

Taking creativity for a walk:

an action research inquiry into coaching supervision on location

Alison Hodge



In this article I share how I have started working in a new way for me, and some of the key findings from the group work that I am involved in as a coaching supervisor.

I have worked as a coaching supervisor with internal and external executive coaches for 20 years, both 1:1 and in groups. While largely UK-based, I work in person and virtually with clients in five of the seven continents. On this, the fifth anniversary of graduation for my professional doctorate (Hodge 2014), it seems timely also to notice, once again, how my doctoral methodology of action research (Reason & Bradbury 2013) has become embedded in my practice.

The four stages of this approach (plan, act, observe, reflect) consistently permeate and inform how I engage in the task of facilitating reflection in and on practice with executive coaches around the world.

While my experiences of this approach are new to me, many readers will already be familiar with working outside, 'on the move' in their coaching, supervision and facilitation practice. Likewise, I am mindful that, at this stage, I've not explored the theoretical literature in any depth in such areas as eco-therapy, eco-psychology or even perhaps Jungian symbolism and metaphor.

Keywords

Coaching supervision, reflective practice, collaborative groups, learning on the move, eco psychology, action research

Some context

As a recognised practice, coaching supervision started slowly in the UK (around 2000), and there are still some executive coaches who don't see the need of or relevance for supervision. However, for many now it has become integral to their ongoing professional practice, development and wellbeing. For the purpose of this article, I offer this brief definition of coaching supervision:

'A co-created learning relationship that supports the supervisee (coach) both personally and professionally and seeks to support them in providing best practice to their client... Through the relationship and dialogue, the coach can receive feedback, broaden their perspectives, generate new ideas and approaches, and maintain standards of practice' (Hodge 2014).

In the UK there is increasing anecdotal evidence of coaches and supervisors who are taking their clients out of their comfortable or familiar office environments into the open air, into nature, into different locations as I have now started to do. We are walking and talking, exploring, discussing and reflecting. We are **moving** both literally and metaphorically as we explore towards outcomes and goals (e.g. Turner (2017), Ellison (2019), Stockdale (2019), Wingrove (2019), Gorham (2019)). This approach seems to personify the theme of 'creative collaboration' that contributes to and develops our learning and practice.

In my own work as a coaching supervisor, I have now started working in this way with clients, both on a one-to-one basis and with groups.

We are exploring such questions as:

- How does our familiar, regular work location constrain or compound our self-image, purpose and effectiveness as a coach or supervisor?
- How does the environment and physical movement impact on and inform how we engage in our supervision?
- How do different locations surprise and deepen our awareness, our reflection and learning in supervision?

To some, this may seem unusual; to others, it may not be strange at all. For centuries, people have engaged in dialogue and reflection while they're on the move, opening themselves up to be influenced either consciously or unconsciously by the changing environment (Ellison 2019). In changing location and including movement in our work our intention is to:

- Stimulate new and diverse connections.
- Tap into our creativity and imagination differently.
- Perhaps enable greater emotional awareness and insights.
- Inform our intentions, our learning and our practice.

Group supervision provides opportunities

Let's start with some accepted norms about how supervision has been recognized and accepted as a reflective learning space (Hodge 2016). Supervision provides opportunities to:

- reflect on practice, on client work, on the self as practitioner.
- restore and refresh our energies.
- gain insight, awareness, new interpretations, clarity.
- learn new tools or methods.
- gain new understanding, choices, affirmation.

So what did my personal training as group supervisor involve?

For me, in setting up groups, I learned that to create a safe space for personal disclosure and allowing vulnerability especially in a group, we needed a quiet, undisturbed, closed physical space that becomes familiar, and thus safe, to enable continuity and containment for the group. The quiet physical 'container' has been vital (e.g. Proctor 2000).

But we are living in a very different world now: 24/7 accessibility, mobile phones and texting, emails and Instagram, constant streams of social media and webinars. We have groups of co-workers coming together globally, with diverse cultures, faiths, politics and languages, and we are having to adapt and be adaptable.

Working spaces are now more open plan; fewer people have their own offices; meeting rooms may be rare; extensive open space facilities offer little privacy; noise is a constant; people traffic is a constant; seldom are two minutes, let alone two hours, the same. Our senses are potentially stimulated 24/7.

Four key influences on my change of approach

So, what has brought me to work in this creatively collaborative way, that is new for me?

There have been at least four key influences, particularly during the past couple of years:

- At a conference in 2018, Rachel Ellison (2018) shared a case study of a coach/coachee going to different London locations for their coaching sessions, and of the impact that this had.
- A member of one of my groups suggested we go somewhere different for our final group supervision session.
- A supervisee shared the effects of taking their coaching clients walking in their local woods and parks.
- Increasingly, supervisees are sharing my own experience of the necessity and value of regular physical exercise, being outdoors and of the recuperative, inspiring effects this has on our own self-care and well-being.

I will now share some of the experiences that I've participated in as supervisor with three different groups, working in supervision 'on location'. I describe some key elements of what happened with each group, and then finally offer my reflections on this work and how it has informed my practice. While I have referred here to the actual locations that I have been to with the groups, to respect their confidentiality, the participants and any reference to session content are generalized.

First enquiry: a day at Tate Modern

A supervisee suggested we go somewhere different for our final group supervision session. She mentioned Tate Modern in London.

I was out of my comfort zone at this suggestion, as I am not always sure how some visual art impacts me. Equally, I was unsure how it might inform my sense of what might be happening for my clients, their coachees, and the client systems that are at the heart of our supervision.

So, by way of reconnaissance, I went alone to the gallery two weeks before the group day, where I

discovered the Anni Albers tapestry exhibition (image 1).

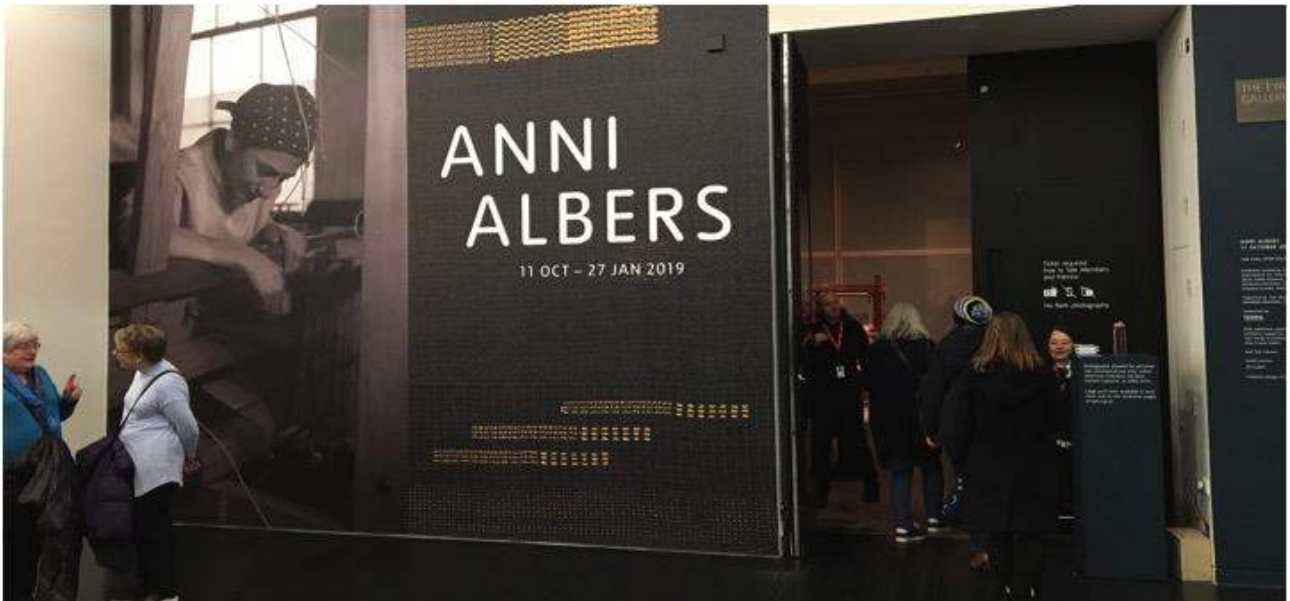


Image 1: The Anni Albers Exhibition at Tate Modern, London, in 2018/19. (Photo by Simon Jenkins.)

Tapestry has not been something that I have been particularly interested in previously. I didn't really enjoy the exhibition on my own. I was not inspired either by the colours or by the works. I was disappointed by what I would describe as the muted shades of grey, brown and taupe. But I decided that this would be good for the group! Why? As a small exhibition within the gallery, it was bounded, contained, 'controllable' and not too big within the wider gallery. Already I could see how this symbolized in part our work together in supervision, which can sometimes be considered a microcosm of the wider systems in which executive coaches work in with their clients. So this is the location we went to for our final group session (images 2 and 3).



Image 2: Art work at the Anni Albers Exhibition, Tate Modern, London. (Photo by Simon Jenkins.)



Image 3: Intricate stitching at the Anni Albers Exhibition, Tate Modern, London. (Photo by Simon Jenkins.)

When we arrived as a group two weeks later, we each went through the exhibition separately, at our own pace, for one hour. Thus, we each moved on our own path, while members of the group and other visitors were moving on theirs. We were just passing through, pausing, reflecting, and noticing whatever caught our attention.

Clearly we were not in our usual quiet, closed room where we would normally be, physically present and sitting still with each other. Rather, we were in a public venue with constant sounds and people moving in all directions, often physically close to any of us. We met at the end of the exhibition and, sitting in one of the cafes, shared our reflections about the impact of the tapestries. This then provided the platform for us to reflect on our year of being together in group supervision.

Here are a few of the salient observations that emerged:

- Most of the works were framed.
- There was so much intricate detail in each tapestry that clearly involved great skill that had gone into creating them.
- Some had tassels at the ends that almost appeared unfinished or that certainly had the potential to be continued.
- From a distance, it was difficult to see the detail in each piece, but it was possible to grasp the sense of the whole work.
- However, in slowing down and stepping up close to each tapestry, it was possible to see the detail and notice how the different threads made a difference.

- The interwoven threads and knots added to the overall beauty of the piece and created whole works of art.
- Each supervisee was inspired by different tapestries to inform their reflections on their practice and our work together as a group.
- In drawing the threads of our individual experiences together, we could create our collaborative learning together.

The parallels with our work in supervision became so patently obvious.

Second enquiry: by popular request

At the second of five whole-day sessions with a new group, we met at a serviced meeting room in Kensington. Here, I shared my reflections about what was emerging in my practice as supervisor and about the impact of my experience at Tate Modern. Almost with one voice, they asked if we could do something similar too. With such energy and curiosity from them all, and if everyone was agreeable, I proposed that we could approach our work together as an 'experiment' to explore this different way of working. The process of creating this new approach felt highly collaborative.

As there were only three in the group, I invited each one of them to take responsibility for choosing a location, planning the details, and we would follow their lead.



Image 4: Hyde Park, London, in springtime, 2019. (Photo by Alison Hodge.)

Some questions that we held from the start of this inquiry:

- How do we adapt in an environment that is new to us?
- How does this inform how we respond in our practice?
- What can we learn from these experiences both individually and as a group that informs and

changes our practice?

- What is it like when someone chooses a location that we don't know?

The three locations the group members chose were Hyde Park (image 4), Kew Gardens in London, and Eastbourne in Sussex (image 5).



Image 5: The seafront at Eastbourne, where we held our final session. (Photo by Alison Hodge.)

At our second session at Kew Gardens, much to our delight and surprise, we discovered the [Dale Chihuly outdoor exhibition](#). So not only did we have the magnificent spring flowers of magnolia, cherry blossom and tulips, but also the wonderful pieces of art nestling in different parts of the gardens, as we went exploring (video 1).



Video 1: [Follow this link](#) for my video reflection on a supervision visit to Kew Gardens. (Video by Simon Jenkins.)

What was it about being here that struck us, or informed us? It was cold, and it was not quite raining, and we were aware that we walked faster to keep warm. At the same time, we engaged in a conversation without a definitive destination – other than the questions that one of the participants raised when we looked at a particular team coaching assignment, and the challenges it presented (video 2).



Video 2: [Follow this link](#) for my video reflection on a supervision visit to Kew Gardens. (Video by Simon Jenkins.)

One of the really fascinating things about working on location is how we set off on a path, holding the intention of the supervision question. We find we're walking, but we don't know exactly where the path is taking us, and when we come to T-junctions or the path splitting, we trust that whichever direction we choose to go, we will keep discovering what may be around the corner. Out of that come the sort of insights we may not get if we are sitting in a static space – perhaps in a circle in an office, with no external stimuli, such as people walking past, or the birds singing. For each of us, hearing the birds, or being part of a group walking, normalised what we were doing and connected us with the wider world, rather than separating us from it in a closed space.

Third inquiry: a new supervision group

I invited people to join this new group explicitly on the basis of working 'on location', framing it as an experiment, as live action research. The group comprises five supervisees and me. I knew everyone from various sources, but no one else knew each other. Right from the start, the members of the group agreed to take a turn to choose and plan a location for each of our sessions.

As supervisor and 'host', I chose the first venue, the Natural History Museum in London (image 6). As we were all meeting for the first time, we would each be bringing our personal history with us, so the symbol of this location seemed appropriate.



Image 6: The Natural History Museum, London (Photo by [Claudio Testa](#) on [Unsplash](#))

This had seemed like a good location, but as the morning wore on and the crowds grew, so too did the noise and the echoes. However, in spite of what felt like escalating pressure from our environment, we worked with two client situations. What was fascinating was the level and extent of the insights, the creativity, the new angles that people offered. These were fantastically fresh and diverse.

By lunchtime we were 'exhausted', and needed to get out. Everyone agreed that we needed some quiet space where we weren't struggling to hear each other or negotiate the crowds and the exhibits. The sun was shining, it was spring, so we walked up to Hyde Park. And here is what we found (image 7)!



Image 7: Circle of wooden toadstools in Hyde Park, London. (Photo by Alison Hodge.)

The blossom was out, the leaves were coming on the trees, the birds were singing, the sun was shining and

we discovered this circle of wooden toadstools, so it seemed natural to sit here and agree the agenda for the afternoon. Because our time was now limited, we took a 'speed supervision' approach (like speed dating). This involved 20-minute sessions per person, for the remaining three members of the group.

There were several significant and notable elements that emerged from this day:

- The impact of the sound and noise: people, echoes, traffic noise.
- The sun was shining, so we were all keen to work outside.
- The colours, light, flowers, sense of space to think and feel in the park.

I came away wondering how each person felt about sharing their client work in public, either in a building or outside. What I noticed was that even though they had never met before, group members seemed able to disclose, be vulnerable, explore their work with the group whatever the location. So what enabled this? I could have hypothesized about the enabling factors, but was more inclined to hold the question. What became clear was that people also needed time to pause and reflect on their own among the hurly-burly of our environment.

As this is a work in progress, I'm now inviting the group to notice how our shared experiences inform and impact on our relationships and capacity to learn through working together 'on location'. I will also be keen to explore the impact of our changing locations for each of us as well as our group development and our individual learning and change to practice.

Some of my reflections so far

Let me share some of my reflections about working in this way, including both the power and some of the pitfalls (see video 3).



Video 3: [Follow this link](#) for my video reflection on a supervision visit to Kew Gardens. (Video by Simon Jenkins.)

Being curious – One of the things I notice happens with a group when we are outside, and particularly in natural settings, is walking around a corner and seeing something different or unexpected. What it provokes for me is allowing our imagination to wander and just wonder what we are seeing might mean, or how it might represent what is going on for us as practitioners, or in the client system. We can't know until we get there. How do we bring delight, curiosity and surprise, and not predict or presume that we know what's going to happen or what is happening until we get there? As we are collaborating in this inquiry, we are all curious as to how this then informs our practice.

Touching all the senses anew – By changing our environment, we stimulate all our senses anew. The potential for these to be numbed by familiarity and habit may be high for many of us. With all our senses enlivened, we not only have fresh thinking but also our imagination is fired up. The external environment, especially in nature, stimulates and enables us to see our world and thus ourselves and our clients differently.

- Sight – horizons, new perspectives, limitless, anything is possible, the sky, clouds, sun, no sun.
- Smell – flowers, leaves, food, animals, the sea – what associations this may bring up.
- Hearing – new sounds, birds, wind in the trees, shrubbery.
- Taste – maybe chew a leaf, new coffees, new food options.
- Feelings and sensations – temperature, sun, wind, rain, heat, space, the air around us.

Walking and talking – While on the move, we breathe differently from when we are just sitting, thus oxygenating our bodily systems, contributing to a feeling of healthiness and wellbeing.

Particularly when we are outside, there is space that gives a real sense of freedom. This in turn gives an implicit permission to speak more openly, while it's also easier to walk away if a challenge is too potent in that moment. Likewise, there is a greater sense of freedom to engage more fully. People don't feel trapped by the conventions that may be implicit or assumed in an office or closed space.

With each of these three groups I have found that we set off in a general direction, but there is flexibility in how we may reach a destination. We are exploring together, collaborating on where we go rather than treading a pre-determined route or path, and we hold the 'endpoint' or goal lightly. The boundaries tend to be time-based and perhaps weather-based, and these determine how we approach the work at any given stage in our days together.

Trusting we'll find our way – What if we get lost? So far, this has not become an issue. My sense is that we will work with that and notice what happens to us, or our clients, if we feel lost in the work. At the same time, I have a strong sense that with trust, we will find our way. We are in this together, walking alongside each other literally as well as metaphorically,



Video 4: [Follow this link](#) for my video reflection on a supervision visit to Kew Gardens. (Video by Simon Jenkins.)

Walking around Kew Gardens, as we discovered the Chihuly installations, it was a bit like Easter egg hunting (see video 4). We went from one beautiful flower bed of tulips or daffodils and then discovered another beautiful piece of glasswork. Whether or not we consciously connected that with the client, or an aspect of our practice, the pieces of art could personify the complexity and intertwining of the threads or layers of the work we were involved in, and they were all interconnected, differently shaped, and tangled, with ends floating away. They gave us wonderful metaphors for the complexity and messiness of our work, particularly in groups and teams.



Video 5: [Follow this link](#) for my video reflection on a supervision visit to Kew Gardens. (Video by Simon Jenkins.)

When we are sitting in a closed office space, people have their notebooks and they write things down as we go (see video 5). But when we are outside, we don't necessarily write notes as we're walking along. So one of the things I have built into this work is time to stop, in a café or under a tree or sitting on a bench, inviting each person to have some quiet, individual time to think about what's emerging for them in this environment, with the visual impact, the noise and the smells. What does this prompt? What does this inspire in terms of their awareness of who they are in relationship to their environment? How does it inform how they show up with their clients? And potentially, in turn, they may invite their clients to notice what impact the environment has on them, and what helps or hinders the client to be a better leader, or a better manager.

The feedback I often receive is that moving to a new space, often outdoors, gives them an opportunity to realise more of themselves than perhaps they do in their day-to-day, habitual environment. That in turn stimulates fresh thinking, with new perspectives. And that, after all, is how we enable and facilitate change in another.

Conclusion

So how is this approach informing our practice as executive coaches and who we are in this practice? At this stage of what for me is an ongoing creative collaboration with my clients in group coaching supervision, let me offer some reflections prompted by this action research inquiry.

As the supervisees participate in this visceral, yet metaphorical experience, it enables and frees them to find new approaches, new interpretations, and new relationships with their client systems or individuals outside the expected norms, or their original training.

The physicality of walking and talking in different locations, with different physical and mental conditions, gives a freedom to share our thinking and experience in a different way, together. I personally feel a greater sense of freedom in how I engage with the group and the work, inspired and stimulated by what is happening around me/us, and the constantly evolving environment.

- Each person's experience and interpretation is unique.
- We don't have to conform to norms or a specific organizational culture.
- No one has to find the 'right thing to say', or be 'the cleverest' or the 'most intelligent', or come up with the 'best questions or observations'.

In setting the frame for this work as action research, we create an experimental flavour, willing to be curious, to try things out. So far, participants have engaged in our work together with an eager curiosity that enables them to draw fresh insights into how they might change or develop in their practice. This appears to be different from previous groups I have worked with, and I'm sure that the impact on me of working this way has fed into our shared experience. I have a sense that group members are able to bring more of themselves into the space so they are more enlivened in their learning and growth, just as in the natural world around us.



Video 6: [Follow this link](#) for my video reflection on a supervision visit to Kew Gardens. (Video by Simon Jenkins.)

During our visit to Kew Gardens, as we walked through an area where there is no sculpture, I was struck by the completely natural location, with the wonderful, unpredictable randomness of the tulips as they were emerging and growing. The tulips had slightly different colours, and blended with the blossom, but the blossom was going to change, and we could just see the green shoots coming. Change is going to happen, although we're not quite sure when.

Thinking about how change and growth occurs in the natural world, we can learn such a lot as we sit with our clients, and as we engage them to learn, change and grow themselves. We don't know quite what colour they will produce, or when they are going to blossom, or when the leaves will come out, but if we hold the belief that change is possible, who knows what magic might occur?

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank and appreciate all those **clients** who have dared to join me in these inquiries. Out of respect for confidentiality, while you may recognize the places that I have described, you remain nameless here, but you know who you are. Our work together is a joy for me and I trust that our experience together may continue to add to your learning and growth.

As the theme of this issue is creative collaboration, I would also like to acknowledge and thank **Simon Jenkins**. As my web designer, 'social media man', creative inspiration and friend, he has helped me to create the videos and has played a major part in providing the technical know-how to create a multi-media article here. Simon is on Twitter as [@simonjenks](#).

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Photo and video credits

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Anni Albers exhibition: Simon Jenkins

Hyde Park and Eastbourne: Alison Hodge

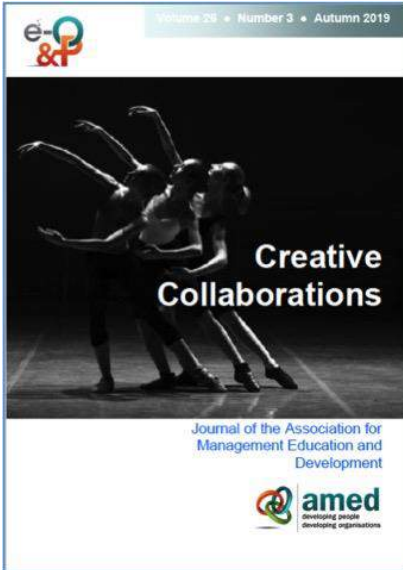
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e-Organisations and People (e-O&P) is the quarterly online journal of The Association for Management Education and Development ([AMED](#)), registered under ISSN: 2042 –9797. This article originally appeared in the Autumn 2019 edition, 'Creative Collaborations', produced in collaboration between AMED and Louise Austin. Copyright remains with the author. The full edition is available [here in pdf](#), free of charge, ([donations welcome](#)). A professionally produced print copy is available at cost (£12.50 approx) from the [AMED office](#).

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