

Taking it personally! The reverberations of living and working in the first person

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Abstract

I have recently completed research exploring the experiences of a number of one-person businesses in Australia. Current business and academic practice seems to have little or no understanding of this phenomenon or of the personal responsibility and accountability that underlies it.

Though my research 'partners' had been 'brought up', and currently live and work in, our 'third person' Western business world, they are also 'taking it personally'. Through the research I realised that they were living and working consciously, in the 'first person', immersing themselves as active participants in their world, not as detached observers of it. They remained awake and aware, reflecting, relating, and learning from every situation.

I believe that they are 're-conceiving' Western business and educational tradition through their living-working-learning experiences. They are exemplars of organisational learning and 'practical' action research. Based on their stories and my own, this paper discusses the living practice of 'taking it personally', of living and working responsibly, in the first person.

This paper discusses recent research that was not action research but which began as a hermeneutic phenomenological 'study' of the experiences of a number of **action-research oriented** one-person businesses in Australia. I was the researcher. I was interested in understanding the phenomenon 'from within its own perspective'. During the research I left my role as a full time academic and became just such a business. The research journey took on an additional heuristic aspect, making it both 'academic' and personal.

Over time I recognised that there was very little literature specifically for, about or by this type of business. Most literature regarding SOHO (small office, home office), the 'self-employed' and 'small businesses' concentrated almost exclusively on business planning. There was no mention of either learning or the more 'personal' side of running a one-person business. In mainstream business literature Hakim (1994) has suggested that 'we are all self-employed' and Pritchett (1994) has spoken of acting 'as if' you own the business yet both were written as motivation for employees of

large organisations. Joshua Rifkin (1996) suggests that we have come to the 'end of work' and William Bridges' (1995) considers that there has been a 'job shift' afoot, away from concepts of 'job' and toward concepts of 'work'. Block's Flawless Consulting (1981) is referred to by some of the one-person businesses I spoke with but he expressly focuses on 'internal consultants'. Bellman (1990) focuses on 'bringing who you are to what you do' as an 'external consultant'. This was the most relevant material from the perspective of the one-person business and yet, even this notion of what is 'internal' and what is 'external' is interesting, relevant and 'history laden'.

I wondered about the silence. I thought, "perhaps there are only a few such businesses", though I suspected otherwise. I briefly visited Australian, US and UK Bureaus of Statistics data to get a feel for the magnitude of the phenomenon and came away even more curious.

In Australia there were over 791,000 micro businesses (1-5 people) operating in 1998-99 (ABS, 2000). 50% of those were one-person businesses (MBCG, 1998), **and** 37% of those one-person businesses planned to stay that way (Yellow Pages Australia, 1998). This means there were over **146,000** businesses nationwide that intended to be 'successfully' one-person (not including those of us who are not counted in those statistics because we have incorporated!) This is not to suggest that all 146,000+ work in the same manner as my research partners and I, but they have all at least made a conscious choice to respond that they will stay 'one-personal'.

It seems that the Western business paradigm of 'bigger is better' is, however silently, being challenged. Interestingly, very recent work by Pink (2001), Salmon and Babitsky (2001), Jaeger (2000), Zbar (2001), Smyre (1999) and others is strongly reinforcing the idea that very small businesses are both viable and desirable.

*For those who feel life is more than making money,
the one-person business is an exciting form.*

*It is business as lifestyle –
business as a statement
about who you are and what you value.
(Whitmyer & Rasberry, 1994)*

Taking 'working' personally

In the words of one of my research partners,

The work is not about money. You need money. It took me a long while to overcome the fact that people are actually paying me. It's very different from getting a salary. I'm being paid to live my life the way I want to – and to be there for people. If I didn't have to worry about money I'd be doing this anyway and I do do it. In my unpaid work with friends, colleagues, people I meet on the street, I'm still actually doing the work I do for people who are paying me in organisations.

This is the story of people who are engaged with and involved in their working and their living. They *are* their work and their work is *they*. They are 'taking it personally'.

One said, *"At the beginning a lot of feedback I was getting from those I worked with was 'what you are offering is yourself'. It was really important that my name was in it because the marketable thing was myself, or the thing that was working for me was myself."*

I thought of Barry Oshry's (1995) book *Seeing Systems* in which he encourages us not to see work as personal because we are 'part of the system'.

*In organisations, much of the time
we think we are dealing person-to-person
when, in fact, we are dealing context-to-context.
And much that feels personal
is not personal at all. (P13)*

Herein lies one of the biggest challenges for both one-person businesses such as my research partners' and for the large corporations who are their clients. Oshry is speaking from within a system that is designed to 'be' impersonal and competitive. His perspective is one of 'us versus them' rather than one of mutuality and openness.

My research partners' 'taking it personally' is not from the 'me against the world' perspective Oshry has in mind. They are not attempting to get "lots of good stories with good parts for US and bad parts for THEM, lots of evaluations, excuses and righteous indignation" (p17). They are actually working in what he perceives the 'harder work' of "taking their worlds into account". As he says, this way takes "less reflex, more thought, less blame, more compassion, less righteous indignation, more power" (p17). That he also regards this as 'impersonal' quite astonishes me.

As one-person businesses, my research partners have a strong sense of personal responsibility. One says, *"It's about responsibility for self, because you have to be responsible. One of the huge lessons we've all got to learn is about responsibility. We can go back to Newtonian stuff and talk about dependence and our traditional workplaces where you depend on your boss and the company rather than a system that's interdependent. People like that have personal crises when they become redundant."*

Another agrees, saying, *"I'm responsible for the things that I do. There's less about 'my bloody company are doing this to me (or making me do this)'. Also, as much as clients can impact on my life, the perception is that I have more responsibility about those things. If I change something then I've got to deal with it tomorrow. If I really know something, and know that I want to change something, then I'm the one that actually has to do it."*

There is an ongoing tension in this way of 'taking it personally'. We need to know who we are.

One of the issues I face that's not so much of an issue for me now but never completely goes away, is 'who am I and am I worth anything when I'm not a part of XYZ Corp?' It was very easy to have a bit of a skipping step when I was working on the 42nd floor surrounded by trappings. I would have people pandering around. It was easy to feel I was important. I had a car space and a corporate car. I drove around. I got on the plane whenever I wanted. That is sort of empty but I never had to confront who I was. I never confronted 'what's

my worth?' and I get scared sometimes because I do face that in my work alone sometimes. I think you've got to have a really healthy sense of what you offer as well as a sense of groundedness.

What's in a story?

As I listened to my research partners' stories I realised their stories were not of an objectified 'lived' experience, but a dynamic, living experience. Their stories were of living and learning, of belonging and not belonging, of wondering and inquiring, of listening and speaking, of knowing and not knowing, of being curious and of sharing that curiosity, indeed sharing all of the above with clients and colleagues and associates and friends, reframing, relating; to self, with self, to others, with others, 'belonging' in a new way, recognising in the 'other' a kindred spirit, remembering and rediscovering dynamic spaces of potential. The stories tumbled over one another.

Sometimes one person would say something specific like "*I'm passionate about process*" or "*I want to work with people I like*" and we would explore that. Other times something lying 'behind' or beneath their words 'spoke' to me, encouraging me to explore further in a particular area. Sometimes it was triggered by a chance word or repeated phrase; sometimes by how, where and when our conversations took place; sometimes by themes that emerged later from across the conversations with all my research partners.

As we had our conversations, we often experienced a very special space being created in our midst, 'between' us (in non physical space). It felt as if we inhabited a place that was of our making yet more than the sum of our abilities and experiences. I began to call this a 'place of potential' or 'Potential Space'. It was a warm, respectful, personal space appreciated by each partner in the conversation. It was a special, highly creative, place of 'being with' another which takes you where neither of you could have expected to go on your own. Through our conversations, we grew to recognize that creating and working in such places was what we aimed for in our practices.

Reconceiving boundaries and barriers

Boundaries and barriers 'in the mind' create, for some people, a persistent alienation from themselves, from others, and from the world by fracturing their present experience into different parts. "We artificially split our awareness into compartments such as ... inside vs. outside ... Life becomes suffering, full of battles. But all our battles ... our conflicts, anxieties, sufferings, and despairs – are created by the boundaries we misguidingly throw around our experience." (Wilber, 2000) We were reflecting on and re-conceiving such boundaries and barriers.

Conventional wisdom has it that borders and boundaries are 'good' and lack of them is 'bad'. (East, 1997) Unbounded or under-bounded systems lack the 'rigor' and 'control' required for 'success' in today's world. We, in Western businesses, seem regularly to insist on constructing tight, rigid boundaries for ourselves – internal OR external consultant, supplier OR customer, 'outsourcing' OR 'insourcing' of skills, home space OR work space, personal OR professional.

Who and what is in?
Who and what is out?

*Boundaries are illusions,
products not of reality, but of the way we map and edit reality.
And while it is fine to map out the territory,
it is fatal to confuse the two. (Wilber, 2000)*

One of my research partners considers that boundaries are 'control mechanisms' – limiting rather than expansive. *“The space for innovation diminishes. That lessens responsibility and increases dependence.”*

What if we perceive personal and professional borders and boundaries not as a dichotomy (either/or) but as a dynamic (both-and) with the dynamic itself in a dialectical tension rather than in opposition?

The dynamic is living in the margins

We need to know ways of belonging and non-belonging to recognize that the two exist together in a space of continual to-and-fro – the space of the margins. My research partners' and my practice are in such places of great potency, where new ways of being, new ways of living are conceived. We are 'in-between', conceiving and dwelling and working in the living, breathing margins. We intentionally live at the boundary that both joins and separates, where there is an opening up rather than a narrowing down of meaning.

One person says

I feel a bit like a 'fringe dweller'. I feel like a lone ridge rider. I keep getting this image of being on the ridge. I sort of keep my eye down there and every now and then I go down in. I've been extremely successful in preventing them from devouring me, which is fraught with risk as well because I'm always a bit marginal.

But there's something around the relationship that I have with them. I just stay a little bit apart which keeps me really relevant or fresh. ... I find I can have a good relationship with those people. It almost all comes out of the relationship. When you are marginal you can easily be discarded but you can also not easily be discarded. There's a paradox.

Marginal space is very much an in-between space, neither fully belonging yet neither fully cut off. It is at “one and the same time inside and outside the network that it questions.” (Taylor, 1984 cited in Veling, 1996)

There is a difference between 'being marginalised' and choosing 'marginality'. The former is 'controlled' externally ('done to you' by an 'other'); the latter is an 'internal' state of being or presence, (maintained personally, as a place of 'vital creativity'). Maintaining 'marginality' while working in and with 'the system' creates a paradox of isolation and collegiality - continually placing ourselves 'between'. We attempt to 'be' (exist) in the margin - the dynamic tension.

Our practice is not so much *at* the edge but *in* the edge, along the edges of tradition, a tradition that we feel ourselves both 'a part of' and 'apart from'. We work at 'making wide the margins' and re-creating, in those wide margins, places of great creativity, energy, ingenuity, interrelatedness, playfulness and personal connection.

Though we may quite regularly work with clients in the 'central business district', none of my research partners or I have an 'office in the city' away from the place we consider 'home'. We both work **from** home and work **at** home, blurring the boundaries between Habermas's public and private spheres (King, 1996), between socially and systems integrated modes.

I choose to work from home rather than sharing space with others like me. If I want to work for myself and I want lots of freedom and autonomy and choice, why would I go off to another workplace? – I'd really prefer to be at home so I can be there after school, can throw a load of washing on. It was a really easy choice for me. It's worked well. I've got a room (office). I'm happy to walk into that room to work – and not do housework or whatever.

However, I'm very happy there are life things as well. Work in my office is mainly administration or writing and I'll bring my laptop out to the deck or up here to the balcony. I'll go to the coffee shop and read or write. I have an office anywhere. So the boundaries are very expansive like that. Someone I've done a lot of work with in my personal development talks about boundaries a lot, saying, 'Make sure this is a fun space, this space is a work space and this space is a quiet space.' I guess some people need that, and others don't. This house is very open. I'm very used to it. We're all different in that way. It's whatever we need to do.

Recognising and respecting rhythm and 'flow'

Most of my research partners spoke of flow and rhythm and energy use. They all said that over time a sense of rhythm and flow nourishes and sustains them both personally and professionally.

One person speaks of flow inferentially, in terms of the 'pace' of life, saying, "*I've had a real difficulty with the pace of corporate life. I think it's extremely harmful. I often used to describe it years ago - I remember drawing pictures of a fast flowing river and I always got a log and got out and got on the bank for a while and had a look whereas there's always people... Empty Raincoatish stuff.*"

The empty raincoat is, to me, the symbol of our most pressing paradox.

If economic progress means

that we become anonymous cogs in some great machine,

then progress is an empty promise. (Handy, 1994, front cover)

But it's not easy! As I found out myself, knowing something is but one step in the journey. Leaving the 'known' of the city for the 'unknown' of working from home doesn't automatically erase the patterning of years. The above person experiences ongoing tension between how he likes to work and his 'corporate' conditioning. He says that in organisations the energy is camouflaged; you can hide in the jungle. In one-person businesses it's magnified and much more personal.

Another has recognised her process - her rhythm - of energy use and recovery and works to care for it. The 'ebbs and flows' guide her rather than frustrating or overwhelming her. This was something she had to work long and hard to recognize and practice, unlearning and relearning how to 'be'.

"I am an extrovert but I enjoy my own company as well. I feel more and more a need to be alone. Work is really demanding. I need time to re-energise. I am actually spending a lot of time in the garden. 'Spare' time – do work – then to garden or coffee shop. To me it's such a 'civilised' way of working. Why wouldn't more people want to do it?"

I have periods where I don't want to work a lot. It sounds silly but the world provides when I need it. When I need to be out of it.... This year I've needed space and it's been there.

My income fluctuates from periods of a lot to periods of a trickle. That's OK. When it's a trickle I trust that it's OK. I don't panic. A 'traditional' person might go out marketing – not devoting themselves to themselves – their personal and professional development. I trust that I've got this time to do what I need to do. As I overcome the hurdles the money starts coming in again."

To me, my research partners are speaking of coherence, flow, congruence, and a sense of being whole. Heidegger (1996) speaks of 'drawing things together into a whole'. On the other hand, Bohm (cited in Wijers, 1996, inside cover) speaks of 'undivided wholeness in flowing movement'. He considers that flow is prior to that of the 'things' rather than an outcome of bringing things together.

Wholeness is not a place you can get to.
It is an approach to life.
When our approach is coherent,
reality will respond coherently to us. (Bohm, 1996)

While Bohm's concept seems similar, to me it is fundamentally different - and this may be the difference that 'makes the difference' in understanding the living experience of my research partners. It is a statement of a particular 'way of being' rather than an accumulation of skills.

The 'process' of being a one-person business

Rather than perceiving 'process' as static, "a systematic series of actions or operations directed to some end" (Brown, 1993), my research partners perceive it as an invisible path, in the philosophical sense of "the course of becoming" (Brown, 1993), experiencing the wonder of the question rather than the rush to an answer. One person reinforced this idea for me, saying, "We are often so fast in search of an answer we forget how wonderful the question was." This sort of process work requires much perseverance, great 'presence' and ongoing attentiveness.

To me the 'process of my practice' is my living process. To me 'work' is the work of the soul. I'm here on this earth to develop myself. I do that through my

work and to me work is very broad – not just where I get paid. It is giving and receiving. I couldn't actually work in a large organization any more because it wouldn't give me the permission to do what I need to for myself and others.

My research partners and I perceive that heightened awareness is essential. It requires us to be personally aware of and connected to the choices we make.

Learning as a way of being

For my research partners learning is not simply a 'particular focus' - it is a way of being. Their expression of their 'living experience' is of continuously being learning. It is the central nature of their "way of being". They are lifelong learners. They continually involve themselves in their own, and others', learning. They are the 'learning organisations' that Senge (1994) describes. They are 'masterful beginners' (Hiley, 1998), continually looking for new opportunities, taking on new challenges with new and different responsibilities, being and becoming.

I can't tell you the reason I've come from any place. There hasn't been any 'plan', per se, other than pursuing those spaces where there seems to be a match between my interests, my skills, and where there's opportunity for learning and growth.

The value of time for reflection and the act of reflecting is, though challenging, understood and practised by all my research partners.

I tend to every once in a while look in the kit bag and say 'I've got some bits and pieces missing' or 'I don't need to be carrying that along. It's no longer significant. It's holding me back.' Some of those are beliefs. Some of those are actual commitments time-wise and relationships and all those sort of things – business, personal or whatever else. It's an interesting process– being out on your own you have a lot more reflective space.

You reflect on what you're holding and what you can let go of?

Umm. Which is painful. It is not the fun part. I think you've gotta believe that it's the right thing to do. Otherwise, it's so much easier to look at another situation.

Relating with one another

As one of my research partners said, "*With conversations like you and I have, it's the little mortar in between it all. ... It came about from working together and then taking the time to talk with one another, ... and you just start to realize "That's an important thing to do!" ...If you whisked it away, working alone as a lone organization means nothing. It doesn't.*"

This is where the feminist re-writing of 'standpoint theory' of authors like Bubeck (2000) helped me. We are coming from a place not of adversity and dependence but of dialogue, mutuality and interdependence. We relate as I-thou, creating an environment in which "each of our personal existences emerges," (Owen, 1994) listening actively to one another, implicitly knowing that "I become I only in relation to

a thou” (Buber, 1958 cited in Owen, 1994) ~ knowing community, conversation, and dialogue are essential; knowing that you and I truly exist only by relating, and that relating begins with listening and grows in community.

We are building bridges of understanding amongst ourselves, forging structure for acceptance rather than vehicles for war; treasuring our ability to speak and listen, helping others learn to do likewise. Once we begin, we discover “a foundation of awareness that softens and melts away habit-conditioned patterns, making them more fluid” (Lessac, 1997). We re-learn how to speak to ourselves, revealing the harmony of physical life, vocal life, emotional life.

Though it is not easy, particularly within our current business 'tradition' and regular auditory overload, we listen for the overlooked and unheard. We are able to work with what some call 'negative capability', an ability to 'endure' absence, uncertainty, partiality and relativity and “to hold at bay the desire for closure, coherence, identity, totality”. (McFague, 1982 cited in Veling, 1996) We are willing and able to hold questions open and developing ways of engaging effectively with them. We put a larger frame around situations, to appreciate their deeper and often paradoxical causes and consequences.

Final messages

The messages of this research are challenging, urging us to 'live in the 'first person', 'putting on our world', taking living and working and learning personally. At the end of this research I have come to believe that those in '**first-person**' businesses, such as my research partners and I, are offering a 're-conceiving' of Western business and educational tradition through the wholeness of our integral, congruent living-working-learning experiences.

I fully agree with Anita Roddick (2001), who says:

I'm occasionally accused of seeing these issues too personally.
As if being in business was necessarily
a cold-hearted, objective, pseudo-scientific project to manipulate consumers.
But I've also learned over the years that it can't be that any more.
The future of the world depends on us all taking it personally.

The practice, as discussed in this paper, of taking living, learning and working personally, as part of a dynamic interactive world, is the essence of action research ~ not AR as a methodology but AR as a way of being. I experienced my research partners in just such a way.

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