

# Artful Ways

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# PRACTICE-based LEARNING IN ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE

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*An Incitement to*  
**HUMANITY**

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# A PAMPHLET

'Pamphleteer' is a historical term for someone who creates or distributes pamphlets: unbound (and therefore inexpensive) booklets intended for wide circulation.

Pamphlets were used to broadcast the writer's opinions: to articulate a political ideology, for example, or to encourage people to vote for a particular politician. During times of political unrest, such as the French Revolution, pamphleteers were highly active in attempting to shape public opinion. Before the advent of telecommunications, those with access to a printing press and a supply of paper often used pamphlets to widely disseminate their ideas.

-Wikipedia

*IN THIS PAMPHLET*, we attempt to revitalise an old tradition, from the bygone days of thin paper and smudgy ink. Those days may be gone but the need to campaign and improve the world of work is pressing. So here we offer a point of view that is both partial and possibly unpopular. It may run against the grain of the times. But we feel it needs to be said. We think there is a danger that something is being lost in organisations; something about learning, about creativity, about life, humanity and expression.

We see a close link between learning and creativity, what we call here 'practice-based learning' and 'artful' ways of being and doing.

We don't intend to spark riots in the streets. We are more likely to ask politely for a pot of tea than to incite a call to the barricades. But we do intend to encourage an expression of human-scale learning and messy artful inquiry. In that sense, we hope to serve people and their workplaces by reminding them of a vast untapped resource of potential that they may be overlooking in their attempt to control the future.

As academic practitioners, both scholarship and practice are important to us. That said, we are acutely aware of the chasm between the two. Just as scholars should not be let off the hook about making their work accessible and relevant, likewise practitioners should be ready to embrace scholarship. The space connecting these two is the ground that we tread.

There are a couple of things that you need to know about this pamphlet:

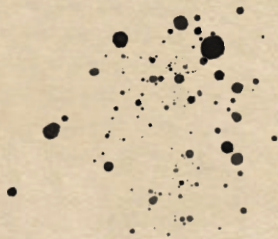
- It is intentionally polemic in parts; we address some big ideas and problems. However, at this point we do not want to get lost in the weeds of detail. We are drawing attention to orthodoxies that for too long have either gone unnoticed or at least have not been discussed.
- You will notice various 'textures' and styles of writing from fiction, ideas and theories, experiences (look out for the bag of lemons) and so on. Some are quick to read, others slower. Patchworks of experiences and how we make sense of them is the work of organisational life and it is ongoing, as it is here, hence the title 'Artful Ways ...'.

## WHO IS THIS FOR?

We have written this for people who are involved in organisational change. Organisational change is a broad canvas and includes people in organisation development, programme and project management, coaching and learning and development to name a few. We are sceptical that abstract models and frameworks hold the key to making a difference. Instead, we are of the view that life is about human relationships and these should be centre-stage. If models and frameworks are helpful, they only serve as a means of communication: they are the servant and not the master of human experience.

This pamphlet aims to support you in your own development, to give you confidence in taking your own experience seriously. With this in mind, we also seek to support those who are designing learning and development projects or organisation development work. In short, to encourage you to support others in taking their own experience seriously. And finally, there is the wider organisation or system: inviting people to pay attention to the ripples that create impact, for good or ill. Moving away from the language of the 'Key Performance Indicator', we are keen to pay attention to how those small interactions, a story or a striking moment, come to change the way people understand their situation and create further change.

We encourage a deeper form of noticing about what we are doing, not only for ourselves but for others too. As indeed others affect us. It is for this reason that we use stories as a way of building bridges between your experiences and ours, to see the world in a slightly different way.



# THE STATE WE ARE IN

We start in a parallel universe, with a story of Georgina, a manager in a company called Rush Corp. We introduce this story as an artful illustration of the challenge we think people and organisations face in the midst of what is sometimes called the 4th Industrial Revolution (4IR). And of how we think learning that is close to the grain of work, what we call ‘practice-based learning’, and the artful expression of our humanity that follows from this are both in some peril and yet offer salvation to work and workplaces in these times.

## *Another day at Rush Corp*

*Georgina is a middle manager in a company, a person who is far more than the person who shows up on a Monday morning. She works in marketing and manages a small team in the social media department. Outside of work, she is an actor in a drama group and an artist. This is where she feels most alive. In the latest production of a new play, she had a major part, designed the artwork for the marketing material and managed the social media. It had been a great success. Since she moved to the small seaside town, these people had become her friends and they valued her for her creativity and hard work but more than anything else for having a sixth sense for what worked. And she had just heard that they had been asked to take part in a major local arts festival. Things were on the up. But at work, her optimism was being shaken. Georgina presented her photo ID card at Rush Corp’s staff entrance and the two Perspex gates whooshed open like a pinball machine. Rush Corp was bought last year and they had now been fully ‘integrated’. Over the last six months, it had all been about efficiency, streamlining and the elimination of waste.*

*Two weeks ago, she had been on a two-day leadership course at a management training centre in the country. Although she had come away full of ideas to inspire and motivate, it all seemed a lifetime ago. She could not reconcile the conversations that she was not having at work with the ideals and theories of leadership they talked about on the course. In fact, she felt confused and guilty about it. How was any of this relevant and how did this help her? Was it her fault that she could not apply these great tools?*

*She valued her team, her work and the purpose of the organisation, but she no longer felt valued. What had changed? It was the small things. She had been pleased to hear of the new commitment to training and development, she had not anticipated that most of this would be online. What Georgina valued more than anything was talking to people, building ideas and seeing them take off. Achieving a pass mark of 70% in a virtual module was not the same. Two or three times a week her team would pause what they were doing and mull things over. Georgina introduced this when she arrived. Topics might include what people were saying about the product, making sense of negative comments (it was easy to take these to heart) and what developments they might want to plan for. Georgina valued these conversations because she could discuss them at one of the regular workshops that the marketing director, Sam, had organised. She had been most proud of an idea that her team had thought of that she had brought to that forum and she could now see was a major part of one of their products.*

*But now all that had changed. There was no longer any time for those conversations. She no longer had regular catch-ups over coffee with Sam. Senior managers had worked out that they could rationalise management and stay on track to meet targets. For Georgina, Sam’s leaving party signalled the end of the team and this culture of creativity. With Sam gone, she could no longer see the wider picture. Her new boss was remote both physically and emotionally. The vision Georgina had held was replaced by a focus on a dashboard of performance indicators. As time went on, Georgina became ever more frustrated. What seemed to be important did not resonate with the conversations she was having with her staff and the customers. At one time, before the merger, she had been encouraged to consider that there was some link between who she was outside work and the creativity she brought to her role. Now she saw those things very separately. The same was true for others. Recently she overheard someone in her team say: ‘I just do my job and can’t wait to get home’. She felt awful about that.*

This Pamphlet is about how we can make things better for someone like Georgina. If you make it better for Georgina, you make things better for her organisation.

# PRACTICE-BASED LEARNING: OUR AGENDA

We see practice-based learning and artful inquiry as possible routes amongst many for organisations to achieve the productivity they so badly crave, at a time when these very things are being squeezed out by an over-reliance on a particular way of thinking behind which sits a set of worn-out assumptions.

There is much in what we are proposing here that can complement the scientific worldview. We are supporting a different kind of science if you like, that rather than 'thingifying' people and their work, embraces what John Shotter calls 'witness-thinking' which studies the world by honouring it. (Shotter, J., 2005). Our aim is to honour and transcend the current dominant worldview. What we aim to do is put learning at the centre of how an organisation measures productivity and how efficiency can be delivered in the service of that, rather than the other way around.

So, let's look in more detail at what we mean by practice-based learning. The term practice-based learning runs the risk of tripping off the tongue, to form a single unnoticed phrase before moving to its PBL abbreviation. Let us consider each word in turn before looking at the idea more broadly.

**PRACTICE:** In our view, everyone has a practice. The ultimate practice is in the making of oneself. And within that, there are practices of work, play and so on. People tend to 'show up' in all of these practices in similar ways. I show up in how I cook in ways that are similar to how I parent, play tennis or do my role at work. So, practice has both an inner and an outer dimension. It never ends, sometimes we do a good job but it is never guaranteed, we are judged by the same token we judge others. There is an interplay between deep memory (of mind and muscle) and the unique context of the day, it is an interaction that we cannot quite put our finger on. There is no absolute as to what good is, it is continually contested and shifting. That said, there are experts who are recognised and looked up to.

**BASED:** Practice is rooted in something; hopefully something that matters. Here, it links practice to learning; it is a foundation from which something can grow.

**LEARNING:** Learning is ongoing and can always be improved. We start from a point of naivety; it is sometimes not obvious that there is something to learn. Learning has different facets from remembering. It is often about making wider connections, to explore a subject or skill deeply. And when all of this comes together, we cannot quite put our finger on it. This is what is sometimes called 'tacit' knowledge. This is sometimes overlooked, yet often is the most ingrained and productive way of going about a practice.

## Characteristics and implications of practice-based learning

Here are some of the characteristics of practice-based learning along with some implications. The intention is not to offer them as a method to be followed as if you were baking a cake. Instead, they are offered as invitations to consider what might be helpful to pay attention to on a wider stage, to do things that you might not have thought of and, from these, to add insights and ideas of your own to share with others.

- ∞ Practice-based learning is highly contextual. Whilst previous experience is valued, working out how a person's knowledge and that of the group will play out in the unique situation at hand is the crux of the task. In this sense, finding the right question is as hard as working out an answer.
- ∞ There is no external owner of the learning. It is the responsibility of the member of the group for whom it matters, the group is responsible for enabling that group member to see their world in a different light. This means that the agenda is set by the group, with key questions having to be negotiated. These include: what questions are important; how shall we go about finding out; what evidence do we think we are looking for; what resources do we have; who is interested and affected by what we do and what do they need?
- ∞ We need to be aware of creative unsettlement. This means that if we are to learn then we might

see the world in a different way. Sometimes this can hurt as we leave established ways of thinking behind and occasionally it comes to affect our identity and who we think we are.

γ Our learning will have a wider impact. This means that, as our learning and practice develop, the way we interact with others will change. This affects the decisions we make, how others see us and wider patterns of interactions beyond those we interact with. This means that we need to pay attention to these ripples and the effect that they have on practice, learning and how others see themselves.

γ This all has an impact over the long term. This means that we should not expect rapid results; sometimes years down the line the impact is still being had in the routines of how people relate and work together. Therefore, we should not get fixated on cause and effect. Instead, we should inquire about the different ways people interact with each other and how we are all seeing and interacting with the world differently.

γ There are issues of power and politics at play. This means what people choose to learn, how they go about it, the questions that are valued, the resources allocated and so on are subject to negotiation. In this process, some people will have more power than others and how people choose to use their power will differ: sometimes it will be overt, at other times hidden and for most of us, the nature of the power we have will not be fully recognised. It is in the interaction where agendas, hopes and what we value rub up against each other that these issues become available for discussion.

γ We have duties on ourselves and others to both support and challenge. This means recognising and discussing the nature of conversations that we are having. Too much support with little challenge means little learning can occur. Too much challenge with little support can mean people close their mind and become defensive but sometimes this can be important as well, given the right situation.

γ We need to be vigilant of the process. This means being aware of how supportive and challenging we are, the nature of the context and issues of power within the group and beyond. Who is going to pay attention to the process and how are they going to make their voice heard?

## Inquiry-driven knowing

We think that models and tools of learning may be unhelpful because they are devoid of context. And context is vital. In fact, you might be better off reading a good novel or watching a movie. What we are advocating is inquiry-driven knowing which is knowing that comes from reflecting and making meaning in the process of doing our work, i.e. our practice in the context we find ourselves in. And it is here that these models and frameworks may have some merit, but only as common conversations. They are the servants of our thoughts, not the master of them. We are making this point strongly as we are concerned that people are far too attached to models and abstract tools rather than having the confidence to make meaning from their own practice.

### *Working Through Brexit*

*We were working with a government department in the midst of preparations for a no-deal Brexit. This department was one of the main departments involved in this planning. Our role was to provide support and expertise for their internal change team working in this unprecedented and at times fraught environment.*

*This department did benefit from some enlightened leadership. One Executive Team member expressed the view at a senior management forum that 'this is a totally unique situation and no one can pretend to know what might happen next, but at least we can learn. Times like these allow for a lot of learning'. We seized on this as a great opportunity. It meant we could put learning at the core of our work with the internal team and across the department. People seemed more prepared to admit their vulnerability and where they didn't know what the answer was. In*

*truth, we didn't see this as particularly unique to this organisation. What was unique was how this narrative from the top team had opened up the possibility to be honest about it. The challenge we had though is that people were so busy and embroiled in preparing for all eventualities of a no-deal scenario that they didn't have time to learn. So, we started to develop a practice of meeting the need where it was, instead of expecting the learners to come to us. This meant that we had to be very flexible about what we delivered to who and how. It meant that rather than a set programme of learning, we needed to draw on all the various tools and skills that we had available to us as a team of mixed internal and external practitioners of learning and organisation development and design (OD & D). It was a bit like that emergency of the moon mission Apollo 13 where they had to quickly cobble together a solution from the bits and pieces that were sitting around the capsule in order to make new CO<sub>2</sub> scrubbers to keep the marooned astronauts alive. So, across the team we found we had skills in leadership, coaching, team development, organisational design, systems thinking, embodied/somatic coaching, mindfulness, resilience and wellbeing techniques and more.*

*We came up with a metaphor for this approach, based on a building technique used in Brighton (where Mayvin is based) called bungaroosh. This is where builders use whatever materials are to hand, flints, cobbles, pebbles from the beach, old bricks and mix them together skilfully in order to build houses. It is about crafting a solution with whatever is to hand. We developed an inquiry model so that whenever we received a request for help from a person or team, we would respond by saying 'what are you trying to achieve? And 'what can you learn?' and 'how can we help?' We called this learning 'close to the grain of the work'. Interestingly, we learned that every town or location had their own version of 'Bungaroosh'. As we worked, the demand grew because what we were offering seemed to be helping people at a challenging time. What we had to do was accept our own vulnerability and 'not knowing' in order not to be too attached to any kind of set way of doing things. This was scary for us too. It was also harder to explain this approach than just running a leadership course. As one person put it, 'The great thing about this is that it is so flexible and really meets people where they are. The hard thing about it is that it is really hard to explain what the 'it' is!'*

This story isn't unique. It is about finding a way to work with organisations that are so under pressures of time and resources that they don't have time for learning. Or at least learning as it is most traditionally considered: as courses and 'away days'. So, learning close to the grain is an artful practice, like the art of building walls for houses with whatever is lying around us at our feet. In this way, we are drawn to consider how 'art' and artfulness might be key to practice-based learning.

What does this way of practice require?

- The way we adapt situations, materials and what we have to hand to different purposes.
- The fact that there is no written rule book of how things ought to be, value has to be imagined and created with what we have in our reach and in our minds.
- Our vulnerability and openness to not knowing, or at least to understanding that what we had previously known and valued might be of limited use.
- The importance of it being a social endeavour, a good question from one person enables the imagination and the sparking of an idea in another.

In pursuit of scholarship as well as practice, let us consider how this reification of models and tools has come about.

## The 'thingifying' of work and learning

Charles Handy, the business guru, is now in his eighties. Naturally, he is looking back on his legacy. He was quoted in *The Economist* on what he called the 'curse of efficiency'. This was based on his own experience of a stay in hospital following a stroke:

*Organisations focus so much on efficiency that they fail to be effective. Instead of concentrating on their core goal, they pay attention to narrower measures like cutting costs... Mr Handy argues that managers tend to like things more than they like people... As it is, there is a temptation to try and turn people into things by calling them "human resources". Call someone a resource and it is a small step to assuming that they can be treated like a thing, subject to being controlled and, ultimately, dispensed with when surplus to requirements.*

*-The Economist, 27th July 2019, p.55*



This isn't a novel view, but it is interesting to note the source, both in terms of Mr Handy and The Economist. It is as if the critique of globalisation is starting to infiltrate the very congregants that have worshipped at its altar for so long. They seem to be identifying the nub of a problem that we face in 'HR' and in 'OD & D': what we call the 'thingifying' problem. And if we don't address it, in an age when disruption is the norm, this problem is going to get more acute.

The sociologist Raymond Williams (Williams, 1977) points to the habit we have to express experience in the past tense and the tendency this has to downplay what it feels like in the present moment, with all its multiple possibilities and confusions, in deciding what we are going to do, often in conversation with others. He points out:

*The strongest barrier to the recognition of human ... activity is this immediate and regular conversion of experience into finished products... so that now only explicit forms exist, and the living presence is always, by definition, receding. (Ibid, p.128).*

In organisations, what this means is that outputs are often favoured over ongoing conversations. How often have we heard, 'when are we going to stop talking and take action?' But in Williams's terms, and perhaps Georgina's in the story above, talking and the messiness of human discourse is as valuable as so-called 'action'. In fact, it *is* action. And this is particularly the case if organisations like Rush Corp want to adjust quickly to new contexts and challenges.

We introduce this because we have a bold view of practice-based learning. It may be going on in conversations that are often overlooked or undervalued as useful. Our tendency to thingify a problem is magnified when we do this on multiple counts during the course of a conversation. We see this in the way conversations in organisations are managed. Certain words, and even ways of talking, are ruled in or out. Behind this disciplining is a set of assumptions, and it is these that we want to challenge. When it comes to our organisational life, we need to be cautious of the ground on which we are treading and to ask the questions: what assumptions we are making; what impact is this having on how we understand and learn; what other ways can we talk about this?

This is a stretch for many of us, especially those at the levels of leadership who have been rewarded in the past for their capacity to thingify. It is about working at a level of relational intelligence that we aren't that well trained or equipped for. Above all, it means changing not just our plans or even our behaviours but our worldview. The goal is to stay in relationship even when the world around is changing catastrophically. When the pieces fall, new orientations of those relationships emerge. For example, in the maelstrom of change over the past ten or more years, people I was once managed by can become my peers or even my employees, and back again. Staying in relationship through all of this has been vital to ensure that we can get on in the context we find ourselves in next. That is the kind of emotional somersault at which we need to be practised. This is where our capacity to learn in the folds of our practice, a constant and changing challenge, comes in. Mr Handy has apparently woken up to this in a missive he is leaving for his grandchildren. We ourselves may need to get on with it earlier in our careers.

In many organisations and for most people, the idea of 'learning' contains a set of assumptions about what this should look like: it too is regularly thingified into 'courses'. Knowledge is thingified into 'tools and techniques' and competencies that can be assessed against learning outcomes. Yet where learning often takes place is much closer to the grain of everyday work, in systems and processes that can't easily be thingified or made, in Handy's terms, more efficient. It takes some life, messiness, conversation and humanity, qualities that organisations seem inadvertently (or even deliberately) intent on managing out of their way. So, why has this happened?

## The science of efficiency

A major influence on the search for efficiency in the workplace is the application of scientific methodology on organisational life. Science has produced many wonderful things and has improved the lives of many. We want to redress the balance. Even the word 'balance' is wrong, it implies a seesaw. Instead, we are

emphasising both science and other ways of knowing together at the same time. Here we are talking about the creative, artful, imaginative and creative sides to who we are.

Let's consider the problem, by looking carefully at just three lines from an influential management scientist of the early 20th century. From these lines, we take three interwoven problems and how they show themselves today giving recent examples relating to the individual, a large corporation and the global economic system. We then ask a series of questions. Those three lines, they are from F.W. Taylor, the American mechanical engineer of the late 19th and early 20th century who was one of the first management consultants and the originator of scientific management:

*I can say, without the slightest hesitation that the science of handling pig-iron is so great that the man who is... physically able to handle pig-iron and is sufficiently... stupid to choose this for his occupation is rarely able to comprehend the science of handling pig-iron (Taylor, 1947).*

In Taylor's day, scientific management had the assumption that in any workplace there was 'one best way' of doing the job and it was their task to find it, often with clipboard and stopwatch. The quote highlights at least three interconnecting problems we can see today:

1. The world views and assumptions of scientific management
2. The lack of consideration of communities of people at work
3. The choices we are able to make.

In summary, when we look at these few lines from Taylor what strikes us is the heart of the problem that leads to thingifying:

Of world views and assumptions that Taylor does not have the 'slightest hesitation', he is certain in his view. He has closed-off those fundamental questions such as is it the right thing to do as well as the ethical implications of his project. Instead, the spirit of inquiry shifts from 'why do we do this' to those ever-decreasing circles of 'what do we understand' of our now fixed world view and 'how do we understand it better?'

Next comes interaction of communities, the scientific split between the knowledgeable observer and the strong but stupid handlers of pig iron. Here, the two groups are destined never to understand each other. We have two communities that never speak, worlds that include work colleagues, family, friends and so on. We have an isolated self of a man, who is considered as if under a microscope. No doubt, this pig iron handler was due to be a soldier, taking into account the history of the 20th century.

And this leads to the choices we make, the final observation of this quotation that people may choose to handle pig iron. It implies that, from an early age, options are presented to an individual from which a choice must carefully be made.

The challenge of thingification is heightened in times of major change and of course, we are now facing a time where disruptive, discontinuous change is the norm. This is where the new type of learning of 'practice-based learning' might become more relevant. This type of learning is relational rather than universal. It takes place close to the grain of the work and is about staying in relationship with the context with which we find ourselves. The blemishes of the context are figural and need to be worked with and even exploited, rather than systemically rejected.

*"... business schools need to change. What they tend to do at the moment is encapsulate the best practices of current businesses, codify them and pass them on. But the real challenge that business-school graduates will face is dealing with the unexpected. That cannot be taught in the classroom but needs to be experienced in the outside world."*

- *The Economist*, 27th July 2019, p.55

To bring this to life, here is a story of an activity to bring home to people the experience of their experience.

### *A bag of lemons*

*We have an activity on one of our practice-based learning programmes which involves handing each participant a lemon. (From an early age, my daughter has been somewhat bemused by my need to go and buy a bag of lemons for work). In this activity, the aim is to consider what knowledge looks like from various angles. By knowledge, I am talking about 'how we think about the things that we end up doing.' This is a question of epistemology in academic-speak — what the theoretical assumptions behind our view of the world are. What Handy is pointing out is that this often shows up in how we speak about things. In my terms, thingyfyng is indeed a speech act.*

*So, back to the lemons. I ask participants to have a series of discussions about these lemons. Firstly, I ask them to consider the lemon in terms of what you do with it; the practical purposes of a lemon. They often come up with the obvious things like use in drinks (a gin and tonic often features), and more obscure uses like keeping cats off kitchen worktops and so on (who knew?!). Then I ask them to put on a metaphorical white lab coat and consider the lemon as a 'lemon-ologist' would. Here we are in the realm of acute thingyfication. Lemons are generically measured in terms of acidity, colour, size, weight etc. Blemishes are considered as deviations from a norm. This is figural. But the mood changes when I ask them to tell each other a story of a time when lemons figured in their own lives. They usually shuffle uncomfortably at first, but then the stories start to flow and the room is abuzz with holidays in Sorrento, marvellous meals, walks through yellow groves and so on. This leads beautifully into the final stage, which is to consider the lemon that is in front of them; to de-thingyfy it as it were. Again, people feel at first often a bit embarrassed but after a while, they get into it. They study their lemon and learn its uniqueness. Blemishes become character, so much so that when I ask them to put their lemon onto the floor in front of them and I mix them up when their backs are turned, they can usually turn back and quite quickly distinguish and reclaim their lemon from a pile of 20 or even 30 others. (Some of them have been known to hang onto their new friend for a while). A discussion ensues about the meaning of this little diversion. It is not, to be clear, saying that any one of these ways of knowing a lemon (no, really!) is any 'better' than any other. It is saying that each way has implications and that maybe, some of the ways we choose to see the world have taken us into certain implications and consequences. Even to the point, on a macro scale, of thingyfyng the very planet we call our home.*

*Back to the scale of organisations, I remember, when I once offered this activity to a group, a leader of a large department said: 'There are 20,000 people in my area of the business. Do you mean to say I have to consider all of them as individuals?' Luckily someone else in the group responded: 'how would it change what you did and how you did it if you did that even a little bit more?'*

*In terms of the lemon experiment, what this means is that most organisational learning takes place on 'away days', staying in the thingyfyng space. But what is required is to learn in close relationship with the context we are in, and in particular the people we are with.*

Here, what we are advocating is a different approach to learning that is rooted in people's experience and crafted in the context they find themselves in and in relationships with others. There is also a duty to enable this in others — the bridge between themselves and others is, we believe, an artful process. It is creative and a relational endeavour. What we want to incite is the artfulness at the root of practice-based learning.

## ARTFULNESS OF PRACTICE

We are making the case for artfulness because we feel strongly that the current paradigm of thinking in organisations, based on a so-called rational, scientific management model, is very limited. This limitation goes deeply into how people are expected to think, talk and behave. Yet beyond this way of being is a much wider experience of ourselves and the world. This wider experience is the territory of the artful, as the examples above suggest.

If we were encouraged to access this wider experience, it would improve our relationships and wellbeing for sure. It would allow us to be more different with each other, rather than conforming to a kind of corporate sameness. (Which as an unpleasant by-product is particularly hard on anyone who isn't white, western, male, middle-aged and middle class). But perhaps as important is the realisation that this limited non-artful way of being isn't fit for purpose. Because the world has gone beyond a stage where it can be argued the rational, scientific management mindset is helpful in solving the particularly complex challenges we face in organisations. These challenges are driven by climate change, political and generational disruptions, populism, globalisation, the increasingly fast-paced and digital quality of experience and so on.

Our view is that these complexities have, in fact, been going on for a while, but the old paradigm of rational management was effective enough to deliver a certain set of unassailable assumptions about the way an organisation needed to be. But the credit crisis of the first decade of the 21st century fundamentally undermined these assumptions. Until then, the belief that we could rationally plan our way forward prevailed. But now the pace of change means we can't pretend this anymore.

So, we face unknowable futures, complexity, the multiplicity truths, the immediacy of decision-making without the 'full facts' being available. A wider way of knowing, as Heron and Reason call it, is required. This is where our artful tendency lends a hand. It doesn't throw out the rational approach but rather it vastly broadens its scope. We know we can hold very limited amounts of data in rational thought. Getting a sense of the wider patterns in artful mechanisms, such as metaphor, powerfully accelerates our capability to get to the root of things. This suggests the artful may be more efficient.

Increasing 'scholarfication' of the human condition only seems to bring about marginal additional insight. By this we mean that instead of narrowing our focus or using our knowledge tools and methods more deftly, let us see what other ways of knowing might be helpful. As we become interested in a subject, a natural tendency is that we focus our intention. But what if we miss the bigger holistic picture with all its nuances, shades and possibilities? We are not suggesting that we ditch the traditional form of knowledge and inquiry we call 'episteme'. Instead, we are keen to pay attention to other forms of knowing.

For example, what do the following words evoke in you right now?

- γ A loaf of bread that has just come out of the oven
- γ Walking through a meadow in summer and your eye is caught by a grasshopper
- γ The musty smell of autumn as the leaves turn yellow and fall, or even:
- γ That meeting you are going to tomorrow, and at the back of your mind there is a doubt about how it will play out and you can't put your finger on it

### *Glimpsing the artful through a glass darkly*

*Working with our clients, we often have to sneak artful approaches in under the radar. But we know they lead to better quality outcomes. A recent example with a UK financial services company shows this. We were working with the executive team. This is a hard-edged commercial environment of some 2,000 people. This senior team was, like most, reforming after a recent churn of personnel, including the CEO. They wanted to spend some time considering how they 'accelerate themselves as a high performing team'. Our approach was to promise an approach that was a mixture of traditional observation and feedback, as well as 'offering insights'. Anything seemingly more creative would have been dismissed as 'flaky' quite quickly.*

*We started relatively gently during our sessions with the group pointing out the language they used, particularly the metaphors which initially were predominantly warlike. Once we had established a more relaxed and trusting atmosphere, we started to suggest more embodied ways of working, for example getting them to stand in the space in orientation to a particular problem or later even to show the orientation of their relationship with each other, such as who they were closer to, more distant from and so on. They found this experience very enlightening, as, according to the CEO, 'it helps us get to the root of things quickly'.*

*As time went on, we introduced other mechanisms like drawing a collective mind-map of the issues facing the team. We noticed how much they felt they needed to preserve this as an artefact and yet they never really looked at it again after the session. It was more a useful way of literally bringing them onto the same page emotionally. It seemed to build trust so there was less of a need for everything to be agreed at a detail level.*

*Even a simple technique such as using picture cards in a session seemed to open things up in a useful way. They would use more open and varied metaphors, things like: 'Wow! That's really made me think! It challenges how I see things', or 'an eye-opening moment'. The time we spend on it is a drop in the ocean. They usually revert to more instrumental language and we have to bring them back to a more artful way of being every time we meet.*

The techniques we are using in this example aren't new or even radical. But they do illustrate how it is possible to open up a more artful space, and also how that artful space still gets quickly closed down. We recognise this 'reversion' phenomenon is a problem; the artful activities do inspire but organisations are still organised along those rational, planful lines. In fact, opening up the artful as a sideshow in monthly meetings or 'away days' is a symptom of a wider malady. So, is there another way of organising? If organisations build connective meaning and then let people act on that basis, there may be less need for anything to be agreed at a 'planful' level. How do we let go of the need to be so archly rational in how we organise things? Will we be able to develop that level of trust?

We see the artful as a turn towards joy and more meaning at work. Perhaps our children will demand it. Recently a youngster we met told us they were giving up a potentially lucrative job in tech journalism because they didn't want to work in an industry that was, in their words, so 'macho and money-oriented'. This is anecdotal evidence for sure, but it was meaningful to us. With the noise around the climate crisis, the state of the world's politics, and so on, and the general failure of the rational, scientific management paradigm to deliver useful futures, we wonder if the artful time has come?

As we see it, this artful knowing isn't an abstract craft that operates at some distance from the everyday work. It isn't just for away days or creativity sessions. It is a skill that operates close to the grain of our work in organisations. In this we recognise how our own change practice works close to the ground, or as one person working in the UK Civil Service put it:

*'my interpretation of artful knowing is having the theoretical grounding and the soft skills to be able to suss out the habitat of an organisation or team and work with it for everyone's benefit.'*

## Being artful

Our view of artfulness is informed by human history. Cave paintings going back tens of thousands of years are often considered as the first appearances of the modern human mind. That is: humanity is defined by its ability to collectively represent its experience through different kinds of artful expression. Our thinking here, as the above story shows, is that this artfulness is intrinsic to the productivity of organisations of organisational learning. And yet like learning, it is often pushed to the fringes in the practice of management by outcomes and the assumptions behind this mindset. And just when this artfulness might be even more vital and useful, in order to learn close to the grain of work, it is being pushed away even further.

## The organisational canvas

Imagine standing in front of a famous painting, for example something by Mark Rothko, (a favourite of both of ours). There is something about standing in front of one of his large paintings that draws us in. There is a 'wholeness' that is greater than what it is made from. We sense the world differently. It seems to tug at a memory or some other part of us that we cannot quite put our finger on. It is something visceral that cannot be intellectualised in admiring the brushstrokes, idea or composition.



© 1998 Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko ARS, NY and DACS, London 2020.

What is the canvas that we in organisations work on and is it helpful to draw on that analogy? The answer is yes and no. Yes, in the sense that we are paying attention to all the qualities it is to be human. In short, we are not just rational robots driven by the scientific method. This relates both to our own practice and the practice of others as well as what we achieve. That said, there are limits. None of us starts with a blank canvas. This was put nicely by Otto Neurath, the early 19th century member of the Vienna Circle. He suggested that in describing the human systems we can imagine ourselves as sailors who, far out at sea, have to transform the shape of their clumsy vessel:

*They make use of some drifting timber... to modify the skeleton and hull of their vessel. But they cannot put the ship in dock... to start from scratch. During their work, they stay on the old structure and deal with heavy gales and thundering waves. A new ship grows out of the old one, step by step... [They] may already be thinking of a new structure, and they will not always agree with one another. The whole business will go on in a way we cannot even anticipate today. That is our fate. — Neurath, 1944, p.47*

What can we usefully say about the metaphorical canvas? One source of insight is Howard Becker's book *Art Worlds* (Becker, 2008). Becker takes a sociological view of the collective action that occurs to make art. He does not only focus on the artists themselves but also others that we do not often hear about such as technicians and fabricators as well the role of patrons, those who directly support artists as well as the general public. Taken together and drawing on examples, he describes the process of what happens — shining a light on questions such as what is 'value' and how is it created. He looks at two perspectives and how they interconnect.

Firstly, consider the artefact. This is the actual paint on canvas as with the Rothko example before, currently hanging in the Tate Gallery in London. The word 'artefact' needs explanation. It is not necessarily physical, and in organisation development terms it often is not, as the above story suggests. It may be something quite ephemeral, such as how a person sees their world differently as a result of some activity that they have taken part in. It is useful to call these activities artefacts because they form units of communication. That is, we can talk about event 'x' that led to ways of working 'y'. But we do so carefully because we can quickly fall into the trap of thingifying.

Secondly, there is the process of how we get there, including the rules and conventions that count. Both the process and conventions are subject to artful play but, as we will explain, they come with risk. We shall now describe how these play out from the perspective of artful organisation development practice.

### **Creating artefacts**

If we run a workshop, a training event, or a set of bungaroosh interventions, we are in these terms creating artefacts. A series of coaching conversations might also be an example, as could a piece of organisation design work with a team. The list goes on. Any intervention has a lifecycle that represents the beginning, middle and end that includes us as OD practitioners, clients and stakeholders, each providing opportunity for artful practice. There is also the physical and virtual space that we use and create. In this sense, organisational intervention artefacts are 'stage-managed', like a piece of theatre. Consider for example, how the room a team finds themselves in for a team event has an impact at a deep level on the dynamic that emerges, perhaps at the same kind of level that the Rothko painting works at. Finally, what is it we leave behind? Often these might be memories of an event or a coaching session and the new perspectives people will have as to how they relate and work with others. There may be reports, posters, flipcharts that facilitate these memories. It is often the case that someone (usually junior) is delegated to 'type up' these outputs. This thinking often puts us back in the mindset of scientific management. As artefacts, these documents become lifeless and ineffective in terms of linking people back to their experience.

Each situation is unique both in terms of the assignment and each stage in that assignment. Drawing inspiration from Becker, there are three areas that constitute artful aspects of our practice, areas where we have to bring skill and craft to bear:

- Firstly, our own artful practice that we sense and we take ownership in developing through professional development and reflecting. This is 'how we show up'. People are essentially 'plastic'. This sounds like an odd thing to say but it means we are malleable; we shape-shift. Although we

like to think our 'selves' are fixed, in fact we believe we are far from that. Consider how you yourself have changed over time, physically, as well as emotionally, intellectually and in how you talk, dress, move etc. This ability to be essentially plastic, moulding and shaping our own being, is possibly one of the ways we can be most artful.

- Secondly, there is the negotiation with the client(s). Lots of questions need to be artfully navigated, such as: What is possible? What time do we have? How much resource can we call upon? What technology is there? What venues and places do we have? What does a good outcome look like and to whom? These are questions that relate not only to the project but also one's own development. These raise questions around enabling constraints. In a closely defined project that has limited resource and time, how does this create an opportunity to be creative?
- Finally, there are the constituents; those who are involved and affected by this organisation development work. What appreciation do they have for what has unfolded, both in terms of what has happened and in terms of any interventions and the effect that they have had?

None of this necessarily means there has to be agreement on a job well done. Sometimes the artistry comes in shaking things up, as the artist Marcel Duchamp aimed to do with his famous fountain:

Duchamp's Fountain – a different way of seeing:



© Association Marcel Duchamp / ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2020.

### Shaking things up

Duchamp, the Impressionists, the Pre-Raphaelites, JMW Turner and others all changed the world of art. After them, there was no going back. However, their success was far from assured, although it might seem that way with hindsight. The same is true in organisation development work. In organisational life, there are rules and cultural norms to be followed. Sometimes these are written down in clear governance structures agreed with internal and external stakeholders. Sometimes these rules and ways of working just emerge. And mostly a combination of the two. That said, they are often hidden, or only understood by those enmeshed in the game and here there is a paradox. Those that are the most expert in the rules and ways of being are least able to notice and articulate them. The people new to the organisation can find them befuddling and unnoticed until a line has been crossed like navigating a maze made of plate glass. Like a Russian Doll, there are rules within rules that set expectations between the frontline and the board and others. You shake one and the ripples are felt elsewhere in unexpected ways. The artful organisation development consultant navigates these carefully. The new pair of eyes is both welcomed and threatening, sometimes both at the same time. The question is: are those rules up for grabs and who decides? The safest option is to work within the rules – training, coaching and workshops all within the existing paradigms of the rules. The threat is lower, but so is the opportunity for impact.

What are the forces at play that restore the web of relationships back to where they began when you leave?  
What might this look like?

*Sue was Head of Change and reported to David, the Director of Corporate and Workforce Development.*

### ***Working within the rules***

*The last time the rules had been redrawn to this extent had been eight years before. Of course, change carried on. Initiatives that had sprung to David's mind included the launch of a new learning and organisation development programme. There was this exercise where people threw stuffed toy fish around the room to replicate the goings-on at a Japanese fish market — it was all about self-organisation and emergence. There was also the new vision and mission. All the senior managers had been gathered at a hotel in the Midlands where they were ushered into a room where upbeat music and some motivational speakers gave their view of the world. Each person was given their blue and red card that now described what we were about and what good looked like. Thereafter, various plans were rolled out including comms, training and development, how it would be linked with appraisals alongside various keyrings, balloons, pens and branded notice boards. And then there had been a couple of Government initiatives that had briefly knocked the organisation off its stride but it had quickly sorted itself out and various plans were put in place and implemented.*

*In summary, it seemed safe. Here, being artful was about cultivating and planning long-term relationships. It was about producing ideas and things that conformed to what was seen to have value. And that did not change much. Investment was longer-term and people were prepared to be seen and noticed.*

### ***The rules are changing***

*Things were up in the air, the Chief Executive had left abruptly and a new one had just been appointed, and in between for the last six months, the rather aloof Finance Director had kept a steady ship. Decisions had to be taken. Questions were now being asked about the purpose of the organisation and how best it would go about delivering its remit. Solutions to problems that the previous Chief Executive had implemented were now becoming problems: their shadow sides were now becoming more evident.*

*Over a couple of hours, David and Sue discussed a conversation that David had had with the new Chief Executive. It was awkward, both Sue and David were uncertain of their place in the new organisation, in fact, Sue had an eye on her next step outside of the organisation. David suggested a new role for Sue if he stayed in the organisation, Sue felt flattered. A number of actions were agreed to move forward the new Chief Executive's thoughts on the new organisation. Over the coming months, workshops were arranged, a consultant was appointed, stakeholders were met and the plans for a 'new organisation' took shape.*

*For David and Sue, each step seemed risky, they had a personal stake in the outcome, whatever that would be. Those around them were in a similar boat. What was being revealed and concealed as people made their next move was difficult to fathom and predict. That said, there was a public front to maintain — confidence, the plan and 'we are in control'. In short, an ordinary story of organisational change where the rules were to change, people were to change and the fate of those close to the centre uncertain.*

*In summary, in re-writing these rules there was no place of safety, and no scientific detachment between decisions and those affected. It felt messy and there was nothing pretty to show for it. In this sense, being artful was working in the moment, and reacting off each other. It was important not to run on autopilot though and to check — 'in whose best interest is this decision conversation for?'*

## A CALL FOR ACTION AND THINKING

You may be thinking that this isn't very incendiary for a pamphlet. It hasn't exactly been 'workers of the world, Unite'. Nevertheless, we hope that it will incite you to move (even slightly) in a radical direction of your own.

*A few years later, and we are back at Rush Corp. Georgina had thought about leaving for quite some time. She wasn't sure what had convinced her in the end to stay. Perhaps it was because she had plenty going on outside of work that had kept her inspired. She had taken on the role as Chair of Trustees of a Community Theatre group. But also,*



*when she looked back, she had taken on a similar kind of mentoring role to her old boss, Sam, who had left some time ago. She had organised her own small team in a way which recreated the lost conversations and creativity she had missed. She stayed in touch with Sam and caught up with her regularly. She had fought for and got some recognition and resources for her team, who in turn seemed much more engaged. It wasn't a straight road; Rush Corp still seemed hell-bent on its programme of dehumanising the workplace. But Georgina had realised that it was in her gift to open up a more creative and human space in and around her own immediate working community. They had even won a marketing industry award; their innovative work seemed to be appreciated much more in this arena than within Rush Corp itself. 'Eventually, they'll catch up with me,' she found herself saying to Sam over coffee. 'But so far, I've got away with it.' 'Maybe that's because, in spite of themselves, you are giving them what they need', Sam responded.*

Georgina and Sam aren't unique; there are countless others out there like them who recognise that learning and productivity in organisations is a human affair, whose conditions are being progressively squeezed by the outputs of a system that does not question its assumptions enough. As a colleague of ours put it recently, there is a kind of 'digital Taylorism' taking over many industries. So, on this, if we are to spell it out, what is our incitement to you to start and to stop doing, on the basis of what we are advocating?

➤ Incitement to stop:

Seeing learning and artful human expression as a peripheral thing to work, like a course you may or may not go on, or as a homogenous thing that all people need to understand in the same way, according to certain abstract models and theories written by people who tend to be (ironically exactly what we are!): white, middle class, middle-aged men.

➤ Incitement to start:

Recognising what your own unique practice is, cherish it in yourself and others, see it as an artful expression of how you show up, how you do relationships, and find a community that provides you with the psychological safety to take some risks; to put your own learning at the heart of what you do. We encourage you to humanise the workplace around you and put your own learning, and that of others, with all its complex and creative twists and turns, at the heart of things, for your own good, and that of organisations and a world in need of a better quality of life.

## THE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE-BASED LEARNING

In this section, we talk about how we went about our project and who was involved. In essence, we just involved people in lots of conversations. An experienced coach and facilitator lamented the fact that although this stuff was really important, they could not talk about it directly with their clients. There was a common theme that conversations with clients about practice and artfulness took trust and time if they were to be had at all. Partly this is the reason why people kept coming back to these forums, to talk about and share their experiences. And in all those conversations things have changed, but not in a barricade storming way that most pamphleteers hope for.

The roots of this practice-based learning project grew in a number of micro-communities in and around Mayvin. In outlining what we did we hope that this gives you the confidence to set up your own groups and conversations be it face to face or online.

It is worth noting who and where these communities were; this is important because in our view PBL is, or should be, highly contextual. It is based on a premise that is opposite to a classic understanding of what learning is. Classic understanding sees learning as universal (i.e. it remains agnostic to its setting) and also it is done in a place removed from the action, i.e. in a classroom).

In our view, proper learning takes place in a way that is highly contextual and best done in the grain of the work. This gives us a problem in relation to theorising what PBL is; it has multiple flavours depending on where it is done. In fact, it is to a certain extent indeterminable what 'it' is because the 'it' changes with the 'where' and the 'who'. Of course, we can discern common patterns, and encourage mutual habits. That indeed is our intent here. But it is also our intent here is to show the communities in order to reveal

the 'it'. In that case, making sense of practice-based learning is often done in reverse to the way learning is usually configured in traditional settings: it starts with who is doing and then sense-making follows.

### The Mayvin Practice Group

In October 2018, we convened the Mayvin Practice Group (MPG) as a meeting place between practice development across our community of L & OD practitioners and volunteers from our wider client base. The aim was to offer people:



- A safe space to develop their practice with like-minded practitioners
- Added breadth and depth to their knowledge and to the opportunity to practice their skills
- A self-managed approach to learning combined with the support and challenge of formal supervision

The idea was to offer a combination of personal practice supervision, group development work and action research about what constitutes excellent practice development in L & OD right now. It was an ambitious agenda. An interesting and varied group of ten came together, mostly experienced L & OD practitioners, sole traders – some of whom were associates of Mayvin (we have an explicit intention to offer our associates the added value of opportunities for their own development rather than maintaining a traditional consultancy 'transactional relationship'), internal L & OD people in organisations like Kingfisher Group, Bloomberg, B&CE and the Department for Transport. The main structure of the group was small group/big group such as the small

groups were trios that self-organised meeting (mostly virtually) as a regular reflection space and the big group consisting of these trios coming together for a day to reflect on aspects of learning that was both coming up in the trios and being fed in via the facilitator. The big group met four times in total between October 2018 and June 2019.

### Government Departments in the UK Civil Service

In the meantime, at about the same time the big group started to meet, Mayvin was commissioned to support some work in a key government department in readiness for EU 'no deal' exit in March 2019. Working with the internal OD team, we were entrusted to develop a process of reflection and learning that would support leaders to maintain focus and resilience during a challenging time. The learning that was emerging in the MPG space fed into this work and vice versa. The two communities were barely aware that what they were doing was in parallel, albeit in very different settings. We acted as a kind of conduit between the two, taking the experience from one setting and testing it in the other and vice versa.



Whilst this work was progressing, we were also involved in other forums across the Civil Service, in which the discussions of learning were taking place. These also fed into the stream of learning. Indeed, what we started to notice was a wider conversation about learning 'close to the grain of the work' taking place, partly facilitated by the urgency of 'no deal' Brexit planning and the requirement to both learn at pace whilst also being respectful of people's wellbeing and relationships. It was the genuine intent to learn combined with the urgency of ongoing work and the lack of space for reflection that this engendered that provided the perfect conditions for questions about practice-based learning.

## Other Settings

Inquiry about learning ‘close to the grain’ leaked into other forums and groups during the life of this intuitive. For example, a regular practice supervision group called the ALFA group, (which stood for Action Learning Facilitator Accreditation) that several Mayvin consultants were members of, cottoned on to the PBL question and contributed their views. It also started to show up at the regular Mayvin Community Events, and also at AMED writers events hosted at the University of Chichester. All of these varied forums had their own context and ‘spin’ on the question, but at the core was the same organising principle, which was best summed up by the question: ‘how do we learn as close to the grain of our practice as possible?’



## The artful start the week calls

We also started a regular monthly virtual meeting on a Monday morning, open to anyone, to incite an artful start to the week. These drop-in virtual meetings encourage people to pause before they dive into the organisation maelstrom and pause to breathe and reflect together on our fundamentally artful experience. We share pictures, ideas, poems and stories, that feel relevant to our experience of crafting a more human engagement within our working environment.

## Mayvin Community Event / 28th Sept 2019

Sometimes it is really nice to be a participant of a workshop, one sees it so differently from running one. So, it was on Thursday evening on the top floor of the Whitechapel Gallery in London. James was with Sophie Shaw, an arts interpretation specialist, and Sandi Drewett, Director of Workforce and Organisational Development at Moorfields Eye Hospital NHS Foundation Trust, running a session on artful approaches to organisational change. For me there was a sense of ‘hyper observing’, thinking – what would I do, how am I sensing this right now. There we were moving around the room creating our own little works of art and then coming together in small groups to curate our wonderings and stories. In my group sitting in a huddle on wooden chairs similar to what I remember at school we became utterly immersed. As the art emerged (both individually and as a group), we talked about how we made sense of it and why things were important to us. It was as though we talked through the art. This meant things that would be difficult to talk about became more natural. For example, I started talking about the colour purple, the love for my wife Linda and the energy I try to put in to paying attention to the here and now – to sense what is going on in the moment. And it is this that brings me to my next observation. James, Sandi, Sophie and others from Mayvin were standing at tall shiny metal tables talking and doing their own thing. The backdrop of the large rooftop windows and standing at those tables created a barrier, I sensed a differential in power – were we being watched? In our plenary session, I asked a question about this, something along the lines of ‘does art exist in a context of fluid meta enablers and constraints, in short, is there a ‘nestedness’ of artfulness that we need to be aware of?’ OK, I know that I don’t ask straightforward questions but that is just me. What I was pointing to were those power relationships that created the conditions for us to create. And, one step further, what were the power relations that enabled those meta conditions? Artfulness is not value or power free. What I became excited about was the ability to use art as a means by which we were playing and giving voice to everyday organisational features.

## Rob and James

Together we have the honour of being named on the HR Most Influential Thinkers list 2019, following a number of joint projects which challenge the traditional building blocks of organisation development, including across the UK Civil Service.

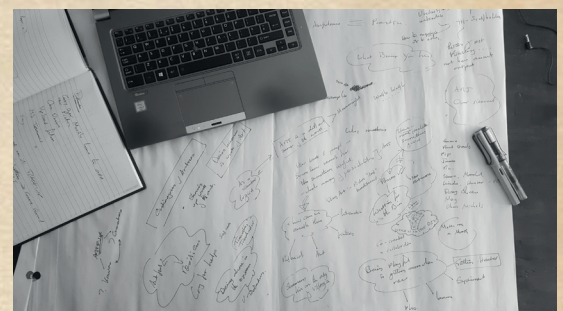
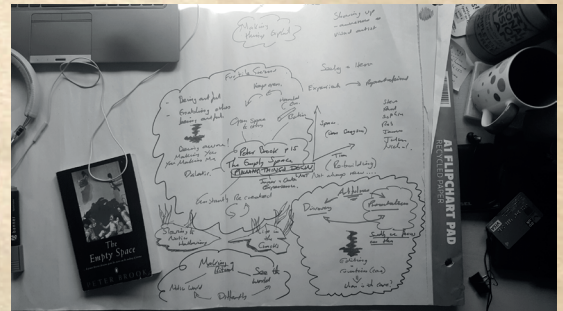
The research in this pamphlet has been organised to a great extent around the working relationship that we the authors have been developing, exploring our own practice with each other.



Our inquiry was conducted during long walks along the coast, the countryside, river footpaths and even the gardens of a palace. In these places, we reflected upon our own experiences asking open searching questions of each other. We chose this method because we are both keen walkers and ‘walking and talking’ is something of a practice, a method of inquiry, for us. In terms of exploration, John Heron (Heron 1996, p.50) draws on Nietzsche’s distinction between the Apollonian and Dionysian, the former dwelling on the rational, planned and controlled. Our approach tended towards the later: emerging from within the lived experience, which can be messy and unpredictable, and acknowledges the way that we learn is not in straight lines but following a: ‘more imaginal, expressive, spiralling, diffuse, impromptu and tacit approach to the interplay between making sense and action’. (Heron, 1996, p.50).

### The challenge of making sense close to the grain of practice

This project is challenging because it has a ‘chicken and egg’ quality to it. In practice, it starts in conversation between the two of us, about our own practices, and then we widen the circle in further conversations to see how it resonates in the settings we mentioned above. It means we don’t start out with a clear definition (although we may get there) because this can have the unwanted consequence of closing down the opportunity for others to define it in their own terms, and also sets us up potentially as ‘experts’. We aim to avoid privileging our definitions over diverse, lived experience. In the words of Raymond Williams, ‘the strongest barrier to the recognition of human ... activity is this immediate and regular conversion of experience into finished products’ (Williams 1977, p.128). Antonio Strati, who has invested much attention into practice-based learning, explained that: ‘The scholar’s attention thus shifts to the specific differences among people at work (Strati, 2007). We see this as a warning to focus on the reflexive processes of understanding and development, rather than categories that separate.



This means that as people join the conversation, it changes and we the authors (deliberately) lose control of it and become followers of it ourselves, as well as co-leaders and co-conveners, facilitating and shaping without aiming to dictate the course. In these early formative steps, we aim to explore our own practices in terms of 1) what it says about our practice; and 2) our reflexive approach of working together. The opportunity and the challenge of this method of inquiry is that it is open to growth and change as people join the conversation. Writing this paper and inviting you, the reader here, into the conversation is another example of such facilitation. In other words, how our Dionysian approach can invite others to do likewise.

You might ask, how is such an invitation relevant to what it is you are inquiring about? Wouldn’t it be simpler just to define it? Yes, it might but we would prefer to answer in a way that addresses the type of knowledge development territory we think we are in, in what can be termed *Metis*, a practical cunning wisdom (Baumard, 1999; DeCerteau, 1984; Detienne & Vernant, 1991; Letiche & Statler, 2005). In this web-driven, complex age, conversations are cyclical and evolutionary and not to be controlled by any centre. In short, we want to remain as open as possible to the lived experience of others and acknowledge and support the diverse ways they might define their own practice-based learning.

We want to acknowledge the many flavours of practice-based learning that are and have been theorised, including action learning (Revans, 1979) and self-managed learning (Cunningham, 1999). But we do this without putting the cart of practice before the horse of theory. Above all, we want to pay attention to the specific and contextual nature that often sits behind such approaches. This ‘practical knowing’ (J. Heron & Reason, 2008) is what counts, in the places we find ourselves, particularly as the complex nature of experience that cannot be easily or even usefully abstracted in a world that moves on so quickly.

And now you are part of that fast-moving conversation too.



## OTHER PROJECTS

If you have been intrigued by the ideas here, you might like to dip into some of our other projects:

Our book *Organisation Development: A Bold Explorer's Guide*  
from Libri Publishing (Traeger & Warwick, 2018)

The accompanying podcast, available at Castbox at <https://bit.ly/2YsSUI1>

Or just dip into the Mayvin resources and blog at [mayvin.co.uk](http://mayvin.co.uk)

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Most of the words that you have read are ours. The spaces between the words are the work of Lee Shearman and Pip Rowson who took our vague ideas of the pamphlet and made them real, and Ian Gorsuch and Ben Murphy at the University of Chichester Print Shop who printed them. We would also like to thank all those that turned up, got involved and artfully created.

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