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Jayne Fleener
1 North Carolina State University


We lost a special person over the holidays. William (“Bill”) Doll died December 27, 2017, one month short of his 87th birthday. Straddling the post-modern, Bill was a complex, complicated, caring man. With his penchant for alliteration, he gave us the four R’s (Richness, Recursion, Relationship & Rigor)¹, the five C’s (Chaos, Complexity, Curriculum and Culture: A Conversation)², and the three S’s (Spirit, Science & Story)³, the latter making room for a third space of spirit among the qualitative/story and quantitative/science.

His most significant work, A Post-Modern Perspective on Curriculum, published in 1993, reveals his early connections among chaos, complexity and education. He laid out for several subsequent generations of scholars the post-modern curriculum perspective that is student-focused, open, and dynamic⁴. He is one of the first scholars to connect Piaget’s genetic epistemology with Prigogine’s concepts of self-organization and dissipative structures, and Dewey and Whitehead’s process thinking.

Bill was very deliberate in his use of the hyphen between “post” and “modern,” arguing we are in a transition period between the modern and whatever comes next. He never made excuses about his own positionality straddling the post and the modern. Born during the depression, he understood his own ties to the modern. But he also knew, and did everything he could to help us all transition to the post-modern, to thinking more complexly, to understanding the powers of chaos and complexity for transformation.

As Dewey did in his early works⁵, Bill articulated and lived by his own pedagogic creed⁶:¹⁶⁰:

> In a reflective relationship between teacher and student, the teacher does not ask the student to accept the teacher’s authority; rather, the teacher asks the student to suspend disbelief in that authority, to join with the teacher in inquiry, into that which the student is experiencing. The teacher agrees to help the student understand the meaning of the advice given, to be readily confrontable by the student, and to work with the student in reflection on the tacit understanding each has.

“Whoosh!” as Bill was known to exclaim when students surprised and delighted him with those nudges of intellectual confrontation. What made Bill such a great teacher, was his own excitement and playfulness about learning. While traveling in China, he with great enthusiasm went to the white board at the front of the class during an English lesson in a Chinese classroom and wrote: I am the King of Chaos. The students were entranced by this 6 foot, 6 inch giant from the US, with his shock of white hair, bow tie and all-encompassing laugh. They were unaccustomed to an American so playfully and without inhibition engaging them in such a spirited manner.

Bill went on to ask them about the Chinese myth of the King of Chaos, the Monkey King who was playful and a bit naughty. He explained he was the King of Chaos because he, too, was a bit naughty, a bit playful, as he explored ideas about chaos and complexity and challenged traditional ways of thinking. They, like so many of his students in the US, were entranced, captured by the playfulness and insights of this larger-than-life person.

Bill shaped the field by introducing us to chaos and complexity applications in education. He supported the development of scholarship in the field by founding the Chaos and Complexity Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association. He was a founding editor of the journal Complicity, providing an outlet for scholarship in the emerging field of chaos and complexity applied to education. And, most importantly, he was the King of Chaos. He played with and encouraged others to explore the mathematics and science of the fields of chaos and complexity. He looked to the future, always optimistic and awe-filled by the newness and uncertainty of the unknown. It is now that he is in this next phase of uncertainty into the unknown that we can pause and appreciate the gifts he has given us and to carry on the work of transitioning from the modern to whatever comes next, as the sciences and society as a whole are transitioning through new understandings of dynamic relationship, emergence, chaos, and complexity. We will miss you, Bill.

References


Emergence: Complexity and Organization
