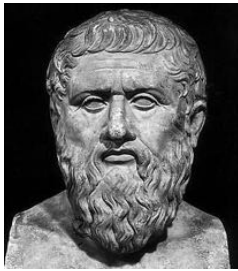


Partnering and the importance of play



*“You can discover more about a person
in an hour of play
than in a year of conversation.”*

Plato

Partnerships do serious work. Be it dealing with natural disasters, a humanitarian crisis, or a long-term development project. This is the kind of work that attracts thoughtful, responsible and committed people. As such, they may be less likely to see themselves as inherently playful.

And yet, I would argue that the capacity to play is fundamental to truly effective partnering.

Partnerships come into being as a response to a particular situation, problem or context. The key word here is ‘responsive’. Partnerships have to meet the needs that arise. And very often, these needs shift, change and evolve. At each moment, the partnership has to be alive to what to do now. This level of flexibility can only happen if the partners are willing and able to improvise and adjust. To let go of fixed ideas and premeditated actions. To be able to ‘play’ with what arises.

Playing is about bringing imagination into the world.

Seeing what is and what might be at one and the same moment. Not simply jumping through the prescribed hoops, but wondering if there is another way. To respond playfully means to ask questions about the assumptions we have made, the rules that we have inherited, the boundaries we construct. To recognise that we always take too much for granted.

Partners who can play together are willing to challenge each other’s narrative. They are alert to the dangers of the single story, the closing down of alternative versions¹. They are able to open up the lens, to widen the range of voices, so that different perspectives emerge and new learning becomes available.

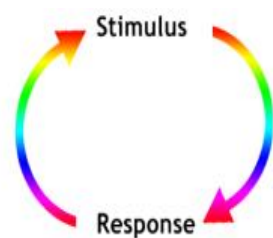
Partnerships that are operating in this way retain the capacity to be surprised. In fact, they actively extend an invitation to the unexpected to appear. They know that the realities with which they are dealing are always more complicated and contradictory than their initial maps describe. They are keen to see what is invisible at first glance, what will only appear when creativity and imagination are brought into focus.

In complex conditions, every situation demands and deserves a unique response. Whether the context is a conversation with a colleague, a project development meeting or preparing a funding proposal – each of these acts needs to be fertilised by the imagination. We need to be willing to ask questions as to why we are doing it like this, to wonder if this is the best or only way. To take things apart, and see if they might be reassembled more productively.

¹ See The Danger of the Single Story https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story

One of the biggest hurdles that inhibits playful partnerships is that play challenges power. In the midst of play, anyone might have the next intuition or insight. This doesn't always sit well within organisational hierarchies. In this sense, play requires not only imagination, but courage. Play is risky. And it is this sense of risk, of doing things differently, that underlines the connection between partnering and play.

There was a connection made throughout the session about the difference between 'reacting' and 'responding' and the importance of opening up space for groups / partners to reflect and deepen their insights and understanding. To deepen their understanding and appreciation of each other – thereby crossing sectoral, cultural and geographic boundaries and, crucially, genuinely acknowledging each other's uniqueness. Creating the possibility of greater willingness to change.



We reclaim choice
when we can open a space
between stimulus and response.

Partnerships are not about business as usual. Instead, they are about devolving power, dispersing control, encouraging initiative. They ask us to step out of our habits, to expand our vision, to imagine otherwise. Partnerships call upon processes and possibilities that stretch our ways of thinking, feeling and working. All of which brings us back to ourselves. If we need to re-imagine the ways we do things, this can only happen if we find ways to develop and strengthen our own imaginative and creative capacities. Play isn't a diversion or a distraction, it is at the heart of what partners need to be able to bring to the work.

Partnerships do serious work. Taking this work seriously, means learning how to play.

Michael Jacobs

5th February 2017

Appendix:

Notes from the session led by Michael Jacobs at the Remote Partnering Design Lab²

It is well established that people are only willing to change when they feel they have been acknowledged. This suggests that an important task for those involved in partnering is to find opportunities for partners to deepen their understanding and appreciation of each other – to bridge divides and relish diversity in terms of personality, values, experiences. This may require more creative / imaginative approaches, it may require ‘play’ (or, as we describe it in the PBA’s training work, ‘serious games’³).

As creatures of habit, we often feel safer jumping through hoops with less thought and more speed.



How often do we just shrug our shoulders and say ‘that’s how it is’ even when what is being proposed / required is clearly un-workable and / or destructive to genuine partnering?

Three exercises:

1. Hoops

Stand in a circle with hands linked. Two hoops are placed on the linked arms of players at opposite sides of the circle. The task is to get the hoops to exchange places without the players losing physical contact.

Typically, the first effort involves the hoops going round the circle by people climbing through them to hand them from one person to the next. It takes, perhaps, 2 minutes. The facilitator says it can be done far more quickly... the group then, typically, try the same thing again but just trying to go through the hoops faster. They take 1.7 minutes and again are told this is very slow indeed.

Eventually, the group come up with an alternative idea – namely that they can move the hoops to the opposite side of the circle by simply walking in a circle without letting go of their joined hands. This still takes more than 30 seconds.

There is pressure on the group to do better. Under pressure people behave in certain ways – some taking over with their idea, others going very quiet and (more or less) opting out. What rarely happens is a period of silence or calm, rational discussion. Often the facilitator is challenged about the rules of the game. If the facilitator is asked to repeat the rules,

² Notes compiled by Ros Tennyson

³ It is notable that the Chairs Game used in every PB Training course across the globe transcends cultural diversity, sector diversity and language barriers. It is a great ‘leveller’ and is very often cited months later as the session that provided most intense learning about the nature of groups, the inadequacies of ‘strategy’ and the challenges of truly learning from experience and applying that learning consistently. Many report the chairs game as a metaphor for partnering and some describe their later partnering experiences as being ‘just like the chairs game’ which gave them pause for thought and some clues as to how to proceed.

someone is likely to hear that the rules said 'exchange places without losing physical contact' (ie not 'without letting go of hands).

Once this is grasped, the next attempt is usually to maintain contact with the feet and to use the hands to pass the hoops round the circle. Only after a few more attempts (and some goading by the Facilitator) is someone likely to suggest that the two people holding the hoops can simply roll or throw them directly across the circle to each other. This takes 2 seconds.

The important part of the game (as with most serious games) is the discussion afterwards. What happened? Why? How did people react – both individually and as a group? Why does competitiveness so easily take over from calm discussion (even in a group of people dedicated to collaborative working)? Why don't we really listen so that we hear the actual rules not the ones we assume? Etc

This game is one that has to be played in the same physical space (like the chairs game) – so in partnering terms it can only really be used with partners when they meet. However, it is likely that having played this game, partners will have had a common experience that can be referred to and built on in subsequent remote working. (They can also be encouraged to play the game in their one organisations or with local partners and stakeholders).

2. Red / Blue (or Prisoners Dilemma)⁴

What is it?

- Prisoner's Dilemma is a game which demonstrates whether people display win-win (co-operative) or win-lose orientation (selfish competitive) in a situation which offers the possibility of both
- It contrasts their actual behaviour with their expressed intentions (i.e. do people who say they support a win-win approach actually carry it out when under pressure?)
- If they do, the implication is that they will be equally concerned that the other party's needs are also met in any agreement

Why is it useful?

Often we're more concerned with winning more than with achieving the optimum result.

This activity:

- Explores the issues of risk and trust between team members and the effects of trust betrayal (Low risk / Low trust vs High risk / High Trust)
- Demonstrates the impacts and outcomes of competition between teams
- Demonstrates the potential advantages of a collaborative approach to solving problems
- Demonstrates the necessity of establishing the purpose of any activity

There is an on-line version of this that may be worth exploring. Though it should not be played unless the facilitator is confident about how to run it and what may happen and how to handle any meltdowns!

3. Story

There are many ways to use stories in a partnering scenario. The one presented at the Design Lab was as follows. The Facilitator tells a story (one that has many characters and

⁴ For more information about the game go to: <https://workshopbank.com/prisoners-dilemma>

potential layers of interpretation)⁵ and invites the listeners to identify with one or other of the characters in the story.

When the story is finished participants are invited to re-tell the story from the perspective of the character they have identified with. When re-telling is finished the other participants write a one word acknowledgement of what they have heard on a piece of paper and place it at the feet of the story-teller.

When everyone has spoken each participant reads the words they have been gifted. They then select one word to share with the group around the circle.

This use of storytelling can be very powerful – unleashing imagination in the listeners who then themselves become storytellers. It illustrates vividly how different people hear and connect with different things, it often reveals something fundamental about each storyteller that makes them a more ‘rounded’ and ‘interesting’ person to those listening. It can live on in the imagination and memory for a long time and thus continue to influence the way that group connects to each other.

It is perfectly possible to use this method on line for relationship-building purposes.

Tiddalik the Frog⁶

Tiddalik was a very big frog. He lived in the Dreamtime and he was huge, like a mountain. One day he was very thirsty. He opened his mouth and drank up all the rain as it fell from the sky, but still he was thirsty. So he looked around and began to drink the water from all the pools and the streams and the rivers.

The other creatures of the Dreamtime saw that the land was drying up. The plants and trees were dying of thirst. The animals were getting thirstier and thirstier. They all became very frightened. The drought was killing everything except Tiddalik, the enormous frog who was growing bigger and bigger. Then the animals realised where the water had gone. It was all inside Tiddalik.

The animals called a meeting. They spoke only one thing. How could they get Tiddalik to open his mouth and give the water back to the land? He was so big and so powerful. Some of the animals despaired, saying there was nothing to be done and they were all going to die. Then the Wombat had an idea. He said, “What we have to do is make Tiddalik laugh. If he laughs, he will have to open his mouth.”

The other animals agreed. They would go and visit Tiddalik and see if they could make him laugh. They went to the place where he sat, resting with his eyes closed and his huge belly full of water. They all gathered round him and each animal in turn did its best to make him laugh.

⁵ See *Tiddalik the Frog* as an example of such a story

⁶ From *Earthtales: Storytelling in Times of Change* – Alida Gersie:

Kookaburra went first. He laughed his famous infectious laugh, but Tiddalik didn't even smile. He took no notice at all.

Then Kangaroo hopped and jumped around Tiddalik, performing a cabaret. This made all the other animals laugh, but not Tiddalik. He just sat there.

Then Lizard tried, making his quick darting movements. Tiddalik just sat there, solemn and unblinking, his mouth tight shut.

At last Naburmum, the eel came slithering across the parched earth and placed himself carefully in front of Tiddalik. He caught the frog's eye with a steady gaze and raised himself off the ground and he was balancing on his tail. Then he began to sway from side to side. It was the beginning of his dance and Tiddalik was watching.

At first Naburmum danced gently and calmly. The frog was mesmerised. Gradually, the eel's movements got wilder, twisting and turning into the funniest shapes. Tiddalik's eyes gleamed with pleasure. He held his belly and for a while he managed not to laugh. But he couldn't take his eyes off Naburmum jumping and wriggling and squirming. At last his mouth began to twitch and suddenly it opened. Tiddalik laughed. As he laughed, all the waters of the world gushed out. The big streams filled up with beautiful, clear water. Every pond and stream was filled. The plants began to grow again and the animals were no longer thirsty.

That was how Naburmum the eel saved the world, but it was the Wombat's idea. And it happened in the Dreamtime.

