

What's the Big Idea?

The thinking behind the structure and development of this site comes from a number of sources. At the personal level it is a key component of a planned transition, over a five year period, from being a full-time salaried employee to being a fully-occupied retired person with motivations, interests and a valid set of contributions still to make. The first year, 2011, saw me leaving behind forty-four years of working to try to make things better for adults and children through planning, developments, initiatives etc in Birmingham, England. My work had always carried titles such as 'director' or 'manager' of 'planning', 'development', 'learning' and so on. This was so much part of my personality (or became so through practice) that any future activity would still have me strongly directing myself, still looking at developments and new ways of doing things/seeing things, through a framework that balances planning with flexibility, and still have a strong emphasis on learning/finding out/exploring.

Above all, any developments would be ones where I continued to feel excited by following a number of existing interests: writing for a range of purposes; thinking about contemporary art and creativity; an interest in photography; a background in social research and evaluation; puzzling over ideas concerning the nature of evidence and progress, notions of complexity and emergence; a long-standing interest in the possibilities of different ways of making situations so interesting that learning gets 'automatically' pulled in to extend them; a desire to better understand marketing and production of creative content; a recognition that all of this is possible from home, from coffee shops, on trains; that there was a great deal for me to still understand about the social value of digital communications; and so much more

As one part of previous activity I managed a website that was used for promoting writing and developments, loosely with a 'Made in Birmingham' label. 2011 was to be a year for reshaping that website, building up more content, thinking about what might be of real interest to others, and beginning to consider how best to tell others that any content existed.

The starting point for much of the thinking was that the website-building could follow these same processes ie would shape itself over time (rather than be fully structured from the start), that some ideas would grow whilst others might fade away, that the site would have sufficient openness and linkages to allow vague ideas to be followed up, to allow for a sense of enjoyment (rather than being a chore, with deadlines and endless maintenance), and that along the way there would be so many things for me to learn about. At the same time there would be an overall framework (from the things listed in the earlier paragraph) and there could be commitments made via the site that I would then feel obliged to try my best to fulfil. In these ways I would be managing a website that itself would be managing how I spent my time. I would be structuring the development of something that, at the same time, was structuring my own development.

The approach offers a light-touch mechanism to think about writing, research, creativity and artistry in broad terms. This isn't set out in advance. There is no linear chart of the way things will unfold. There is a sense that any thinking may end up being somewhat paradoxical; emerging as it goes along in a self-organising way. So, the thinking and the developments will not be rigidly ordered but neither will they be disorganised. Any particular paths taken will not be heavily structured but neither will they be

chaotic. The whole enterprise carries an aspect of being a bit risky and unpredictable, but hopefully won't end up becoming unstable and out-of-control. It may be messy, branching, tentative, amendable, feeling incomplete and even contradictory; yet have some sense of direction, a sense of purpose and an overall 'tone'.

At the end of 2011 the framework for taking all of this forward is largely in place in a way that is open enough to allow further development activities to arise. 2012 would be a year to press ahead with things without it all becoming burdensome or boring for any of those involved. After each six month period there might be a review of where it has all got to, and where it might still be heading: the journey so far and the paths open to roam along. After two or three more years I will certainly know whether it has been of any value to anyone, whether it is worth continuing with; and I fully expect that by the end of the 2015 it might all be taking on a different shape. We will just have to wait and see.

Given the way that the contents of this site are likely to change and emerge over time, there is hopefully a deliberate feeling of contingency and possibility rather than the main purpose being to work up a range of products to sell or information to promote. Part of the enjoyment is in working through all of this and ending up with a narrative that seems sufficiently credible. It is, in itself, a story in the making ... even if initially, at least, it starts as a tale I tell myself.

Birmingham already has a long and varied history of supporting development of ideas at many levels, within the city. There is a similar long history of creativity and socially-focused thinking. This activity, under the banner of The Word's the Thing, is one small piece of this much larger jigsaw of activity. Its main aim is to produce a range of texts and images and make them openly available to a wide audience, within Birmingham and beyond.

All the development activities will be undertaken in good faith. Although, ultimately, any claims to ownership will remain jointly with Birmingham Core Skills Development Partnership and Forward Thinking Developments Limited any developments will be shared openly for non-commercial uses, trusting that others will acknowledge the source. The outcomes of any activities are meant to be used in a wide variety of appropriate ways. The hope is that a range of people will enjoy it, discover something to think/talk about, and want to share it with others in order to stimulate some broader thinking about language, ideas and developments.

That is all very well but if that is as far as it goes then it is still a relatively small idea, a modest enterprise.

In a world where so much communication is characterised by strident voices, by slick soundbites, by self-promotion and general lack of sensitivity, by a focus on celebrity status and possession of commodities, whatever gets undertaken may have some potential to go beyond that and to demonstrate that there is a place for collaborating to meet the needs of others, for honesty and integrity, for things done for fun and with enthusiasm without being too frivolous, for opening up the complexities of debates and not closing them down to over-simplifications, and for trying to push 'regular' thinking a bit sideways to see what happens.

Things are still at an early stage and may never get that far but much of what is already emerging is about people, about relationships, about things interacting, and about society. This gives some potential for being of value.

Some things are already beginning to take a certain shape. Without everything necessarily being predetermined, the approach being taken means that whatever is attempted will take on a particular feel. It is unlikely (for example) that the developments will have much in the way of action gaming, or links to humorous video clips. Not that these are ruled out, it is just that there are more likely to be chunks of text. That is the medium I am comfortable with at the moment. What matters more is what is done with that raw material. There may seem to be an over-intellectual drive behind some of the emerging developments rather than attempts to engage with the current political and economic difficulties faced by so many people. It could be seen as a distraction from real-life issues; as playing with ideas rather than dealing in realities. I can only paraphrase that there may be nothing so practical as a well-thought-through idea when realities are often constructed by the ways they are described. Whatever gets done is certainly intended to avoid deliberately making things dense, impenetrable or exclusive. Nor does it mean that various 'real-life' activities are not being engaged with in other ways.

This is a new (and non-commercial) enterprise and, when setting out on any commercial enterprise, people are often advised to think in terms of a target audience or a niche market. Certainly there are people I have in mind: people who might be interested in what is being developed. These are people who may be willing to stop and stare, to linger over things, to consider and to puzzle. There are others who may choose to dip in, collect a few fragments and hop off again, making their own linkages and connections. There are likely to be others who come, look and leave; hopefully not too disappointed and hopefully willing to revisit from time to time.

So, whilst there is a strong desire to have a range of people visit and take up things, this is unlikely to be thought of as driving customers to the site. Invitation, choice and uncertainty are more valued than any desire to force people in a certain direction. There probably won't be the construction of a large database of people to be bombarded with offers; but there will be the invitation to sign up to getting occasional updates on how things are going.

When I hold such people in mind it is more in the sense of friends, visitors, potential allies etc. I do not have them in mind as clients or customers. The openness should encourage links to the work of others. There are already signs of ideas from here sparking off thinking elsewhere. There is the potential for things to go way beyond a simple 'one person staying busy' set of activities. This begins to edge things nearer the potential for stretching towards a bigger idea. I have committed a proportion of my energies, over the next few years to 2015, to explore where any of this might get to.