Whatever Happened to Synectics?

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The article brings the story of the Synectics creative problem-solving techniques (originating in 1960) up to date. It identifies its origins with a group of inventors, who tape-recorded their meetings to research their creative process, and the resulting benefits and weaknesses. Synectics today is a set of process tools which can be used successfully in a variety of situations, either in a specific sequence (as in the original invention model) or individually according to the needs of the situation. The result is a variety of meeting models and techniques for enhancing personal effectiveness.

From time to time, academic friends who are interested in creativity ask me ‘Whatever happened to Synectics? It has disappeared off our radar screens completely’. The short answer is that Synectics is alive and well, and flourishing in the world of international business. Maintaining a presence on academic radar screens has not been a priority for the company. But it is becoming one for Synectics Education Initiative, the registered charity dedicated to promoting the use of Synectics skills in the education system. So this article brings the Synectics story up to date and, hopefully, removes some misunderstandings that seem to exist among some members of the academic community.

The academic world, it seems to me, gets most of its information from the written word. But there is another world out there, the world of experience, people using and developing creative methods like Synectics. The written word, in my experience, tends to lag what might be called ‘the real world’ by an interval of approximately ten years – simply because the practitioners are too busy doing it to have the time to write about it!

Unfortunately, there is only one book with the word ‘synectics’ in its title, the one written by W.J.J. Gordon in 1960. This is how it is possible for a PhD thesis on creativity published in 1995 to contain a chapter on Synectics derived entirely from Gordon’s 1960 book! It is like deriving your knowledge of computers from a book written in 1960 called ‘Computers’.

Excellent and still relevant though Gordon’s book is (particularly on the subject of ‘metaphorical process’) there are several later books by Synectics practitioners, which complement Gordon and bring the subject up to date. In chronological order, they are: The Practice of Creativity by George Prince (1970), (co-founder with Gordon of the Synectics company), my own Open to Change (Nolan, 1981) and Innovators Handbook (Nolan, 1989), Innovation and Creativity by Jonne Ceseranni and Peter Greatwood (1995), Creative Education (Synectics Education Initiative (ed. Nolan), 2000), and Your Life is a Series of Meetings by George Prince (2002). A book by Richard Harriman (Chairman of Synectics Corp) and Jeff Mauzy is scheduled for publication in Spring 2003.

Not all academics fall into the ‘Synectics is Gordon’ trap. Michael J. Hicks (1991) covers Synectics accurately in his excellent Problem Solving in Business and Management as a result of talking to practitioners and users of Synectics. Likewise, Dr John Martin and Jane Henry of the Open University collaborated with Synectics Ltd to generate the material contained in the OU’s module on Creative Management (1992) for their MBA Course (including filming live sessions for the accompanying video). Dr R.C. Parker, in The Management of Innovation (1982) gives an accurate description of the Synectics process together with transcripts of live sessions and follows up the results. Michael J. Hicks is currently assembling a comprehensive bibliography of writings about Synectics; it will be accessible from the website www.synecticsworld.com.

To be fair, much of the problem arises from the word ‘synectics’ itself. It was made up by
the founders of Synectics Inc. to convey ‘the bringing together of diverse forces’, from the Greek, ‘syn’ and ‘ektos’. It was, says George Prince (1981), ‘our first big mistake’ and the mistake was compounded by applying it both to the methods, and to the company (not to mention Gordon’s book). By registering the word as a trademark, the Synectics company gave itself the task of ensuring that everything that was done in the name of Synectics came up to their standards of quality – at the same time as running training courses and training in-company trainers. Understandably, course graduates (and indeed readers of Gordon’s book) tend to believe that they are practising ‘synectics’ without necessarily matching Synectics Inc.’s quality standards. In this article, I am using a capital S for Synectics to refer to the company and the work done by its accredited personnel and a lower case ‘s’ for the generic synectics as practised by people who are not accredited.

The attempt to protect the trademark has not been completely successful – the word has become a generic term for creative problem-solving in groups (see The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary) – and a web search on the word Synectics produces a bewildering array of diverse sites, only one of which is that of the Synectics Corporation, www.synecticsworld.com.

To complicate matters further, Synectics is an evolving body of knowledge, from the very nature of its origins and its continuing ethos. Synectics resulted from the decision by a group of inventors (the Invention Design Group of the Arthur D. Little consulting company) in the 1950s, to research their own creative process by tape-recording their meetings and discussions. (That is the official story; there is an alternative explanation, which I like better – whenever they had a breakthrough in their invention activity, there were furious arguments about whose idea it was and how it had happened. The tape-recording was set up to settle these arguments.)

Its origin with a group of inventors is a great strength of the Synectics process (and also a weakness). It is a strength because invention requires a strong process to carry an idea through to implementation, through an often lengthy process of development. Brainstorming, by contrast, came from an advertising context, where the idea itself can be the solution (Osborn, 1953), requiring further craft work in copywriting, graphics and TV production but little further creativity.

Whatever the true story (and both could be true), recordings of live meetings became an integral part of the Synectics research and learning process (video having replaced audio as soon as it became available). Consequently, new insights are always being discovered, even though a core body of knowledge has stood the test of application to real-world situations over a long period of time. (Unfortunately, each new generation of Synectics practitioners has a tendency to re-invent the terminology, which can generate further confusion.)

A classic example is the (possibly apocryphal) story of the creation of the pre-war advertisement for Player’s cigarettes: Player’s Please. The sales director is reported as saying in a brainstorming session, ‘What we need is something dead simple, like Players Please!’ and scrawled it up on a flipchart. Immediately it was seen as a solution – a simple alliterative catchphrase, with an attractive double meaning. It appeared in advertisements and on posters, in the sales director’s original scrawl. James Dyson, on the other hand, built over 5,000 prototypes before launching his cyclone vacuum cleaner! His ‘development engineering’ required constant injections of creativity and a sustained climate of open-minded experiment (Dyson, 1998).

The Synectics process views the initial approaches generated in a period of suspended judgement (similar to, but more sophisticated, than brainstorming) as starting points for further development rather than as finished solutions to be accepted or rejected. They call them ‘springboards’: they are taking-off points, not (normally) end points (Nolan, 1989).

At the end of the explicitly divergent process to generate springboards, Synectics moves on to the development process, which converts initially new, but not feasible approaches into new and feasible courses of action. It does so by using a developmental type of judgement, to be made by the individual who will be responsible for implementing the solution.

A developmental judgement is a temporary, provisional judgement, which articulates what is, or might be, attractive about an idea and goes on to express its major shortcoming as a ‘need for improvement’. There are two important elements to this apparently simple process: the first is the positive emphasis of finding, even searching for, all the value in the idea. This ensures that every idea that is evaluated is positively received, maintaining the safe climate created by the initial suspending judgement. There is no risk of rejection in expressing any idea.

The second is the conversion of the one major negative into a ‘direction for improvement’: ‘what I need now is a way to . . .’, invit-
ing ideas directed at this new target. By continued iteration between the ideas and their **constructive** evaluation, the process moves (probably) to a course of action that is new and feasible and has the commitment of the individual who has been doing the directing (Nolan, 1989). (The process should not be confused with the traditional, binary screening of ideas as good and bad, or even classifying them as ‘plus, minus, interesting’. There are no negatives in Synectics – except perhaps for the inelegant label ‘itemised response’, which is given to this method of evaluation.)

The responsibility for the direction of this process goes to the individual who will be responsible for implementing the solution, eliminating at a stroke the ‘not invented here’ syndrome, the unwillingness of people to implement new ideas unless they have played a major part in inventing them. In the Synectics model, that person, alone, switches into a convergent mode of thinking, after the divergent phase; everyone else continues to suspend judgement, but focuses their thinking on the ‘needs for improvement’ being articulated by the problem owner or ‘client’ (the label originally used, following Carl Rogers’ ‘client-centred’ therapy (1961)).

The enthusiasm and commitment required for successful implementation of new ideas comes from the emotional ownership generated by the process of producing the invention and the responsibility for deciding which routes to explore and which solution to adopt. If I feel it is my idea (and it genuinely is) then I will make sure it works. Many brainstorming/lateral thinking sessions come up with exciting new solutions and then look for someone to implement them. (They remind me of the Aesop fable about the mice: to stop the depredations of the household cat, they came up with the solution of tying a bell round the cat’s neck. But then the question came up, ‘Who will bell the cat?’.) And if someone is ‘tasked’ to implement the solution, they are unlikely to do so with the commitment and enthusiasm needed to make a new solution successful.

I mentioned earlier that its origin in invention is also a source of weakness for synectics. The standard nine-step model (as published on the Synectics website, www.synecticsworld.com) starts from the assumption that there is a problem owner looking for help from others to solve a problem they cannot solve satisfactorily on their own. As Parker (1975) points out, to make such an admission is seen as a confession of failure in the culture of most organizations. If the organization has ‘problems’ they are ascribed to the shortcomings of others (‘the hole is at the other end of the ship’).

Managers solve their own problems privately (perhaps in consultation with a trusted colleague or external consultant) and arrive at what they consider to be the best solution. They then try to ‘sell’ their solution to their colleagues, whose support they will probably need. These colleagues, not having shared in the problem-solving process, will probably want to explore alternatives; ‘Have you thought of . . . ?’, ‘Why not . . . ?’. The solution owner will tend to hear these questions as a challenge and will begin to defend his solution. A debate ensues, using time and energy that could be better used to build a consensus by either improving the proposed solution, or inventing a better one.

So the opportunities for the direct application of the standard synectics model tend to be fairly limited. However the tools which make up the standard model can be readily adapted to the situation as it exists within the organization, in this case to recognize that the problem owner is actually a ‘solution owner’. The proposed solution (or ‘best current thinking’ in Synectics language) can be subjected to a constructive evaluation to identify the common ground and also the ways in which it needs to be improved. The creative techniques can then be directed to inventing the necessary improvements. Alternatively (or additionally), the original solution can be set aside (temporarily) while the group addresses the original problem to see if better solutions can be devised. Either way, the group are engaged in a co-operative, win-win process, rather than an adversarial, win-lose debate. And, in this situation, Synectics has evolved into a conflict resolution model as well as an invention model (Nolan, 1990, 2002).

The same principles are also applied to deal with the wide spread of responsibility for decision-making and action within organizations. To apply Synectics effectively calls for clarity about ‘who does what’ in the organization; establishing that clarity is often a useful step in itself.

The key principle of the client/problem owner concept is that each individual is responsible for what they do individually, within the framework of agreed strategies and policies (which may be decided at a different level of hierarchy). Each individual is also responsible for ensuring that their actions do not cause problems elsewhere in the organization. The Synectics model provides a framework for ‘creative consultation’ on the lines of the conflict resolution model described above.
In fact, Synectics is a powerful alternative to the argument and debate which wastes so much time and energy in organizations of all kinds (Nolan, 2002).

Equally, the elements of the Synectics toolkit can be reshuffled to deal with other, not explicitly creative, situations. For example, the Synectics agenda meeting is a model which demonstrably reduces the time spent in conventional meetings as well as improving the quality of the output and the satisfaction of the participants (‘we achieve twice as much in half the time’, they say) (Nolan, 1989). The itemised response tool can be used to ensure that feedback of any kind is constructive in its effect as well as its intent (in, for example, an appraisal situation) (Nolan, 1989). And so on...

So what, then, is Synectics today? Precise definition of such a rich and evolving body of knowledge is difficult, but here is my ‘best current thinking’:

Synectics is a set of process tools derived from video analysis of the methods used successfully in a variety of situations. The tools may be used in a specific sequence (as in the original Invention Model) or individually according to the needs of the situation, resulting in a variety of meeting models and techniques for enhancing personal effectiveness.

It follows from such a broad definition that Synectics will overlap with other bodies of knowledge. It defies the urge to pigeon-hole – perhaps because it is an eagle, not a pigeon that can be picked up by the academic radar screens.

References

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