

CHAPTER 26

THE COMPLEXITY OF COMPLEX SYSTEMS CONFERENCES: REFLEXIVITY AND WALKING THE TALK

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Complexity conferences may be an ideal expression of what the study of complex systems is about: a 'collective' which in totality can only be properly approached as 'an ensemble' is sought to be 'understood' by an observer in a manner such that the resultant understanding can be communicated to others without the necessity of a repetition of the total experience. The very heterogeneity of the attendees of these conferences demands that boundaries, uncertainty, emergence, dialogue and context be carefully attended to if the conference is to be labeled a 'success' by the majority of those attending. Indeed, the feedback effects of models, labels, and stories about complex social systems mean that simple characterizations - often the heart and soul of conference organizing - will leave out much more than they will capture. What complexity theory teaches us, is to try and describe activity while being aware of the power of the 'weak signals'. Different degrees of abstraction, attention to different components of a system, are appropriate to our varying pragmatic goals and conceptual and computational abilities. Thus, complexity conferences demand many characterizations and their interweaving into complex stories before something actionable can be understood. At conferences, persons share complex structures of cognition, and relate to one another from their shared rhetorical circumstance. A successful conference is a conference, which has embraced the possibilities for emergence and attempted to create the affordances those possibilities require.