

# Creative Ecologies and the Involvement of Others

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This article is offered as a background paper to the #creativeHE collaborative inquiry 'Exploring Creative Ecologies'.

In one of her posts Chrissi Nerantzi raised the issue of how other people might be involved in our creative ecologies. I thought it was worth elaborating some thoughts on the involvement of others and illustrating with some examples.

*Hi +Norman Jackson just read the article.... I am also wondering the role others play in this process and how they help shape our individual and collective creativity, if there is such a thing. Chrissi Nerantzi*

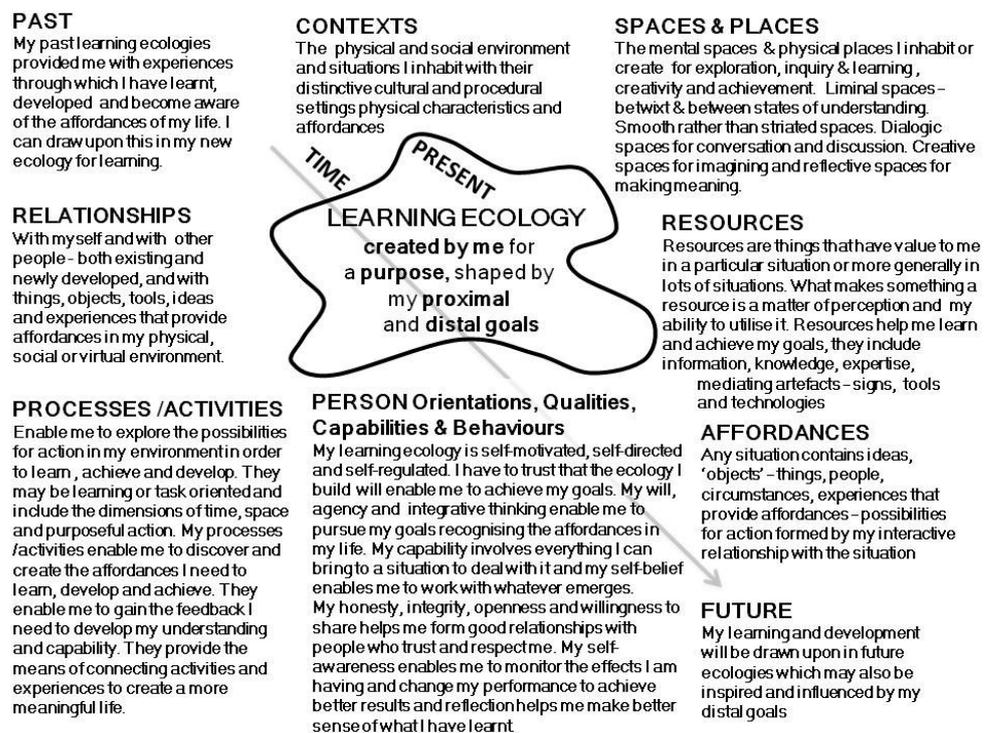
In one sense other people are always involved in our learning ecologies. From the moment we are born until the moment we die we are connected to other people who share their thoughts and ideas. We hear, see or feel something filter and absorb it and give it meaning that makes it our own.

We may have close relationships (family, friends or colleagues) with the people who are the sources of information or we may have no direct relationship for example when we watch TV, read a newspaper, book or a blog. Regardless of the origin stuff that we have absorbed from others may be available to us when we try to solve a problem or bring something into existence. Navid Tomlinson's idea that we are all synthesizers is consistent with this perspective and the way we as unique individuals combine and integrate the stuff we know in the particular context and moment is ultimately where novelty lies.

**Figure 1**  
Components of a Learning Ecology (Jackson 2016)

But there are situations where we develop a close collaborative relationship in order to achieve something with other people. A couple raising a family provides a great example where the

partnership between husband and wife creates an ecology that is shared or highly converged. But work also provides many opportunities for people to work together on projects that inherently lead to the creation of new ideas, knowledge and things. In such collaborative working relationships many of the elements of the ecology are shared - like the



purpose and goals, contexts, spaces and places, resources. But individuals involved bring their own unique histories and their own experiences, talents, qualities and capabilities and sets of relationships. These are pooled and combined to co-create the ecology and over time co-create the outcomes.

## Collaboration and Co-creation in film making

We can learn a lot from film making about collaborative, co-creative processes to produce a complex product which is full of creative inputs of many people with different talents. Ed Catmull CEO of Pixar describes this very well.

People tend to think of creativity as a mysterious solo act....However, in filmmaking and many other kinds of complex product development, creativity involves a large number of people from different disciplines working effectively together to solve a great many problems. The initial idea for the movie—what people in the movie business call “the high concept”—is merely one step in a long, arduous process that takes four to five years.

A movie contains literally tens of thousands of ideas. They're in the form of every sentence; in the performance of each line; in the design of characters, sets, and backgrounds; in the locations of the camera; in the colors, the lighting, the pacing. The director and the other creative leaders of a production do not come up with all the ideas on their own; rather, every single member of the 200- to 250-person production group makes suggestions. Creativity must be present at every level of every artistic and technical part of the organization. The leaders sort through a mass of ideas to find the ones that fit into a coherent whole—that support the story—which is a very difficult task. It's like an archaeological dig where you don't know what you're looking for or whether you will even find anything. The process is downright scary (Catmull 2008)

## Illustration of Co-creation in Film Making

In recent years I have also discovered that there are some great resources on YouTube that we can use to gain insights the creativity emerges when people work together to create something. I have become a fan of film director Christopher Nolan who not only makes great films (Interstellar, Inception, Dark Knight and many more) he takes the trouble to explain how the film was made and more specifically how he worked with other people to create what we experience on the screen. What hits you as you watch and listen to these stories is the intelligence he brings to his projects, the care and attention to detail he gives to every aspect of the film, his willingness to work with uncertainty and to take risks, his commitment and the effort he puts in to finding more than one right answer to his problems, his willingness to trust the people he works with to experiment and to persevere. All these things are necessary to achieve the complex creative product which is the film he wants to make which brings his unfolding vision into reality.

There is an interview in which Christopher Nolan talks about what he did to engage Hans Zimmer (great music composer) in writing the main theme music for the movie Interstellar. After providing him some dialogue and the basic idea of the film Nolan tricked Zimmer into thinking he was writing for one relational situation when he was writing for another. As a result Zimmer created the basic theme inspired by his own relationship with his son.

Then Hans Zimmer talks about his relationship with Roger Sayer the musician who played the organ for the main theme and how both Hans and Roger worked together bouncing ideas and judgements off each other experimenting with different combinations of sounds so in a mysterious, organic and iterative way the composer influenced the musician who then influenced the composer. In this respectful relationship the enthusiasms and talents of two musicians, director and the recording crew ideas are played with, re-shaped and co-created through lived experiences involving demonstration, listening, writing, performing and recording. These are the types of energetic collaborations that cause ideas and emotions to collide and produce something truly original and remarkable when we experience the complex creative product that is Interstellar.

Please watch and listen to the film and visualise the ecology that was co-created by the people involved to produce this amazing piece of music

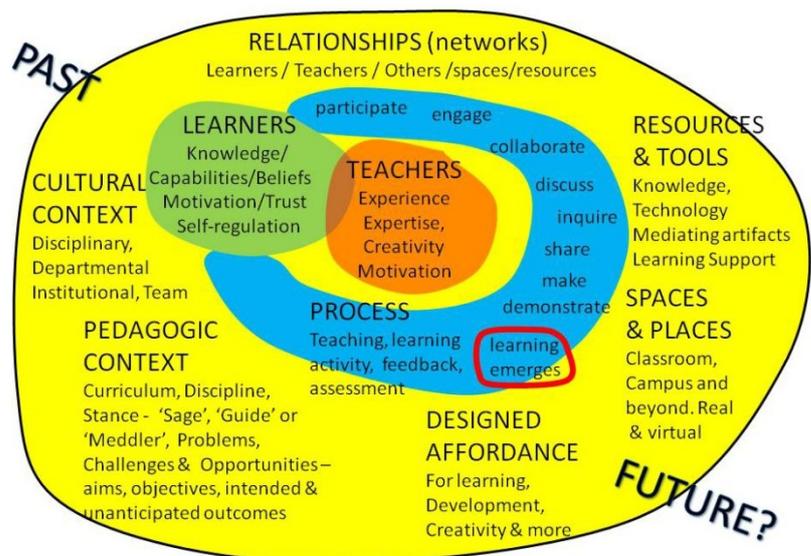


[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L\\_8t2VlwK4w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_8t2VlwK4w)

When we think about our ecologies for learning and creativity we need to think about how other people are involved in them and how we seek to involve other people. Nolan reveals his skill in involving other talented people in ways that encourage them to use their creativity in exceptional ways.

I think analogies might be drawn between film making as the co-production of a complex creative product and the design and implementation of a higher education programme involving teachers, students and other professionals who support students' learning (right).

**Figure 2** Model of an ecology created by higher education teachers to deliver a programme.



## #creativeHE as a tool for connecting learning/creative ecologies

Finally, it is worth reflecting on the role that #creativeHE plays in enabling people who share an interest in creativity to connect their ecologies for learning to the ecologies of other people who use the platform. #creativeHE <https://plus.google.com/communities/110898703741307769041> is a resource/tool that enables people to connect, communicate and interact in other ways. It provides affordance for individuals' learning and creativity and for co-creative activity not just the obvious exchange of ideas but also the development of relationships that may lead to entirely new projects. For example, in the #creativeHE course that was run October-November 2015 five participants formed a group which worked as a collective during the course and then together curated the content of the site through production of an issue of Creative Academic Magazine. The animation of the site by course or discussion organisers and moderators leads to the formation of an ecology for learning that is similar to that depicted in Figure 2.

You only have to peruse the posts that are made to see that the process of actively engaging in conversation sharing, connecting and combining ideas and perspectives helps co-create new meanings and overall a new creative product - the site, its content and the links to other resources.

### References

- Jackson, N. J (2016) Exploring Learning Ecologies Lulu <http://www.lulu.com/shop/norman-jackson/exploring-learning-ecologies/paperback/product-22603535.html>
- Catmull E. (2008) How Pixar Fosters Collective Creativity Harvard Business Review <https://hbr.org/2008/09/how-pixar-fosters-collective-creativity/>