

# The Writers' Residency: A Case Study in Emergence for NTL

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(Ken Benne, co-founder of NTL and philosopher of democracy answering a question about what he would like to say to future practitioners of OD. Arthur Freedman, Taped interview July 18, 1988. Lake Kezar, Maine.)



From the library-looking-out view in the country house in Provence

*The NTL Writers' Residency in Provence was a big success according to the participants. This essay looks beyond this immediate success to explore in a larger context its relevance for NTL's goals for members and the world. We step back to explore the Residency in the context of NTL's three-year history of trying to create the NTL Next Generation – in conceptual terms, a networked, self-managed, self-renewing complex organization that sustains NTL's legacy of contributions to individual, group and organization development. In this context, the Residency is viewed as an example of “emergence”. Viewed through this lens, the Residency is a valuable focus for learning, and a resource for NTL going forward.*

*Our exploration is in five parts; first a short description of the Residency and some of the characteristics that made it a success; second, summarizing NTL's effort to remake itself as NTL Next Generation as context for the Residency; third, an exploration of the Residency as an example of “emergence”, a key part of the change strategy for NTL Next Generation; fourth, a description of how the Residency and similar instances of emergence can contribute to NTL's development; and fifth, some thoughts about how to “grow” emergent events to the benefit of NTL.*

## The NTL Provence Writer's Residency: A Successful NTL Experiment

The NTL Provence Writers' Residency took place in Provence, France from May 22 to May 26, 2017. Nineteen participants, including seventeen NTL members, attended. Subscribed beyond the original plan, participants stayed in two estates approximately 20 KM from Avignon, France. Four members were accompanied by spouses who, while not participants, enjoyed the environs and socializing with members during meals and "off times". The Residency program itself took place in a large country house with 11 sleeping rooms, sitting rooms filled with books and lovely, inspirational artwork, a large parlor meeting space, many nooks and outside quiet places perfect for "writing-alone" time, a large community kitchen, and a heated swimming pool; all located amidst acres of olive orchards – suffice to say an ideal (and idyllic) venue. (<http://www.theluberon.com/rentals/ls/tarascon/18/mas-st-andiol>)

Locally inspired meals, excepting a Thursday evening group excursion into St Remy de Provence for dinner, and breakfast croissants and breads retrieved from the local baker (thank you Lennox Joseph and Mary Tschudy), were provided by a lovely woman named Lucy Bakr. (Inspired, she donated her earnings to a water charity she supports in Uganda.) A typical day included group sessions in the morning and late-afternoon dealing with different aspects of writing – creating the "first shitty draft"; writing journals; biblio-teachers; techniques for moving forward; putting your work out in the world; the editing process; writing software; feedback (of course) – and lots of free time to write and/or just "be", which we learned was also a part of the writing process. We shared meals in the garden and clean-up duty according to a schedule worked out early in the week. No T-grouping here, just colleagues living together, getting to know and enjoy each other, taking individual time and space as needed, and supporting each other in the work we came to do.

Participants came away with varying degrees of manuscript "completion", and universal satisfaction with their experience of the week. Three articles

were completed and will be considered for publication in *Practising Social Change* (NTL's e-journal for practitioners). Two dissertation chapters were produced after hours of dedicated afternoon and evening time on the computer – way to go James! Two authors dug into the book they had committed to writing together. Others, inspired by the conversation and writing exercises, reconsidered the topic they had intended to develop and took a different path. In homage to the iterative writing necessity, a number of manuscripts are "in process" – many of their authors connected to colleagues who will continue to give them and their efforts feedback and support. In our final session members expressed appreciation anew for the power of in-person, face-to-face collegiality and collaborative support.

Apart from the work, there were meals in the sun and shade of the garden, quick (and leisurely) afternoon swims, long walks along surrounding country roads among nearby farm/estates, the evening in St Remy, and, of course, the magic of Provence!

Some aspects of the Residency design are worth noting as contributors to the success of the design:

- Light design and facilitation – the design mixed "light" instruction and simple exercises with lots of "free space" in the form of time and choice of work agendas for participants
- Affirming support from the organizers and participants, including responding to individual needs and requests
- The process was task oriented, support rich, and provided the possibility of personal payoffs.

## The Writers' Residency: Emergence in NTL, Revisiting NTL Next Generation

### The NTL Context

In March, 2014, the NTL Board announced a restructuring of NTL based on a self-organizing member network of hubs and projects, held together by a central core and driven by members. (Board Communication to Members, March 2014) A Transition Team was established to guide the

transitional journey to the new organization. Change Action Teams were established to work with the Board and Transition Team to implement parts of the reconfigured NTL. The Transition Team, Board and Change Action Teams worked for two years to bring “NTL Next Generation” into fruition.

The essence of the NTL Next Generation organizing framework was to re-create NTL as (in organizational language) a complex, adaptive system, driven internally and externally by membership initiatives and external opportunities. Structures that were established – CATS (Change Action Teams), Hubs, Projects, and a Central Core of leaders focused on both programs and membership - defined the architecture for NTL Next Generation. The underlying intent was to mobilize NTL’s members as contributors and benefactors of NTL’s collective intellectual and social capital. The organizing concept was/is not one, in the traditional sense, of a central office directing and/or creating the direction of the evolving NTL - although to be sure, leaders in these roles can initiate this kind of movement and, without question, play other critical roles. Instead, the concept was/is of an organization that “finds its way” in a diverse, fast changing, often unpredictable environment through processes of members acting on their own impulses for creativity, their knowledge of opportunities, and their initiatives in support of NTL’s purpose. It is a much more “organic” notion of how an organization grows; not top down, or even bottom up; but inside - inside, inside - out and outside - in; from often disparate nodules of shared member energy and interests. In this conception of NTL, new directions do not result from “top down” implementation of a strategy plan in the traditional sense, but in the “discovery” of opportunities for productive work and innovation on the part of small groups with shared interests and shared energy; and then growing these initiatives, knitting them together within a framework of purpose and strategic direction.

The concepts underlying NTL Next Generation were elegant in the abstract but more difficult in the specific. There was/is no popular roadmap for developing an organization like the envisioned NTL Next Generation. In these respects, NTL Next

Generation was/has been/remains a grand experiment.

The NTL Board and other key actors have changed over the years since the initiation of NTL Next Generation. The enthusiasm for the Next Generation vision of NTL and its transition has flowed and ebbed. Indeed, Next Generation terminology is rarely if ever mentioned today within NTL, perhaps a result of our structural proclivity to temporary member engagements. Boards and Transition Teams come and go; and in the heat of immediate crises (we’ve had a few), long term directions, and past intentions and initiatives get lost or discounted. Nevertheless, the established Next Generation structures remain containers for their initial intent.

In parts of NTL, and often out of sight of the membership as a whole, members have created, and are creating, noteworthy initiatives that have the potential for transforming NTL, not in wholesale flashes of upheaval but in quieter, budding nodes of innovation and sustainable member engagement. In complex adaptive theory, this dynamic is termed “emergence”. (Stacey, Griffin and Shaw, 2000) It is a key concept in the “change theory” of Complex Adaptive Systems and a critical process envisioned for NTL Next Generation.

This paper attempts to develop an understanding of emergence in NTL by reflecting on one successful emergent event, the NTL Writers’ Residency.

### **Residency: an Example of Emergent Growth**

From the lens of complex organization theory, the Writers’ Residency is a clear example of how emergence can take place. As such, it is significant beyond its immediate success. NTL must learn more about how to nurture and sustain this and other “emergent” member initiatives and projects. As a self-organizing complex system, NTL’s success depends upon it.

The Residency displays a number of characteristics of emergence as it can happen in NTL.

- The Residency was born out of member interest and initiative. The idea for a residency was one of a number of initiatives, some which have “stuck” and some which have not, that were generated at the 2014 and 2015 member meetings in which groups of members huddled together in “open space” to plan for new “hubs” and projects. (Note the open space technology in organization development is itself an example of emergent processes.) The course of the idea (more appropriately termed a project than a hub) was not a straight line. Two members who volunteered to lead the development of a writers’ conference, after some struggling to gather support from other members and changing circumstances in their personal lives, resigned from their leadership roles and stepped aside.

Kate Cowie and David Kiel kept the idea alive. David was serving as a leader of the research hub and Kate was continuing as editor of *Practising Social Change*—both have long been advocates for members writing and publishing their work. Kate had long thought Provence, France to be an ideal place to hold a writing workshop, and she and David formulated the beginnings of a plan. They enrolled Ted Tschudy, a fellow traveler in the NTL “let’s encourage writing” journey, and then Yvette Hyater-Adams, a member and colleague with a long history of conducting writing workshops and coaching other NTL members in their writing efforts. Yvette and Evangelina Holvino had initiated one of the early NTL Next Generation Hubs, Scholarly Personal Writing. A significant investment of time and planning resources on the part of Kate and her assistant, Sheila Lilley, continued to move the idea forward.

- The Residency was initiated and carried out by members independent of the NTL central office or leadership. While the idea was percolating with Kate, David and Ted (and later with Yvette), NTL was undergoing changes in Board leadership, changes in the central staff, appointment of an acting CEO (Pat Bidol-Padva), budget constraints, and eventually the employment of two new co-CEO’s, one for membership and one for programs.

- Financial support was neither expected nor planned for. Consistent with the underlying concepts of NTL Next Generation and minimal NTL resources, Board guidelines called for Hub and project initiatives to be self-financing. Little support, financial or otherwise, could be counted on from NTL’s central organization.

The planning group agreed to take no fees for their work and to pay their own way to the Residency. Because little was asked of NTL headquarters, no funds were included in the registration fee for NTL overhead. Nevertheless, in an important gesture of support, James Smith, the recently hired NTL program CEO, offered to invoice and process registration fees for participants after a request from Kate. This was significant since administrative matters for registration and payment are often problematic when working internationally in NTL.

Working with Sheila, Kate located an estate not far from Avignon that was ideal for the Residency – a dream spot in a rural setting with meeting space, multiple sleeping rooms and bathrooms, and a pool situated amid acres of olive orchards. It was an attractive venue. David provided additional support by advancing the 900 Euro deposit for the program locale, while Kate advanced all the remaining costs for local ground transport, meals and the rent on both the main property and a second property (which was needed when the Residency became over-subscribed), and also donated 2000 euros to the project in order to reduce the program fee and so facilitate participation..

In retrospect, the success of the Residency resulted from the willingness of a few members to take the risk of investing time, energy, reputation, and in some cases their own funds, to “up-front” the opportunity. Emergence cannot happen without the efforts of a “committed node” of members. As in the case of the residency, this node might consist of a small group of two to four members.

- The Residency leveraged member learning resources. The diverse membership of staff and

participants made for a synergy that became more than the whole. Originally, the Residency was conceived as a simple gathering of members in which there would be early morning and afternoon group check-ins separated by long hours in which members were free to write. The Residency planning took on more structured teaching and sharing components (including a program resource book) when Yvette Hyater-Adams joined the planning group. Yvette brought extensive experience as a writer and writer teacher/coach who had previously coached and/or mentored many NTL members in their writing efforts. Yvette has been active in Women's Voices Hub and has written and taught about the art and practice of Scholarly Personal Narrative. Kate brought expertise from her experience as a book author and editor of *Practising Social Change*, NTL's on-line journal. David Kiel, former steward of NTL's Research community of Practice, added perspectives on how practitioners might write about their practice in a thoughtful way. Although David was unable to attend the Residency because of unexpected heart surgery (successful, thankfully), three participants (two of them new members) he referred proved to be wonderful colleagues. David worked with them and others virtually as a reader, providing feedback and other support. Ted contributed design ideas, and understanding of the NTL "system", as well as his long standing desire to regain NTL's prominence in small group and organization development "thought leadership". During the workshop, Bob Marshak, former acting editor of NTL's *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* and ODN Lifetime Achievement Award Winner, lent support by contributing a Skype session on academic and practitioner writing and the "writing development journey".

- Diversity made for a rich experience. Like the planning group, the Residency participants were a diverse group of members and non-members who brought a wide variety of writing projects, in various stages of development, from "no idea" to almost completed manuscripts. Participants were also diverse in age, gender, race, sexual orientation, nationality and culture – the way we

like it in NTL. We were academics, practitioners and students, including Yvette's daughter, Simone, a millennial Ph.D. student working on her dissertation using autoethnography, who also completed one of her writing projects during the Residency. All of this made the experience of joining together in a "foreign" (for most of us) place a rich experience in itself, and the differences brought many opportunities for learning, expanded perspectives and enjoyable informal conversations.

- The Residency was an "attractor". It tapped a "felt need" for members who were then willing to "buy in". In complexity terms, the residency was an "attractor". (Ok, in the language of chaos theory the term is "strange attractor" but there really wasn't anything strange about this event.) Initially, the attraction was among the planners who were willing to invest themselves in promoting writing opportunities for members. Members undoubtedly signed up for a variety of reasons. Obviously, we wanted to further our ability to write and in many cases to complete specific manuscripts. The venue was also an "attractor" (Who wouldn't want to spend a week in Provence, France, tax deductible expense to boot?), as was the opportunity to spend time in collaboration and sharing with members in the UK, Europe, India and the US. The planners, each with some recognition among parts of the NTL membership, provided a varied sponsorship base. Most importantly, the Residency could not have been successful without the presence of a "latent" desire to write within the membership, perhaps fostered by years of discussion about the necessity and possibilities for such, as well as some previous efforts that didn't succeed. When the opportunity was provided, it was a catalyst for these latent desires.

### **Beneficial Emergence: How is NTL Helped?**

Member attendees agreed that they benefited from their participation in the Writers' Residency. An important question is, "How is NTL, the organization, helped by the Provence NTL Writers' Residency?" It's useful to reflect on the short and long term benefits for NTL:

- There were completed manuscripts. Some participants came to the Residency with articles or chapters that were near completion. They used their time to complete manuscripts and prepare them for publication, all of which are being considered for inclusion in *Practising Social Change*, NTL's on-line journal. James Smith, NTL's CEO, attending at his own expense, worked tirelessly to write critical chapters of his dissertation. (He reports they received favorable reviews from his dissertation committee. – go James!) Other writing projects are “in process”
- Ideas were given root that may develop into articles, products and practices. Some ideas, less formed at the beginning of the Residency, ripened as they were nurtured among the thoughts and reactions of colleagues. These ideas may show up later in completed manuscripts and/or laboratory designs; or in creative expansions of work in NTL learning laboratories already underway. For most NTL members, there are few opportunities to concentrate on writing and thinking in a hectic, time-constrained consulting life. Thought leadership takes time! Ideas don't come to fruition when the creative process is interrupted by the distractions of our practice and personal commitments. In this respect, Residency “time away” was an investment in creativity for the individual participants and for NTL. It can be seen as a kind of “forward development” for NTL.
- The network “writing capacity” grew. Supportive “writing relationships” were formed that continue beyond the Residency. Drafts were shared and critiqued with other members as part of the Residency program. As drafts were taking shape and participants learned what others were writing about, additional natural connections were made, as well as commitments to share manuscripts “in development” after the completion of the Residency.
- Member networks were strengthened. Many members often speak with longing appreciation of their times in Bethel. For them, summer in Bethel was an enriching opportunity to meet and get to know other NTL members, to renew relationships

and learn what others were doing/thinking. It was a place for enriching NTL relationships, strengthening the band-width of connections. Although on a smaller scale, a similar dynamic was present in Provence. We lived and ate together, got to spend time in informal conversation, and accommodated to each other's food and living needs. In many cases there were opportunities to form new relationships. Others enjoyed the company of long-term colleagues and friends.

As an aside, the locale shared another similarity to Bethel – remoteness. It took some work to get there for many of us – a plane ride or two for most, a two and a half to three hour trip from Paris on one of France's high speed trains, and a thirty five minute ride into the countryside.

- The Residency is scalable. Members can replicate the residency model. They are invited to use the design, the program book and the learning from the Residency to create their own writing “event” with other members. The key elements of place, writing focus, economy, time specificity, and sponsorship are the basics upon which all members can tailor a similar event, or a variation of it, should they choose.

The residency model is also useful for other purposes in NTL. Members can come together for other tasks in co-located, time limited settings to carry out other work agendas. For example, the CORE hub brought members together to work on Human Interaction labs in 2016. The model fits for NTL members who can complete work in short, concentrated time frames, but often have difficulty sustaining longer term projects..

- There were unanticipated “second order” benefits. One characteristic of emergence is unplanned second and third order impacts on other “nodes” of action. For example, Rianna Moore attended the Residency and actively promoted a new Publishing Hub which she and other members have established in cooperation with New Dynamics, a consulting group consisting mostly of NTL members. Another example - *Practising Social Change* achieved a greater level of visibility and access to members present. As participants invest

themselves and “spread the word”, an increased level of awareness and appreciation can be built for this underutilized “gem” of NTL’s brand.

- Some benefits have delayed feedback loops. While some benefits of the Residency are immediate for NTL and the members who attended, others are less immediate, but no less important. As members publish they help sustain NTL over the longer term. Publications strengthen NTL’s “brand”. They also provide credibility that draws participants for NTL’s legacy revenue producing products – the Human Interaction and Organization Development programs. Publications are often the “advertisements” for program offerings. They are the “R and D” products of NTL. They distinguish NTL’s brand in ways that are consistent with its legacy, and important in the highly populated and competitive thought-and-practice space in which NTL works.
- Residencies can be NTL’s “discovery and development space”. In the architecture of the new NTL, residencies can serve as “petri dishes” for emergence. They can be places where ideas are nurtured, shared, critiqued, and polished; where thought leadership is crafted. They can be the space where practice innovations are created by like-interested members. As members learn models and “routines” for nurturing emergence, these practices can become a source of self-sustaining and self-generating renewal, benefiting members, NTL and its mission.

### **Leveraging Emergence in NTL**

If instances of “emergence” in NTL are to be leveraged for the benefit of the whole organization, they must be recognized as such and “managed” (perhaps a better term might be supported) in ways consistent with network dynamics. Following are some thoughts about possible ways this might be accomplished:

- Members must take responsibility for the viability of NTL thought and practice leadership. NTL members must see themselves as internal “entrepreneurs” in the space of NTL’s purpose and

mission. New energy in the NTL network cannot happen unless members are willing to invest time, energy and reputation in new and existing NTL work. The membership must take on the task of finding the kinds of opportunities that have the potential to enhance member and NTL fortunes. Members must work out ways in which these opportunities can be developed to enhance, rather than compete with, the welfare of themselves, fellow members, and NTL. As with most ventures (adventures?), some will not succeed, so it helps to see these results as the network or world “not ready” rather than a failure on the part of NTL and/or the member entrepreneur(s). We learn from them. Broad NTL policies may help, but in the end it is the ingenuity of individual members of NTL who create ways to make NTL’s thought and practice leadership happen.

- NTL must have an “information easy” technical infrastructure that promotes awareness of resources and emerging nodes of activity. Members must be able to “find” colleagues that are interested in similar action thrusts in NTL to link up with them as ideas and projects emerge. (One colleague expressed frustration that she was unaware that the Residency was being organized. She regretted the lost opportunity to attend.) “Information easy” infrastructures allow members to take advantage (in network terminology) of “weak” or distant network relationships. The basics for this infrastructure include contact information about members and their identified areas of interest and work. More powerful capabilities would act like “radar screens” for the network, showing where and when in the network initiatives are being mobilized – for example, a simple electronic bulletin board, or an on-line newsletter, or (more sophisticated) network analysis software that tracks clusters of network relationships and linkages that can be leveraged to mobilize and/or link nodes of interest and energy.
- Publicize rather than analyze. In the NTL tradition, action research has been our core methodology for change. Action research has a significant place in supporting development of network relationships, but it alone is too passive

for leveraging emergence. In the case of emergence, the way to grow an initiative is to give it visibility, to “push” it into the awareness of the larger network beyond its “local” presence, extending the range of awareness so that other network actors – individuals or already formed nodes of members – can initiate interaction in natural processes of “seeking and sorting out”.

- Actively link complimentary nodes of activity and interest. In Networks, change begins in clusters. A strategy for leveraging emergence is to link clusters with other clusters that have similar or complimentary interests and/or activities. June Holly, a practitioner, writes about this strategy in her *Network Weaver Handbook*. She and her colleagues have worked in communities to identify “like” clusters of individuals and organizations who are interested in commonly held community agendas and then actively link them through simple meetings or other mechanisms for bringing them together. This linking function can be a key leadership role for Hub leaders, NTL staff, and NTL members. It must be a leadership role for all members. We all need to become proficient network participants.

### The Critical Membership Role

Implicit in NTL Next Generation is the assumption that the future of NTL rests ultimately with the membership, It is the membership that creates NTL’s value in the world, through committed engagement with each other in support of NTL’s mission. This engagement must include being thought and practice “entrepreneurs” in NTL’s network of members. It cannot be based solely on self-interest, but must also come from a commitment of time, energy and personal resource to the values and purposes of NTL in the world.

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