

Conversational Labyrinths and Metaphorical Journeys

A review of *Higher Education Reconceived: A Geography of Change* by Sherrie Reynolds and Toni Craven, 2009. Fort Worth, Texas: TCU Press, xiv + 128 pp. ISBN 0-875-65391-X. \$16.95 USD

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As described by Reynolds and Craven, the labyrinth was first developed in ancient Greece, Egypt and Rome, then later used during the medieval period to organize devotional prayer and symbolize religious journey. Labyrinths are still used today to encourage contemplation and reduce stress as those walking or tracing the labyrinth path concentrate on the path-as-taken. Combining the physical with the spiritual, the twists and turns of the labyrinth become sacred spaces for reflection.

The use of the labyrinth metaphor by Reynolds and Craven seems fitting as the entrée to each chapter of the book – an invitation to join in the authors' journeys of reflection. Just as the portal to a labyrinth invites one into introspective spaces, so each chapter invites the reader into the reflective spaces of their journeys of curricular change in higher education.

Changing Ideas

Each of the major chapter headings in Reynolds and Craven (2009) refers to various aspects of the authors' journeys in changing ideas about the teaching/learning

relationship in their university classes. While Reynolds teaches in a more traditional university setting, Craven describes her journey as a religious educator. Titles of chapters include: changing ideas about consciousness; changing ideas about learning; changing ideas about curriculum; changing ideas about communities of learning. Underlying their combined autobiographical and historical perspectives is their emphasis on the value of metaphor to change how we think about education.

Chaos and Complexity Metaphors

To disrupt traditional divisions of teaching, learning, and curriculum, the authors develop teaching/learning/curriculum dynamics as relational, emergent, and self-organizing. They build on chaos and complexity metaphors and language to describe their labyrinth journeys and challenges to educational structures that build on causal and predictive metaphors. They describe their experiences of change not as incremental but dramatic – a “phase shift” of fundamental beliefs about teaching and learning. As Reynolds describes it, “much of my growth as a professor has not been as much about adding new ideas as it has been about uncovering and discarding old ones that are constraining me” (p. 2). Craven compares the phase shift of her reflective journey with the difference between sleeping/dreaming and being awake. “Many of us believed that it is the professor’s job to ‘cover’ certain material. We thought we had to have the answers, and that we had to be ‘in charge’ or ‘in control’ (p. 5).

Reynolds and Craven use the metaphor of “baby elephant ideas” to describe how our practices and understandings that start out as deliberate choices, over time, become unchallenged and untested; just as having all of the answers or being in control in the classroom remain for many of us unexamined assumptions about our role as teachers. Changing how we teach is difficult because beliefs about teaching and learning are difficult to change and often remain unchallenged. The authors describe the change process and the “baby elephants” metaphor as follows:

True change is a complex and difficult psychological process. This is especially true of change in teaching because teaching rests on closely held beliefs that arise from our deepest sense of our world, our selves, and others. My friend Howard Polanz calls these “baby elephant beliefs.” He tells how circus elephant trainers restrain a baby elephant with a rope tied to a stake in the ground. If it tries to escape, it cannot because is not strong enough to get free of the rope. The baby elephant adopts the belief that it cannot escape, and by the time it is grown it no longer questions that belief. The adult elephant would find escape easy, but it never tries. Howard suggests that many of us have “baby elephant beliefs” that restrain us just as surely as the elephant’s belief about the rope. (p. 2)

Preparing to change our ideas about teaching and learning requires, as they describe, a certain amount of discomfort before we come to a point where we willingly to and necessarily do question previously unchallenged beliefs. Using Piagetian equilibration theory, they describe change as a process that is often “messy” and difficult. The difficulty, they describe, is associated with the uncertainty of change and the

psychological experiences of disequilibrium. In addition to not seeing the need to change, as the elephant fails to recognize it has outgrown its constraints, we resist change because it can be difficult not only for us but for our students and colleagues. Even in the midst of the rapid changes our society faces, university teaching practices have remained relatively unaffected.

Reynolds and Craven use the distinction between first and second order change (Watzlowick, et al., 1988) to introduce transformational (second order) change using fractal metaphors. Characteristics of fractals that include similarity across scales, non-linearity, and emergent order provide metaphors for them to re-think their teaching experiences, making way for second order change to occur:

Teaching based on the belief that learning is emergent is very different from traditional teaching. The belief that learning emerges reverses the traditional view that teaching causes learning. It suggests, instead, that teaching is a response to learning. Teaching becomes possible when a student encounters a problem, sees a contradiction, or expresses a question. (p. 13)

Letting go of ideas about hierarchical authority and pedagogic control, they compare the potential for emergence in the college classroom with the morphology of living systems. As living systems engage in qualitative change, so classrooms, they suggest, can be transformed when self-organization rather than top-down control is supported. Opening up the curriculum, they describe, building on William Doll's work (1993), a shift in focus from set curriculum plans to rich, recursive, relational and rigorous curriculum dynamics in which students and their interactions and experiences play a role. Quoting Eisner (p. 16), they allude to the importance of this shift in thinking about teaching, learning, and the curriculum – "The kinds of nets we know how to weave determine the kinds of nets we cast. These nets, in turn, determine the kinds of fish we catch" (Eisner, 1994, 41).

By opening up the curriculum, valuing individual experiences and stories, their own experiences with their students and understandings of their roles as faculty have changed, paralleling and reflecting what they described as Schwartz and Ogilvy's shifting understandings in the sciences from simple to complex, hierarchical to heterarchical, mechanical to holographic, determinate to indeterminate, linear causality to mutual causality, assembly to morphogenesis, and objective to perspectival. As they describe,

We believe that the seven interrelated features Schwartz and Ogilvy describe provide a powerful context for beliefs about teaching, ourselves as professors, our students, universities and their purposes, and graduate theological education and its purposes, to name a short list. (27)

Changing (Ideas)

The chapters of the book build on and extend understandings and changing ideas about learning, curriculum and community. While each chapter focuses on changes to include that which is changed, namely, e.g., ideas about teaching and learning, there is another

dimension of change that is revealed through the individual stories of the authors – which are, themselves, stories of change. Each of the last four chapters of the book, respectively, is titled *Changing Ideas about Consciousness*; *Changing Ideas about Learning*; *Changing Ideas About Curriculum*; and *Changing Ideas About Communities of Learning*. These chapter titles could just as appropriately been titled without the “ideas about” – *Changing Consciousness*; *Changing Learning*; *Changing Curriculum*; and *Changing Communities of Learners*. They are stories not only about the changing ideas of the authors, but the changing practices as well.

Offering a mix of historical and personal perspectives, Reynolds and Craven recreate their own journeys through the labyrinth of self-discovery, personal and professional transformation, and classroom dynamics, releasing the baby elephant of unexamined assumptions about teaching and learning they have experienced. In their telling, they wish to avoid providing the historical perspectives in neat little packages to be consumed by the reader. “When people recount a history of growth,” they acknowledge, “they often tell it in a linear sequence, suggesting a rationality and control that never really existed. We have developed standards for shared knowledge that avoid some of the idiosyncratic errors in thought. We subject shared knowledge to public scrutiny and debate” (p. 42). While they describe this process as they used it in their classes, particular sections in the book nevertheless present the flow of historical ideas in what could be interpreted as ordered, linear, sequenced chains of events. It is the second order descriptions, however, of features of their own teaching that reveal the interconnectedness of the historical ideas and open up the curricular conversation to possibilities for emergence to occur. “Instead of planning a class, what I must do in preparation for class is to prepare myself” (p. 61).

Sacred Spaces for Organizational Change

While Reynolds and Craven use the labyrinth images metaphorically to depict their own reflective and transformational journeys of teaching, learning, and the unfolding of curricula in their university classes, there is another perspective of the labyrinth that is higher education. While they have offered a description from within the labyrinth of their changing ideas about the teaching/learning relationship, the learning environments of college and university classrooms as described and envisioned by Reynolds and Craven will become increasingly important for future generations of college students as these visions for change occur in the larger context of universities. Beyond their classrooms, the labyrinth that is higher education will be forced to turn in on itself and reflect on purpose and meaning; opening up internal spaces as the university itself becomes transformed.

The images of the labyrinths used in Reynolds and Craven’s book represent patterns, much like the nautilus in nature, or fractals, of growth and unfolding complexity. Unlike the nautilus, however, the growth in the labyrinth focuses inward, a self-contained whole, or as Blake described: infinity within a grain of sand. Each image, while unique, has similarities with the others. There is a scaling aspect, both internally to

each labyrinth and across all labyrinths. There is self-similarity, within each labyrinth and across the variety of images and manifestations of labyrinths. And there is an interesting dynamic among openness and closedness – uncertainty and certainty, as seen in the images of labyrinths used in Reynolds and Craven.

Each labyrinth has an entry-point, a portal to reflection and an opening to process. The opening point of the labyrinth is both an entrée and an exodus. One is removed from one space and enveloped by another – the space of the labyrinth itself. There is a “firstness” of the labyrinth, not in the sense of beginnings or origins, but in a Peircean sense, an opening of possibilities.

From the opening, there are symmetries of paths – those taken and those prohibited. There is a natural unfolding of the paths where one must move from and through time as Bergson would describe time, a motion through space. Across dimensions of space, time, and space-time, the labyrinth becomes the relational space between the physical representation and the psychic and spiritual dimensions. The containment of the labyrinth belies the complexity of experiences as one traverses the labyrinth path. The openness of experience is placed in tension with the closedness of space as time emerges within the making of the journey.

This book opens up the spaces of university classrooms to reinvent higher education. Unstated and yet untried, the possibilities for extending that which has occurred in their teaching is as open as the labyrinth – a contained space of change and potential; a geography or terrain of promise.

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