



Case stories

## Creativity, two wine glasses and an ashtray: Kath Oram's story of the founding of **ecl**

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June 2011

## Creativity, two wine glasses and an ashtray



Shortly after Kath Oram left her job as a Local Education Authority (LEA) advisor in Wiltshire, England, in the autumn of 2001, she was at an overnight residential conference for headteachers from the county. Sitting round a table in the bar in the evening, these former colleagues asked her what she was up to. She told them that by far the most exciting thing that she was involved in was learning about an interesting technique called systemic constellations. They looked bemused but interested and she set about explaining.

On the table were some wine glasses, a wine bottle and an ashtray (it was autumn 2001). 'Tell me about an issue or a problem you've got,' she said and then used the objects to demonstrate a little of how a constellation works. The colleagues were intrigued she recalls and went a step further in her spontaneous demonstration: 'There was a tray and I put the things on the tray and held the tray up high with one hand and said - it's about getting balance. If I move that wine glass over and slightly forward it's going to change the balance of the whole'

Kath's enthusiasm and excitement about constellations and the possibilities of bringing systemic approaches into education stemmed from an insight into their potential application. Here was something new and different that could meet the need identified by Ken Robinson in his 'All Our Futures' report (1999), which had struck a chord with her months earlier. There really was a need to look afresh at education – to find ways of bringing excitement and creativity back into schools. She set up a cross-disciplinary meeting in the LEA for colleagues to explore what education in Wiltshire might be like in the light of this new thinking. She invited Ken Robinson to this meeting to share his ideas.

Kath's search for 'the new' led her to an opportunity to experience organisational constellations with Terry Ingham, Ty Francis and Judith Hemming. She was immediately certain she wanted to know more and attended the first three-day training module put on by the **nowhere** foundation in London in September 2001.

At the end of the final day, the facilitators, Judith and Ty, asked the participants to get into small groups to explore what they might do with what they'd learnt.' I was bursting with ideas,' Kath recalls. 'I literally hadn't been able to sleep the night before. Thoughts kept coming in waves about who could benefit from this. I could see the possibility of a real new contribution to working in schools and education.'

Working alongside Terry Ingham, who also attended the three-day course in London, Kath was instrumental to bringing together a group of 30 people in January 2002 – a meeting that launched the initiative now called **ecl**. In the months following the meeting Terry and Judith went in search of funding to set up a research and innovation project called 'The Schools We Need...', which began in September 2002. Its focus was on helping leaders in schools, both primary and secondary, deal with the mounting issues they were experiencing. 'We had to do something different, because what we were doing wasn't effective enough, and the money to resource support was getting less and less', says Kath.

Speaking to this passionate and dedicated educationalist, ten years down the line, confirms that she is proud of what she helped to get started. For personal reasons she stepped out of direct engagement after the twelve months or so. But there is no doubt that the success of this first systemic education project in the England stemmed directly from Kath's insight, knowledge and connections.

Recalling the story, she reconnects with the excitement. 'I can feel the buzz as I think about it. I could see that whole picture – of how this would benefit the children and their parents and teachers – and headteachers especially. This kind of systemic thinking influences everything I do still. I coach headteachers and this is what is at the heart of it – being on the outside supporting them to look at their whole system – it's what drives me. It's such great work'.

*Kath Oram was interviewed by Jane James in June 2012*

### Reference

Robinson, K. et al, (1999) *All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education*, London: National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (Departments for Education and Employment and Culture, Media and Sport)

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