

Poetry in the Boardroom: Thinking Beyond the Facts

A roundtable discussion among Clare Morgan, Kirsten Lange, Ted Buswick, and editor Nanci Healy

This roundtable discussion sets out the ideas developed by Clare Morgan and emerging from an investigation conducted by The Strategy Institute of The Boston Consulting Group on the relation between reading poetry and strategic thinking. Ted Buswick initiated the poetry project for the Institute.

Last fall, JBS Editor Nanci Healy facilitated a roundtable discussion among Clare Morgan (Oxford University), Kirsten Lange (Boston Consulting Group, Munich) and Ted Buswick (Boston Consulting Group, Boston) on poetry and business strategy, two subjects that don't ordinarily go together. The editor thanks the participants for sharing their ideas and creativity with JBS readers and possibly opening up new avenues of thought for business leaders.

Healy: Clare, can you talk about the workshop you recently conducted with a high tech company in England that included poetry as part of business strategy?

Morgan: This was a young UK company that wanted to expand quickly and make sure the strategies for expansion were right. My own company had been doing some organization development work with them, and the CEO wanted to spend time at a strategy retreat developing the thinking of his management team as well as addressing the concrete issues that faced them. We'd kept him informed about the work within the Boston Consulting Group Strategy Institute on poetry and thinking, and—being a poetry reader himself—he was eager to see how exposure to some poetry would affect the way his team approached certain key issues.

Healy: How did you decide what line to take in presenting such an unusual subject?

Morgan: We decided to focus on the real topic at hand—making decisions. We chose a poem that showed how complex making decisions is: complex, that is, in terms of how so many different elements can affect how we see 'the facts'. The CEO was very pleased that the content of the poem opened up a wide-ranging discussion of real issues like: when is the right time to kill off a project? What influences we may not be aware of are affecting how we prioritize value and make fine judgements? The poem also opened up how *we* may be judged, for making tough choices that affect the lives of others. The CEO liked the way the discussion highlighted that in many cases there is not a clear cut right or wrong to the decision we're faced with. Sometimes the information we have is incomplete, or the different strands of need cannot be definitively prioritized. The poem we used at the workshop was 'Traveling Through the Dark', by William Stafford, and it reminded the management team just how much 'in the dark' we often are at important decision-making moments.

Healy: Was your goal to find a poem that suited the topic and explore it?

Morgan: It was much more than that. The right choice of topic is important in getting the interest of a busy executive. If the pay-off were just the new and expanded visions about decision making, or risk, or leadership, or power, or any of the other many areas of relevance a

poem could be dealing with – that wouldn't be enough of a reason, in most companies, for playing the wild card of a poem, rather than, say, organizing a discussion group.

Buswick: The big thing it offered was the skills it began to develop. Reading poetry opens up new thinking spaces, and accessing those spaces requires you to develop a new set of thinking skills.

Morgan: A poem is a distillation of thought, experience, emotion into a tightly controlled form which utilizes words, images, sound and rhythm patterns to create a complex set of meanings that constantly form and re-form themselves. Its components take it beyond argument into a realm where expectations of single, analysable meaning are deliberately questioned and subverted. All art does this, but poems do it in a particularly condensed and therefore intensive way. A poem is a puzzle with multiple, inexhaustible, co-existent – and interchangeable - 'solutions', each more or less dependent on the others for validity. This means that the desire for closure, which drives most business considerations, the desire for pursuing the shortest route between A and B, another dominant mode in business thinking – won't get you anywhere at all when you're faced with a poem.

Healy: Would that lack of closure alienate the business reader?

Buswick: Not if you make a careful choice of the poem you're going to discuss -- in subject matter, and by focussing on a poem that's accessible enough not to put the unaccustomed reader off yet complex enough to yield the many layers of meaning and multiple means of expressing that meaning that help develop the desirable thinking skills.

Lange: The poem has to be beautiful, too. One of the important things that affects you and works on you as a reader is the beauty of the language and the images.

Healy: What role does beauty have?

Morgan: T S Eliot said that the meaning of a poem was like the bit of meat the burglar threw to the dog while he was burgling the house. The beauty is a bit like this. It's part of the 'lure' the poem exercises, part of what entices you to spend the time trying to get to grips with it.

Lange: The beauty is something you hear, in the rhymes and rhythms, and something you can 'see' in your mind's eye, through the images the poet places before you. In these lines from Wordsworth: 'I wandered lonely as a cloud/ That floats on high o'er vales and hills,/ When all at once I saw a crowd,/ A host of golden daffodils;/ Beside the lake, beneath the trees,/ Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.': you see the image of the man, the sky, the flowers and you hear the sounds of the words rising and falling like music. It's beautiful, it has an effect on you. The question is, what does it all mean? If it's appealing to your inner mind and ear, you're more likely to be willing to spend the time to find out.

Morgan: The emotional charge Kirsten is identifying is vital to the poem's meaning. It's also a key ingredient in the kind of thinking spaces poetry opens up, and in how it goes about opening them.

Healy: Are your theories based on your perceived need to get more emotion and heart into the business world?

Buswick: That's a view we need to avoid because it's misleading. What our theories offer isn't an 'alternative' approach. It's a tough, skills-based initiative aimed at adding to the repertoire of analysis-based thinking spaces.

Morgan: Reading poetry can expand under-used powers of conceptual thinking that take you way beyond the limits of analysis and cause and effect.

Healy: But in the real business of the executive – making decisions, dealing with risk, deciding which path is most appropriate for the business to take at a given moment – what role do the emotions play?

Morgan: We've turned to cutting edge research in neuroscience and psychology to substantiate our claims in this area. The eminent neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, one of the leaders in this kind of research, describes in his book *Descartes' Error* how his patient, a man named Elliot, suffered brain damage. He could still function with a high degree of normality, scoring well in activities which tested his ability to make estimates on the basis of incomplete knowledge, his facility for changing mental set, in short, the standard tests of 'rationality'. Even his personality tests proved within normal range. And yet, Elliot was unable to perform one function crucial to human life: he was unable to make decisions. On the occasions when he *did* chose between options confronting him, his choices were, by any standards, wildly inappropriate. When he drove, for example, on an icy road, the emotions associated with 'risk', and all the nuanced response, the myriad tiny adjustments you would usually make to accommodate your judgements of conditions, possibilities, reactions, were absent. So Elliot was unable to formulate a way of handling himself and his car which took into account ideas of 'skid', 'accident', 'death', or 'mortal danger'. Without an emotional component, he was unable to function effectively in the world.

Damasio's findings on the reasons for this inability showed that making decisions, and thinking itself, is not the rational, deductive, factual-assessment process it is so often taken to be. Damasio concluded that ". . . there appears to be a collection of systems in the human brain consistently dedicated to the goal-oriented process we call reasoning, and to the response selection we call decision making. This same collection of systems is also involved in emotion and feeling."

Damasio called his book *Descartes' Error* because Descartes had suggested a split between 'reason' and 'feeling' that has continued to colour the way we think about thinking ever since the eighteenth century. The idea that we're predominantly 'rational' creatures, who best arrive at the answers to things through the application of logic, has mostly held sway. How we 'feel' about things has been pushed into the background – corralled along with superstition and emotion into things that belong to the less sophisticated and civilized sides of humanity. But that's changing now. We're coming to realize again, in the twenty-first century, that factors other than logic and deductive reasoning are critical to what we do in the world.

Healy: Has business thinking really been so dominated by logical approaches?

Buswick: Of course situations vary from company to company. Many businesses now organize themselves to reflect a greater emphasis on communities of value or highlight the interpersonal side of business relationships.

Lange: That's true, of course. The way BCG's offices in Munich are set up, for example, reflects this change. We organize ourselves into villages, or communities, and there's a lot of flexibility and interchange. But the rational models of business management that were so popular earlier in the twentieth century (I'm thinking of Taylor and the Hawthorne studies and all that followed from them) still have a huge influence. Speed, fact, analysis and 'cutting to the chase' still predominate in most business situations. There are times when this is necessary and appropriate. Executive summaries, as an example, give the executive a swift grip on what's in front of her. She doesn't have to waste time ploughing through a sea of information that may not be entirely relevant. I don't want my time taken up in focussing on unnecessary things.

Morgan: This is where Kirsten and I still have some differences! The A to B, let's-get-all-our-ducks-in-a-row way of thinking is what this initiative is aimed at combating. If you're going to be able to think innovatively or creatively, you have to abandon the quest for swiftness of conclusion. You have to see thinking as an exploration, not just a means to an end.

Buswick: And our view is, everyone in an organization should be thinking creatively. There are two kinds of innovation: new ways of doing things that fall within a register already developed – so they're new to the individual doing them; or new in a way that falls outside existing registers – they're new historically – no one has done them that way before. Not everyone is going to do things in ways that make a historical breakthrough. But most people can develop their own new approaches to the things that confront them. Everyone in an organisation can focus on the 'individual' innovation, the first of these.

Morgan: Yes, and this focus is one of the ways the intellectual capital of a business can be developed and utilised. Individual responsibility for new ways of thinking is also a key to effective knowledge management. As far back as the 1920s, Graham Wallas, one of the seminal writers about how thinking happens, formulated the notion of the 'thought-act' made up of four elements: preparation, incubation, inspiration and verification. Much subsequent thinking-about-thinking has been based around expanding and refining that model. Breakthrough thinking – the kind that takes you to a new way of doing things individually, or even historically - isn't something you can achieve at will. It happens during that 'inspiration' stage.

Healy: Are you saying that the kind of inspiration poets have when they're composing is what executives have when they're cracking a tough problem?

Lange: The capacity for breakthrough thinking, which all successful companies tap into, is something you need to recognize and nurture at an individual level. It's an essential part of the intellectual capital of an organization.

Buswick: We're also saying that reading poetry can help open up the kinds of thinking spaces where 'inspiration' – the kind of innovative leap we've been taking about – can occur.

Healy: Do you have evidence for this?

Morgan: Within the last twelve months, neuroscientists at the University of London have been measuring the brainwaves of poets at the moment of creative inspiration, with a view to pinpointing the neurological activity that takes place. Psychologists and educators agree that creative leaps take place most often in a region of the mind we have no direct access to. It's a thinking space where we haven't tied things down yet, where we haven't categorized them into cut and dried 'thoughts', or answers, or solutions to the problems at hand. It's an area closely

tied in to what Damasio was talking about when he said the rational and the emotional are inextricable. Psychologists call it the ‘feeling-state’, or the ‘pre-categorical’ realm. The names don’t matter but the function does because it’s in this realm that a lot of the fine-tuning of what we do, that isn’t based in logical deduction, comes from.

Healy: Is this instinct or intuition?

Morgan: You could call it either but we would be opening it up to the kind of criticism and negative charges that have held us for so long onto the rational-deductive route. Let’s say rather, it’s a diffuse and generalized state where our feelings about things, that we may not have recognized or articulated, can have a very big effect on the way we think and act. You might say Damasio’s patient Elliot had huge chunks of this function missing. There was no feeling realm he could access about, say, danger or death. There was no non-rational realm there to guide him. So he couldn’t function effectively.

Healy: Do you think it would have helped if he’d read some poetry?

Morgan: No, because reading poetry helps open access between the rational and the ‘feeling state’ realm – a realm Elliot, to all intents and purposes, no longer possessed. Thankfully, most of us haven’t suffered that kind of damage. But many of us, given the emphasis on rational, deductive approaches that I was speaking of, may have lost the ease of access to that ‘pre-categorical’ realm. That ‘feeling’ side of things has become foreign to many of us. We may be dimly aware that it exists, but we don’t know how to get there anymore.

Healy: Could that be why poetry often intimidates people? Do you think people are afraid of poetry, of not understanding it? Does that fit in with what you’re getting at?

Lange: Yes, it does. Opening up new thinking spaces requires that you acknowledge you have spaces that may be closed. It can be difficult for highly trained, intelligent specialists to face feeling relatively powerless in front of a poem. Getting familiar with poetry can be like cranking up an engine that has been unused for too long.

Buswick: Here’s where our method of developing new skills is important. Choosing the right poem, focusing on an appropriate topic and working sensitively with the group, so no one is exposed or made to feel ignorant.

Lange: This is crucial, in my opinion. My own experience reflects the importance of the skills-development process, and also how necessary it is to get all the elements of the environment right. When I first joined the poetry project and we were discussing what poems might be good to use and what specific poems were about and how they worked, I would try to boil it down to a definitive answer, to establish what the ‘meaning’ of it was, right away. But through the discussions with the other members of the team, I got drawn in to how complex the poem was. It also became clear there weren’t any right answers – just different solutions that didn’t cancel each other out. The logical meaning of the words (if there was one) was only part of the picture. I had to let the sounds and the rhythms and the patterns work on me. I would say it was like tuning in to weak signals – things you may not even recognize as signals – and seeing how they affect your responses, how they feed in to what you make of the thing as a whole.

Healy: Could you give me an example?

Lange: We discussed Robert Frost's 'The Road Not Taken'. This is a very good poem to use because so many people are familiar with it and it seems to have a relatively straightforward message that's relevant to business issues. It begins:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;
Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,
And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.

When I first read it I would have concentrated on trying to work out what the words meant. I would have come up with not much more than a rather indecisive man trying to decide which of two roads to take. I wouldn't have picked up on the weaker signals, such as how the 'yellow' and 'black' set up a whole aspect that isn't discussed overtly in the poem: the idea of autumn, decay, a gloom. I wouldn't have asked what that was doing alongside the jaunty rhythm. I wouldn't have felt the discord between the jauntiness and the colours, I wouldn't have explored what that meant. I wouldn't have listened to the way 'pass' and 'grass' hiss at you and so got to the sense of fear and maybe impotence the traveller has. None of that could have fed into the whole process of exploring what it is that comes into making decisions that is way beyond the 'facts' that you're faced with; and also, what kind of factors make those facts themselves very difficult to identify and keep hold of.

Morgan: Kirsten is describing that opening up of avenues of access that we've been talking about. The more practiced you become in reading poetry, the more easily you can switch between rational analysis and allowing the responses of the 'feeling state' to come into play. What you gain is a space for thinking additional to, and complementing, the usual cause-and-effect mode. You have to make that mode more flexible in order to make room for the new access, the new spaces. But what you end up with is a profitable pay-off between the two.

Healy: This makes sense, but most executives might feel more comfortable if there were more proof that it works the way you say it does – and more evidence of the beneficial effects.

Morgan: We're developing a book out of the experiences and research of the project that goes further into the experiments and hypotheses of language theorists in establishing quantitative data on what poetry can do. There's well established work on the high levels of unpredictability poetry generates and also on its demand of associative rather than causal thinking skills. Linguists from Ferdinand de Saussure to Stephen Pinker have identified the unique characteristics poetry brings to making meaning. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein said, in his *Philosophical Investigations*, that anyone who couldn't understand poetry was 'meaning blind'.

Healy: Can you give some examples of poems that you might suggest discussing in business?

Morgan: We have explored and identified a wide range of poems that would be good to use in various business environments. In situations where you're addressing creativity and innovation, Ted Hughes's 'The Thought Fox', or Seamus Heaney's 'At the Frontiers of Writing' are clear candidates.

Buswick: If you're looking at leadership, Allison Joseph's 'Numbers' has a lot to offer. On the hazards of unpacking prejudices and learning through real experience, D H Lawrence's 'The Snake' would be strong. How our perceptions of things vary at different times and in different circumstances is very fully explored in Hilda Morley's 'For Elaine de Kooning'. On the subject of poetry itself – what it has to offer, how we can deal with it – Billy Collins's 'Introduction to Poetry' or Archibald Macleish's 'Ars Poetica' are interesting.

Morgan: All these distinctions refer to the 'topic' aspect of the poems. The actual development of the thinking skills, the opening up of the new thinking-spaces, is a common experience gained through reading all the poems, no matter what topic we may have chosen them to illuminate.

Buswick: And these new thinking spaces won't develop immediately. A facilitated discussion of one or two poems can open your mind to the existence of new, valuable spaces, but it will take regular reading over time before access to those spaces becomes second nature.

Healy: Is there a particular genre of poetry that lends itself best to your goals in business strategy? Modern poetry? Shakespeare? Eliot? All good poetry?

Lange: We have to meet executives on a ground of common interest, so I'd say any poem that has relevance of topic and is 'good' enough (by which we mean is rich in the complex elements we want our readers to explore) will suit the purpose.

Buswick: We have found, though, that we need to choose poems that don't have too many layers of allusion, or archaic phrases. We've used a speech of Duke Theseus from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and some passages from Donne. But we'd be likely to start off in more contemporary, and so more apparently accessible, mode.

Morgan: We've also used Keats's 'On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer' which worked well in focusing on 'discovery' as a shared ground. We use poems in translation, too: Tomos Tanstromer's 'Solitude', or Pablo Neruda's 'A Small Box' are examples.

Healy: How translatable are your ideas across cultural boundaries?

Morgan: This is something we're investigating. We're planning a workshop in India in 2005, and the experiences there will be incorporated into the book. I'm currently working on how the thinking spaces that poetry develops feed into the idea of corporate citizenship, looking at how the images and patterns of poetry can transcend boundaries and at the same time point up differences between cultures. The process of understanding a poem means you have to be able to stand in a other people's shoes, enter into meanings that other people can see but that you so far haven't. This can be a far more potent way of gaining insight into new markets or new expansion possibilities than any crash course in the 'facts' or mores of another culture. Comparable insights are available across divisions or departments within a single geographical entity of an organization.

Healy: So one of the points of application of your theories would be in change situations?

Lange: Yes, for the reasons that Clare has just said and also because research has shown that a sense of controllability can have a strong negative impact on change. The ability poetry develops, of moving between the categorical and pre-categorical modes of thinking, puts a different complexion on the idea of ‘controllability’. The natural desire to control things can cause you to try and tie down what things ‘mean’ far too soon. This has the effect of keeping valuable possibilities – potential future shapes of things – hidden. The strategist needs to live with uncontrollability – thrive on it, see it as a positive thing in terms of future opportunities. In demanding you postpone any definitive conclusion about its ‘meaning’, the poem is asking you to take another look at the value of ‘control’.

Healy: But if a poem doesn’t have any meaning you can readily get a grip on, where do you go from there?

Lange: The future isn’t made up of single meanings we can just get hold of. That’s where an awful lot of strategies – and strategists – fall down. A poem has many different, co-existent potential meanings, all situated at different levels.

Morgan: Just like the future, the poem is full of hints, intimations, vague shapes, half-submerged patternings. Learning not just to tolerate these but to relish them and capitalize on their potential can offer business leaders a powerful new mechanism to bring to their thinking. It can also encourage significant adjustment to the environment in which ‘thinking-strategy’ occurs.

If emphasis on ‘accurate knowledge’ goes hand in hand with expectations of controllability, then failure to meet criteria of ‘accuracy’ can lead to a strong sense of pessimism about a given situation. Poetry rehabilitates the notion of ‘inaccuracy’, does away with the binary emphasis of right-and-wrong: in its refusal of stable and singular meaning in favour of interchangeable sets of meaningful relations between elements, poetry enmeshes its readers in the skills of harnessing relativism as a positive attribute.

Healy: So who in the business world could benefit most from reading poetry?

Buswick: Anyone who wants to challenge the conventions of business thinking, who wants to add new skills to his thinking armoury. Our ideas are applicable in any organization that cares about the quality and scope of its intellectual capital.

Lange: Our ideas can be of great value in change situations. Any manager or executive who has responsibility for shaping the future would benefit from the development of thinking skills and the enhancement of thinking spaces that reading poetry offers.

Morgan: You could say that ‘facts’ have to do with what has happened in the past, and ‘strategy’ has to do with what might or could happen in the future. Reading poetry enhances your ability to configure co-existent visions not only of what is, but also of what might be. Poetry juxtaposes and builds; it can hold apparent irreconcilables in a delicate and fruitful balance. Engaging with the intricate mechanisms of the balances a poet has created enlarges your observation space, enabling you to find out where you might go, what you might encounter, in a way often outside the scope of everyday business approaches. The skills poetry develops are invaluable *thinking* skills, applicable to a wide range of functions and situations.

Healy: Does reading poetry develop leadership skills?

Morgan: Not necessarily, but it does familiarize you with the principles of getting at a range of meanings outside the scope of everyday argument or rhetoric. It enables you to approach problems without a have-knowledge-will-solve mindset. Anyone who wants to lead, or make a mark in her organization, would benefit from that ability.

Healy: What are your plans for the poetry and business project in the next few years?

Morgan: We want to incorporate our practical experiences of working with companies into the book. Workshops and seminars are a vital aspect of the development of our thinking, and we'll be expanding and developing those.

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