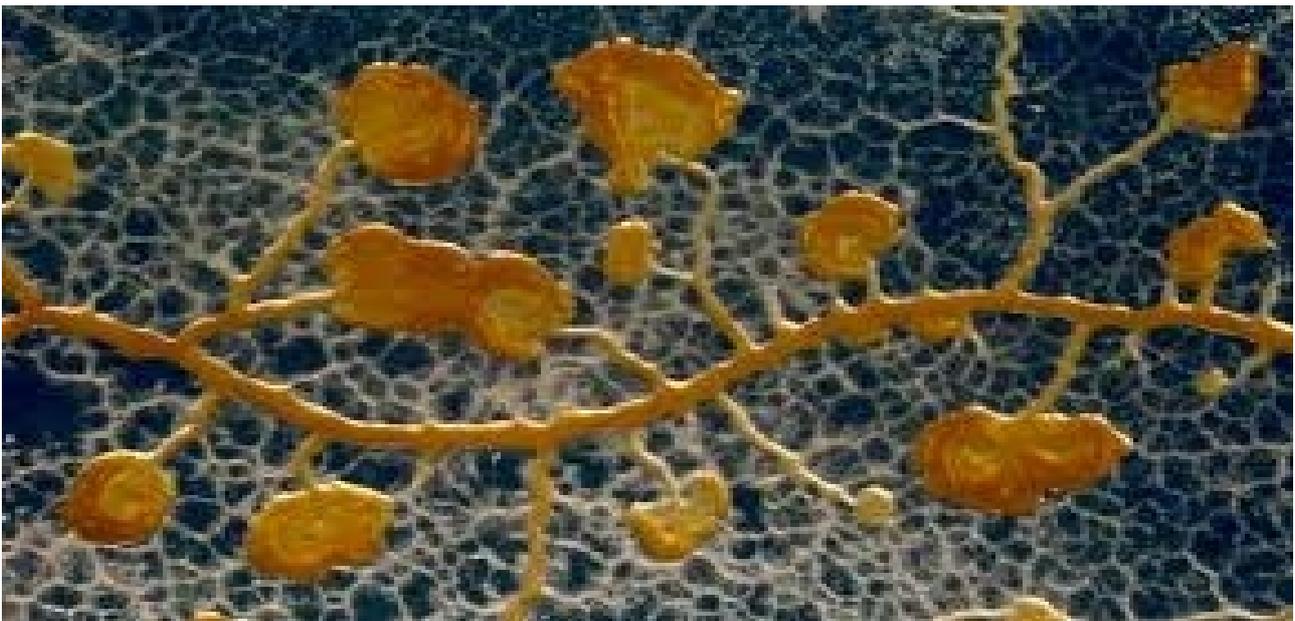# What's All the Fuss About Creative Networks? A Tale of Fish and Aeroplanes

By Jim Shorthose. Jan. 2013

Proverb

The best place to store surplus food is in the stomach of a neighbour.

This attitude protects you both against the future, and means that you both have a better world to live in.

We hear a lot these days about creative networks, and the potential they hold for creative business – for creative collaboration, business development and growing lively creative communities. But often this is a rather flimsy, over-hyped narrative that doesn't tell you anything – about how to understand them, engage with them and really find the benefits of them.

So let's think about some practical and concrete issues that might help with being good at networks and networking within your daily creative business life.

A General Attitude

One of the great myths about Big Business and the Big Economy, the one which has just so spectacularly failed, the one that perpetuates the idea that it *has to be* competitive and selfish. But creative people tend to know different, and tend to do networking all the time. It is just part of who we are and what we do. We tend to be constantly talking about our work, our new ideas and our plans. Try stopping us/them, right?.

A *zero-sum* game is a contest that has finite rewards because there has to be a winner and a loser. In a *non-zero-sum* game everyone can gain just by taking part, because the rewards are potentially infinite. Players can make a better context for each others' life and work just by playing together. Balancing the pursuit of one's own individual ends against acting together with/for other people is a powerful idea if you, we, get the balance right. Invest in, caring about, attending to our relationships with the people around us, is a way of growing ourselves too.

The non-zero-sum attitude is similar to what Ivan Illich has called *conviviality,* which he defined as,

> *…the autonomous and creative intercourse between persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment* (what I will later call the creative ecology)*…. I consider conviviality to be **individual freedom** realised in **personal interdependence** and, as such, an intrinsic value*.
>
> (from *Tools for Conviviality,* by I. Illich)

So far, so sensible perhaps. But if we fail to self-consciously appreciate and develop these possibilities for what they are, fail to get a handle on them, reflect back upon them and actively try to mutually grow them, they can elude us.

As another proverb suggests,

The last animals to discover water will be fish, because they are in it.

Same for us. If we are not good at seeing the nature and characteristics of the creative networks we are in, we might not 'discover the water' we are in, and so miss all sorts of opportunities. It is useful to understand the value of creative networks as potentially expandable space similar to our 'non-zero-sum' game.

In a practical sense,

- Deepening networking inevitably brings greater capacity to work well in cross-disciplinary creativity, which is likely to be increasingly necessary in the future. Good networks can be a great R&D department for your creativity and business, allowing you access to great sources of mutual teaching, learning and informal professional development in all sorts of unforeseen ways. You do not know *what* you need to know, because you do not know it yet. Deepening networks brings prolonged, intimate and trusting creative relationships that are also often good for a whole host of other 'emotional' reasons

- Broadening networks out beyond the usual suspects can open up new areas of creative development. You do not know *who* you need to know, because you do not know it/them yet. Allowing for the spontaneous and unplanned aspects of networking can bring people and their ideas to creativity and business that fully worked out plans cannot

- Good networking can mean you do not necessarily need to buy that new piece of kit, or learn that new skill right away, because you know someone who can help you out in exchange for a return favour. This makes creativity and business quicker, cheaper and means you can compete for business across a wider field by getting and staying together when it is strategically smart to do so. You do not know *where* or *when* you need to know, because... you get the idea

So good networks include an element of *breadth* (knowing lots of people a little), and *depth* (knowing a few people who you might work with more intensively). Both aspects of networks can be very useful. Networks can be about contacts you have with people over many years who are fundamental to what you do and how you do it (creative collaborators, joint authors, members of a creative group); or they can be quite fleeting relationships that come and go, are not necessarily experienced as meaningful but are vital to business nonetheless (with suppliers and service providers, and perhaps with customers).

But either way...

Emergent Behaviour for Creative Networking

In his book *Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains and Cities*, Steven Johnson has outlines the key features of what he, and others have called *emergent behaviour.* This can be useful as a kind of check list of ways to think about engaging with creative networks. Treat these points as an exercise, and test yourself to see how good you are at these things. It is professional development! Equally important, notice that these points suggest that you have responsibilities *to* your networks as well as expectations of getting something *from* them,

- **More is Different** – the more micro-difference involved in a creative network, the livelier and more useful they will be. Look for diversity in your networks. The higher the levels of difference among the creative people who come together, the more skill and ideas everyone has to potentially draw upon. Be an ambassador for difference; be your own DiY 'dating agency' to bring creative people together and maybe everyone will benefit, including yourself

- **Ignorance is Useful** – as we touched upon above, you never know what/who/when you need to know, because de facto, you do not know about it yet. As Bertrand Russell once said, there is no such thing a 'useless knowledge'. Embracing and enjoying your own ignorance will quickly show you the need to be open to new learning experiences - even, or maybe especially, those not directly connected to your own creative work. Fish think they know all about everything, but they don't even know about water yet!

- **Encourage Random Encounters** – because networks are highly decentralised 'organizations' they rely heavily on random interactions. Without these haphazard encounters you will not stumble over new and innovative ideas, new collaborators and new possibilities so often. Without random encounters you will not get the usefulness from difference and 'ignorance'. Not everything needs to be planned, if it is you might 'plan out' creativity and innovation

- **Look for Patterns in the Signs** – stand back from the detail and look for common patterns across your creative network. Pattern detection is a sure sign of intelligence and a learning business, and it also encourages collaboration. It is useful to recognise that you and potential collaborators may be working on similar issues, even though the overt content of each creative project might at first appear

very different

- **Pay Attention to Your Neighbours** – the most important one. Local information leads to global wisdom. Paying attention to the micro-communications coming from your neighbours encourages joint understanding and mutual growth. Be convivial, take time for each other, have a coffee and a chat, it is work! It is a non-zero sum game

We can sum all this up with a metaphor.

Metaphor

Does This Plane Go To Barcelona?

It is good to have a plan and 'stick to it', but it also good to spot new opportunities and 'go for it'.

When a plane takes off from London and flies to, for instance Barcelona, pilot error, turbulence and the sideways drift of the plane mean that the plane's direction needs to be constantly checked and re-adjusted so as to stay on course. This means that the plane is always zig-zagging around and across the intended flight path. It is almost never exactly 'on course'.

The constant zig-zagging back and forth around the intended flight path illustrates that,
- *for the vast majority of the flight the plane (creative business) is actually flying in the wrong direction. Only just before it lands on the runway in 'Barcelona' is it actually flying in the right direction. But it does get there. And it will need to do the same on another flight tomorrow*
- *the points of checking, correction and re-alignment are as important and realistic for pilot of the plane (creative business) as some unreasonable obsession with being exactly on course all of the time*

This is a useful metaphor for thinking about emergent behaviour in creative networks, for thinking about balancing a clear plan against encouraging random creative encounters. For *knowing what you know* whilst grasping the gaps in your knowledge so as to *learn what you need*. It might not be possible, or even desirable, to be exactly on course with

your creative business plan all the time. Creative networks will make life more complicated, but if your business is to get and stay creative, then complicated is good. Creative networks - real, vital and tangible networks that genuinely bring people together, as opposed to the stuffy, wooden 'talk about networking' – might just be the most important creative business resource out there for emergent behaviour and navigating your plane to your own Barcelona. But only if you get good at understanding them, skilled in engaging with them, keen to develop them and responsible in introducing new members to them.

You will need to learn your own creative networks and what you can specifically get/give to them. But in general getting good at 'doing' networks', enjoying them, growing them and sustaining them is likely to stay as a key creative and professional skill in the future 'new economy'.

Better to be a pilot flying a plane to Barcelona than a fish.