

CHEFS' BRIGADE

Mapping an Ecology of Practice Case Study

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Introduction



Films of practitioners engaging in their work provide a flavour of what an ecology of practice looks and feels like in a particular field of practice. [Jason Atherton](#), a top UK chef who has built a global chain of 18 restaurants including 4 Michelin stars, has spent his professional life building strong kitchen teams known as 'brigades'. In the BBC's 'Chefs' Brigade' he is challenged to form a new, high performing brigade from a group of chefs whose experience is limited to working in the kitchens of pubs, cafes, bistros and the army rather than top restaurants.

The challenge for this 'brigade in formation' is to compete with six established brigades in top class restaurants, in five different countries during a six week tour of Europe. The challenge for Jason is to create a brigade that is capable of achieving this goal.

The Chef's Brigade, takes its title and concept from the "brigade" system established by legendary chef Auguste Escoffier. It's a pattern of social organisation and a division of labour within the kitchen that "Every single restaurant of any sort of value in the world today uses." Jason Atherton

Engaging with these challenges requires many individual and collaborative ecologies of practice to be created. What we see in the film is Jason Atherton designing and implementing with the help of his two assistants, an ecology of practice to develop, in an experiential way, the 10 members of the brigade to form an efficient, effective and creative collective. We see the novice brigade immersed in unfamiliar practice environments engaging with cooking challenges in authentic experiential situations with varying degrees of success. The only way they can succeed in their challenge is to combine their talents in effective and productive ways through a collaborative ecology of practice.

Jason's roles

Jason combines his role of being a highly accomplished chef with that of manager and teacher. As a restaurant manager he is looking for talent and aiming to produce a competitive brigade, 'if you want to work in one of my kitchens you have to perform to my exacting standards.' He gives meaning to this role by sending home members of the brigade who do not perform under pressure.

As a teacher his challenge is to develop the members of the brigade through authentic work situations so that they are prepared for the competitive challenges they will face. As an expert practitioner in a teaching role he adopts the pedagogical stance of an expert [‘meddler in the middle’](#) (1) whose characteristics include:

Meddlers have clear intentions about what they do, and they are energetically up and doing it...They provide support and direction through structure-rich activity in which they themselves are highly involved. They do not take over the work of thinking and doing,

They have high expectations and provide a high level of support, in the knowledge that neither of these dispositions by themselves will make for better learning outcomes.

Meddlers create opportunities for hands-on, minds-on and, where appropriate, plugged-in learning collaborations

[Meddlers] allow their students to experience the risks and confusion of authentic learning by allowing [them] to stay in the grey of unresolvedness, supporting any and all attempts... to experiment with possibilities in ways that put their ignorance to work.



Jason, and his two experienced assistants, work alongside the chefs in the preparatory stages of the challenge, but leave them to perform in the challenge itself. In this way they are able to observe, evaluate, support and coach individuals and the team. Through such close working JA is able identify and replace low performing members of the group with other novice chefs who are keen to participate so that he is able to work towards his goal of developing a high performing brigade capable of competing with the very best restaurants.

The extent to which he achieves this goal of developing a high performing brigade is revealed in each of the programmes in the series culminating in Episode 6 when the brigade go up against another kitchen brigade from a Michelin star restaurant in Paris. This Case Study is based on Episode 3 (week 3) of the six week immersive experience.

Exercise : Mapping Jason Atherton’s Ecology of Practice

The case study is based on 12 video clips taken from Episode 3 (week 3 of the 6 week process) which can be accessed at this password protected site.

<https://ecolila.weebly.com/chefs-brigade-case-study.html> **PASSWORD LILA2019**

The video clips help us appreciate the nature and meaning of ecologies of practice in which learning, creativity, performance and achievement emerge as people interact and collaborate in particular environments. In this case study we are focusing on the ecology of practice Jason Atherton created in order for the brigade chefs to perform, achieve, learn and develop individually and collectively

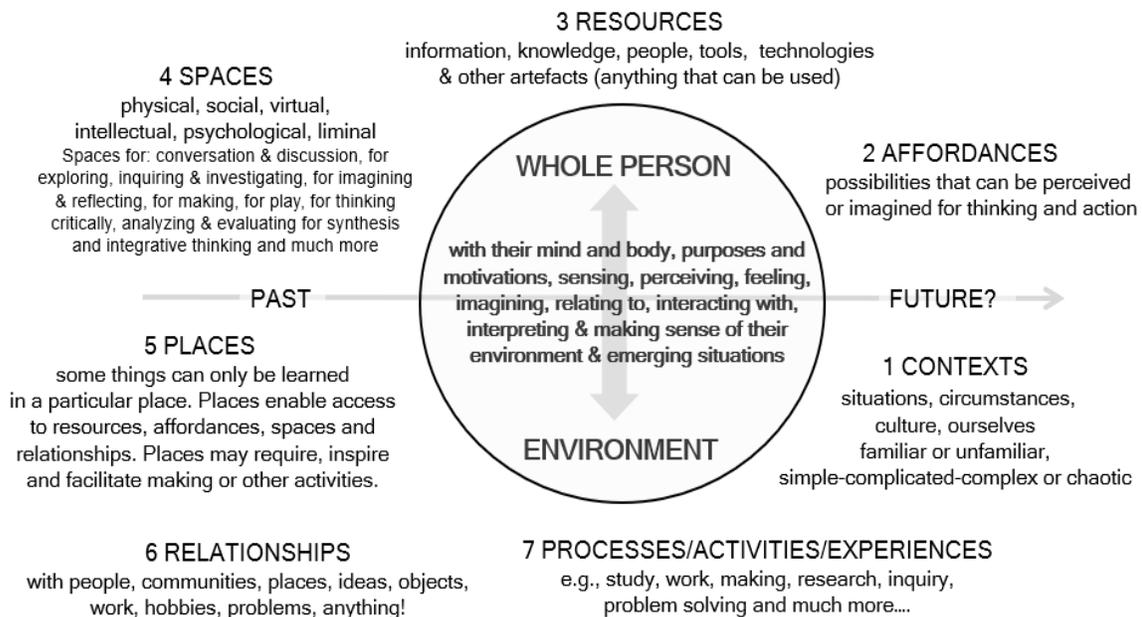
You are invited to create a narrative and a map to reveal the ecology of practice Jason Atherton creates and implements to achieve his goal of forming and developing a kitchen brigade that is capable of competing with the kitchen brigades of top-class restaurants.

If you would like to share your narrative and map with me, I will provide you with feedback and send you my own analysis in return. Please email me at lifewider1@gmail.com.

GUIDANCE

While watching the clips it is important to have in mind the framework we are using to understand the dynamics of an ecology of practice Figure 1. A set of questions are provided to aid inquiry.

Framework for understanding an ecology of practice for learning and achievement(2)



Questions to aid inquiry into Jason Atherton's (JA's) ecology of practice

- What is the nature of the ecosystem within which the chefs' ecologies of practices are enacted?
- What purpose(s) did JA's ecologies of practice fulfil?
- What were the important contexts for practice, learning, creativity and achievement? *What new understandings of context had to be developed in order to achieve? And how were these understandings developed?*
- What affordances or opportunities were created to facilitate learning and development for members of the brigade?
- What resources and tools did the chefs draw upon to achieve JA's goals, and what new resources / artefacts did they create?
- What sort of physical, intellectual or emotional, spaces did the chefs inhabit in order to achieve JA's goals?
- What processes/activities did JA create in order for the chefs to perform, achieve, learn and develop?
- What challenges/problems did the chefs encounter and what sort of things did they learn from engaging with these challenges?
- What mistakes were made and how did they feature in the learning process?
- What important new relationships were formed in order to achieve the desired results?
- How was place important to the chefs' ecologies of practice?
- How did JA's creativity manifest itself? How did he encourage chefs to be creative? How was their creativity manifested?
- What forms of leadership were manifested through JA's ecology of practice?
- What feedback mechanisms did JA employ to enable the chefs to evaluate their own performance individually and collectively?
- Do you think Jason's ecology of practice is effective in enabling the young chefs to learn and develop individually and as a team? If you do, why do you think its effective? If you don't, what are the flaws in the process?
- By working alongside the novice chefs and revealing his own ecology of practice, do you think that JA enabled the chefs to develop their own ecologies of practice?
- Do you think the idea of 'expert-meddler-in-the-middle' is appropriate for the pedagogical role Jason performed?
- Does your organisation employ similar practices for the development of individuals and teams? If not, is there value in adapting this approach to your own organisational environment and learning and development strategies?
- How might the framework we are using to map an ecology of practice be improved?

References

- 1) McWilliam, Erica L. (2009) Teaching for creativity : from sage to guide to meddler. Asia Pacific Journal of Education, 29(3). pp. 281-293. <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/32389/1/c32389.pdf>
- 2) Jackson, N.J. (2016) Exploring learning ecologies LULU