

## **Education as human development: putting theory into practice**

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This presentation derives from my paper “Simplifying Complexity: Know thyself...and others” published in the journal *Complicity: An International Journal of Complexity and Education*:  
[http://www.complexityandeducation.ualberta.ca/COMPLICITY5/documents/Complicity\\_5\\_1\\_07\\_Semetsky.pdf](http://www.complexityandeducation.ualberta.ca/COMPLICITY5/documents/Complicity_5_1_07_Semetsky.pdf) (see also Tony Whitson’s response at [http://www.complexityandeducation.ualberta.ca/COMPLICITY5/documents/Complicity\\_5\\_1\\_08\\_Whitson.pdf](http://www.complexityandeducation.ualberta.ca/COMPLICITY5/documents/Complicity_5_1_08_Whitson.pdf)).

However in this presentation, rather than focusing on theory exclusively, I will demonstrate a systems-theoretical approach in action by reference to a particular practice and using data of my research conducted under the auspices of the Board of Behavioral Science Examiners in California. I will demonstrate a real-life Tarot reading (with the subject’s consent) that shows an expansion of the “circle of knowledge” when the subject’s awareness grows due to multiple feedbacks embedded in the relational dynamics of the reading. The chaotic flux of the subject’s experiences becomes organized into order at the higher level of complexity and expanded awareness.

The theoretical framework for this study is a complex adaptive systems theory and the evolutionary approach to human development. Tarot will be shown to function as a self-organized system of pictorial signs akin to a meta-language and a means of communication. The study is informed by the pioneering work of the general systems theorist Erich Jantsch who back in 1975 has included Tarot in his systematic overview of approaches and techniques of what he called the “inner way” to knowledge, placing Tarot at the mythological level among genealogical approaches, yet acknowledging the relation of such a mythological level to the level identified as evolutionary. Jantsch claims that it is at this particular level where the human mind becomes potentially capable of tuning into the evolutionary wave-form thus developing a consciousness capable of relating to a space-time structure of reality.

Pointing out that the organization of systems proceeds through self-realizing and self-balancing processes, Jantsch envisaged that the Tarot pictures may be seen as embodying and mapping out the field of potential human responses and actual experiences. When pictures are spread in a particular layout, the reader interprets the meanings embedded in the images under the assumption of holistic, anti-Cartesian, and ecological approach to education in which human mind is not separate from the world as a passive observer but is an active participant in its dynamics: as Jantsch said, human mind is in the active relationship with the real world. When applied in practice, this approach overcomes the objective-subjective split and enables human learning, evolution and gaining intelligence as an increase in complexity.

The complicated task of interpretation, according to Jantsch, requires a dynamic communication mechanism, which is at work across the levels of perception. Therefore ‘insight’ from the evolutionary level may be received in some other form at the mythological level, e.g., in the form of intuition. Intuition plays an important role in interpreting the meanings of the images. And the unusual communicative link capable of crossing the thresholds of perception across the levels of order is established because of the self-organizing dynamics based on the logic of the included middle embodied in a Tarot layout. I will discuss such “virtual logic” (as it is called in mathematics), based on the work of contemporary mathematician and systems theorist Louis Kauffman.

I will then demonstrate the sequences of Tarot pictures that embody meaningful structures of experience, each image representing a symbolic lesson to be learned so that to achieve the wider scope of awareness than one provided by the method of instruction solely. The constellation of pictures represent real—both actual and potential—experiential lessons learned in the school of life. I will focus on the reading for Cathy (no her real name) using her layout and the almost verbatim process-recording at the time when Cathy was a college student. This research was conducted as part of my Master of Arts Degree in Human Development and Family Counseling at Pacific Oaks College, Pasadena, under the auspices of the Board of Behavioral Science Examiners in California.

Cathy wanted to have a reading for the reason of personal and professional problems. She hoped to gain insight into past, present, future and herself. She further wanted to analyze feelings, to clarify issues and to find out more about Tarot. Prior to the reading she mentioned that she was curious as she "heard about Tarot and wanted to try".



person in her life that could be either a boyfriend, or a father, or both. Compassion happened to be an affect unknown to such a personality, and accordingly, absent for Cathy. Was there anybody in her life who ever said that he was here for her? It did not look so from the spread of the images on the pictures, and Cathy said at that point, "True".

The second card, however, with its image of the Knight of Wands – crossing over the first card – provided positive counterpart to the negative influence of the King of Swords. Symbolizing a creative energy, this Knight indicated that Cathy was about to move out, to change a place of residence for herself. When I asked Cathy if this indeed was the case, she said she was constantly thinking about moving out.

Still, the unconscious motivation of maintaining the status quo (the four of pentacles in the third position) was an anchor pulling Cathy back versus the driving pushing force of the Knight of Wands. Thus, Cathy's deeply engraved belief in her inability to take even the slightest risk enmeshed with the feeling that it is better to have than have not.

At a preconscious level Cathy desperately tried to keep what was her only family with its shallow stability and security (the ten of pentacles in the fifth position). She did not realize though that the family's homeostasis was based on such a precarious foundation as her being the victim, the victim of abuse. Cathy interjected saying that she has been in therapy for four years.

I wondered if in the past she tried to leave, to walk off – as the eight of cups in the fourth position unequivocally suggested. Cathy answered "yes". According to the imagery of the eight of cups, she had tried to leave her situation behind, because the feeling that it was not right persisted. However the feeling of what IS right was not there either, and Cathy remained confused, her confusion leading to the vicious circle of feeling more and more depressed.

The cycle of depression, though, was just about to end, as depicted by the ten of swords in the sixth position, providing that Cathy, influenced by the positive constructive energy of the Knight of Wands, would make a decision to move out and on with her life. At this point Cathy said that her therapist kept telling her the same.

Well, perhaps she was not ready before, but right now the collective unconscious identified Cathy with the Page of Wands (in the fourteenth position), who carried a message of optimism and vitality and the image of the Page of Wands was encouraging Cathy that she has had those qualities within herself, even if not yet actually but potentially.

Cathy's state of mind, as per the constellation of the three cards in the seventh position, reflected the severity of mental blocks and the presence of inhibitions. The major card Judgement was of particular significance. The imagery of the Judgement conveys a call for action. Although Judgement indicated that Cathy has "heard the call of the trumpet" that has "awaken" her thus having completed the current life cycle, her desire to finally have a peace of mind and to achieve emotional stability (the nine of cups) was sabotaged by the presence of the six of cups in this position. Unconsciously, Cathy was fighting her own development, her own growth resisting the possibility of re-entry into an authentic existence as per "Judgement" imagery.

Importantly, the image of the six of cups "located" within the *context* of mental fixation carried a message that Cathy has been blocking her childhood memories. That is, to get rid of self-recrimination and low self-esteem, to gain confidence in herself in order to be able to get "up and going" was only possible through recovering of Cathy's memories. At this point Cathy said that she went to hypnotherapy, engaged in workshops, but she did not have any childhood memories at all, neither good or bad.

How then Cathy became aware about the importance of recovering her memories, I asked. Cathy said that after four years in therapy her therapist told her that she had all the symptoms of having been sexually abused as a child, and Cathy's lack of memories was an issue indeed discussed in her therapy. Wow! That's why this theme was prevalent in the layout: even as a specifically sexual abuse was not explicit, but the issues of overall abuse and neglect were overwhelming in the images. Indeed, the image of the Judgment was invoking the Jungian "inferior" function of *feeling* as a rational complement to the superior *thinking* that perhaps was the only function available to Cathy in her, quite likely, of cognitive-behavioural orientation, therapy! The activated archetype of Judgement, however, was making it impossible for Cathy to continue in her present state.

The reality of physical or emotional abuse was reflected in the constellation of eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth cards. The Chariot indicated that whenever Cathy had the quality of energy to be able and determined to fight for a desired goal and was prepared to fight for self-assertion, she not only did not have any support in her pursuits, but was punished, scolded, felt abandoned and was constantly reminded about how bad she was (the five of cups). Her mom practically turned her back onto her (The Queen of Swords as a partner to the King of Swords in the position of Cathy's

presenting problem). At this point Cathy said that her parents always call her names, call her crazy, tell her she did not earn enough money, etc. This was a clear case of a continuous verbal abuse. The past has been repeating itself in the present as Cathy's psyche made an enormous effort to suppress her memories. Therefore having subconsciously jeopardized her own personal development was the only possible survival mechanism for her in her immediate environment.

The nine of wands, however, in the position of hopes suggested that despite Cathy's feeling as though she came to the end of her ability to protect her interests, there was still strength and determination in reserve. The old wound hurt, but victory would be achieved through endurance. The three of pentacles as the "outcome" card suggested a strong probability for Cathy to make a first step towards her growth and personal/spiritual development. A long awaited feeling of self-worth and respect from others would be Cathy's reward if she steps up and out of the oppressive environment. She would not be without support system either. The Page of pentacles in the eighth position indicated not only Cathy getting a degree, but the school becoming a supportive environment for her, where she would gain all due respect in accordance with her being hard-working and diligent; the major influence of the imagery of the Judgement as a calling, "a vocation" (Nichols 1980, p. 341), was obvious.

When her session was over, I handed over a questionnaire to Cathy as it was part of the study design to have my subjects answer some follow-up questions in lieu of their free-of-charge session and reading. Cathy answered "yes" to the question if this reading contributed to achieving her purpose and explained her answer as follows: "I was a little skeptical but now I believe more [in Tarot] because it was true for me. My situation was in the cards". She added: "I live with my parents and my boyfriend. My father and boyfriend are verbally abusive and my mom usually agrees with them. She does not do anything except what my dad wants her to do". The reading was significant and meaningful for Cathy and she added that it verified what she had been told by her therapist too.

Cathy said that she realized the necessity to move out and on with her life, but how to recover her memories? She wanted the guidance of Tarot and pulled out the card that happened to be zero trump, the Fool. New, happy life cycle would begin if Cathy makes a choice of taking a fresh start. Cathy commented that her therapist also kept telling her that she was the one to make a choice in this respect. Surrounded by the same walls, so to speak, Cathy would be unable to remember the past as it would be too painful for her. Moving out, though, and expanding the world around her (as conveyed by the Fool imagery) would provide Cathy with the ability of feeling safe – something she lacked in the family. It would be safe to remember, and the inner child in Cathy would be born again, this time feeling happy, safe and secure.