rather than a traditional conference format, there was a depth and frankness of discussion at the events which we rarely achieve in the more usual meetings or conferences.

"Strong civic societies are connected by horizontal networks of collaboration, renewed by *virtuous cycles of reciprocity and trust.*" [my italics] (Atwood et al., 2003)

Atwood et al. (2003) describe the benefits of taking a whole systems approach to leading change in complex settings:



Figure 3. Microcosms of the wider system in the room, and around the tables

"Whole systems ...

- ... work takes an optimistic view of human capacity...and assumes that the generation of a high-trust environment is a more realistic route to implementation.
- ... methodologies work in the uncomfortable space where top-down collides with the horizontal and networked world of implementation.
- ... processes use the metaphor of organisations as living beings, pluralist and in transition and flux."



Figure 4. Each participant commits to a personal and a professional action step

Reflections on the importance of cross-disciplinary collaborations

From an early age, I have been interested in the *connections* and *relationships* between things: origins (e.g. of words, ideas, people, accents), names of things (e.g. birds, cars, trees) and hence the affinities between things (families of plants, animals, people), effects, exchange. Hence my interest in ecology and in (with caveats) ecological ways of seeing complex systems.

Any implementation *takes time*, involves many links in many chains, and hence many opportunities for original aims to be modified, distorted or lost. The two-way symbiosis in the green worm involves relatively few links and has had millions of years to evolve.

When I was at the stage of deciding what to focus on for my PhD, I met with a professor of physiology to discuss a potential project on nutritional relationships in marine environments. After a while, he said to me: "You know, Shelagh, you can really only make a proper contribution if you specialise in a particular area, in depth, rather than a number of things superficially..." I remember my strong inner reaction. What he said went against the grain for me and seemed like a false polarity. I was determined to keep hold of a cross-disciplinary way of working. More recently, my own deceleration, as depicted in the arc of the Dance of Reciprocity, from paid work was interrupted, first by voluntary redundancy and then by cancer. During this phase, I found a series of workshops based on the ideas of William Bridges (2001) very helpful in moving through these transitions.

The worms on the beach illustrate but one of the myriad kinds of reciprocal relationships in nature. They can serve as a metaphor with resonances for our human systems. During my time in adult learning, opening the process up to learners and working with them to co-create course content based on their concerns and questions meant mutual engagement on a new level. Together, we created a space for some critical questioning of science and its place in society, as well as of education itself.

In interagency work, my concern was to facilitate conversations which could develop from, and foster mutual understanding of roles, responsibilities and pressures. Methods such as "conversation days" and action learning can help this understanding, and with time and a bit of luck create the conditions for successful collaboration. Whole systems approaches can take this to the next level: moving from understanding to ways of expressing and experiencing in a tangible form the future(s) we are trying to create.

Returning for a moment to the symbiotic green worms on the beach, there is a message in the sand for the woman who asked about the value and purpose of studying this symbiosis. A recent paper in *Frontiers in Microbiology* (Bailly et al., 2014) identifies the organism I worked on as a good model for studying both brain regeneration, and the effects of climate change in marine environments.

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About Shelagh

Shelagh has worked in learning and development in the public and voluntary sectors for over forty years, at individual, team, intra- and inter-agency levels. She also has a background in the study of ecology and symbiosis, and has always been interested in ways of understanding how exchange happens across boundaries and difference. She is a long-standing member of the AMED Writers' Group. You can contact Shelagh via shelaghdoonan2010@btinternet.com.

Reciprocity between people and place on a Spanish finca and association

Kate and Anna Fairtlough



La Burra Verde (The Green Donkey) is an association, based in an organic olive farm (finca) in Andalucía, dedicated to developing models of sustainable and cooperative living and working. Drawing on conversations with Kate Fairtlough, president of La Burra



Verde and vice-president of a local organic olive oil cooperative, La Flor de la Alpujarra (The Flower of the Alpujarra), this article explores reciprocity between people coming to work or stay on the finca or attend events run by La Burra Verde, reciprocity between La Burra Verde and local and wider communities, and reciprocity between La Burra Verde and the non-human living and natural environment.

Keywords

Reciprocity, Sustainability, Spanish, Symbiosis, Community

From the Green Donkey blog

La Asociación La Burra Verde se formó en junio de 2013 y tiene su sede en la finca La Burra Verde en Las Alpujarras, Granada. La finca está en funcionamiento en su forma actual desde 1995 y su principal producción es un aceite de oliva ecológico de alta calidad. Las 20 hectáreas con las que cuenta la finca La Burra Verde constituyen la sede de la asociación, situada en un precioso valle, sin acceso con vehículos a motor, donde se realizan la mayoría de sus actividades. Este lugar privilegiado nos permitirá desarrollar una serie de actividades relacionadas con la conservación del entorno, la investigación sobre adaptación al cambio climático, reforestación, agricultura ecológica, energías renovables, bio-

<https://laburraverdeblog.wordpress.com/blog/>

The Burra Verde was formed in June 2013 and is based in a finca in the Alpujarras, Granada. The finca has been going in its current form since 1996. Its main crop is high quality organic olive oil. The twenty hectares of the finca provide a base for the association, where most of its activities take place. The finca is located in a beautiful valley without road access. This provides an exceptional place to develop activities related to environmental conservation, research about adaptation to climate change, reforestation, organic agriculture, bio-construction and other

construcción, y otros temas relacionados con la vida sostenible. Nuestro objetivo es desarrollar, dar ejemplos y promover iniciativas locales y a pequeña escala relacionadas con estos temas. Pretendemos realizar talleres y cursos, crear vínculos con otras asociaciones con fines similares y colaborar con grupos e individuos buscando campos de investigación. Agradecemos a las personas que acudan a las actividades que se celebren en la finca que opten por las opciones de transporte más sostenibles posibles antes de viajar a este lugar.

Anna: When and why did you first go the finca?

Kate: I came to the finca more than 20 years ago. I wanted to have a go living in Spain and being somewhere completely different to London. I think it was a desire to do my own thing - to have freedom. So I created a job for myself and it's just gone on from there - it's metamorphosed into its own thing. It was never planned long term and has just evolved over time.

topics relating to sustainability. Our aim is to support local initiatives and develop examples of good practice to share with others. We plan to run workshops and courses, make links with other associations with similar goals and work with individuals and groups looking for research sites. We appreciate it when people choose the most ecologically friendly way of coming here.



Kaki Fruit from La Burra Verde. Photo: Anna Fairtlough

Anna: What was it like when you first arrived?

Kate: When I first arrived the finca had been basically abandoned for eight or nine years. Just olive trees that were very dry because they hadn't been watered for years and a tiny three walled ruin.

Anna: What have been some of the key milestones of the project?

Kate: First, I guess building a house that I could live in as a home. My neighbours helped me renovate the ruin (now called the 'casita'). It was very basic - four walls, a roof, mud floors and a single window. Really, I was just camping. I cooked on a fire and dug a hole for a toilet. There was no electricity or running water. Then we built what is now Casa Parra, and then the straw bale house where I currently live.

Another significant stage was when I first started having volunteers, rather than doing it all on my own. Then having long term people living and working on the finca. The donkeys were there from the beginning and were vital to getting the building work done. Then we got more donkeys and chickens and cats.

Getting mains water was an important step. At the beginning, I didn't even have solar power. Now there are six different houses or huts that we have built or renovated. There is a yoga studio and the two yurts. All the houses have solar panels. We have a swimming pool that uses natural rather than chemical means. We have put in composting toilets and solar hot water systems. The latest house has a flush toilet. More recently, we have started to let two of the houses for people to come for eco-holidays.



'Casa Luna' – the latest house. Photo: Anna Fairtlough

Anna: What is the relationship between the finca and La Burra Verde association?

Kate: They are a bit merged but they are not the same thing. Maybe this is something to work on in the future. The aims of the association are to promote eco-living via workshops, courses, work experience, and research. It is very similar to what we do on the finca because that is our practical work but it's about taking the ideas more out into the world rather than just doing it.

Anna: How do you see reciprocity - defined simply as mutual giving and receiving - embodied in the relationships between people on the finca and in the association?

Kate: I suppose it makes sense to me in terms of the biological concept of symbiosis. I tend to think in terms of biology, ecology and nature. The volunteers do work on the finca, and sometimes with the association too, in exchange for accommodation, food and the experience of being here. They learn different things, depending on what projects we are working on, the season, and the skills they bring or are needed at any particular time. They come for the whole experience, to be here in this environment, in this special place as well as having opportunities to learn new skills. They live in the middle of nature, not surrounded by other people, buildings and cars. They experience as far as possible a self-sustainable life.



The yoga studio (with bed). Photo: Anna Fairtlough

Anna: Is it the same for people who attend the courses?

Kate: It is similar in a way because if they are staying on the finca they will also learn about life on the finca. They will see how the solar power, cookers and hot water systems work. And obviously they are also learning about the particular focus of the course. In the case of the yurt-building course, the finished yurt is going to be donated to a refugee charity in Lesbos, so that is another way in which reciprocity is involved. They experience the feeling of community with each other and with other people on the finca.

Anna: Obviously they learn from you but also from each other?

Kate: They learn practical things from me - they don't get the living together experience from me. The social interactions in the group, that's something they get between themselves.

Anna: How do you respond to people who express an interest in coming? What is your role on the finca?

Kate: There is a lot of interaction and communication before people show up. I try to be very clear about what they will get and what they are likely to experience before they arrive. It's also important to be equally clear about what they will be expected to give in return. As the owner of the finca I have overall responsibility for organising the work and keeping the whole thing going. But I'm wanting to find ways to share this more with others in the future.

Anna: I know sometimes it doesn't always work out as hoped. The reciprocity is sometimes disrupted.

Kate: Sometimes that does happen and then from my point of view it doesn't feel like a fair exchange. We had an experience like that on a recent course where someone negotiated not to pay the full fee because he was bringing particular skills. In the end, it was clear what he was going to get but not so clear about what we were going to get. We'll learn from that in the future - to be much clearer about mutual expectations.

Anna: What is daily life on the finca like?

Kate: A lot of it is based around food! Routines are also based around the tasks - like getting the donkey out and taking him to where he will graze. The jobs are seasonal so volunteers join in with what is happening at the time. There is a clear start time, which varies throughout the year. In the summer, this is early because it gets hot. In the winter, it is later as it is dark and cold in the mornings. There is a mid-morning break. The lunch break is the end of the working day. It's important for the volunteers to know when they are going to start, what they have to do, when they are going to eat and when they will have free time.

I usually cook the lunch so there's a giving there. The volunteers really enjoy the meals. It is a time to come together to relax, socialise, reflect on the morning's work and plan the activities for the next day. There is normally a mini fiesta the day before

volunteers leave. That spontaneously happens amongst the group and they tend to organise it themselves. I might be more involved if someone has been there a long time.



Pomegranate tree. Photo: Anna Fairtlough

Anna: How do you see reciprocity between the finca/La Burra Verde and the local community and wider communities?

Kate: In relation to the very local community.... Some of the founder members are from the local village. Some are not very active though. The very local community perhaps is not as involved as they could be. This is something that we could work on in the future. One thing that La Burra Verde does is clear the communal acequia (water channel). We started doing it every spring and now everyone just expects us to do it!

Anna: How does reciprocity work within the local currency that you have set up?

Kate: Our local currency - the 'Algorrobo' (Carob tree) - is starting to work on the scale of the finca involving people who offer us services or products. I've been to a group in Granada to learn about their local currency. It's not just about copying what other people do though. Each individual currency should be tailored to wherever it is being used.

Just setting this up has sparked quite a lot of interest in the local town. I've been to meetings to talk about our experiences. We are going to have a local market - a barter market - an alternative currency that is going to be used just for that event to get people familiar with the idea. Yeah, it's exciting, we'll see where it goes.

Anna: And beyond the local community to the wider world? What would you like to do?

Kate: We would like to be in contact with other associations and organisations with similar aims. Maybe get people to come or give a talk - exchange ideas - run a conference. Swap volunteers - support each other's initiatives - advertise each other's courses. We haven't really done as much as we would like yet.

Anna: There is also the co-operative 'La Flor de la Alpujarra'?

Kate: The finca is part of that because it's where we get our olives milled. I was a founder member of the cooperative. The main idea is to support organic farmers locally. To have somewhere to take the crop - to get a decent price for organic olives. It has created quite a strong sense of community and doing things together.

Anna: I know the economics of it all are hard. It's hard to do things differently from the mega-producers. The fact that the finca is not mechanised and has no road access, I guess that makes it more difficult?

Kate: I'm not unique. A lot of fincas locally are in the same situation, but yes, it's a lot more labour intensive than the big producers.



On the community building in Bayacas, the local village, there are tiles shown as leaves on a tree to represent local houses and fincas.
Photo: Anna Fairtlough

Anna: I wonder if we can think about reciprocity not only between people in the present but also going through the past and the future. The fact that the land has such a long history, you are still using the acequias that were built in Moorish times. There is a continuity of people from the past. You've learned from people's experience in the past and you are giving to people to carry it on in the future.

Kate: Yeah, I suppose so. In the immediate past, there were different neighbours that I learned from, some of whom are dead now. A lot of that knowledge has been passed down to me. I was helped to learn how to manage the olive trees, the picking, using donkeys for working, the donkey tackle. I pass it down to people who are working on the finca - I don't know how much they will use it in the future but I guess some of it will be left somewhere.

Anna: That's interesting. How was it when you first arrived? Did the local people welcome you even though you were a British woman, an outsider really?

Kate: It helped that I could already speak the language. But I found that most people were really positive and not xenophobic. I don't feel that I was discriminated against as a woman. People helped out by giving advice or practical help. I think two of the neighbours in particular have really enjoyed being friends with us. They were open to new things and interacting with different people. At the time, there weren't many young people of my generation staying on the land. Most of them had moved away for other jobs. This has changed a bit since the economic crisis but then fincas were being abandoned. There was one neighbour who was worried about what I was going to do. But I just went to talk to him and said I hear you are worried about my weeds encroaching on your land, I'll make sure I cut them down.

Anna: What languages are spoken at the Burra Verde?

Kate: One-to-one I will use either English or Spanish, depending on the person. Around the dinner table it switches between Spanish and English. Sometimes almost all the conversation is in Spanish and then there might be a period where it's mostly in English. Sometimes I'm not happy when English dominates. I want to encourage more Spanish people to come and if they don't speak English that can be off-putting. But mostly people are really happy to learn other languages and exchange skills.

Anna: How do you see reciprocity in action between you all and other living things and the natural environment?

Kate: What I am trying to do is to give back to the natural environment. There were parts of the finca that were in poor condition, the soil was degraded. We have made a few mistakes too. But we are trying to improve the ecology of the soil and plant more trees. It's hard to know how well we are doing, farming always involves taking things away, you've got to try and give something back. In terms of how things look - on a bad year - if it doesn't rain things don't look good. But this year, we've had a bit of rain, everything looks good this year. So many different plants. It is teeming with wildlife. It's really diverse in terms of birds, mammals, insects. It's really noisy at the moment. There is a nightingale that is singing day and night right outside my house.

[*\[Listen to the nightingales.\]*](#)

I see the finca as a kind of eco-system that needs a particular human population to function most efficiently. I don't think we have reached that optimal point yet, which is why we are still reaching out to bring in new people. I don't know when that will happen but I guess we will know it when it does.

Anna: What are you still looking for in terms of new people?

Kate: We are developing some new posts for people who want to stay more than a year. We are looking for people who could take on a key responsibility such as maintaining the buildings or taking care of the vegetable plots as well as sharing other daily tasks.

In return, they would have their own small house and food and a stipend of 100 euros a month. Like the other volunteers they would have afternoons and evenings and weekends off, which they could use to do some other work. Alternatively, if someone had an idea for a small enterprise using the resources of the finca (e.g. bee keeping) they could have one morning off a week, but would not get the stipend.

Anna: Then there's also climate change. The idea of give and take in terms of the carbon cycle.

Kate: We are looking to take carbon out rather than put it in. We are probably on the + rather than - side if you take into account all the trees that we have planted. The wood for our stoves comes from the finca. Our energy sources are all renewable.

Anna: It's inspiring how you can live that way. I guess it's easier when you have good solar resource though.

Kate: Yes. That's true but if we didn't have solar but we would have to find something else, wind or geothermal for instance.

Anna: As you know, we are planning an Open Source Thinking event some time in 2018 at La Burra Verde. What ideas do you have for what we could do?

Kate: I think that we would need to know more about who is coming, when, for how long and what their interests and skills are. Then we can all think together about what project(s) we could do. I like the idea of something that would involve the wider community.

Anna: We are going to have a gathering in Tostat, France in June 2017. That would be a good opportunity to start a reciprocal dialogue about this. I'm planning to offer a workshop where we can think about what those who are planning to come could offer and would like to get out of this event. I suggest we have a conversation between us and La Burra Verde sometime during this event.

Anna's reflection on this conversation

For me, three sets of ideas that are explored elsewhere in this edition resonate with the themes here. Both Shelagh Doonan (this edition) and Kate Fairtlough make use of the concept of symbiosis to think literally and metaphorically about reciprocity in the systems in which they have worked or studied. A Google search for definitions of symbiosis (2 May 2017) brings up two distinct meanings, one biological and one social, each of which are relevant to the two accounts: 'interaction between two different organisms living in close physical association, typically to the advantage of both' or as 'a mutually beneficial relationship between different people or groups'. Kate has a deep appreciation - and love - for the donkeys that give La Burra Verde its name (particularly 'Burra' the original donkey who made the first buildings possible). Hopefully, the donkeys would agree it is advantageous to them too that they live in such close association with their humans, who care for them in ways Kate describes above.

As well as using the idea of symbiosis, the 'dance of reciprocity,' as elaborated in Dawn Cutler's article, can illuminate the interactions between people within La Burra Verde. Kate describes how the initiation, orientation and state of attention phases are crucial when potential volunteers, students and guests make contact with La Burra Verde. Each party needs to understand what they will give and receive; when this is out of step the exchange often doesn't work well. This dance is mirrored too in the rhythm of the days. The interactions between people in the work group accelerate throughout the morning. In the conviviality of the midday meal under the shade of the grape vine outside Kate's house, people share bread baked on the solar cooker and a meal that uses vegetables, fruit, nuts, eggs and olive oil originating from the finca. Excited conversations peak and then subside before people withdraw to rest or turn to their own activities.

The work of La Burra Verde (both finca and association) in many ways exemplifies the notion of 'building community in the context of difference' that Bob MacKenzie, Rosemary Cairns, Alison Piasecka and Andy Piasecki write about. The idea of reciprocity has a long history in social and economic anthropology (for example see Sahlins, 1972). Swift (2015: no page number) proposes the idea of a 'reciprocal economy'. He writes: "if we treated each other...strictly on the basis of profit and loss, life would be intolerable. So why should we not make the principle of generous reciprocity so present in everyday interactions, the basis of economic life rather than the current model of competing egos?" Some reciprocity is altruistic and doesn't expect an immediate or equivalent reward, as when people within friendship, family or neighbourhood groups freely give to each other. Kate gives examples of how neighbours, who later became friends, gave advice and practical help to her when she first arrived. La Burra Verde gives to the local community by clearing the water channel every spring without a specific expectation that the favour will be returned. The reciprocity involved between Kate and the volunteers is more balanced: there is a clear mutual expectation of equivalent exchange. These forms of reciprocity rely on there being trusting relationships between people who know each other.

The way the finca currency - the Algorrobo - works is also balanced. It presumes that what is given will later be given back. Although most people using the Algorrobo will be known to each other, it opens up reciprocal interactions with others outside of La Burra Verde. The possible benefits of local currencies for their communities are many: money is kept within the local community, employment and small enterprises supported, social relationships strengthened, inequalities reduced, and environmentally destructive practices discouraged (Kennedy et al. 2012). Kate also trades with others outside of the local community. Trade can be more or less fair for producer and consumer and involve more or less transparency about the circumstances in which the goods have been produced (Bowes 2011). La Flor de la Alpujarra, through which the oil produced with the finca's olives is milled and mostly sold, aims to build a community of local organic farmers, support traditional agricultural practices and produce high quality oil at a fair price for both producer and consumer.

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About the authors

Kate Fairtlough is passionate about self-reliance and finding ways to lower our negative impact on the environment. In her mid-thirties, she moved to a large olive farm in Las Alpujarras, Southern Spain. She began building and farming with local traditional methods and materials, growing organically and installing systems to enable the farm to become self-sufficient in energy. The farm has now expanded to encompass many different initiatives and is home to short and long-term volunteers inspired to contribute to the development of the project.







Anna Fairtlough is a registered social worker with over thirty years' experience of social work practice, management and education. Her research and publications are in the fields of professional leadership and organisational development, equalities and social work, and work with parents in different contexts. As a practitioner, front line manager and trainer she has developed policy, practice and training in the areas of child sexual abuse, domestic violence, supervision and practice education. Anna has wide experience of developing and teaching on qualifying and post-qualifying social work programmes. She is interested in exploring how ideas about reciprocity, containment, distributed leadership and open source thinking can be embodied in progressive social work, educational and organisational development practice. Her current book (Fairtlough 2017) addresses these issues.

Fairtlough, A. (2017) *Professional Leadership for Social Work Practitioners and Educators*. Hove: Routledge

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6 July, CCPE, London W2	<p>Exploring the dynamics of complaints, with Robin Shohet, Maria Arpa and others</p> <p>http://www.amed.org.uk/events/fear-in-organisational-life-with-robin-shohet-maria-arpa-and-othe</p>	
18 August 1.15-4.30 pm, London SE11	<p>AMED Writers' Group</p> <p><i>Writing for containment and reciprocity in professional relationships and organisations</i>, with Anna Fairtlough,</p> <p>http://www.amed.org.uk/group/amedwritersgroup</p>	
20 October, 1.15-4.30 pm, London SE11	<p>AMED Writers' Group</p> <p><i>Sharing experiences of facilitation through writing'</i>, with Steve Dilworth</p>	
October	<p>Publication of the Autumn 2017 e-O&P, <i>A 2020 Vision for AMED</i>, guest editors tbc</p>	
17 to 20 Oct 2017	<p>Celebrating 70 years of becoming more humane</p> <p>We would like to invite you to join us for a four-day festival that we promise will be as Tavistock as the Institute has ever been: experiential, interpretative, imaginative, interdisciplinary, rigorous, forward looking, learningful and above all participative</p>	
18 December, 1.15-4.30 pm, London SE11	<p>AMED Writers' Group</p> <p><i>Celebration of our Writing Year, and Private Passions</i>, with Bob MacKenzie and Friends,</p> <p>http://www.amed.org.uk/group/amedwritersgroup</p>	

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