

Presencing a Collective Response

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Introduction

In this response to Gunnlaugson (2011), the collective represented by those who reviewed the manuscript in its iterations through several versions and revisions, engage with each other and the work. We draw from our individual reviews and letters to the editor and open the dialogic space to our collective thinking and questioning, inviting further conversation and engagement. While Gunnlaugson does not directly draw from Gadamer (1989), Gadamer's caution about contrived versus genuine conversation is relevant: "a genuine conversation is never the one we wanted to conduct. Rather, it is generally more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even that we become

involved in it....but the partners conversing are far less the leaders of it than the led” (p. 385).

As reviewers of a paper submitted for publication in *Complicity*, we were invited by the journal’s Editor to enter this conversation. In effect, we were led, through this invitation, to consider how we might generate a new conversation or sustain the one that Gunnlaugson initiated. This suggests that there was an imagined sense of what a collective response might be, even as it was left for us to decide what shape this might take. This is a key issue for us as interrogators of the notion of presencing, that is, “towards learning together from the emerging future by collectively sensing into and intuiting not yet embodied or known possibilities” (Gunnlaugson, 2010, p. 3). Does conversation necessarily lead here? Or, can we direct its path so that conditions are set up for creating this emerging future?

Following Gunnlaugson, and by way of the discussion in the current Response, we draw from Sharmer’s (2007) fields of conversation, and in turn, consider the notion of presencing as a complex emergent process that may represent another collective modality of learning and inquiry. We see this claim as contentious, and even among ourselves, do not agree. In the process of exploring the claim, we can interrogate our respective and collective understandings of emergence.

Downloading, Debate and Dialogue

Sharmer’s (2007) four fields of conversation (see Figure 1, p. 3), while arranged in a quartered pie, are described in terms that suggest they are hierarchical. While it is not the representation of the model to which we wish to draw attention, we could use these fields to trace the process of conducting our individual reviews (“downloading”), preparing comments for the editor (“debate”) and engaging with each other to consider a collective response (“dialogue”).

As we individually conducted our initial reviews of earlier drafts of Gunnlaugson’s paper, the task was clear, the purpose of activity clearly defined and an outcome anticipated (e.g. a peer review as a product). This could be considered a closed system, since once the review is sent off to the editor, this may signal the end of the reviewer’s involvement in the peer review process. It becomes difficult to characterize this activity as isolated, though, since the reviewer is aware that the result of the review is taken up by others, starting with the editor, but then, probably by the author of the paper, in some way. How it is taken up by the author may be beyond what the reviewer can imagine, but often, the author must take up comments and suggestions in order to move the paper along to publication. Clearly, the actual review (and the reviewer who has produced it) is implicated in a wider system, even though he or she may have no further involvement with the work. To what extent do those participating in a closed conversation (or system) need to be aware of other forms of connection between or beyond them? Does this depend on the type of activity in which the individuals are engaged?

Offering the review to the editor starts a new series of actions, as several (usually) reviews are compiled, analyzed and perhaps discussed with an editorial or advisory team. Presenting the results of this analysis to the author enables an adaptive response on the part of the author, akin to the second of Sharmer's fields: debate. The debate exists on several levels: editor and author; reviewer(s) and editor; comments from reviewer(s) and author; author's response to reviews and editor. The reviewers still have no knowledge of each other at this level, and generally the conversational field of debate continues between the editor (as mediator) and the reviewer(s) comments and the author until such time as the paper is accepted for publication (or is rejected).

For the level of conversation to 'rise' to the third field (dialogue), an element of self-reflection must be part of the system, according to Sharmer. This involves an awareness, at the level of the individual, that one has been "participating in collectively enacting this system" (Gunnlaugson, 2010, p. 6). This notion was raised in regard to the earlier discussion about the 'downloading' phase of reviewer participation, which seems to suggest that there is considerable overlap in the fields, or that there are conditions in terms of what counts as conversation. Drawing back to the process of developing this collective response, self-reflection may have been inspired by Deborah's invitation to participate in writing a collective response. It may have come as a realization that the article now being responded to is quite different from the one that was initially reviewed. Further, the 'self' in terms of the collective involved in drafting this response is not one mind, but four. The dialogue is on-going between us, but also with the work, and peripherally, with the editorial team for *Complicity*.

Presencing

In the widest sense possible, developing a collective response to a paper we each reviewed in one (or more) of its earlier iterations means that something unimagined in our earlier, individual, conversations with the work, was in fact imagined by someone. In this case, we could identify *Complicity* Editor Deborah Osberg as the source of this imagining, although she may very well have imagined this idea in the company of others, her editorial team, for example. In inviting the possibility of a collective response, some as-yet unimagined and unactualized version of the future was imagined. In this case, what *could* have been presenced was another article: a follow-up to the one written by Gunnlaugson. Not to trivialize the notion of presencing, but are there limits or bounds to what *can* be presenced? Starting a conversation around ideas, experiences or, as in Gunnlaugson's work, future knowing lets us explore directions and dimensions in the process of engagement. In some ways, this must be retrospective, as tracing ideas in process can be both technically and conceptually challenging. If presencing is a process, what are its conditions? And, how are these different from planful action to the achievement of some particular goal? Can it really be argued that this is the basis for creativity? And, is this really *emergence*?

It could be argued that the collective represented by the reviewers for Gunnlaugson's paper form a decentralized intelligence. According to Johnson (2001),

this is a key condition for emergence. But then, *what* emerges? There is a something, in the form of this response. It was planful in the sense that it was an initial goal of an invitation that set the process represented here in motion. While we could argue that what has arisen from our collective activity is something brand new in the world, it did not, however, happen without being imagined and constructed into being. Just as learning activity in a classroom is not a random event, conversation evolving to include wider perspectives, more people, more iterations, etc does not necessarily mean what comes into being is worth anything.

A further point about bringing forth an article: this seems to indicate that there is a *something* to what can be presenced. This links back to the idea of the knower and the knower's relationship to the known. In social semiotic terms, the field specifies knowledge and the knower's ability to use this knowledge to form logical relationships. We could call this learning, or rearrangement, depending on how the individual develops the connections, what prior knowledge is drawn upon, and who is witness to any representations that arise from the interaction, all of which point to the assumption of an external reality. In other words, there is still a *what* that is presenced, although Gunnlaugson seems to be aiming for a more abstract notion of personal awareness and/or capacity to deal with the abstractions.

Along similar lines, can a new awareness about one's own thinking or processing really be considered *presencing*? If it is in the nature of living creatures, and more particularly, sentient ones, to engage in learning behavior, what does this really say about learning and the capacities of the learner to bring forth newness? It might be reasonable to ask for some elaboration on Sharmer's quadrants as lead-up to "presencing." In particular, framing this response around the four fields could represent a misreading of Sharmer's conceptions in the model. It could also serve to help us unpack our own process of engagement. If we start with the assumption that we don't know where this engagement and conversation will lead, can we still explore the process? As educators in several contexts for teaching and learning, it is also reasonable to question whether this exploration has any value—educative, scholarly or otherwise. In effect, looking into an imagined future (even if it was someone else's initial imagining) requires a leap of faith, a leap that likely steps beyond curriculum frameworks, subject outcomes or even learning about something in particular. By way of stimulating conversation or discussion, this is not a meaningless proposition. Rather, if the model includes a progressive notion of deeper levels of engagement or "upward causation" (Thompson & Varela, 2001), as suggested by Gunnlaugson, we become free to consider the progression and its implications.

The real question may be that if the fields unfold into one another, do the four fields of conversation modeled by Sharmer really represent a complexity perspective or even help us to understand it? Drawing distinctions among the fields leads one to think that, emergence can be 'tamed' or 'controlled' in the first three fields and then suddenly 'appears' in the fourth field. Is that a helpful way to understand the dynamics of conversations? Or does a complexity perspective help us to see that what presents itself as a *description*, in terms of different 'modes' or 'modalities' of conversation in fact is an

articulation of a number of *evaluations* of conversational modes and thus presents us with a *normative* account, rather than a descriptive one? And this leads us, in turn, to what perhaps is the most pressing question in any attempt to use ideas from complexity in an educational context, which is the question to what extent, under what conditions and for what reasons ‘presencing’ can be singled out as educationally *desirable*.

Education is not just any conversation

While it cannot be denied that conversation plays a role in education, this does not automatically mean that any conversation can be classified as education or as educational. Similarly: while learning is an obvious aim in education, this does not mean that any form of learning is educational, nor that processes of learning together are automatically forms of education. The difference that makes a difference here is the question of purpose: that is the question of what the learning is *for*. It is with respect to this question that we feel that Gunnlaugson’s discussion remains too vague. We agree that it could sometimes be desirable in educational settings, including in higher education, to promote “the exploration of complex emergent forms of knowledge making with our students” (Gunnlaugson, p. 1). But we also wish to argue that sometimes this is not desirable at all, which means that the critical question that is not sufficiently addressed in Gunnlaugson’s paper is when and for what purposes such opening up is desirable, and, when it is not. The reference to ‘higher education’ does not really address this question since ‘higher education’ covers so many different educational realities that are extremely divergent in what they aim to achieve, and learning in one context may be irrelevant or uninteresting in another. While on the humanities end of the spectrum there may be a case for arguing that the educational aim is that of engaging students in emergent forms of meaning making, at the other end of the spectrum (and we think that higher education is a spectrum with many different ends) we may well wish to emphasize the importance of the transmission of particular knowledge, skills and professional values that are crucial for the formation of, say, good dentists or good teachers. The problem with the way in which Gunnlaugson develops his argument – and perhaps we can also say the danger with the way that is suggested – is that he forgets to engage with an important educational question, that is, the question of desirability. What is dangerous about this, at least from an educational perspective, is the unwarranted step from the ‘is’ of a complex understanding of the emergence of meaning towards the ‘ought’ of how our educational processes and practices should be orchestrated and for what ends. The question here is not only whether such ideas as ‘creativity’ or ‘coming-into-presence’ are desirable and justifiable educational aims. Even if it is argued that ‘emergence’ is a desirable and justifiable educational aim, we should not assume that once this has been settled all further issues are entirely ‘technical.’ Notions such as “becoming a part of the group’s greater source of collective intelligence,” “moving into a fuller expression and integration of who [students] are individually in relation to the subject they are presencing into,” “the emergence of a group culture,” “uncovering shared resonance” (Gunnlaugson, p. 13) and so on, are all

highly specific and highly normative educational ‘outcomes’ that cannot be assumed to be justified by the higher aim of promoting emergence, which brings us back to the educative value or perception thereof in terms of conversation and presencing.

If the teacher conceives of his or her educative role in terms of occasioning student knowing actions and inter-actions, rather than as someone who in some way determines those actions, then a ‘learning’ emergence may be fostered both for the individual students and the learning collective that of course includes the teacher. Human beings have the biological, ‘lived experience’, characteristics to participate in complex systems and they do this all the time. The question may be, what can we do in classrooms to take advantage of the complex emergence? From a teacher and student point of view, this involves various ethics or ethical stances on what and how we provide in classrooms (e.g. provisional ethics); how we listen in classrooms (attentional); and how we realize that our actions necessarily provide occasions for others to take up our actions/consequences and act upon them (occasional ethics). Such a view enables us to use Sharmer’s fields very differently in a way related to Gadamer’s notion of conversation that we began with, engendering conversation that is at once open, unknown and capable of having educative value.

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