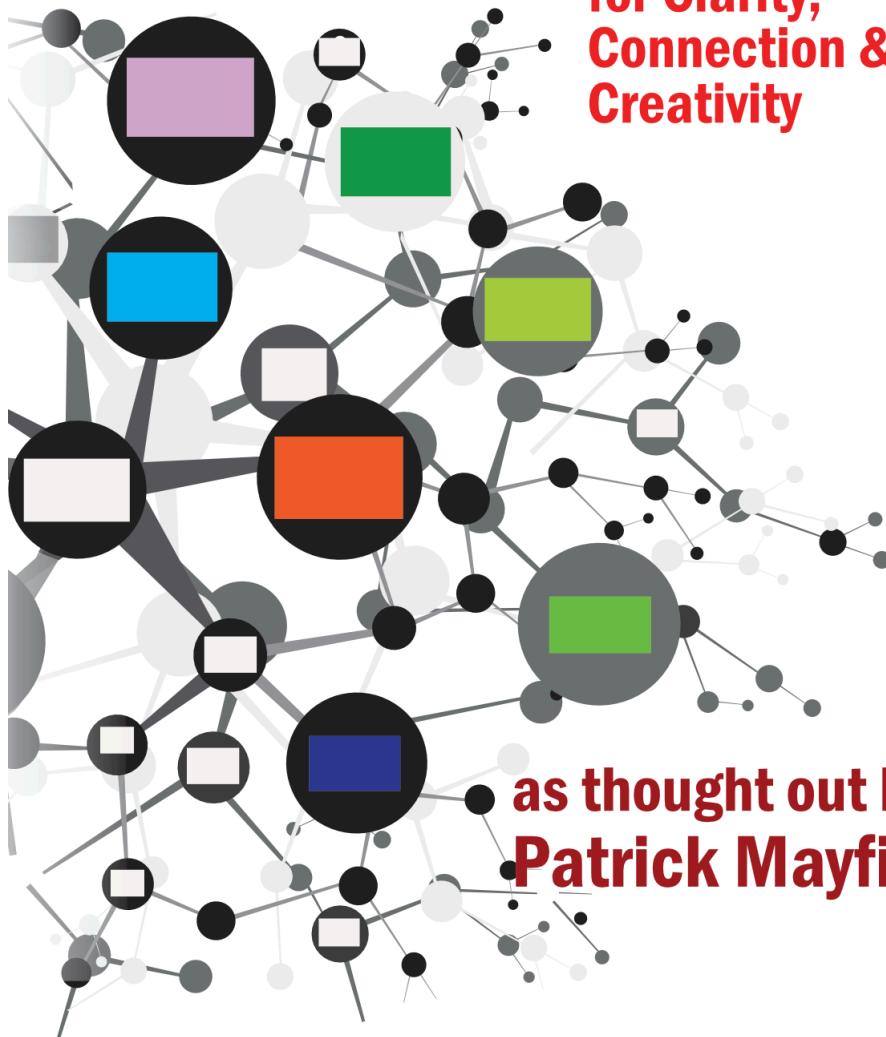

Thinking It Out

for Clarity,
Connection &
Creativity



Thinking It Out: For Clarity, Connection & Creativity

As thought out by Patrick Mayfield

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Preface

Preface

Friends and clients have asked me about my personal thinking process. "How do you take notes?" they ask. "How do you order them? How do you come up with your ideas?"

I began to organise an account and this book is the result.

In quantum physics, there is a phenomenon where the observer seems to affect the behaviour of the subatomic particles. In the same way, as I focused on this topic, what I observed seemed to change.

When I was an undergraduate, I was invited to take part in a focus group into new study skills. I was the final year representative of a four-year Masters. We were given the new learning resources and asked to review them.

I thought they were good; excellent, in fact. I could have made good use of them a lot earlier in my Masters. Why had nobody told me about these techniques sooner? I felt a mix of curiosity and frustration at the same time.

Then I noticed a pattern among our group. The farther into our four-year degree each of us had gone, the more we seemed to appreciate the new material that was shared. The first year rep seemed somewhat indifferent but polite. The second year rep was rather more positive. The third year rep was warming to these approaches.

Experience does that to us. Often, the most wasteful thing is to expose the novice to new learning. It is the failure, it is the struggle, it is the hard knocks and the underperformance that all give valuable prods to our attention and makes us hungry for solutions.

Learning how to learn has always been a passion of mine. Looking back over my career as a software developer, project manager, consultant, coach and writer, there were some significant advances along the way. I benefitted from the field of psychology, from a growing understanding of neuroscience and how our brain works best; and from learning from people of astonishing productivity.

This book is written at a time when many conventions and traditions are being challenged about note-taking, note-making and how we could create and craft something new.

Exciting new digital apps seem to emerge all the time that help us link and reference from one note to another. As I write, Generative AI (artificial intelligence) is making impressive strides in searching, generating text and editing. These advances are such that it is hard for some of us right now to distinguish between what is authentically created by another human or came from some large language model.

I began to hear echoes back in history, in pre-digital times. As all this captured my interest, I wrote, I revised, all the while testing out new practices and old for myself. First, I used the latest digital apps and then in parallel I wrote with pen on cards, storing carefully in card boxes.

So, this experiment meant that it took me rather longer than usual to author this particular book. The experiment of comparing digital and analog methods left me changed. I now have a very different habit of note-keeping.

More than that, as I researched in the writing of this book, it not only changed my working practices, it seemed to change me in the process.

Patrick Mayfield

Oxfordshire, UK 2023

Introduction

Introduction

Hook

It was not the first time that I thought, "How is it I had forgotten that note? I could have used that earlier!"

Only a few days after presenting in a webinar, I found an old note that would have been helpful. Even though I made a note in the past, I forgot about it and couldn't find it when I needed it..

My notes, as a collection, were a mess. I had some in paper files. A few notes were on Evernote, some were in hand-drawn mind maps, others on digital mind maps, and some on more sophisticated digital applications. My notes felt like clutter. The sensation I experienced was like the time when I purchased a warm winter coat a few years ago, but then found the forgotten one right after buying a new one!!

I found these habits of note-taking to be a waste of my mental resources.

Then I came across the story of a 20th Century sociologist who had been remarkably productive in publishing many books and hundreds of papers over his career. How did he achieve this? He said it was his personal note-taking system, but back then, few paid attention. This man had been careful how he recorded, stored and referenced his notes. Over his lifetime, the dividends it paid increased.

My work in writing and presenting improve<\$ScrKeepWithNext>d when I practiced this approach with my own notes. My notes are transforming into powerful and organized information, and my system is coming alive. It seems like we are having a private conversation.

Promise

You can learn to develop such a system for yourself, did you know that? I can show you how.

Promise 2

The book discusses the benefits of externalized thinking, which involves writing out a thought, connecting it to other thoughts, and observing the positive results that follow.

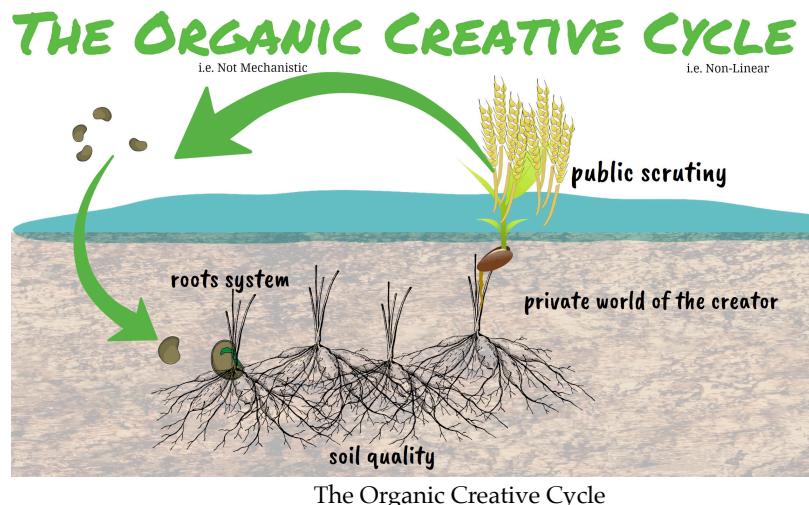
This is the book I wished I had read when I was 23. It's debatable, though, whether I would have been wise enough to choose to read it back then!

My thoughts became clearer when I took notes. The initial principle surfaced:

What you think is too valuable to keep in your head.

The Cycle and the LENS

The pattern I'm about to share with you can be as personal to you as it is to me. However, it is a pattern that is at odds with the way look at work and creativity. This is what I refer to as the **organic creative cycle**.



It is a cycle because it is like the cycle of sowing seed and reaping a harvest:

- The process starts with sowing outside thoughts and ideas into the soil of your personal notes system;
- allowing your thoughts to take root as notes;
- developing a rich network of notes;
- Emergent ideas remain hidden until they push through the surface into public scrutiny, like shoots;
- Where some shoots not only survive but also thrive to produce a harvest.
- Some of this fruit provide seed for future work.

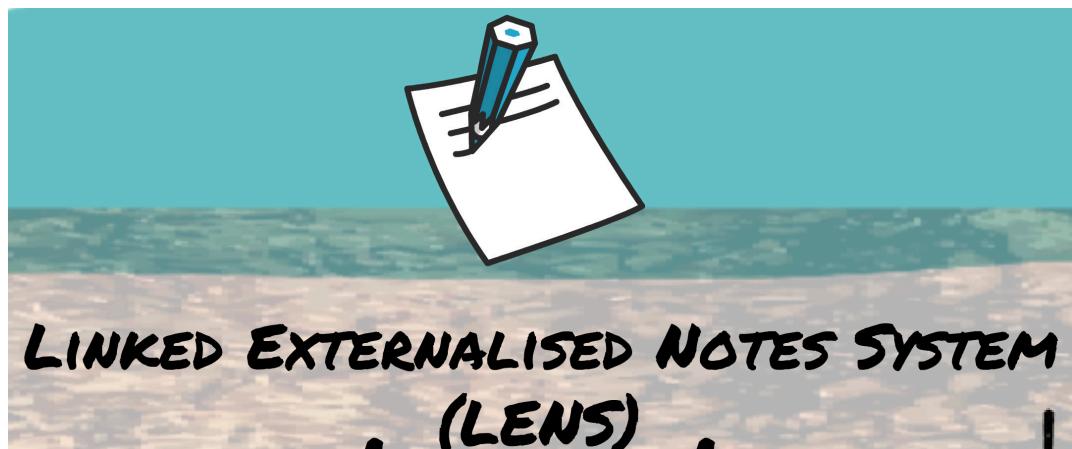
This approach to creativity is at odds, though with much of modern Western thinking about work in two fundamental respects.

Let's start by acknowledging that the pattern and process are not linear. It is a cycle. Typically, the concept of growth is presented to us as a linear progression, often illustrated as a graph that curves upwards. At each stage in the cycle, growth occurs, but overall it accumulates, with a harvest resulting in even more growth.

Second, the cycle is organic, not mechanistic. What I will share cannot be reduced to a formula, a template or a methodology. The factory metaphor has greatly influenced modern management theory. This is understandable; industry has made huge advances in manufacturing since the dawn of the industrial revolution. However, thinking about a problem as a factory is not always appropriate, and certainly not for human creativity. Rather, if you follow this whole cycle, and repeating it, it also will affect your creativity and productivity. The fruits of this creativity will be yours to enjoy, along with newfound productivity. That's been my personal experience.

There are multiple names for this written note system in current literature. A German word called zettelkasten seems to have established use. **Even** if you're a native English speaker, don't let the weirdness of this word discourage you. The story of zettelkasten provides valuable clues for achieving better clarity, connection, and creativity.

I opt for a different term: **LENS**, an abbreviation for **Linked Externalised Notes System**.



A LENS is:

- **Linked.** This is because each note you make can be associated with others in a networked manner, not solely in some hierarchical filing system. Fascinating connections form and grow across different contexts and categories.
- **Externalised.** You get that thought out of your head by objectifying it onto paper or on screen, thus achieving greater clarity. The act of putting the thought in your own words instead of 'cutting and pasting' can have a deep impact on your clarity and creativity.
- **Notes.** There is this basic discipline of writing out separate thoughts as separate notes. When you capture notes in this manner, it creates clarity and a priceless dialogue with those notes.
- **System.** Every note becomes part of a larger whole, showing associations of thought or theme, often across domains of different contexts where, perhaps, previously you not noticed and association. Your notes will achieve a sense of wholeness and unity by adhering to regular note-making and referencing practices.

Another reason that I prefer the term LENS is that this private notes system gives you a unique way, a lens, of seeing this thinking and creativity of yours emerging; it reflects how you have seen and are seeing the world around you.

You might already practise some parts of this cycle. Take encouragement from that. You are in good company. Many brilliant minds throughout history have followed suit.

However hand, there may be parts of the cycle that are new to you. Or there may be topics that have only been on the margins of your awareness. If so, you may want to follow this cycle for a while as an experiment. Then feel free to adapt it. Doing so will improve your thinking, specifically your ability to achieve clarity, and to connect your thoughts and ideas more effectively, as well as to create new ones.

This cyclical system will help you to preserve and reference your valuable ideas and insights over time. Ideas can come from outside sources, but as you work with these, expect new ideas to emerge increasingly from your creativity; these will be original to you. This cycle will help you collect your thoughts in one place, as a system of notes.

The organic cycle that surrounds and feeds your LENS will also provide you with a means to revise and improve your thoughts in a way that will grow. Creating and using your LENS is like learning any new skill. At the beginning it can feel clumsy and a lot of effort, but it will increase your productivity significantly over the longer term.

However, mere productivity should not be your aim; at least, not to begin with. You may have learned to ride a bicycle, where speed and distance were not your first concern. Yet, that early learning now pays off such that you can now cover many miles with safety, ease and perhaps at speed. Riding a bike feels second nature to you, as if it is an extension of your body. So, it will be, as you learn to express your thoughts in a LENS. Expect it to be wobbly and require much more energy at first, but it is worth it over time.

I have written this book for those of us commonly called knowledge workers. Many casually assume that the only people who are paid to think are the academics. Of course, this is not true. If you have picked this book up because the topic seems interesting, then that is a good indication that you too are a knowledge worker. If you are a writer, a coach, a medical practitioner, a scientist, a teacher, leading a business, a curator or an artisan, then this is for you. Practice its contents and you are likely come to the attention of others for your insights, exceptional understanding and wisdom. You will stand out. People will notice. I know this because it keeps happening to me. Remember:

What you think is too valuable to keep in your head.

More Than Mere Knowledge

So yes, this book is for knowledge workers. But even terms like knowledge worker and *Personal Knowledge Management (PKM)* trouble me.

There is something very limiting about all this emphasis on *knowledge*. Knowledge worker is also used as a term for someone who uses their knowledge in decision-making. Some people I know could be described as knowledge workers in this sense, but it is insufficient. These people produce some good work from their knowledge, yes; but it is so much more than the mere accumulation of their knowledge.

This matter of the distinction between knowledge and creativity is also illustrative of how the act of creation is much more organic than the mechanistic language of what is meant by PKM and the common processes that apply to it. I am uneasy with the idea that all I do is to assemble knowledge.

I am more interested in creativity *from* knowledge than merely adding to, or curating it. What you offer is rather more than the assembly of different lego bricks of knowledge.

My friend Mike, for example, commands a lot of knowledge, but his impact and influence goes way beyond this. When he stands up to speak, he is doing far more than regurgitating his learning. As Mike speaks, there is insight, connection, craft, presence, wisdom, even poetry. He brings all this to bear out of a deep understanding of, and love for, his audience and of the context of their lives. Whilst he is riveting in his relevance, he is conveying far more than mere knowledge. He brings hope and encouragement.

So, I dislike the term PKM. It puts all the emphasis on know-how, whereas I have learned that a good curated system helps me develop insight and, as others tell me, uncommon wisdom. Yet, the best PKM advocates out there are all purveyors of so much more than assembly of knowledge. They deserve a better term.

My late father once told me about the time when he discovered he could no longer keep rhythm in dancing with my mother. He stumbled a lot. When he became hopeless at playing darts in his local pub, he went to his doctor. They referred him to a specialist medical consultant.

This medic had arranged his desk so that he could see his patients as they walked into his consulting room.

When my father entered with a slight shuffle, straight away this specialist diagnosed my father with the early onset of Parkinson's Disease. Over years of experience, this doctor had taught himself to recognise the small giveaway signs, the 'tells,' the characteristic gait of someone in the early stages of this disease. Since then, it has always made me wonder how many vital clues doctors miss in their clinic when most of them now seem so absorbed with our medical records on their computer screens, giving the patient barely a glance.

My father's consultant was a lifelong learner. This medic paid attention to what was important in his work. I'm sure that there was no rigid process to his learning. He had learned from what he saw through experience: trial, error, and reflection.

In this complex, challenging world, we need to show up with more than mere knowledge. Otherwise we are all in danger, at best of becoming irrelevant, at worst clever devils.

... wisdom in decision making is vastly more important—not just practically, but philosophically
—than knowledge.

Nassim Nicholas Taleb¹

What I have discovered is that my LENS becomes a trigger for insight and a repository for wisdom. So, this book applies to you, the knowledge worker, yes; but hoping you will realise from it so much more than being a mere wielder of information and knowledge.

What Makes This Book Different

¹ *Antifragile: Things that Gain from Disorder* (Random House, 2012).

If you explore this area for yourself, through some of the other sources I draw upon in this book, you will find other fine work on this subject. So, why read this one? I offer you at least three reasons.

First, the mindsets often applied in most of the literature on note-making do not recognise anything like the potential that lies between your ears, that remarkable organ called your brain. The emphasis seems to be more on cranking up some kind of machine, or algorithm. If we subscribe to that way of looking at the world, it can seduce us into thinking we are part of that machine or worse, slaves to it. Instead, you find that I break with mechanistic language. Instead, I use organic metaphors and comparisons. The more I have explored what I call the Organic Creative Cycle, the more similarities I now see in my own creative journey. Nature has a lot to teach us.

Second, there is an almost religious debate about the superiority of one medium over another, or of one app over another. This even reaches the point where the champions for one app seem to despise all other apps, particularly the last one that they used themselves! Instead, I have attempted to be inclusive, showing examples from both the digital world and the handwritten one. There are strengths and weaknesses to both worlds. I want to show that some principles of externalised thinking, common to both worlds, can get lost in this argument between the zealots.

Third, I have tried to look beyond mere methods and techniques to the future of the thinker who applies these practices to ordering her thinking. This is also looking beyond the individual, towards shaping a very different future for our work and creativity across society. Sadly, I am coming across little discussion on these possibilities elsewhere right now. I hope this book will help spark curiosity and stimulate conversation around a better future for our work.

Often the most important realisations hide in plain sight. I hope that, as you read on, this will resonate with your experience of trying to manage your notes in these ways.

As in the story I began with, notes I had written years ago now almost shout to me with their relevance. In the same way, I hope this book will be as much a sense-making of what you might already have been doing, or at least have known or suspected, for some time.

What Follows

This book falls into three major parts. Using the organic metaphor of farming:

- Part 1 is laying the **Groundwork**. It is a mistake to plant on what is already there. The soil may be poor or non-existent. Weeds may be ready to strangle and choke whatever is planted in that ground. So, we need some clearance and preparation for the best results.
Here we look at the example of the lives and work of four people who illustrate the features of a LENS. We take a high-level tour through the organic creative cycle itself. And we consider an issue that is not trivial and requires addressing before we dive in: the media we might use.
- Part 2, **Cultivation**, explains the cycle in more detail. We illustrate seeding in Chapter 4. The following Chapter 5, *Germination*, considers how a note taken from an external source is transformed into a main note, sown into the private world of our LENS. Chapter 6 describes how a thought takes root. This all leads to your emergent creativity in *Mycelium* (Chapter 7), appearing before others as *Shoots* (Chapter 8). Chapter 9 ends the cycle description with *Harvest*, where you offer your work as something of value to others.
- Part 3, **Wider, Deeper, Higher**, examines how using such an organic creative cycle with your own LENS can become so much more in three dimensions at least. *Wider* (Chapter 10), takes the analogy of *The Farm* and describes how part of your organic creative cycle is managing the growing abundance of your portfolio of creative assets and diversifying your work to the benefit of the entire farm. *Deeper*

(Chapter 11) compares the soil of the farm, which is you, the knowledge worker; how this kind of work can enrich you spiritually, emotionally, physically, and socially; in fact, in your whole being. Chapter 12 on *Higher*, examines the future of so-called knowledge work, and how your LENS can become your superpower for your future self. Finally, I come clean about how, in writing this book, the authoring journey changed how I cultivate my knowledge and wisdom (Chapter 13).

- Part 4 invites you to stand back, and I share some personal conclusions during my research for this book.

And at the end of each chapter, including this one, there are summaries of the key points. If you wish, you can begin each chapter by skipping to the summary first, and then hunt for the bits about which you are curious.

As is the convention in most non-fiction books, I have included a **Glossary of Terms** at the end. However, my glossary has particular importance here. As I have already argued, terms used in this field can be misleading. One of my concerns is that as language develops, many of these terms become historic linguistic artefacts. Their literal meaning may no longer be relevant, or even be true. But they have stuck as common usage with a wide currency. They need explaining. Sometimes, I would argue, they need discarding.

Introduction Summary

- Central to this book is the **Organic Creative Cycle** and the core component within it, your **LENS** (Linked Externalised Notes System).
- If you get paid to come up with something original or make decisions, congratulations! You are a knowledge worker, and this book is for you.
- Our work is more than merely accumulating knowledge. Creativity and wisdom are involved.