Book Review

A review of *The Paradox of Control in Organizations*, by Philip J. Streatfield, 2001. London and New York: Routledge, 208 pp. ISBN 0415250323. $40.95 USD.

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Philip Streatfield's book, *The Paradox of Control in Organizations*, is one of a number of important contributions to *Complexity and Emergence in Organizations*, a series of books edited by Ralph Stacey, Douglas Griffin, and Patricia Shaw from the Complexity and Management Centre at the University of Hertfordshire in the United Kingdom. Streatfield's work (2001) is offered, as are the other books in this series, as an example of "a particular way of speaking about complexity in organizations" with the aim to "develop theories of human organization, including ethics" (p. iii). To be clear, this particular book is written explicitly for and with management practitioners and business leaders in mind. And, yet, it speaks just as well to the project of learning as manifest in and through the many layers of today's educational systems.

In the series preface, the editors highlight the need to speak about the complexities of social organizations where there is an emphasis on self-referentiality, reflexiveness, an essentially responsive and participatory way of human relating, and an understanding that organizations evolve in time in radically unpredictable ways . This notion, attributed to Stacey (2001), is known as "complex responsive processes" (CRP). The notion of CRP is one which draws upon the complexity sciences as a domain for analogies, as well as, the fields of psychology and sociology, primarily through the work of George Herbert Mead and Norbert Elias. This way of thinking about social organizations places the views of the writers of this series on the fringes of organizational and management theory, some distance from the more central ideas about the dynamics of organizations as spoken in the

language of intentions, regularity, and control where leaders and managers stand "outside" of organizations deemed to be objective and already given and understood to be easily modeled, designed, and controlled.

Streatfield's work is one which readers, who seek to understand what actually happens in organizations as opposed to what ought to happen in them, will find potentially refreshing. This is conveyed in and by the title of the book under review here: the inherent paradox of controllability where organizations are not exactly "out of control" and managers are not exactly "in control" either. Put differently, Streatfield's book is concerned with the emergence of organizations in real time as opposed to a rationalized and "cleansed" view of social organizations managed from the "outside" by managers who design processes for interaction and production by insisting upon conformity and a reduction of variability through the detection and correction of deviations from what is to be expected.

Being able to design, plan, measure, and monitor an organization is, to many practitioners in and theoreticians of organizations, essential to the proper functioning of organizations. Indeed, one might even include class-rooms, schools, school boards, authorities, and higher governing bodies like ministries of education as organizational bodies framed by such a view. As Streatfield suggests, writers on management are mostly concerned with prescribing what should happen in organizations, thus permitting managers to "stay in control," rather than describing what does happen. As such, readers might find this book to be of limited use, since, on the surface, it might not seem to be a "how-to" kind of book. That said, it is a book which potentially serves to help prompt within the reader a radically different way of conceptualizing, reflecting upon, and helping to improve the experiences that people in organizations have.

The central question in Streatfield's book is who or what is "in control" of an organization? This paradoxical theme of "being in control" and "not being in control" is explored through five themes: dynamic pattern formation, self-organization and emergence, qualities of interaction or human relating, anxiety, and conversation. Briefly, Streatfield's concerns are with how patterns of meaning emerge in the actions of people, in the fluid relations that are continually forming and transforming. Moreover, such patterns are dynamic and evolving in nature. They are self-organizing in nature where they emerge in and through the embodied interactions of people. In this manner, processes of human relating, as local non-linear interactions giving rise to larger global patterns of collectivities, also give shape to matters of political, social, and cultural importance. The significance of anxiety as the fourth theme arises in part from Streatfield's personal experiences and reflections upon the place and importance of human emotions and anxiety, in particular, for the creative side of human organizations to emerge. The final theme—conversations—arises

for the author as an important self-organizing phenomenon wherein meaning arises. As such, a great deal of Streatfield's book is manifest through his own interwoven narratives of working in a variety of different settings.

It must seem unthinkable to some that maybe no one single person is ever in control in an organization. Does this make sense in the case of a classroom or school? This, I suspect, is the claim that Streatfield would make if he were talking explicitly about schools. In fact, Streatfield's work, as manifest through his own stories and reflections, suggests that control is an illusion and that, while teachers and principals may be in formal positions of leadership and in charge of particular aspects of schools, they are not in control of these places in any simple and direct way. To be sure, he is not suggesting that there is no control at all. Rather, his key argument is that through the self-organizing nature of places where humans live and work and where meaning making unfolds through conversations, human beings experience a paradox of simultaneously being in control and not being in control.

While there are certain efforts to frame and understand aspects of education, including the dynamics of learning in classrooms and schools, through a complexity science perspective—especially through the framework of complex adaptive systems (CAS)—Stacey's notion of CRP, being relatively new, has yet to make a significant impact on the thinking of educationalists. To be sure, complexity has not had the same impact and presence in the larger picture of education as, say, constructivism, social constructionism, behaviourist, and mentalist theories of cognition. Its contact with matters of educational concern, in fact, is just being felt.

It does bear pointing out that the guiding metaphor in each of these theories resonates with the concept of particular "bodies of cognition" (Davis, Sumara, and Luce-Kapler 2008), especially where complexity science speaks of nested and embedded bodies. The theoretical framework of CRP, however, is a temporally-oriented theory of complex self-organizing social phenomena, rather than a spatially-oriented one. This is what distinguishes CRP perspective from the CAS theoretical frame. Additionally, here rests the importance of Stacey's and Streatfield's work: paradoxes are not to be collapsed, but lived with and through so that new patterns of meaning might move organizations forward into new creative possibilities. For Streatfield, as reflected in his own stories and reflections, neither the subjective accounts of management practitioners nor the objective descriptions and prescriptive renderings of researchers alone have helped him to make sense of his experiences with uncertainty and the anxiety that comes with the thought that he had to be in control.

For Streatfield, as with Stacey, this is much more than finding one "side" to be more or less than helpful than the other. To be sure, this conceptual

"split" has been a mainstay in modern Western thought, prompting a number of concerns to arise. However, from a CRP perspective, "internal worlds" and "external worlds" unfold from the same dynamic, suggesting that there are no insides or outsides to speak of. As Stacey (2003) makes clear, this "divide" has also split ways of thinking (theory) from action (practice). This is important to mention here, as some readers will inevitably ask, "What difference does this approach make in a field which is quite pragmatic in nature?" In other words, what difference does Streatfield's work—based on a theory of complex responsive processes—make in practice? The answer is that changing the way in which we think about things changes how we act. That is, the implications for teaching and learning should emerge while exploring ways for thinking about thinking. That is, through the self-organizing nature of conversation lies the potential for change. By living with the tension of uncertainty and the seeming need to be in control, lies new creative possibilities for ways in which we might live our lives differently. Of course, the radical unpredictability of living processes makes it difficult to say when or how such changes might unfold. Until then, we must simply continue to converse with others in what Patricia Shaw (2002) describes as "changing conversations"—a recognition of the ever-evolving nature of conversation and the deliberate and intentional act of changing what is discussed.

References

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