

From the Desk of Dr. Linda J. Burrs

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Title: Complexity Science and Educating Others



According to organization development scholars with expertise in the area of human dynamics, complexity science is the theory that supports the concept that all things tend to organize themselves into patterns. When complexity seeks the middle ground between chaos and equilibrium it becomes known as self-organizing. The emerging field of human systems dynamics is taking the learning from the hard sciences and looking at applications to human behavior. Considered an interdisciplinary science, I believe this process of self-organizing may have some value to faculty working with diverse students having diverse learning styles at UOP.

I am convinced complexity science holds a great deal of promise for individuals, teams, and organizations as they look to move beyond the extremes of predictable and unpredictable existence. What does this mean for me as an educator? It means I may use an understanding of the connection between complexity science to human science to help me be a more effective facilitator of learning for my self and my learners.

When faculty instructs on assignments or puts individuals into teams, there is a generally accepted understanding that the student will know what to do, how to do the assignment, and how to behave and perform in a learning team. What I often find is that for whatever reason, some students experience more challenges to completing the assignment or behaving and performing in a strictly linear and predictable way than others. This unpredictability often leads to frustration and irritation from other team members and faculty as well. I believe understanding human systems dynamics helps me and my learners overcome these challenges more effectively.

It is when old and predictable patterns in an individual or team change, new patterns and boundaries are inevitably created. This new space offers a rich place for *transforming exchanges* to occur across differences and move an individual or group into new understandings and performance. When I am frustrated, I might ask myself:

- ◆ What does this problem look like to me?
- ◆ What does this problem feel like to me?
- ◆ What does this problem sound like to me?
- ◆ What does this problem mean to me?

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I believe this will help me get in touch with my own thoughts and emotions about a particular learner or group of learners. Helping learners by getting them to answer these questions for themselves could lead to their self-development and growth as much as it could my own.

When individuals and teams focus on the micro-level where powerful change may occur, the success some find often leads to willingness to share and repeat the success (Olson and Quade 2006). Complexity science challenges me (and my learners) to change my expectations about how the world works and how individuals and teams respond to the learning environment.

As a faculty, when I enter a classroom with the predictable tools of the trade: syllabus, PowerPoints, SmartBoards, etc., I enter with an expectation of teaching a group of learners with my personal predictable teaching style because it has been successful for me in the past so I assume it will be successful for me now.

What may be needed is a shock to the system that changes the focus from predictability to unpredictability which may be a worrisome place for faculty to be. Even my best planned efforts are often met with unpredictable behaviors and events which cause me to pause with great wonder. As a result, most of the time I assume the learner is just not interested in learning or wants the easy way out. What I am learning from complexity science is that this behavior may often show up because the learner and I are not in the same place and therefore my focus on my teaching style versus the learner's learning style leaves me and my learners on the fringes of irritability and less than effective exchanges.

Now, am I saying I believe I have to adjust my teaching style to every student's learning style? In a way I guess I am; however what I am not saying is that this will require a HUGE adjustment or a lot of work on my part. It only requires that I am fluid enough with my personal learning objectives and comfortable enough with my teaching material that I can simultaneously move within the system in a way that benefits the learners more than it benefits me as the faculty.

How do I do this?

A T-group has been defined as a group of individuals under the watchful care of a well trained facilitator. This group seeks to develop self-awareness and sensitivity to others by openly expressing feelings during group sessions using *I-statements*. A T-group looks to *self organize* around a higher level in the quality of life. It is generally held that the more conscious one is of the potential value of human existence, the higher the level of functioning is possible. T-groups explore three basic functions of the human experience: emotion, cognition, and behavior.

In a recent T-group learning experience, I learned that when there is a specific need, that need may well become the seed to charge the learning system with enough divergence or conflict to redirect the focus on what differences will make a difference. For me, this means, if a student is having a difficult time in a learning team, I may have to take a minute or two to find out what differences that learner is being challenged by and offer instruction on how to use *I statements* to help him or her help the team understand them better and vice versa.

When SEOCs are not what I think or want them to be (very rare of course ☺), do I look for the patterns within the system I may use to interact with future learners in a way that help me learn how to deal with varying learning styles even though it may take me a bit longer to personally explain a theory or concept or just to listen to a student without judgment?

When I am focused on what is really important I will trustingly and truthfully ask myself:

- ◆ How have I been helpful to my learners?
- ◆ How have I been detrimental to my learners?
- ◆ How might my actions help transform my learners?

In order to facilitate genuine learning, I am committed to asking myself if I am being too constrained or not constrained enough to allow true learning to take place. My new challenge for myself is to help learners develop their own thinking and learning styles in a way that best supports their needs by helping them figure out for themselves what is important to them and their organizations at large. What's in it for me? What's in it for me is the increased confidence and assuredness that I am a self-organizing, transforming facilitator of learning in a non-traditional learning environment committed to making a difference in the world through the benefit of complexity science. Yikes . . . am I getting old or what? ☺

About the author:

Dr. Linda Burrs is the President and Principal Consultant of the *Step Up to Success!* consulting firm that focuses on leadership and organizational strategies for leaders, teams and individuals. For more than 25 years, Dr. Burrs has brought her rich dynamic approach to the corporate and professional training arena. The breadth of her experience crosses all walks of social and organizational life including law firms, technology organizations, educators, business professionals, leadership groups and non-profit groups.

As Lead Faculty and Area Chair for Management and Leadership at the University of Phoenix Cincinnati campus and Dayton Learning Center, Dr. Burrs facilitates learning in courses such as: Organizational Behavior, Management, Transformational Leadership, Cultural Diversity and Human Resources Management. She is also a guest lecturer at Antioch University's McGregor School of Business for students in the Masters program.

Dr. Burrs serves on the boards of The Dunbar Institute (Dayton, OH) as Program Chair and on the board of The BenMar Group (New York). She is a founding member of DaytonCoaches.com, an executive, business and career coaching group formed to support individuals in the greater Dayton community who are committed to personal, professional, and organizational growth and development.

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