

On the Edge: Facilitating at the margins

Recently a friend¹ gave me the book, *Why we Play: An anthropological study* by Robert Hamayon.² I immediately started reading Chapter 17, 'Taking advantage of the gap: Margin and metaphor'. I began to see how the concept and metaphor of 'margin' mapped on to various aspects of Symbolic Modelling and the way we have learned to apply it over 25+ years. Then it occurred to me that 'margin' could be a *generic organising metaphor*, similar to the usefulness of *levels*,³ *pointing*,⁴ and *antifragility*.⁵

David Grove loved 'edges'. It was a metaphor he used regularly and some might say he lived on the edge! He was fascinated by the borders, boundaries and horizons of a person's experience. Why? Because edges mark the transition between two worlds. We once saw him do a piece of work where the client explored the boundary between two "cosmological worlds" by physically swaying back and forth across the edge between the two worlds.

Clearly there is an intimate relationship between edges and margins which we will explore below and at the The Developing Group.

Definitions

What is a *margin*? According to various dictionaries and in relation to this discussion, margin has four interrelated meanings:

1. The edge or boundary of something *e.g. the border on each side of a page.*
2. Allowing some freedom to move within limits, *e.g. margin for error.*
3. A measure or degree of difference, *e.g. margin of victory, a profit margin.*
4. The furthest limit of inclusion or exclusion, *e.g. society's margins; margin of acceptability.*

Other words related to margin:

1. perimeter, brink, brim, rim, fringe, limits, periphery, bound, extremity, side, bank, verge
2. leeway, latitude, flexibility, scope, room (for manoeuvre, to spare), allowance, surplus
3. gap, minority, amount, difference, degree of difference

Interestingly, the origin of the word 'margin' can be traced back for thousands of years, unchanged to its proto-Indo-European language root, *merg-* meaning "boundary, border".

Below we consider a number of ideas and briefly look at them through the lens of 'margin'.

Life on the edge of chaos.

Roger Lewin's 1993 book. *Complexity: Life at the Edge of Chaos* introduced me the idea that life only exists in the narrow margin between deterministic rules and complete randomness. This idea can be widened to include many other phenomena where there is a vital margin between:

order and disorder
familiarity and surprise
safety and risk
planning and spontaneity
stability and instability
certainty and randomness
known and unknown
conscious and unconscious
linear and systemic
sameness and difference
rigid and malleable
fragile and robust
clean and leading

and so on.

Structure of a margin

A margin exists *between two* phenomena – it is a *relationship* – it marks out when something is close to a limit, boundary or edge. A page margin is a classic example. It lies between on the page and off the page. Schematically this can be represented as (Figure 1):



The margin is a *transition* between A and B, between two: spaces, times (events), features (variables), levels or perceivers (entities):

Space - near the edge or periphery or boundary between two areas

Time - near the beginning and end of a process or event

Form - near the upper or lower limit of a feature or criteria

Level - near the higher and lower degree of complexity of a system's organisation

Perceiver - near the outer and inner edge of an entity's existence (identity)

Edges

Edges mark a difference, a change between one object, area or surface and another. They are generally narrow – an edge of a blade, a cliff edge, the border between two countries. This idea is easily extended by metaphor to the delineation between times, events, features, etc.

A margin is the area, time or degree of a variable *either side* of an edge. Margins are the just-before and just-after an edge. Thus Figure 1 becomes Figure 2:



Note that the before/nearest/inside margin and the after/furthest/outside⁶ margin either side of an edge can have very different natures. For example, the margin on a page is usually blank, while the margin that lies off the page, a desk for instance, is made of something very different.

The narrowest edges are 'digital', they separate on from off, in from out, etc. Digital edges represent either/or thinking with no grey area in between. However, there is still likely to be a margin before and after such an edge, especially a time margin. It can take people a long time deciding whether to (physically or mentally) jump or not.

Sometimes there is no well-defined edge, one margin merges or blurs into another. Think of travelling from a grassland which becomes more and more sparse until it becomes a desert. Think of healing. There's a before and an after a wound is healed but where's the edge between healed and not healed? There isn't a clear boundary because it's a continuous process. Morphing is another example.

Edges are thresholds. There is a world of difference between a one-way and a two-way threshold. There's no going back once you've crossed a one-way threshold. A cake cooked can never return to its original ingredients. A baby cannot be unborn. Two-way thresholds on the other hand allow for a retracing of steps, for minds to be changed. The thresholds between ice, water and steam are reversible. Nevertheless, as far as the arrow of time is concerned, there is no 'going back'. Things can never be just the way they were because the universe has moved on in the intervening period. "No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man" (Heraclitus). However, time is more malleable in the theatre of the mind where we can convince ourselves that things can 'return to normal' or I can 'get my old self back'.

Compared with edges, generally margins are:	Allowing:
<i>Broader</i>	<i>More time and space:</i> - for 'warning' signals of approaching an edge - to consider and adjust
<i>Fuzzier</i>	<i>More room for ambiguity, more 'wiggle room'</i>
<i>Analogue</i>	<i>Greater variety, more options</i>
<i>More Stable</i>	<i>Firmer footing</i>
<i>A stepping stone to change</i>	<i>Incremental change or morphing</i>
<i>Two-way (reversible)</i>	<i>Greater opportunity to retrace steps</i>

Of course, depending on the circumstances, margins can have their downsides and edges can have their advantages. The starkness of an edge can be at times be a big plus - as evidenced by the value of the "just do it" slogan.

Margins themselves are subject to the characteristics of margins, i.e. there can be too little or too much margin! If a margin is too wide it can limit the centre, reducing the stability of a system. As the young child in a cot remarked "The sides are too near the middle". If a margin is too narrow, it loses its characteristics and effectively becomes an edge.

The other margin

Even when we recognise one margin or edge, we often have little awareness of the complementary margin at the 'other end'. However, when we appreciate the importance of margins, we realise that much of the significant action takes place and at the beginning and the end of an interaction, or at the getting into and getting out of a state. If we widen our perspective from a dyad to a triad we will see that Figure 1 is only half of the story, thus (Figure 3):



And Figure 2 becomes Figure 4:



It is not just that there is a margin between ... but there is a margin between too little structure and too much structure with an appropriate amount of structure sitting in the middle.

Sometimes the two margins/edges are so far apart that it is difficult to appreciate both at the same time. To take an extreme example (Figure 5):



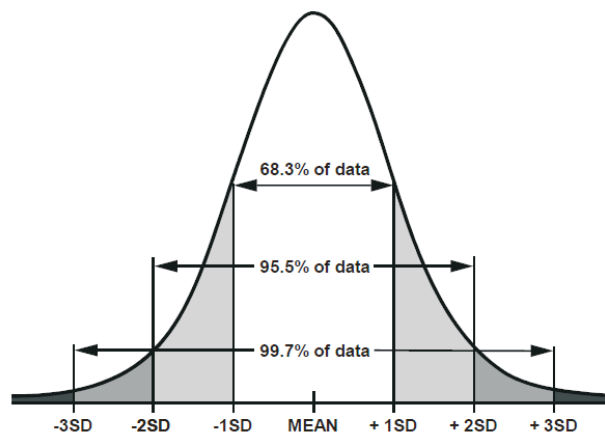
And, as this example makes clear, when you are perceiving from near the middle of 'B' it can be a stretch to envisage the existence of A or C. On a more prosaic level, when living in 'middle America' it can seem like people on the East and West coasts are living on another planet!

Most of the time our attention is taken up with life in the habitual middle; the 'he said, she said' drama of life. Rarely do we pay much attention to how the drama started and how it moved on to something else – a contributory factor in why it keeps repeating.

In the margin we have some semblance of choice. Once we've crossed the threshold, patterns have a habit of producing similar outcomes.

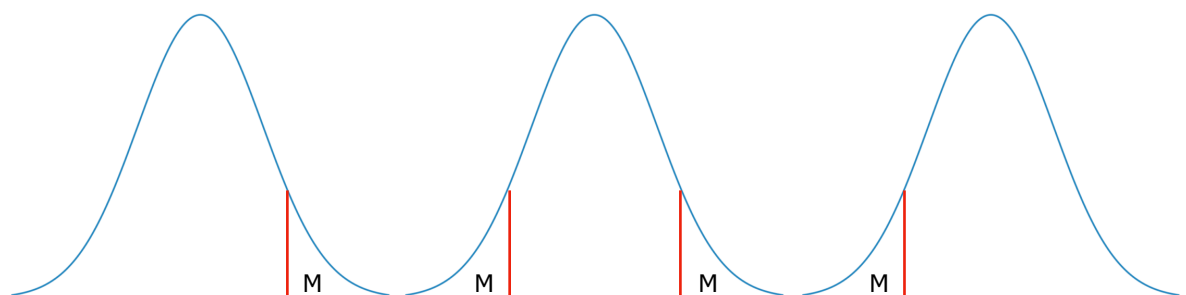
Bell-shaped curve

Another way to represent a feature of margins is a bell-shaped curve (Figure 6):

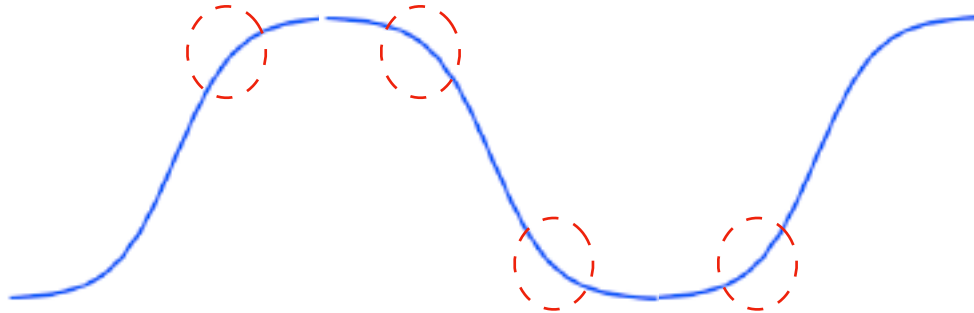


The bell-shaped curve represents the *frequency* of occurrences for systems that conform to a 'normal' distribution. It shows that occurrences in the middle of the distribution are common while those at the end are increasingly rare.

And, if we consider more than one curve, the idea of margins being on both sides of a boundary or edge is easier to see (Figure 7):



But, if we use the same *shape* to represent hills, plateaus and U-shaped valleys then there are other margins where interesting things happen (Figure 8):⁷



You can see how we applied the notion of transitions in our 'The Journey to Self-Truthfulness' a part of Penny and my series of article on self-deception, -delusion and -denial.⁸

Gregory Bateson

"Those particular items which happen to be on a boundary come to transcend their individuality as members of the set and carry information about the set as a whole" (p. 140, *Sacred Unity*).

This stunning insight derived from an acute understanding of information theory. Penny and I effectively arrived at the same conclusion by observing how people do and do not change but we weren't able to explain *why* margins are so important to our work – until now.

In the same essay, Bateson also says that *errors* occur most frequently near boundaries and the mapping of errors will provide an *outline* of the phenomenon. I translate this to mean: modelling the pattern of failures to change and learn will reveal information about the structure of the phenomenon that is attempting to learn and change itself.⁹

Feedback processes

Understanding the concept of a margin is all well and good, but we are also interested in the *dynamics* that occur at and near a margin.

The most important feature of any complex adaptive system is the "circular or more complex chains of causality" (Bateson), also known as feedback circuits or loops.¹⁰

The complexity of a system is a function of the complexity of its feedback loops. Amazingly there are only two types of feedback circuit: escalating and dampening. (Unfortunately, technically known respectively as positive and negative feedback; resulting in untold misunderstanding.)

Escalating feedback would, if left unchecked by dampening feedback, push a system out of bounds risking "breakdown rather than breakthrough" (Wilber).

On the other hand, dampening feedback, left to its own devices, would result in stagnation and an inability to adapt to changing circumstances. Every system needs both. It is the dynamic interplay between the two that determines the fragility, robustness or antifragility of a system.¹¹

In human mind-body terms we can observe the following generic patterns:¹²

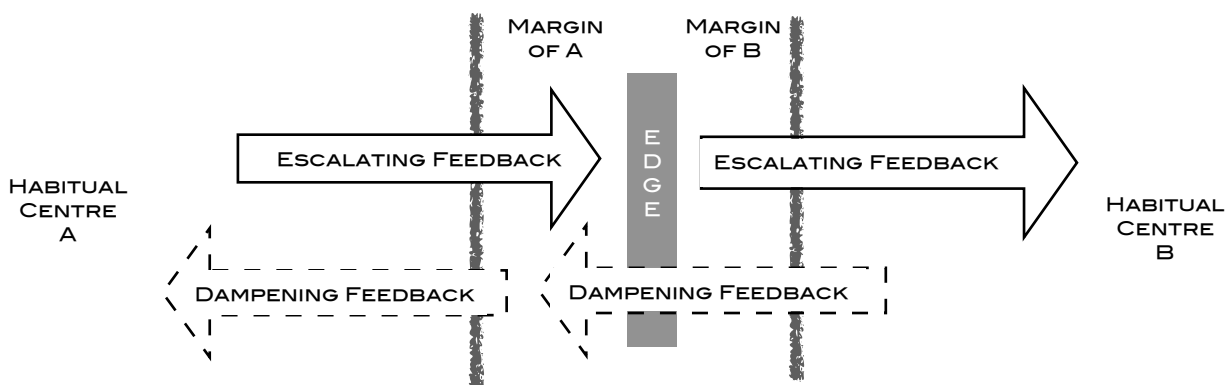
Before an edge is crossed:

- As escalating feedback propels a system towards a margin, complementary dampening mechanisms will be activated in an attempt to slow the rate of change and to preserve the current existence of the system. This is why we say it is not up to us as facilitators to favour change over staying the same. Sometimes no change is the most beneficial outcome.
- When dampening feedback keeps a system close to its centre or norms, either (a) inherent impulses to grow, to introduce novelty and creativity will be activated; or (b) the system encounters new external circumstances which mean it has to 'venture out of its comfort zone'.

After a boundary is crossed:

- Dampening feedback will act to 'return to the norm' otherwise known as 'relapse'. Dampening processes can also come from the wider system. Other family members and friends attempt (often out of awareness) to get the changing person to revert to type (thereby removing the need for them to change themselves in response!). Harriet Goldhor Lerner calls these "countermoves or 'Change back!' reactions".¹³
- At the same time, life is different on the other side of the boundary and there is the excitement of the new and room for escalating feedback to stretch into.

This is the eternal dynamic which results in evolution and sustainable development, without which we wouldn't even have made it to single-cell organisms (Figure 9).



A margin contains the *potential* for the crossing of a boundary. The closer to either side of an edge, the more the relationship between the two types of feedback processes become evident. One of the reasons we continually emphasise the value of developing a desired outcome (and the escalating feedback loop associated with it) is because doing so usually prompts the system to react, and to reveal the *specific* dampening feedback which inhibits the desired outcome becoming an actual outcome.

Signals

A key message: a system needs to have some way of knowing that it is approaching a margin. This knowing manifests as *signals* that are apparent to the system itself – and also to an attuned observer. A system reveals itself through the pattern of these signals which can be modelled to produce an outline of its structure. Thus, a system that has the capacity to self-reflect can notice its own structures and incorporate that knowledge in service of the wider and longer-term ecology of the system.

Those systems that do not have well-developed signals cannot respond in time to have a pre-emptive effect. They only get to find out belatedly and are continually surprised that “It’s just happened again”.

Learning

Learning can take place at the centre, but systems ‘learn to learn’ at the margins, i.e. in Vygotsky’s ‘zone of proximal development’. And with enough experience of learning to learn, it’s possible to ‘learn to learn to learn’.¹⁴

Note, the width and characteristics of a margin are also subject to learning, i.e. evolving in response to changing circumstances. For example, the margin of what is considered racist behaviour has narrowed considerably over the last few hundred years.

Transcend and include (levels)

Ken Wilber’s 1-2-1 model¹⁵ represents the developmental pathway of: an integrated whole (1) – differentiates many parts (2) – emerging to a new kind of whole (1) at a higher emergent level of organisation. Or put another way, at a certain level of complexity a new whole emerges which ‘transcends and includes’ the interacting parts. There is a margin between levels “1-2” and “2-1”

In Wilber’s model there are horizontal margins *within*, and vertical margins *between*, developmental levels. Wilber calls crossing a boundary *within* a level a *translation*, and crossing a boundary *between* levels, a *transformation*.

Wilber emphasised that the whole person does not necessarily ‘cross’ a developmental level in one go or at one time. More often, when a level is crossed some aspects remain operating from the lower level, enabling the threshold to be crossed many times. This is why, even years after developing we can, on occasions, revert to behaviours learned much earlier in our life. It is another way of saying, development never proceeds in a straight line – it meanders!

The capacity to transcend and include also enables us to “straddle two different groups at the same time, participating in two different identities”.¹⁶ To do so we need to keep a foot in the margins on either side of the boundary.

While David Grove’s clients were deep in thought he often said he would just sit and have “a cappuccino at a cafe on the edge of their universe” (a phrase he adapted from Douglas Adams’s *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*.) The position or perspective of a symbolic modeller can be thought of as residing on the edge ‘straddling’ two landscapes: the client’s, and our model of the client’s landscape. Remaining on the periphery enables us to be keep in touch, but not so much that we get enmeshed in the client’s habitual patterns residing at the centre.

Play and latitude

Margins have another vital feature. At the margin the system dynamics result in a degree of latitude or play that isn't apparent at the centre. 'Play' in English has multiple meanings and the two that are most relevant here are: (1) to engage in activity for enjoyment and recreation; and (2) the scope for freedom of action or thought.

There are six key ideas in the following extract from *Why we Play*:

The margin corresponds both to ... *movement's permitted latitude in the limited space in which it can be carried out*, and to the *relative interpretational freedom* it benefits from ... It is thus doubly at the *source of the random outcome* of this movement ... It is the ideal place for individual *agency to express itself*, and for the *variations it generates*. (p. 280, italics added)

The relationship between margin, latitude and play is one of the most interesting ideas to come out of Hamayon's book:

This margin, or this latitude, ... Being the space wherein agency occurs, the margin is thus the root of play's indefinitely innovative aspect. ... Hence, it is vital to one feature of play, its uncertain result (p. 281)

We've long seen the dance between client and Symbolic Modelling facilitator as a form of improvisation within some broad navigating structures.¹⁷

The above quotes suggest that innovation, adaptation and creativity occur at the margins because that's where the loosening of structures provides some latitude, some degree of play. It's where gaps appear that can be filled with new ideas (which over time are absorbed into the centre).

Margins are also where random events can have an influence. Serendipity, the wellspring of much creativity and innovation, requires the utilisation of these chance events.¹⁸

Furthermore, the capacity to 'transcend and include' exists in the margin. It's there that the latitude enables the rising above content and the playing with structure and process – conditions that encourage emergence.

Metaphor

Lakoff and Johnson's approach has an additional merit: it highlights another implication of metaphorical structuring. While what structures and what is structured are bound to be different, the degree of acceptable otherness is not unlimited: the "other" must be close enough to allow comparison, and different enough to ban identification. In other words, metaphorical structuring enjoys a margin, but this margin is narrow. (*Why We Play*, p. 288)

In other words metaphors are adjacent to what they represent.¹⁹

Concluding thoughts

Of course margins are metaphors. Nature doesn't have edges. Humans (and probably most other organisms) create the *idea* of a margin, and then react to the world as if it true. That's fine and useful, *and* it has its limitations. There is also value in remembering that this is but *one* way of "punctuating" the world (Bateson), that there are lots of other ways, and that it says more about us than it does the world.

For me, the biggest advantage of margins is that it keeps me thinking in terms of *relationships*, which prompts me to think in terms of triads, and then sliding triads, and from there I'm well on my way to thinking more systemically – to conceiving of the world in *circular* rather than *linear* chains of causation.

Notes

- ¹ Thank you Greg Le Roy.
- ² Translated from the original French by Damien Simon (2016).
- ³ Levels – all the way up and all the way down (2003) cleanlanguage.com/levels/
- ⁴ Pointing to a New Modelling Perspective (2013) cleanlanguage.com/pointing-to-a-new-modelling-perspective/
- ⁵ I gave an extensive presentation of Taleb's ideas and their relevance to our work at the 2013 Clean Conference: [Antifragility, Black Swans and Befriending Uncertainty](#) (slide deck).
- ⁶ Whether a margin is seen as before/nearest/inside or after/furthest/outside depends, as ever, on *where* the perceiver is perceiving from.
- ⁷ This idea can be extended to 'fitness landscapes', see: cleanlanguage.com/applying-cross-domain-thinking/
- ⁸ Learning to Act from What You Know to be True (2004). cleanlanguage.com/learning-to-act-from-what-you-know-to-be-true/
- ⁹ When the Remedy is the Problem (2005) cleanlanguage.com/when-the-remedy-is-the-problem/
- ¹⁰ Feedback Loops (2005) cleanlanguage.com/feedback-loops/
- ¹¹ Nassim Nicholas Taleb (2012). *Antifragile: things that gain from disorder*.
- ¹² These four feedback process can be mapped on to 'David Grove's last four questions' which we explored at the May 2020 Developing Group.
- ¹³ Harriet Goldhor Lerner (1989). *The Dance of Intimacy*, p. 193
- ¹⁴ Bateson, G. (1973) *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution and Epistemology*. Bateson defined these levels as:
 - I Learning = creating useful structures and processes
 - II Learning to learn = creating multiple ways to learn, i.e. creating different classes of learning
 - III Learning to learn to learn = creating multiple ways to create learning to learn, i.e creating different classes of ways to create multiple ways to learn.
- ¹⁵ Ken Wilber (1995). *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality: The Spirit of Evolution*
- ¹⁶ Thanks to Birgit Suberg for this idea.
- ¹⁷ Coaching in-the-moment (2007) cleanlanguage.com/coaching-in-the-moment/
What did Improv ever do for us? (2010). cleanlanguage.com/what-did-improv-ever-do-for-us/
- ¹⁸ Maximising Serendipity: The art of recognising and fostering unexpected potential - A Systemic Approach to Change (2008). cleanlanguage.com/maximising-serendipity/
- ¹⁹ Proximity and Meaning: A 'clean' approach to adjacency cleanlanguage.com/proximity-and-meaning/