Northumbria Research Link

The readers of this newsletter may know that
Stafford Beer (1926-2002) pioneered the
application of cybernetics to the problems of
organisational management and was the
founding practitioner of viable system modelling.
The editors of this newsletter have requested
that I pen a few recollections of him as a teacher
and friend.

I first met Stafford in 1998. He had accepted an
invitation to attend a lecture on managerial
cybernetics that was to be given at the
Newcastle Business School, Northumbria
University. Our lecturer was also a guest:
Professor Alfredo Moscardini of Sunderland
University. At that time Stafford was rather
poorly but he lent his full support, from the floor
of the lecture theatre, to Alfredo's expansive
introduction to the origin of cybernetics and its
application to the problems of management. In a
style that was to become familiar, Stafford asked
everyone present to close their eyes for one
minute and to contemplate the complexity of a
national economic system. He then requested
that we contrast the product of our thoughts with
what came to mind at his mentioning of the
Treasury model of the UK economy. I still wonder
as to whether the many people present fully
understood his point.

In the years between 1998 and 2001, Stafford
made many visits to Northumbria University to
teach in his Socratic mode. This mode of inquiry
was based on the questioning method that
Socrates practised in Plato's dialogues. In
Stafford's version it required participants to
study some part of his writings - including his
poetry - and to ask him a single question.
Stafford's approach was to offer thoughts on
each of the questions and then to demonstrate
his holistic philosophy by somehow connecting
each of the questions together. He was not
always very successful in doing this, but that was
part of the charm. At that time in his life,
success had no more importance than failure, so
long as both offered a bit of fun and
entertainment.

The Socratic symposia attracted participants
from both within and outside the university.
Whilst the categories that Stafford used to
discuss organisations had little resonance with
business school academics, the breadth of his

knowledge and learning made it perfectly
feasible to advertise his sessions across all of
the faculties of the university. This was in accord
with his view that all divisions in the universe of
knowledge are arbitrary. Indeed, he would
identify such divisions with what he called
 'reductionist thinking' .

Conducting those Socratic symposia formed a
part of Stafford's formal obligations, as a Visiting
Professor, to the university. But he was usually
keen to make himself available to people for
most of the duration of his visits. On a morning
he would enjoy some time to himself to
meditate and read the Guardian newspaper, but
from the afternoon until the early hours of the
following morning he liked convivially to meet
people of all ages and all backgrounds,
especially if they had an interest in science,
politics, philosophy or simply having a laugh over
some joke or other. As is well known, Stafford
liked to situate himself in a comfy chair, glass in
hand, and recount his memories of the pioneers
of cybernetics, for instance, Warren McCulloch,
Ross Ashby and Gordon Pask. Stafford was
anxious that our generation read their works and
celebrate their memory, but equally perhaps he
could see how the developments unfolding in
higher education and on the Internet made this
prospect unlikely.

I was always surprised at how little inclined
Stafford was toward discussing his own works
such as the Viable System Model. "It is all in the
books" he used to say. Indeed, he could be quite
brutal with people who expected him to
compress his work into a few strap lines.
Contemporary events were what he liked to
make sense of. Looking back, from the distance
of a decade, I now realise that he had a keen
and prescient sense of what were to become the
major problems for Great Britain in the first
decade of the twenty-first century: the foreign
policy of the Blair government, its relaxed
attitude to an unregulated capitalism, and
declining standards in public life and
institutional management. Yet, at that moment
in time, the course of history was only beginning
to be shaped by political and managerial
decision-making. Stafford did not live to observe
the full horror of its outcomes.

Overall, my own memory of Stafford Beer is best

summarised by a tribute paid to him by his friend and colleague, Professor David Weir, shortly after Stafford's death. It read: "As a person and a scholar, he was a great, shaggy inspiration; the sort of person you hope to encounter when you enter academic life and, of course, rarely do".