

Organising and managing across boundaries



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Guest Editors: Chris Blanter and Tom Boydell

This is an experimental edition, likely to evolve over the coming weeks

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Cover illustration: Original quotation – 'Two monologues don't make a dialogue' – Jeff Daly, from an original photograph by Mark Cardwell, composed by Chris Blanter, December 2002.

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David McAra

Working across boundaries

David has a dream

David McAra



To make some cross-boundary working happen, the editorial team planned a 'Gathering' for September, so I thought it would be interesting to try to join up some of the LinkedIn groups I follow. I posted a question in the AMED group ("How should we describe the radical re-think we need about organising?") and 'shared' it across a number of other groups under the heading: "... wondering about synergy." There were a number of interesting responses though I can't really claim they amounted to much in the way of synergy.

Louie Gardiner was kind enough to review my draft and I found her comments helpful so have included them in the blue panels.

It's a bit presumptuous of me, I know, to reference Dr King in my title but I believe that the transformation of society is necessary and possible.

- *Necessary ... because our existing models of organising are not sustainable and cause too much suffering*
- *Possible ... if we can unlock the synergy between the many wonderful and creative ideas which are currently on the loose.*

The problems of society are profound and complex. How shall we learn to adopt sustainable lifestyles? How shall we educate the young? How shall we take care of our elderly? How shall we reconcile strident adversarial ideologies? ... or even moderately conflicting short term interests?

According to Complex Adaptive Systems theory, change happens through local to local interactions i.e. local to us as individuals rather than thinking about local in terms of geographical place. We create patterns through our exchanges with those in our realms. Like Glenda Eoyang, I suggest that we need to find new ways of seeing to shift our understanding what is going on – when this happens, the next 'now what?' becomes self-evident.... So in essence, it is always about emergence and awareness of emergence; integrating and adapting what we do as each new moment arises. In a complex, uncertain, world and an unknowable future, we can never know what we will need to know to cope, ahead of time. We only come to know it in retrospect!!! So – in agreement with Eoyang – I believe that all we can do is grow our Adaptive Capacity.

No central body, however wise and well-intentioned, will ever be able to sort it out. We must learn new ways of working together, or slide into chaos.

Ah! Chaos!

I'm not very optimistic about our capacity to learn as individuals, never mind as a society. So perhaps the slide into chaos is inevitable. Now ... the concept of chaos (in my layman's understanding) offers the possibility of the emergence of a new order.

Perhaps we can slide through - or with - chaos. I understand that the prospect of emergence is enhanced by optimising three aspects of the chaotic brew:

- The **diversity** of the ingredients – because an understanding of the challenges and the opportunities is not accessible to any one person or group, but is scattered through many minds in our infinitely varied ways of seeing the world

Eoyang would call this condition 'Container' – i.e. similarities that bring and hold agents or agencies together. These can be physical, perceptual, metaphysical etc and are often overlapping and massively entangled.

Eoyang in her PhD research identified 3 pattern-influencing conditions CDE: Differences – that hold the potential for change to occur

- The **connectedness** of the ingredients. For emergence to occur, the scattered pieces of knowledge must be able to find each other, to cohere – if momentarily, to form a new picture which we will only be able to see when we can all see it

- The **quality** of the connections – so insights can be perceived through the noise.

Again Eoyang would speak of 'Exchanges' – which is more about the channel across which 'differences' can pass

“... synergy between the many wonderful and creative ideas ...”

For something productive to arise, the three conditions CDE need to be 'coherent'. A great HSD (Human Systems Dynamics) model that conveys this without needing to understand the underpinning science is the STAR

*S = balance of **similarities** and differences - Diversity*

*T = effective balance and quality of **talking** and listening (Exchanges)*

*A = **Authentic** work = **action** i.e. a needed, useful task / focus of activity (container)*

*R = **Reason** for being – intention/ purpose (Container)*

If these are not in place / balance / coherent then the group of people (agents) will not be generative. This can help to understand why stuff simply does not start, continue or regenerate.

To try and make some cross-boundary working happen, the e-O&P editorial team planned a 'Gathering' for

11 September, so I thought it would be interesting to try to join up some of the LinkedIn groups I follow. I posted a question in the AMED group (“How should we describe the radical re-think we need about organising?”) and ‘shared’ it across a number of other groups under the heading: “... wondering about synergy.”

A reasonable number of responses appeared in four of the groups (see table below) but there seemed to be more speaking than listening and more energy for introducing solutions to cross-boundary working than inquiry and open sharing of experience and triumphs and disappointments.

Perhaps I am naive to hope for anything else from a networking social media site. It felt like a party with everyone constantly scanning for someone more interesting to speak to. It is an incredibly crowded party, after all. Social media has infinite diversity and connectedness. How can we improve the signal quality and enable more fruitful dialogue?

Looking at Eoyang’s criteria, presented by Louie, above, I think we need to be building a container.

The responsive groups

The blue link in the group name will take you to the relevant LinkedIn pages.

Link to group discussion topics	AMED	Great Insiders	Unreasonable Learners	Lancaster University MAMLL,	Totals
Group’s area of interest	Management education and development	Mutual support for internal consultants	New thinking about gov’t and business	Management learning and leadership	Connections across boundaries
Comments	23	13	15	10	61
Contributors	9	5	6	4	24

All these groups share some appreciation for the problems with hierarchies and the value of cross-boundary working. While agendas are subtly different, I feel we are all pulling in more or less the same direction.

I left out a group which didn’t seem to recognise the collaborative spirit of inquiry I was hoping for. There was only one response: “the <group> virtually always has 'Joined up Thinking' as a way of life, with masses of accredited positive outcomes and not the average 70% failure rates that plague all the non-joined up thinking projects”.

Any suggestions for further experimentation or exploration will be greatly appreciated. Please post your thoughts [here](#), or contact me directly: david.mcara@petrotechnics.com.

About the author

David McAra is a member of AMED Council and of the e-O&P editorial board.

A note about inter-logics



We are specialists in learning and development – with particular emphasis on collaborative management and organisational learning. We have extensive experience in public, governmental and commercial sectors and are pioneers of effective methodologies for enabling ‘integration’, ‘co-production’, multi-stakeholder working and resolving ‘wicked problems’.

Our registered office is in S. Yorkshire with a satellite office in Dumfries & Galloway we have extensive UK and international experience.

Directors and associates are renowned practitioners and authors (Pedler, Burgoyne & Boydell) of seminal works on organisational learning and self development.

Contact Chris Blantern or Tom Boydell: cblantern@inter-logics.net or tboydell@inter-logics.net

A note about AMED



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

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

At AMED, we strive to benefit our members and the wider society. Exclusive Member benefits include excellent professional indemnity cover, free copies of the quarterly journal *e-O&P*, and discounted fees for participation in a range of face-to-face events, special interest groups, and our interactive website. We aim to build on our three cornerstones of **knowledge**, **innovation** and **networking** in the digital age. Wherever we can, AMED Members, Networkers and Guests seek to work with likeminded individuals and organisations, to generate synergy and critical mass for change.

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