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Creative Collaboration: A Partial Primer for the Social Intellect

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FIELD NOTES

Creative Collaboration: A Partial Primer for the Social IntellectFELICE S. WYNDHAM¹**Field journal excerpt 1-2 November 2001, Sierra Tarahumara, Mexico²**

Catalina invited me to stay at her house for the Day of the Dead as she prepared *tesgüino* and killed two chickens for her husband who died six years ago. She lives with several teenaged Rarámuri girls from the high school: Tonita, Ribechi, Margarita, and Rosa. It was my impression that Catalina has taken on the role of protector for adolescent girls. They clearly love her and she them.

They worked together making corn tortillas. They went through huge bowls of dough in a seamlessly coordinated fashion, mushrooming round bubbles of dough off of the main mass and forming them into squashed spheres, taking these up and patting them into the desired flat shape while carefully assuring their perfect roundness by finger-tipping around the edges every several pats, walking these over to the wood stove (an oil drum, cut in half and upended with a pipe hole punched in) and composing them on the hot surface. A cast aluminum tortilla press was also in action, with two round plastic liners to keep the dough from sticking. A firm touch of a hand on a cooking tortilla told them whether it was ready to be turned, moved, or taken off the stove and flipped into a woven *sotol* basket lined with *maseca* papers. What was remarkable to me was that this was not assembly line production but a sophisticated coordination of individual action such that there seemed to be but one mind, one purpose. Each woman wove in and out of the tortilla traffic, now at one task, then another, taking up where another had just left off without a blink.

My attempts to synchronize with them were clumsy. I kept seeming to be in the way, or off-timed such that I found myself waiting for an available spot on the stove only to have a more efficient Rosa or Margarita snake in and pop a raw tortilla on the next open spot. I didn't know the rules or the rhythm. My first corn tortilla was normal sized, about six inches in diameter, and then I realized every one else was patting theirs at 3 or 4 inches, especially for the dead to eat. That one ended up in the compost bucket. I managed to get a good line of tortillas for the dead going, though I was helping at the periphery of the steady whirl, doing all the steps myself instead of coordinating with the complex dance the others were in. Catalina arranged the cooked tortillas in piles of three. As she was giving the fiesta for a man, her husband, there was a tortilla for each of his three souls. A woman, having four souls, would receive them in piles of four.

From an outsider's perspective, and from what I imagined to be the men's perspective as they sat playing the guitar, eating cake, drinking strawberry soda pop and *pisto* (cane liquor), it looked like the women of the house were simply, making tortillas. It wasn't until I tried to join in that the complex coordination required for what they were doing became apparent. I found it mentally tiring, like driving in fast freeway traffic. I thought about how one would go about learning to coordinate like that. I exited after an hour or so, excusing myself once the full moon came up over the cliff enough to see my way down the rocky slope to the candlelit church below where the *matachines* were dancing their way into the night punctuated by the coyote cries of the dance leaders.

In the enculturation system I grew up in we are ruthlessly trained to be individuals. To go away, alone, and find or create something novel then return and present it to an audience for judgment, to be ignored or rewarded. So when I find myself among people who are highly skilled at collaboration, who have a honed awareness of the rhythms

needed to work together, drink together, dance together, think together, I feel in dire need of a remedial course in how to be a social animal. Edward Hall said:

we in the West have this notion that each of us is all by himself in this world—that behavior is

¹ University of Georgia, Department of Anthropology. With many thanks to Eric Jones who reviewed and commented on this essay and to H. E. Kuchka for the impetus to write it.

² All names of individuals have been changed.

something that originates inside the skin, isolated from the outside world and from other human beings. Nothing could be farther from the truth. (Hall 1983:162)

Unfortunately, in academia this folk belief still holds sway, especially in socio-cultural anthropology, where it is rare to find collective work done by dynamic groups of intellectuals (for an insightful account of an exception, see Bateson 1991). We are, for the most part, still in the mode of adversarial advance; a kind of intellectual survival of the fittest. But dog-eat-dog may not be the best way to enhance understanding. In some areas of our cultural sphere formal collaboration has always been *de rigueur*: for example, in ballet, on construction sites, among musical groups and during naval navigation. In some restricted spheres such as the business world there have been explicit attempts to codify rules for mutual aid and fostering productive group dynamics (see de Bono 1990a and 1990b for examples of great utility to social intellectuals). For our personal work and advancement and for the discipline as a whole it behooves us to identify and implement the principles of creative collaboration. Development of the practice and

development of the practitioner must go hand in hand (Figure 1).

Over the past few years I have been fortunate to be a part of a study group on Information Ecology and Human Ecosystems, the “Human Ecosystems Kuchka.” We have attempted creative collaboration, and the skills required are not that far removed from the skills I observed in the tortilla-making Rarámuri household described above. We have matured dramatically in our abilities to work productively and creatively together, partly because we have tried to be explicit and self-aware of the techniques and processes needed for true collaboration. True collaboration emerges out of complex interaction such that the product is more than the sum of the pieces that contributed. Threads of individual contributions may be recognizable but they only make sense in light of the whole. The Kuchka met for a weekend retreat not long after the Day of the Dead. We talked about how we were getting better at interacting productively, and I took notes so as to put this piece together. I briefly outline below some of the techniques, processes and insights that we have applied as our study group has worked together over the years.³

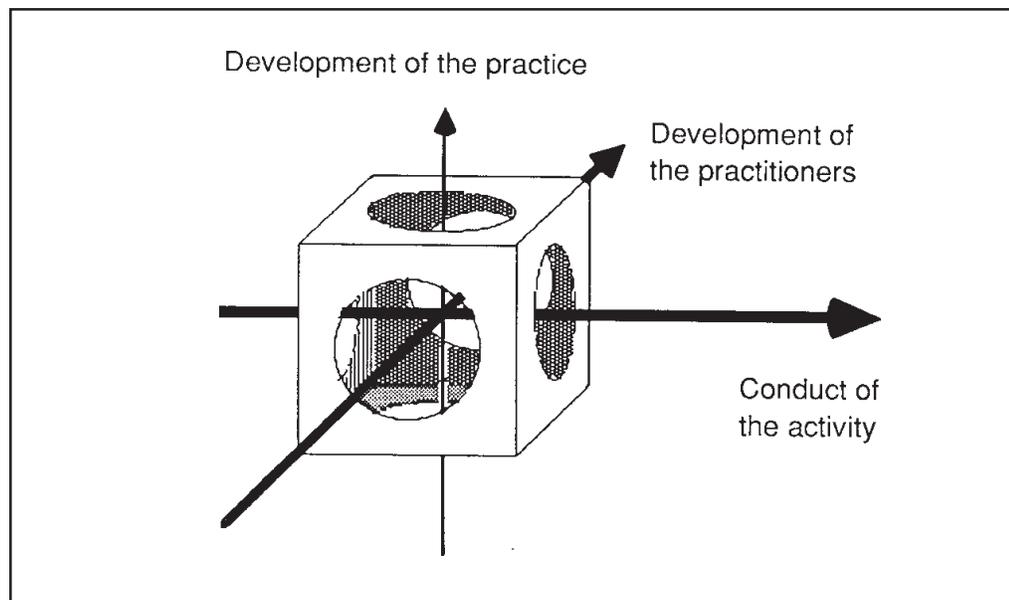


FIGURE 1. DEVELOPMENT OF PRACTICE AS A SYNERGISTIC PROCESS (HUTCHINS 1996).

³Note that many of the techniques described here are also useful in the classroom.

Insist on space and time for interaction

This seems obvious but is essential. Blocks of unencumbered time should be allotted for interaction, with as little distraction and as few constraints as possible. Pleasant venues for retreats, such as Florida beaches or Austrian castles help too. For large projects several days at a time might be necessary. The time frame for the group's work together should be explicit—especially if the group is to be involved in a trans-generational project, in which case mentoring and leadership skills are necessary sub-themes to whatever topic is at hand.

Alternification and brainstorming

Alternification provokes all possibilities or answers to questions posed. It is part of lateral thinking, involving creative dissolution of recognized or unrecognized barriers and taboos. The process of alternification and brainstorming requires that you not make initial judgements about utterances or contributions. Get all the thoughts and ideas down, then edit. Sometimes crazy sounding ideas are the ones that persist, or through later challenges, lead to fresh insight. Encourage the wildest possible ideas. One of the problems with group work is that of divergent personalities and diverse ways of thinking and working. However, what may be considered a liability in some settings can become a strength, with the recognition that it is beneficial for different people to play different roles or wear different 'hats' (see de Bono 1990b and Appendix H. E. Kuchka 2001). Don't be alarmed if the atmosphere becomes slightly manic. One person may seek to guide interactions (the 'blue hat'), another express emotional opinions (the 'red hat'), and still another may voice only positive encouragement (the 'yellow hat'). This method allows the group to avoid a culturally learned tendency to automatically 'black hat' other peoples' contributions—search for the flaw in logic, take a defensive stance, be negative. The 'black hat' can restrict creative flow of ideas, but once recognized can be useful. When a contribution seems black hat, interpret it as a possible alternification instead in order to assess its place in the discussion. This approach sidesteps common distractions such as ego battles, sulking and hurt feelings. All mem-

bers of the working group should be encouraged to participate—the more views the better (though for this phase groups under 10 members work best). Build on others' ideas. Don't worry about raw contributions or unpolished thoughts, just get it out there so it can be worked with. Encourage humor in all phases of the process.

Setting goals

Set goals early for group interactions and refine and modify them as you go along. Some goals will be short term, others long term, some detailed and others abstract. Note them all and periodically return to them to compare desired process and results with what actually emerges. Creative collaboration, when successful, yields multitudes of possibilities. Be prepared to reduce the scope of the planned project. The discipline of distilling creative bounty into a coherent product is of critical importance, and can only be achieved by judicious selection of which goals to pursue. The Kuchka's recent experience was that it was necessary to drastically reduce our expected output in order to get a foot in the door towards completing it. A planned manuscript had loomed large in our imaginations—each chapter at least fifty pages long to accommodate all the pieces we envisioned. It was daunting in its scope and depth. The job became much more manageable, however, once we re-envisioned the manuscript (following the advice of Eugene Odum, through Charles Peters) as a slim, poetic work, each chapter succinct and of narrow scope—a few pages at most. Though the outcome will probably be neither a tome nor a slip of poetry, it was helpful to start small. Reducing goals allows the group more successes than failures. Also, a group that has a long-term commitment to work together will be able to expand the scope of a project later and can use the leftover material as a source of continuity for further interactions down the line.

Externalization

It is usually best to appoint someone as recorder/note-taker. This job can rotate if the group is working together for long periods and if possible have two recorders at a time so as to later cross-check the output. This allows the note-tak-

ers to participate and not worry that something is being missed. While one person will catch most of what is discussed, two people will catch almost everything. During active brainstorming it helps to have reams or rolls of big-sized paper and plenty of pens at hand. Participants should feel free to jump in and sketch, draw or write the ideas circulating in conversation. Graphic models are important conceptual input and output, as they encourage holistic thinking and often juxtapose ideas that wouldn't otherwise be seen together. Unlike text, large graphic depictions of the concepts and problems at hand can be focused on and manipulated by the whole group at the same time. It helps to develop common graphic conventions and reading skills within the group. Put these graphics, along with other interesting items, up on the walls to trigger new ideas or remind group members of important concepts that should be included in the task at hand. The Kuchka's recent retreat was attended by Last Bite Barbie, a (University of Georgia) Dawgs cheerleading doll who attacked when overly sexist remarks were made or relevant gender issues were being overlooked in our discussion of what makes human ecosystems tick. The very process of group thinking is a process of externalizing cognition that allows for long-term enhanced collective memory—pieces of the whole are stored in multiple places/multiple minds and so are less likely to be lost or overlooked in the long run.

Inter-personal dynamics

Building trust and respect among members is essential to enabling the process of creative collaboration. This may take months or years, but it is invaluable for a long-term study group. When the process is constructed correctly, the outcome exceeds individual expectations, and will save time in the long run. All participants should:

watch and occasionally encourage the individual talent of each member of the group to grow. Also needed is the trust to permit each to do his or her own thinking. This means that we strive to bring out the best in each other and to somehow allow the rhythm of the group to establish itself and avoid at all costs the imposition of the artificial rhythm of a fixed agenda. (Hall 1983:166)

Avoid ranking or judging the merit of the members of the group by reminders that each has something unique and valuable to contribute. Rotate leadership roles while interacting. Credit others in the group to include them in the process of your idea or point you are making; build on other people's ideas rather than focusing on yourself and your personal contribution (e.g. "As you mentioned earlier . . ." instead of "As I've said before . . ."). Seek out participation from researchers with diverse intellectual proclivities, disciplinary affiliations and cultural backgrounds. This helps in the identification of understated, unstated or unsuspected underlying assumptions and taboos (Longino 1990).

As described earlier, the six thinking hats method has been an important tool in the Kuchka's inter-personal and personal maturation (see de Bono 1990b). The hats are designed to enable constructive thinking in multiple modes so as to avoid entrenched patterns of argument. For example, the idea of the black hat has helped bring our thoughts from a knee-jerk response into consciousness, and thus allowed us to either check those ideas or file them away for later editing, without interrupting creative flow. The key to the hats is that you are forced to see yourself in relation to the process in which you are involved, and thus loosen the inhibiting grip of egocentrism.

One of the advantages of group work is that not everybody has to be "on" at the same time all the time. The group finds its own rhythm, with spurts of energy and input from different people in different areas at certain times. Practice feeling comfortable with taking on different roles—sometimes the observer, the leader, or even checking out altogether. The group momentum will carry on and you can join in again later. And of course take frequent, refreshing breaks.

Conclusion

The advantages of collective cognition, creative collaboration, group work, or "clusters of interacting individuals" as Mead (1964) describes it, are most immediately obvious to those who have participated in them. It is a sort of wonderment to see a product with no one identifiable author and

to know that you had a part in the interaction from which it emerged. There are many kinds of collaboration, from the high-competence artisanal coordination of women preparing food together to the intellectual interactions that produce new ideas and juxtapose old ones. What they have in common is commitment to collective expression. A group that works well together can simply get more creative work done than the sum of individual contributions, whether we are talking of theory, manuscripts, or tortillas for the dead.

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