Chapter 18

Researching Supercomplexity: Planes, Possibilities, Poetry

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ABSTRACT

A schema is proposed on which basis education research might be advanced. The approach revisits an earlier idea, that of supercomplexity, and substantially develops it into a supercomplexity mark two. The discussion is situated in the context of the university and the proposed schema situates the university on three planes. The planes hold together both ontological and ideational components (the university as institution and as idea), reveal spaces for emergence, and allow for imaginative thought and action. Two implications emerge. Firstly, education research should be conducted with an awareness of the total (tri-planar) space in which an institution such as the university moves, in all its ontological and ideational aspects. Secondly, writing becomes not an adjunct to research but takes on aspects of creativity and even poetry. In response to an enquiry about one’s professional occupation, an academic should be happy to say “I am a writer.”

INTRODUCTION

We live in turbulent times. It is not just that we live amidst change but that our fundamental concepts and frameworks through which we make sense of the world are in dispute. In turn, each person and each group—say in professional life—is having to juggle multiple, proliferating and contending frameworks of understanding. In turn, too, professional identity is unstable and full of immanent conflict. A doctor can no longer be sure of his or her identity as a doctor, a situation that arises, in part, as a result of a surrounding swirl of rival frameworks.

This situation has to have repercussions for education research and for the role of the university more broadly. In the wider philosophical and social theoretical literature, terms are to be found that attempt to do some justice to it. The metaphor of an unstructured “rhizome” and its associated theme of “multiplicities” (Deleuze & Guattari, 2007), a “liquid world” (Bauman, 2005), and “assemblage” theory (De Landa, 2013; Irwin & Michael, 2003), are just a few of the contemporary offerings to gain

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some hold of an inchoate situation. The implications of these movements, both in the world and in our efforts to understand that unstable world, have yet to work its way fully into education research. This essay, accordingly, seeks to address the matter. If the world is so unstable that our very frameworks for comprehending it are problematic, if words can hardly do justice to the world’s fluidity, how might education research itself be construed and conducted? The main ploy adopted here is that of revisiting an earlier idea, that of supercomplexity, and developing it in the light of more recent theoretical developments, and then turning to suggest some implications for education research. Perhaps even the very term “education research” needs to come in for scrutiny: Our very notions of research may be inadequate in doing justice to the world now before us.

TWO KINDS OF COMPLEXITY

Approaching twenty years ago (Barnett, 1990), the idea of supercomplexity was posited as a way of understanding some of the challenges befalling an educational institution (the university was the object of interest at that time). The idea of supercomplexity possessed a number of components, both positive and negative. Negatively, it could be said, supercomplexity was not complexity. More positively, supercomplexity was sharply distinguished from complexity in having its own characteristics. Crudely, so far as an educational institution such as the university was concerned, complexity worked at the systems level. It was concerned with the inputs, systemic processes and outputs, all of which had their place in an environment that was itself complex, and which ranged from the local through the national to the global levels. “Complexity” here referred to the instability and, thereby, the unpredictability of the interactions of all of these components and the outcomes of those interactions.

“Supercomplexity,” in contrast, was still a form of complexity but it was not that systems-kind of complexity. Supercomplexity arose from the presence of multiple conceptual frameworks through which individuals and groups—members of a university, say—interpreted their world. The very categories through which the world was understood were not only in dispute but were proliferating. Just what was a university, for example? Was it an institution for human development or for economic gain or for worldly power or for public understanding? To say it is all of these things was to evade the matter at hand, for the categories of possible understanding cut across each other. Some might even be incommensurable with each other. And this presence of competing frameworks is the character of the world—and thereby of people’s lifeworld—today.

The difference between complexity and supercomplexity, so understood, can be encapsulated in this way. (The example of what it was to be a doctor was given.) A doctor is faced with increasing numbers of new drugs, new procedures, a surfeit of patients, an overload of data, growing audits of various kinds, and an insufficiency of resources to cope with the situation. Such a situation is not just replete with multiple entities but is one that is characteristically complex. For all the features just mentioned are in effect sub-systems that are entangled with each other, producing all the time unexpected happenings and events, which in turn demand a response. This complexity is real: It exists in the world and it imposes, in turn, considerable psychological burdens. So much so that doctors experience stress. Doctors even commit suicide.

Supercomplexity, in contrast, is not systems related, at least not in the same way. As stated, supercomplexity is present when there is a situation of multiple, proliferating and rivalrous sets of categories through which situations may be understood. Here, in relation to our example, the question arises: “What
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