Self On Self: Inspired by Ayoade

ABSTRACT

This paper is a brief exploration of what this website is and what it's growing into. The fact is that any body of work really emerges from a process of discovery rather than as the outcome of a a plan. Or so I think, anyway, and maybe that's the point to this piece.

So, what are you trying to do here again?

Yesterday (5 October 2019) I picked up a book called Ayoade on Ayoade at a charity store. I find books appear, much like teachers, when I need them. I have been thinking for some time about things like The Point Of It All, and trying to find a way to approach the problem.

Ayoade, in case you are not already familiar with the name, is a film maker and writer that is perhaps most widely known for his role in the IT Crowd. The days before I chanced upon his book I had been thinking about ways in which I could go through the material on my website, www.handcraftedinsight.com, taking material that is very much a first draft and reshaping it into something that is more coherent, structured and useful. I could do it as a podcast, I thought. It didn't take much time to get the gear needed, and then it was time to think about a format. A lot of podcasts are interviews, but I felt a monologue would perhaps be more appropriate, partly because having to coordinate is more difficult than just coordinating with myself. I even thought that I could put together a session where I asked myself questions as a way to review and distil the material I've created over the years.

So, when I flipped through the first few pages of Ayoade's book and realised that it was all about understanding himself by interviewing himself it felt like something I had to buy. After all, he had written, "Has there ever been an interview book where the interviewer was the same person as the interviewee? This could be a new literary genre!" He goes on to say that before we start doing that we must look at the "historical and (counter)cultural context" because "... a tree without a past is like a man without roots ..." So, inspired by Ayoade, how can we look at things differently?

Let us start, then, with the context.

Chronology

1980 - 1995

An uneventful childhood.

1996 - 2005

The careers of Indian children are captured in an old joke: As a child of Indian parents, you can become a doctor, lawyer or engineer. Your parents think they give you plenty of choice because you can decide what *kind* of doctor, lawyer or engineer you want to be.

Along with, presumably, millions of other children, I didn't want to be a doctor because it looked like hard work, failed to get into law school and so defaulted into becoming an engineer by going to engineering school.

2005 - 2015

Entered the world of work and learned many useful things, and experienced the odd feelings involved in working with others. Didn't use anything I learned in engineering school but picked up what was needed from the Internet. Steadily diminishing quality of life from having to work with others, especially when having to manage them. Didn't like having to wear suits as well.

2015

Went back to school, this time to study management. The main difference was that while my first degree was to get a job the next one was because I wanted to learn, and that made a big difference. All of a sudden I had theory that helped explain what I had experienced. It's like blundering through a dark landscape, feeling your way along the thorn bushes and trying to avoid falling down steep slopes and then the sun rises and you can see what's going on around you.

2016

Back to the world of work but this time with a toolbox full of theory, and a different attitude.

2017

A teacher once said that when you've got your MBA what you have is a Masters *in* Business Administration. You're not a Master *of* Business Administration. The blog was a way to revisit and re-evaluate the theory I had been introduced to, and think about how it might be used in the situations I and others might face. Which, I suppose, is where an interview might begin.

So, what's with the drawings?

Left to my own devices I'd have probably studied history or English. I liked drawing when I was younger and spent some time practising calligraphy and handwriting. These kinds of things were of no use, of course, in getting you a job so I put those aside and focused on the things that people said you should do if you wanted to get a job.

The whole getting a job thing was harder than I expected. Then again, I'm not sure what I expected. What I learned, sometime, somewhere, was how to wait. How to be patient and do what was necessary. Maybe it's an immigrant thing, the fact that you have to do what you need to do in order to create the time and space and freedom to do what you want to do.

Anyway, with the drawings, I doodled a lot and then when my first kid came along I drew stories with him. We would talk though situations by drawing them. This interest coincided with a raft of drawing related concepts, that one could become aware of because of the Internet. This included stuff like Dan Roam's 'Back of the napkin', the whole sketchnote movement and an introduction to Soft Systems Methodology, which suggested that drawing was a good way to get a 'rich picture' of what was going in in a problematic situation.

I found that if I wanted to think through a concept or approach it was much easier to first try and draw it, to diagram it in some way and then the words and exploration sort of just fell out onto the page. Suddenly I had a way to create content that worked for me and, more importantly, was unique to some extent to my work process and way of thinking. So, I wrote and wrote. And kept writing. Which is where we are now.

What are you trying to achieve with your writing?

I feel like there is a disconnect between thought and action — a rift of some kind between a good idea and what then happens in practice. For example if you're trying to provide a service then you're often advised to worry about what's on the surface. You never get a second chance to make a first impression, for example. The focus is on appearing perfect, unblemished — in control. When it comes to business, anyway. At the other end you have art, which aims to hold a mirror up to reality. Perhaps. There you search for what is raw, what is the essence, the root of all things, the place where it starts — and take it however it is.

The first is perhaps safe and structured. The second perhaps unsettling and discomforting. Between these extremes, if indeed they are the right extremes, are lots of middlings, helped along and brought to our consciousness by the Internet. It's a world where you get the polished and varnished perfect lives on Instagram along with the day by day reality of someone's existence. It's true and false, raw and edited, planned and unplanned all happening at the same time. It's a changing world, but that's always the case.

I think that my aim when writing is to try and understand, but not in a structured and direct way. Instead, it's by ambling around the idea, exploring alleyways and interesting looking corners, that one starts to get a feeling of the shape and size of the idea, sort of taking it from a two-dimensional model to a four-dimensional reality.

Have you found an approach that works for you in a changing world?

Maybe. I don't quite know. What I do know is that I spent a lot of time doing what I thought I should do, and it's only through the work in this blog that I'm discovering what I want to do. For example there are many good ideas out there. People come up with ideas all the time — or if you want to be scientific about it, they come up with theories. Theories about social situations are very hard to prove or disprove because people don't behave the same way every time. You choose your theory and then try it out in your situation to see if it works for you. The fundamental mistake that I see is that people approach reality in an objective, positivist way. They think that if they do A and B then C will happen. For example, if they send their team to a motivational

session, performance will improve. Or if they put a cold calling program in place the law of averages means that sales will rise. Salespeople try and persuade you that their product will deliver for you whatever your situation.

The reality is that everything is "contingent", it depends on your particular situation. A theory is merely a first step, a suggestion of a possible approach that may work for you. There is a long path ahead where you implement and learn and adapt that theory until it starts to work in the particular situation you have to sort out.

The central point of my work so far has been about appreciating this need for an approach that is customised to the situation, one that is contingent. Of course, some people want something that works — they don't want to take any risk. At the other extreme, some people promise nothing, because they are in the business of creating art.

The first kind of people only buy commodities — they select things that are already made and tested and perfected, and this is the right thing to do when you're in the market for a commodity. The second kind of person makes something they want to make and then they take it to the market and see if there is any interest. Sometimes there is but often there isn't.

Between these two extremes exists a space where people act with purpose, where they are trying to improve a situation without taking on too much risk — where they want to do something better but avoid failing badly at the same time. This is the space where interesting work happens, where theory can be selected and customised and tested and adapted to a customer's needs.

The basic sales pitch here is that we've done a lot of things and here are some examples. Some of what you want we know how to do, and some of it is new but we know how to work on new things with you so that we minimise the chances of failure and, when we do that, there is a good chance we'll get you a result you'll like.

We're almost out of time, so is there anything you want to say before we end?

Just this, I suppose. Learning is something that happens all the time, as you discover or are exposed to a new concept and then you try it in a situation and learn from that and then try again. The difficulty many of us face is being honest about what we're doing, especially when we think about the prize rather than the process. I've never had much interest in prizes, and so the process is what interests me the most. I think that we could do better business if we were more honest with ourselves and our customers about how we're still working through things ourselves. It might make it easier if we can take the whole thing less seriously. For example, I expect that no one will read this paper because its main value is in helping me work through my thoughts rather than helping you with your problem. In doing that, however, something may come out that helps you with your project, eventually. After all, Ayoade's book has little to do with the kinds of things I write about in my blog, but it has everything to do with making sense of something.

And the purpose of this blog and my work and the podcast, that I hope to do, is about getting better at making sense of things.

About the author

Karthik Suresh is a Management Consultant who helps customers with energy, utility, sustainability, research, innovation and knowledge management projects. His experience includes working with large and small organisations to select and implement strategic decision systems, improve and develop management capability and deploy risk management, IT, communications and information systems projects.

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