

Making a Painting (version 1)

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Connecting the materials of life

Early in December 2017 my wife announced that we were going to club together to buy ourselves a painting for Christmas. My first thought was, how difficult it was going to be to find something we will both like? My second thought was, I should stop talking about painting something (which I had been doing for years) and actually do it. Another bit of context was that my interest in painting had recently been rekindled as a result of watching some YouTube videos of artist David Hockney painting and following this I had tried to make a digital painting on my garden¹. I went on line and bought a large canvas and stored it in my office as I wanted it to be a surprise. The size of the canvas was determined by a hot air vent on the wall that we wanted to cover up!



But what to paint? I searched for inspiration and remembered a walk we had made in late October when, passing the place where my wife's first husband was buried, we looked back towards the hills behind our house. These hills form a low ridge and there are several chalk quarries in it. I have, through walks with my grandson and a bit of imaginative storytelling,



renamed this hill 'Chalk Mountain'. As we looked across the fields to the hills in the late afternoon autumnal light, we both remarked how stunningly beautiful it was. I took several photographs on my phone. I remembered

this moment and phone the photos and decided that this was the scene I wanted to paint.

I watched several video clips on YouTube where artists had painted skies and landscapes with acrylic paints and tried to work out what colours I would need while standing in the shop looking at what was available. Then I purchased some brushes and a set of 6 tubes of acrylic paint in a box. With time running out, this was the week before the Christmas week, I started to paint the scene, or rather my version of the scene. In fact, I revisited the spot where I had taken the photos and took some more photos. The field was no longer ploughed but I was looking for different perspectives on the sky and the hills.



Each day that week I spent a couple of hours in my office painting and trying not to arouse suspicion. It's several decades since I painted anything so I kept it simple and experimented a lot. To make my acrylic paint go further I mixed it with white emulsion paint. A lot of the time I was not happy with the results and the more I painted the more I seemed to get away from what I had hoped to achieve - apart from the sky which was the first thing I painted. I was also worried that my wife wouldn't like it. But gradually, the composition, colours and effects I wanted, or at least that I could live with, began to emerge and I began to feel a bit happier with the result.

Eventually, on Christmas Eve I plucked up courage to show my wife. She had no idea I was doing it and I was relieved and pleasantly surprised that she didn't tell me to start again. She made a few suggestions, including repainting the foreground and suggested the colour that she thought might work better. I wasn't happy either with the foreground so I readily agreed and sure enough it looked better when it was repainted. I was pleased that she had influenced the picture and I think she was pleased I'd taken her advice. That evening we hung it on the wall in the lounge.

Hanging it on the wall became a form of public exhibition as each member of the family encountered it for the first time. And it became the subject of many conversations and a few jokes over Christmas when family and visitors were able to comment on it. Because the scene was familiar everyone was able to create their own interpretations and meanings.



Everyone was surprised and generally complementary and this made me feel good about it. In this way it was accepted and assimilated into our life and our home.

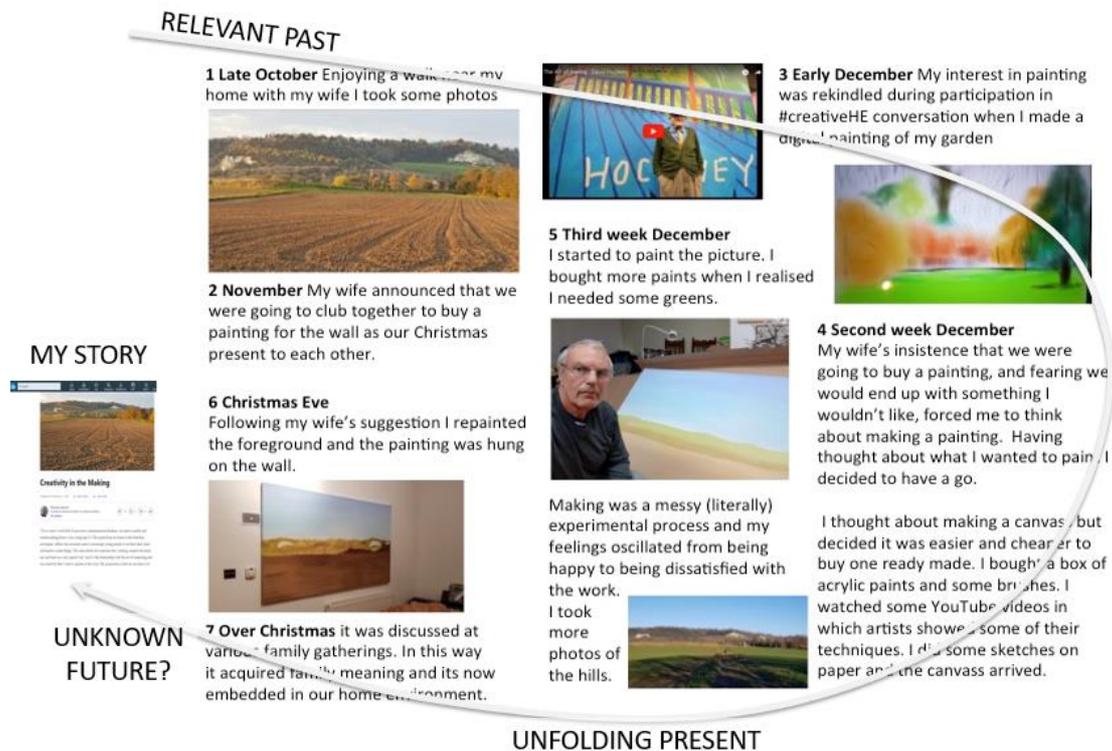
Making my artefact

I made a map of the most important events in my painting project (Figure 1). The painting is (for me) a novel relational and meaningful product grown in the particular circumstances of my life².

My painting grew out of my relationship with my wife and the initial motivation came from her idea (insistence) that we would buy a painting for the wall for Christmas (an important context). While the inspiration came from an experience we had shared while walking in the landscape we live in: a landscape that was rich in memories for both of us. The view of the hills held multiple meanings for me and my wife and these meanings became incorporated, quite naturally into the painting and into the motivations that led to this particular painting. I did not

need to imagine a scene, I can see and experience this scene everyday so my project was one of reproducing something from my memory based on perceptions of my everyday reality.

Figure 1 My map of important contexts and circumstances in making my artistic artefact - a process that demonstrates the idea that ‘making is connecting’⁽³⁾



Another recent circumstance was the fact that I had, through my involvement in the early December #creativeHE discussion on creativity in practice, rekindled my interest in painting. I had watched a number of videos showing artist David Hockney at work which I'd found quite inspiring, and I'd had a go at creating a digital painting of my garden. All these things connected to create the reasons, affordance (opportunity for action) and confidence for me to try to paint a picture to fulfil the need I now had.

The form of the artefact itself was influenced by such things as the size of the vent on the wall, my wife's desires for certain colours (autumnal browns rather than spring of summer greens that I would have preferred), and my need to find a subject that meant something not just to me, but to the whole family, as it was going to become a prominent feature of our home. All these things became connected in my project.

Once I had found my subject I felt motivated (inspired describes the feeling) to have a go at painting it. I painted the sky and liked it and this encouraged me to go further. But I didn't like the results of painting the hills and had several goes at it, even changing the shape of the hills and quarries several times. This was my first attempt to paint for many years and I had to do a lot of experimenting mixing colours and using different brushes to get the effects I wanted. It was very much trial and error, on the job learning, rather than applying techniques that had already been mastered.

Painting the picture was more than an act of self-expression as my wife had to like it as well. If there hadn't been the Christmas deadline I probably would have carried on tinkering with it for a while. When my wife did finally see it, her positive reaction gave me confidence to see it through (a negative reaction would have caused me to lose heart). I was able to use her suggestion for repainting the foreground and I think that helped her have some ownership for it. In this way I connected my picture to her appreciation of what would improve the scene.

Making sense of my experience: How did my creativity feature in making this artefact?

I don't think any individual part of my making process was creative: in fact putting paint on the canvas felt very uncreative. Through this reflective process I have come to see my creativity as the way I connected everything so that eventually something whole and quite different to anything I had produced before was brought into existence. I found David Gauntlett's ideas⁽³⁾ on making particularly useful. At the start of his book 'Making is Connecting' he offers three propositions:

Making is connecting because you have to connect things together (materials, ideas, or both) to make something new; Making is connecting because acts of creativity usually involve, at some point, a social dimension and connect us with other people; And making is connecting because through making things and sharing them in the world, we increase our engagement and connection with our social and physical environments. Of course, there will be objections and exceptions to each of these, which we may consider along the way. But that's my basic set of propositions.' ^(3:2)

I can see from the map of my process that all three of these propositions are valid. I connected ideas, imagination, emotions, experiences and materials in particular ways and in a particular time frame to produce something new and tangible. I connected to people, in particular my wife, who had shared the same experience of the autumn walk that became the inspiration for my painting and also, inadvertently, became the catalyst for my process of connecting. And through the process of making I engaged more deeply with my physical and social environment and the feelings that my interactions created.

Of course, you can't connect things without perception and imagination (ability to connect things mentally) since seeing that something has the possibility for connection in the first place, either in advance or as the situation presents itself, are important part of this process of making. And, we do not connect random things, there is a process going on all the time where we select and choose things to connect that fit our purpose and our mental models of what we are trying to do. In this way our process of connecting draws together, combines and integrates things that are meaningful in the evolving context of our making. And this process of connecting does not end when we have finished our painting. When we spend time thinking about what we have done by reflecting in a fairly systematic way, our clever mind can see and find even more connections in the process as it tries to make more sense and meaning of the whole, for example by creating a story that joins up all the dots. And as I write this now I can see that this story becomes an extension of the making is connecting process.

We can use technology to assist our imagination. For example, while I was painting I periodically looked at the photograph on my phone to remind myself of the scene and at the

same time tap into some nice feelings that helped to motivate me. I was using the technology to connect me back to the moments that were the source of my inspiration for the painting.

But I also had the scene in my mind and I was drawing on the mental images I had which were different to the photo. These mental images were continuously refined as the colours and shapes went onto the canvas and I used what limited skills I had to try to create a picture that I (and I hoped my wife and family) would be happy with. The final painting was a synthesis of my efforts spurred on by my imagination and perhaps creativity lies in this synthesis of all the efforts and imaginings.

Ecology of connecting

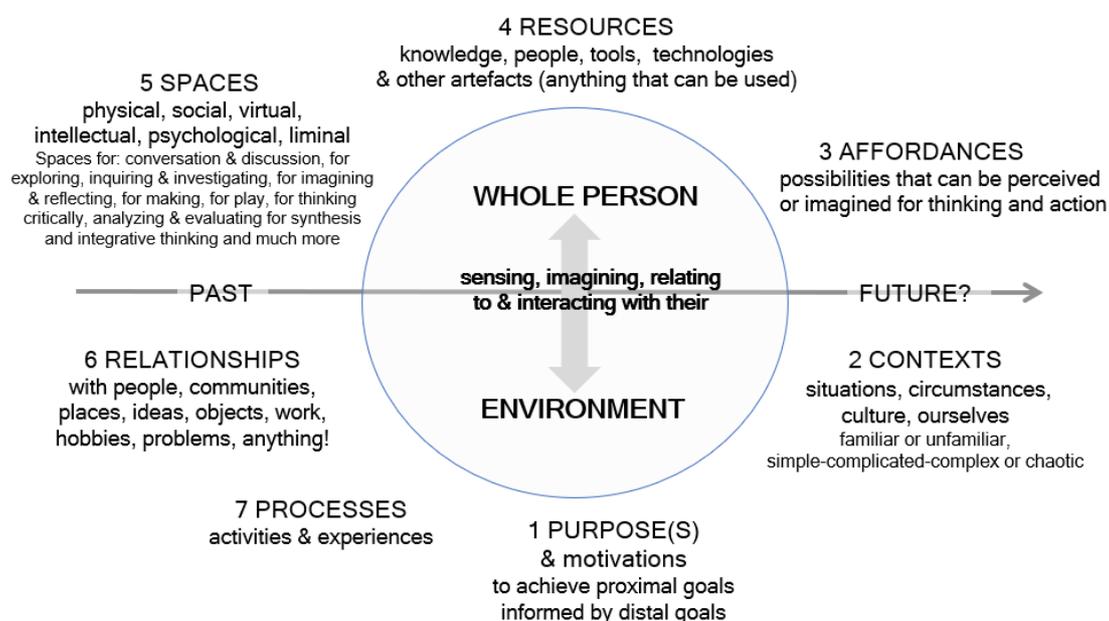
My process of 'making' a painting is a story about connecting many things. The process of connecting is fundamentally a relational and interactional process involving me coming to know what to connect and why to connect it to the things that mattered to me. My ecology for learning⁴ was an ecology for making connections (Figure 2).

So what did my ecology enable me to connect and incorporate into my making project? It involved my purpose, my desire to create this picture in my circumstances and the time frame I had set myself. It involved me connecting contexts including 'me' and 'my life' which included my interests in creativity, and in writing, and the fact that Christmas was looming. It involved me physically, cognitively and emotionally, in relationships and interactions with my wife. It involved me interacting with, sensing and experiencing my physical environment - my home and the landscape in which I live, and the virtual environment (accessing videos that inspired me and showed me some techniques) and music I listened to while painting. It enabled me to find and connect the resources I needed to make my artefact like canvas and paints and specialized tools like paint brushes. It involved me in perceiving the possibilities for productive action (seeing affordance) in the evolving situation, in the landscape and in particular things like the materials and tools I was using and the space for painting that I created.

To make my picture I connected the mental images and the emotions they engendered to the bodily act of painting, "making connects the hand, eye and brain in a very special way"¹ I interacted with the paints and canvas to respond to the imagined scenes in my mind. What emerged was not necessarily what I imagined, it was a trial and error process and I stuck with the colours and shapes I liked and repainted what I didn't like. The very act of painting was creating something that I gave meaning to - what was left meant something to me. I energized myself by playing loud music (often Max Richter's Three Worlds) as I painted and I know some of this music created certain feelings or moods so that was another connection in the process.

I also connected my present to aspects of my own past life - for example to my experiences of painting in my youth, and I know that what I had experienced, learnt and achieved would at some point connect to my future. In fact, 6 weeks after the painting was finished I can now demonstrate this as this article is being written in the future as far as the painting is concerned.

Figure 2 An ecology for learning and making something (adapted from Jackson⁴) The framework or model shows key relationships and interactions between the person and their environment. The ecological framework is a heuristic technique to help us imagine some of the complexity involved in acts like learning and making. The labels explain an aspect of the ecology but do not say how they interact. This is revealed in the narrative of the action. The components of the ecology do not stand in isolation. They can and do connect, interfere and be incorporated into each other.



This article, and the sense making story it contains, is another artefact connected to my process of making and it illustrates again how important connecting is to creative expression. Writing, especially narrative, brings language into the process of making and language can be used to express and explore complex ideas and to connect ideas and theories to the story of reality I have described.

Through writing I explore my ideas and events and use my imagination and reasoning to bring some sort of order and meaning to their randomness as they are connected to what I already think I know, and to the ideas of others. Through this process of connecting and examining the consequences of what has been connected, I begin to make more sense of complex things - like my experience and my creativity.

There are many definitions of creativity but as a writer I have always had a soft spot for the definition proposed by Dellas and Gaier⁵ who suggest that creativity is the desire and ability to use imagination, insight, intellect [reasoning], feeling and emotion to move an idea from one state to an alternative, previously unexplored state. What this definition doesn't do is go into how this is achieved which necessarily involves a complex interaction between the person, their past history and an unfolding present in the world that they inhabit and to some extent create for themselves. Through their uniqueness (as an individual, their process and their unique circumstances) they make new connections and bring together previously unrelated ideas, situations and things.

Another way of looking at Dellas and Gaier's perspective on creativity, is to see the idea of moving an idea from one level of understanding to another, as the passage through liminal space⁶ - that transitional space where you are leaving one state behind yet have not fully crossed over to the next. It is the space where transformation occurs as new thresholds of understanding are crossed.

Learning ecologies are inevitably dealing with liminal spaces as we transit from one state of understanding to another. In fact, we might argue that we create an ecology precisely to work with all the uncertainty, perplexity and ambiguity of not knowing in the context of a pursuing a particular purpose/goal, resolving a difficult problem or confusion, meeting a challenge or, in my case, making the most of an opportunity to paint a picture.

As I write this it also strikes me that this narrative is a technology to facilitate the passage of both me as writer (creator) and the reader who is now sharing my thoughts, through the liminal space that is my unfolding story and the ideas it contains, so that once it is written and read, and new meanings are co-created, 'we' have crossed the threshold to a higher state of understanding and awareness.

Through my story I can see that an important part of the relational and interactional process in the making of this picture involves *connecting, combining, integrating ideas to develop a synthesis that did not exist before*. This sums up very nicely what often happens when I sit down and think about an experience such as the one I am describing. The process of crystallising thoughts and feelings in words and connecting the numerous elements of an experience, enables me to gain new or richer perspectives on the way I have interacted with the world and what has resulted from these interactions. The question of 'How do I know what I know until I write or draw it?' is very real to me. Through writing and visualizing through diagrams and models, I connect and perhaps adapt my ideas to the ideas of others, and extend my understanding and my ignorance in the process. Writing for me is my most important process for connecting the ideas of other theorists and I use my own life stories to evaluate their relevance and through this a new awareness emerges.

Writing this article has enabled me to connect to another bit of the jigsaw puzzle that is our creativity, namely the 'mediums' we use to express ourselves⁷. According to Ken Robinson the medium is the means or mode of creative expression. 'If you're doing something creative, you have to be working in a medium'⁸. For an artist the medium is his art - his drawing, painting or other form of expression and it includes the media he uses to create his representations, his sketchbook and tools for sketching and colouring. Or, if he is a digital artist - a computer or digitising pad, scanner and camera or smartphone and software to process and manipulate the images. The medium of the footballer is the game of football he plays and his tools are the ball and the boots he wears. The writer's medium for self-expression is the words he writes with a pen and notebook or a word processor on a laptop. My making project involved me expressing myself first through the medium of painting and then through the medium of writing.

Concluding remarks

Anthropologist Tim Ingold offers two perspectives on the idea and process of making namely^{9:20-2}: *making as a project* 'we start with an idea in mind, of what we want to achieve, and with a supply of the raw material needed to achieve it. And it is to finish at the

moment when the material has taken on the intended form', or *making...as a process of growth*, 'the maker from the outset [is] a participant .. amongst a world of active materials. These materials are what he has to work with, and in the process of making he 'joins forces' with them, bringing them together or splitting them apart, synthesising and distilling, in anticipation of what might emerge.'

The idea of 'material' is central to the idea of making. Dictionary definitions of material¹⁰ include: (1) The matter from which a thing is or can be made and (2) Information or ideas for use in creating a book or other work or items, such as songs or jokes, comprising a performer's act. In the context of my painting this picture narrative I am using materials in two senses, the physical materials that formed the physical substance of the painting and the materials of my life - events like walking in the landscape and Christmas, people and relationships, all of which influenced and were connected through my painting.

This narrative represents my painting as both a project, in the sense of having an idea for a painting and then completing various activities and tasks until it was completed, and also a dynamic process of growth in which I was an engaged participant 'amongst a world of active materials' (using the concept of materials outlined above): a world of active materials that continues well beyond the completion of the painting.

It seems to me that my making of these artefacts emerged through the circumstances of my life (circumstances I have influenced but not controlled) in the manner envisaged by Carl Rogers² - the creative process is, *'the emergence in action of a novel relational product growing out of the uniqueness of the individual on the one hand, and the materials, events, or circumstances of their life'*. This ecological concept of creativity clearly aligns well to Ingold's ideas on making as a process of growth. This is very much an ecological (relational, interactional and *connectional/combinational*) view of creativity in line with the experience I have described in my narrative.

My experience and my reflections on the experience enable me to personalise and appropriate Carl Rogers' definition for my own creative process *'through a process of imagining and connecting particular things to achieve a particular goal, new, novel (for me) relational products grew out of my uniqueness as an individual on the one hand, and the materials of my life'*. The map of my making process and this narrative shows this cycle of action and interaction occurred twice: firstly, to generate my painting and then to produce this narrative which is continuing to the moment I am posting it (07 March), and will, I know, continue in my future.

The author and poet William Plomer once said, *"It is the function of creative people to perceive relations between thoughts, or things, or forms of expressions that seem utterly different, and to be able to connect the seemingly unconnected."* But we are all creative people and my story illustrates that when we create, the things we connect are not really unconnected because they are connected by our very existence and our relationships and interactions with the real or imagined worlds we inhabit. From all the possibilities for connection we encounter, we select those that have meaning for a particular purpose, context or circumstance, like the desire to make a particular thing or to make a particular thing happen. The mental construct I have developed (encapsulated in a metaphorical diagram and words) to explain this personal task of creation, is an ecology of practice that embraces *the whole of us* in a continuously unfolding interactive and connected relationship with our real and imagined worlds.

Writing these words triggered a memory from a few weeks ago coming across a video clip of David Hockney talking about the need to find the poetry in his art. I think the search for conceptual understanding is a bit like creating a poem in so far as it's a search for deeper meanings and expressions of alternative realities.

Acknowledgements

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Creative ideas and work is often inspired by the words and deeds of others. My interest in painting has definitely been rejuvenated by watching and listening to David Hockney on YouTube and participating in the December 2017 #creativeHE discussion.

Sources

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Version 1 07/03/18 (there is a version 2 which also considers the role of imagination in my process)