

Remembering my colleague Dr Joanna Kozubska

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Many of the highlights of Joanna’s career are there for all to see in her LinkedIn entry¹, and I won’t rehearse them here. Rather, I’d like to share just a few personal and professional impressions and memories of my involvement with her over the last 12 years of her life. This is in the context of our shared interest in Action Learning, and of our work together on various related organisational development and writing projects. I know that everyone will have a different story to tell about Joanna. So I’m following David Boje’s injunction that, authentically, you can only tell your *own* story – and even that with more than a postmodern pinch of salt.

In attempting to tease out significant strands in Joanna’s life and contribution, I’ve drawn on four interrelated themes. These are: Joanna’s professional persona; her contribution to action learning in the context of academic and IMCA Business School activities; the community of which she was such a central member in Fonthill Bishop and Berwick St Leonard; and some general impressions. All four strands have had a significant bearing upon my own learning and development journey.

Joanna’s professional persona

¹ <https://www.linkedin.com/profile/view?id=AAEAAAEEno4EBKrTC4s5HxGOyiTWNKm7xW1UkxKg>

In my experience, Joanna's professional persona embodied at least two essential characteristics. Those are of a dynamic facilitator and initiator, and of a deft, dogged operator behind the scenes.

As a facilitator, Joanna could switch quickly between being persuasive, forceful or laid back. She was never afraid to crack the whip when she felt it was necessary. But by default she'd also endeavour to encourage a group, client or Associate to discover things for themselves, intervening only when she felt necessary.

As a fixer, Joanna was a Resource-Investigator *par excellence*. I often sensed that there was considerably more going on behind the scenes with other stakeholders than she ever disclosed. Explication (see below) is still a largely unclaimed and unrecognised paradigm of management and leadership learning and development. Yet it seems me that explication owes a great deal of whatever toehold it's been gaining to Joanna's vision and determination. Her tenacity in the face of adversity was remarkable. She also excelled in identifying and enlisting the talents of other people in the service of causes in which she believed, as in the case of the SEAL doctoral programme.

The Senior Executive Action Learning (SEAL) D Phil Programme

(Joanna at the lectern, Rhodes House, IMCA
Admissions Ceremony, April 2008)



Joanna gained her own D Phil through the International Management Centres Association (IMCA) in 1999 on the theme of 'Reflections on Leadership'. Reg

Revans, the founding Chancellor of what became the IMCA's Business School, was her personal mentor. In due course, she was appointed IMCA's Professor of Managerial Communications. In that capacity, in 2004, at the IMCA's 22nd Congregation in Cape Town, she made a typically persuasive presentation to gain endorsement for an 'innovative SEAL Explication programme'. Drawing upon and extending ideas of Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt, this programme 'requires associates to

“demonstrate they have made an original contribution to knowledge and praxis through their management practice’.

As she did more than once, she put her money and reputation on the line, took a risk, and here it paid off. As do many others, I applaud and celebrate Joanna’s vision and commitment to action learning in general, and to the SEAL programme in particular, against considerable odds. We can only guess at the conversations and manoeuvring in which she was engaged behind the scenes to get her vision more widely accepted in this and other instances.

My particular appreciation of her work on the pioneering SEAL doctoral programmes is coupled with a special acknowledgement to Professor Peter Franklin, whose formative involvement was one of Joanna’s many inspired initiatives and partnerships. Peter was instrumental in asserting better descriptions of explication as a hitherto largely unclaimed management development paradigm.

I remember vividly my very first meeting with Joanna, at Southampton Art Gallery in 2003, where Joanna persuaded me – initially hesitant – to join the very first SEAL doctoral cohort. There, we established a shared love of Cavafy’s marvellous poem ‘*Ithaca*’. *Ithica* exquisitely sums up for me the emotional and intellectual voyage of discovery upon which – incorporating action learning principles - my doctoral Explication has taken me.



(Joanna with Dr Terry Tucker, SEAL 2 Associate, Rhodes House, Oxford, 2008)

Several times Joanna felt compelled to shake her metaphorical whip and jackboots at Set Members and Associates as deadlines approached. (This does *not* include Terry, pictured with Joanna above!). Being involved in any capacity in a DPhil by Explication is never an easy ride. It generally (inevitably?) involves both highs and lows. Hence,

typically, working with Joanna was not always without its creative tensions. But her tactics of carrot and stick, along with her fabled resilience, persistence and resourcefulness, generally paid off handsomely in the end.

Life at Berwick St Leonard and Fonthill Bishop



(All Saints Church, Fonthill Bishop. by Niall MacDougal <http://www.panoramio.com/photo/55687393>)

Visits to the haven created by Joanna and her partner Jo Denby at Fonthill Bishop and Berwick House in rural Wiltshire were a rare treat and refreshment in an otherwise frenetic world. There, one could revel in stylish hospitality and creative conversation, and participate in the many community activities of the parish, including the Fonthill Festival, in which they both played seminal roles.



(River Barn, Fonthill Bishop.
<http://www.theriverbarn.org.uk>)

A major joint enterprise of Joanna and Jo's at that time was River Barn, which they described as 'a very kind, forgiving building.... It might

not work in every village – but it is inspiring to see how a run-down shop can be saved, and turned into a thriving business and community facility, that is meeting a range of local needs, and bringing in tourists and overseas visitors to this beautiful, peaceful corner of Wiltshire.’

Such sentiments mirrored the convivial learning atmosphere they were to generate on the SEAL D Phil programme. My own several visits to River Barn to discuss progress on my doctoral Explication with Joanna were always memorable. They included long walks in a snow-covered landscape, and deep, extended conversations over an elegant lunch or afternoon tea by the river.

(Joanna and Jo’s ground floor apartment in
Berwick House, Berwick St Leonard)



Later, poacher-turned-gamekeeper, I joined Joanna on the faculty of IMCA Business School. We would often meet colleagues and Associates in the comfortable, book-lined study that Joanna and Jo had created just up the road at Berwick House, working to sustain a vibrant international community of action learning practice. I also had the privilege of co-authoring two articles with Joanna on Action Learning, as well as sharing an Ael-y-Bryn writing retreat in North Wales with Joanna and several others. In this rambling cottage at Malltraeth, near Newborough, Anglesey, Joanna was engaged in incubating her last major publication ‘Cries for Help’ (2014). Needless to say, typically, those experiences involved liberal doses of conviviality, creativity and critical friendship, as well as bouts of intensive hard work and re-writing.

Joanna’s legacy

‘I get a buzz out of lighting sparks in other people’

(From Joanna’s LinkedIn page)

In the course of our association, I came to appreciate Joanna as a doughty campaigner, who carried on an entrepreneurial family tradition -- in her case this involved seeking to give voice to the voiceless, and to speak truth unto power. She famously believed that charisma – a quality that she personified - is a ‘gift to other people.’ (1997: 200).

The achievements of those who have worked and learned with Joanna were her achievements too. For my part, I am grateful for her accompanying me in both the solitude and comradeship of my own learning and writing journey, and for her unwavering commitment to the cause and continuing development of Action Learning.

A select bibliography of Joanna’s publications

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