

Call for Papers

Special Issue of Systemist Journal

Systems thinking education for professional practice?

Despite decades of recognition that holistic approaches to problem structuring are needed in real-world contexts, it is still often observed that professionals and managers tend to focus upon the concrete when, for instance, they attend development workshops and lectures. This is understandable because working life is busy, and it is much easier to find time to seek out new, fully-developed solutions to common problems than to take time to challenge the rationale and thinking processes that underpin such a search. Thus, we find in project management that the focus still tends to converge upon the so-called 'Iron Triangle' of time, cost and specified quality. In IS development, professionals may be aware that formal methods have some drawbacks and that more holistic approaches such as SSM are available to them, but they lack a deep, systemic understanding to be able to choose from and combine methods to co-create an effective methodology. In management practice, decision-making approaches still tend to focus upon achievement of planned objectives, even though successive authors have shown such a model to be misleading.

Approaches that are intended to be used in an expansive way, increasing richness and depth of understanding, are often translated instead into reductionist methods that are quicker and easier to assimilate in use. In each case, complexity can remain unrecognized and there is a danger that ambiguous situations are addressed as if they were clear and straightforward. It is conceived as more important to be seen to be doing something about a problem, than making actual progress towards achieving a result that is experienced as useful. Two examples of such a strategy can be seen in the RISE Systems framework for education, and the Systems Thinking Toolkit for Civil Servants. The former is said to be 'sufficiently structured to give boundaries to the analysis but sufficiently flexible to be adapted to multiple scenarios'. The latter offers a 'Systems Thinking Journey ... written to help policy makers and others to use systems thinking to effectively navigate complexity'. It is submitted that, for Systemists, boundaries cannot be 'given', nor is complexity something to be 'navigated'. These terms suggest that reductionist, rather than open Systems thinking is involved.

Domenici (2020) points out that there is an urgency to rethinking opportunities for learning because the curricula of our educational institutions still do not provide sufficient underpinning for students to grapple with '*hypercomplexity*' in all our political, cultural and social processes, with '*their indeterminateness, interdependence and interconnection*'. It is difficult to disagree when we are living in an age of impending climate catastrophe and societal conflict. However, even at the level of professional practice, it can be seen that development of new and 'better' methodologies will not serve our purposes if we do not first inculcate capacity for systemic thinking in those who will evaluate, select and use them in context. The advent of a Systems Thinking apprenticeship scheme is welcome, but wider opportunities to develop awareness of complexity are needed at all levels of the curriculum, in schools and universities as well as at postgraduate or post-experiences stages.

The purpose of this special issue of Systemist is therefore to invite discussion of the ways in which educational curricula at different levels need to change to address the on-going needs of organisations and society.

Contributions are invited on any systemic topic relevant to the theme set out above. Guidelines for authors and Submission details are available on the Systemist webpages.