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Foreword

It is a great honour and pleasure to be allowed to write a few words of introduction to Madelyn Blair's new book, *Riding the Current*. I have known Madelyn for more than fifteen years now. We first met in Taos, the small town in New Mexico, where the Taos Institute, then still in its inception, was holding one of its meetings. I was there together with my wife, Anne Marie, and one of my earlier PhD students, Hans Strikwerda, now professor at the University of Amsterdam and head of a large research-institute, the Nolan Norton. As Hans and Madelyn conversed, it soon became clear that the research that Madelyn had done in international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, where she was one of the first female division managers ever, would eminently serve as basis for a practice-rooted dissertation as Hans had made himself before.

Madelyn and I then engaged in conversation and came to an agreement – the beginning of one of my most remarkable and inspiring paths of my career.

I was immediately struck by the enormously precise and clear way of Madelyn's thinking and writing – every word, every sentence well formed and exactly in place, like a mathematical flow with a poetic overtone. Of course, she graduated from one of the most, if not 'the' most prestigious business school in the world, the Wharton Business School in Philadelphia, and one might expect at least some marks of such a great Eden. But there was more, because her very best school, as I later found out, was the school she seems to carry with her even today, her mother and father – and probably in that order. I wished I could repeat the entire dedication she wrote on the first part of her dissertation, but one single sentence may carry the flavour: "...My father talked about being true to myself, but my mother gave me the tools and attitude to find and achieve myself. I owe her...". You immediately sense a woman here – Madelyn – who has learned to do what it takes, not by shouting at barricades, but by simply doing it, perfectly, performing elegantly, like her mother.

Likewise, I, too, gained strong inspiration from women who became the accompaniers and co-practitioners in my learning with Madelyn. First Mary Gergen, who really helped in building structure and by asking questions. Then Tineke Willemsen, who became co-supervisor

and helped to finalize the product in good order. Both were academic professors in women's studies, highly sharp and critical, but immensely dedicated, like Madelyn herself. But also my wife, Anne Marie, who, without being a professor in women's studies, acted like one, and made Madelyn, her husband Gerald, and even her piano-playing niece, Ariana, part of our family. They all played a part in the cast of what became a great play.

Madelyn became a role-model herself. Soon after finishing her dissertation, the Taos Institute, under the inspiring guidance of its president, Kenneth Gergen, built a Ph.D. program with my University at Tilburg, to write more dissertations like the one Madelyn had written, that is of highly performing, reflective practitioners, whose tacit knowledge very much deserves the scholarly articulation that can inspire other practitioners and scholars in the same field. The guiding spirit of this program is the one that also underlies the new book of Madelyn, that is the relational constructionism – the idea that meaning and value, or what we cherish as knowledge and the good, is constantly created and maintained in communities of practice. This has always been so. But in a pre-modern or modern world, where communities can live on their own, or where, when they move and communicate, they can do this with objectifying power on others, it does not strike so clearly. But in the current postmodern world, where we constantly deal with other people from many different communities, without the possibility to dominate or to excommunicate when encountering difference, the acknowledgement of the relational character of what we know and what we value has become a virtually inevitable necessity. This has all been articulated and debated at length in many publications of members of the Taos Institute, not the least in those of its president, Kenneth Gergen. Madelyn's new book *Riding the Current*, however, is a perfect illustration of how these experiences and conceptions 'can' and, I dare to say 'should' be translated in participatory practices of learning and development for people who, on average, live longer than ever, and need to stay fresh in knowledge and want to keep their work alive.

Without going back in detail to all the philosophical and epistemological underpinnings, but also clearly without ignoring them, Madelyn has managed to create very practical lessons from these intellectual resources. Her own immense experience in consulting and coaching, in top line management, in running her own business, and in communicating with other scholars and practitioners, has given her a unique basis to do this.

I cannot refrain from thinking now of the preface which Lee Cronbach, who later became president of the American Psychological Association, wrote for his book on Educational Psychology, now about half a century ago. He said that books of this type should be judged on their relevance for the people who need it, their being based on evidence, their doing justice to the complexity of human behaviour, and their clarity, so that people who want to use it can really read and understand it. Dear Madelyn, your book is written in a new area, with new inspirations and other targets, but will definitely also do very well on these ancient criteria. We, including me, owe you a lot. Thanks.

John Rijsman, Ph.D.
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Preface

I was very pleased when Madelyn Blair asked if I would contribute a preface to the present work. Madelyn has been a close friend and stimulating colleague for over 15 years. Here was a lovely opportunity to pay credit to all I have learned from her, and all she has contributed to me, to the Taos Institute, and to the organizational world at large. At the same time, the invitation was daunting. I was overwhelmed with commitments, and daily the email brought with it dozens of additional issues to which I should attend. And this was to say nothing of the accumulating journals in the stacks around my desk, unopened manuscripts to which I should respond, and books sent on to me by various friends and publishers. I was overwhelmed and rudderless. How, then, was I to find a moment to respond to Madelyn's welcoming invitation?

As I began to read through the manuscript, however, the answer struck me between the eyes. Surely I would contribute a Preface, for this book was going to speak exactly to my condition of aimless overload. It is not simply the ever-expanding sea of connections made available through the internet. There is also the explosion of websites, which demonstrate to us that for virtually any topic in which we have an interest, there may be thousands of relevant sites. Mastery is impossible, the accumulation continuous, and motivation retreats. How shall we cope; is it even worth a try? Then on top of this, there is also the burgeoning of new social network facilities – Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and High 5, and on and on – inviting 24/7 communication. We swim in a sea of information, and we all sense the dread of drowning.

It is in this context that I find Madelyn's writing not only refreshing and reassuring, but wonderfully instructive. With compelling clarity she lays out the steps we might follow, not only to generate a tactic for orienting ourselves in this world of information overload, but to keep our interests alive and our knowledge useful. I found especially helpful her emphasis on the way in which our relationships contribute to staying fresh and focused. To some degree we must make personal decisions, but not without being conscious of the communities of practice to which we belong and the particular organizational contexts in

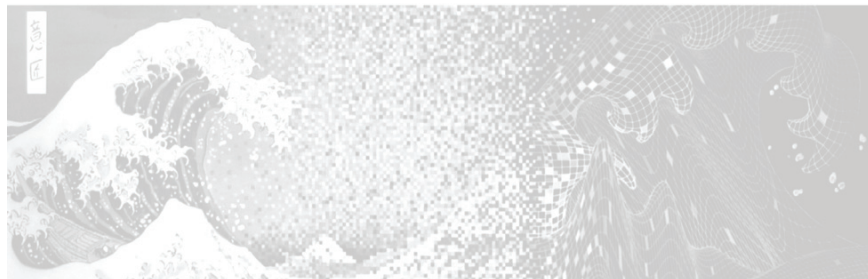
which we labor. And within such communities of practice, Madelyn emphasizes the significance of conversation with others. Through conversations with practice partners, she points out, issues become alive for us, their contours take shape, and we begin to direct our information-search and appropriation in ways that are effective. Here I recall the lively breakfast room conversations between Madelyn and my wife, Mary Gergen, during the period in which Madelyn was writing her PhD dissertation. Mary was serving as one of her advisors at the time, and I can now see in these catalytic conversations the concept of the practice partner in vivid color.

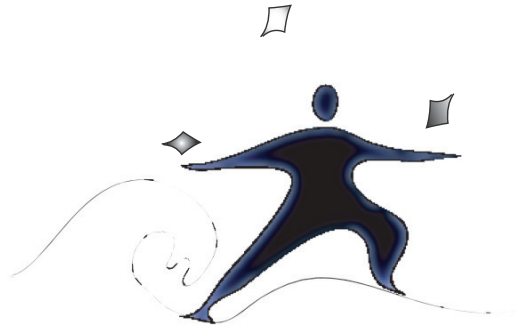
Riding the Current speaks cogently to the condition of our times. We all ride more safely, sanely, and effectively with Madelyn Blair at the helm.

Kenneth J. Gergen

President, The Taos Institute

Riding the Current





Riding the Current: How to Deal With the Daily Deluge of Data

Introduction

This book offers a new way to keep your knowledge fresh through conscious self-guided learning that is grounded in the world of those around you. It is an approach that can be applied directly to work, avocations and passions. The approach is built on several disciplines that recognize that the question ‘What do you know?’ can’t be answered directly; that discovery and creation of new knowledge is done in conversation with others; and that our stories offer a wealth of insight.

A word about the word *fresh*. Staying current implies a perfection that is unachievable. No one I talked with feel they remain current in their fields whether they are completely lax in keeping up or stellar in keeping up. They see their knowledge in relation to the mass of information that is known rather than in relation to what they could know. Yet, they do feel they can keep fresh their knowledge by consciously attending to it in full recognition that knowing it all is not possible. In this book, I will use this wonderful word *fresh*.



Riding the Current

This book draws on my experience and the experience of over fifty people interviewed. It combines that knowledge base with theory and exercises to present an approach that is powerful and easy to understand. Regardless of your focus—work, avocation, passion or all three—this book will be useful.

This book will help you discover ways in which your learning can occur outside the classroom and beyond books, journals, blogs, wikis, magazines and podcasts. It will help to illuminate the ways in which we all learn every day—and can learn more, as we become more aware of *how* we learn.

As you explore the exercises and advice of this book, you will experience the critical questions faced by anyone interested in managing her own desire to keep her knowledge fresh and alive. In the process of doing this, you will be exploring the general topic of *knowledge management* at the individual level, sometimes called personal knowledge management. (This book will tend not to use this language, preferring to talk about keeping knowledge fresh and about riding the current.)

Who is your crew on the journey, as you learn how to ‘ride the current’? If you are on the staff of an organization, you will see that supervisors, colleagues and team members can become real supporters as you explore and create approaches for keeping your knowledge fresh and alive. My long-term friend, Brenda Hermann, has suggested that supervisors should really think of themselves as accompanying their staff. The concept of “accompanying” offers a freedom that some supervisors may not normally feel, by suggesting that as supervisors they are just journeying with you, the staff, accompanying you in workplace activity.