

*When Royalty Steps Forth—
Role Drama as an Embodied Learning System:
The Language of Complexity and Complicity
in Co-creating Ourselves*

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I remember attending the first complexity science and educational research conference in Edmonton, Alberta in 2003, during which time a number of us used a variety of complicated graphs and Venn diagrams in our attempts to language our understanding of complexity in education. A couple of us turned to drama and music to call attention to emergent possibilities through these mediums of engagement. But we were in the minority. Four years later, this year's conference organizers invited contributors to view complexity and education through the lens of visual and performing arts, an invitation that many of us, arts educators and curriculum theorists, welcomed with delight.

Accordingly, I would like to focus on role drama as an entry point into complexity and education, and in doing so, call our attention to the language that has emerged in our conversations together. I would like to suggest that role drama is an embodied learning system—and that like any living learning system, small shifts in alliances, perspectives, language, and ways of engagement can create new understandings.

I am a tinker.

I repair pots and pans, and sell my

wares in the town square. I am unhappy, and miserable to my customers.

I am trapped by a secret love for the miller's daughter, whose beauty has rendered me silent, too terrified to approach her, to confess my desire.

I pace the cramped quarters of my stall

cursing my ill-fate, grumbling non-stop to my

friend, the baker, who sells his bread and cakes

in the stall next to mine. He is an optimist, our as-yet unnamed leader of a fledging

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group seeking to bring democracy to our kingdom, as they plot a peaceful overthrow of the monarchy. Democracy is his entry point into a new way of engaging in the world.

In the above scenario, my students and I are engaged in a role drama, designed and led by pre-service teachers in a drama education course that I annually teach.¹ The role drama had been designed to explore the benefits and challenges of democracy as compared to rule by monarchy. In our role drama, the kingdom is ruled by a queen along side her two daughters and a son. Others are in role as merchants, palace servants, guards, and the miller and his friends and relations. My identity as a tinker is self-chosen, informed by a photograph that I had selected from the many placed inside an envelop. The brilliant blue sky, turquoise ocean, and sandy beach drew me to choose this photograph. I had not noticed, until I held the photograph in my hand, that the ocean vista was fore-fronted by a barbwire fence.

A town crier enters the market and, reading from a scroll, announces the betrothal of the prince to the miller's daughter. The square resounds with a flurry of gossip and concern! *Can a prince marry a commoner? What does this mean to the monarchy?* And then, a rumour spreads through the crowd—the miller's daughter is imprisoned in the tower, forced to spin straw into gold, powerless to escape. I, the tinker, am devastated by this news—whether imprisoned or married to the prince—she is lost to me.

The leaders call "Freeze!" and ask each one of us to speak to our thoughts at this moment. Thought bubbles, a drama activity often used in role drama, reveal the inner thoughts of those in role, unmasking ambition, motivation, hidden agendas, unspoken emotions. We circle the room, one by one, sharing our thought bubbles.

"Royalty marrying a commoner? Outrageous!"

"This will bring too much power to the commoners in our kingdom."

"A royal wedding! I shall make lots of money selling my flowers!"

And then I, the tinker, speak, my words unanticipated.

"I am a caged animal, pacing my cell.
I have no hope, I hate my job, I have nothing."

After our break, we are led into a room where supplies for making placards are laid out on tables. We are told to prepare a placard in our assigned groups. The baker and I choose a white piece of cardboard, and take up a black marker. *What should our slogan say? I don't know. Any thoughts? None.* We watch as others design their placards, bending to their task, wild colours and slogans spilling onto the white sheets. *Thought of anything yet? No, but it matters what we write.* One of the role drama leaders comes to us then, tries to hurry us but still we resist, seeking words that remain beyond our reach, then, finally, they come, and we write them down, nothing else, just these words—

Walls do not a prison make.

Joining the others, we parade in a protest march around the outside of the building, startling passing students as we wave our placards, and vigorously shout our slogans.

Down with the Monarchy!
Three cheers for Democracy!
Freedom is one vote per person!
Hurray for the Queen!
Democracy lovers go home!

We enter the grand room, two opposing sides facing each other, shouting loudly, our placards raised in protest.

And then, time stops.

A man steps forth from amongst the crowd, and says,

"I am your king. For months I have lived among you, my people. I have listened to what you have said. And now I will take my rightful place upon the throne."

And with a single breath, the crowd kneels in the presence of the king—a collective response, a shifting of alliance, a motion of complicity, compliance, acknowledgement of authority. Nearby, a noosed rope has been placed on a podium between the two opposing sides of protesters, as if in anticipation of this moment. The appearance of a king was unplanned by the role drama leaders, he simply emerged, as if called upon to take action. As the king sits upon his throne, we frantically try to recall our interactions with him in the past hours.

*What did I say when I thought he was a commoner?
Does he know I plotted against the monarchy?
Will he remember the kind words I spoke about the royal family?*

He glares out over the crowd. He admonishes those of us for plotting against the monarchy; he praises those who stood fast in the name of the monarchy. He points to my friend, the baker, and says, "You, approach the throne." We wait with bated breath—a fledging democracy to be aborted, the baker to hang from a noose, a new possible world silenced....

And then I, the tinker, step forward,

"My liege, it is I who is the leader calling for democracy, it is I who is responsible. It is I, not the baker that you want."

I had everything and nothing to lose.

And in that moment, within what Appelbaum (1995) calls the stop, a momentary glimpse of the possible, I suddenly understood how Nelson Mandela could survive twenty-seven years in a prison cell. I understood how a young man could choose to step in front of the tanks as they rolled towards Tiananmen square. And I came to understand how a life might be lived within the walls of one's own limited construction.

Walls do not a prison make.

In role drama, something happens that calls our attention to the moment.

Philosopher, David Appelbaum in his book *The Stop* tells the story about a man without sight, who journeys along an unknown path, guided by touch through his cane. And then, without warning, he meets with an obstacle. He is unable to move, uncertain whether taking a step to the left will lead to a tumble off a cliff, or whether, with a step to the right, he will fall in love, perhaps find a new way of being in relationship in the world. It is a stop; he must make a choice, not knowing at that moment what will unfold, what will become of him, what action he will take, *a moment before the moment of decision.*

Appelbaum explores the stop as a moment of risk, a moment of opportunity, in which action is momentarily suspended, yet anticipated.

A stop is a moment that calls to us, a stop is a moment that calls us to attention.

Between closing and beginning lives a gap, (a caesura,) a discontinuity.
The betweenness is a hinge that belongs to neither one nor the other.
It is neither poised nor unpoised, yet moves both ways...
It is the stop.
(Appelbaum, 1995, p. 15, 16)

This moment is what I have come to call a moment of recognition, or learning realized through the interplay that is performance—in this instance through role drama—an awakening to what may be possible...

The next day, two pre-service students come to me, and share their experience as leaders of the role drama. They speak about how they with two of their peers had designed the role drama to explore issues around freedom of choice within structures of government, thus comparing the rule of monarchy with democracy. They tell me how the role drama diverted from their original plan; I remember seeing these two women consulting with their co-planners in the corner of the room during their role drama, pointing at their outlines, shrugging their shoulders in dismay. As the role drama unfolded, it became apparent that the role drama had taken on a life of its own—prisoners escaping from prison, plots hatched against the royalty, secret meetings organized to rescue the miller's daughter, new roles coming into play, an organic entity that shifted and flowed in response to, and interaction with the

evolving relationships, and interactions. Finally, they told me, *we had to let go of our script, to see what would happen, it was out of our control.*

And in this letting go, they came to a “stop” as emergent teachers. They realized that embodied within a framework that allows for divergence and co-emerge is an invitation for students to co-create within the spaces and context of curricular explorations. Through their experience, and upon reflection, they came to understand that to guide and engage students through a curricular enterprise, with a willingness to be responsive, and attentive to the acoustic dynamic landscape unfolding before them, is open to up new possibilities, new directions of explorations in what we might call a democratic process of learning. The learning was theirs as new teachers in how to be in relationship with their students—to allow events to emerge, to listen in response to the curriculum as it emerges, to give agency to their students, to allow the integrity of a curricular experience, in this case, the role drama, to bring forth new learning.

And as participants in the role drama, they questioned their actions chosen in role.

Why did we kneel when the king stepped forward? Why did we not interrogate this newcomer? Or question his right to sit on the throne? And when you stepped forward to protect the baker, why did we too not step forward to support you? If we cannot speak out in a role drama, does this mean we will choose to be silent in the face of authority? What does this mean in terms of how we will choose to act in our own lives beyond the role drama?

This too is a stop.

A stop calls us to reflect upon how we are shaped by actions and language of habit, authority, location and context. The critical question becomes: How do we interrupt? How do we now engage? What is it that I may learn in this moment of recognition?

What is role drama? Why would one come to role drama as an educational venture? Simply, engaging in role drama collectively is an opportunity for us to shrug off our roles as professors, graduate students, teachers, students, and take on new roles, within a given context and environment, in order to make a decision, explore a situation, resolve a problem. In the process, we co-create an embodied temporary world that is as-yet unimagined, within a framework and logic of embodied languaging. And it is through our actions, and interactions in role, that we may come, collectively and individually, to new learning.

Complexity theory calls the educator to an awareness of teaching and learning that is “more about expanding the space of the possible and creating the conditions for the emergence of the as-yet unimagined, rather than about perpetuating entrenched habits of interpretation” (Davis et al., 2003, p. 228). How we engage, our choices of

investigation, and our positioning of relationship and values matter. I would like to invite you to think of role drama as a learning living system—a curricular exploration through movement and inter-relationships in which new possible worlds are called forth² or co-created. You might, as I illustrate below, imagine role drama as living learning system that has within it components of a complex system as identified by complexity theorists.

In writings about complexity, there are a number of key properties that have been identified within a complex system, which I propose are present in a role drama. Of these, I will focus on the following five: enabling constraints, decentralized control, internal redundancy, internal diversity, neighbouring interactions. These are not the only properties or identified characteristics of a complex system, but they are the ones I have chosen to explore in relationship to role drama.

I first came across these five components on the white board outside my colleague's office next to mine. He had recently learned of these key components, now scrawled on the write board in front of me, and had decided to look at their application to teacher education. Curious, I asked him about them, and he sent me to an article written by Brent Davis, and his colleagues (2003).

Let's look at each of these five key properties or characteristics as they relate to role drama, and see how a group of individuals engaged in role drama may be understood as a living learning system.

Enabling constraints

Enabling constraints may be understood as the framework of parameters and logic of established ways of engagement within a complex system that simultaneously limit and permit dynamic interactions to occur. These constraints set out the parameters that define and yet enable an agency of individual and collective movement and interaction. In role drama, for example, participants work within the logic and language of a co-created world defined by context, environment, and roles; within these established constraints, participants address a problem or series of problems or decisions that become the focus of the unfolding role drama.

Within the parameters of this role drama, as defined by its context, environment, and predetermined roles, as a tinker, I was already located within a hierarchy or structure and language of occupation, position within the community, and rule of government, living as I did within a monarchy within which democratic ambitions were simmering. While working within the constraints established by the role drama and its leaders, I, and my fellow participants, were free to take action, to step forward or not, to resist or accept our status and resulting relationships within the community.

Ironically, the photograph I had chosen, had its own enabling constraint, the barbwire fence—an ocean vista contained and constrained within a given boundary, yet one

that demanded a response, a challenge. How curious that my tinker's stall, indeed my life as I perceived it in role as a tinker, became its own constraint, within which I felt unable to act, yet which simultaneously I enacted to call forth a new response. The feelings and frustrations that surfaced during the role drama, the impulse to stand forward, brought into play a clarity of individual agency and responsibility of engagement that I had not initially imagined in my position as the tinker.

Constraints that are too restrictive or rigidly imposed ultimately result in a system that fails to regenerate itself. A role drama requires a fine balance of structured invitation and individual and collective freedom of engagement in order to take on a life of its own. It is readily apparent to participants when someone steps outside the constraints given, the logic of the world co-created within a role drama collapses, there is a silence, a groan, laughter (or not); and those engaged must readjust, reinforcing enabling constraints in order to re-establish the integrity of a shared imaginary co-emergent world.

Decentralized control

Decentralized control within a complex system requires that individual components are in a reciprocal relationship where control—or the dictates of action and interaction—is shared rather than located in a single entity. Within a living learning system, there needs to be opportunity of action and response. A role drama in which the teacher in role dominates decision-making or predetermines all actions or decision-making inevitably becomes stagnant. Decentralized control is one of reciprocity that is established between all participants, in which leadership is shared and responsive.

Decentralized control is an interesting concept within education, as it calls upon teachers to release the positioning that they are “in control,” or that all choices of actions, decisions, or participant engagement emanate from their leadership. Decentralized control requires a sharing of responsibility and agency for learning to emerge. The teacher in role becomes a guiding interactive presence, creating opportunities for occasions³ to occur, within which there is the opportunity for response, for emergent leadership, for questioning, for engaging.

Internal redundancy and diversity

A complex system requires internal redundancy and diversity. In other words, there must be a degree of similarity of components or elements in interaction, in order for that system to be coherent and functional. Yet, simultaneously, there must also be a degree of diversity among components if a complex system is to be a generative, dynamic learning system.

Within an educational setting, there is a shared similarity among participants and their relationships with each other. Generally, they are all students, or, as with this

role drama, pre-service teachers, who share a commitment to learning and education, and who have had common educational experiences or are engaged in shared activities that allow them to interact together. At the same time, as individuals, they have their own narratives, social and economic positions, motivations and perspectives that reflect a diversity of individual and communal identities and experience. In any classroom, there is an internal redundancy and diversity amongst students that allows for generative engagement, provided that the other necessary elements of a complex system are present.

Within role drama, there exists simultaneously internal redundancy and diversity; individuals are assigned roles in groups and each group is assigned a particular task or is involved in a problem-solving activity from a particular vantage point. Groups-in-role may be given similar tasks (e.g. designing a placard) and yet each group may come to the same task with differing agendas, perspectives, and motivations. In this particular role drama, participants are separated into groups-in-role as merchants, royal family, servants, guards, and the miller and his friends and relatives. Each member, situated within a group by definition of his or her role, approaches problems or situations from a particular perspective or given objective. The diversity of roles, personal and communal experiences, and narratives that influence choices of action and response both within and outside of the role drama, ensure a level of diversity and redundancy that invites individuals to interact as if they are within a complex system.

Neighbouring interactions

And finally, we come to neighbouring interactions—the engagement of components as they interact with and respond to each other within a complex system. Within these interactions and inter-relationships, small shifts of movement or response or composition generate new engagements, new possible relationships. new possibilities of interaction, new recognitions.

A generative learning system is one embodied within an action-site of inquiry within which a curricular exploration, in this case, role drama, is shaped by the questions, interests, contributions, responses, and ideas of all participants in interaction with each other, in and out of role. Such sharing of ideas and questions and responses in action and interaction are the neighbouring interactions required for learning to emerge. As groups and individuals interact in role, possibilities for new ideas, new ways of engagement with others emerge.

New understandings or questions may emerge through our interactions together in role, as informed by our imagination, experience, personal and collective narratives, points of view, perspectives that we embody individually and communally. The choices of action and response taken throughout a role drama become locations for reflection both during and following the completion of the role drama. *Why did everyone kneel simultaneously in the king's presence? What happens within a monarchy when divine right is questioned? What motivation is required in the stepping forward to*

protect another? How might we understand what happened during our role drama in terms of our lived experience, or how we might choose to engage with others or our environment in the future? What did I learn from my role as tinker, that embodies who I am, and who I might yet become?

A shifting of positioning or perspective opens up new possible ways of engagement. For example, the participant who stepped out of one role (the miller) and into another (the king), required those of us in role to engage differently in response to his presence, our actions becoming appropriate to those in the presence of a king (kneeling). And yet, in doing so and upon reflection, as evident from my conversation with the two role drama leaders, participation in role drama can generate new questions, challenging ourselves and our ethical positioning as individuals and teachers. *How could I have kneeled so quickly, without questioning authority? How will I choose to respond in future situations if I am confronted by individuals of authority, or circumstances of difficulty? Will I speak out or remain silent as I did within the role drama?*

Having addressed all five components of a complex system in relationship to role drama, I suggest that role drama may be defined as a complex system, or, as Davis et. al. (2003) would suggest, a living learning system. Now the question becomes: What is a drama educator doing at a complexity science and educational research conference? Why pay attention to role drama, to its engagement between participants, to what unfolds? Ironically, I first stumbled upon the connection between complexity and role drama when I turned to the etymological dictionary in our university library and looked up the word *performance*.

per / form / ance

While the meaning of *form* is evident (ie. structure) and *ance* is easily understood as action, such as in *d / ance*, it is the prefix *per* that calls us to attention. *Per*, meaning through, defines the word adjacent to it, so that we may say, speaking etymologically of the word *per / form / ance*, that it is “through form we come to action.” However, *per* is delightfully complicit in its etymological reading as it may also mean “through the destruction of.”⁴ Thus, in an ecstatic moment of sleuthing, I understood that *performance* may be read as “*simultaneously* through form and through the destruction of form we come to action,” or, as I have argued,⁵ *knowing, doing, being, creating*. Performance then, is an action-site of learning and inquiry.

Etymological play with our word *per / form / ance* brings us unexpectedly into the playground of complexity, a generative dynamic space where, as Mitchell Waldrop writes in his book *Complexity*: “components of a system never quite lock into place, and yet never quite dissolve into turbulence, either...the one place where a complex system can be spontaneous, adaptive, and alive” in “an endless dance of co-emergence.” (1992, 12). Here too, in my experience, is the generative learning space of role drama—each stop an awakening that calls us to ourselves and to each other. And so it is, that an arts educator finds welcome within complexity theory as it relates to performance and the living learning system that is role drama.

I'd like to pause here for a moment and draw our attention to the language that emerges as we embrace complexity into education, and our use of terms such as neighbouring interactions, enabling constraints, and decentralized control, of internal redundancy or internal diversity. While useful concepts that help us understand what is required for role drama or any curricular venture to "come to life," or to become an enterprise of learning for participants, these components, as they are languaged, are quite unfamiliar to those of us located in the classroom, who deal with the everydayness of lived experience. The language of complex systems that is entering the educational system through conferences such as this is similarly different from that used by Waldrop (1992) who employs metaphors such as an "endless dance of co-emergence" and "edge of chaos," which help to locate us as we seek understand concepts of emergent learning. Similarly, the language of complex systems threatens to submerge that of enactivist theorists such as Maturana and Varela (1992), who write of "... *an ongoing bringing forth of a world through the process of living itself*" (italics added), which is, in turn, different from that of a language of desire, presence, absence, integrity, betrayal, intimacy within human relationships and engagement. Although I have enjoyed exploring role drama as a living learning system, replete with the five necessary components of engagement, I would like to suggest that when educators turn to the language of complex systems—however illuminating—we lose something in the translation.

And here I call us to attention. As we engage in our curiosity about complexity science and its implications for education, as educators, we must remember that our search for a theory, language and/or metaphor for learning springs from a desire to come to understand how learning happens. Most importantly, we must be aware that *how* we come to engage in that desire or quest is in itself shaped by the context, environment, and language of our endeavors. "What we do," Varela (1987) says, "is what we know, and ours is but one of many possible worlds. It is not a mirroring of the world, but the laying down of a world..." (p. 62). Our presence, our absence, our language of engagement matters. As Brent Davis et al. remind us, "just as I am shaped by my location, my location is shaped by my presence" (1996, p. 157).

As educators, and writers, we need to remain cautiously aware of our choice of language, and the theory that engages and shapes us, even as we shape the emergent curriculum that is our learning. When we speak of neighbouring interactions, enabling constraints, and decentralized control, of internal redundancy or internal diversity, we are speaking to a living entanglement of emergent relationships that is learning through the intimacy of human engagement. These living engagements occur within a context and environment that is rife with hidden agendas, motivations, conflicting perspectives, desires, fears. Embodied within my own understanding of complexity and enactivism is the interplay of breath, presence, absence within the intimacy of relationship, time, engagement, inquiry, and landscape.

presence, absence, breath...intimacy

Performative inquiry through role drama offers us an opportunity to bring into being new possible worlds. To call us to awakeness. Performative inquiry opens spaces of engagement that become simultaneously possible and impossible within the presence and absence of each other in relationship, within multiple possible locations—guided, seduced, driven, interrupted, shaped by our desires, our fears, our hopes, our frailties. What matters is not the script nor the lesson plan, nor the terminology that guides us in our understanding, but the emergent learning that comes through our engagement with each other, within a context, an environment, through inquiry and reflection, the curiosity of asking *what happens if?*

*Not walls
of cement, but...
the melodies
of your temperature
(Barba, 1995, 162)*

The question, for me, becomes what language do we chose to write /perform ourselves into meaning? What happens when an etymological reading of *performance* tumbles us freefall into complexity theory? What happens if we release the language of complex systems, and welcome the language of breath, intimacy, presence, absence? When royalty steps forward, how do we respond? What impulse, what glorious moment of awakening comes to us, in a moment of recognition, that is our educational quest within the unveiling of communal imaginary?

In closing, I'd like to share with you fragments of a poem written by Antonio Machado as translated by Varela (1987) that invite us to acknowledge and celebrate our presence—a presence as elusive and temporary as the elusive stops we bring forth through role drama in moments of recognition.

*wanderer, ...
you lay down a path in walking
in walking you lay down a
path
and when turning around...
wanderer, path there is none,
only tracks on ocean foam.⁶*

Notes

1. This role drama was first written about in Fels (2002).
2. Varela and Maturana (1992) speak to the bringing forth of new possible worlds in their writing, a concept that has greatly influenced my own understanding of performance through role drama as a bringing forth of new imaginary worlds, co-created by those in role within a given context and environment. See Fels (1999).

3. Davis et al. (2003) refers to curricular activities as created by an educator as “occasions” or curricular experiences within which learning may occur.
4. This etymological reading of the word *per / form / ance* has been explored in my doctoral thesis *in the wind, clothes dance on a line: performative inquiry—a research methodology*, and in earlier work anticipating the conceptualization and articulation of performance as an action-site of learning. See Fels (1999) and Fels & Stothers (1996).
5. See Fels (1995).
6. Poem by Antonio Machado, from *Proverbios y Cantares* (1930) as translated by F. Varela (1987), p. 63.

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