

## **A Personal Backstory to a T-Practice Workshop: Moving Beyond Boundaries - Opening to the Power of Metaphor**

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**Keywords:** Complexity, Futures, Metaphor, Wisdom, Insight

### **Abstract**

Today's complex problems and the lack of wisdom to solve them make it imperative to explore and experiment with possible new approaches to transformative futures. Among the challenges are the West's propensity for favoring monodisciplinary approaches to knowledge and its focus on detail at the expense of context and big-picture thinking. This paper suggests one possible tool to expand our narrow boundaries by embracing the potential power of metaphor as a pathway to new narratives.

The impetus for my journey began with an attempt to bring two distant disciplinary fields together. This ultimately led to the discovery of the power of metaphor in providing a bridge and new possibilities. As a relative newcomer to future studies, this discovery resulted in the desire to dig deeper. That digging led to research for a now-published academic paper, 'Wising up through jazz and the metamorphosis of perception' <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2023.103111>. The paper linked knowledge systems to jazz styles as metaphors and led to the identification of a transformed knowledge future.

Seeking greater accessibility for a wider readership, I composed this personal backstory, 'Moving Beyond Boundaries - Opening to the Power of Metaphor,' which also doubles as a backstory for the workshop delivered at the Transformations Conference 2023 titled, 'Engaging New Narratives for a Transformed Future.' With the application of metaphor at its heart and with knowledge of futures and jazz styles as one case study, the workshop added a further dimension, that of climate change and the search for a transformative metaphor and narrative.

As a thought piece rather than an academic article, this paper is written in the first person in the story style. Taken together, the academic article, this thought piece, and the workshop combine to strengthen the case for the value of metaphor as a tool in the journey toward a transformed future.



**Image source: Author**

### **Moving beyond boundaries - opening to the power of metaphor**

My PhD journey left me flummoxed!

Attempting to bring two fields together, Accounting and Futures Studies, along with naivety around disciplinary ‘rules’ and boundaries, I learned that certain ‘traditional’ disciplines may accept an incursion but that the field of futures studies was a leap too far. The result was less a collision and more a stand-off.

However, encouraging examples of a freeing-up are happening without too much wreckage, for instance, uniting Indigenous and Western knowledges. Other promising examples of breaking boundaries and escaping silos are also on the horizon. Quiet signals of change are becoming visible.

Curiosity about disciplinary combinations following the PhD led to three pieces of work.

To reiterate, first came the full academic article ‘Wising up through jazz and the metamorphosis of perception’ (Holdaway 2023), then the T-Workshop ‘Engaging New Narratives for a Transformed Future,’ and now this short, easy-to-read piece. This piece is intended as a backstory to both the academic article and the T-Workshop. Key premises underlying this journey were that we can’t do or be what we can’t see, that we live by the stories we tell ourselves, and that transformative metaphors can give rise to much-needed new narratives. Moreover, learning to engage the imagination to create alternative, preferred futures, is required in these ‘postnormal times.’

### **Postnormal Times and Knowledges**

‘Postnormal times’ (Sardar 2015) refers to ‘complexity, contradictions and chaos’ – features of life recognizable today. We are faced with existential problems that we are ill-equipped to tackle. We largely persist in applying tired methods to problem-solving. What to do? Which brings me to this story. It is a prompt to rethink mainstream thought in these times. Drawing on the work of others, I pondered on wisdom, imagination, metaphor, and jazz – a seeming hodgepodge. Ultimately, these ponderings led to what is essentially a ‘thought experiment.’ Being flummoxed led to curiosity about disciplinary knowledge systems and the types/extent of knowledge combinations. Assorted readings revealed rudimentary understandings – understandings I simply sketch here. Beyond the most common, the single discipline that operates alone with common language and rules (monodisciplinary), there are combinations that pair up but stay separate (multidisciplinary), combinations that meet more closely and

work at ways to blend (interdisciplinary), and combinations that transcend and cross boundaries (transdisciplinary). Finally, there are highly ‘irregular’ combinations where new knowledge is reimagined and re-visioned (post-disciplinary). That these later combinations currently exist, especially the trans and post varieties, was an eye-opener.

### **Aha moment!**

Where does jazz fit in, and how do jazz and the metamorphosis of perception come together? How do disciplinary combinations fit into the puzzle? The following attempts to shed light on these questions.

Seated in my living room with these fascinating knowledge combinations rolling around in my head and with jazz playing in the background, I began to listen more attentively. Gradually, it dawned on me that jazz also embraced interesting combinations. More intense listening by way of searching Google and Spotify led to a jazz journey. Unintentionally (at least to my rational self), my imagination unveiled images in jazz that aligned with the various disciplinary approaches I sought to understand. You might call this a ‘Aha moment!’ This experience enriched and deepened imaginative possibilities that linked jazz with my newly discovered disciplinary combinations. Here’s how they looked and sounded from my perspective. Maybe you, too, can see them? Listen via the links provided. Make up your own mind and enjoy!

- Monodisciplinary approaches sounded somewhat like groups of saxophonists (albeit probably featuring differing melodies and instrument pitches). Think of a saxophone section playing in a big band <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AZw2n90thHk>, then think of a monodiscipline, for example, branches of engineering.
- Multidisciplinary approaches bring in the sounds of other various instruments. They ‘speak’ to one another, though the instruments differ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h6VqJDc66oA>, such as professionals from diverse health fields discussing patient care.
- Interdisciplinary research features a more intimate blending of different styles and introduces a wider variety of instruments to produce a new sound, such as in gospel/jazz <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CGQMz70jG60>. Think bioethics (e.g., bringing together ethics and medical practice).
- Transdisciplinary approaches are mirrored by the improvised free jazz style of which the ‘compositions’ of Miles Davis are supreme examples: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bCa3iyBekCs>. Interdisciplinarity has morphed into transdisciplinarity, with transcendence ushering in a new level of cooperation. Think of sustainability science as a science where research is defined by a particular problem rather than by a discipline, and different systems interact. The ‘how’ is an evolving practice and is currently a key research focus. For example, see the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) <https://www.uts.edu.au/isf/services-and-capabilities/our-approach/transdisciplinary-research>
- Postdisciplinary approaches, as with post-jazz <https://wildflowermusic.bandcamp.com/album/better-times>, is another creature altogether that

exhibits a total re-visioning of knowledge. Cybernetics is one example and is defined in part in Wikipedia as a wide-ranging field concerned with circular causal processes such as feedback.

A loosening of knowledge boundaries is considered necessary to solve today's problems, and musical metaphors of jazz styles helped to envisage variations, combinations, and future possibilities.

### **Metaphor and Wisdom**

Since being alert to the world of metaphor, I have become captive. Being introduced to the significance of metaphor through a futures methodology constructed by Sohail Inayatullah (2017), I am surrounded by and immersed in metaphor. Here are some broad-brush understandings of metaphor and of wisdom.

My own experience is that metaphor enables meaning, expands understanding and imagination, strengthens memory, and prompts ideas. Metaphor whets my appetite to set out exploring. Metaphors can also provide a bridge between the seemingly unrelated, leading to new territory and possibilities. For some who have difficulty taking metaphors seriously, a special edition on the topic is a good place to start (Inayatullah, Izgarjan, Kuusi, and Minkkinen, 2016, 109-114).

The use of metaphor is where wisdom enters the story.

Of course, wisdom is a BIG topic. Above and beyond knowledge, we need wisdom rather than ignorance – the latter being the driving force evident today (Sardar, 2020). The following descriptors hint at the 'how to' relating to wisdom. Examples include grasping and appreciating the big picture, creating opportunities to nurture insight, integration (both/and) by aiming for wholeness and unification, and acknowledging that there is a place for metaphysics. As indicators of wisdom, imagination by way of metaphor can be one tool applied in moving towards wisdom.

This has been a story of simultaneously charting the journey of differing knowledge systems coming together and their association with jazz styles. The next step is to draw on metaphor to provide a new narrative and open up new possibilities.

### **Transformed Knowledge Future – 'Beyond the Big Band'**

Continuing along the lines of jazz, I sought a means to unite and go beyond the various knowledges. Retaining receptive openness to imaginative possibilities led to the metaphor 'beyond the 'big band'', where 'composers, conductors, and musicians co-create a musical dialogue within wide and permeable boundaries.' The quote below describes a transformed knowledge metaphor (Holdaway, 2023, 9).

*With a jazz orchestra, bandleaders and composers with big bands apply a broad-brush approach in their role. There are still soloists and musical improvisations occurring within a composition, giving rise to the new narrative that generates the vision of composers, conductors, and musicians co-creating a musical dialogue within*

*wide and permeable boundaries. There is freedom to experiment and improvise within these boundaries, thereby allowing co-produced compositions to emerge.*

Where do we go with these ‘thought experiments’? Many could be easily rejected as hogwash, but there have been numerous times in history that insights have led to experiments and useful discoveries. For example, recall the legend that Isaac Newton ‘discovered’ gravity ‘when he saw a falling apple while thinking about the forces of nature.’

It is more important than ever to ‘imagine and create more desirable futures’ (Sardar, 2020, 8). Plausibility and co-creation are key. Therefore, exploratory areas such as those proposed here could be piloted in living labs and warm data labs.

A powerful, living example of applying imagination occurring in the field is ‘Camden Imagines,’ where Local Council Officers in Camden, an area in the London Borough of Camden, undergo training in the application of collective imagination. A sample of excerpts from the video <https://vimeo.com/831045874> is expressed in the following: the training is a ‘way of re-framing’ and results in ‘novel approaches to tackling challenges’; ‘thinking beyond the current constraints’; ‘unleashing different thought paths’; developing policy ‘where you can go far without any boundaries.’ Metaphor is a tool applied. See ‘The Impossible Train Story’ <https://www.moralimagnations.com/impossibletrain>

No, ‘...there’s no rule book...you try it, and some of it crashes and burns, and some of it works really, really well’. For details, please refer to <https://www.moralimagnations.com/camden-imagines>.

Should you be drawn to further explore you are invited to read the full academic paper complete with extensive referencing and comprehensive explanations, ‘Wising up through jazz and the metamorphosis of perception’ available through the journal ‘Futures’.

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