

The Challenge of Complexity

Moving from Self as Instrument to Self as Participant

By Graham Curtis

As a practitioner of organisational development, how often have you heard descriptions or even prescriptions for how to intervene in an organisational system? I know that for me these terms are ubiquitous and usually get everyone in the room nodding along appreciatively. Especially if the person describes the system as “*complex*” and/or “*adaptive*”. At a recent event I attended the presenter said exactly that, something along the lines of “...of course we all know organisations are complex adaptive systems.” and had everyone in the room agreeing with her.

I wonder how many of us reflect on where these terms come from and what they mean. Ludwig von Bertalanffy is often attributed with the development of systems thinking with his open systems theory, although thinking in terms of systems goes all the way back to the philosopher Immanuel Kant and his recognition of human autonomy. Kant argued that we could think of things in nature ‘as if’ they were systems to inquire into our experience of them. Kant also warned against thinking of human social interaction in terms of systems. However, it seems that not only have we forgotten the metaphorical ‘as if’ distinction that Kant advised but we have also either missed or disregarded his warning about thinking of human social phenomena in systems terms.

This provides us with something of a quandary. If we cannot think of organisations in terms of systems then how do we think about them? Ralph Stacey and other researchers working in the so-called ‘complexity group’ in the University of Hertfordshire have written extensively about the human experience of working with organisations and for a while they also argued for thinking about organisations in terms of complex adaptive systems. However, for a long time now they have argued that organisations should not be regarded as systems and instead they suggest that organisations are imaginative constructs that emerge from our everyday interaction. By this I mean that thinking in terms of systems then enables and constrains what we think is possible to do together as we work with people in organisations. These researchers argue for thinking about organisational life in terms of complex responsive processes in which the individual and the social emerge together in a paradoxical and dialectical relationship. We become who we are through our experience of others and vice versa. There is no system, there is nothing else going on but conscious human bodies constraining and enabling each other.

Together we maintain the idea of organisations which then enables and constrains what we think is possible. Using analogies drawn from complexity science, Stacey et al argue that as a consequence of the many interactions between people, the future is fundamentally unpredictable. They further argue that thinking in terms of systems gives us the idea that we can understand a cause and effect relationship between organisational inputs and outputs, thereby managing the anxiety that arises from life’s inherent unpredictability.

A few years ago I was working with the board of a large not for profit organisation in the UK. I had done a review of the effectiveness of the senior leadership in one of the organisations sub-divisions. As I was thinking about how I would present my findings, I harked back to my OD education and took up the Burke-Litwin model, a thoroughly dependable systems model. There are many derivations of such models, they can usually be identified as a big box with smaller boxes inside. Arrows and lines are also popular. Even as I was using it, I was becoming sceptical of systems thinking and yet I also knew it would have the desired effect of convincing anyone in my audience who might doubt my findings or my competence. I wonder how many of you are doing the same kind of thing in your practice?

The problem is, in my view, such models offer a form of predictability that cannot be delivered and even if the promised results are delivered, such models mask the power struggles that went on in delivering them.

So if we cannot predict the outcome of any interaction or intervention, then how can we understand our practice and move away from thinking of ourselves as instruments of a system?

I want to put forward an argument for thinking of ourselves as participants in the ongoing organisational complex responsive processes. When we work with others we join them in conversations that are already fairly firm in people's minds as to what is and is not possible in the specific contexts that have historically emerged in that organisation. I think this is an important point because this points to the fallacy of considering emergent and planned approaches to organisational change as if they are either/or choices. Emergence is simply what happens over time as people work together. Of course, we do make choices about how to get things done and those choices serve to further enable and constrain our conversations. This enabling and constraining often relates to making strategies and plans and creating policies. These things then in turn constrain and enable us as we agree or disagree with each other in enacting them. When we engage with others as practitioners I think it's our job to help them think about the history of what they have either forgotten or taken for granted about what is possible. I don't think our job is to get everyone to agree, I think it is to help people reflect on what they are arguing about.

To do this we need to think of ourselves as reflexive practitioners. I am using this word reflexive to take a step further than simply being reflective. As I've said earlier, when we work with others our sense of who we are is also being formed and potentially transformed in those interactions. We need to pay attention not only to what is going on between others but also what is going on for ourselves as we get involved. Bringing these processes to the attention of others can often result in difficult and conflictual interactions, people being excluded, and the emergence of uncomfortable emotions such as anger, shame and guilt. We just need to look at recent examples of whistle-blowers in the NHS and social care to see how that can play out. I don't think we should shy away from the potential for conflict. As Michael Foucault, the French philosopher argued, conflict can be generative as well as destructive.

It's important then that we develop expert practical judgement (what Aristotle called phronesis) in engaging in such conversations. Another French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu argued that, as individuals, we are formed by what he called the 'habitus' in which we exist. He suggested that we are shaped by the habitus and we then work with others to maintain it. I think this is an explanation for why we keep holding on to systems thinking. Bourdieu argued that **to be reflexive is to become aware of our habitus**. That is to say the habits we have built up over time in how we think. This is the skill of the reflexive practitioner as a participant in everyday organisational life. A way of practicing that requires us to take our experience seriously. As we build experience of working reflexively with other people how we are feeling is the data that we can introduce into narrative inquiry with others.

The good news is that I think it is possible, through experimenting in groups, and understanding the context we are working in, to develop our reflexive practice and our practical judgement. In doing so we can then support the people we work with in organisations to do the same. We can then let go of the comfort blanket of systemic instrumentality, and engage in the potential for transformational participation.

Graham Curtis, 2017

