

Taking a Bridport bench to Brazil

“Thank you for your application for a scoping grant to develop a bid to the British Council’s Developing Inclusive and Creative Economies (DICE) programme. We are happy to inform you that your bid has been successful, and we look forward to receiving a list of the meetings you will be organising when you visit Brazil in November.”

We were pleased to have got through to the next stage of the DICE programme, but there was something about the notion of a “scoping visit” that made us feel uncomfortable. Our bid, developed by partners at the Brazilian Institute of Community Studies and Support (and requiring a UK partner), sought funds to begin the development of a women’s carpentry co-operative in Parelheiros, a “peripheral”, low-income community in the south of São Paulo. Yet a series of meetings did not feel the best way to begin that process.

So we proposed to the British Council that we organise a practical workshop, and bring to Brazil a designer-maker, Alice Blogg, from the UK. They agreed, though could not fund the additional costs of flights and accommodation. We found ways to reduce these costs, and re-directed the funding towards the workshop. In the end, the workshop happened, a beautiful bench was produced, everyone involved was inspired by doing something practical, and the second stage application for development funding from DICE was submitted.

And yet – this does not really describe all the lines of movement which came together around a simple idea of a carpentry workshop. The common assumption would be that working with colleagues at IBEAC we created a plan, we ensured that all the necessary inputs were in place, we delivered a successful workshop and then submitted a follow-up proposal to the British Council requesting support for the setting up of the cooperative. However, a closer look at the unfolding process indicates a different and much more complex dynamic.

When I suggested that we might invite Alice to Brazil, I sent over a link to her website, and when a colleague from IBEAC showed this to community members in Parelheiros, the picture they were struck by was a bench, made by Alice out of local oak, which sat in a local community centre. They asked: “Could we make something like this, perhaps made up of individual stools that could be put together into a bench that we can sit on for our meetings?”



So the idea of “bringing” the Bridport bench to Brazil began to take shape. The next question though was – how can we bring Alice to Brazil, as we only have a limited budget from the British Council? Here, two of my former students stepped forward, offering to put us up in their homes during our stay and also offering to deal with all the logistics of travel, liaison with partners, dealing with finances, etc. They had met Alice while in the UK, and were able to liaise with her about a possible

re-design of the Bridport bench that could be produced in a day by women and young people with no experience.

The next issue was workspace, tools and materials – the carpentry workshop was a great idea, but how were we going to deal with the practical requirements? Workers at IBEAC began asking around Parelheiros, and discovered an existing underused workspace run by another NGO called ITS (the Institute for Social Technology). The coordinator agreed to support the carpentry workshop and even identified some old wooden packaging boxes that could be recycled into planks. Suddenly the workshop was becoming more possible.



As the date drew closer, other elements were drawn into the confluence – the women of the Amara Kitchen project agreed to provide breakfast and lunch, community workers from CPCD's centre in Vargem Grande (one of the neighbourhoods in Parelheiros) agreed to lend their support, and members of the local family farmers' cooperative also agreed to help.



At the end of the workshop, the participants made up paint made from the local soils, and the “bench” was complete:



The original Bridport bench was made from oak, and this quote from John Shotter seems an apt way to describe how things came together to “form” the Parelheiros workshop. The idea for the workshop could be considered the “acorn” that seeded the activity that followed, but John Shotter (2012:140) challenges our usual conceptions:

Consider, say, an oak tree growing from an acorn: The acorn, as such, makes a negligible contribution to the material substance of the oak tree or to the energy needed to make it grow. The materials needed come from the air, water, and soil, while energy comes from the sun. These all move around in the acorn’s surroundings, clearly, in a not very organized manner. But as itself an open, living system able to ‘take in’ selected aspects of these materials, a ‘confluence’ within the acorn works to intertwine the streams of energized material flowing through it to produce a growing oak tree, that matures, produces acorns, dies, and eventually decays to return its material substances back into the unorganized flow of inanimate matter from whence it and they came.

Where, then, is the life of the oak tree? Is it *in* the tree itself? No. It is *in the unfolding relations* of the tree to its surroundings.

The scoping visit allowed relations to unfold in unexpected ways, with resources discovered, new connections made, possibilities imagined. Yet this did not just happen, in some mysterious way. Tim Ingold (2011:210) says that skilled practitioners have the ability to “find the grain of the world’s becoming and to follow its course while bending it to their evolving purpose.” We need to recognise the knowledge, skill and judgement brought to bear by people in the community, people at IBEAC and people in the partner organisations – the Institute for Social Technology, CPCD, Amara Kitchen, the family farmers’ cooperative – all of whom created the confluence and made new connections and began to explore new ways forward as a result.

Shotter and Tsoukas (2014:228) ask:

“how do practically thinking agents, embedded in social practices, act in complex circumstances, in which the alternatives available to them are at first not clear, or where the situation is not a matter of neatly comparing a range of alternatives and making a best

choice among them, but is a matter of coming to judgment in a way that “does justice” to what the overall concrete circumstances seem both to “demand” and to “permit”? “

Our friends in Parelheiros skilfully assessed what the circumstances demanded, but not in the rational, problem solving way that we usually think of as “planning” or “judgement” – rather they did so by engaging emotions and reason, intuition and intellect, sizing up the situation and *finding the grain* so as to meet their evolving purpose. The “form” of the workshop, as with the form of the bench, gradually firmed up through responsiveness to a constantly evolving situation.

The workshop in Parelheiros was not developed through focusing on “whats” (the inputs and outputs) with little consideration given to “how” the day might happen. One way to view the process was as the unfolding of a complex situation. However, even complexity theory can mask the actual processes involved. According to Edgar Morin (2008: 20-21),

“when cybernetics recognised complexity it was to get around it, to put it in parentheses, but without denying it. It is the principle of the *black box*: one considers the inputs and the outputs. This allows one to study the results of the system’s functioning, the resources needed by the system, the relationship between inputs and outputs, without ever entering into the mystery of the black box.”

Bruno Latour (1987) also refers to the way that processes of relating are treated as a “black box”, and this is commented on by McNamee and Hosking (2012: 38) – they suggest that this entails “centering the production, performance, or the ‘how’ of ongoing processes (rather than the ‘what’ of inputs and/or outputs).....Our interest is not in ‘What is it? Questions, nor in assumed entities; our interest is in how ongoing relational processes construct and re-construct local ontologies as forms of life.”

Engaging with the people in Parelheiros and IBEAC helped me to see these relational processes, whereas focusing just on inputs and outputs would have obscured the dynamic elements of the story.

“What we traditionally view as ‘independent’ elements – the man with the bat, the bags, the men in the field – are not truly independent. They are all mutually defining... Alone they would [all] be virtually without meaning. It is when we bring all these elements into a mutually defining relationship that we can speak about ‘playing baseball’. Let us then speak of the baseball game as *a confluence*, a form of life in this case that is constituted by an array of mutually defining ‘entities’” (Gergen, 2009: 54).

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