Draw Your Own Conclusions:

Provocations from a creative business thinker

by Robert Poynton

with Introduction by Christopher Riley

Introduction
By Chris Riley

Robert lives in rural Spain, near Avila, off the grid. You may think that off the grid is some kind of metaphor for his connection to contemporary thought in business. Maybe "off the grid" is about escapism or retreat? Far from it.

In Robert's case, "off the grid" is an integral part of his life-long examination of the one thing we do too little of in business: thinking. Off the grid means off the tram-lines of conventional thought. It means off the grid of conventional perceptions, processes and inquiry in business. If it is a metaphor it is one that alludes to the perennial problem of conformist thinking. In Robert's world, daily life offers insight into corporate life. And, I am sure, vice versa.

One part of his life is in rural Spain, an old economy infused both with diversity (a guitarist from Brazilian parentage is one example) and innovation (Robert's wife, Bea, is reinventing agriculture as a regenerative activity). Another part of his life is caught between the dreamy spires of old Oxford and the gleaming modernism of a new business school. In both places the tension between the old and new is manifest. In both places that tension reveals the value of both old and new.

Being off the grid means Robert can reimagine the ways we think. His obsession, like many innovators, comes from a sense of discomfort. He has had an intuitive feeling that the way we process information (or the way we seek inspiration) in the corporate world is broken.

Why such discomfort? Robert's roots are in one of the most creative businesses in the world, advertising's BBH, and his more recent activities are with the On Your Feet improv collective and the academia of Oxford University. He has

discovered the almost unlimited potential of improvisation as a means of discovery and the discipline of academic rigor as a means of inquiry. The discipline of improv is to create generative rules, the use of which opens up individual creativity within the context of strong relational bonds. Surely the most compelling aspect of improv is the speed and brilliance with which people cohere as a group to invent new things. The discipline of academic study is of skepticism, of testing out ideas, of cross referencing and being precise. The two are orthogonal partners yet they sit within Robert like rods of catalytic fuel. No wonder the discomfort. He sees how bland the thinking can be in businesses with linear habits and formulaic processes. Oh yes, and how ineffective.

Within these short, illuminating essays Robert shares in all three modes: (1) off the grid, (2) between the dreamy spires and gleaming towers and (3) improv. The result is a selection of thoughts that work as oblique strategies. The idea seems to be that one half of the improvisation is on the page and you, the reader, hold the other half.

No doubt each of us will have very different reflections and reactions based on any given story. I would hope so. But, as is always the case with Robert's work, there is more to this than meets the eye. As soon as you dip into either or all of his worlds you have an inevitable awakening. Maybe there is a better way of thinking. Maybe I can be inspired by the problem-solving in a distant part of rural Spain. Or, as I have, a question: are we limiting the possibilities of business to change the world by limiting ourselves to the machinations of recent business school memes?

Maybe the cultural anthropologists and big data evangelists are only a small component of human knowledge. Maybe, just maybe, the wisdom of older times, of rural life, of dreamy, academic spires unhindered by the drive for corporate money, holds the key to how we relate to the

new, the innovative, the disruptive and the plain confusion of modern markets.

Peter Schwartz, the eminent strategist and author of The Art of the Long View, once said to me, "The more we become digital the closer to analog we get." In Robert's consideration of everything from the construction of conversations to the value of small town networks, we see that thread.

It may very well be that what we need to discover—as captains and navigators of industry— is the perfect humanity of what business has become. Humans are not a resource, they are not capital, they are not organizational charts and 360 degree reviews. Customers are not data and employees are not overhead. Markets turn out to be conversations, exactly as predicted in the Cluetrain Manifesto at the turn of the millennium.

The conversations we have, even when global, are not really different from those in the Creative Tapas of a small market town in Spain. In fact, as Robert illustrates, the language of that town, the Castilian language, has itself evolved to enable a sophisticated understanding of social order and community transactions. The football team you support is referred to as being permanent, your marriage is not.

In his association with Oxford University's Green Templeton College, Robert spikes the language of business schools with the language of philosophy, agrarian culture and a capacity to see patterns beyond immediate analysis. He improvises with intellectual analysis as he does in life. It is not without its discomfort and bad days, it is not an idyl he has created. But it is a fresh way of tackling a perennial problem: How can businesses be smart? Not just spreadsheet exploitative smart, but human smart.The kind of smart that transforms businesses from organizations whose sole mode is extraction and exploitation into

organizations that nourish their people, the world, the market, and provide the kind of change we so obviously need. This will come from learning in ways new to business and opening minds to the possibilities of improvised group behavior, openness to old ways, and the need to spend time thinking together.

As I read these pieces, I envied Robert his location in time, space and thought. Then I caught myself thinking we can all make changes. We can change the pace of what we do, gain insight from the real world, unhook from the immediate and dwell on the long view. We can all do this. We can all learn to improvise, listen and expand the time we have to think. We can all see the groups we live and work among as collectively imaginative, innovative or simply interesting. It is just that some people, like Robert, have the courage to actually do it.

CONTENTS

CONTENTS (continued)

The Copenhagen interpretation

posted on September 12, 2011

In July, we were in Copenhagen. We were with my friend Helene Simonsen at one of the open-air jazz concerts when she bumped into someone she knew. I remember he was wearing some very cool glasses and looked like a bit of a boffin.

My new found friend asked me how I knew Helene and I sketched out a connection that led from Oxford, via Peter Hanke and his work with conducting and leadership, to an Arts and Leadership conference at Bramstrup and thus to Helene. I also mentioned my own work with improvisation.

This struck a chord. It turned out that my un-named friend worked for IBM and he started talking about 'Agile Project Management' and 'Scrum'. I remember finding it a bit uncomfortable because Helene hadn't actually introduced me (I later discovered this was because she couldn't remember his name).

But what he was saying was fascinating. It struck me how the improvisational practices seemed to be almost designed into the structure of the way of working he was talking about. Later that day I checked out 'Agile Project Management' and 'Scrum' on the web. It wasn't as interesting as what he had said, but still provided some food for thought.

A few days later we were in Henne Strand in Jutland, out for a long walk on a wild and windswept beach. My

unconscious mind had obviously been snacking on all of this because I suddenly realised there is a huge hole in the work I have been doing. I love it when something becomes clear that has been in plain sight all along. I enjoy the feeling of "how could I have been so stupid?" (quite easily is probably the answer).

So, as a result of this fabulously serendipitous and unlikely sequence of events with a man with no name in a square in Copenhagen I can see that I have, for about a decade now, leaped straight to behaviour. There's nothing wrong with running workshops that aim to help people become more adaptable by adopting improv practices, but it would be an awful lot easier if you actually designed the organisation or team in such a way as to promote that behaviour in the first place.

So what I am interested in now, and what I am going to spend some time working on and thinking about is how to design for improv, as it were, in both process and structure. Because process, being time based, is really narrative, which means that all the story tools and frameworks and ideas could fit there. And improv forms have micro and macro structure, as does a show and the theatre itself. And one could create feedback loops between all of this so that the design of structure and process to promote improvised, agile, creative behaviour could yield changes to the structure and process so as to create more chance of yet more of the same kind of behaviour, and so on.

I am very excited about all this. It feels like it could give my work a whole new lease of life, which is very timely. I am going to call it the Copenhagen Interpretation, in homage to Nils Bohr and Werner Heisenberg, whose interpretation of quantum physics also bears the name of a city that is, apparently, the only one in the world with too many bicycles.

How to cultivate conversation

posted on November 27, 2011

Recently, I was working with friend and colleague Marshall Young at Green Templeton College, Oxford. We filled three enormous whiteboards with scribbles, which I always think is a pretty good sign. We were thinking about how conversation works and what the underlying conditions or dimensions that shape conversation are and what you would seek to vary or change if you are endeavouring to create a series of rich conversations.

There's scale – group, triads, pairs. Duration, or structure in time. Periodicity as well. Iteration is another one (i.e. you can create series of conversations). Space and physical layout, including proximity and position (do you talk to someone next to you or in front of you? do you stand or sit?). There's constraint (a given topic, or rule or procedure) and stimulus (an input of some kind).

All these things make a difference to the kind of conversation that you have and though they don't have straightforward, linear effects, you do know that varying them will make a difference, even if you can't predict what that difference will be. And, the craft of conversation, at least in a setting like a workshop, lies in combining these elements.

In a way, this is all that improv exercises do as well, though they are fairly extreme forms. An improv form is a structure that conditions the kind of interaction or conversation that is created. What interested us in this was the notion of how

you create a rich field for conversation, without dictating where that conversation would go. Rather like hosting a party really – you work on creating the conditions and allow people to flow through the 'system' (fueled by food and drink on a social occasion) and interact as they will.

Intellectual, physical, social, reflective

posted on December 6, 2011

Imagine you divide your day into four kinds of activity:

- intellectual or cognitive (like thinking or writing)
- physical (working out or digging the vegetables)
- social (not socialising per se but interacting with others – e.g. meetings)
- reflective (meditation, yoga, prayer, walking the dog)

How would your day divide up?

My idea is that a balance is important, not just over time (though I am sure that matters too) but within each day. When I watch myself, I realise that I do better thinking when I haven't been thinking all day. Physical activity calms the mind and helps me think (and sleep) better.

Some activities, perhaps the best ones, combine several or all of these categories at once. I don't play golf myself but I find it easy to imagine that golf has all of these elements. Which is maybe why it is so popular. At the moment we are harvesting the olives here – which is physical, social and reflective (not much intellect involved) and lovely for it.

Most people leading an office bound city life spend most of their time in social activity of some kind, predominantly meetings. The aptly named 'social' media, put ever more pressure on time to think (intellectual) and physical activity gets relegated to (twice weekly?) visits to the gym or sport at the weekend. Reflective rarely gets a look in, since it doesn't

count as 'do-ing' anything. This imbalance can't be healthy, for individuals or for society. The leaders I work with often seem to regard reflection as a delightful luxury, yet if they are making significant decisions, surely it ought to be a daily necessity?

I first drew up this idea (as a four box grid, of course) about a decade ago and still find it a useful compass. It reminds me of the need for a daily variety of activity and of how easily I get locked into one mode.

One of the things I adore about living in a rural area is that the reflective is much more to hand (all you have to do is look up at the mountains or the stars). And physical activity is woven into things – so much needs mending or tending, harvesting or feeding. I wonder if there is some way to weave the physical (and for that matter the reflective) into city life, so that it doesn't become yet another thing on the to do list….. (take all the escalators out of the tube perhaps?).

Leonardo da Vindication

posted on January 6, 2012

I saw the Leonardo exhibition at the National Gallery in London over the holidays, which was fabulous, though reminiscent of looking at great art on a rush hour tube, so crowded was the space.

I was struck by how significant two pieces of improv practice were in the master's work – collaboration and being willing to be changed. All of Leonardo's major works (with the exception of 'The Last Supper') have at various times, been attributed to his pupils. And even though the Madonna Litta, for example, is (currently) attributed to him, it really would seem to be a collaborative work, as the studies by Boltraffio that surround it so beautifully demonstrate.

The other thing was a comment by the gallery's restorer, Larry Keith, on the audio commentary (which I would highly recommend if you go). He mentions that despite doing a lot of preparatory work, Leonardo was very willing to let the final work change as he painted it, even if it meant the original ideas were transformed beyond recognition. He wrote about this and encouraged his pupils not to get stuck on what they had prepared.

My favourite piece was the 'cartoon'. I am not the only one. Apparently people flocked to see it when it was first displayed. It makes me think that 'finishing' things is over-rated.

Two be

posted on January 21, 2012

I find myself thinking about the theme of permanence and change and the balance between them. Hardly surprising perhaps since in Spanish, it is woven into the language. Castillian has two verbs to be – 'ser' and 'estar'. The first is used for things that are deemed to be permanent – like where you are from (or which football team you support). The second is used for things that are deemed to be temporary – like whether you are hungry (or married).

At Oxford in November it struck me that this distinction is useful for leadership development. Leaders need to not only develop their capabilities and capacities (the 'ser') but, perhaps more importantly, develop practical judgement, in the moment, as to which approach, and which personal qualities are more appropriate in that particular context (the 'estar').

A shame then that so few of our participants speak Spanish, since the distinction inherent in the language would make this very easy to explain. Looking back it is funny to think how odd the idea of there being two verbs to be, and now how completely normal it becomes over time as the very structure of the language becomes incorporated into the fabric of the way you think.

Rhythm versus pace

posted on February 2, 2012

One of my neighbours, Vicente, lives mostly off the land. Nature made him a very elegant calendar, with a beautiful cadence from one crop to another, preparing, sowing, fertilising, harvesting, pruning. Olives, then figs, then cherries, then chestnuts in a cycle of cycles throughout the year.

Quite a contrast to the clients who always want the workshop by the end of the following month. Time goes by, they call again, and curiously enough they still have to have it by the end of the following month, except that now its June not February.

To me, Vicente has light and shade in his way of working. There is an ebb and flow, which has both rhythm and harmony. Musical notions both, obviously. By contrast, the client wanting a workshop seems to me to have a flat, oppressive sense both of time and of their own priorities. There is little harmony or rhythm there, just a sense of building pressure and stress (driven by technology's accelerating pace). As one of them said to me this morning "time is evaporating".

I think we need to learn to appreciate variation more. If, as Tom Friedman suggests, the world is becoming flatter, we might ask ourselves what we have to do to find, or create, ebb and flow, peaks and troughs, intensity and reflection. In general, flat isn't very attractive.

One thing might be to start to be more thoughtful about when the workshop really needs to be done by…..about when would be the right season for it. To think about whether it is connected more to sowing or reaping, fertilising or pruning. Do this, and my hunch is, we would find the rhythm of our own lives, like Vicente, who is one of the cheeriest people I know.

What do we leave behind?

posted on February 10, 2012

I have a change of scenery this weekend. Maybe that will help me write. Not far, just north 80km to the other side of the sierra, to Avila and an old house that belongs to my wife's family.

Place makes such a difference. Not just because of its intrinsic features (air, light, beauty, quiet, etc.) but because of what people have done (and thought) there before. We notice this on the Oxford Strategic Leadership Programme and joke about making sure we give people an experience of the dreaming spires (not just the modern Business School).

It is as if we lay down sedimentary layers of experience, that whilst invisible, are somehow accessible to people later. In places that people have frequented for a long time like Oxford, or La Serna (some of the house is 16th Century) there are many layers of sediment for us to access. Which makes you think not just about what you can take from the presence of people gone by, but about what you might leave for those that are yet to come…

There is always the chance of a fresh start

posted on February 17, 2012

I had a terrible day on Wednesday. I didn't get anything like what I wanted to do done. What I did, I didn't like. Then, in a foul mood, 'everything' got worse, mostly because I started interpreting it that way. Which gave me the great displeasure of being right. Which made me bad tempered with the people I love most in the world. Well done, Robert.

What struck me at 6am on Thursday, as I got up to write, was the power of a fresh start. Consulting with the pillow (as we say here in Spain) makes that easier, but what I noticed was how, if we choose, we can make a fresh start at any point, at any level of scale. Not just each day, but each hour, each minute, each moment.

It doesn't require an overnight sleep, it just requires you to let go of the emotional energy you are dragging from the past moments or hours, into the current moment. It takes a certain power of observation and will to do this, but that's all. That fresh start is always there (like one of Gary's robots) waiting for you. If you really want it, all you have to do is accept it.

Small town networks

posted on March 3, 2012

Friends from London, or some other metropolis, often ask me what it is like living in a small town. I think they wonder what on earth we do to entertain ourselves in such a place. When I first lived in Arenas, I used to answer that there was a trade off (one I was quite happy to accept) but a trade off nonetheless, between the spectacular natural landscape and the human landscape which was, so I thought, pretty limited. I see it a bit differently now.

I have a more varied group of friends in Arenas than I ever expected. This includes a blues singing vet from Arizona, a Galician producer who grew up in Germany and a locally born, half-Brazilian guitarist who spent a decade in Nashville. There is a surprisingly wide variety of people here.

Those interesting people do interesting things. Our Venetian chef started a thriving branch of the Slow Food Society. There is a farmer's market, ecological consumer group, a cooperative gallery for local artists, workshops on body percussion and movement therapy, groups that meet to star gaze.

Obviously this isn't a patch on what any big city offers, but the human scale changes things. You hear about everything interesting that happens. It is all close – you can go to a yoga class and the film club in the same evening and still have time to meet someone for a drink. The grapevine is powerful. You

can reach anyone you want to, whether it's a percussionist or a photographer, even if you don't know them yourself.

This has made me realise that wherever you live, what there is to do is a function of two things. It doesn't just depend upon what is available, but upon how accessible it is. In big cities there is a collosal amount to do. But it isn't very accessible. It may be hard to get to, over-subscribed or simply expensive. Much of what you see in *Time Out* only serves as a backdrop. In a small place there isn't anything like as much going on, but everything is incredibly accessible. I suspect that we over value the amount of stuff that is happening, and under estimate the importance of accessibility.

It made me wonder about whether we misread things in a similar way in other contexts. Work maybe? Perhaps the content, the stuff, that we have available is less important than the access—via easy, human channels—that we have to it?

Quit while you are ahead

posted on March 12, 2012

It struck me recently what a skill it is knowing when to stop. Marshall Young (Director of the Oxford Praxis Forum), who I work with at Oxford, seems to me to be a past master at this. A couple of weeks back we were having a typically rambling conversation when, as is often the case, a striking idea hailed into view (it was to do with the difference between an economy and an ecology). We spent some time exploring the idea, made some connections and identified some actions and then, quite naturally, Marshall drew that part of the conversation to a close and we moved on. I realised that isn't the first time he has done that. He tends to let the natural rhythm of the conversation dictate the length of the meeting, rather than let the length of the meeting dictate the rhythm of the conversation. Since people seem to schedule everything rigidly these days, that's incredibly rare. The diary rules the dialogue. Which makes for a lesser quality of conversation.

It also strikes me that there is great skill here that I (and many other people) could do with practising, instead of talking an idea to death through over-enthusiasm, which I am apt to do.

I'll stop now.

Collaboration in Cambodia

posted on March 16, 2012

I am in Cambodia this week, working on collaboration.

I was invited only last week, to work with a co-facilitator I hadn't met, for a client I don't know, in a field I am completely ignorant of (disaster relief management). It has been fascinating. In particular, what I am noticing is how the way the invitation was made demonstrated an openness, a willingness to let go that made it almost impossible for me not to accept.

Many people might have worried that making a last minute invitation would come across as disorganised. But on the receiving end, it felt incredibly confident and positive and that inspired me to think that this would be something worth doing. So the way I was asked was itself a great example of how to inspire collaboration, the theme of the workshop.

Neat.

Start before you're ready

posted on July 2, 2012

I have been very struck recently by how productive it can be to start things before you are 'ready'. It is something improvisers do the whole time. They step on stage before they have an idea, rather than waiting until they have one. They let the idea emerge from the action.

It seems to me that a similar thing happens in other contexts. I don't mean you shouldn't prepare but that if everything is determined and decided beforehand (in other words, if you are completely 'ready') then something is lost. The unimagined possibility is eradicated before it even has the chance to occur.

In the month of May I was part of two gatherings where this spirit of 'unreadiness' prevailed. The Creative Tapas was one, an extreme example perhaps, but a wonderful reminder of the power of leaving space for people to do what they want. The Praxis Forum was another – as a pilot workshop it made a lot of sense not to 'finish' it but that is hard to do. We normally feel obliged to tie things up neatly. In my view, Marshall Young (the Praxis Forum Director) did a masterful job of giving people enough structure to make it work, but to leave enough open or unfinished so that people felt really involved and valued.

This is another good reason not to work so hard. Instead, let people help you. Ask for help. Start before you are ready.

Does it scale?

posted on July 8, 2012

Recently I have become very interested in the issue of scale.

In particular in the assumption that bigger (or more), is better (necessary even). This assumption is everywhere. Businesses seek more sales, more customers, more products and yet more growth. Pressure groups want more supporters, more people signing their petitions and making more contributions so they can get bigger still. Business schools and even alternative conferences want more talks on their web sites, bloggers and authors want more readers and so on. "Ah, but does it scale?"is a question on every consultant's lips. Success means achieving big numbers, and, big numbers means success. More is almost universally assumed to be merrier.

I question this. Or, to be more precise, I question that being able to scale is the only, or the most important, indicator of worth. I have two problems with the idea that scale is necessarily good. First, in many cases it is self-defeating. We are subtle creatures, who both need and enjoy intimacy, connection and nuance. As organisations or endeavours (of any kind) grow, the sense of intimacy and connection inevitably diminishes for everyone involved (creators, staff, customers, suppliers, audience). As a result, organisations introduce systems and processes, normally heavily automated ones (like computerised call handling) to substitute for intimacy, but these are a poor imitation and we feel the difference profoundly.

Or, as things grow, they simply become unwieldy. To take one personal example there are now far too many talks on TED for me to find the TED site a good use of my time. The people that run TED chose to make it bigger (it wasn't something they had to do) and that choice has consequences. Something is lost as the thing gets bigger.

The second problem I have has to do with complexity and requisite variety. Colin Tudge talks about this eloquently in the context of farming in his Do Lecture but I think the point is more widely applicable. Scaling implies that at some level there is a uniform, reproducible, standardised element. Software, as Microsoft conceived of it in their heyday, is the apogee of this approach. However, complexity doesn't lend itself to this approach. If you want to create value in the system as a whole, instead of just exploiting the capital of the system for your own good, you need to be sensitive to local, micro conditions, you need a wide variety of options and possibilities to choose from and you need to pay close attention to what is unfolding and changing as it does so. Webs of tightly coupled interaction are anything but uniform, as nature shows us all the time.

So I don't think scale is all it is cracked up to be. The diseconomies of scale, whether personal (alienation and depersonalisation) or systemic (soil degradation and resource depletion) are intimately connected to this obsession with growth.

I am convinced that more often than not (particularly in the longer term) the diseconomies of scale are as important as the 'economies of scale' that we hear so much about. Our insistence on scaling up, coupled with the impatient way we go about it creates at least as many difficulties as it solves. If we want to create an ecological economy (and if we

can't then I think we are toast) then we need to give up this monotonous insistence on size. Again, ecology shows us the way, as Paul Colinvaux points out in the very title of his book, *Why Big Fierce Animals are Rare*.

I am prepared to admit that this dislike of scale could just be a question of personal taste. Or it could be a handy post-rationalisation for a personal failing. More than once I have been told (rightly, I think) that I lack the ambition, persistence or stamina to grow something 'significant'.

Even so, I also think it is valid to suggest that there are other ways to proceed and that backing off from a relentless focus on scale can be a good place to start. Scale isn't the only way to create an impact.

For example, I recently held an event for fifty people called The Creative Tapas experiment. It couldn't possibly scale. It won't even be repeated at the same level of scale. Yet it had an effect, of a different kind. It acted as a catapult. It has created leaps and discontinuities in relationships amongst people who have known each other for years, created new connections, opened up new possibilities and given people a great gift of seeing what they themselves are capable of, given the right conditions. And those are just the things we can see a month on from the event.

The effects of that event and the experience it created will never acquire any visible scale. I won't become famous or rich as a result. But the impact is there. And sometimes, I think that is enough.

Act yourself into a new way of thinking

posted on September 4, 2012

'Start before you are ready' is an invitation to action. It reminds me that we can act ourselves into a new way of thinking, just as well as we can think ourselves into a new way of acting. This maxim encourages me to pay attention to what is happening as events unfold, to be present and attentive to what actually happens, rather than what I imagine might happen. It also makes me leave space for other people to make contributions I wouldn't have thought of.

Starting before you are ready means accepting that you won't ever have all the information. I once met Gene Krantz, the flight controller on the fateful Apollo XIII mission and he said, "Sometimes you have to act before you get all the data in, or you will never get all the data in." Acting on hunch or feel, as Krantz had to do, isn't acting on the basis of no data, it is acting on the basis of a different kind of data.

The brain is a symphony

posted on October 8, 2012

I have been struggling to find a fitting metaphor for the absurdity of the 'locational fetish' that seems to be afflicting anyone who writes in the popular media about the brain these days (i.e. the idea that by knowing which part of the brain is active we know something important). This morning it came to me. It is like a symphony orchestra. Simply knowing that the woodwind is playing during a particular section of a symphony tells you very little. It is true, but almost entirely useless.

Without an appreciation of how, at a particular point in a particular symphony, the sound of the woodwind relates to the barely audible rumble of the accompanying timpani, or echoes an earlier theme, or acts as a prelude to a coming one, you are understanding very little. The woodwind is not inflexibly and atomistically responsible for a particular kind of sound. At different moments, in different pieces, it is used for a vast range of purposes. The woodwind can't be understood in isolation and the symphony can't be reduced to discrete and separate elements.

Nonetheless, this is how we often talk about the brain or bits of the brain (which, by the way, aren't actually discrete structures, but areas). Yet the brain is like a symphony. Or, perhaps, like a symphony of symphonies, millions of times more complex and more interconnected than any piece of music anyone could ever compose. Mozart's own brain was way more complex than any music he wrote.

The 'bits and pieces' way of thinking and talking is inappropriate, unhelpful and insidious. It makes us see everything—from food to the brain—as no more than the sum of its component parts. It becomes circular. When we always break everything down into bits, we forget that there is any other way of thinking or acting. It stops us seeing anything else (like relationships for example). People look for the bits and pieces of leadership or creativity or love. When that approach doesn't work they assume they simply haven't found the right bits, or that they haven't looked hard enough. As if more computational power were all you needed to find Mr. Right or lead an organisation through turmoil.

I design and lead workshops. They aren't exactly symphonies but there is a rhythm, a metre, a cadence and flurries of energy and ideas that are akin to melodies. I find these really useful ideas both when designing and running workshops. I don't need to focus on the bits, I can look at the patterns and at the whole. Now, that's a whole lot more difficult in brain science I admit, but the complexity doesn't go away just because we pretend it isn't there.

I have no doubt I owe an unconscious debt to Denis Noble here for the musical metaphor, which he develops substantially in his book The Music of Life – Biology Beyond Genes.

Change and serendipity

posted on December 3, 2012

I often come across people who want to change the world, or create 'large scale change'. A noble aim indeed. Yet I wonder about this. To scale things we create systems and programmes that can be 'rolled out'. Such roll outs almost always fail or falter, or produce unintended consequences that exacerbate the very issue they were aiming to address, or create a new one. The best programmed change (e.g. Positive Deviance) doesn't seek to roll out solutions but allows people to discover things for themselves.

However, it seems to me that change (or changes) often happen in other, completely un-programmed ways. Like a stone skipping across the water, ideas and actions often leap in unlikely ways, from one place to another. A doctor in Sussex tries something new that a jet lagged Canadian hospital CEO sees at five in the morning on a regional BBC news show which he mentions to his medical staff, which sparks off an inquiry that wouldn't otherwise have happened. No one can track, or even see, the path the idea has taken. But does it matter?

I don't think it does. I think I know when I am involved in something that is rich and fecund and that is going to give rise to all sorts of seeds of ideas, actions and initiatives that I will never be party to (like The Creative Tapas Experiment or the Do Lectures). That ought to be enough but I suspect that one of the reasons it doesn't get much attention is because nobody gets the credit for this kind of change…

Your body knows stuff you don't

posted on January 22, 2013

A few years back I was lucky enough to see the Venezuelan pianist Gabriela Montero perform. She is a classical pianist. And she improvises.

The first thing she did was invite the audience to sit anywhere. Many joined her on stage. Some even sat under the piano. Then, she asked people to volunteer a start point – she asked them to sing, or hum, or whistle a short melody. Anything would do, she said, even a ring tone from a phone. After a short pause, she would then launch herself into a piece of classical style music, with all the variation and complexity that implies. Some pieces lasted up to eight minutes (I timed it) – and it was all improvised.

Her playing was extraordinary of course, but just as interesting to me was the behaviour of the audience. People very quickly started suggesting songs they knew, by title. When they did, even if it was something really obvious (like 'Happy Birthday'), she still insisted they sing a little of it.

This came to a head when someone suggested, by name, a specific section of a particular piece (by Rachmaninov). He even told her which bars he was interested in. Gabriela looked blank. The man, surprised and sounding like a bit of a smartass went on…"But you must know it," he said. She still looked blank.

"Can you play the piece?" she asked in return.

He rather smugly replied that he could, so she asked him up on stage and he took her place at the piano stool. He lifted his hands to play, but before they even hit the keyboard she burst in with, "Oh, that one, yes of course." She promptly shunted him off the piano stool and played the bars he had in mind.

I thought this was fascinating. I am convinced she didn't do it to make fun of the man (though he probably deserved it if she had). I think it shows that during this kind of performance she is engaging her somatic, sensory self. She needs to hear the music or see the position of the hands. She is working in a non-intellectual plane, which is why she couldn't work off the title of a song or a piece, even if she "knew" it.

Which is why Gabriela herself, or at least her cognitive, verbal self, can't explain how she does it. She is charmingly open about this, saying that she really has no idea what she is doing, that the music just 'comes'.

But at some level, in a way she cannot articulate, except perhaps through the music itself, she knows exactly what she is doing. It is just a kind of knowledge that is deeply mysterious and cannot be transmitted. The best kind, perhaps?

Humour me

posted on February 13, 2013

I am beginning to realise how important it is to have a sense of humour. Not just because it makes life more enjoyable, but because it draws attention to things that you can then do something about.

I am learning this from Marshall Young, who I work with at Oxford. For example, he used to call old Oxford of the dreaming spires, the 'medieval theme park'. Not something you would catch many Oxford dons doing.

Marshall's joke made me laugh and think. As a result, I started to think in a very different way about the role of old Oxford and, in particular, the leadership programme we both worked on. It gave me a new understanding of how the programme worked, the importance of aesthetics, space and the effect they have on the participants. It completely changed how I understood what we were doing. It also led to a new a rich line of inquiry about the use of physical space in executive education and training in general. Not bad for a throwaway line.

He did it again recently. I was designing another programme and mentioned that I was going to bring in a colleague, Stewart Morgan, to talk about a model called 'The Trialogue'. Marshall knows both Stewart and the model and, with a smile, suggested that the model was 'a fig leaf' and that all that mattered was to get Stewart into conversation with the participants.

I thought this amusing enough to mention to Stewart who replied, "Well, perhaps it is a fig leaf, but a fig leaf covers your important bits, so I am pretty glad to have it." Which made me realise that what we needed was fig leaves all round. That would help everyone make sense of a very complex timetable, making the conversations we wanted, more likely.

I don't think Marshall does this consciously. But his sense of humour and levity are part of who he is and that quality encourages the mind to dwell on things it might otherwise ignore.

Laughing matters.

Busy is the new lazy

posted on March 19, 2013

Being busy is great, isn't it? It makes you feel and sound so purposeful, so important. But actually I think being busy is often just lazy. It is an excuse for not prioritising – for allowing business and work to trump things that are more important. It allows us to avoid making conscious choices. It blinds us to the simple things life offers us every day (beauty, a kind word with a stranger, the smell of fresh bread and so on). It excuses us from honouring our commitments to the people we love ("Sorry I didn't call/visit/ask/turn up...I was busy").

I think we should stop the lazy approach that allows us to be busy the whole time and be properly lazy instead and build in time with no goal or purpose. Time to lie fallow, to allow ideas to mature, connect or emerge without forcing them. Time to 'visit' with ourselves, as my American friends put it. Even if all you want is to be as productive as possible, being busy isn't the best way to achieve it. And if you want a creative, fulfilling, satisfying life then being constantly busy is a sure way to ensure you don't get it.

There's no such thing as a bad idea - or is there?

posted on April 5, 2013

People often say there is no such thing as a bad idea. I disagree. I think there are plenty of bad ideas. I have lots of them myself.

Instead, I prefer to say: "There is no such thing as a good idea….**yet**." I think that is much more useful direction for anyone interested in having ideas. It changes the emphasis. It suggests that we shouldn't expect any idea to be perfect from the outset and that any and every idea can (and should) evolve into a better one. This gives new ideas the protection they need and allows any idea, how silly or odd it may sound to have potential. However, in addition it also encourages us to build on them. So, yes there are bad ideas, but if we build on them they might evolve into good ones.

Stop pushing

posted on October 10, 2013

A couple of weeks after the Praxis Reading Weekend, two of the participants have told me that it helped them solve business problems. Which I think is brilliant. It convinces me more than ever that it is pointless to just push harder. We need to go away to come back, to breath out after we breath in. We need to look at things out of the corner of our eye, to let the unconscious do its work, to allow new connections with new people and new ideas to be made in ways we don't predict.

What is so fantastic about this is that while it can't be forced, the Praxis Reading Weekend—and umpteen other events I have been involved with—prove that there is a huge amount we know about how to create the right conditions for this to happen, if we let ourselves work a little less hard.

The dictatorship of diaries

posted on April 23, 2014

Diaries lay time out in a long line and chop it into little bits. They all do. In more or less sophisticated, clever, beautiful or techie ways perhaps, but essentially it is the same idea. As if time is a piece of string.

This is not how I experience time. For me time has depth and layers and fuzzy endings and beginnings and intensity and quality and colour. More like a river than a piece of string.

I am not alone in this. Stewart Brand wrote about 'Pace Layers' in a wonderful chapter of his book, *The Clock of the Long Now*. The Greeks distinguished between 'chronos' (quantitative or clock time) and 'kairos' (qualitative, propitious moments).

So the tools we have don't work for me. Cutting time into pre-determined chunks that dictate what I should do based on some prior decision… What if I don't feel like it? What if I am not in the mood? What if the activity I need to spend time on is a slow, long, rumbling, ruminative one that won't fit neatly into a box? There are a thousand ways that the dictates of a diary don't work or don't help.

So, tool makers of the world, here's a challenge. Can we design a diary, electronic or otherwise, that acknowledges the rich, complex, layered nature of time and helps us use it in a wiser, gentler, more creative way?

Learning fast and slow

posted on June 17, 2014

Over the past couple of months I have started to realise how long it can take for me to learn. Sometimes, years after an event I am still learning. For example, even now, two years on from The Creative Tapas Experiment, I am still getting ideas from it – both through reflection and through conversation with other people who were there.

I think this makes sense and that we have quite mistaken ideas about how and when learning of any significance happens. We are often in too much of a hurry to allow any deep learning to happen. If we are trying to memorise the road signs of the Highway Code, then maybe it's reasonable to expect an immediate result. But if we are interested in anything complex or subtle, like leadership or creativity, is that really sensible? Or is it wiser to let a learning experience seep into us slowly and start to affect us over time, in gentle ways we didn't anticipate?

I love this idea. It means that powerful experiences, like The Praxis Awareness Experiment I was lucky enough to be involved in a few weeks ago or The Coaching To Excellence programme I was on last week, have the capacity to keep on yielding learning for who knows how long. All I have to do is be patient and they will, in their own sweet time, surrender their riches to me.

The old ones are the best

posted on September 12, 2014

In an interview last year, I was asked why we use the arts and humanities so much in the Oxford Strategic Leadership Programme. To me, the question revealed a couple of assumptions. First, that the most important knowledge is proto-scientific, technical and in the main, rational. And, as a natural consequence, that it is the most recent theories, the 'latest research' we should pay most attention to. These assumptions are, I think, very widespread, which is what made it a natural question to ask. I also think they are mistaken. So I answered with another question. "Why would you ignore the collected wisdom of thousands of years of human inquiry?" I replied.

We are easily seduced by novelty and recency and can quickly become 'fashionistas' of thought. This is upside down. My feeling is that there is a kind of inverse law in play, along the lines of 'the more recent it is, the more likely it is to be trivial or inconsequential'.

If you are grappling with anything that involves a consideration of human nature (and frankly, who isn't?), if you are looking for deep understanding, for an explanation of why we act as we do, then you are going to need, at the very least, to include the long view of human thought.

It is a bit like biomimicry. Yes, it is a nascent field, but biomimicry bases itself on three billion years of research in the massive R&D lab that is 'life on planet Earth'. Surely the

collective wisdom of thinkers and doers throughout the ages is more likely to hold solutions to important human issues than an up-to-the-minute MBA?

So, if you want to learn proper grown-up stuff then the old ideas are the best. Or to put the same thing the other way around, if you only concern yourself only with new learning, you are unlikely to come across anything that is great.

The Power of Context

posted on September 24, 2014

At the beginning of September my two elder sons went away to school, leaving Pablo, the youngest, living alone at home with his parents. He is, as they say 'a different person'. We see it ourselves and others comment upon it. With no competition for attention, or food, or time on the Play Station, Pablo has indeed become different. But he hasn't changed. He is just expressing himself differently. No doubt he *will* learn and change through this experience, but the immediately observable change is a change in context more than a change in him. He isn't really a different person. How could he be in the space of a few days?

This makes visible how mistaken our normal way of thinking can be. We find it easier and simpler to treat people as if they were objects to which we attribute stable (or slowly changing) attributes. What Pablo is showing us is that a person is a stream of actions not a thing (in complexity language a 'dissipative structure'). As such, people are profoundly shaped by context and relationship. Not so much 'Pablo' as 'pablo-ing' – more verb than noun. Alan Watts says something rather similar, here (http://www.openculture.com/2014/11/the-wisdom-of-alan-watts-in-four-thought-provoking-animations.html). Start at 'Appling' at 1min 15s.

Change the context, change the relationships and you 'change' the person. Which changes everything. Something you might want to think about if you are interested in changing some 'thing' or someone.

People are oceans not objects

posted on November 23, 2014

I like the idea of thinking of people as oceans rather than objects. Whilst it is neat and tidy to identify people as objects, we are more complex than that. Context shapes who we are far more than we realise and in some ways, we blur into each other (something I wrote about in "The Power of Context").

There are various aspects of the oceans metaphor I like. For example, we don't have a problem referring to the Atlantic or the Indian ocean, yet when you get down to the Cape of Good Hope, it's obvious that we can't be too definitive about where one ends and another begins. I also like the idea that oceans are deep and mysterious. I have heard tell that we know the surface of the Moon better than the depths of the oceans. And every time some brave submariner with a new bit of amazing kit descends a bit further into those hidden depths they find extraordinary, unlikely creatures, alive and well down there in the darkness, or in the scorching heat of volcanic vents. Then there is the fact that ocean currents flow in different, often opposite directions at different depths and in different regions and in different seasons. So as metaphor, it invites us (or reminds us) to see ourselves as the complex, fluid, unresolved, fuzzy, contradictory beings we are.

Evaluation vs. Feedback

posted on January 21, 2015

My friend and colleague John-Paul Flintoff has been writing about feedback. So I gave him some and he gave me some – inviting me to write this post. I am interested in how easily we confuse feedback and evaluation. Indeed, we don't just confuse them (i.e. have trouble telling them apart) we conflate them – assuming them to be the same thing. But they aren't.

I remember very well the moment I realised this. I was working with an executive who was talking about performance reviews and why she found them difficult. "We aren't very good at giving feedback. If you have to say someone hasn't done well, then that's obviously difficult. But being British, I find it just as hard to give compliments to people." For her feedback came with a value judgement included. It was evaluative. And whether that was good or bad, she found it difficult.

Yet the word feedback, in its original sense, doesn't imply this at all. It is simply information – literally a 'feed' of data reporting back on an action or series of actions. Feedback would be: you are going north. Evaluation would be: you are going the wrong way.

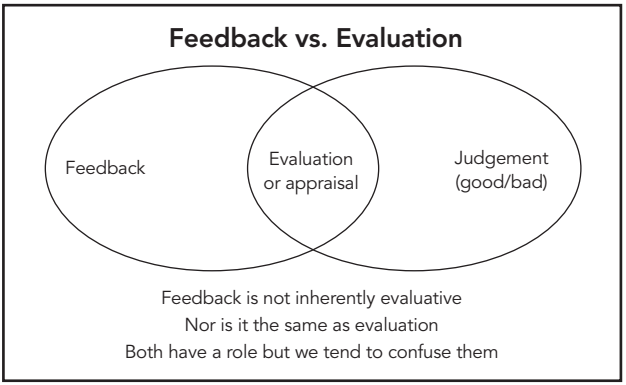
I also realised, in that same moment, how common it is to conflate the two, and how much complication and difficulty

that leads to. In a world of Facebook 'likes', where we are constantly invited to evaluate, this blind spot is probably getting bigger.

Just as this senior manager said, if all feedback is interpreted as being thumbs up or thumbs down, then of course it was hard to give, or take. So you probably would avoid it (or dismiss it) as much as you could, stunting or slowing the flow of information.

So how would you get simple, straightforward information about what was actually happening? How could you think sensibly about what to do if everything was always loaded with judgement? It's a small step from that to the knife in the ribs that John Paul experienced.

I find it useful to tease the two apart. Like this. Evaluation is feedback plus judgement.



So to anyone who wants to encourage a healthy flow of information between people, to improve whatever you are doing, my feedback would be – be ready to give and get both feedback and evaluation. And learn to distinguish one from the other.

Good beats right

posted on February 23, 2015

In the past few months I have been making an effort to substitute the word 'right' with the word 'good'. Why?

'Right' implies something definitive, certain, finished, complete, correct and singular. More often than not, in everyday life, it is inaccurate and misleading to talk about 'right'. Outside of maths (or other purely symbolic realms) how often can we really talk of the *right* answer? Is the campaign, idea, text, process, product or design we have come up with really the one and only 'right' one? Or are we just trying to sound important?

Talk of one right answer limits, curtails and closes down possibility. 'Right' kills improvement. If you have the 'right' answer you stop. If you have a 'good' one, you might yet make it better.

Right also suggests 'wrong'. It polarises. The two are closely related, so as soon as something is 'right' then everything else (or more often, every*one* else) is wrong. Thinking in terms of 'good and better' (rather than 'right and wrong') leaves room for difference, variety, complement, nuance, growth and development. It allows and encourages more than one way of doing things.

My friend and colleague at On Your Feet, Gary Hirsch, took up improv theatre because of this. He loved acting but found it hard to remember the lines. Gary found that a script, by defining what was right, made everything else 'wrong', which

paralysed him. When he discovered improv he found a world that was more forgiving, flexible, free, creative and satisfying.

So, whether I am right or not, I find this is a good habit to practise…..

Help - ask early, ask often

posted on June 30, 2015

In the spring I hosted an event called 'The Help Weekend', an inquiry into what it takes to get and give help. It was based on the observation that most people are slow to ask for help, yet when they are asked to help someone else they are (often) delighted.

I brought a small group of people to my home in Arenas de San Pedro for the weekend and asked each of them to think of something they could use a little help with.

The process of inviting people started to reveal some very different attitudes to help. At one end of the spectrum were people who said, "Oh, that's an interesting idea, but there isn't really anything I need help with." Seriously?

At the other extreme were people who were so worried by the number of things they needed help with and the difficulty of choosing that they felt unable to participate. As one of them put it, "I think what I need help with is asking for help."

In the end, there were seven others and me. Each of us had a chunk of time, to use as we wished, to get help from the others. When you weren't being helped you were a helper.

It was a wonderful, highly emotional, weekend. The experience quickly created a strong sense of connection amongst us. And we not only got a lot of help on our particular projects, but learned a lot about the wider issue of asking for and giving help.

Here's a selection of the things we noticed….

- Its hard to help people if they are very abstract. Being concrete helps people to help you.
- Small things, almost inconsequential things, can be very valuable.
- You need to be honest with yourself about what it is you need help with.
- To get help you have to let go of trying to control stuff.
- We easily get too used to doing things by ourselves.
- Asking for help is intensely personal – you get 'up close' and that can make you feel vulnerable.
- You can get what you haven't asked for, which is often more helpful than what you thought would be useful.
- The importance of empty spaces…
- Asking for help shows us that we are incomplete…this makes us more interesting people and therefore more beautiful.
- Giving help can light a fire in you and uncover wisdom you didn't know you had.
- You always have something to contribute, even when you don't think you do.
- There is an emotional release to asking.
- There is physical joy in giving and receiving…

We came up with a motto, that seemed to capture much of this: "ask early, ask often" (hat tip to Ideo). We have taken this practise to heart. We continue to help each other and in general, people report being much more willing to ask for help than before.

So it would seem that the Help Weekend helped.

How do you look?

posted on June 30, 2015

Years ago a friend, who is an artist, did a very simple line drawing portrait of me.

A few years later another, who is an engineer, turned it into a wood block. I was amazed at his ingenuity. "I have made a few improvements though," he said. "Your glasses weren't drawn straight, so I levelled them out."

Here's the thing. My glasses are never straight. My face isn't straight and as anyone who wears glasses knows, the act of taking them off with your dominant hand tends to skew them even more.

The artist drew what he saw. The engineer made an assumption that regularity was good and 'corrected' the image to be more regular, thus in his view, making it 'better'.

Draw your own conclusions.

About Robert Poynton

Robert Poynton lives in an off-grid house on a hill top in rural Spain.

He is a creative business thinker, facilitator, coach and writer who believes that you learn more by playing around with things than by trying to control them.

He designs learning experiences and events for people and organisations around the world, but particularly at Oxford University, where he is an Associate Fellow at the Saïd Business School and Green Templeton College.

He has led courses at Schumacher College, spoken at the Do Lectures and has written two books about the application of improvisation to business and life – 'Everything's an Offer' and 'Do Improvise'.

This is a selection from his blog posts up to August 2015. More can be found at http://robertpoynton.com/blog/.

Blog: robertpoynton.com
Twitter: @robpoynton
E-mail: rob@robertpoynton.com