

Bournemouth's 'Big ReThink' Project: An Arts-based Model for Change in a University

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Change is seldom easy and finding novel approaches that will increase the effectiveness of the process, engage all partners throughout and lead to a difference in culture at the end, adds additional challenge. Creative solutions, using arts-based methods, were seen as a positive way to bring about a reorganisation in a large school in a university. Bournemouth University's [Kip Jones](#) and [Gail Thomas](#) report on a process that drew on the underpinning philosophy of arts-based 'Oblique Strategies'. This was undertaken to bring colleagues together innovatively and constructively to be part of the change process.



Implementing successful change in a large, complex organisation creates opportunities as well as presenting significant challenge. There are many theoretical approaches to change management described in the literature, although some authorities believe there is a lack of convincing outcomes from implementing these strategies (e.g., [Todnem By 2005](#)), with [Balogun and Hope Hailey \(2004\)](#) reporting an approximate failure rate of 70 percent. Despite change being an ever-present feature of organisational life ([Burnes 2004](#)), it is not a popular phenomenon with many employees who may feel that they need routines to be effective and able to improve performance ([Luecke 2003](#)). The need for change at times is unpredictable and may lead to reactive and ad hoc approaches ([DeWit & Mayer 2005](#)) that fail to engage staff effectively in the processes and expected outcomes.



Context

A change of structure was proposed for the [School of Health & Social Care](#) at Bournemouth in order to ensure colleagues were able to meet the strategic plans of the University. These included well-rounded, outward facing roles (engaging in research, enterprise and professional practice as well as education) and removing the pre-existing division between primarily teaching-focussed and research-active staff. The School is fairly large with approximately 160 academic and 70 administrative staff and covers a wide range of professional disciplines and academic subjects.

An innovative approach was taken to bring about the change in order to achieve an acceptable and sustainable structure. [Performative Social Science](#) (PSS), or the use of arts-based methods in social science research, and [Qualitative Research](#) are two key academic strengths in the School; a researcher versed in these approaches was asked to propose a creative solution to finding out what people felt about the organisation and how the change could be seen as enabling their success. The process became known as the *Big ReThink*.

The use of tools from the Arts and Humanities, in both generation and dissemination of data, is gaining critical mass amongst social scientists under the umbrella paradigm of "Performative Social Science" (PSS). Because of its natural requirement for community, PSS provides the overarching intellectual prowess, strategies and methodological/ theoretical bases to engage and unite scholars across disciplines. [Relational Aesthetics](#) ([Bourriaud 2002](#)) offers a theoretical basis for the complexities of connections across seemingly disparate disciplines, such as the arts and sciences, and for further exploration of the synergies between disciplines. Central to Relational Art are inter-subjectivity, being-together, the encounter and the social construction of meaning; through relational artistic activity, there is the opportunity 'to achieve modest connections, open up (one or two) obstructed passages, and connect levels of reality kept apart from one another'.

Process

Having decided to use a PSS approach to change, HSC staff was invited to engage for a year with Eno and Schmidt's (2001) *Oblique Strategies* and other arts-based generative processes to rethink the School's structure and roles within that structure. Eno and Schmidt produced *Oblique Strategies*, a box of flash cards with an inspirational phrase or trigger on each card, as way to move forward when getting "stuck" in the recording or painting studio. Eno, a musician, and Schmidt, a painter, realised that these were prompts that they had used at art school and that they could help in other circumstances as well. Eno remarked: 'It's like having someone look over your shoulder and point out something you overlooked'.

As a means to tapping into creative ideas for change at HSC, every member of staff was invited to express their vision (*ReThink*) for the School in Moleskine© Japanese-style sketchbooks. After colleagues had been offered some time to think about their vision and to articulate it in whatever form they felt was most appropriate, an exhibition of the books was held (see Figure 1). The sketchbooks demonstrated an impressive range of creative skills, using text, images, artwork, drawings and collage approaches. The enthusiasm and energy used to produce them was inspiring and the concepts depicted provided excellent thoughts on the priorities for change.



Figure 1: Examples of Moleskine© sketchbooks completed for the Big ReThink Project

A buzz was created around this project in the School at community level—in some ways, an unexpected one. The project progressed bottom-up rather than managerially top-down, stimulated by creative encounters within the interface between materials and concepts. A notion quite new to most was the “product as the process” itself. This emulates an andragogy approach where the learning is process oriented, not product oriented (Knowles 1973). Colleagues who were somewhat deadened by systems and structures, formats and formulae were asked to reinvest the personal in their workplace, be creative and produce an object that documented, even stimulated and expanded, their own ideas for a better School.

Obliquity Revisited

John Kay, a visiting Professor of Economics at the London School of Economics, defines obliquity as ‘an extremely useful strategy for getting the most out of life: stop pursuing your goals and you are far more likely to achieve them’. Kay believes ‘that most of the challenges we face involve too many intricately connected factors to ever be fully understood. It is only by embracing this fact that we can learn to make better decisions’. He continues that the most

profitable companies in the world are not dedicated to profit; the best cities in the world are not the planned ones. Kay is a firm opponent of targets and precise rules. He cautions, however, that oblique approaches – or lateral thinking – are much harder to devise than the direct alternatives. ‘The theory of obliquity states that the factors that cause any one event are so numerous and complexly connected that no event can be attributed to any one factor. ... In this way, [obliquity is similar to chaos theory](#)’.

According to Eno and Schmidt’s *Oblique Strategies*, linear thinking is not the best way to find creative solutions. Mixing it up, serendipity and even chaos all contribute to eliciting ideas that promise freshness and innovation. ‘Breathe more deeply’ and ‘Do nothing for as long as possible’ are two of the more obtuse suggestions from the Strategies. Nonetheless, “mash-ups” in music and on television (*Glee*, for instance) demonstrate that freshness and innovation can be accomplished by combining two or more, often old, ideas or forms, creating new ones that are more than the sum of their parts.

Lateral thinking, key to both Kay’s *Obliquity* and Eno and Schmidt’s *Oblique Strategies*, is about reasoning that is not immediately obvious and about ideas that may not be obtainable by using only traditional step-by-step logic. A person would use lateral thinking when they want to move from one known idea to creating new ideas (De Bono, 1970).

These are all processes that were thrown into the mix and explored in the School’s *Big ReThink Project*. By keeping the initial focus on creativity and producing an object (the Moleskine© sketchbook), coming up with solutions to structure or management of the School became quite secondary, almost an offshoot of the activity. Tackling the problem indirectly provided possibilities for not only innovative solutions, but also some surprising suggestions.

Discussion: Engagement Emerging from the Exercise

Using unusual approaches to managing change has brought some significant benefits to our organisation. Previous feedback from staff across the University, through a staff survey, had indicated that they did not always feel listened to; this process provided considerable opportunity for their voices, ideas and proposals to be shared and heard. It was pleasing how many staff participated in the development of the sketchbooks as well as the social gatherings, open meetings and email discussions generated by the *Big ReThink*—a sense of engagement that seemed to be missing prior to it. Informal feedback indicates that the consensus is that the process has been a positive experience.



Conclusion

The *Big ReThink Project* at Bournemouth University's School of Health and Social Care has brought a whole new approach to managing staff change, based on *Oblique Strategies* and principles of Performative Social Science. The process is not yet complete and we continue to consider how best to get positive engagement across all groups; nonetheless, we have benefited from significant learning on the way. The mainly positive response by staff to a creative means of engaging them, in trying to capture their innovative ideas and to address their frustrations, is confirming that sometimes management is advised to 'Go outside. Shut the door' (Eno & Schmidt, 2001) and listen from a distance. This approach offers managers an alternative to traditional change techniques that often fail to take the staff with them. The ultimate goal will be to have academic communities of engaged colleagues who are happy to come to work.

"Faced with a choice, do both"—Eno and Schmidt, Oblique Strategies

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