



## Innovation at the Intersection of... Disciplines, Ideas, Cultures and More

An opportunity for significant, even transformative innovation, it has been said, can often be discerned at the intersection of two or more disciplines, ideas or activities. Have you come across the notion that retaining a single key concept from a book makes the time spent reading it worthwhile? The view that a conversation that yields a single gem can be priceless?

Well, some version of this Big Idea goes back to a cognitive psychology course I took (more years ago than I will admit!) at the University of Toronto. I recall it being presented at the start of one of the chapters and hitting my gray matter like a bolt of lightning.

I recall this insight being attributed to Thomas Kuhn, who is, according to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy:

“...one of the most influential philosophers of science of the twentieth century, perhaps the most influential. His 1962 book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* is one of the most cited academic books of all time.” (see <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/thomas-kuhn/>).

In searching for the exact quote (which in the end, I did not locate), I became aware of “The Medici Effect” by Frans Johansson (<https://www.fransjohansson.com/>), described as “...an innovation classic that explores why the most powerful innovation

happens at the “Intersection,” where ideas and concepts from diverse industries, cultures, and disciplines collide. Innovation today is less about expertise and more about how you can rapidly combine insights and ideas, often widely disparate, to create surprising and unique breakthroughs.”

Whatever variation of this notion you decide to ascribe to, and whatever its origin, this has been, for me, a Big Idea worthy of inclusion in this blog.

## What does it Mean?

This Big Idea, like all others that we will explore, is subject to interpretation, nuance, refinement...OK, it can mean something very different to you, than it means to me.

Here's my take:

Actively looking for points of intersection can be a great way to trigger new patterns of thinking, new ways of looking at familiar topics or ideas, and new “connections” between concepts that might first appear to be worlds apart. Taking this a step further, including a discipline or a topic in which you have little or no experience or expertise adds an extreme version of the “fresh perspective” that has the potential to uniquely inform and shape your thought processes, your analysis and your conclusions.

Reflecting on business or personal interactions across cultures, a similar “intersections” perspective can be invaluable in the simplest social context or in the most complex commercial, policy or other form of negotiation. “Getting down to business” or being direct and straightforward in communications can work very well, and be particularly appreciated in some parts of the world, but it can be ineffective, even offensive in other environments.

Shaping your understanding of these types of interactions by looking at the intersection or the interplay between low-context and high-context cultures (look into the work of Hofstede and Hall - see Edward T. Hall in HBR <https://hbr.org/1960/05/the-silent-language-in-overseas-business> and Gert Hofstede <https://www.hofstede.com>

insights.com/) can be a revelation, and has the potential to help you take innovative approaches to your cross-cultural interactions.

This can be helpful whether you are backpacking across a new part of the world, managing a project with a virtual team from multiple jurisdictions or negotiating a new partnership in a market you have not been active in before.

Whether in contemplation of the profound – such as the nature of the soul, the mind and consciousness that arguably started with the Greek philosophers and spawned the field of psychology – or in appreciation of the growing universe of fusion cuisine, this Big Idea can touch a wide swath of our collective experience.

## Let's Get Practical

So, here you are, dazzled by the brilliance of this Big Idea, thinking to yourself, "Wow, I wish the Big Idea Blog had been launched years ago. What do I do with this flash of genius brought to me through just three minutes of reading?"

Well, here are a few suggestions:

Start looking at your world in terms of connections and points of intersection rather than separations and points of discord. You'll see much more of this Big Idea at work than you would have until now

Apply the concept to your next project, school research paper or thesis – choose your topic, identify one or two points of intersection, ideally with at least one unrelated topic, and see where it takes you

Think about incorporating this Big Idea into your next scientific research, R&D or innovation initiative

Consider this concept as you decide the next step in your career evolution, shape your next mandate, or start (or invest in) a new business

Look for ways to build bridges or create linkages that add value, based on this Big Idea. Do you understand business and are you capable of grasping how technology can solve business issues? The intersection of these silos of a project or enterprise needs a lot of help and can be an opportunity for you

Look for and aim to experience some interesting points of intersection on your next leisure or business trip

Think in terms of transferable or “intersecting” skills: what are you good at in one area, that could help you start a new hobby, explore a new passion or solve a problem for the world?

Take your decades of professional experience and look for ways to identify overlaps with volunteer opportunities, community contribution or other activities aimed at giving back

## By the Way...

Be careful what you try to “intersect” in pursuit of new experiences, insight, innovation and a new or unique contribution to the dialogues or initiatives you are involved in. Not everyone you meet, interact with or work with will appreciate your well-intentioned application of this Big Idea.

I hear you – the chorus of thousands of you reading this post at the same moment from the farthest reaches of the globe – demanding an example.

I've been known to enjoy the occasional (periodic?) glass of wine here and there, though I have only the most basic appreciation for the complexities of this ageless and noble libation. I've tried on numerous occasions to “intersect” what for me, was an enjoyable bottle of wine with a variety of menu items, to the apparent distress of those whose taste buds were painfully offended, but whose sense of humour found an outlet

in my questionable pairings. Luckily, I've not been sprayed across the table as a result of the combination of distaste and laughter that ensued.

Completely unrelatedly, if you have the inclination, try this Italian red and let us know what you think:

<https://www.winemag.com/buying-guide/mastroberardino-2014-radici-taurasi-301183/>

Enough whining about wine!

(The humour in these blog entries will improve over time...)

On a more serious note, there are those in positions of authority – academic, professional or otherwise, who have the imagination and creativity of a brick. I remember being taken to task by just such a manager years ago because I dared staple papers to a file folder (some of you, hopefully, will have no idea what these things are...) with the staple at a 45-degree angle rather than parallel to the edge of the page.

Horror of horrors.

I'm stunned that the global business unit we worked for did not go bankrupt as a direct result.

If you can put this Big Idea into practice, go for it. If some part of your current reality makes it difficult, create an environment – even with a couple of family members, friends or colleagues – that will enable you to do so.

Thoughts on this blog post? Comment below! Add some suggestions on how to apply this Big Idea, or story about an attempt that could have gone better.

**“Everything you possess of skill, and wealth, and handicraft, wasn't it first merely a thought and a quest?”**

— Rumi

