

Slow Knowledge: uses of the postcard in re-forming organisational time, place and meaning

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ABSTRACT

This working paper is one in a series which considers the importance of slowness, rhythm, and tempo in organisations. In modern organisations people feel both 'out of time' in the sense that they have no time, and they feel out of synch with what goes on, and 'out of place' in the sense that they do not belong. Our concern here is with how a postcard can be used, as an object with both real and metaphorical attributes, in ways which change an organisation's ability to see and hear itself, and introduce for the individual a new and meaningful sense of time and place.

The paper outlines 4 case studies over the past 2 years in which postcards have explicitly been used as an active device to reorganise organisational time, place and knowledge. The purpose of the postcard, combined with display in some cases, was threefold. Firstly to find new ways to develop, secure and refresh shared meaning between individuals and the organisation. Secondly, to do this in such a way that it creates a kind of open architecture which can sustain itself. Thirdly to use the experience to make apparent the effect of dislocation in organisations including: loss of contact between the past and the present, lack of connection between the individual and the organisation and loss of momentum through lack of attention to rhythm.

These case studies are set within various theoretical frameworks which consider the role of objects in the transformation of knowledge.

We end by drawing some conclusions about lessons to be drawn about how to use specific types of object as signifiers - a means to bridge the virtual and the physical, the individual and the organisation, private and public spaces, word and image, and for strengthening the links between past, present and future in organisations going through change.

Please note that we do regard this as a working paper. Ideas and contributions are most welcome.

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Context: the thrust of Sparknow's enquiry

It is necessary to start with a brief introduction to Sparknow ('Spark') which is a small knowledge management consultancy, rooted in the theory and practice of complexity. It pays particular attention to embedding 'art' inside organisational processes as a means by which cultural change can be effected. In particular spark has paid attention to

1. the role of dialogue and storytelling in organisations, and of the consultant as observer-participant,
2. the role of objects and display – for example as mnemonics which trigger memory of specific experience; as vehicles of co-creation which foster community and common purpose; as nodal visualisations which make visible patterns and collections which might otherwise stay tacit and undetected, and
3. the nature of space and place in global organisations – in particular the impact of corporate initiatives which makes for increasingly public space and a loss of private place for individuals. Private time and private place are increasingly colonised by time-hungry corporate organisations.

One of our concerns is with how individuals work in three environments in the organisation – desk/pc-based, mobile and social. In all cases the knowledge worker is likely to be working on an object, either on their own, or with others, whether it is a paper, document or idea. What is needed to work effectively is an environment which enhances possibilities for action either by increasing the worker's relationship to other objects, or their relationship to people in constructing the object. This is an interesting kind of reverse engineering of the virtual experience where context (traces of where you have been, signposts to where you can go) is as visible as content and plays an equally important role. The internet has de facto encouraged context, connections, links,

exploration, serendipity. Can this be translated to the physical environment? Google as an example has created visibility as a valuable knowledge by-product of the search process. The intention is to find something. The maps of findings create a kind of visible context which enriches your understanding or catalyses your curiosity. Google in fact run a kind of digital display – a ticker of analysis of the searches which runs on a screen in their office and provides both entertainment and context.

Context is increasingly important, not just because the internet has provided some insight into the benefits of contextualisation, but also because of the growing fragmentation of global organizations, prompted both by mobile technologies which have changed work patterns, and by a relatively new contract society, where relationships are fluid and shift rapidly. One needs, therefore, to be really clear about categories and conditions of work activities. We have found it useful to consider the following matrix (after Johansen, 1988):

<p style="text-align: center;">Same Time Same Place</p> <p>individual pc work, dialogues, group meetings, workshops, events and presentations, looking at displays and noticeboards</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Different Time Same Place</p> <p>libraries and shared archives, contributing to noticeboards and displays, project rooms, museums, galleries, exhibits etc, facilitation techniques for workshops such as NimSpace (EU –funded research)</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Same Time Different Place</p> <p>videoconferencing (including desktop), audioconferencing, chatlines, virtual meetings through, e.g. NetMeeting, EU-funded research such as MILK project (use of plasma screens for multiple-site interaction round objects and dialogue)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Different Time Different Place</p> <p>Email exchange, SMS text messaging, Discussion Databases</p>

Of course, even within this there can be subtle, but important, reorganizations of time and rhythm. A smaller unit of time, as well as a larger one, can be reorganized by introducing different rules and technologies. The key, as an observer-participant, is to notice the consequences of different choices.

For example, for one client (a government agency) the chief executive decided to have a national conference call which included key sites at all thirteen offices. While he could communicate/broadcast using both video and audio, respondents at allocated sites in the offices could only communicate with him through online questions. This in turn created local dialogue while groups of the audience chose collectively what question to put. The dynamic of this syncopation created a much more intimate shared experience than would have been achieved through a multi-site video conference.

1.2 Why postcards?

The postcard was very much an invention of the 19th Century, with the first acknowledged postcard being approved by the Austro-Hungarian government in 1869. There were many improvements which took place over the next 30 years, including permission to put photographs on one side. The introduction of the “divided back” in 1902, which enabled both text and address to be on the side opposite to the photograph, inaugurated the “golden era” of the postcard. So it is appropriate that we are virtually at the centenary of that golden era in 2003:

“Almost everyone bought and sent cards compulsively at the peak of the postcard craze in 1903. Every corner shop or stall sold them, and the demand for novelty and variety was enormous. Postcards were a rapid and amusing means of communication, and with six or seven postal deliveries a day in cities, people could make an appointment with certainty for later that same day. Small talk, gossip, holiday messages, and even romances were pursued on cards. Albums filled with cards provided entertainment for family and friends. Local photographers recorded accidents and events, and stage artists used cards to publicize their shows.” Connor (2000)

In many ways the postcard serves a powerful metaphoric role for key dimensions of knowledge management and of time:

- ? It is personal/private but at the same time both shareable and publishable via a noticeboard.
- ? It maintains its quality of having been individually authored, so the link to the originator stays explicit.
- ? It is light, compact, and highly portable.

- ? It is asynchronous, but interactive and annotatable
- ? It is an ideal vehicle for messaging
- ? It is time saving for the author.
- ? It is an early form of multimedia, allowing an almost infinite range of attached images

We would note in passing that the postcard was invented in a primarily German-speaking environment – Austro-Hungary. There is a famous contemporary series called “Boring Postcards” for the UK (Parr, 1999), USA and latterly Germany (Parr, 2001). The title of the German volume is “Langweilige Postkarten” and this reminded us that the word “lanweilige” is not an exact replication of the English word “boring”. It carries an additional sense of being “drawn out”: a subtlety which is missing in the rather brutally direct English word, but a very relevant aspect to our own study of slowness. The postcard was seen by senders as a “fast” device, but then put in album or put on wall - almost the ultimate in slowness. A century ago, another example of slowness was through frequent use of serial postcards – issued say weekly that would encourage users to buy, send and collect a whole series. One spark associate engages today in serial sending of postcards from overseas trips each highlighting a distinctive knowledge spaces from around the world. Slowly these cards when received at Spark cumulate up into a body of knowledge in its own right

Willoughby (1992) highlighted that the medium was very much the message:

“...soon a person did not need a particular reason to send a postcard to a friend – the picture was reason enough and if you were lucky, the recipient might send one in return.”

Willoughby goes on to identify the benefits of postcards for the general public:

- ? initially cost cutting – cheap to purchase and half the stamp cost. PO own card was just cost of stamp.
- ? saving in time allowed especially for a short note with ordinary contents “see you tomorrow at 4 p.m.”, “caught last train, arrived home safely”
- ? at a time of no telephone it was the quickest means of making contact asynchronously
- ? collectability

Nicholson (1994) describes how James Douglas, a London journalist, reported that before the postcard, people had to write lengthy letter to their friends.

“It has secretly delivered us from the toil of letter writing...our forefathers actually sat down and wasted hours over these long epistles. It is sad to think of the books that dead authors might have written if they had saved the hours they had squandered upon private correspondence. Formerly when a man went abroad he was forced to tear himself from the scenery in order to write laborious descriptions of it to his friends at home. Now he merely buys a picture postcard at each station...nobody needs fear that there is any spot on the earth which is not depicted on this wonderful oblong”.

The connections with email and particularly with text messaging are clear, although Douglas would have been disappointed at the “squandering” of time on the modern journal – the blog.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Research perspective

There is increasing challenge to the classic methods of research, e.g. OECD (1997):

“In the early part of the 21st century, however, university research and its relation to society are likely to be very different from what they are today.”

One of the most active challenges to classic research comes from the advocates of Mode 2 research. Hammersley (1999) provides an excellent summary of Mode 2 research, which is worth quoting at length:

“Mode 1 research is based primarily in universities, is focused on disciplines, and is concerned simply with contributing to a cumulating body of knowledge; so that any 'application' of the knowledge is a secondary matter, and one that is seen as beyond the responsibility of researchers....Mode2 research contrasts with Mode 1 in several respects:

First, it is focused on solving problems that arise in particular practical contexts. The aim is to generate some solution or product, rather than simply to contribute to a body of knowledge.

Secondly, it takes place via team work, involving researchers from diverse disciplinary backgrounds. And these teams are seen as 'non-hierarchical, heterogeneously organised forms which are essentially transient' (Gibbons et al 1994: vii).

Thirdly, Mode 2 research is transdisciplinary in orientation. In other words, while disciplinary knowledge is drawn on, even more important are the knowledge, understanding and techniques that those engaged in Mode 2 research accumulate in the course of doing it

Finally, accountability is practical in character, involving users as well as researchers. Indeed, there is no permanent body of researchers that could play the kind of role in accountability that the discipline plays in Mode 1 research.....”

In the discussion of relevance we have been particularly struck by the proposals of Flyvbjerg and Sampson (2001). They recommend researchers drawing on draw on all three of Aristotle's types of knowledge: Episteme (analytical scientific knowledge); Techne (craft know how) and Phronesis (prudence, practical wisdom).

Flyvbjerg suggests that phronesis (practical wisdom) is largely ignored in scientific and even social science research, yet in fact embodies the very characteristic that is needed for applied research to be made relevant and directly related to practical action, or put into Aristotle's own more elegant words from the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

“... a true state, reasoned and capable of action with regard to things that are good or bad for man.”

The work outlined in this paper is placed very directly in the Mode 2 perspective. The case studies are all based on solving practical problems. Both the problem solving and the production of the paper are based on transdisciplinary teamwork. (Our core disciplines are respectively information systems, consultancy, knowledge management, anthropology and theatre design). And the accountability is practical, involving both users as well as researchers in transient contexts. In the language of complexity, we consciously style ourselves, both in the case studies which follow, and in the construction of papers like these, as observer-participants, conscious that the record of the experience,

and the unfolding of the experience over time, are equally significant, albeit one is tangible and the other intangible.

2.2 Slowness

In this paper we build on our previous work (Ward, Holtham and Bohn 2002) on the importance and indeed the necessity of slowness in the process of knowledge creation and sharing. Since that earlier paper we have carried out experiments in the explicit use of methods to achieve slowness, and here we report on those methods. We have had for some time a particular focus on the role of artefacts in knowledge creation and sharing (Holtham, Ward and Bohn, 2002), and this focus has proved to be particularly relevant to our pursuit of slowness. At a meta-level we are concerned with conversation/dialogue plus time and then below that are dimensions relating to:

1. the role of stories in slowing things down for various kinds of sensemaking (Weick, 1995)
2. the role of objects/art/artistic processes in speeding things up and slowing things down, in collapsing distance and bringing the edges to centre, and their theoretical construct as signifiers, representations of social mores in a particular material culture
3. situated learning, Lave and Wenger (1998) argue that it is the only learning that really works...i.e. you have to do it to learn it, but you don't necessarily know what it is you are learning until after you have done it
4. thinking about the kinds of units of time, and its punctuation, the rhythm that define an organisation

Virilio (1980) argues that speed is far from neutral: it orders our lives, dominates our expectations and even alters our deep sense of ourselves. Sørensen (2000) studies "social learning" in response to the problems of understanding what happens to technology in society which implies an emphasis of both spatial and temporal aspects. Quoting Giddens and the literature on technology transfer he says that disembodied knowledge is

insufficient. Knowledge has either to be embodied (transfer of people as well as technology) and/or to be developed locally through learning.

Social learning is thus more than learning-by-interacting. It may be characterised as a combined act of discovery and analysis, of understanding and meaning, and of tinkering and the development of routines. In order to make an artefact work, it has to be placed, spatially, temporally, and mentally. Artefacts are important as triggers of imagination, i.e. seeing beyond the immediate materiality of an object. It is the faculty of the human mind that responds to story and image that most proximately is excited by the possibilities of art. So it has its acknowledged cultural primacy (Kingswell, 1995).

3 FOUR CASES WHERE POSTCARDS AND DISPLAY WERE USED TO REORGANISE SPACE INTO TIME AND TIME INTO SPACE

The rest of this section of our paper considers four case studies where postcards and display were explicitly used to introduce private individual experience into public spaces in ways which would change the rhythm and actions of the organisation. In particular the goal of these exercises was to use analogue techniques to create postings of small defining experiences and insights, in such a way that they could accumulate into patterns, an informative bricolage, where the future could be directly informed by past experience. In this sense, a vertical physical place (either a temporary erected screen or hoarding, or a permanent wall, boundary or meeting place) is deliberately being appropriated for a period of time to create a cumulative record of individual past experiences which will shape present understanding in such a way as to have a direct impact on the future.

3.1 Case One; postcards for atomisation and speed, and display to prompt congregation, conversation and the posting and sharing of sensitive intelligence

Summary: A public sector organisation. E-postcards and physical displays were piloted in a knowledge management programme as devices to create secure and speedy channels for news and congregation points for posting and sharing sensitive intelligence.

(In this case, we should be clear that Sparknow was not the lead consultant, but was supporting Accenture in their work.)

The aspects both of using postcards, and of developing the role of display were both part of a substantial knowledge management pilot programme in a public sector entity handling highly sensitive intelligence. In this particular organisation the culture was very much one where both analysis work and fieldwork depended both on formal channels of identification, and on informal skills, such as powers of observation which might detect unlikely patterns which would then need to be acted on. Particularly in the case of the fieldwork, it is often true that a single sighting of something may not, at first blush, look like important intelligence. It is only by building patterns of observations that the organisation can develop effective responses.

The idea of electronic postcards was to encourage information flows from regions to the centre, and create a much more distributed, voluntary system of channelling and contributing news and insights from fieldwork.

‘It will require the maximum number of people to contribute their own experiences to make this element robust in avoiding duplication of effort seen where two officers investigate the same issue. We will measure at the individual level the number of contributions compared to the total number of potential contributors there are. This will help to build an understanding of how far we have been able to promote the value of individual knowledge and the need for this to be shared.’ [Extracted from project documentation]

The natural unit of the organisation which lent itself to this experiment was the COPE, Centres of Operational Excellence, sponsored by the organisation. It was decided that a standard template would be designed, to be made available on the Intranet for officers to complete and email to the COPE. In addition, officials in the outfield beyond the reach of the intranet were to have preformatted cards (colour-coded for assessments, issues, etc) on which they would record a new assessment, an issue that has arisen, and so forth.

In a separate, but related pilot, the challenge was to use the physical space in the premises to increase and improve the flow of information and knowledge between two different groups gathering intelligence and to introduce elements of a more collaborative working environment. Here a central proposal was to create a small, contained information point, the I-Point.

This was situated in a small triangle of space just inside the main office doors, a location with high visibility and good wall/display space. It included an Information Wall consisting of a lockable whiteboard for sensitive information; wall mounted flip charts; mobile literature display stand; small lockable index file for information cards; shelving for colour coded magazine files.

The proposed etiquette for using the I-point, was that the pilot team wishing to gather feedback and/or material for the Information Cards could use the shelf for feedback cards, and keep the department updated about the pilot project. Postcards could be used for capturing this information on the boards, completed anonymously if wished.

‘It is important to encourage people to see the I-Point as an interactive resource to which they can add their expertise, knowledge and information. The desk should be kept clear for this purpose and have a stock of marker pens, blank cards etc. and a small explanatory notice.’ [Extracted from Angela Dove’s recommendations to the client]

Although we did not realise it explicitly at that time, which was quite early in our research into tempo in organisations, these two experiments were distinct, but related, attempts to change the tempo of the organisation.

On the one hand, with the electronic postcards, the pilot sought to inject more speed and distance: by atomising knowledge into small, digestible nuggets (what can you communicate in 15 seconds?) and packaging it as postcards the challenge was to cover distances, with speed and create channels for posting sightings which would not otherwise be passed on. It is of significance that the vehicles for these objects were the existing semi-formal communities of practice already sponsored by the organisation. In

this sense the intention was not to cross boundaries in the organisation, but to create more flows down channels which already existed. Coming back to the earlier matrix, this was an attempt to use Different Place actively as a benefit to the organisation by encouraging flows from the outfield to the centre of the organisation, and at the same time to try and compress the time it might make for the news to travel, and to allow it to be reassembled into organisational intelligence at the other end.

On the other, the display, based round a liminal space, with a lockable noticeboard positioned between two groups, was an experiment in creating a boundary object which would join two different intelligence gathering groups in the organisation. To create sufficient protocols and safety of procedure that mutuality and trust would build in the posting of confidential intelligence to a shared space. The object was a boundary object both organisationally (postings by two groups without particular trust in each other), and physically (postings in a space which invited both groups over the threshold to a space where they would be working on something jointly). The I-Point was intended to slow things down, at least to the extent that it invited face to face encounter as well as human/non-human interactions around the postings. So one might characterise the I-Point idea as one seeking to accumulate, congregate and converse, while the experimental postcards sought atomisation, speed and distance.

In both cases they exemplify the trend identified by Nigel Thrift (Spacing and Timing, 2001) towards organisational attention paid to 'very small spaces and times'.

3.2 Case Two: postcards and dialogue for cultural change.

Summary: A law enforcement organisation cultural change programme. Postcards were used as a device to intermediate the move from conversation to action, from action to conversation and back again, and so create a rhythm, which translated directly into individual and collective actions which, could both be sustained and viewed over time.

Here, postcards and display were used in the second phase of a cultural change programme. The first phase had been designed with the intention of stripping away the

normal gimmicks and props of facilitated organisational interaction (brainstorm, flip chart, facilitation, postit notes) and create an empty, slow, space in which dialogue between peers would be the central experience, enriched by some conversations with outsiders who might add some fresh twist of perspective. These dialogues, in a series of 6 events, had led to a shared event where the whole group of participants had elected to work together on a number of actions which they felt would create a new cultural climate of their choice. Phase two, six months after this first, larger meeting, was intended to revisit this work and jointly chose where to take it next.

Delegates asked to come equipped with views, opinions, points of view canvassed from other colleagues around 4 headings:

- ? How well is this action being communicated?
- ? What's good about it? What is working well?
- ? What's bad about it? What is not working well?
- ? What might we change or improve in future?

Postcards were chosen because they are visual and tangible and a lot of the topics being talked about were not. It would enhance an otherwise dull and wordy process. The process began with an ice breaker called 'Touring, Viewing & Postcards'. Delegates were given time to mill around and familiarise themselves with the strands/products presented. When visiting each table, they are asked to record their strongest reactions/ opinions on a postcard provided and pin it up. This would serve as an icebreaker to open up dialogue. In the next session (tour), delegates were asked to focus on writing postcards for the 'actions' they are not concentrating on in roundtables.

Postcards were designed by an in-house designer. The 'action strands' designed, developed and now being evaluated by the attendees were branded by the designer, with help from Spark, by selecting a suitable image to stand for that action, e.g. informal lunches to up the level of free debate in the organisation were represented by photo of an espresso and a sandwich, the communications agreement was represented by a photograph of two people shaking hands etc.

Each action strand was also given a colour to represent it, like dark blue, purple, green etc. The branding helped short-form or create essence of what was otherwise a complex idea, helping people to visualise, compare and contrast essences rather than swimming in words and detail. The postcards were designed so that on one side, the side which would not show when pinned up, you had the colour. On the other side, the side to be written on, you had the brand/ image/ motif etc, faded out but visible.

When the day came to evaluate the 7/8 action strands, the room was set up so that enclaves were created using display boards (with coloured space and the image, plus the agreed short-form explanation of the initiative/ action in the centre. The boards were positioned to wrap around the end of a roundtable such that they would frame the discussions.

On entering the room, attendees saw the different areas and were given time to mill around, write and view postcards recording the feedback they were asked to gather from colleagues in advance of the session as to how these initiatives were being received, how widely they were being communicated, what was working well, what was not working, and how they could be improved in future plus success measures etc.

Once one or two people had added comments to a particular area, especially if they were contentious, it seemed to provoke a response, such that people would write comments in threads connected to each other and then have a dialogue with the person (or not) about it. It proved a safe way to add comments, as people tacitly respected others written comments and did not seem to challenge even the very contentious ones. Those in charge of the various action strands, who were there to gather the feedback, make sense then propose next steps based on recommendations, took an active role in getting the substance behind some of the comments, as postcards force a brevity that is useful on one level, but needs to be opened wider on another.

Attendees were allowed to do this slowly, and it worked - there was a lot of conversation with no lack of energy, no aimless wandering, the postcards were strong visual triggers and the displays building in real time worked well to focus the attention in the room. People could literally see evaluation happening and that felt satisfying.

The postcards proved a useful source of fuel for the roundtable discussions that followed, where the action strand reps asked groups to take a moment to view what had been written on the postcards over the last 45 minutes, and consider whether any themes were striking, in relation to the four headings: how well communicated, what's good, what's bad, and what to change or improve.

Postcards then, in short, worked well because:

- ? They were well designed/ branded to stand for something and contain thought
- ? They allowed people to submit views anonymously. There is something striking about the open/closedness of postcards - the only mailing you can read, publicly, but it is still considered a bit rude to do so... maybe we just expect people won't read them. This dimension was consistent with the ethos of trying to promote open honest dialogue
- ? Their shortness focused the thinking to only convey the essence of what they had seen/ heard. The evaluation did not suffer because of it, as what followed was a roundtable discussion which used them as prompts
- ? It helped people who are ordinarily unheard in these fora submit positive views without fear of it moving nothing on, or it being too trite. This was, in fact, an interesting outcome.
- ? The tangibility meant that people's individual comments, fragments or words, usually left in the ether during discussions or recorded on a single clumsy flipchart, could be dismantled, plucked, strung together, re-ordered, classified etc to make sense, to be used to support or reject... as evidence. Does that make sense? People took single postcards down from displays during discussions to say - 'look, it's not just me. This person said...' or 'but that is odd, as this person said the opposite' etc.

- ? They are now kept as primary evidence, which has not gone through an organisational translation process of sanitisation. All the impact and all the meaning comes from the fact they were written, by hand, by attendees and not facilitators or managers of the process. They remain direct and unintercepted feedback, caught in time.

And they worked because attendees were allowed time to warm up to the day, to meet others, to feel settled in an unfamiliar location with an unfamiliar process. They were allowed time for them to take a card, think about what they had heard or seen and turn that simply into a comment to stick up. The exercise was simple and very light, very free. The organisers made sure they took time.

3.3 Case Three: postcards, display and story for creating new spaces.

Summary: Postcards were a device we used to help health workers reorganise their physical space and organisational hierarchy and as a means to weave personal memory and experience into the fabric of the design for a new integrated health centre.

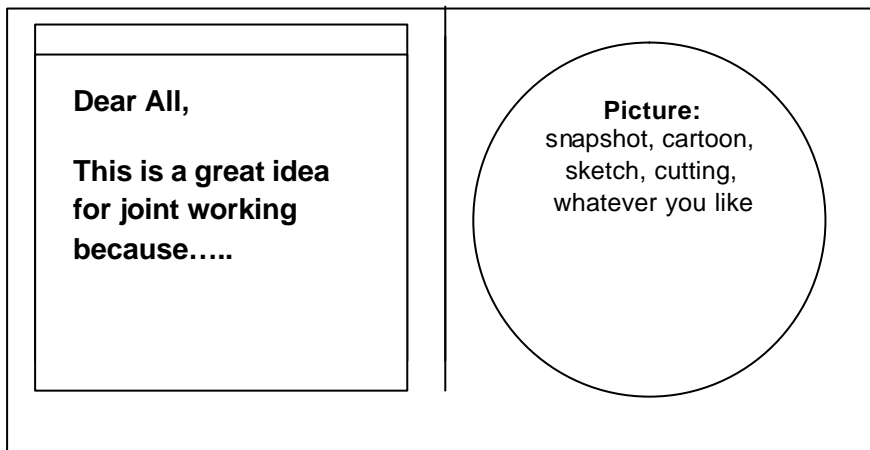
In this case we were invited by a local General Practitioner to facilitate the contribution by frontline healthworkers to the brief for an architects' competition for the design of a new building which would foster the very best environment for integrated working between, for example, nurses, doctors, social workers, volunteers. We chose to have them gather for one day in an intense experience designed to move from contributing observations from the outside (through postcard and display) to sharing and consolidating narratives of personal experience, and then using the materials generated to construct visual ideas which they could display to each other and use as the basis for incorporating recommendations into a final brief, which was to be written by the sponsoring GP.

We sent a letter of invitation and a task note to attendees. This was the task note:

A small task beforehand.....

As you know, Sparknow has been invited to facilitate a day in which you start to develop a clear brief for the physical space for joint working and use this to direct the architects and to organise yourselves. We are very pleased that you are willing to set aside precious time to take part, as joint working *about* joint working is valuable in itself. We have tried to design a day that will foster the sharing of ideas, opinions, lessons and experiences, and harness these into a clear understanding and sense of direction for the future building.

We would like to ask all of you to take the time beforehand to seek out images, stories and characteristics that capture what you think works well about your space and should be part of joint working. These could be whole spaces, or tiny objects, or you at work. Imagine that you are making postcards:



Please feel free to make several postcards. And don't be afraid either to be sweepingly general, or to notice tiny details. Often in this work we find that people assume that what they experience is too obvious to share, or too trivial. This is simply not true. Nothing is too obvious. Nothing is too trivial. Everything is welcome and worthwhile.

We enclose a camera for you to capture some elements for your postcards or simply to record details of your workspace and day.

This will help to build a picture of the relationship between people and the space, and how the space is used effectively, or not, in working across disciplines/boundaries.

Ten snaps would be enough but do take more if you wish and have the time.

Some points to consider:

- ? Use the opportunity to tell a visual story of your working day, documenting the journeys you make through the building.
- ? Workspace can mean any part of the building that you use, including the car park!
- ? Meeting space can include formal and informal space, social space, corridors, canteen, the local cafe.
- ? Space should include your desktop, and walls, notice boards, information points, IT terminals, bookshelves, resources, filing systems, and storage cupboards.

Your costs will be covered in full.

And thank you in advance for taking part. We will do our very best to make it a good experience.

Angie, Kerry, Victoria

The key messages from this were that:

- ? They brought external noticings with them, so they brought the real world and their own experience in, using postcards as a kind of mnemonic device to remind them to have their own experiences present in the room.
- ? The creation of exhibits from postcards (posted up on brown paper etc) redefined the space being used for the day, and the hierarachies amongst workers.
- ? An early, narrative, connection was made between image and words, which was explicitly reincorporated later in the day in such a way that the postcards were embedded into a larger shared narrative of vision for the future.

The extent to which this was successful was evidenced in a visit to the practice to start a new piece of work. In the room was the maquette of the building – the most radical design submitted to the competition, together with a few of the ‘postcards’ blu-tacked to the wall above. We asked the practice manager whether the experience had made any difference, and she was able to point to specific elements of design which could be traced directly back to the day, and in some cases directly back to specific ideas which had been postcarded to the initial display.

3.4 Case Four: postcards and dialogue to bridge virtual and physical communities.

Summary: In a research project on knowledge and physical environments. A postcard was used to intermediate the transition from virtual (web based community of practice) to face to face (dialogue), and so act as a way to draw out concrete experiences through dialogue which would then form the basis of a further round of response and investigation.

The method involved using a postcard with an image of a lighthouse-keeper’s cottage on Orford Ness on the front. The questions were devised as anthropologically and effective story eliciting questions. The postcard deliberately and professionally designed to create a temporary private space which would allow associates to engage in conversations with

delegates of the conference which had some meaning and depth, elicited insights and created mechanism for posting these. In practice most consultants wrote notes on the postcards which summarised conversation, then blogged these on an intranet sometimes with images. The postcard questions were:

- ? Do you think your own workspace encourages collaboration?
- ? Tell us about a recent incident where this happened.
- ? Are there any parts of your building or workspace which you associate with memorable moments of work?
- ? Tell us about a time and place when this happened. How does where you work reflect the way you work?
- ? Have you ever witnessed a company change its workspace radically? What happened?
- ? Where do you have your most interesting work conversations?
- ? In your experience, can you ever replace real workspace with virtual workspace? How?

There were several key findings from this case study. Firstly, the postcard was used successfully to create a community amongst volunteers in a virtual community and create engagement between them and others which would prompt rich elicitation of experiences. Secondly, while successful within the moment of conversation it was only partly successful in sustaining the interaction beyond that moment (and in fact this is mainly due to lack of time to write things up in a form that would engage a wider audience in a further round of conversations, comparing experiences). Thirdly, it was very effective in creating temporary private space within a huge expo space of the conference centre. The postcard created intimacy with friends and strangers which helped erect temporary, slower and more reflective private spaces for dialogue within the postcard space. When we considered whether this was a virtual or physical space, we concluded afterwards that in fact what we had created was a kind of emotional or psychological space and that this was important to pay attention to. This type of space was being fostered here by virtue of us having gathered together associates from a virtual network to share a common experience which would then fund their future relationships with the individuals in the network and with the network as a whole. The activity was also helping to create a common mental framework through which individuals could continue to act in a

coherent, and recognisably ‘Sparknow’ way when engaging with people external to our organisation.

Much more could be done to develop micro-experiences like this where the explicit object has beauty, elegance, minimalism and emotional meaning, and this leads to a tacit experience in three dimensions:

- ? the theoretical and practical underpinnings which have led to the minimalism of the design of the explicit process,
- ? the emotional significance which is a consequence of the process, and
- ? the resulting rhythm of tacit and explicit which leads to a sense of an unfolding narrative shared meaning which is a direct consequence of individual dialogue.

4 CONCLUSION

Our initial interest in postcards was purely functional, as a tool to be used in the elicitation of knowledge. But as our work progressed, it became clearer to us that the postcard was itself both a symbol and a representation of a particular perspective on knowledge and time. It is a visible symbol of "slowness". It is a representation of a slow but interactive approach to knowledge accumulation which collapses the global into the local, contacts the ‘edges’ or closes distance between others, using physical objects which are both signifiers of social mores and local cultures, and symbols of gift exchange.

The displays which can then be fostered, either through intense experience (same time, same place) or asynchronously by individual contributions to a noticeboard (different time, same place) then lead to a further round of dialogue and contributions who accretions enrich and deepen meaning round key themes. The resulting context starts to create links, connections, patterns, nodes and signposts which can play a powerful role in reintroducing place and community in fragmented organisations, and relocate the individual in the context of the whole organisation. The sense of being dispossessed, of being ‘out of time’ and out of place’ is mitigated.

Much of the evolution of knowledge management has over-emphasised fast digital-based technology. We are increasingly of the view that slow analogue technologies have at least an equal role to play. We had not expected to see the humble postcard as a vehicle of innovation. But this quintessentially nineteenth century invention may yet serve to remind us that in the area of time and knowledge, a great deal can still be learnt from rediscovery of our past, alongside invention of the new.

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