Multimodal Approaches to IT Projects, with Blogosphere as Starting Point
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A commonplace in the world of creative process is a product without a process history. How were the decisions made, and how might we replicate that experience that brought us success? We don't usually know. With the blog, we have insight into process because the mode we chose, and the process for using it throughout the design and production phases of any project, captures the process as it unfolds.

What I've learned about multimodal project based collaboration can be broken into several rules of thumb, or near-precepts:

1. **Successful creative, flexible exploration and use of a single mode/medium depends absolutely on strong adoption of that mode/medium as your group's primary, preferred mode.**

   By "strong adoption" I mean preferential adoption, unflinchingly devoted adoption. How do you select a mode you can unflinchingly adopt, one you can evangelize around? A few ideas.

   Before introducing the mode your group will use, do research way beyond your own first preference, and look beyond any work experiences and associated tools as well. I happen to like cartoon chat, and vanilla IM, probably too much, enough that when I first taught online I hosted my own Palace (cartoon chat) server for my class sessions and office hours, enough that I keep Trillian and too many friends lists going much of the time when I'm online. But was chat the best mode for what my team needed to do? That was the question I had to use a starting point.

   Ask yourself: what is it we need to do together? List those things. You might need synchronous contact but not necessarily f2f, asynchronous but somehow archived so anyone can pop into the "conversation" at any point, a way to exchange documents and files including maybe reviewing what's exchanged, a way of letting others in the hierarchy know what you are working on in more than a bulleted-list way, a way of sharing work with informal peers outside your group. Maybe you realize that your work, and your mode, will not be an isolated effort but one that might serve as the starting point for your organization. In that case, you also need to consider which feature sets you need that other groups in your organization might need, and how you can get tool, mode, and skill transfer to happen within your organization. Always have an eye on the larger system within which, and for which, your group functions. Ask yourself these deep, key questions. Always keep an eye glued both to your context and the future of the activity – and value – your mode will add to that context. And select a mode, or tool, or method, based on the honest answers you give yourself.

So you have a tool you researched and know will work better than anything else you know of for your team and project goals. Cool. Now introduce it to your team (this is the unflinching part, phase 1) by outlining what you need to do as a group, how this tool will get you there, and when you expect everyone to start using this mode exclusively. (*Now*, preferably. Waiting weakens.) Do not apologize for your choice, but do suggest that there might be an adjustment period as everyone shifts from the variety of individual modes they'd been using to the single mode you suggest.

Frederic Jablin reads the literature of organizational social information processing frameworks to suggest that "a worker's job attitudes are socially constructed and are largely a result of normative and informational cues communicated to the workers by others in the work environment, particularly coworkers" (220). The blog becomes, or has become for our team, a consensus-normative construct that exploits this social construction of both attitudes and knowledges, so what we get is what John Dykstra calls "communal brain," this way of creating something jointly in an unknown or unfamiliar information domain, a space where "what matters most is not the individual talents but the ability to integrate them" (Schrage 31).

Offer alternatives and alternative scenarios. In our case, blog use is mandatory for everything except personal (highly personal, not idle backchannel) communication to the team leader. Highly personal communication modes for our group have been identified as private telephone call or email. Everything else goes through the blog. It's important to allow these modal exceptions, in fact it is critical, as people need to still have a safe communication path. If the team feels they have to type everything in a common, public space, they'll balk and resist. And who can blame them? Give them a safe place for communication that needs to stay safe. Research shows that an "individual's communication predisposition may affect his or her relative effectiveness in interacting problem-solving groups" (Jablin 222), and safe spaces suit the predispositions of some collaborators.

Backchannel is the most critical communication and collaborative knowledge-building path that work groups tend to lose, or never know about. Bringing backchannel forward into a common space empowers the lurkers. Foregrounding the backchannel also has the potential to unify the workSelves of team members who tend to backchannel as a way of expressing ideas they feel the team might not accept. This is powerful on several levels. A team member who is not resisting creative expression in herself might not resist it in other peers. The productive open expression of what might otherwise be backchannelled communication opens dialogue team-wide about ideas and possibilities. Backchannels sometimes exist for political reasons; people want to try out their ideas and have the backchannel vet the ideas before they're taken forward. In the open communication method, every idea has the potential for adoption, use, and debate. It's key that your team know that backchannel is productive communication. Invite that production into the foreground.

So adopt a mode, introduce it as your strong choice, and start requiring it as the mode for team communication and team work. To make it optional is to weaken it. Your backchannels will still function, and you'll never get all the best thinking out into the open. Also, if you allow any other mode to operate ("I know you don't really like the blog, Bubba, so you can still just email everybody instead."), you confuse everyone. Team members will wonder what they are supposed to check, they'll be exasperated at the lack of efficiency, and they'll feel you're either playing favorites or simply playing games.

2. **Realize that some on your team will resist your choice/adoption (some strongly and vocally, some less strongly). This resistance will, at least for a time, bog your collaborative efforts and your forward momentum on projects.**

Some of this resistance stems from the presence of outsiders, whether as active agents or merely occasional observers, in the exclusive domain of team work and identity. Goffman notes in The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life that "we often find that when interaction must proceed in the presence of outsiders, outsiders tactfully act in an uninterested, unperceiving fashion, so that if physical isolation is not obtained by walls or distance, effective isolation can at least be obtained by convention" (230). Of course, in the blog, the walls or boundaries could be(come) an authentication practice that keeps all but the inside group out of the collaborative/shared space, or it could be the choice to exclude the blog pages from public view.

IT groups tend to be comprised of dozens of programming and knowledge workers which splinter into workgroups and cliques with highly specific emphases and functional focuses. A blog for an entire IT group would, in my view, find it difficult to create and maintain focus. Separate focused groups, then, require separate blogs, the boundaries of which are the database and domain and folder-system boundaries created when a digital container is created and populated with objects – groups, functions and their security limits, users – specific to that container. The academic technology blog is one container, the technology master plan task force blog another, the IT web redesign team Sharepoint site another, and so on. Perhaps the structures and types of objects are static across all containers (blogs, websites) of a certain type or with a shared or similar function; what is different, ultimately, between one container and the next, the difference that makes each container a space for agency, is the user group associated with the container. Security and object-function rules form agency boundaries within the container; digital boundaries define the container proper.

Online, "effective isolation" can be achieved even in an "open" digital container even when multiple agents outside the core group (I'm instinctively using Wenger's communities of practice language here) are loaded as users within the core group's digital workspace. Again, establishing simple yet firm rules for practice makes it possible for the core group to perform and define their group through action *even while being observed*.

Our team blog has as authorized authors all core group members, plus an executive director of IT, plus our main network admin. Why these two people? Sometimes, the group posts a question that can only be answered by someone IT-internal, and while I could run down the hall and ask them and then run back and post the answer, I'd rather see the team dialogue with the person directly. These IT-internal folks are only added on the fly, on demand, so since a few questions have surfaced about network and bandwidth issues, I added the network person to the blog and asked him to log on and respond. Likewise, the executive director was added when questions emerged about budget and/or policy that I was simply enforcing and not creating. *Why not have the policy/budget person answer his questions?* I thought. So I added him to the list, and he responded to the team directly.

This sort of activity flattens the hierarchy, and that makes some people nervous (on both sides of the hierarchy). The network director is my lateral peer, so inviting his response did not really have a flattening effect. But inviting my supervisor to relate directly to my team, intentionally collapsing the hierarchical boundary between my team and my supervisor, was, and is, a potentially risky activity, one that invites an empowering sort of team agency.

Because we trackback and share web resources on our blog, and because we've chosen to make our blog open to public view, we have also received feedback and comments from the creators of certain sites we've mentioned and discussed. This has been a universally positive exchange thus far, and certainly breaks us out of potential silo mentality, but it has also given the team the real sense that our work, our working through process on the blog, has an audience, has a voice, has a different kind of impact and agency potential.
Even while being observed is something to return to, as it does create its issues, at least at first, and it does impact practice, though I'm not convinced that impact is all, or even mostly, negative.

Central to Goffman's concept of teamness is the keeping of secrets, an active notness in the area of performativity and "show," the team members "shar[ing] and ke[eping]" its "secrets that could give the show away" (238, TPOSIEL). If my team exists, or works, or performs, or "shows," primarily in the blogosphere, how do we both share and keep our secrets?

Some of the answer is in project/performance setup, something that was initiated offblog. We established interaction conventions organically, in a combination of f2f and online meetings and conversations. We became "natural" together in both modes through a series of naturalizing activities I convened and called "retreats." These were not paintball or three-legged-race team building exercises; rather, I knew we had certain big issues to tackle straight away, and I organized the events around those issues. That sentence means little, I know, so here's a better try. Our institution created a unit from scratch. A few of us had experience in the institution proper, and we all had higher-ed staff or faculty experience, but we had not existed either together or in this type of group before, and the institution had not experienced our kind of group before (we were not replacing an existing staff set or unit within the org structure; the structure found a new branch on its tree for us). So our retreats had to tackle both "what are we going to do, what does the institution need from us, what will our vision/mission/focus be, how do we build our baseline" and "what kind of institution is this, how do things work here, who am i, who are we, what are we together." Jablin suggests that the "process by which organizational members become part of, or are absorbed into, an organization" (256) has "two reciprocal components: the organization's planned and unplanned attempts to "socialize" the recruit, and the new employees efforts to "individualize" his or her role" (213). We welcome, and structured through both the blog and other interactions, both.

On the planned absorption end, we had a series of halfday retreats, brainstorming and whiteboard-filling high-energy sessions we continued post-f2f with some emails and lotsa blogging. Our session topics included institutional culture, goals and vision, protocols and tools, strategic work, and dailiness/job pathing. Working together on these issues, setting goals together, visioning our team as an essential force within the institution, helped us see who we were together, helped solidarity develop. Some task- or interest-based pairing off of members was part of the naturalizing process and persists, though in evolving pair relationships, now, several months later.

So, secrets. Teamwide backchannel kept offline from the rest of the watching world. When I read our blog, I read more than the text – I read the subtextual clues that are easy enough for me to catch because I also know these people offline, I know some of what they are saying *behind* what they are typing. Team members have argued in the past, and some of the blog etiquette has shifted to accommodate that history; some people not involved in the past heat use its momentary (yet archived, thus perpetual), long-expired terse language as an opening for tightening up, tersening, their own blog language, while the historic-argument participants now either wait until a conversation is almost done before posting (playing it very safe) or, no matter the idea, are unfailingly polite and calm.

Once upon a time I appreciated online politeness, I practiced extreme online politeness. Now I see it as a mask, as a voiceless, even silenced, history. What is the lie behind "great idea!"? Which secrets waver behind the text as I type, between their truth and the way I express them in academic, safe, prose?

3. **Realize that resistance to your mode/tool of choice will make long-term commitment stronger, not weaker. Embrace rather than fear resistance. Use resistance as a discussion prompt; never try to shut it down or shush it into its corner.**

When resistance first arrives, it's only seeming to arrive at that moment. It's been there, building, before you have a chance to see it. By the time resistance actually rears its head, by the time someone on the team actively resists, resistance is established and possibly already viral. Over the years I've experienced resistance, has been both the resisted and the resister. I'm sure most of the people on my team, people with long histories in higher ed and/or industry, have similar experiences. But when resistance hit our team, about a full month into deep implementation, it came as a shock.

The team was – or had seemed to be – gliding along smoothly, managing the new tool and working through new projects out in the open. Our team engages in ongoing consensus-based decision making, and our staff meetings (and blog, though to a certain extent because of the different and unpredictable audience) are open forums, a safe dialogue space. I had set no parameters beyond openness and the guiding idea of consensuality rather than dissensuality. At two separate staff meetings, someone spoke up and announced their noncooperation. Not just discomfort with the tools, not just noticing trends at the blog that made them feel iffy about it, but straight noncooperation. I had received no backchannel to warn me, and others on the team were picking their jaws up off the floor the same as I was. Except. Except that they were also looking to me to see what would happen next.

Your team, no matter how strong, no matter how brilliant, depends on your leadership. At a crisis moment, you have to be strong enough and smart enough to do the right thing. I can say this because I was neither of those things at those moments. The first time it happened, my response was reactive; I took the refusal to cooperate personally, as a personal attack on this thing I had chosen and wanted to do. The second time it happened, my response was too conciliatory; I suggested that, with two serial complaints about the tool, maybe we should give it a certain amont of time and then revisit our tool/mode choice. I flinched, and the flinch cost my team several weeks of blog downtime as people didn't know whether this really was our dominant mode, didn't know what might become the next arguable post. I softened my blog tone, shied away from controversial topics even if they might advance our work, and all of that cost us dwarly. The data analysis for our blog activity demonstrates this with painful accuracy; almost immediately after the first incident, activity on the blog tanked, and after the second incident it all but dies for some weeks.

Two notes on this before we move on to the good, or better, news. First: when things go wrong, it's a cooperative exercise just like it is when things go right. One employee can say or do whatever they want, but they cannot derail your activity unless you cooperate in that derailment. Tough lesson. Second: downtime in your mode launch is damaging. While team members are not using your new collaboration tool, they are still collaborating, still working. They are going back to the way they used to work, using old comfort modes, and they are creating at the same time comfort backchannels they might never release when activity resumes post-incident.

Twenty twenty hindsight is a wonderful thing. Not as wonderful as 20:20 foresight, alas, but wonderful nonetheless. With a little distance between the incidents and the current moment, we were able to joke a little about the blog as an "unsafe" space, talk edgily at first but later with more ease about how we would resume project work at the blog. We discussed teamwide issues with our collaboration tool and worked out some ways to reorganize our work behaviors so the blog would work better for all of us and not just for those who felt infinite comfort in this mode. It's interesting that the resistant team members are now frequent contributors, but they've worked out their own individual style of posting, of working in an open space. I did not realize this in time, but I can share it with you. Give people time to adjust to the new mode. Make it mandatory, but maybe precreate a backchannel for those who might potentially resist. Some people feel behind, almost humiliated, if they can't learn the tool fast enough, if they see other teammates functioning with high fluency and they feel behind, less adept. In a workspace this is even more troubling for them because they might see the openness of their nonfluency grounds for evaluation. Make it clear this is not so.

Discover the points of resistance and find a way to functionally balance your desire to keep a single dominant collaboration and work modality in play with the needs of those who resist and lack fluency in the mode you've selected.
Remember what matters interpersonally. Michael Schrage writes that "what matters most is that the collaborators possess a modicum of mutual trust, the belief that they are each adding value, and a genuine desire to solve the problem at hand or create something new" (36).

4. **Remain flexible in the way you as leader think about and employ the dominant mode/tool. The best way to lead innovation is to innovate.**

As the leader of a group using a mode you've chosen, you must use that tool innovatively. You might consider using your own personal blog in a nontraditional (blog tradition?) way, or your mode of choice in some out-of-box application. Grow your comfort with the tool and let your team know through your practice that innovation, thinking as you work, matters.

5. **Remain engaged without dominating. Collaborative flow needs urging in not just the right, but sometimes a better even if already right, direction. Learn the balance between engagement and overdesire.**

Because I've spent too much time for several years online, teaching, collaborating, socializing, working, my own enthusiasm about my team's online collaboration possibilities raged pretty wildly. A problem with raging enthusiasm is that it's, well, off-putting. Nobody can love this thing the way you do, believe in it the way you do. Which is why the first thing to do post-choice, the thing to keep returning to, is a tempering of your enthusiasm and optimism. Just as you'd temper your discouragement before offering bad news to your team, temper your thrill, no matter how thrilling things really really seem to you. Be the temperate evangelist and allow the team to work out for themselves their own level of devotion. This is a first, and another tough, rule of thumb. When you're introducing cool toys and exciting project possibilities, it's too easy to jump in and do the work. But if you're a project lead or a manager or director, you have to engage your team in the project and then back away and let them play.   Set parameters, get them started, and then do your own work.

Of course, anyone who'd taught online knows that you don't have to be present to be dominant. Use the guidelines that smart online teachers use:

- Set parameters and guidelines for interaction
- Set specific parameters and guidelines for the work to be done
- Give each person a well defined yet flexible role
- Set timelines and benchmarks
- Go do your own work, only re-engaging if (a) a problem is presented to you and it really seems to be something you should step in and manage (if it's a rules-based solution you see, point that out and again fade away) or (b) it's benchmark time and you need to step in with reminders and prompts.

How do you step in at benchmark time? First, know when those moments are (you probably set them). My own team breaks into mini-project teams, each of which sets its own timeline and benchmarking. Each project team sends me their Project file, and I mark what I need to notice (and when) from those Gannt charts.   But, just like an effective online teacher, I step in lightly, just to see how things are going and help things get back on track if I notice a swerve in focus or direction. Then I step away again and let the professionals do their work.

What does my own engagement with the blog look like? What do I do now that I've learned from doing some of the wrong things (and more of the right ones)? Typically, a team leader will post:

- Updates on major issues the team needs to know about (process or procedural changes, for instance)
- Links to resources with a call for others to add to these resources
- Calls for team updates (with a directive to post updates as comments appended to the "call" post)
- Ideas for new projects – if a major idea hits – or a swerve idea for projects in process
- Major documents to the team share folder

The team leader will also comment on ongoing conversations, either toward the end of the conversation (so you don't cut off any late-but-important posts from colleagues) or when they notice that things are at a standstill because team members do not have the intervention or information they require to move ahead.

This means the team leader needs to read the blog every day and check in for updates throughout the day when they can.

This is more manageable because we set rules of engagement that include only responding to posts new within the past work week (so you are not parsing through thousands of posts for anything new). When you know you only are parsing a dozen or two dozen posts for updates, all on one page, that's not so time consuming.

6. Stroke your engaged internal team leaders. Privately.

Ridding suggests that "good" managers in organizations tend to "be sensitive to the feeling and ego-defense needs of their subordinates; e.g., they are careful to reprimand in private rather than in public" (443). Likewise, it is a good idea to praise that way, and for the same reasons. Graen and colleagues suggest that certain employees are given preferential treatment, and that this is not a bad thing. According to their Vertical Dyad Linkage (VDL) leadership model, "these selected subordinates (in-group members) make contributions that go beyond their formal job duties and take on responsibility for the completion of tasks that are most critical to the success of the unit. In return, they receive greater attention, support, and sensitivity from their supervisors."

Our consensus model and my transparent management style made a VDL model impracticable. The literature might suggest that leadership is developed in this way, and indeed I have benefited from the VDL model. But even as I was being stroked and groomed for leadership, even though that selection and grooming was based on performance over time, both I and my then-colleagues sometimes chafed at the unequal treatment such meritocratic arrangements and structures make so painfully evident. What I have tried to do with this AT team is not anti-VDL but a lateralizing of VDL, so that I have high expectations for, and high, individualized relationships with, each team member. This is difficult to maintain, but I believe it's necessary. Sometimes, I'm tempted back to the hierarchizing meritocratic ethic by a team member who so outperforms that a response seems essential. In these cases, I give an even-toned response in our transparent space, the blog, and save the more personalized, near-effusive appreciation or recognition for email.

Common sense tells us that if we engage in public stroking we are bound to hurt feelings, overlook other worthy achievements, or create/increase resentment. If what you want is team bliss, avoid uneven tone and uneven attention.

7. Do not invest actual dollars in the product you choose as your dominant mode/tool until it proves its value to your group's productivity.

In our case this was several months. Firmly adopt, but go for low-cost or free trial for as long as you can. This keeps you from having budget pressure compounding the "make it work" pressure that will already exist.