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Chaos and Order in Teaching NLP

Teaching is chaos (as teachers know!)

This is an article about creating order in teaching, and specifically about creating order in the teaching of NLP. There are many theories about teaching. And new teachers often hope that if they find the right theory, it will all suddenly make sense. This is comparable to the hope that weather forecasters had earlier this century. They thought that if they had good enough satellites and monitors, they could one day predict the weather perfectly. The work of Edward Lorenz, in 1961 (Gleick, 1987, pp.11–31) finally proved that this dream could never be fulfilled. The weather is so complex that to monitor it well enough would require monitoring every cubic inch of air every second of the day, not to mention knowing what every person on the planet was about to do next! Just measuring it could change the whole pattern. Weather forecasters are up the creek without a paddle! The weather, it turns out, is a “chaotic” system. That doesn’t mean it’s got no order; it just means that the order is so complex that its result cannot, in the real world, be predicted. And teaching is exactly the same. This article is about how to take advantage of that.

The snowflake

The new science of Chaos can be very simply understood if we use the example of a snowflake. Every snowflake is unique. Every single one. The process of making a snowflake, then, is not “ordered” in the way we normally use that word. It is Chaotic. And yet there are similarities between snowflakes. Let me show you a simple way to make one of the millions of possible snowflake patterns (Gleick, 1987, p.99). You take a simple triangle (A in the figure on the following page). Then, you add other simple triangles to the middle of each edge of the first one (B). Then you do that again, adding other triangles to the middle of the edge of those (C). Then you simply keep doing it again (D). By this