Discovering Complexity:
Teachers’ Collective Responses to Change

Submitted by
Barbara Scholes Gillings de González
to the University of Exeter
as a thesis for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Education

October 2009

This thesis is available for Library use on the understanding that it is copyright material and that no quotation from the thesis may be published without proper acknowledgement.

I certify that all material in this thesis which is not my own work has been identified and that no material has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a degree by this or any other University.
Acknowledgements

I would like to gratefully acknowledge and heartedly thank the many people who have supported me in different ways. Their invaluable assistance, patience, and above all intellectual, as well as especially emotional support not only motivated me to embark on this journey, but more importantly sustained my perseverance throughout this process.

First of all I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Veracruz University, especially Dr. Magdalena Hernández Alarcón for her encouragement during the stages of my professional development. In addition, my thanks go to the staff at the Postgraduate Office (PROMEP) who humanised the difficult red tape process of acquiring financial support.

Special thanks, gratitude and recognition go to Dr. Tony Wright who has been my main supervisor since the beginning of my studies. Not only did he provide me with helpful suggestions and advice, but he also knew when it was appropriate and timely to give them.

I also wish to express my appreciation and gratitude to Dr. Salah Troudi who made time in his busy schedule to read the drafts of my work and give me valuable suggestions and constructive advice.

I am also very indebted to my friends who embarked on this change process with me and without whom this research would not have been possible. Although I must keep to myself their identities, I give all credit and heartfelt thanks not only for their time and assistance, but also for their invaluable emotional support.

A very special thanks and appreciation must go also to my friends, David Ryan, Patricia Reidy and Dr. Patricia Grounds who not only proof read my work and gave helpful suggestions, but who were constantly by my side during all the ups and downs along this bumpy road.

Last, but certainly by no means least, my heartfelt thanks, gratitude and recognition are for my husband, Roberto, and my son, Alan, for their constant loving support and forbearance, as well as their enduring motivation during this lengthy process.
This thesis is dedicated to my beloved
father and mother
who taught and gave me so much.

This is for you
Discovering Complexity:  
Teachers’ Collective Responses to change

Abstract

This thesis explores a small number of TEFL teachers’ collective responses to an extended change process in their Mexican university context from 1989-2003. The nature of the emergent knowledge arising from this inquiry hinges on the analysis and interpretation by the researcher who is also a complete participant in this educational context of her informants’ perceptions from their retrospection, and a reconstruction of the past, in present time.

The methodology I adopted broadly follows interpretative qualitative research principles, including aspects of life history inquiry. The data generation process employed to explore our perceptions of ourselves, as well as our working context, before and during the 1990s, as we ourselves narrate them, comprised of: ‘conversations with a purpose’, critical incident and repertory grid interviews, as well as the concurrent analysis of the data, based on aspects of Grounded Theory. As a result, numerous categories and concepts emerged. These not only helped me to discover the issues that were both instrumental and influential regarding our positive receptivity to change, but also how being involved in a change process changed us, not only as individuals, but also as a culture.

Based on these findings that have led to my deeper understanding of the nature of educational change, I conclude this thesis by positing that instead of adopting a mechanistic paradigm for viewing change, it is necessary, and more useful, to view it through the lens of complexity theory. Finally, this thesis ends by examining the implications that this position and the findings have for change policy makers, managers and change leaders, as well as suggestions for future research.
# Table of Contents

Discovering Complexity: ................................................................. 1
Teachers’ Collective Responses to Change ..................................... 1
Acknowledgements ....................................................................... 2
Abstract ....................................................................................... 4
Table of Contents .......................................................................... 5
List of Tables ................................................................................ 10
List of Figures ............................................................................... 10
List of Acronyms ........................................................................... 11

## Introduction .............................................................................. 12

- Research Context ..................................................................... 13
- Allow Me to Introduce Myself ................................................... 13
- Aims of Inquiry ....................................................................... 15
- Significance of the Study .......................................................... 15
- Research Question .................................................................... 16
- Map of the Thesis ..................................................................... 16

## Chapter One ............................................................................ 19


### 1. The Macrocosm ................................................................. 20

- 1.1 The Current Organizational Culture of Higher Education in Mexico ...... 20
  a) International Institutions .......................................................... 20
  b) National Institutions ............................................................... 20
  c) University Institutions ............................................................ 20
- 1.2 An Overview of the History of Higher Education in Mexico ............... 21
  1.2.1 Higher Education in Mexico before the 1990s ....................... 22
  1.2.2 Higher Education in Mexico from 1989 Onwards .................. 25
  1.2.3 Reforms in Higher Education: 1989-1999 ......................... 26
  1.2.4 Higher Education in Mexico: 2000-2006 ........................... 29

### 2. The Microcosm .................................................................... 31

- 2.1 The Local Organizational Culture Centred on in this Inquiry .......... 31
- 2.2 Local Organizational Culture: 1976 - 1988 ............................. 32
- 2.3 The Beginning of the Change Process at the School of Languages: 1988-8933
- 2.4 The Changes from 1989-2003 ............................................. 34
  2.4.1 ‘Plan 90’ .................................................................... 35
  2.4.2 TELF Postgraduate Diplomas .......................................... 37
  2.4.3 The Opening of a Self-Access Centre (SAC) ....................... 38
  2.4.4 The Opening of the Resource Centre ............................... 39
  2.4.5 MSc in TEFL ............................................................... 39
  2.4.6 In-House MA in TELF .................................................. 40
  2.4.7 New BA Curriculum ..................................................... 40
  2.4.8 Research ..................................................................... 40
3.4.3 Secondary Data Generating Method: Repertory Grid Interviews ...............124
3.4.4 Personal log .........................................................................................125
3.5 Data Generation Process ........................................................................126
3.6 Data Analysis Procedure .........................................................................128

4. Limitations .................................................................................................135

4.1 Trustworthiness ......................................................................................136
  4.1.1 My Dual Role in this Inquiry: Limitations and Advantages .............136
  4.1.2 Memory of Informants: Limitations and Procedures Adopted ........138
    a) The Use of Well-Established Methods ..............................................139
    b) Triangulation and Member Checks ..................................................139

Summary .......................................................................................................141

Chapter 4 .....................................................................................................143

Waking from Professional Slumber – Change and Professional Engagement ....143

1. ‘Professional Slumber’ .............................................................................143
  1.1 Our Individual Biography .....................................................................145
  1.2 The Influence of Our Working Context ..............................................147
  1.3 Our Conceptions of Ourselves as Teachers ........................................150
  1.4 The Influence of our Membership in a Particular Teaching Culture ......152
    1.4.1 Our Isolation in the Classroom .....................................................153
    1.4.2 Our Isolation within our University Context ..............................156
    1.4.3 Our Isolation from Other Language Teaching Communities .........157
  1.5 Discussion – ‘Professional Slumber’ ....................................................158
    1.5.1 The Formation of our Personal Construal of our Professional Identities ....159
    1.5.2 The Nature of our Teaching Culture in this Context ....................160

2. ‘The Awakening’ ......................................................................................161
  2.1 Basic Conditions and Support .............................................................162
    2.1.1 The Organization of a School Forum ..........................................164
    2.1.2 The Use of Credible Well Thought Out Arguments ....................165
    2.1.3 The Identification of Key Teachers ..............................................167
  2.2 Opportunities and Support for Professional Development ...............170
    2.2.1 Initial Internal Funding .................................................................171
    2.2.2 Securing External Funding ..........................................................171
  2.3 A Supportive School Environment .....................................................176
    2.3.1 Our Own Positive Attitude to Change ........................................176
    2.3.2. Our Commitment ....................................................................181
      A. Our Concern for the Educational Welfare of our Students ...........181
      B. Our Growing Sense of Indebtedness to both the School and the University 183
  2.4 Discussion – ‘The Awakening’ ............................................................186

Summary .......................................................................................................187

Chapter 5 .....................................................................................................188

How Change Changed Us, the Teachers .....................................................188

1. Changes in Professional Self .................................................................188
  1.1 Belief in Ourselves as Teachers ..........................................................188
1. The Complexity of Change at the School of Languages .................................................. 189
1.1.2 Recognition by Significant Others ............................................................................. 191
1.2 Change in our Attitudes ................................................................................................. 195
1.3 Changes in our Behaviour ............................................................................................. 198

2. ‘Emotional Glue’ ............................................................................................................. 200
2.1 Our Growing Sense of Mutual Trust and Respect .......................................................... 200
  2.1.1 “Positive Interpersonal Attraction” ........................................................................... 201
    • Strong Work Ethic ...................................................................................................... 201
    • Our Honesty and Reliability ...................................................................................... 202
    • Our Commitment ...................................................................................................... 203
  2.2 Collective pride ............................................................................................................ 213
    2.2.1 Pride of Achievement ............................................................................................. 214
    • Alleviation of Fears and Uncertainty Associated with Change .................................. 214
    • Recognition by ‘significant others’ ............................................................................ 216
    • Personal and Professional Growth .............................................................................. 216
  2.3 Discussion: ‘Emotional Glue’ ....................................................................................... 219

Summary .............................................................................................................................. 220

Chapter Six ........................................................................................................................... 221

The Complex Nature of Educational Change: Discussion .................................................. 221

1. The Complexity of Change at the School of Languages .................................................. 223
  2.1 Macro-Context (National politics) ............................................................................... 225
  2.2 Micro-Context (The School of Languages) ................................................................ 227
  2.3 Leadership ................................................................................................................... 227
    2.3.1 Palpable Energy, Enthusiasm, and Hope ............................................................... 228
    2.3.2 Moral Purpose ..................................................................................................... 228
    2.3.3 Understanding, Coherence, Knowledge Creation and Sharing ............................. 229
    2.3.4 The Ability to Improve Relationships ................................................................. 230
    2.3.5 Effectiveness in Creating a Culture of Sustained Change ..................................... 231
  2.4 Teachers’ Receptivity to Change ................................................................................. 231
    2.4.1 The Role of an Effective Change Leader ............................................................... 233
    2.4.2 Availability of Funding and Opportunities for Professional Development ............. 235
    2.4.3 Teachers’ Dissatisfaction with the Prevailing Status Quo ..................................... 236
    2.4.4 Teachers’ Perception of Change .......................................................................... 237
    2.4.5 Teachers’ Commitment ....................................................................................... 238
  2.5 Teachers’ Professional Identity ..................................................................................... 239
    2.5.1 Biographical Baggage ........................................................................................... 241
    2.5.2 Students’ Welfare .................................................................................................. 242
    2.5.3 Influence of Working Context .............................................................................. 243
    2.5.4 Reform and Change ............................................................................................. 244
    2.5.5 Nature of Teachers’ Teaching Culture or Community .......................................... 245
  2.6 Emotional Understanding and Teachers’ Cultures/Communities ............................... 248
    2.6.1 Emotional Understanding ..................................................................................... 249
    2.6.2 Shared Biographic History .................................................................................... 250
a) Pre-Service Education.................................................................251
b) ‘Professional slumber’...............................................................251
2.6.3 Shared Values and Vision....................................................253
2.6.4 Shared Behaviour...............................................................254
2.6.5 ‘Emotional Glue’.................................................................255
   a) Trust and Respect...............................................................255
   b) Collective Pride.................................................................261

Conclusion..................................................................................267

Summary......................................................................................268

Chapter Seven ............................................................................270

Implications for Practice and Recommendations for Research ........270

1. Main theoretical contributions of this inquiry ..............................270
2. Implications of the Research and Action Principles for Educational Change ......................................271
   2.1 Recognition of the Complexity of Change.................................273
   2.2 Consideration of Teachers’ Pivotal Role in Educational Change ....276
   2.3 Awareness of How Teachers’ Cultures/Communities Evolve...........279
   2.4 Awareness of the Emotional Dimension of Change .................282

3. Recommendations for Future Research......................................284
   3.1 The Complex Nature of Educational Change..............................284
   3.2 Teachers’ Receptivity to Educational Change ..............................285
   3.3 The Formation and Transformation of Teachers’ Professional Identities 285
   3.4 Teachers’ Cultures/Communities............................................286
   3.5 Emotions in Collegial Relationships and their Impact on Change Initiatives 286

Conclusion..................................................................................287

List of Appendixes.......................................................................288

Appendix 1: Life history interview guide......................................288
Appendix 2: Personal Construct of before and after the 1990’s............289
Appendix 3: Prelim research/interview questions guide....................290
Appendix 4: Critical incident interview guide..................................291
Appendix 5: Repertory Grid: changes..........................................292
Appendix 6: Repertory grid: people engaged in change....................293
Appendix 7: An example of the transcribed response during the repertory grid interview about the changes .....294
Appendix 8: An example of the transcribed response during the repertory grid interview about the people engaged in change ............295
Appendix 9: Verification interview guide: What I think brought us together 296

List of References........................................................................298