Chaos Theory and the Sciences of Complexity:

Foundations for Transforming Education

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Public education in the United States is an array of highly complex systems whose results have proven difficult to predict or control. Similarly, the process of transforming a school system is highly complex and difficult to predict or control. Chaos theory and the sciences of complexity (Kellert, 1993; Wheatley, 1999) were developed to help understand highly complex systems. They recognizes that beneath the apparently chaotic behavior of a complex system lie certain patterns that can help one to both understand and influence the behavior of the system. This paper begins with a summary of some of the key features of chaos theory and the sciences of complexity and then explores the ways that these theories can inform the systemic transformation of K-12 education in the United States.

What Are Chaos Theory and the Sciences of Complexity?

Some of the key features of chaos theory and the sciences of complexity include co-evolution, disequilibrium, positive feedback, perturbance, transformation, fractals, strange attractors, self-organization, and dynamic complexity. Each of these is briefly discussed next.

Co-evolution

For a system to be healthy, it must co-evolve with its environment: it changes in response to changes in its environment, and its environment changes in response to its changes. Wheatley says, “We inhabit a world that co-evolves as we interact with it. This world is impossible to pin down, constantly changing ….” (Wheatley, 1999, p. 9). A K-12 educational system exists in a community and larger society that are constantly evolving. But how are they evolving?

Toffler (1980) has identified three major waves of societal evolution. Each has been accompanied by a major changes in our educational systems, and collectively they provide us with examples of co-evolution between educational systems and their environments. During the agrarian age, the one-room schoolhouse was the predominant paradigm of education, with its focus on tutoring and apprenticeship. During the industrial age, the factory model of schools became the predominant paradigm of education, with its focus on standardization and teacher-centered learning. Now, as we evolve ever deeper into the information age, society is undergoing just as dramatic a change as during the industrial revolution, and this is putting great pressure on our educational systems to co-evolve in major ways.

As the pace of changes in our communities and society has been increasing, the need for co-evolution in education has become ever more urgent. Banathy (1991) has pointed to a large co-evolutionary imbalance between education and society, which places our society in ill-health and peril. Schlechty (1990), Caine and Caine (1997) and others have pointed out that our educational systems are doing a better job than ever at what they were designed to do, but that our society is increasingly calling on them to do things they were not designed to do.

To identify how an educational system should co-evolve, one issue we must look at is how its environment has changed. This includes changes in the community's educational needs, in the tools it offers to educators, and in other community (and societal) conditions that impact education, such as drugs,

violence, teen pregnancy, and latch-key children. However, an educational system is not just shaped by its community; it also helps shape its community. Thus, another issue for identifying how an educational system should co-evolve is the ways the community would like its educational system to change to better shape the community. Those ways are heavily based on the values, beliefs, hopes, and visions of the community.

Disequilibrium and Positive Feedback

Co-evolution is fostered by disequilibrium and positive feedback. Equilibrium is defined as "a condition in which all acting influences are canceled by others, resulting in a stable, balanced, or unchanging system" (American Heritage Dictionary, as quoted by Wheatley, 1999, p. 76). Systems can be in a state of equilibrium, in which case minor changes or adjustments to the system are all that is necessary; or systems can be in a state of disequilibrium, in which case they approach the edge of chaos. This might lead one to believe that disequilibrium is a bad thing. However, Wheatley (1999) makes the following points:

- "I observed the search for organizational equilibrium as a sure path to institutional death." (p. 76).
- "In venerating equilibrium, we have blinded ourselves to the processes that foster life." (p. 77).
- "To stay viable, open systems maintain a state of non-equilibrium…. They participate in an open exchange with their world, using what is there for their own growth." (p. 78).

- “Prigogine’s work demonstrated that disequilibrium is the necessary condition for a system’s growth.” (p. 79).

Hence, disequilibrium is one important condition for co-evolution. The other is positive feedback. Systems may receive both negative and positive feedback. Negative feedback provides information about deficiencies in attaining a system’s goals so that the system can adjust its processes to overcome those deficiencies. In contrast, positive feedback provides information about opportunities for a system to change the goals that it pursues. Thus, positive feedback is information from the environment that helps a system to co-evolve with its environment. Often it takes the form of perturbances (or disturbances) that cause disequilibrium in a system.

Perturbance

A perturbance is any change in a system’s environment that causes disequilibrium in a system. For example, as our society in the United States has evolved into the information age, a new educational need that has arisen is the need for life-long learning. Rapid change in the workplace and the new reality of multiple careers during one’s life require people to be life-long learners. To help people become life-long learners, schools must cultivate both the desire to learn (a love of learning) and the skills to learn (self-directed learning). However, our typical industrial-age school systems do the opposite on both counts, placing stress on the environment (co-evolutionary imbalance) and causing the environment to put pressure (perturbance) on the educational system to undergo fundamental change, or transformation.

Transformation

Disequilibrium creates a state in which the system is ripe for transformation, which is reorganization on a higher level of complexity. Transformation occurs through a process called "emergence," by which new processes and structures emerge to replace old ones in a system. Transformation is in contrast to piecemeal change, which entails changing one part of a system without changing other parts or the way the parts are organized (the structure of the system). According to Duffy, Rogerson and Blick (2000), transformation of an educational system requires simultaneous changes in the core work processes (teaching and learning), the social architecture of the system (culture and communications), and the system's relationships with its environment.

Fractals and "Strange Attractors"

Transformation is strongly influenced by "strange attractors," which are a kind of fractal (Wheatley, 1999). Fractals are patterns that recur at all levels of a system, called self-similarity. In educational systems, they can be considered "core ideas" and values or beliefs (Banathy, 1991, 1996) that guide or characterize the design of the system. These recurring patterns can be structural and/or behavioral – that is, they can be patterns of form and/or function, and they strongly influence, and are influenced by, complex system dynamics (Senge, 1990). One example of a fractal in education is autocratic control. On the community level of an educational system, the school board typically controls the superintendent. On the district level, the superintendent controls the principals.

On the building level the principals control their teachers. And on the classroom level the teachers control their students.

Another example of a fractal in education is uniformity. On the district level all elementary schools are typically supposed to be the same (equal) in such key features as policies, curriculum, methods, and assessments. On the building level all teachers at the same grade level are supposed to teach the same content at the same time with the same textbooks, again to provide "equality". On the classroom level all students in a classroom are typically supposed to learn the same thing at the same time in the same way. And even for professional development, all teachers typically engage in the same professional development activities at the same time. Top-down control and uniformity are but two of many fractals that characterize our factory model of schools. While we are beginning to see changes in some of these patterns, few would argue that they were not typical of our industrial-age educational systems, and they are likely still the predominant paradigm in educational systems today.

A strange attractor is a kind of fractal that has a powerful influence over the processes and structures that emerge in a system undergoing transformation. Fractals are similar to what Dawkins called "memes," which are ideas or cultural beliefs that are "the social counterpoints to genes in the physical organism" and have the power to organize a system in a specific way (Caine & Caine, 1997, p. 33). One example of a strange attractor, or meme, in education is empowerment/ownership, which entails providing both the freedom to make decisions and support for making and acting on those decisions. On the district

level this takes the form of the school board and superintendent empowering each building principal to experiment with and adopt new approaches to better meet students' needs and to make other important decisions (hiring, budgeting, etc.). On the building level the principal empowers each teacher to experiment with and adopt new approaches to better meet students' needs and to participate in school policymaking and decision making. On the classroom level the teacher empowers each student to make decisions about how to best meet her or his needs. This form of leadership at all levels entails providing guidance and support to cultivate the ability to make good decisions and act effectively on them.

A second example of a strange attractor is customization/differentiation (or diversity). On the district level, each school has the freedom to be different from other schools. On the building level each teacher has the freedom to be different from other teachers. And on the classroom level each student has the freedom to be different from other students (with respect to both what to learn and how to learn it). A third example is shared decision making/collaboration. On the district level the school board and superintendent involve community members, teachers, and staff in policymaking and decision making. On the school level the principal involves parents, teachers, and staff in policymaking and decision making. And on the classroom level the teacher involves the child and parents in decisions and activities to promote the child's learning and development.

To become an effective strange attractor for the transformation of a school system, the core ideas and values (or beliefs) must become fairly widespread

cultural norms among the stakeholders most involved with making the changes. Once that status is reached, very little planning needs to be done for the transformation to take place. Appropriate behaviors and structures will emerge spontaneously through a process called self-organization.

Self-Organization

Self-organizing systems are adaptive; they evolve themselves; they are agile (McCarthy, 2003). They require two major characteristics: openness and self-reference (Wheatley, 1999). To be open with its environment, a system must actively seek information from its environment and make it widely available within the system.

> The intent of this new information is to keep the system off-balance, alert to how it might need to change. An open organization doesn't look for information that makes it feel good, that verifies its past and validates its present. It is deliberately looking for information that might threaten its stability, knock it off balance, and open it to growth. (Wheatley, 1999, p. 83)

But the system must go beyond seeking and circulating information from its environment; it must also partner with its environment. As Wheatley (1999) notes: "Because it partners *with* its environment, the system develops increasing autonomy *from* the environment and also develops new capacities that make it increasingly resourceful." (p. 84).

A second characteristic of self-organizing systems is the ability to self-reference on the core ideas, values, or beliefs that give the organization an

identity. In this way, “When the environment shifts and the system notices that it needs to change, it always changes in such a way that it remains consistent with itself. … Change is never random; the system will not take off in bizarre new directions.” (Wheatley, 1999, p. 85).

A third characteristic is freedom for people to make their own decisions about changes. Jantsch (1980) has noted the paradoxical but profound systems dynamic: “The more freedom in self-organization, the more order” (p. 40, as cited by Wheatley, 1999, p. 87). As long as the freedom is guided by sufficient self-reference, it will allow changes to occur before a crisis point is reached in the system, thereby creating greater stability and order. Paradoxically, the system is “less controlling, but more orderly” by being self-organizing (Wheatley, 1999, p. 87). Typically, co-evolution occurs through self-organization, but complex system dynamics have a powerful influence on self-organization and any resulting systemic transformation.

Complex System Dynamics

According to Peter Senge, social systems have detail complexity and dynamic complexity. The nature of dynamic complexity is revealed by Senge (1990):

> When the same action has dramatically different effects in the short run and the long, there is dynamic complexity. When an action has one set of consequences locally and a very different set of consequences in another part of the system, there is dynamic

> complexity. When obvious interventions produce nonobvious consequences, there is dynamic complexity. (p. 71)

Complex system dynamics are the web of causal relationships that influence the behavior of a system at all its various levels. They help us to understand how a change in one part of an educational system is likely to impact the other parts and the outputs of the system, and to understand how a change in one part of an educational system is likely to be impacted by the other parts of the system. Dynamic complexity is captured to some extent by Senge's "11 laws of the fifth discipline" and his "system archetypes." The laws include such general dynamics as:

- The harder you push, the harder the system pushes back.
- The easy way out usually leads back in.
- The cure can be worse than the disease.
- Faster is slower.
- Cause and effect are not closely related in time and space.
- Small changes can produce big results—but the areas of highest leverage are often the least obvious.

Senge's (1990) system archetypes include:

- "Limits to growth" in which an amplifying process that is put in motion to create a certain result has a secondary effect (a balancing process) that counters the desired result.
- "Shifting the burden" in which the underlying problem is difficult to address, so people address the symptoms with easier "fixes," leaving the

underlying problem to grow worse unnoticed until it is much more difficult, if not impossible, to fix.

- "Tragedy of the commons" in which a commonly available but limited resource is used to the extent that it becomes more difficult to obtain, which causes intensification of efforts until the resource is significantly or entirely depleted.
- "Growth and underinvestment" in which growth approaches a limit that can be raised with additional investment, but if the investment is not rapid nor aggressive enough, growth will be stalled and the investment will become unnecessary.
- "Fixes that fail" in which a fix that is effective in the short run has unforeseen long-term effects that reduce their effectiveness and require more of the same fix.

Senge's laws and archetypes identify high-level or general system dynamics, but it is important to also identify the complex system dynamics at play in a particular educational system. Those dynamics are complex causal relationships that govern patterns of behavior, explain why piecemeal solutions are failing, and predict what kinds of solutions may offer higher leverage in transforming a system to better meet students' needs.

How Can Chaos Theory and the Sciences of Complexity Inform the Transformation of Education?

The remainder of this paper explores the ways that chaos theory and the sciences of complexity can inform the systemic transformation of education.

They can do so in two fundamental ways. First, they can help us to understand the present system of education and how it is likely to respond to changes that we try to make. Second, they can help us to understand and improve the transformation process as a complex system that educational systems use to transform themselves.

Understanding the Present System

Chaos theory and the sciences of complexity can help us to understand our present systems of education, including (a) when each is ready for transformation, and (b) the system dynamics that are likely to influence individual changes we try to make and the effects of those changes.

Readiness for transformation. Chaos theory and the sciences of complexity tell us that readiness for transformation is influenced by several factors. First, there must be sufficient **impetus** for transformation, which is created by perturbations from outside the system that produce a state of disequilibrium in the system. That disequilibrium may be caused by either of two kinds of changes in the environment (a school system's community): a) ones that create problems for the system (such as dysfunctional home environments and lack of discipline in the home), or (b) ones that present opportunities to the system (such as the Internet or other powerful technologies to support learning). Second, there must also be sufficient **enablers** of transformation, which are created by factors inside the system, such as "participatory" (Schlechty, 1990) or "transformational" leadership (Duffy et al., 2000) (as opposed to the industrial-age command-and-control form of leadership – or more appropriately,

management), and sufficient levels of trust within and among stakeholder groups, such as the teachers association, administration, school board, and parents.

System dynamics. System dynamics are complex sets of causes and effects that are largely probabilistic (a "cause" increases the chances that an "effect" will take place) and highly interactive (the extent of influence of a "cause" on an "effect" is strongly influenced by other factors, including other causes). Regarding **causes**, system dynamics provide us with an understanding of aspects of the current system that will likely influence the viability and durability of any given change. For example, we come to learn that high-stakes tests that focus on lower levels of learning in Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, Krathwohl, & Masia, 1956) are likely to reduce the viability and durability of attempts by teachers to develop higher-order thinking skills, because such efforts will necessarily reduce the amount of time the teachers spend on the lower-level content, causing a decline in the high-stakes test scores. Regarding the **effects** of any given change, system dynamics provide us with the ability to predict what effects the change is likely to have on the outcomes of the transformed educational system, such as levels of student learning. For example, as the Saturn School of Tomorrow found (Bennett & King, 1991), allowing students to do what they want when they want can cause a reduction in "time on task" to learn the important skills and understandings, resulting in a reduction in learning.

Understanding the Transformation Process

Chaos theory and the sciences of complexity can also help us to understand and improve the transformation process in which educational

systems engage to transform themselves. The transformation process is itself a complex system comprised of many subsystems, processes, and dynamics. With research and experience we can expect to learn much about the dynamics that influence the subsystems and processes that are most likely to foster systemic transformation, but chaos theory and the sciences of complexity tell us that we cannot hope to *control* the transformation process (Caine & Caine, 1997; Wheatley, 1999). Caine and Caine (1997) state that "the underlying belief is that we are in charge and can control the nature of change. All the reports on how difficult it has been to change education confirm the failure of this logic." (p. 12). Chaos theory and the sciences of complexity also tell us that we *can* hope to influence the process through the use of such tools as strange attractors and leverage points, and that we must constantly adjust and adapt the process to the emerging, ever-changing reality of a particular educational system and its environment (Caine & Caine, 1997; Wheatley, 1999).

Strange attractors. The most powerful strange attractors are core ideas and beliefs like those described earlier: ownership and empowerment, customization and differentiation, and shared decision making and collaboration. These core ideas stand in stark contrast to those that characterize the industrial-age mindset about "the real school" (Tyack & Cuban, 1995): centralization and bureaucracy, standardization (or uniformity), and autocratic (or command-and-control) management. However, to have a powerful influence on the features that emerge in the system undergoing transformation, the core ideas and beliefs must become integral parts of the mindsets or mental models held by a critical

mass of participants in the transformation process, and, therefore, they must collectively comprise the culture of the transformation process as a system. This means that *the* major focus of a systemic transformation process in a school district must be on helping all stakeholders to evolve their mindsets about education and to develop a set of shared core ideas and beliefs about the ideal kind of educational system they would like to have (Banathy, 1991; Caine & Caine, 1997; Reigeluth, 1993). This entails helping people to uncover the mental models that often unwittingly control their views of education and then deciding whether or not that is the way they really want their educational system to be.

Leverage points. Leverage points can greatly facilitate the systemic transformation of educational systems. An example of a leverage point is student assessment. Our industrial-age schools reflect the belief that the purpose of student assessment is to compare students with each other. Hence we use norm-based tests, and students become labeled as winners and losers, successes and failures. In contrast, if we want all children to succeed (no children left behind), then the purpose of assessment should be to compare students with a standard of attainment, so that they may continue to work on a standard until it has been met. The current report card, with its list of courses and comparative grades, could be replaced by an "inventory of attainments" that are checked off as they are reached by each student. This one change could exert leverage on other parts of the system, most notably the way teaching and learning occur in the classroom, that might be more powerful than the forces that the rest of the system would place on student assessment to change back.

Furthermore, if appropriate strange attractors have been developed (e.g., enough stakeholders have evolved their mental models to encompass the belief that student assessment should be designed to inform learning rather than to compare students with each other), those strange attractors will create a powerful force in support of such a compatible leverage point and against those aspects of the current system that would otherwise be working to change the assessment system back to what it was.

Conclusion

An understanding of chaos theory and the sciences of complexity is crucial to systemic transformation of our educational systems to better meet the rapidly changing needs of our children and communities. Helpful concepts include co-evolution, disequilibrium, positive feedback, perturbance, transformation, fractals, strange attractors, self-organization, and dynamic complexity. These concepts can help us to understand (a) when a system is ready for transformation, and (b) the system dynamics that are likely to influence individual changes we try to make and the effects of those changes. Furthermore, chaos theory and the sciences of complexity can help us to understand and improve the transformation process as a complex system that educational systems use to transform themselves. Strange attractors and leverage points are particularly important to help our educational systems to correct the dangerous evolutionary imbalance that currently exists.

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