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Gardening and greenhouses ecological metaphors

This #creative conversation set out to explore this idea of creative ecologies. One of the questions underlying this exploration was how can we use the ecological metaphor in the context of developing higher education professionals. The etymological roots of the word ‘ecology’ are in Greek oikos (household) and logos (knowledge). Oikos suggests notions of dwelling or habitat (Ingold 2000). Our learning ecology is therefore the particular habitat in which we think, do, learn and become, it includes ourselves and our purposeful interactions with our environment. At a larger scale we think of a healthy ecosystem as an environment in which many organisms interact with each other and their environment are flourishing. Similarly, our learning and development is more likely to flourish when individuals with shared interests and complementary skills interact in effective and creative ways with each other and with their environment.

I am attracted to the idea that our development or growth as a professional in an institutional environment is an ecological phenomenon in which our environment and the way in which we interact with it can enable or conversely inhibit people’s flourishing. So when I searched for a metaphor to describe an approach to professional development I was pioneering in my institution I chose the idea of a greenhouse as it captures in one word a story and a set of values and beliefs about how people learn and develop together. A greenhouse comprises a secure and protected space within which the gardeners who use it help create an ecosystem within which plants can flourish. Using this analogy I wanted to create something similar to enable my professional colleagues to develop themselves and flourish.

The greenhouse metaphor has helped me articulate and share my recent explorations into the world of individual and collective creativity in the context of professional development and, I hope, it will help the reader visualise it with me. Most of us are familiar with the greenhouse in gardens, back yards, and sometimes seen on terraces or balconies. Many people have the desire to grow plants that wouldn’t survive outside the greenhouse. Often their aim is to nurture the plant from a seed, seedling or cutting so that it can grow strong to the point where the plant can survive and thrive in the garden. Of course some plants can’t survive in our climate, they are more needy and can only thrive in the greenhouse.

As humans we can interfere with nature and create entirely new environments, like a greenhouse, through which we can, with the right knowledge and skill, create the conditions for such seeds to grow. My emphasis on creation is deliberate and relevant to the idea of ecologies for professional development. People who specialise in educational and professional development commit time, energy and intellectual effort to developing knowledge and skill to create and be creative, with the support of their institution, the fruitful conditions to nurture professional growth. Creativity is nurtured in the greenhouse and allows pedagogic seeds to grow into healthy plants and shared with the wider community.
Our Greenhouse: a space for cultivating ideas and confidence

Giving ideas a life is the essence of creativity. James and Brookfield23 remind us that “the capacity to imagine is part of what makes us human.” Through my imagination, I have imagined and given meaning to the greenhouse metaphor, and it has been useful for me for some years now. It helps me explain who I am as an academic developer, how I work and learn with people and what I value, but also show where my heart is. There is this saying “home is where the heart is”, where you can be yourself. The more I think about it the more I come to realise that my professional and spiritual home resembles or is in fact a greenhouse. My greenhouse, our greenhouse, as I see it is a shared creation, a place where many creative gardeners (the colleagues I work with in my institution) come together to share their love for growing plants, literally or metaphorically in the form of ideas and new practices. We, seed, feed and weed, our imaginations, our practices. After all, “imagination is what sets human beings apart from every other species on earth.”457 In the greenhouse gardeners connect in magical ways, with each other and their plants. A gardener may also grow plants with other gardeners, wandering, wondering and imagining together. They trust each other, are open and accept and respect each other. Gardeners externalise their curiosity through their greenhouse activities. This sets them free! They push the boundaries and experiment with seeds and plants. Gardeners love nurturing their plants, their ideas become extensions of themselves. Not all plants will make it, as mentioned already, but some will. Others will thrive in the greenhouse. The same happens with ideas. Curiosity and playfulness but also the hunger for adventure are essential characteristics of being human and brought us to where we are today. This is why we need greenhouses and gardeners, but also more than one gardener per greenhouse. One gardener per greenhouse is just not enough. It leads to silo cultures and isolation. The real value of a greenhouse is when it is shared. Then it becomes fertile ground for sharing of ideas, feelings and emotions, concerns and troubles. Were gardeners care for and support each other and our ideas. We know that collectively we can achieve so much more than individually.
Co-creating a greenhouse for professional development
In October 2013 I moved institutions. Initial feelings of loneliness and disorientation filled my days. Suddenly I was on my own in a massive institution. I didn't know anybody and nobody knew me. This is particularly hard for academic developers as relationships are vital in our work. Beyond feeling lost, I also lost my voice. This is not uncommon as noted by Debowski as it takes time to build relationships... often years. Many developers have experienced similar feelings and often this makes us reach out to find allies in other institutions. However, I think this situation is not unique to academic development. In the contrary it is common in all jobs and every human activity. It is perhaps particularly challenging when we join established communities and groups. Especially closed groups can lead to polarisation and exclusion. On the other hand, it takes time to be accepted and become a member of any community but it also requires the community to accept the newcomer and there are often obstacles there. Trying to understand the complexities and managing these can be challenging but also rewarding when things start to change for the better.

While I was reaching out to colleagues in other institutions, I also saw value in finding ways to connect with colleagues in my own new institution as my primary role is to be there for them. Starting from scratch is hard... However, investing time and energy to build new relationships is a vital part of this process and I was prepared to do this. It always amazes me how we humans find the strength and determination to start fresh, to change and make change happen, to adapt and move forwards. Some don't! However, new links can be made and connections grow and flourish... if we want to, if there is a purpose, and if there is mutual commitment. Relationships have to be co-created they can’t happen otherwise.

So, when I arrived in the Centre for Excellence for Learning and Teaching (CELT) at Manchester Metropolitan University, I was a bit like Little Red Riding Hood in the big dark wood. My curiosity and love for working with other like-minded individuals put me on an adventure to search for them. Some of the seeds grew almost instantly, other ones took a bit longer to germinate, and some, I have to admit ended up in the bin. Rejection is hard but it is part of life and we need to deal with it in a positive way so that we can move on. I started looking after the seeds that grew and started watering them. I knew I could make it happen and that there were others out there who were also looking for a community. This was the moment when the greenhouse idea I had nurtured in my mind became new social practice.

The Greenhouse became a reality in January 2014. It is a communal space and a community, in fact an ecosystem, that brings like-minded individuals together - ‘academic gardeners’. Creative academic ‘gardeners’ who enjoy thinking and acting creatively in their practice as teachers but also as learners in higher education as well as more widely in their lives. Academic gardeners who bring their own ideas and practices, share them openly with others, who respect the ideas of others and help them to grow and flourish in a professional sense. Creative people can’t just switch the creativity tap off when not working. For them it is a habit, that fills their days and often nights with excitement and anticipation but also curiosity and passion to come up and join up ideas and make them happen. Creative gardeners plant seeds that can grow into exotic plants. Not all will survive or thrive. Out in the wilderness there are often less chances... new seeds and ideas are fragile and often hostile elements block their growth and trample on them before even they have the chance to flower.

Cultivating ideas, practices, relationships and experiences
The Greenhouse we co-created helped me to find my voice again through conversations and other interactions with like-minded and like-spirited colleagues. I felt I was accepted for who I am and what I stand for. It also enabled me to be myself and experience professional freedom. In its creation I found a new purpose, a new direction and made new relationships with like-minded people in my own institution. Together we are developing creative ideas linked to learning and teaching through sharing and experimentation. Our monthly gatherings, I am avoiding to call them meetings, evolved over time and while the first ones perhaps resembled more a support network similar to AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) we gradually found ourselves and became more like a collaborative community. We enjoy each other’s company and are open with each other. We make things and we make things happen.
Some of the activities we have undertaken together include creative walks in the park, debates about values in education, conversations about how to ‘sell’ creative ideas, play activities to explore how we can visualise our inner thoughts, creative making workshops and a Christmas picnic. No two Greenhouse gatherings are the same. In the two and half years our collaborative ecology has existed colleagues from around the university have joined us. All voluntarily and based on a need to connect and be with like-minded people. Among us are lecturers from different disciplines, professors, developers, colleagues from professional services. We all come together in one community. About 50 colleagues have become members and there have been 243 participations in 28 monthly events (averaging about 9 individuals per gathering). As a result of the Greenhouse cross-disciplinary relationships among Greenhouse members have been developed. Some of them led to collaborative working and pedagogical projects. Examples include the “I love learning” campaign which received funding from CELT, co-facilitation at learning and teaching conferences, locally, nationally and internationally, joined-up research among Greenhouse members, supporting each other to prepare for conferences and publications and the development of resources. Among the recent success stories are three members of the Greenhouse (David Roberts, Dr Helena Kettleborough and Haleh Moravej) who won Student Union Teaching Awards in 2016.

Reflections on our co-created ecology of professional development

The branding of this co-created ecology for professional development as a greenhouse - provided a suitable metaphor for conveying to participants the values and purposes that underlay the idea and communicated my expectations as the developer, of how I hoped people would behave. Time has shown that this model of an ecology for professional learning and development works. While the greenhouse project was created out of a personal need to connect and share, understand and be understood, it seems that there were other gardeners out there who also missed such a place, such a community. Wenger et al. remind us “Being more interconnected often increases the sense of community, and a desire to learn about a shared concern often motivates people to seek connections.” This is definitely how I feel.

Figure 1. Creative ecology

Jackson’s model of creative ecology (Figure 1) which was shared and discussed during a special iteration of #creativeHE provides a useful tool to reflect on the elements of the co-created Greenhouse ecology for professional growth. The model was proposed to explain the main components of a creative ecology. We can use this model as a prompt to reflect on the ecologies we create or co-create.

At the heart of our ecology was a set of purposes - as I explained I chose the idea of a greenhouse for the collaborative professional development initiative as it captures in one word a concept that encapsulates a story, a set of values and the beliefs that I wanted to convey to the people who were participating in the co-created ecology. Our proximal goal was to recreate an environment in which we could all develop and flourish within the more distal goal of becoming a better version of ourselves. There was also a personal purpose - my need to learn about my institution, build relationships and fulfil my role as a developer of educational practices.
Persons - The co-created ecology was given life and meaning by the involvement and participation of people connected by shared interests, commitment and values. The collective and diverse interests, experiences and talents of the individuals enabled us to create a dynamic environment that energised us all and facilitated the exchange of ideas and practices carried by and shared by participants. Each of the people who participated in the ecology brought with them an interesting past through which they had become the person they were, and each was involved in an unfolding professional present in their own institutional role. Together we helped imagine and create different futures for ourselves and each other. While the Greenhouse sits within Manchester Metropolitan University, it is open to anybody who would like to be involved from outside the university.

Context(s) - we shared a common context - our university, but each participant worked within particular practice contexts within the institution - together we were a constellation of experiences working in a range of institutional contexts, which meant that we shared a common organisational language and culture. This shared contextual understanding greatly facilitated our ability to communicate and empathise with each other but it also enabled us to develop a deeper understanding about the workings and culture of our own institution. But perhaps the most interesting phenomenon associated with our ecology was the context and culture we co-created for ourselves. A context and culture that was different to any other we experienced in our institution.

Affordances - Creative educators are pedagogical activists. The reality is that no change happens without disruption. Creative educators have the energy and can turn things upside down, inside out driven by their endless curiosity and passion to play, experiment and innovate through taking risks, falling down and standing up again and continuing with determination. Play is still not properly understood in higher education but for me experimentation and research are interwoven with play and make up vital ingredient to recover, uncover and discover new and exciting things. Our greenhouse offered important affordance for imagining, exploring and play affordance that is often difficult to find in the everyday pressure of academic life.

Spaces - The space provided by our greenhouse is flexible, elastic and expansive. It accommodates everybody who wants to join and take part. The Greenhouse is a space for imagining and sharing, experimenting and playing, exploring and making, inquiring and creating. Our Greenhouse enables us to imagine and utilise all these different sorts of spaces and more.
Our Greenhouse ecosystem takes full advantage of all the spaces available to us. We have organised gatherings in a wide range of physical locations across the institution, indoors and outdoors, in communal and public spaces as well as online. We have interacted and held conversations in café's, art studios, kitchens, woodlands and parks, in the streets and markets of Manchester and art gallery's as well as more conventional teaching rooms.

In higher education institutions there is a widespread pressure to conform\(^6\). This also happens in professional development. Di Napoli\(^7\) has written about this phenomenon and claims that the pressure academic developers are under to standardise and conform could stifle creativity and innovative practices. The creation of our greenhouse provided precious spaces and permissions for participants to think in ways that did not conform to standard practices and opened up possibility spaces for creative thinking and actions.

**Relationships** - I think we found each other because we need each other: in coming together we are fulfilling a need for meaningful and supportive relationships. We also recognise the importance of connections and sharing for personal and collective growth. Often creative people are misunderstood... marginalised, kicked to the corner, out-of-sight, bruised, as they are seen as trouble-makers as they can be unconventional and often rock the boat.

Fryer\(^11:84\) found that highly creative people “forge ahead” even when feeling constrained and isolated. They don’t let constraints or disapproval by others stop them questioning typical practices and from innovating. But the reality is that often high achievers are marginalised and socially excluded from their peers\(^12\). Slavin\(^13\) suggests that cooperative learning, and I would extend this notion to collaborations and communities, reduce the risk of social ridicule and exclusion of high performers, which often does happen in highly competitive environments. Within cooperative, collaborative groups but also genuine communities, competition is pushed into the corner and cooperation and collaboration for the common good is what shines through and enables individuals and the collective to grow. Within an institutional environment a collaborative ecology for learning and professional development is thus a vehicle for fostering relationships that enable people who want to innovate and take risks to connect to people who want to do the same and gain confidence and support through this set of relationships.

The driving force for the Greenhouse and its members seems to be the will to connect and be together and to do things together. The real value seems to come from this *togetherness* which is as much emotional as it is physical and it often boosts individual and collective creative confidence so that action and change emerge. Such relational ties are strong enough to overcome many of the challenges and limitations we face working in a university and help us keep going and keep experimenting with creative pedagogic ideas and practices.
Resources - The Greenhouse has been functioning from the outset without any financial support. We meet in our own time usually within the institution’s spaces. The most important resource is the knowledge and experience provided by participants. Some of the activities we have funded ourselves for example the celebrations and picnics we have organised. We generally use low-tech resources to express our ideas like flip chart paper, marker pens, paint and post-its and occasionally more exotic materials like felt, clay, food and LEGO. As the photographs show we are resourceful in finding the resources we need to express ourselves. Sometimes we make use of our smart phones and tablets as tools to record and share what we are experiencing.

Processes and activities - All colleagues and students are welcome to the Greenhouse and there are no specific joining requirements, beyond a passion to experiment and a willingness to try to be creative in learning and teaching or the will and determination to become more experimental and creative in their teaching. The formation of the Greenhouse itself has been organic and evolved since its birth in January 2014 and its shape and textures reflect the community it serves. The Greenhouse gatherings are discursive and democratic and the academic gardeners themselves take ownership of these, and organise and facilitate them. There is no hidden agenda. The driving force of the Greenhouse are its members and their gifts of experience and special interests for example we have had sessions involving poetry, and the use of clay, paint and textiles, walks through the city and picnics in the park. A number of sessions have involved making artefacts that mean something to the maker.

We curate our Greenhouse activities in our visual diary using flickr also use the #greenhouse hashtag on Twitter.

Our Visual Diary
https://www.flickr.com/photos/21614692@N02/albums/72157642314666495

Culture - I wanted to encourage the creation of a culture that supported the creative wellbeing of creative practitioners, somewhere they could call home and feel as their spiritual home. But cultures are created by all the people who are involved in the social situation. The net effect of people coming together regularly to participate in activities, form relationships, share experiences and challenges, ideas and practices, and co-create new meanings, is to develop our own culture which is open, trusting, respectful, encouraging caring, empathetic and emotionally supportive. There is acceptance of individuality and diversity. We recognise that we are all different but we also have many things in common. These things hold us together and give us strength to be brave and move forward both as individuals in our own cultural contexts and as a collective.

Participants’ voices
But what are the magical ingredients that bind us together in our co-created ecology for learning, development and creativity? Robinson 4:94 notes that “When we connect with our own energy, we’re more open to the energy of other people. The more alive we feel, the more we can contribute to the lives of others.” Could the Greenhouse be the space that helps us to kick-start this process?

‘organisational culture is the emergent result of the continuing negotiations about values, meanings and proprieties between the members of that organisation and with its environment - in other words culture is the result of all the daily conversations and negotiations between the members of an organisation about the way we do things [or perhaps would like to do things] here’. Richard Seel (14)’
Authentic voices of our creative academic gardeners have been collected via a short survey instrument and a selection is included in the box to illuminate the value the Greenhouse has for them. The themes that come up consistently are:

- meeting colleagues from across the university
- growing as practitioners
- openness and sharing ideas
- being brave to be creative

Exploring Deutsch’s social interdependence theory enabled me to better understand the dynamic of our greenhouse group and identify some of the key features that bring and keep us together. I would like to believe that we practise positive interdependence and recognise that we can achieve our own personal goals through respecting and supporting each other. We have created positive conditions to promote interaction, where individuals develop caring relationships, are emotionally connected, are open, share and support each other, but also trust each other, resolve issues constructively and are committed to the group goal and contribute effectively to achieve this. These might be represented as a culture within our Greenhouse ecology.

Sullivan wrote about professional education saying that it can flourish when it affects the head, hand and heart. But how often does this actually happen? My experience of the professionals who participated in our greenhouse community developed their intellect, practical skills but also behaviours, attitudes and values that foster cooperation, collaboration but also their personal and collective growth.

Creating the conditions for us to open up can lead to great discoveries. But it also free our minds and our hearts and we become more playful and experimental especially with the people we trust. We take risks and worry less, or not at all about the consequences when or if it goes wrong. We also worry less or not at all about what others will think and say about us. We truly get wings and fly. We explore our ideas, we combine and develop them further and we are more likely to implement them. When I was asked what creative teaching meant to me I said: Using curiosity to help others develop a wide-open mind, creative habits and making the impossible, possible. The greenhouse is a space and a community that encourages and enables this and helps us bring “our subjects alive” as James & Brookfield would say.

What might happen next?
Emergence is an important property of complex ecosystems so it is worth considering the question of what is emerging from our co-created ecology. While the Greenhouse has been a valuable community for colleagues who have joined us since January 2015, it still is a fringe initiative within Manchester Metropolitan University as a whole. There are opportunities to further develop the Greenhouse and create the conditions for greater institutional support to nurture pedagogic innovators and creative practitioners and through this demonstrate greater commitment to creative practitioners and the vital role they play to drive the institution forward. To develop and truly recognise the talent we have across the institution and inspire our students and further colleagues and seed the bug for creative practice. Furthermore, creating a physical home for the Greenhouse at the heart of the university and identifying innovative ways to showcase, disseminate and connect what emerges from our
I am excited about the opportunities we as community have identified for the Greenhouse and I hope to be able to discuss and implement some of our ideas in the near future.

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