Learning for Well-being Magazine 5
Published by the Learning for Well-being Foundation
www.l4wb-magazine.org

'Editorial: Living System Perspective,' in Learning for Well-being Magazine, Issue 5, published by the Learning for Well-being Foundation.

Editorial: Living System Perspective

By Linda O'Toole & Jean Gordon

Welcome to the fifth issue of the *L4WB Magazine*.

A key objective for this magazine is to give readers multiple perspectives on selected themes. In a world where a frequent tendency is to stay with one's familiar reference points, we are delighted to offer a space for researchers and practitioners from various fields and sectors to write about their work and experiences for an audience living and working in different countries and circumstances.

For the current issue of the *L4WB Magazine* we have selected the theme of *living systems*, specifically how a living system perspective enhances actions and interactions in various arenas of life. It is worth taking a moment to describe what we mean by the term 'living systems.'

System: A sense of the whole

According to online dictionaries, 'system' is variously defined as: 'a regularly interacting or interdependent group of items forming an integrated whole', 'a set of things working together as parts of a mechanism or an interconnecting network', 'a group of related parts that move or work together', and so forth. A systemic approach is broadly defined but generally contains a focus on paying attention to the whole – whether object, situation, or process – and recognizing the elements or part of this whole as connected and impacting one another. A systemic approach to social policies, for example, emphasizes that 'all elements in the system impact each other vertically/horizontally, affecting the transitions across age, sector, services, but also from service delivery to policy. Therefore, changes need to be seen through the complexity of their impact inside a system.' (INTESYS Toolkit, page 33, Retrieved from http://www.europe-kbf.eu/en/projects/early-childhood/intesys)

Systems science and systems dynamics were originally used primarily in engineering, mathematics, and computer science, and then increasingly in biology, economics and the management sciences. In the last 50 years there has been a growing application of systems

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License: http://creativecommons.org/licenses

theory and systems thinking to the varieties of human experience, so we understand individuals, groups, communities, and societies as systems. With this inclusion of the human experience into the systemic approach, there has been a significant shift towards what is called a living systems approach. What is the difference between a systems approach and a living systems approach, and why does it matter?

The most significant difference, from which the other points flow, is that a living systems approach – whether you refer to it as complex adaptive systems, whole systems perspective, ecological systems or a living systems approach – follows the patterns of nature. The basic premise asserts that life is more accurately viewed as a process, built on relationships and relating, rather than seen as a product or end state. Nature itself, and everything included within that term, works as a *living whole system*.

A living system approach highlights an important distinction with mechanical systems. Machines (computers, airplanes, blenders) are systems, but an intrinsic aspect of mechanical systems is that parts or elements can be repaired and replaced without disturbing the whole. Yet we know, for example, that this does not work in a classroom (which is also a system): you cannot just replace 10 students in a classroom with 10 other children and expect stability. Often, you cannot even predict the impact on the system according to the systems thinking rules for reinforcing and balancing feedback loops.

However, you can apply the basic principles of a living systems perspective to any situation and understand more completely how to work with the circumstances – whether it is a manufacturing organization, a community, a classroom, a child, a star, or a cell. Because these principles are based on the processes of Nature, they apply broadly.

Understanding the dynamics of living systems and the impacts on our well-being

In different contexts and situations, various authors have offered principles of living systems. In fact, in an article in this issue, Richard Dunne lists several principles of living systems that relate to his way of educating.

One of the most distilled lists we have encountered are the three points synthesized by Tom Johnson, a management professor who studies and writes about accounting systems in automakers.[1] He asserts that these principles are fundamental to living systems:

- **Self-organization** refers to the capability of all living entities to define and sustain their own unique identity, even as they constantly adjust and adapt themselves in response to feedback from their environment. This self-organizing power implies the potential to grow limitlessly.
- **Interdependence** refers to the principle by which unlimited growth is prevented. It says that everything in nature is inextricably connected to everything else, and any entity

[1] Johnson, Tom and Anders Brom (2000). *Profit Beyond Measure*. New York: The Free Press.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License: http://creativecommons.org/licenses

seeking to use all the energy in the universe for its own purposes is bound to bump up against, and be challenged by, other entities.
- **Diversity** is the consequence of the interactions among self-organizing entities – the endless generation of new things and, in terms of human entities, new thinking.

Taking an education system as an example of applying these principles, it seems obvious that education must act as a *living* system, rather than a mechanical one. An implicit mandate is that the ways in which people design and think about education matches and capitalizes on the natural and unique ways in which people learn. One of the major attributes of all self-organizing systems – that is 'me', 'us', 'them' and 'it' – is that they **learn**. They do it all the time, and all by themselves. In fact, the structures and controls for this learning come from *within* the system, rather than being derived from outside of it. This is particularly important for us humans to remember because it implies that learning is as natural for us as breathing,

We also know from the principles of living systems that the dynamic balance of individuals is influenced by relationships with the many environments they inhabit, as well as the growth and development within the individuals themselves. This includes all environments – the physical environments of the planet, our homes, our communities, our own bodies, including our senses; the mental environments of our personal beliefs and our cultural norms; the emotional/social environments of how we feel and relate to others; and our spiritual environment – that which inspires us and connects us to something larger than ourselves. These dynamic environments function as nested systems, both vertically (that is, a child in a classroom in a school in a community, etc.) and horizontally (a hungry child interacting with their peers and the available classroom resources, etc.).

Further, the three principles of living systems remind us that diversity is not a concept to be celebrated or an initiative to be implemented but a fact of life. Diversity – which results in the generation of new ideas, new forms, new possibilities and potentials, and optimized choices – is an outgrowth of the interactions of uniquely functioning and interdependent individuals, within the larger contexts of which they are part. This fact has profound implications for how we work with individuals, groups, organizations and communities.

The shift in the worldview from a mechanistic paradigm to one that embraces the living systems perspective directly impacts how we think about issues of well-being for it changes how we think about reality and about what it means to be human.

The articles

In this issue we feature six articles and two viewpoints, all exploring the theme of living systems from different perspectives. The first two articles share a common focus on education, both recommending a living systems approach as a useful way to reshape education systems. The next two articles also examine education from the perspective of living systems, but in both cases with the focus on vocational education and training systems. The last two articles express different views of the impact of systems of specific communities: in one article on the community of those seeking to influence and inform EU

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License: http://creativecommons.org/licenses

policymakers and in the other article exploring the values and the self-organizing principles on community associated with an international conference centre.

We are pleased to begin this issue with Richard Dunne's article on 'Why We Need an Education Revolution.' As head teacher of an English primary school, Richard provides his experience in how teaching can embody the principles of living systems through shaping the experiences in the classroom and the school. He advocates addressing the 'big questions' and engaging students in the world around them so that lessons become projects that are authentically connected to life, and not simply theoretical. It is an approach that offers a blueprint for a new way of educating while referencing the old ways of human–earth interactions.

Jean Gordon's article asks 'How Can a Living Systems Perspective of Learners Contribute to How We Think About Education?' Her ideas resonate with those of the first article, but her perspective broadens to include the ideas of researchers, thinkers and educationalists, specifically on the topics of holistic processes in learning, what we mean by 'the whole child' and the implications for education systems. She concludes with a section on the importance of finding new ways to approach education and schooling in order to foster open democratic systems that allow the creativity of individuals and communities to express themselves fully.

In the third article, 'The Systemic Development of Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Three Countries', David Parkes offers his experience and reflections on systemic change at national level in the vocational education sector in three countries. He links his key question: 'how to make systemic change work **in practice** within the complexity of politics, people, social policy, bureaucracy and the overall environment?' with the questions Jean Gordon explores about developing the whole person in the context of the overall environment, specifically the education environment. The focus is on approaches and mechanisms to bring people(s) together to reach consensus over ways forward, the priority of the consultant being to facilitate consensus rather than to impose agreement.

The interest in Vocational Education and Training continues in the fourth article by Frédéric Bruggeman, 'Has French Decentralisation Fostered Systemic Approaches to Employment, Training and Guidance? The Example of Further Vocational Training.' Frédéric Bruggeman suggests that the process of decentralization in France over recent decades has left a fragmented provision of VET services. His article examines 'how to make systemic change work **in practice** within the complexity of politics, people, social policy, bureaucracy and the overall environment?' He ends on a cautiously optimistic note that the introduction of new experimentation may allow different actors and service providers to work together, to concretely experience the problems-fragmented approaches and to look for ways to overcome them.

Georg Jürgens takes a different view in 'Lobbying for Well-being' on working within large and complex systems. Jürgens is associated with the information and influencing activities of the European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education. ECSWE is a network of 26 national Steiner Waldorf school associations representing 712 schools and 159,230 pupils in 28

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License: http://creativecommons.org/licenses

European countries. Jürgens shares his experience and perspectives on working with the vertical and horizontal complexity of the EU political system and offers this to associates in the ECSWE network as a practical guide for providing policymakers and other stakeholders with information to influence systemic decision-making.

The sixth article for this issue looks at the intrinsic and nested systems of an international conference and training centre, the Caux Forum, run by Initiatives of Change. 'Employing Values, Silence and Dialogue to Bridge Gaps in Status, Culture, Gender, Age, Role and Purpose' 'by Nick Foster suggests that the 70-year-old-experiment in peace-building and reconciliation activities rests on the fundamental that 'change begins with me.' The living system approach is particularly strong in the self-organizing environment that is created by the different conferences over the summer period, through shared values and practices that stress service, connection, and diversity. Various embedded videos provide insights into the experiences of speakers, participants and organizers illustrating individual reflection that facilitates new ideas, undermines stereotypy, and builds unique, often unlikely, alliances that can create new opportunities for change; individual, corporate and/or systemic.

Lastly, we present two viewpoints. Susan Booth shares her experience on 'Facing the Inevitable' as she designs and facilitates a discussion course for her peers (senior learners) on addressing, questioning, challenging and deliberating on the cycles of life and what we experience as the last phase in our individual life cycle, and how we want to approach this season while living fully.

We conclude this issue with Nik Dee Dahlstrom's viewpoint on 'Arts Reflecting Living Systems.' Dahlstrom asks many provocative questions in his presentation, but his central invitation is to ask the reader to engage with all senses open and aware, to move beyond the linear expression of words, and to experience his viewpoint!

We hope you enjoy reading (and experiencing) this issue of the *L4WB Magazine*. We will be very pleased to receive your feedback.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License: http://creativecommons.org/licenses