

An exercise for experiencing emergence in a complex adaptive system

“The one-word story”

If you have 10 or 20 individuals then ask them to sit in a circle facing each other. You then feed them an initial line of a story (e.g. “The girl went into the forest”). Then tap someone on the shoulder and ask them to add a word to the story. And so this continues round the circle with each person adding a word to the emerging story.

This can be a good experiential exercise since during the debrief participants often say that no one individual was in control but a story structure clearly emerged. They also reach the point where the emerging story is influencing what is said next. Some talk of the futility of trying to control the story and how frustrated they were when the person next to them uttered a word they had not predicted and so had to respond differently. The parallels here with organizations as emergent phenomenon are very strong.