

# Using the visual arts to facilitate emergence in organisations<sup>1</sup>

**Julian Burton, Strategic artist**

Poor communication in organisations is currently a major barrier to successful change and is the cause of misunderstanding, confusion and lack of clarity. This in turn creates the sort of stress and anxiety that inhibit service delivery and improvement. Informal, open and honest conversations undertaken in an adequate space to reflect are the key to sense-making and hence change in social systems. My purpose is to show how the use of pictures can stimulate conversation through a facilitation process called Visual Dialogue. This chapter describes an NHS Trust workshop where the use of visual art facilitated emergence and helped to catalyse rich, meaningful and productive dialogue.

## **Key points:**

- ◆ The conditions for emergent change and self-organisation can be supported by using more non-rational and emotional forms of self-expression.
- ◆ Visual art can create the conditions for the sort of conversations in which new meaning or knowing can arise naturally for an individual or group.
- ◆ Visual metaphors and stories are a powerful way of representing experience in a more concrete way than words.
- ◆ Pictures can be used to provide a more holistic and aesthetic way of knowing and encourage more open and spontaneous conversations.
- ◆ Pictures that reflect the causes of anxiety and frustration can often trigger conversations on difficult, and normally avoided issues.
- ◆ These types of pictures are best created from concrete descriptions of experience, and so can cut through intellectual abstractions and jargon.

## **1. Introduction - why do we want emergent change?**

There is a growing interest in complexity thinking as a different way of understanding how change happens. In social systems, change emerges from our relationships: the space between us, the way we interact, relate and coordinate our activities. It is our conversations that can create the context for new and creative action. Along side this development is a growing interest in using the arts to enhance people's understanding and sense-making in organisational settings. The visual arts are a particularly powerful way of representing important themes symbolically, non-verbal and aesthetically. They are also useful artifacts that can be used to stimulate conversations and can present knowledge in a more concrete form than words.

Many people I meet working in large organisations are struggling to work out how to "facilitate emergence" or lead "emergent change". Facilitate is to make something easier and emergence means to arise naturally. So the aim is to "make it easier for something to arise naturally". Precisely what is it that we in this community want to arise naturally? In the abstract language of Complexity this something is usually called novelty or "new order". But what is this "new order?"

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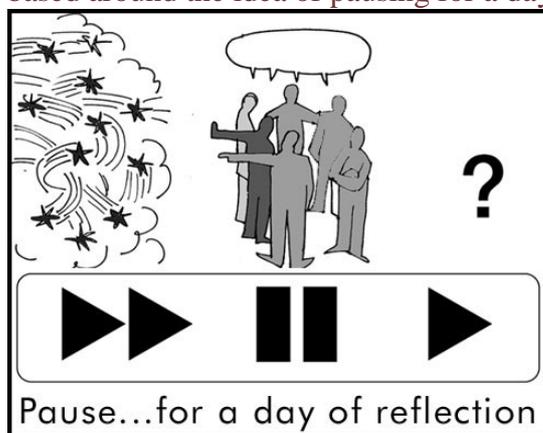
<sup>1</sup> Appear as a chapter in a forthcoming book (2003) *Complexity in Health Care* (edited by David Kernick).

When I am silently struggling to make sense of a complex situation in which I need to make a decision it helps to discuss it with someone. By expressing the contradictions and dilemmas at hand, socialising what I think and feel, I can feel energised and inspired. Things make more sense when I speak of them to another, and suddenly I have a better grip on the situation. In my opinion facilitating the emergence of new order is nothing more complex or theoretical than creating the conditions for a good conversation!

I have found in my work in organisations as an artist that people value pictures which reflect their personal metaphors and stories of often unvoiced experience at work. Also in the process of making pictures for clients, It is usually the most grounded and personal language that make the best pictures, so if I am hearing lots of abstractions or jargon, I immediately ask " what does that mean to you? What would it look like?". Grounding the conversation like this puts the human back into communication and brings more energy to any engagement. They find they catalyse lively and animated conversations - the sort of conversations in which people could experience some clarity or movement in their situation. From feeling stuck to a feeling of having a sense of hope, possibility, or clarity that comes from having talked about what is happening to them. It seems to me that this is experienced as an outcome of having engaged in a creative and constructive conversation.

## 2. Pausing for a day of reflection - a practical example

A large health trust commissioned me to help facilitate a session at a one-day workshop for 50 senior managers, leaders and clinicians. The theme of the day was based around the idea of pausing for a day of reflection.

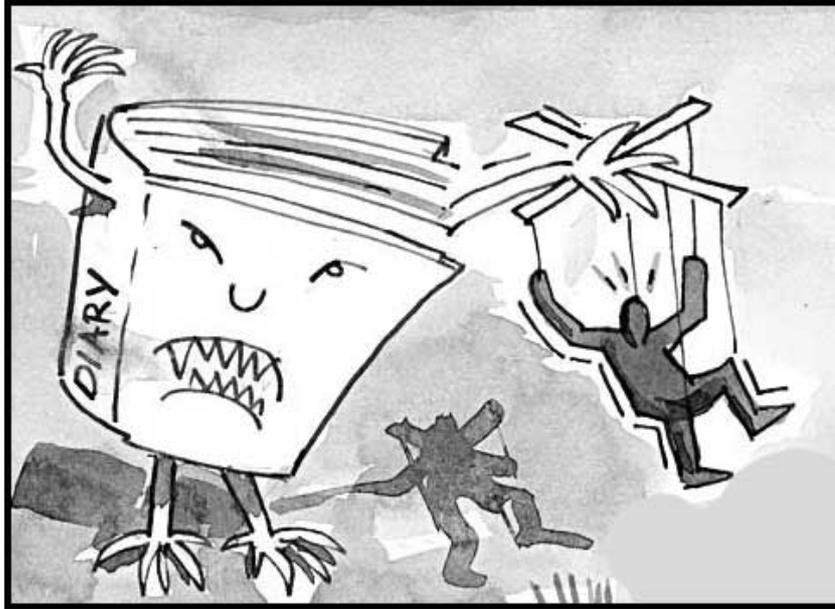


Part of the workshop invitation

Not surprisingly there was high attendance as many people's daily experience involved: coping with the chaos at work; email mountains; the feeling of drowning in detail; horrific diaries; confusion; lack of clarity on priorities; going off sick because of stress; a constant struggle to keep their head above water; and trying to cope with the anxiety and uncertainty caused by always being in the midst of a new restructuring. Like most people in many organisations, they spend much time and energy trying to make sense of the formal communications and directives intended to effect an improvement in performance and service delivery.

As a warm-up, the first session of the day was designed to engage participants in discussion around their current experience at work by using a picture to open up the

conversations. Before the workshop I talked with several people about their experiences at work and what metaphors would best describe them. I created a picture of the metaphors that reflected what they were currently dealing with. For example, I rang one manager to arrange an appointment, and he said he couldn't because he had a horrific diary.



The horrific diary

Their descriptions were distilled into a composite picture that reflected their metaphorical themes. Copies of the picture were distributed at the beginning of my session. The participants were asked to pair up, look at the picture and ask each other questions like, "what do you see? What does it mean? How does it relate to your work?" The picture created a real buzz as people discussed it in pairs. Very quickly the hum of conversation grew and the energy in the room rose noticeably. This released a lot of energy and helped to create some initial conditions for a successful day. It is often difficult to find space to feel confident enough to overcome the fear of being vulnerable, to express one's feelings about current realities. At this workshop I saw people create a space within which they could reflect together. Acknowledging and validating each other's experiences, and express feelings about what was going on. In this process new meanings arose naturally, creating clarity, a sense of new possibilities, energy and movement.

One interesting outcome was that a group of doctors found the picture quite negative. This was because it visualised the pressures and issues of managers. When this was pointed out to them, they suddenly understood what managers were really going through, with some sympathy. This is always a good first step in creating better relationships.



You have mail!

### 3. Using Visual Dialogue

#### *Simplifying abstraction and jargon*

The language used in many formal meetings is quite abstract and can be distanced from our experience. It can cause confusion and ambiguity in organisations. Equivocation has become a tool to hide a lack of knowledge, not something valued in our culture. This doesn't help when people are trying to understand each other and make sense of their daily experience at work. Pictures are created from concrete descriptions of experience and can cut through intellectual abstractions and jargon.



Overwhelmed by detail

### *Generating Symbolic Artifacts*

Another aspect of this process is to look at visual art as symbolic artifacts. Symbols help us organise our human systems. For example, the symbol of language plays a central role in organisations and is the primary means for coordinating our activities. When we speak we can make things happen and create new possibilities for action. Symbolic artifacts, material objects, and particularly symbolic ones, can structure our experience. There is value in the marks we make when we symbolise experience for what ever purposes. What do we symbolise? What do we translate into tangible, visual form? Organisational structures, policy, statistics, strategies, etc. What is not usually represented is relationships and process, inner states and feelings, values, much of which cannot be formally talked about. Art can articulate these tacit elements and help generate meaning in organisations.

Symbols themselves don't carry direct meaning but are interpreted locally by people in context. Meaning is symbolic, created in interactions but if they are not constantly negotiated, refreshed or replaced they create contradictions and subsequently distress. Many symbols in organisations can be closed and fixed, and often are defended from mutual negotiation. For mutually meaningful, and hence useful symbols to be currently relevant and useful for everyone one in an organisation there needs to be space to create new ones.

### *Creating a reflective space*

Creating pictures that re-present what people experience at work can create a reflective space in which people step back and disengaged from the chaos at work,

getting some critical distance from the mass of details. People can visually and orally explore and examine the picture together, providing a vehicle to encourage mutually focused discussion. It offers an opportunity to speak about what is really going on for them within the organisation and share their hopes and aspirations of where they have come from and where would like to be. This creates understanding between people and is the key to developing better relationships and improving performance

#### **4. Conclusion**

By reflecting back to people what they say about their immediate concerns, frustrations and dilemmas, pictures serve as a mirror to provoke new conversations and offer an opportunity to explore and share organisational experiences. By translating verbally articulated themes into symbolic artifacts which represent experience metaphorically, a trigger for the types of spontaneous and improvised discussions is created that can lead to emergence of new order, i.e. the clarity one feels when things make sense and one can proceed with confidence.

Visual Art can be the graphic representation of experience in a concrete artifact. It can convey meaning and, paradoxically, clarity and ambiguity at the same time. Pictures convey different meaning to different people so can stimulate dialectical movement in their understanding of each other. They allow for continuous and local interpretation of our experiences in a way that can keep meanings moving and flowing. In doing so, the consolidation of meaning into rigid and fixed frameworks that are used to maintain un-constructive power relations is prevented.

There is a desperate need to create space in organisations for people to engage in reflective practice, share their subjective experiences honestly and openly at work. Informal conversations are the key to sense-making and hence change. I hope I have shown how visual art can facilitate this by stimulating productive dialogue. I believe that honest and grounded conversations are the heart of change and that visual art has potential to make a major contribution to creating better organisations.