

Participation: a Quantum Concept April 19, 2004

The observer is part of what she observes.

Thanks to the McNeil-Lehrer Report which featured Louis Menard, the winner of the history Pulitzer in 2002, I am reading *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America*. What amazes me is the fact that men could be so sure (then) about what is so (today) obviously wrong. “Scientists” I am reading about suffered conspicuously from an absence of doubt. Menard has a lovely comment: their conviction could easily give way to prejudice.

What a compelling thought! Where does my own conviction put me in danger of prejudice? In today’s angry, anguished world, personal and national conviction might well be seen as a dangerous lead in to prejudice.

The quantum concept of participation holds that the learner affects what she is learning. Our convictions are operating in all our learning. This is a constructionist perspective, showing that we construct meaning as we learn. For example, when I teach you the history of North Carolina, you learn it through your own eyes, your own context, your own history. No two of you would hear the same story.

This is itself a theory, subject to doubt and uncertainty, subject to the affect of the perceiver. As you read this journal article, you are learning something intensely personal and idiosyncratic... or not! That phrase – *or not...* The word *perhaps...* indicates a certain humility, a certain willingness to be wrong, to learn, to go beyond - that, in my opinion, is crucial to the scientist.

We are educators; we are social scientists. Our efforts are worthy of reflection, which can lead to new efforts, different, constructed for our context out of experience and theory working together. I had the joy of attending a staff meeting at the new Follow the Child Montessori School in Raleigh yesterday. Sylvia Saenger, Head of School, is a Master Teacher with Global Learning Partners, Inc. She is writing a chapter in the new book, *Dialogue Education at Work*, on the use of dialogue education in staff meetings. What a privilege it was to see dialogue in action, and to reflect on the experience with someone as humble and avid for learning as Sylvia. I saw how she participated in the learning potential, making my observations fit into her unique context.

Whatever I am teaching, it is a relief to know that the learners are participating in making the learning meaningful to themselves. This quantum concept is a key to dialogue. Jung wrote over the lintel of his home: “Bidden or unbidden, God is here.” So, learners are in dialogue with their own lives and context, always testing what we teach through their participation. We can relax and celebrate the learning!