



Joint Meeting of OUSyS and UKSS Members

Report

Walton Hall
Milton Keynes

8 December 2001

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1. Background

This section of the Newsletter reports the Proceedings of a joint meeting of OUSyS and the UK Systems Society (UKSS) organised by the SPMC Network. It was held at the OU (Walton Hall) on Saturday 8th December 2001. It was attended by over 60 people spread roughly between the two Societies. A full list of delegates is given towards the end of the report.

These Proceedings comprise four main sections. At first the SPMC Network is introduced, along with the aims of the day. Then follows accounts of the presentations made by two, invited guest speakers, Peter Checkland and Patricia Shaw. We are very grateful to OUSyS member Geoff Moss who kindly provided his accounts of the talks by Peter and Patricia. Both speakers were sent copies of Geoff's notes and were invited to correct any matters of concern. Peter and Patricia were both impressed with the quality of Geoff's account. Both have used his material as a basis to make some minor changes. I hope you will agree that the outcome is two interesting papers.

Then follows an account of the output of the group sessions that were held on the day. In finalising this account a draft of the proceedings was sent to all participants inviting them to add 'meat' to the bones of the bullet points or figures which were taken from the one overhead transparency available per group during the plenary sessions. We are grateful to those who responded. This enabled us to make the content of the proceedings more meaningful to readers who were not at the event.

The fourth section contains feedback from some of those present or from other members of the SPMC Network.

1.1 Outline of the SPMC Network Project

The SPMC Network has been funded by the EPSRC. This workshop was the second held with stakeholders in the Network. (The Proceedings of the first workshop were published as a special edition of the *Systemist*, the publication of the UKSS. Some of the papers from that event can be seen on the project website: www.spmc.org.uk). The Network has theoretical, practical and managerial aims.

(i) *Theoretical*

- developing systems theory and new forms of systems practice by applying systems thinking to new domains
- facilitating the emergence of new research questions about systems practice and systems theory
- subjecting new theoretical developments and reflections on practice to scrutiny and challenge in industrial, business, NGO or not-for-profit environments¹;

These objectives will have been met if fundable research proposals emerge, 'industry' agrees to co-fund or participate in this research and papers in refereed journals, workshop proceedings and a book are produced.

(ii) *Practice-based*

¹ For the sake of brevity we refer to this range of organisations under the generic heading 'industry'.

- initiating and supporting 'networks of conversation' between systems thinkers in academia and potential systems thinkers in business and industrial contexts;
- identifying and pursuing themes of interest shared between the academic and industrial and business participants;
- bringing together those involved in, and concerned about failure in the development of information systems;

These objectives will have been met if the relationships generated at the workshops and other network meetings are self-sustaining and lead to further collaborative initiatives.

(iii) *Management*

- facilitating a wider appreciation of systems thinking and systems ideas in industrial and business contexts and a desire for systems skills and understandings is manifest;
- eliciting new case-study material for research and teaching;
- generating new proposals for shared research activities, for example through the use of CASE studentships;

The objectives will have been met if case studies and research proposals are forthcoming and if requests for further development of skills are received from non-academic participants.

What we are doing?

- (i) Workshops to understand if business/services sector are receptive to Systems ideas.
- (ii) Workshops to embrace the wider systems community

Who is involved?

- (i) The applicants – Ray Ison, Frank Stowell ably assisted by Jacqueline Eisenstadt
- (ii) The beginnings of the network - see the delegate list in the Systemist special edition

What are we planning?

- (i) This workshop – see below
- (ii) Next Year – workshop possibly followed by master classes with the focus upon issues brought in by members of the business community and addressed by an expert in the field.
- (iii) Publication – Special editions, papers, book
- (iv) Joint ventures e.g. business/academic partnerships to explore issues arising from the meetings and workshops (see 1 (i)-(iii) above)

Today's workshop relates to the feedback of key points that we learnt from the delegates to the first workshop in May 2001. These are contained in the Special edition of Systemist and are summarised here.

In the first workshop the delegates were asked to address:

- What are the main needs that Systems Thinking/Practice might address?
- What other perspectives need to be drawn in to the process?

- Who has these perspectives and might be invited for the planned major
- Do the initial research questions remain relevant?
- Are you able to suggest some tentative research questions of relevance to you?

A summary of their responses is as follows

1. Understanding of “Systems “ by the wider community is lacking
2. Language of Systems presents barriers to many
3. Failure of “Systems Practice” to communicate to Business
4. Business has a problem of over saturation of “new” ideas- this may present a significant difficulty for introducing ideas.
5. Need examples of situations where Systems Thinking and Systems Practice (STSP) has helped (examples relevant to all sectors)
6. Need Tools for action
7. How can STSP be introduced into main stream education?
8. Need clear identification of research issues – who owns the research, who is it for, who will use it and how will it be evaluated.

The workshop design (see end of this report) builds on these findings. Included in the programme were two invited guest speakers. Edited versions of their talks follow.

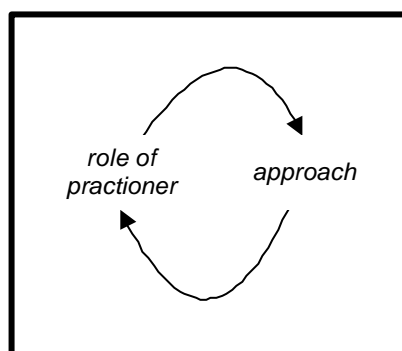
2. Presentations by Invited Speakers

2.1 The Role of the practitioner in a soft systems study by Peter Checkland

Notes of a talk given to OUSyS and UKSS, Saturday 8 December 2001

Introduction

The question that this talk is trying to answer is:

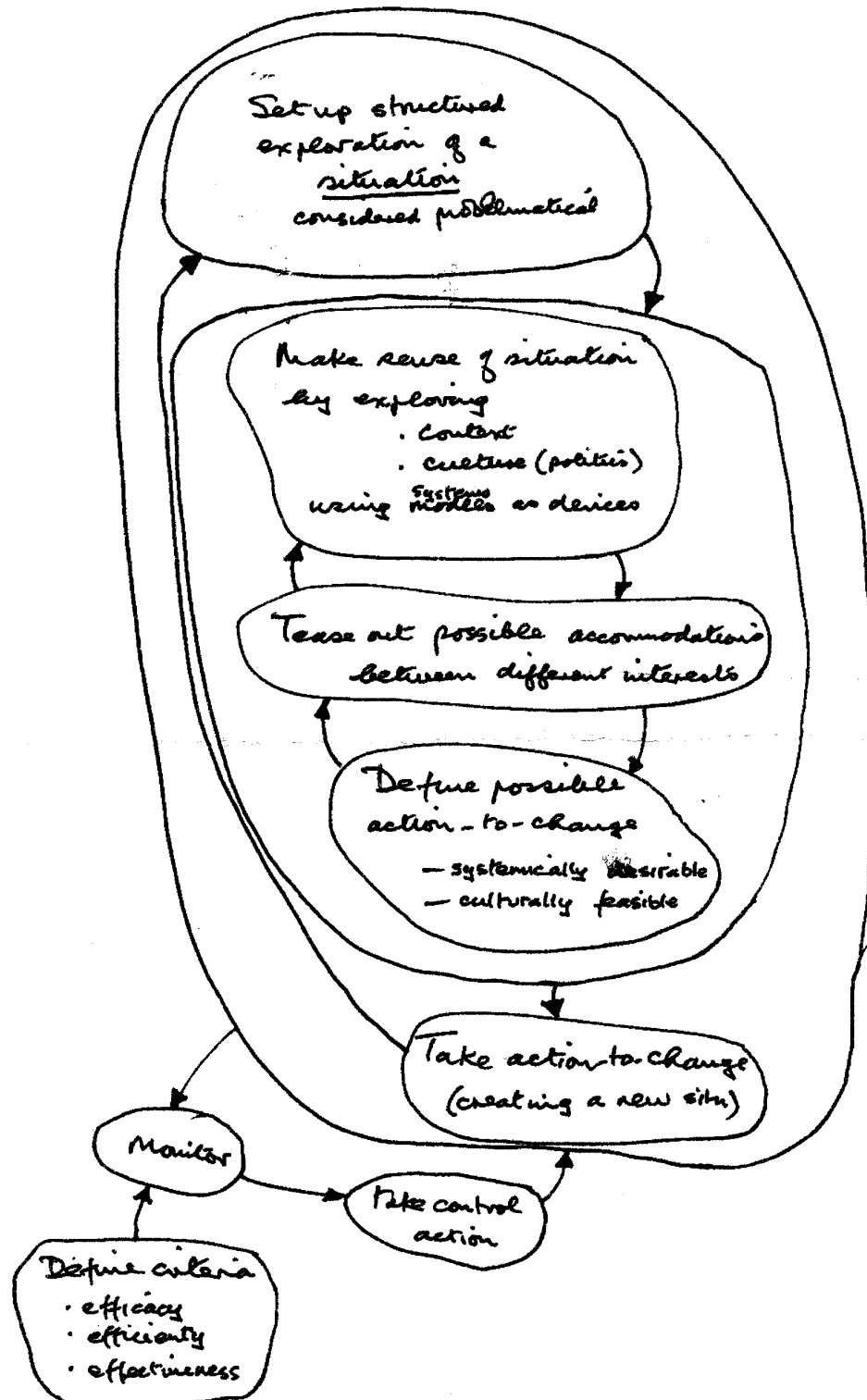


What is the phenomenon evoked when Soft Systems Methodology is used?

The question can be answered only by considering both the role and the approach, since they each continually create the other: that is the essence of a methodology as opposed to a method independent of the user.

Features of Soft Systems Methodology

The major steps can be characterised as:



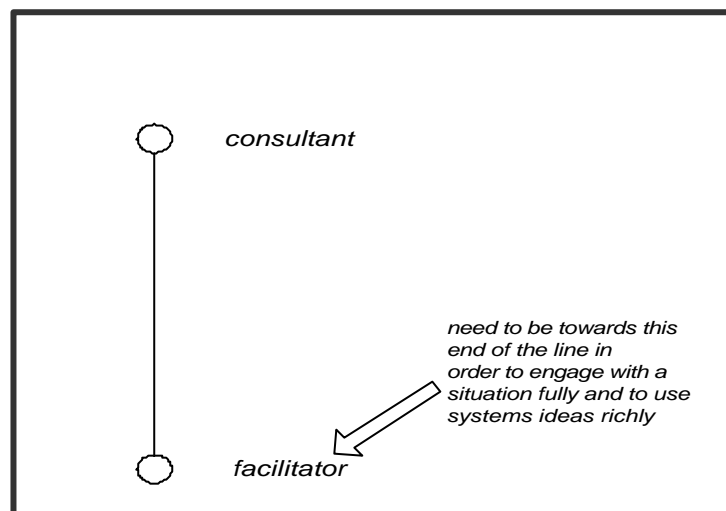
Soft Systems Methodology is an iterative process – deciding when it is complete is a matter of judgement.

It is an action-oriented approach – that is to say, the intention of a study is to produce a change seen as improvement. It is *not* about introducing or creating a system, though that may be appropriate on occasion. Thus 'systems engineering' is subsumed within SSM as a special case.

The products used within Soft Systems Methodology (Conceptual Models) are not prescriptive models. They are devices to make sense of the problem situation.

Modes of Operation

The Role of the Systems Practitioner



The role of the systems practitioner sits somewhere on this axis – from being a *consultant*, brought in from outside to analyse the situation and advise on change, to a *facilitator*, who helps the participants understand their own situation, and, sometimes, do their own study with help.

What Does a Soft Systems Practitioner Do?

The practitioner does whatever is necessary to enact the process on the previous page. Broadly speaking, the study:

- Looks at the situation
- Surfaces the Weltanschauungen present in the situation
- Teases out the accommodations between the different interests which will enable 'action to improve' to be taken.
- Explores change

Change can be:

- Structural change
- Process change
- Attitudinal change

Normally in human situations introduced change entails a mix of all of these. Structural change is the easiest to introduce, but normally requires the other two elements to be successful

Examples

(i) Shell

Task was a rethinking of the role for a central department responsible for reviewing manufacturing methods.

- 6 2-day workshop/seminars to explore role
- Results documented and circulated widely, feedback was collected and tabulated.
- The department was re-invented; re-think and implementation took 15 months

(ii) NHS Resource Management

Broad initiative, involving the implementation of lots of information systems, and some organisational development.

The task of the study was to carry out an evaluation of the £300m programme – essentially an audit to demonstrate value for money.

The study found that there was no case of a link between IT projects and organisational development though that was the 'RM' concept.

(iii) Inland Revenue

Task is a 2-year study to rethinking personal taxation arrangements (this is not looking at the current "personal taxation system", as Checkland does not see it as 'a system' out there in the world.)

The study used 14 different groups, bringing together in workshops different stakeholders ranging from those responsible for policy formulation to taxpayers and those in receipt of tax credit.

One opening exercise, to raise the level of thinking away from form re-design, was to explore the participants' views of the tax arrangements using a 'car' metaphor i.e. 'if the tax arrangements were a car, what kind of car would it be?' Answers included:

- a 1950s kit car, with all sorts of odd bits bolted on
- a tank - those inside can't see out much, and those outside can't see in at all!

(iv) NHS RVI (Newcastle)

A process to develop information systems. Brought together 40 participants in small groups selected across the hospital. Activity models were used to define information needs, and a new information strategy was developed participatively in a period March - September.

(v) *South African Bank*

This was part of the post-Apartheid transformation/reconciliation process that all organisations were required to undertake, to come to terms with their past role and define their position in the new society. Participants defined a project they could each carry forward within their area.

The plug may be pulled on the project by the CEO; he appears threatened by the high-level thinking being practised by his middle and junior managers.

(vi) *Concorde*

Study revealed that the British side was in a wholly engineering culture. It was highly compartmentalised, and there was no project management and little attention to marketing - those working on the project believed that the product would be so good that everyone would want to buy it. 'Project Management' was dismissed as 'what Boeing do!' Informal cross-boundary information flows were improved but PM was culturally infeasible at that time in British Aircraft Corporation.

Conclusion

The question for the talk was: *What is the phenomenon evoked when Soft Systems Methodology is used?*

The answer is that it has something to do with changing modes of thinking. It is a process in which the thinking (of individuals and groups) is shifted to a different level. It produces 'meta-thinking' – that is, thinking about how you are thinking about the phenomenal world.

This mode of thinking rearranges people's mental furniture and enables plausible action-to-improve to be achieved.

Success in the process requires:

- Thinking 'situation' not thinking 'systems'
- Confidence in SSM as a learning process
- Thinking consciously at several levels ('why', 'what', 'how'). When you listen to managers talking, you hear them switching between levels (and time scales) in the same conversation without being aware that they are doing it. Soft Systems Methodology makes the jump between levels (and time scales) more explicit, more conscious.
- Surfacing the world views of the participants, and dealing with the consequences
- Acceptance of the 'cards-on-the-table' transparency of the process

So SSM use is a 'mental rearrangement' phenomenon.

Questions, Answers and Observations

Why don't you explain to participants that you are using Soft Systems Methodology?

It's not necessary and can be helpful. As a facilitator I am constantly aware of it, I keep a model of it in my head and apply it in order to map the process. For example, I do a mental CATWOE analysis of activity models. But most of the participants do not want to know about the methodology, as they are grappling with the problem at hand.

How do you break down functional silos?

We use issue-based activity models, rather than those which map onto functional divisions present within organisation in question

Isn't it a trap for educators if you do not talk about your method?

I am prepared to talk about it, but not in the sense of ramming it down people's throats. I don't talk about it unless the participants are motivated to ask. In the Shell study the workshop participants began to ask about the process being followed, and we then made it explicit.

But doesn't that make systems a 'silent' practice, when we are trying to raise awareness?

In fact usually in a study some people usually do ask, and then I explain what I'm doing.

Soft Systems Methodology appears to be a problem-solving scheme with two components: real world situation and systems thinking approach. However, it doesn't have a target for change ...

I have given up using the language of 'problem-solving', as it is not helpful for describing the flux of human activity that the methodology is dealing with. That said, Soft Systems Methodology can subsume hard systems methods e.g. a theme may emerge which has clear objectives, and the outcome may be the 'engineering' of a system.

So SSM is about 'action-to-improve', not problem solving

But there must be a target: an end point ...

No, but the methodology takes you round the loop: it creates a whole new situation, and then you can think again about what you are doing.

I had a conversation with Jim Scholes, (co-author of 'SSM in Action') when he was working as a manager in an organisation. He said that I had a consultant's view of the methodology because, given the University base, we came in, carried out a study and went away again. He said that being a manager involved doing soft systems constantly as part of the process of thinking through problems. He was right, and this changed our perception of the approach.

Peter Checkland, Notes by Geoff Moss, 9 December 2001

2.2 Notes of a talk by Patricia Shaw

Patricia Shaw has a background in physics, operational research and Gestalt psychology. She has been acting as an organizational consultant for twenty years. She works with Ralph Stacey at the Complexity and Management Centre at the University of Hertfordshire.

Introduction

I did not prepare a paper for this event because I wanted to respond to what people have been saying.

One theme here is what it means to be a systems practitioner. I do not use that label for myself, but I am interested in the same kind of questions as the systems community.

Such a question concerns what it means to have 'rigour'. What kind of rigour? If we are all working with organising as communicative interaction then what do we think we are doing and how do we account to one another for what we are doing?

My experience has led me to be wary of using tools which downplay what it is to be human, or which instrumentalise human activity. I am interested in the ordinary everyday sense-making of organisational life. I was struck by Peter Checkland's recalling Jim Scholes view of himself as a manager introduced to soft systems approaches: "this is what I do all the time".

So my question is:

What can we do to help people act with more rigour in the process of sense making?

I am led to consider what kind of language business is using. People talk of the world becoming more complex. Once able to 'survey' the territory of action from the vantage point of an elevated perspective managers began to feel that everything was slightly beyond their ken. They began to engage with their situation by various means such as scenario planning or future search. These processes are a form of **scouting** - trying to get information about a landscape which is just out of view. There are many process tools that play to this scouting metaphor.

But increasingly when managers describe what they do most of the time, the metaphor is: "***I am constantly stepping out, knowing that my very stepping shifts the ground on which I am walking.***"

This is an offer to us as practitioners to find ways of speaking directly to this experience of interdependence and emergence. I have begun to make sense of my work with organisations by talking in terms of a joint inquiry into who we are and what we are doing together in such a way that we pay attention to how continuity and change emerges simultaneously from within the conduct of our sense-making conversations.

Peter talked about SSM as a process in which thinking is shifted to a meta-level: How are we thinking about this? How else could we think? It is an offer to managers to help them explore and work with ill-structured problems and to 'see', with the help of systems tools, not some external territory, but the processes of thought they are using to bring structure and purchase to the situation they are literally finding themselves in.

What has been bothering me is what it means to deal with wholes. To me Systems Thinking continues to require a notion of wholes as a spatial metaphor. It leads us to value the ability to picture interdependencies and relationships spread out all at once before one's gaze, however reflexive such a mapping may be. Perhaps we move to a paradoxical notion of the 'system as a whole' but how useful is it to talk about 'wholes' that are being jointly constructed **over time**, that are constantly evolving, and that are never complete?

My interest is in a process that does *not* make the situation manageable **as a whole**. At CMC we have been exploring how Complexity theory may offer the insight of complex iterative non-linear interaction patterning itself. Instead of looking to picture patterns can we participate in the process of the patterning of human interaction that is always patterning further interaction as narrative themes over time?

For example, we could examine the issue of changing the culture in an organisation. But in order to do this we have to dissolve the notion of 'culture' as something that can yield to an instrumental process.

For example a colleague and I worked with Imation - a spin-off company of a large global corporation. Their question was how can we escape our traditions as we inherit the same people with the same ways? One particular concern was an Italian factory perceived as particularly hide-bound and impenetrable. Rather than engage in any pattern identification work we immersed ourselves in the ongoing conversations through which people constructed the sense of themselves and their situations. Over lunch with various people throughout Europe we began to hear stories of peoples' experiences of working with counterparts at the factory. We began to note down on the table napkins the names which kept cropping up, particularly when people referred to so-and so as beginning to 'get it.' After some time we phoned a name that had figured often, explaining honestly about how we had developed our list. He was intrigued. Who else was on the list? Ah yes of course we would have x, but what about y and why z? Would he be interested in gathering some of these people together so that we could ask ourselves what 'getting it' might mean? Get what? According to who? Much of our work involved inviting and convening fruitfully ambiguous gatherings where the urgent need to make sense of 'why us', 'what are we here for' encouraged intensive narrative sense-making that remade the past in the present and so opened up fresh ways of going forward together that had not made sense before.

Conclusion

The kind of inquiry process that I am interested in therefore is how we may help people engage in the kind of open-ended sense-making in which the patterning *over time* of mutual enabling-constraints which we are holding one another to as we interact may shift spontaneously creating continuity and change simultaneously. This is very much a process practice informed by thinking of human interaction as self-organising sense-making through which identity and difference are continuously emerging. I am interested in how such temporal Complexity Thinking relates to the spatial wholes of Systems Thinking.

Patricia Shaw, from notes by Geoff Moss, 9 December 2001

3. Contributions from the participants

3.1 Process design and starting questions

This session was introduced by listing questions that had arisen as important from the first meeting of the Network. It was felt that those present had contributions to be made based on their experience. These were:

- Your experiences of systems thinking
- How you talk about systems thinking?
- What helps or hinders you talking about it?
- What you experience when you see systems thinking in action?
- How you know if you are practising systems?
- How you know if you are doing it well?
- Are these questions relevant or should we be asking/exploring a different set of questions?
- Based on your experience how might systems thinking be talked about more easily?
- Can you relate some examples from your personal and professional life?
- Would you like to write a short case study based on your experience?

- What sorts of experiences/situations might help in starting a conversation about systems thinking?

3.2 Outcomes from session 1

Group 1 – AM (Steve M Group)

- Workshops – useful for exchanging ideas
- Are we in silos?
- Infiltration
- Sample description (no simple synthesis)
- Selling the benefits
- Which audiences?
- A virtual university?/Academy
- Effectiveness of systems depths?
- Lessons Learnt

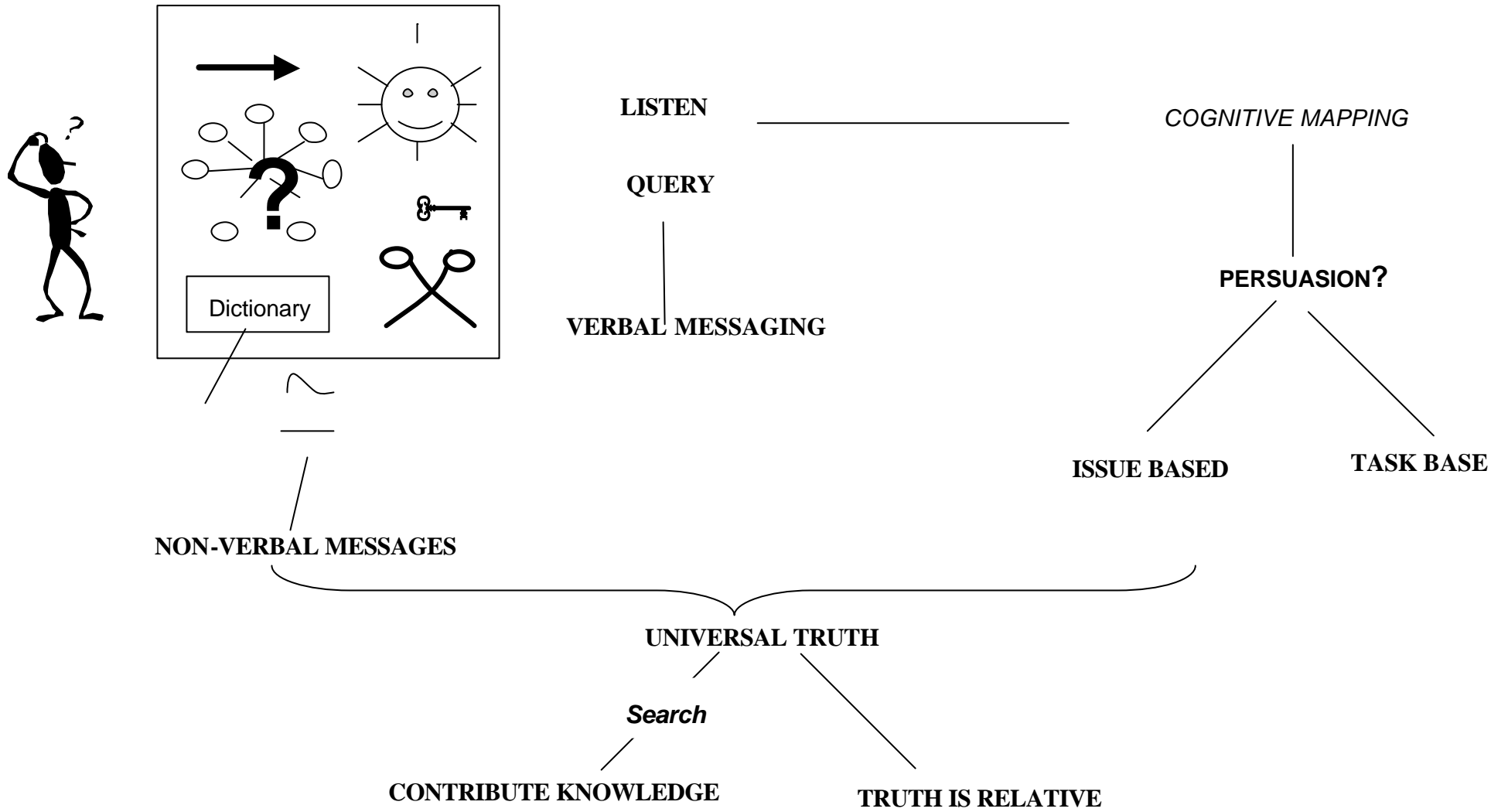
Group 2 – AM

- How do people learn about systems?
- Systems ideas need to be owned to be systems ideas.
- Core ideas need to be kept amidst change.

Group 3 – AM (Keith)

- No need to indulge in 'System Speak'.
- Experience the Key.
- Tough barriers in organisation? (culture / politics) to understand and overcome.

Group 4 – AM (Terry)



Group 5 – AM (Rosemary’s group)

1. Dynamic
2. Personal Perspective
3. Expressing the Intangible

Group 6 – AM

Systems Thinking

- Internal?
- Explicit?

Systems Practice

- commercial
- academic/Research

Need to

- improve capabilities of practitioners
- increase understanding/acceptance of ST/SP

Rachelle Andrews kindly adds the following clarifications.

'As a member of Group 6 I have recollections of the two sessions and there were two areas of discussion that seemed to be relevant and for me they were quite thought provoking:

In the morning session there was discussion on how to 'sell' Systems Thinking as a practical aid to management to those outside the immediate Systems Community? Someone mentioned (I am afraid I did not note the lady's name that spoke) that whilst there is a need to familiarise interested parties with systems concepts and ideas by making it more accessible, the other side of this is that if it is simplified too much it could mask the higher level concepts and it may lose some of its value.

It would appear that there was a tension or tonus between giving away some of the higher level theories to gain a greater understanding from those working with systems ideas and the problem of familiarity leading to a lack of respect of systems thinking in general.

In the afternoon session – following Peter Checkland's focus in his address on 'moving peoples mental furniture' discussion centred around the risks involved in changing peoples views and ideas in a way that was beneficial to the company and yet could endanger the individual. It seemed that there could be problems - using Peter Checkland's own example whereby changing certain aspects of the way a department functioned actually affected the mental state of someone working within that department. Although there were no conclusions it seemed to be a topic that had relevance to the development of the systems approach.

These were the main thoughts that occurred to me following a read through of the draft newsletter'

3.3 Outcomes from session 2

The brief for the final small group session was based on your experience and what you have heard today:

- how can we be sensitive to the problem of language?

- what research questions suggest themselves to you that the SPMC network might address (and who might be involved)?
- What new perspectives might we add to this conversation to enhance our collective creativity?
- what design considerations would you recommend for future SPMC events?

As in the first session groups were asked to report back using one transparency. The material on these follow.

Group 1 – PM (Steve M)

- Use local acceptable language
- Case Studies
- Avoid jargon

How can we use systems ideas in other communities [e.g. management] = action research

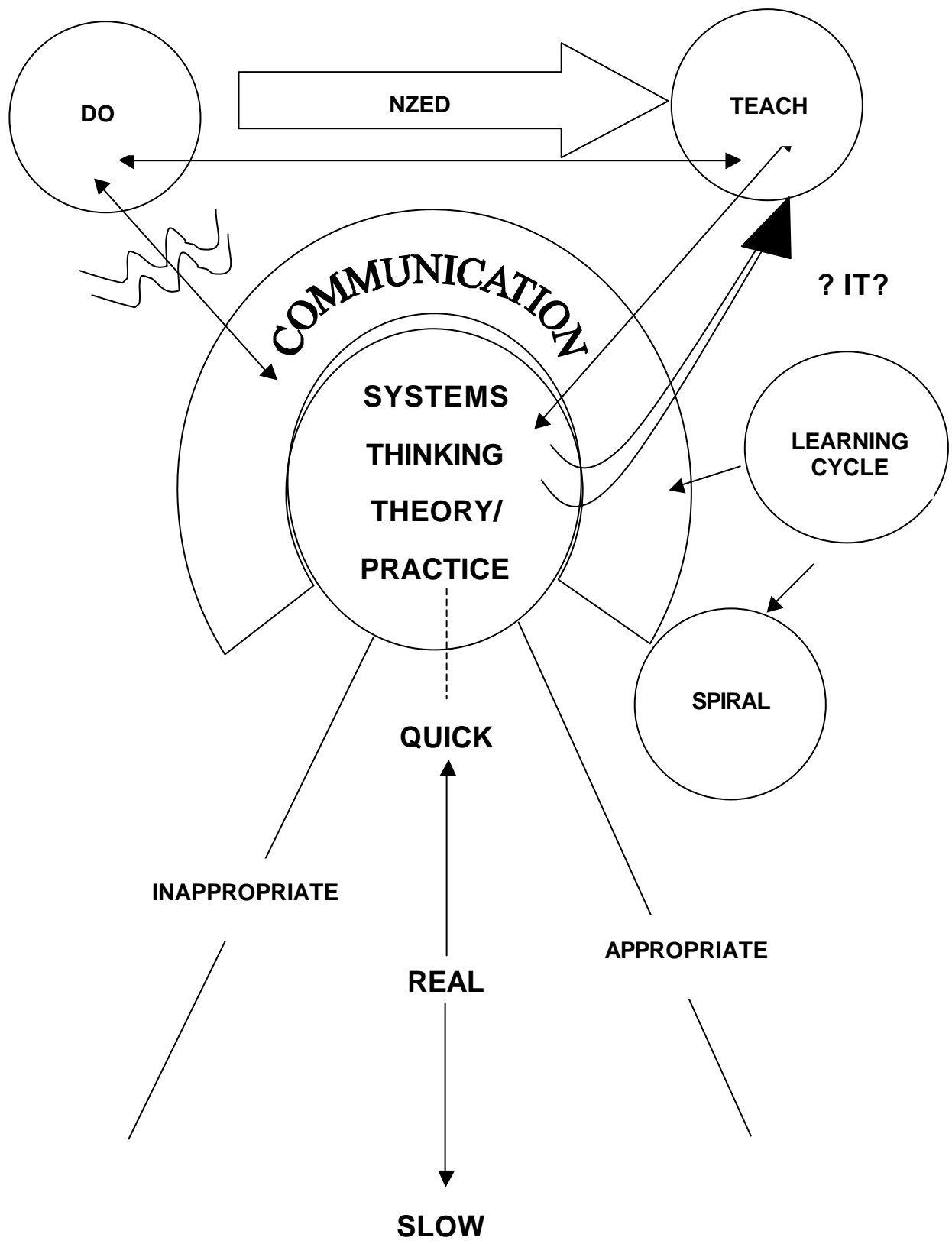
Clarify key questions

Focus groups of e.g. Practitioners

- Tutorial sites?
- Pace – often uncomfortable
- Shorter/more focused questions

Group 2 – PM

1. More dialogue.
2. How can we be sensitive to the challenge of?
 - Language
 - Thinking
 - Ever-Changing World
3. More time for listening.
4. Move from A1 strict theory to actual concepts



Group 3 – PM (Keith)

- How practitioners and stakeholders may be reflected at systems enquiry?
- What are the factors that could hinder a systems enquiry?
- How can we sustain the systems enquiry?

Group 4 – PM (Terry G.)

Sensitivity

Listen	Perception
Query	Non-verbal clues
Co-operation	Tolerance

Research Question

- What is the problem if systems theory is solution?
- How can we build a network?
- Define/research practitioner?

New Perspectives

- Quality people – complexity
- Best value people
- Other institutions
- Business and Management

Design Considerations

- Different people in workshops
- Basic structure OK
- Better capturing of discussion

Group 5 – PM (Rosemary)

Sensitivity to Language

- Jettison the jargon!
- Awareness of audience
- Does “Action” for me = “Action” for you?

Research Q - How to:

- enthuse people
- identify audience
- develop a united theory of systems
- establish utility
- establish credibility
- model scenarios
- make it acceptable

- articulate ideas and how to teach others to articulate ideas.

We want:

- concrete examples
- practical workshops, *i.e. doing it*

3.4 Summary of session outcomes

Steven Hamilton, a participant says that for him the big issues discussed on Dec 8th were making systems accessible, more user friendly and dejargonising by exploring three questions (i) how can we sell it; (ii) how can we make it more usable in everyday life and (iii) how can we reach younger people?

It was clear from many of those present, particularly those that did consulting, that they used systems ideas but often did so in a way that was not transparent to those involved. In many, if not most cases, to refer to Systems concepts was found unnecessary or unhelpful. This suggested to me a major problem for Systems educators and researchers who faced the need to build institutional capital (brand recognition, funding etc) based on the success and/or utility of Systems but in a context in which those who used it (whether as clients or consultants) did not make any public claims for their systems practice. This suggests one area where the SPMC network could assist in future - to bring together consultants and other users of systems thinking in fora in which they can exchange experiences, reflect on their own practice and build new skills. Such an activity might assist in building professional credibility for the 'systems practitioner' and help diffuse confusion in the mind of the public as to what a systems practitioner does or could do.

The desire of many in the event to meet again and to continue their discussions suggests that there are too few opportunities to join with fellow enthusiasts and practitioners - to reflect - but perhaps more importantly to develop confidence and coherence².

Another outcome of the day, aided by the papers from Peter and Patricia, was to draw attention to Systems practice (or complexity practice) as a process of inquiry. The loud message from Peter was to start with an exploration of the context (problem or opportunity situation) - not the search for System.

Yet again a common theme was the need for more case studies of practice that had worked.

In feedback Annemarie Strauss recognised a number of research opportunities: (i) world wide economic effects of bottomless financial silos; (ii) the cling-on to Taylorism out-performance of performance and (iii) the reward system culture for managerial failure. She recognised the following possible problems in moving forward: (i) UKSS skills will be difficult to market; (ii) intuitive group use of systems-based principles *a la* Checkland hence needing diagrammatic communication to unify (rather than jargon) and (iii) 'shifting sand' metaphor relative to dynamic human activity systems will prevent institutionalisation of systems thinking.

She concluded by saying: 'I enjoyed the workshop because it raised my awareness of the undiminished value of 'systems thinking's basic ground rules as espoused by Professor Checkland'.

4. Feedback from participants

² By coherence I do not mean agreement - but the ability to articulate and respect difference based on reflections on practice.

Since the workshop several other people have chosen to provide feedback on their own initiative. This has been rewarding for us as organisers. As the feedback has been instructive for us we have, with the permission of the authors, included it here for your consideration.

4.1 Rachelle Andrews (OUSyS)

Dear Professor Ison,

I wanted to write to you in response to the excellent day that was arranged on December 8th.

As a lowly student with two years to go before the end of my degree I feel that my input on this day may be less valid than a participant with more credentials but from a systemic perspective I realise that mine is equally relevant in other ways. I have to say that I am totally committed to systems thinking and intend to continue building on my learning from the OU courses I have undertaken and take my studies as far as I can.

Firstly I thoroughly enjoyed the day. It was an opportunity to get together with other systems minded people and that community of practice was of great value to me. I am one of those systems practitioners (have the Diploma to prove it!) who is actually 'out there' using it as a way of seeking improvements to real life problems I face as Managing Director of a SME.

To be able to talk about systems with other systems people was refreshing and in the spirit of T306 came home and wrote in my personal journal (an extension of my original Learning Album) my thoughts about the day. It was quite exciting to come away with more questions than answers making me realise that I have much to learn to further develop my methodology through practice.

Secondly there was much to write - I was fortunate to have been in the group with Peter Checkland and that was a wonderful personal experience - having been an avid reader of his work. I was particularly interested in his clear address which I found helped to re-establish the meaning of systems to me. (It seems sometimes that no sooner do I feel I understand systems that another aspect appears in the complexity and I have to re-evaluate everything I thought I knew about it). We also were fortunate to have Andy Lane as facilitator - I felt especially fortunate when comparing notes with other delegates and found that at least one other group had a less positive experience in the way the discussion was both led and recorded.

It certainly was a wonderful day from my perspective - giving me much to reflect on at so many different levels. I hope that you decide to continue with your suggestion of setting up a future meeting where people can talk for an extended period. It is a valuable experience to share views about systems with other systems people and to find out how others perceive and use a systems approach.

I think that the new active approach via the SPMC is working already - like all systems it needs energy and commitment to really make a difference but by harnessing the enthusiasm of such a diverse range of people involved in systems I believe that it has the potential to increase systems awareness beyond its present boundaries.

I am truly grateful for the opportunity to attend the workshop and look forward to more in the future. Thank you for a rewarding experience and for giving a 'lowly' undergrad the chance to take part!

Editor's Note: I am very appreciative of Rachelle for taking time to write. From my perspective, however, I have never regarded students as 'lowly' (though she has, I know, said that with 'tongue - in - cheek'). My

invitation to Rachelle and others in a similar situation is to think in other terms because you have much to contribute.

4.2 Keith Ellis (UKSS)

Dear Jacqueline

Thank you for a superbly well organised day last Saturday. I enjoyed it very much.

Warm Regards

Keith Ellis

4.3 Prof. Janice Jiggins (an international member of SPMC)

Dear Jacqueline,

Thank you for sending me the Special edition of the Systemist. I would be interested in taking up with other network members two of the challenges thrown down by the participants to the meeting:

1. Development of new models of courses and curricula by using, a la Linux, "some simple rules of co-operation, and giving away the source code" (p45). What in terms of systems courses on the management of complexity, for example, might the 'source code' be, what would be appropriate rules of co-operation, and what might be the meta-rules for the management of relationships so that self-organising curriculum/course development emerges?
2. "Encouraging intelligence in the actors rather than depend on intelligence in the design" (p27). I am familiar with this idea through the experience of the Farmer Field School approach to integrated pest management and, I suppose in part, in the Landcare movement in Australia. I would like to learn about examples that spin local level intelligence among networked actors into higher levels, so that regulatory frameworks, fiscal and other develop 'horizontal' connectedness that is supportive of lower level learning.

any takers?

With best wishes

Janice

4.4 Janos Korn (UKSS)

Dear Ray

With reference to the 8th of Dec meeting at the OU, I attach a rather hurriedly constructed note for your consideration. As always I enjoyed the company of my colleagues which I miss very much and the opportunity of debate. Thank you.

Best wishes

Janos Korn

Thank you very much for letting me take part in the SPMC meeting, 8th Dec 01. I do not know if you remember me: I got up a couple times to say my piece, I sat on the extreme left (opposite you) in the first row, have no hair on the top and speak with a central European accent.

Introduction

I intended to make a few remarks about the meeting. However, looking again at the Systemist, Editorial, page 1, points (i) and (iii) and having had the experience of the meeting, it has occurred to me to produce a more extensive writing.

Editor's Note: The numbers Janos refers to from the Systemist are the following:

"The impetus for this project started with a sense of concern within the EPSRC. These concerns can be summarised as follows:

- (i) systems theory development had stalled;
 - (ii) the claimed benefits of applying systems thinking had not been realised
 - (iii) new networks were needed to trigger new research questions (and fundable projects) of relevance to the EPSRC and other funding bodies"
-

I am very interested in point (iii) which would fit my activity very closely as far as I can see. The objective at the moment is to give you some idea about myself and my work. This would enable you to judge if I could get involved in the network with a view perhaps:

1. to debate/discuss, to evaluate my work;
2. to develop it further if found acceptable, especially towards application to more realistic problems and to consider the fundamentals behind it;
3. to integrate my work with current thinking, and
4. to develop software backup.

Personal Profile

I am retired, used to work at Middlesex University for about 30 years. I was an OU tutor for 20 years from 1973 in Systems alternating occasionally with Control Engineering. I have published 96 papers and had a hand in producing two books.

Description to Primary Problems

In the 1970's I formulated a number of outstanding questions referred to as 'modern problems' broadly speaking in the field of conventional science and control theory:

1. Why dynamics especially in control systems, dealt with isothermal operation neglecting thermal transients, or warming up, and subsequent elevated running temperature,
2. Why main-stream control theory was remote, still is, from the field of conventional science and had no fundamental basis in physics,
3. Why there was no (still there is not an accepted) general approach of human activity situations/scenarios,
4. Why there was no (still there is not an accepted) definition of information which would fit into the framework of a theory of change inclusive of information systems,
5. Why there was no (still there is not an accepted) general theory of product and systems design.

Answers to the first two questions are available. The first question is answered by the introduction of temperature and entropy flow as thermal variables in engineering systems and of the notions of external/internal, internal/internal energy converters. The second question is

answered by the development of multidisciplinary network analysis of control systems and their derivation from the theory of spontaneous processes.

However, we are concerned with answers to the last three questions but we examine briefly the current state of affairs first.

Current state of Systems Science

Although there are many definitions of what a 'system' is due to the still reining confusion of the subject, the definition: 'system is a set of related objects' is very general to be capable of further development. Accordingly, systems science may be seen to have its origin in Lagrange/Hamilton theory in the 18th century. However, it was von Bertalanffy before the 2nd world war who noticed that to view objects in the world as systems was pervasive, perhaps as extensively as gravity is. He saw isomorphism as the basis for the development of general systems theory. His view gave rise to development of general systems theories based by and large on mathematical symbolism of sets. The development of control theory and engineering systems took place after the war. Later workers in the 'systems field' developed a number of diagrammatic methods to represent systems following the definition above. The 'systems movement' has embraced a variety of philosophical and metaphysical theories. A number of 'methodologies' intended to deal with human activity scenarios came to be developed perhaps the most widely accepted and controversial is the SSM.

Thus, the development considered part of 'systems science':

1. Exhibits an immense variety of views with no consensus of opinions about fundamental notion such as what system is, what is meant by systems thinking, systems practice and so on,
2. Tends to divide the subject into hard, soft systems, information systems, computer/control systems, natural systems etc,
3. Lacks observational basis. This means that imagination plays a large part in developing any number of views without the need for 'thought experiments',
4. Results in a variety 'jargon' or the use of high level linguistic terms due to the variety of views which are not usually or cannot be easily related to experience,
5. Has negligible basis in accepted branches of knowledge.

For example, SSM is based on a number of ill defined diagrams, with erroneous conception of change and its significance in problem solving denying the role of vision, foresight and the possibility of constructing models. It involves the use of 'low level' abstraction like 'rich picture' and indiscriminate use of natural language.

All these remarks tend to emphasise perceived deficiencies so as to contrast with intended development.

The Intended Development

The intention is to develop an approach based on the assertion that 'The systems phenomenon made explicit by the systems view as opposed to the view of conventional science, is unique, indivisible and pervasive throughout experience'. Accordingly, the approach:

1. Provides an analysis and design theory of systems corresponding to systems thinking and practice,
2. Is based on isomorphism of observation created generalisations which are common to all aggregates/systems,

3. Uses the symbolism of natural language, a story, processed by linguistic analysis leading to semantic diagrams and the inferential structure of semi-predicate logic with uncertainty associated with human elements as summed up in Fig.1.
4. Sorts out influence carrying information activity from that of skilled power carrying energy,
5. Is dynamic i.e. there is a procession of states expressed as properties in time?
6. Requires development of appropriate software to be computable,
7. Generates a systematic design procedure with the notion of generalised product.

The method encourages the construction of models based on a variety of views of the same scenario. A scenario may currently exist or can be the product of imagination. This results in the possibility of exploring scenarios which is of importance in organisations or in any kind of human activity.

Conclusions

This writing is a rather hurriedly constructed reaction to the 8th of December SPMC meeting, especially to the remark on page 28 of [the Special Edition of] *Systemist*: 'need for rigorous systems thinking is growing'. But hopefully it sums up a proposal for a systems theory development to initiate debate and evaluation. Much of the work has been published, there are a number of papers awaiting refereeing and much is still under development.

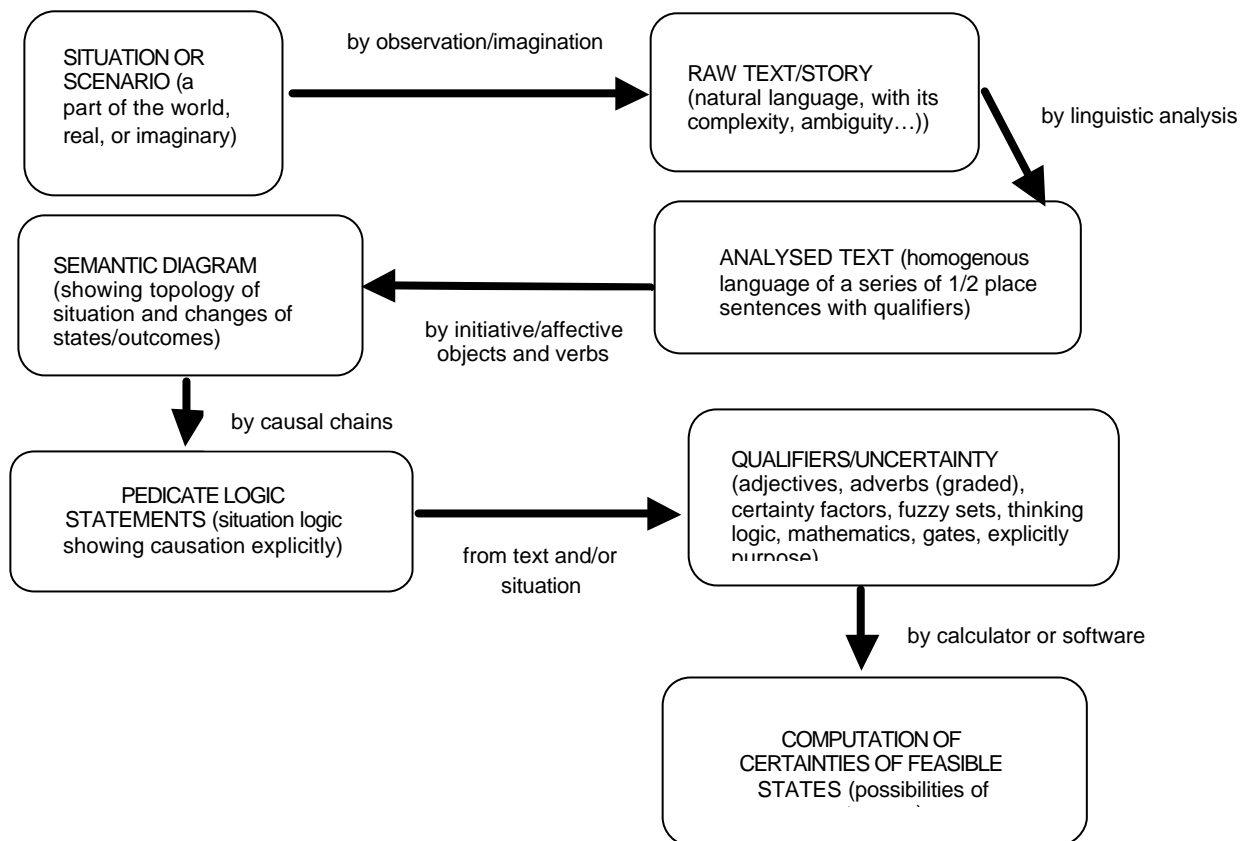


Fig.1. Stages of linguistic modelling of situations

Editor's Note: I thank Janos for offering his reflections on our workshop and outlining his own perspective. The offer is there for members of the Network to respond to Janos either directly, through this Newsletter or through future meetings.

4.5 John MacDonald

John writes:

Dear Ray,

I wish to express my appreciation for the work that you and your colleagues put into organising this splendid event which introduced the audience to the current interesting developments in systems practice and activities of the global systems community. The occasion was enhanced by the warm informal social atmosphere and the excellent cuisine. One topic introduced which was of particular interest to me was the need for a systems practitioner to communicate systems perspectives to those unfamiliar with the tools of systems analysis. This may include concepts, methods, methodologies and diagrams, plus borrowing features from a range of academic disciplines when pertinent.

My earliest association with systems thinking came via the OU in the early 70's. About the time of the introduction of the Health and Safety at Work Act, I was working for a major oil company and my role was to ensure the integrity of a petrochemical complex. I was required to give a presentation to other department heads on how this was being accomplished. I prepared a series of diagrams to support my discussion and communicate how this complex task was being addressed. With experience the initial ideas were developed and I led seminars at academic and engineering environments. Presentations were deliberately short on concepts and methodologies, but heavily weighted towards diagrams supported with short explanations. This approach seemed to be successful in explaining my holistic systems perspective on the complexities encountered. I also made use of this strategy in carrying out engineering audits, consultancies and subsequent reports on work in the Far and Middle East, Europe and the UK.

I hope you enjoyed the festive season and 2002 will be a good year for you.

Regards,

John MacDonald

Editor's Note: I want to thank John for his letter and to acknowledge receipt of his diagrams and other material. We shall be exploring how these might be incorporated in future editions of the Newsletter.

5. Concluding comments and future directions

Following the 8th December meeting I wrote to my colleagues in the Systems Discipline at the OU in the following terms. I offer it here as a summary of the day and its outcomes:

'A very successful first ever joint meeting of the UKSS and OUSyS was held here at the OU on Saturday hosted by the SPMC Network. Peter Checkland and Patricia Shaw spoke and were both very well received. For me they both provided some challenging new insights.

We had about 60 participants (in the end we had to turn people away) with about half-and-half from UKSS and OUSyS. Despite a lack of time in a packed programme those present were positive about the day and a majority wanted another event early in the new year designed to pick up the conversations that were started. SPMC have undertaken to facilitate this happening along with others.

A report of the meeting will be written-up and distributed. There is also demand for an interactive Bulletin Board which we will be investigating.

Most OUSyS members stayed for the AGM. Thanks were expressed for the role Chris Blackmore is taking with the Newsletter. There were many positive comments about initiating a joint meeting with UKSS. At the OUSyS meeting it was decided to:

- 1. Keep annual fee at current level;*
- 2. Maintain the current management model of two central and two regional coordinators (as central academics we have responsibility for deciding who the two central staff will be). It was decided to call for nominations from non-central staff via the next newsletter. (AndyLane as chair of the meeting has undertaken to do this as well as provide a financial report for the next Newsletter).*

My thanks also to Jacqueline for her hard work in making the day a success.

Ray

PS. By the time you have received this you may have also received news about the next SPMC event. Whilst this is designed for those less familiar with Systems than many OUSyS and UKSS folk (e.g. many in our first SPMC event) we think it will have much to offer. So I hope to see you there. We have not forgotten the promise to host a follow-up day based on continuing your conversation of December the 8th. More news soon.

PPS. I welcome your feedback from this report. It needs interaction and connectivity to become a genuine network. We will also be exploring how we can facilitate our interactions but we are constrained by lack of capacity to act more quickly than we are. Any offers are most welcome.

6. Programme and Participant list

Systems Practice for Managing Complexity (SPMC)

Workshop with the United Kingdom Systems Society and the Open University Systems Society, 8th December 2001, at the Open University Milton Keynes

Programme

- | | |
|-------|--|
| 10.00 | Coffee and Registration |
| 10.30 | Introduction/Summary |
| 11.00 | Small group workshops |
| 11.45 | Plenary session |
| 12.15 | Address by Peter Checkland |
| 1.00 | Lunch |
| 1.45 | Address by Patricia Shaw |
| 2.30 | The task for SPMC: small group workshops |
| 3.00 | Summary |
| 3.45 | End of workshop and tea |
| 4.00 | OUSyS and UKSS AGMs start |
| 5.00 | Finish |

Participant names are listed by Society and are sorted alphabetically by first name (some individuals have multiple affiliations).

OUSyS	UKSS	SPMC
Alan Byrom	A. Jagus	Frank Stowell
Alison Hines	A. Paucar-Caceres	Jacqueline Eisenstadt
Andy Lane	C. Elvin	Ray I son
Anne Marie Strauss	C.H. Richardson	
C. Webb	D. Champion	
D. Byford	D. Cronin	
Elaine Pugh	D. Simpson	
Geoff Moss	D. Tsagdis	
I an Cooper	D.J. Powell	
J. McDonald	E. M. Dowse	
J. McGregor	G.J. Mansell	
J. Pannett	G.L. Mason	
Jane Cosgrove	Gerald Midgley	
John MacDonal d	Gill Ragsdell	
M. Tranter	H. Williams	
M.J. Collins	I an Munro	
Mike Painter	J. Boarder	
Mrs S Martin	J. Korn	
Paul Nason	Jim Howell	
Peter Copping	K. Ellis	
R.G. Saunders	Keith Sawyer	
Rachel Andrews	M. Hebel	
Ray Last	M. Young	
Rosemary Harris	P. Hearne	
S.C. Hamilton	Paul Lewis	
Stephen Martin	R. Elvin	
Steve Turner	R. Lo	
Sylvia Brown	R. Rowe	
Terry Giles	R. Sherwood	
Tony Wright	Roger Stewart	
	Sue Holwell	

