An overview of Triple Task Methodology: Simon Bell. October 2013

This is an approach for gaining a deeper understanding of the ways in which groups of stakeholders work, and therefore providing a means to understand how multi-stakeholder groups plan and think in a collaborative manner, is increasingly documented in the literature but finds its most full exposition in Bell and Morse 2012 (Bell and Morse 2012).

"Triple Task is not a silver bullet seeking a werewolf or a magic fix. It is a process which sets out the basis for understanding group dynamic and, hopefully therefore making groups work resiliently. It is also founded on the assumption that the facilitator needs to understand in a systemic manner and appreciate the people they are working with. As we present it here, it is an attempt to blend both the systems practice traditions with elements of the psychodynamic tradition – most specifically as expounded by Bridger in his Double Task model (Bridger 2007), and is intended to work with three flows within a workshop context:
1 the work of the group;
2 the group's work as understood externally: from the outside in;
3 the group's own reflection: from the inside out" (Bell and Morse 2012 pages 44 - 45).

The integration of the three tasks in Triple task allow for a combination of multiple methods – and this has been suggested might allow for deeper understandings of group process and output. As Smith argued:
"Overall, what is being suggested here is the use of multiple methods to augment the findings of singular, solitary methods such as observation. By proceeding in such a manner, future researchers should be able to uncover deeper and hidden meanings that underlie group and individual behaviour. In addition, this approach can be used in either a manner in which the various models build upon one another or in such a way that the data gathered provide deeper meaning and insight into the developmental process." (Smith 2001 page 43)
Bell and Morse argue that Triple Task provides what can best be described as Eductive Observation (EO). Eductive or drawing out, because the groups discover and draw out their own new and creative ideas. Observation because, at a high level of abstraction, all three tasks are observed and interpreted by the facilitator team. In the research described here we apply Triple Task 'Theory' and innovate on the specifics of the Triple Task Methodology described by Bell and Morse.

Innovating Triple Task Methodology

Triple Task Theory involves a triple review of group work. Bell and Morse described the nature of the Triple Task as follows:
"Task 1: The task undertaken by groups. This is the process normally undertaken within the participatory process and which generates the insights. We would normally expect Task 1 to relate to some issue of importance to the group.

Task 2: An assessment of the group dynamic in Task 1 made by the facilitator(s) of the participatory process. This assessment is based upon what are in practice largely visual clues as to how the groups are working, but will also be based to an extent on the presentations made by group members during Task 1.
Task 3: An assessment made by the members of their group dynamic while undertaking Task 1. This will, of course, have some overlap with Task 2 but could also conceivably be quite different as the facilitators are having to draw their insights from 'outside' the groups." (Bell and Morse 2012 page 45)

In their book Bell and Morse describe the means by which each element of the TTM is to be undertaken. Task 1 is accomplished by use of a participatory technique known as Imagine (Bell 2011) but with particular focus being made of a technique called Rich Pictures (Bell and Morse 2013). In Task 1 the groups once convened engage in sharing ideas by the drawing of the free form 'Rich Picture'. This is a device to allow people to share and converse with each other in a mode of optimal indiscretion. Task 1 comprises therefore a triangulated interpretation (i.e. an agreed assessment made by the facilitators) of outputs from Imagine, such as the Rich Picture. Figure 1 is an example of a Rich Picture taken from the current research and Table 1 is a table which sets out guidelines, adapted from those used by Bell and Morse in their 2012 book, for interpreting Imagine Rich Picture output on a four point scale (in this adaptation the polarity of the table is reversed from Bell and Morse's book to make it consistent with the polarity of the other two Tasks).

Figure 1.

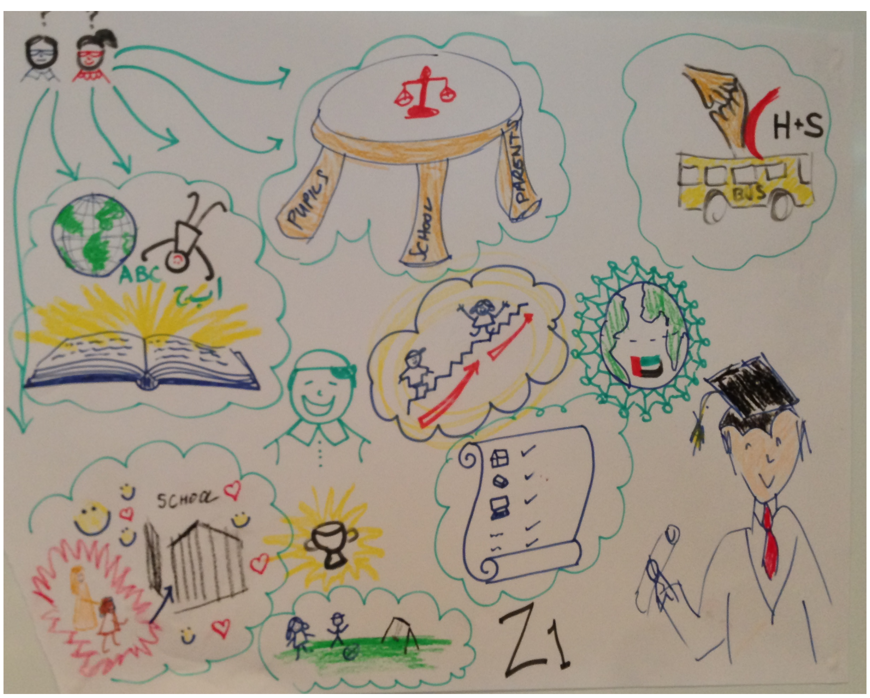

Table 1

Criteria	Levels			
	4: Incoherent rich picture.	***3: Semi-incoherent rich picture.***	***2: Semi coherent rich picture.***	***1: coherent rich picture.***
I. Colour relevance	Hardly any or no colour. Not used for any discernable reason	Little colour, rarely used to emphasise meaning	Colours in some places, sometimes used to emphasise meaning	Vibrant colours, attention to additional colouring for meaning
II. Kinetic	Hardly any or no variation in line width and no use of symbol – drawing limited to lines – wide use of words and acronyms	Little variation of line width, small use of symbol – substantial use of words or acronyms	Some variation of line width and shape, a limited use of symbol – some use of words	Vibrant line width and shape, much agitated use of symbol – little or no use of words
III. Mood expression	No evidence of a story, fracture and /or isolated elements.	Little evidence of a narrative theme	Some evidence of a narrative positive or negative	Evidence of a strong 'story' and narrative direction (positive or negative)
IV. Evidence for focus on the issue being explored (i.e. relevance)	No explicit reference to the issue being explored	Little reference to the issue being explored	Occasional reference to the issue being explored	Frequent reference to the issue being explored
Interpretation	**Linear, step by step analysis**	**Evidence of some systemic insight but mainly linear**	**More systemic, evidence of holistic thinking**	**Systemic output**

The interpretation of the group output is agreed among the facilitators to the process. This interpretation will take the form of a discussion based upon the richness of the Rich Picture according to the scale provided in Table 1. Each groups Imagine contribution will therefore be ascribed a value between 1 and 4 where a score of 1 would represent a perfect score (systemic output).

Task 2 is undertaken by the Facilitators observing the group process and ranking the behavior observed on a seven point scale relating to four categories – of the groups **B**eing or general sense of mood, the way the group **E**ngages in its work, how it **C**ontextualizes the groups activity within its existing frame of understanding and how the group **M**anages its operation – the abbreviation for this approach is BECM (Bell and Morse 2011). The BECM criteria are set out in Table 2.

The Facilitators observe each group three times during each day, one at a time, and independent of each other. Then, 'blind' to each other's assessment, share their various scores. The Facilitators agree on an assessment for each group for each stage of the day and agree on an overall BECM score for each group overall which will be in the range between 1 and 7 where 1 would represent a perfect score (reflective practitioners). At the time of writing both of these approaches are adopted however, the third of the Triple Task has been innovated upon and adapted.
Originally, the third task was undertaken by use of a questionnaire and related analysis process called SYMLOG (a **SY**stem for the **M**ultiple **L**evel of **O**bservation of **G**roups).

SYMLOG is a well known established quantitative means to review internal group dynamic and comes with a wealth of process and quantitative assessment (Bales, Cohen and Williamson 1979; Park 1985; Nowack 1987; Blumberg 2006). It is however very different in tone and approach when compared to Task 1 and 2: Imagine and BECM. The background influence to the first two tasks is from classic participatory and systems approaches to group work – in the spirit of such thinkers as Donald Schon, Robert Chambers and Robert Flood (Schon 1983; Chambers 1997; Flood 1999). Imagine and BECM are essentially qualitative devices which rely for their authentication on the triangulation of observation by the researchers engaged in the analysis. SYMLOG on the other hand is both quantitative in form and reductive in analysis – tending to focus on the interpretation of the aggregation of cumulative data. Although all questionnaires are quantitative and aggregative in process, SYMLOG was found to require considerable prior statistical knowledge and knowledge of the 'rules' by which SYMLOG operates. Advocates of SYMLOG might possit these issues as strengths rather than weaknesses. SYMLOG is arguably one of the most used forms of group dynamic analysis. The SYMLOG Consulting Group website (to be found at: www.symlog.com) has claimed that: "The SYMLOG research base contains over 1,000,000 profiles drawn from applications in twelve languages, in sixty countries, on six continents" (Bell and Morse 2011 page 320). SYMLOG is however undeniably a specialized device and it was the hope of the researchers to produce a new version of TTM which would be more consistent with rapid, agile and participatory approaches and coherent in internal structure across the three tasks, relying less on quantitative methods and more on facilitator interpretation working to the types of participatory guidelines noted by Bryson et al (Bryson, Quck, Slotterback and Crosby 2012). By this means it was hoped that TTM, like other approaches described in participatory literature, could be made available to a wider analytical community. At the time of writing the BECM matrix had already been applied as the basis of the observer-orientated approach contained in Task 2 (Bell and Morse 2013) and extensively as a means to assess student performance in teaching at the Open University. The BECM matrix was derived from the action learning cycle as described by Bell and Lane (Bell and Lane 1998) but refined by Zimmer. Zimmer (Zimmer 2001) drawing on the group learning work of Kolb adh Houston (Kolb 1984; Houston 1995), defined the way in which BECM could be seen as fitting within the action learning cycle. In a sequence of steps he demonstrated how the BECM approach both confirmed the logic of the cycle and, through reflective engagement with the output from the matrix, enhanced students learning. The capacity of the BECM approach to be applied rapidly and the outputs to be potentially available for participants of group dynamic processes to consider and review was attractive. In their 2013 paper Bell and Morse discussed the value of applying BECM in the Task 3 role. They observed:

"A more 'open' version of BECM is being planned by us as a research tool. This would require the approach to be used 'outside in', as is the case at present, but also 'inside out'; allowing members of the researched group to undertake their own self ‐ analysis and perhaps to contest/ compare this to the outsiders view. This kind of approach is in keeping with advocates of self ‐ analysis (Horney 1994; Moon 1999) and ties in with earlier work undertaken by one of the authors (Bell 1992; Bell 1997). The benefits of such an innovation might be multiplex:

• allowing the group to consciously review its progress and, in an ethical sense, to take responsibility for the reporting on the group owned work;

• therefore, to explore its behaviour and to respond to its own assessment;

• thus, tackling difficult issues that are now explicit but that might otherwise remain obscure; and

• possibly improving group dynamic in certain contexts.” (Bell and Morse 2011 page 331)

Whilst we cannot claim here to have achieved all these aims, the current research is a step towards a more rapid and open to participant review form of enquiry.

Arising from this, the third of the Triple Task was conceived as a brief questionnaire (allowing for easy and rapid completion by participants), comprising two series of eight questions. The first series of eight questions relate to how each group member felt their group operated. The second series of eight questions relate to how the individual felt when working within the group. For each set of eight questions two each are probing each of the BECM criteria of Being, Engaging, Contextualizing and Managing. Responses are assessed in terms of Rarely, Sometimes and Frequently. An example of a questionnaire relating to one of the groups in this research is shown in Table 3.

Table 2 BECM

Broad guidelines for team assessment – the group shows …	**Being - respecting perspectives The group is …**	**Engaging with complex situations: the group shows that …**	**Contextualising an approach: The group does …**	**Managing practice: the group manages by…**
1. That it has internalised the concepts/ skills associated with effective practice - can use and apply ideas in a logical way - varying approach in reflection with context. The group can adapt and change approach in creative ways. Learning is bi-directional. Evidence of realistic, astute, practical judgement and perception	Self-aware, aware of others and ethically focused. Written material uses 2nd and 3rd order language ('I' and 'We')	Complexity seen as being within the nature of relationships not something overwhelming 'in the world'. The group understands that good qualities emerge from reflective engagement	adapt concepts, approach and methodology to context with ease, responsibility and creativity.	Inviting and welcoming others to join in and share enquiry. The group is aware of the value of people sharing in enquiry. They appreciate the need for evaluating own managing. The group is responsive to opportunities and 'environmental' problems
2. A solid grasp of methods which can be applied over a wide range of contexts – without the innovative ability to reflect imaginatively. Good straightforward and sensible approach. Potential but needs to develop reflective capability	Aware and sometimes self-aware. Evidence of considering ethical issues. Frequent use of 'I' and 'we' in group discourse	Complexity usually seen as being understandable and not something overwhelming 'in the world'	Some good at adapting approach to context. Good grasp of approach and methodology	Providing the where-with-all for mutual and effective enquiry. It demonstrates awareness of modes of managing (for, with, or enabling others to). It acknowledges the need to be responsive to environment
3. That it has good qualities and can manage an enquiry but understanding of arguments and engaging are flawed and limited. Not wholly confident about methods.	Aware but not really self-aware. Some use of Ethical approaches. Written material uses mainly 1st order language ('it', 'them')	Complexity sometimes seen as being understandable and not something overwhelming 'in the world'	Generally well at adapting approach to context. Better than adequate grasp of approach and develops own methodology	Sometimes providing mutual effective enquiry and sometimes aware of different modes of managing. Some, though inconsistent acknowledgement of, and responsiveness to, the environment
4. That it has adopted an instrumentalist (line of least resistance) approach to getting through. Has difficulty contextualising approaches to changing circumstances - low to poor ability to engage reflectively.	Very limited awareness. Very limited thought about the ethics of an intervention as demonstrated by use of 'it' and 'them' language	Complexity usually 'in the world' - sometimes abstractly considered as being understandable	sometimes prove to be able at adapting approach to context. Adequate grasp of approach - applies methods and sometime methodologies	Showing little but occasional thought of viability in enquiry - fairly instrumentalist. Little acknowledgement of environment outside immediate managerial concerns
5. Some reference to methods but mainly an instrumentalist approach of the most limited and basic kind. No coherent logical thread going through work. Work full of bald and stereotypical 'this is what you want to hear' comments but not based on learning. Repeating known and preferred ideas without thought.	Not aware of how the self is or relates to others as demonstrated by limited use of 'it' and 'them' language.	Complexity is always 'in the world' – always divorced completely from different perceptions including that of the practitioner	Not prove able to adapt approach to context. Very limited grasp of approach -applies methods in a simple, though not incomplete systematic, unreflective manner	Highly instrumentalist. Little awareness of different modes of managing. The style tends to be a narrow and sketchy focus on elements bound within a presumed 'system'.
6. Little of reflection on behaviour. A few isolated points. Grossly flawed understanding and representation of points. Incoherent.	Domination and self-assertion. Possible signs of egoistic attitude permeating reports, accompanied with dogmatic assertions	Complexity is someone else's fault	not adapt approach to context. Muddy view of any approach - square peg in round hole	Showing no awareness of different modes of managing. Non-responsive to values, beliefs and circumstances outside the managers own sphere.
7. No understanding of methods for reflection. Joining the dots.	A tyranny. Frequent use of dogmatic assertions and no evidence at all of being self-critical	Complexity is not understandable and chaos is expected	Not have any kind of grasp of systems concepts or approaches at all	Flagrant abuse of others values, beliefs and circumstances. No idea of what 'managing' involves

Table 3 Third Task Questionnaire for Group Z2

Your group:	**Rarely**	**Sometimes**	**Frequently**
felt like a warm place to be with people who were sociable			**4**
people said very little to each other; quiet	**4**		
got on with each other			**4**
had some tough-minded and powerful people who dominated the discussion	3		1
was task-oriented and focused on the problem at hand. There was a lot of problem-solving based on what we already knew		1	3
thinking was constrained tended to be tramlined into an ‘established’ point of view. What we did had to be right according to our existing culture	2	1	1
had a nice atmosphere and was equalitarian in management style, with everyone given an opportunity to contribute			**4**
worked like a group of business-like managers and made sure that it delivered what we were supposed to.			**4**
In my group I felt like:	**Rarely**	**Sometimes**	**Frequently**
making others feel comfortable and sociable		1	3
Not saying a lot .. I was restrained.	2	2	
I cooperated with others.		1	3
I was assertive and made sure my point was made		2	2
I was using established social beliefs and values – they dominated our discussions	1	2	1
What we thought about was set out in terms of what we already knew and believed		2	2
I was a good manager. Helping others to have their say		**4**	
I was effective and managed in a good way .. progress was made		3	1

6 uniform responses, one negative and one sometimes. In the interpretation of the groups self-assessment of their dynamic the research team looked for unanimous responses to questions. With small groups (such as the group of four shown in Table 3) only the unanimous responses were taken into account. With larger groups of six or seven, where unanimity is less likely, second highest scores were also included in analysis. The intention of the analysis is to gather information from the group about areas where they strongly agreed on how they felt their work progressed. The concentration on unanimity or near unanimity in response to questions is not intended to deny future deeper exploration of the data but, in this research, we were interested in gaining a rapid and as unambiguous as possible a view of the group self-perception. In this self-analysis they provide an inside knowledge of the group dynamic which can subsequently be compared to the observed output from the groups (as shown in Task 1) and the observed behavior of the group (as monitored in Task 2). It was intended that the new version of the third Task – conforming to what Robert Chambers defined as 'quick and dirty' would, nonetheless provide insights into the invisible (to the facilitator) effectiveness of the group and help the research team to understand multi stakeholder collaborative planning. It would also present as a rapidly adoptable methodology which others could apply in complex contexts requiring detailed group analysis.