

Editorial

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*"Spring is sprung, the grass is riz!
I wonder where the birdies is?"**

Hello All,

the systems grass seems to be sprouting like couch grass at the moment! In this newsletter we have the regular updates from the teams involved in the development of the website, the organizational maturity model and the SCiO members survey. SCiO is moving South from its heartland in the North West of England to

offer a beginners level VSM course to at Milton Keynes in April. We also have news of a newly devised modular postgraduate level MSc course being offered by the Open University as a way of learning more and consolidating your systems thinking.

And to add to this, we have an eyewitness account of Stafford Beer in action from Denis.

Enjoy the spring!

Dave and Gordon

**Ogden Nash*

What you'll find inside.....

Stories: At Last - The First Meeting with Stafford Beer—page 2

Denis is the first member to come forward with a story. This one recalls a meeting with Stafford Beer about a PhD project. What about you? Do you have a story to tell that sheds light on an aspect of systems thinking *in practice*? (page 2)

Parish Notices—page 2

SCiO survey results — page 3

The results of the recent survey of members have been analysed in more detail and Sally presents some conclusions. (page 3)

Forthcoming meetings—pages 4 and 5

Find out what is on the agenda at the next open meeting and what happens at development days.

VSM training—page 5

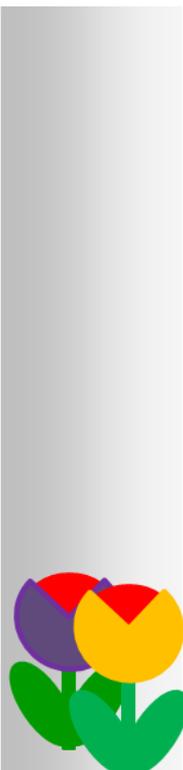
Details of a VSM workshop for beginners to be held in Milton Keynes.

Developing your systems thinking in practice—page 6

Perhaps you are new to the area, or maybe you've been doing "systems" a while and (like me!) you feel that you need to know more about what is behind it and understand alternative approaches better. Some new postgraduate level courses from the OU may help.

Bookworm—page 7

Some newly published books on systems thinking and systems approaches. Do you know of others?



She was an ex-international netball player and a freelance international coach and wanted to understand how her national sport organisation worked.

Stories: At Last - The First Meeting with Stafford Beer

Fil was a lecturer in sports science and had submitted an application to the Polytechnic research committee to enrol on a PhD programme. The committee had suggested that she chat with me.

As she outlined her ideas and questions it was clear that she needed to know about Stafford's works. She was an ex-international netball player and a freelance international coach and wanted to understand how her national sport organisation worked.

We discussed supervisors and I suggested that Stafford Beer would know who might be qualified in the UK.

Fil and I met Stafford 'in the bar at twelve' at Manchester Business School sometime in June 1981.

We arrived early and the receptionists at MBS told us to wait in the bar because Stafford had just slipped out of the building for a few minutes. I asked them how I would recognise him. They were still laughing when someone rushed in behind us with his characteristic "Hello"; it was Stafford.

After getting the drinks, he immediately started asking some questions about the roles of people involved in the system. How do people find a club? Why do they get involved? How do they progress from club to national team? Do all members want to be elite athletes? What do the others want from a club? Do the various club committees support both types of members? Why on earth do people want to spend time on committees? And so on. He eventually made several points that could set Fil going on some fact finding. To our amazement Stafford offered to be the supervisor.

During the drive back to Liverpool, Fil was still reeling from the experience and asked me how, after just two hours of discussion, Stafford could understand more about the organisation workings than she could, after being in the system for over 20 years.

I said that's what a scientific model does for you, and a lot of experience.

Denis Adams

Parish Notices—AGM and Elections

AGM in April.

In previous years, the AGM has been run as an all day decision workshop for member to set the direction for SCiO for the next year. Following the establishment last year of a functioning board which can take most of the executive decision and also because we seem to have rather better momentum, we're cutting the AGM element of the meeting to an hour and running the rest of the day as a normal open meeting with the usual selection of presentations and workshops.

For those concerned about the board taking decision on behalf of the group, board meetings are open to any member and you are welcome to come and make a contribution. The board are still following the strategic direction set at the meeting last year – and there is still plenty to do....

Can I remind members that there is still

time to make nominations for board appointments. All board positions are up for election by ballot at the AGM.

Patrick

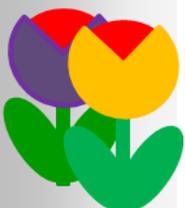
SCiO Elections.

I have offered to be the returning officer for the upcoming elections for membership of the SCiO board. The elections are for the following roles; Board and Legal Secretary, Chair, Commercial Lead, Communications Lead(2) – web & newsletter, Education Lead, Meetings Lead, Membership Secretary, Non-executive board members (3), Outreach and Treasurer

Please e-mail me before the end of March if you would like to nominate anyone or yourself.

Alex Hough: r.a.hough@googlemail.com

AGM in April Nominations for board appointments to Alex.



SCiO survey results

We have now done some more analysis of the recent survey of the SCiO Community. It's very clear from the survey that people value SCiO, feel committed to it, and would like to see the community grow in both scope and numbers.

By far the most popular reasons for participating were to learn more about Systems Practice and to network with like-minded people for support. Other popular choices were to get advice on systems issues, share knowledge, promote the practical application of systems, and identify opportunities for collaboration on joint projects.

Around 50% of respondents were based in SCiO's Northern UK 'heartland'. However, we also had 3 replies from outside the UK and 25% said that they rarely or never attend meetings. Unsurprisingly, work priorities, travelling time/cost and other commitments are barriers for some people, especially those not self-employed, but there was not an obvious case for changing the current arrangements, apart from investigating the possibility of holding a meeting in a more southerly location (any volunteer hosts should contact Doug Haynes). People generally expressed satisfaction with the meeting content and organisation and supplied some good ideas for future ones.

A number of people expressed a preference for practical content over theory and were keen to see SCiO develop accessible introductions to Systems Thinking, to help draw in a wider audience of general

professional and managerial people. One person expressed a desire for SCiO to focus more on VSM/cybernetics, others wanted to embrace a wider range of Systems Practice concepts.

A key objective of the survey was to explore digital communication needs and possibilities. The importance of this is now very clear, given the desire to expand Scio membership and the fact that a significant proportion of the group are not able to get to meetings regularly. Nearly everyone was keen on having a newsletter and most people wanted to be able to communicate directly with other members. About 50 % of people use online discussion groups and a very small proportion of members are making active use of social media tools such as Twitter. While few people expressed overt discomfort with technology, some reservations were also expressed, including lack of time and a desire to maintain privacy. Some pointed out that the Open University facilitates online interaction very successfully.

The survey provided plenty of scope for freeform comment, and the recipients took the opportunity to make many helpful suggestions. We won't list them all here, but every member of the SCiO board has received an anonymised copy of the survey results. We will explore the topic of using online tools to further Scio members' aims at the next Open Meeting.

Sally Bean

The tentacles of SCiO are gradually infiltrating the South East, soon the whole of the UK will be

The Organisational Maturity Model

The OMM group have recently reviewed the work carried out so far on developing this diagnostic tool.

- The questionnaire content has remained stable,
- The IT implementation is substantially complete and requires thorough testing and final tidying of the presentation,
- The pathologies require some further reworking

The user testing of the IT version is now

completed and the group are currently deciding on which of the suggested changes need to be implemented before a first release can be issued.

The group have also decided to develop a paper version of the OMM, based on the same content as the IT version.

We hope to be able to announce that one or both of these versions of the OMM will be available in the near future.

Jane Searles

The OMM tool is being developed as an IT and paper-based diagnostic tool.

Forthcoming Meetings

A members only AGM will be held on 19th April from 10-11am in the penthouse suite of MBS West.

The AGM will be immediately followed by an open meeting starting at 11:20am and running to 4.30pm

MBS - Penthouse Suite

£10 fee

SCiO AGM – members only – 19th April 10-11:00am, MBS West - Penthouse Suite

Separate email communication from Jane

SCiO Open Meeting – all welcome— 19th April 11:20-4:30pm, MBS West - Penthouse Suite

Session 1: Sally Bean and Team: SCiO Journey – from an *Informal Network* to a *Community of Practice*

This session aims to share and discuss what we think are the key elements of a successful community of practice and how SCiO might move forward with this vision. Sally will briefly summarise the outcomes of the SCiO Survey which confirm that SCiO is both expanding and changing its nature from a relatively informal network to a more explicit Community of Practice that actively develops and maintains a 'body of knowledge'.

One emerging key element is the ease and effectiveness of on-line IT support for communication and collaboration. So for example, many SCiO members want to be able to com-

municate with each other more easily outside the context of meetings. SCiO is starting to produce enduring content (newsletters etc) and there is a demand for more such material. So we need better communication and documentation/reference tools, and to do this, we need to understand what activities we want to support with IT.

Sally and Team will attempt to present the key concepts, leverage relevant current thinking, and share personal experiences on communities of practice, drawing from a new book 'Digital Habitats' (Wenger)

Workshop: A 'Digital Habitat' for SCiO – including shaping our on-line community

The workshop, through discussion groups, will try to synthesize views on several 'shaping' issues:-

Are there enough people who will ACTIVELY participate in a SCiO online community to make it worth moving forward?

What should be our focus areas for SCiO activities and supporting tools to support members' systems practice (e.g. a discussion forum which provides facilitated Q & A around Systems usage, and/or tools that facilitate the co-creation of a Systems Practice 'elevator

pitch')?

What pointers do we need to give our technical experts to start thinking about the next phase of development of the SCiO website www.scio.org.uk ?

Can we continue on-going conversations about user requirements for online tools in the SCiO Google group discussion forum, so that remote people can participate too?

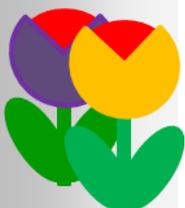
Session 2: Michael Cavanagh: Managing Complex Projects

While it is inarguable that many complex projects have indeed over-run and under-delivered, it is profoundly untrue that this is an inevitable outcome. Rather, it is simply the case that the prevailing acquisition environment militates towards failure. It is unrealistic to depend on toolsets and skillsets that may be adequate for simple projects but cannot cope with complexity. They might work sometimes – but their success has probably owed more to individual heroism and the conjunctions of the planets

than the suitability of the processes deployed.

There are four major issues to address:

- **The Conspiracy of Optimism.**
- **Appropriate Contracting Models;** committing before knowing what you are committing to.
- **Complex Project Management Competencies & Tools;** what is 2nd order PM?
- **Leadership** in complex projects



SCiO Development Day - all members welcome

Our next Development Day is on Sunday 18th April at MBS. You don't have to provide a topic for discussion.

We had a record attendance at our last one in January and if attendance continues to grow there maybe enough interest to start a second group somewhere in the South?

If you are a member of SCiO and haven't been to a SCiO development day before, how about giving it a try? Or if you would like to if only there was one in the South, please let me know.

If you plan to attend, please let me know.

Topics for the day

These can either be communicated before-hand or developed on the day. If you plan to attend and would like to provide an initial summary of your topic by Friday 9th April, then I will send your topic information on to those members who are planning to be there. Alternatively you can provide topics as part of developing the agenda

at the start of the meeting. If you would like to bring with you a number of copies of a paragraph describing your topic and what you would like to get out of discussing it, then these can be distributed at the time.

Confidentiality and publication

Any participant can require their topic to be treated confidentially. A list of the non-confidential topics will be published in the following SCiO newsletter. Any participant who chooses can provide a write-up of their topic after the session and these write-ups will contribute to our ongoing development materials on the SCiO website.

So, I am looking forward to an interesting set of discussions on the 18th April and hope that these arrangements will enable everyone who participates to experience useful interactions.

Jane Searles

**The Next One:
Development
Day,
Sunday 18th
April 2010 ,
members only
10am to 4pm
Manchester
Business
School**

VSM skills and training: beginners level course

This is a whole day workshop designed for those relatively new to the Viable System Model and provides basic training in building a model of an organisation using VSM.

The attendees work together in groups to develop their model of a case study organisation and to diagnose weaknesses. The workshop follows a structured approach, with a series of steps that take the groups through a modelling process in (relatively !) easy stages.

The case study is based on a real organisation – a medium sized IT and office supplies company and provides a platform for developing the skills needed to take normal organisational information, show how that relates to the VSM

and how the VSM can provide a set of new insights into the company.

The workshop will be run by Patrick Hoverstadt of Fractal.

Booking: The workshop is open to members and non-members of SCiO. The fee for SCiO members and for students on the OU's T306 course is £20 and for non-members is £50.

Places are limited, so please book early.

Contact:

Jane Searles jane.searles@btinternet.com or

Patrick Hoverstadt Patrick@fractal-consulting.com

**A Beginners
Level
Workshop
24th April
2010.
The Open
University,
Milton
Keynes**

The Systems Minefield: a two day course for the systemically confused.

Systems" is a wide-ranging set of disciplines covering many approaches and problem areas. Choosing which approach is appropriate is not easy. This two day course will cover a set of systems methodologies and for each one show:

how it works, the issues and scale it can address, how difficult it is to learn and apply, how fast it is to use, what you need to know before choosing.

This is education, and emphatically not sales.

The course is aimed at those who are advising on approaches, those who are responsible for assessing bids using systems approaches, those

working alongside consultants on an intervention and taking over the work when they have finished, involved in performance measurement to understand how the basis of performance will change

The course can be run for a minimum of 20 and a maximum of 50 people.

For more information contact

Patrick@fractal-consulting.com or

aidan_ward@antelopes.com

An opportunity to develop your systems thinking in practice

The Open University has launched a new modular MSc Systems Thinking in Practice, the first module of which entitled 'Thinking Strategically: systems tools for managing change' starts on the 1st May. The purpose of the award is to enable you to link and integrate your professional knowledge with your management knowledge through the use of systems thinking in developing your professional practice. The key steps to the award are: -

Postgraduate Certificate Systems Thinking in Practice consists of TU811 "Thinking Strategically: systems tools for managing change" (30 points) plus one other 30 point postgraduate course. There are a range of option courses that can be studied to enable you to develop your business and management knowledge or your professional area technical knowledge.

TU811 takes you on an exploration of your own domain of interest so that you gain knowledge in your own interest area, and develops your skills in the use of five established systems tools – System Dynamics, the Viable System Model, Strategic Options Development and Analysis, Soft Systems Methodology and Critical Systems Heuristics and also explores some more psychological aspects of those who use the tools – issues to do with cognition and thinking skills, and how we, as human beings, try to 'make sense' of our often bewildering world.

Postgraduate Diploma Systems Thinking in Practice consists of the Postgraduate Certificate plus the second of the systems practice courses TU812 "Managing systemic change: inquiry, ac-

tion, and interaction" (30 points) and a further 30 point postgraduate option course supporting your professional or management practice.

TU812 examines the processes of inquiry, action and interaction that are central to the process of managing systemic change. Inquiry is a form of practice as well as a disposition. Action is inescapable if one is engaged in practice – but the concern here is to enhance purposeful action through developing and enhancing your systems practice to change situations for the better. The course goes on to consider the implications of the social and institutional contexts of practice and practitioners and how we affect and are affected by them, how these contexts can constrain and enable the processes of managing change.

MSc Systems Thinking in Practice consists of the Postgraduate Diploma plus a further 30 point postgraduate option course supporting your professional or management practice followed by a 30 point integrative project T842 (This course is currently being updated to accommodate the new requirements). The purpose of the project is to enable you to tackle a substantive project in which you will be able to show off your systems thinking and systems practice skills.

For more information: Call 0845 3668017; Visit www.openuniversity.co.uk/STIP; Register before 12th April 2010

Robin Asby

The Open University is now offering postgraduate certificate, diploma and Masters courses in Systems Thinking in Practice.



Bookworm: some interesting new offerings from the OU/Springer

Systems Thinkers

Magnus Ramage and Karen Shipp.

Springer; x, 316pp. edition (18 Sep 2009)

ISBN: 978-1848825246

One of the problems with Systems Thinking and systemic approaches in general is that they form elements of a meta-discipline which can be applied in a wide range of areas, consequently, the epistemology of approaches to thinking systemically has its roots in contributions coming from many diverse areas of human endeavour. This book provides a history of the field itself through a consideration of the works of thirty major thinkers who have provided insights from areas as diverse as chemistry, management and sociology.

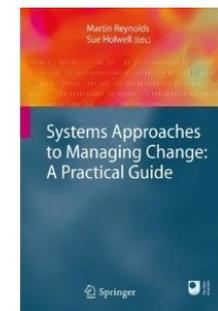
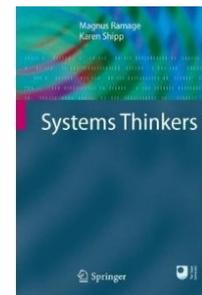
Systems Approaches to managing change : a practical guide

Ed. Martin Reynolds and Sue Holwell

Springer; 309pp edition (15 Mar 2010)

ISBN 978-1848828087

A compilation of readings supporting the OU postgraduate course "Thinking strategically: system tools for managing change" introduces five important systems approaches: systems dynamics (Forrester), VSM (Beer), SODA (Eden), SSM (Checkland) and Critical Systems Heuristic (Ulrich) which can be used to help understanding of complex situations.



Mandelstuff

Tree and leaf, root and branch. The tree is often seen as the archetype of an efficient branching hierarchy and this has been supported by mathematical models which show that indeed, the branching arrangement of the components of your average oak is the most efficient way of getting nutrients around the plant. However, recent work shows that a leaf has a very different structure. It too has a network of tubes transporting stuff around but arranged as an interconnected network of tubes. Loops are the order of the day in the leaf. But why? Physical loops introduce redundancy into the structure and redundancy is expensive from an evolutionary point of view. By looking at what these loops are doing, it

seems that flows of nutrients etc are routed in a subtle response to local needs within the leaf. Even when damaged, the leaf can still make sugar from CO₂, water and light. In other words, they introduce resilience into the network.

The analogy to physical distribution networks in human societies has been drawn and there are lessons to be learnt for electricity and water distribution.

What about *information* flow?

See: "Tree and Leaf", The Economist, 2010, 384 (8699) p 78

Dodds, "Why leaves aren't trees": <http://focus.aps.org/story/v25/st4>



Noticeboard

SCiO

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Membership enquiries:

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Gordon Kennedy
(kennedygordon85@yahoo.com)

Open Meetings

Doug Haynes

Calendar 2010

Upcoming Workshops

1Q10 (date to be finalised) - "The Systems Minefield"- An Overview of Systems Thinking and Practice": a 2 day systems thinking workshop for public sector purchasers

24th April: Beginners VSM Workshop, OU, Milton Keynes

Open Meetings (Mondays, open to all)

- 18th January
- 19th April (AGM)
- 5th July
- 11th October

Development Days (Sundays, members only)

- 17th January
- 18th April
- 4th July
- 10th October

