

## Notes from Plenary Session, SPMC Conference 16 July 2003

The speakers were introduced by Ray Ison. They were Janice Jiggins, Klaus Krippendorff, Richard Bawden and Tom Bentley.

**Janice Jiggins** began by reflecting on what she had heard during the day. Her first impression was that some issues were being experienced by conference participants as 'scary'. What we have been hearing about how the world is changing is generating a climate of fear. Understanding that systems thinking helps, is to perceive how to deal with fear. She drew on a quotation from Maturana to demonstrate that conflict = mutual negation, and that we need to move towards different groupings so as to achieve co-existence. People do not want to work together.

There are three large questions:

- 1) How to...how can we use metaphor, not only to engage in conversation, but to disengage and re-engage on other terms? What role is there for metaphors?
- 2) Epistemic? Is there any circumstance in which it is ethically right to intervene to stop conversations which deny co-existence? Should there be a pre-emptive strike to actions which deny co-existence?
- 3) We have had conversations with those involved in corporate activities, such as Tom Bentley. Are we falling into a systemic trap by thinking of government rather than governance? Is it possible to think of ways of moving towards new framework conditions where certain situations can be created? Is it possible to create a new relationship between agency and citizens - she quoted the example of the emergence of new pressure groups and environmental movements. There need to be ways of expressing political points which do not go through normal channels.

**Klaus Krippendorff** picked up the point of the negation of the Other and the need for the ethical perspective. All issues where negation of the Other occur come where there is a high level of distractions - country, statehood....He referred to Wittgenstein and the issue of discourse and how this may involve people. Defining the nature of languaging - utterances, who says what - he emphasized the difference between conversation and discourse. Conversation is open, and occurs rarely. Body language is part of languaging. With written language, certain things are lost. He discussed the metaphor of power and language, including manipulation - what happens to those who listen? So what can be done with these theories? He invites us to take responsibility for what we say and to learn to understand how language uses us. When asked by a member of the audience what you should do with metaphors we don't want, he responded Don't use it!

**Richard Bawden** pointed out that a number of recurring themes which generate themes are used in different ways. Responsibilities should be ethically rather than technocentrally grounded. Questions such as whose ethics? What does inclusive wellbeing mean? need to be brought into the discourse. We need to challenge metaphors to clarify our own position and that of others. Universal inclusive wellbeing is not feasible. He discussed the concept of deliberative democracy - should democracy be the number one priority in life? Can you destroy the environment around you in the name of democracy? We need to return to small groups engaging with each other to explore better ways forward.

*Comment from the audience: Klaus Krippendorff indicated that a phrase such as Fetch the head of the household to me is created and maintained by speech acts. Does this relate to social systems? This is reminiscent of the sociology of the 1960s. And, to Richard Bawden, where is the soft systems perspective? There is no halfway position. There are systems out there and we know there are descriptions of them. He feels that the presenters have failed to engage with the differences between the world as systemic and using systemicity to create a process to learn about the world.*

**Klaus Krippendorff** responded that the point of a speech act is that it is an act of commitment that holds systems together.

*Question from the audience: Surely conversation and conflict are directly opposite?*

**Janice Jiggins** commented that social organisations are held together by commitments - speech acts - but people can say that they don't like the conversation, or refuse to have conversations, thus denying the possibility of co-existence.

*Question from the audience: What are we learning about doing that?*

**Tom Bentley** said that it was possible to imagine a process leading to fundamental adjustment to social conditions. Agencies and citizens are not different from others.

**Richard Bawden** said that it was difficult to bring different discourses together. Outrage is unbelievably significant and justifiable.

*Comment from the audience: For Tom Bentley: there were many misunderstandings of the place of the observer in the diagram - there were no opportunities to go back. He mentioned the recent Third Way conference - but there was no report in the media. How should we communicate with those who want to know?*

**Tom Bentley** quoted the experience of DEMOS in setting different thresholds according to different conversations. Need to investigate the metaphor level of mutual misconception/misunderstandings and enable them to grow. Many powerful ideas start off half-baked! We need to find different kinds of understanding, different ways of finding out people's priorities. Examples are electronic networks for teaching - offering some new sources of differentiation such as flexibility. To spark conversations we need to link to metaphors - what we really need is a different kind of mechanism. No mechanism will do what they want to achieve ie process. Proximal space is needed to replace metaphor with something vaguely recognisable to the others.

*Comment from the audience: In relation to the electronic networks - how can we reconceptualise the notion of the school and the school environment?*

**Tom Bentley** responded: How do we ask the question What do schools want to learn and what might they want to share? Two specific things have been found to be really useful (and these might form part of an answer to the original third question). DEMOS have found possible uses for systemic learning in the establishment of norms in everyday behaviour, so do with external relationships. Not many people understand the way in which norms can be used. How can we change the framework

conditions? Policymakers' resources need to be spread across the environments where the process is being carried out (and not in government departments). Solutions can be found among people and practitioners. How can these be found while still carrying out the day job? Continuous evolution of micro experiences is necessary, and the innovation strategy must be much more distributed.