

Transcript

SIMON BELL: Hi. I'm Simon Bell, Emeritus Prof at the OU. Welcome to the Systems Thinking in Practise podcast.

I tend to think of myself as instinctively systemic. I use systems analysis as my primary means to make sense of the world. For example, in 2017, I studied and wrote a book about fear from a systems perspective, calling it the Formations of Terror. This resulted in the co-publication with the Open University called Project Fear. As it happened, this was prescient because there was an awful lot of fear around, and we still live in times of fear today. Systems approaches are always useful.

Today, my guest is Mo Vernon. Hi, Mo.

MO VERNON: Hi, Simon. Lovely to see you.

SIMON BELL: Lovely to see you, too, Mo. We've worked together on a number of modules over the years, Mo-- summer school, systems courses, environmental management. You've done a lot of student moderation. It's great to have you on the pod.

If I could start off by just asking you a straight question, Mo. How do you use systems in your everyday life?

MO VERNON: Oh wow, it's a good question. I think I use systems all the time. [INAUDIBLE] been using it for so many years.

But one of the main ways I would say I use systems thinking is in appreciating different perspectives because this can shed light on things that I may never have thought of on my own. So I can give you a really good example of why this is important to me in systems thinking. And it came up in consultancy work a few years ago when I was, I was working with my colleague Eddie, and we were working at an NHS hospital. We used to do a lot of work with the NHS. And they wanted to make changes to try and alleviate some of the problems they were experiencing.

So they wanted for us to come in and work through these issues with their top team of managers and some of the consultant doctors. And we agreed to go, but on one condition-- that it was not with the top team, but with a variety of stakeholders as well. And we said we wanted to have representatives of all staff in groups from top to bottom, and also to have some willing users of the system, some of the patients to come along as well.

And I would add here that Eddie and I asked not to know who the different people were, what their roles were. Only their names because we felt it was important that we, too, didn't make any assumptions. And the results of those sessions were amazing, because it opened the top team's eyes up to what the real problems were. Because all the various stakeholders-- none of them knew who anybody else was-- had just amazing views of the system-- completely different to how the top team saw them. And this really helped them to see ways forward.

And for Eddie and I as well, you know, it was really interesting to see how the patients and even the cleaners came up with ideas that top team would never ever have thought of. So for me, this really highlighted the value of thinking about stakeholders in situations, and thinking about how we have to take those views into account, or we're not getting a full picture of what's really going on.

And to be honest, I do enjoy reading theories about systems-- don't get me wrong-- and indeed I use theories about systems. But I learn just as much from working about with people and listening to their perspectives, because that always enhances my own thinking and my own Practise in some way.

SIMON BELL: Well, let me cut in on that point, because it's interesting, isn't it, that systems thinking, systems Practise-- we talk about these two things, but it is one of those areas where the Practise informs the thinking as much as the thinking informs the Practise if you know what I mean.

MO VERNON: Absolutely. The two go hand in hand. They sort of have to, don't they. I like to think of it as systems thinking in Practise, because you are doing it in your Practise, and you can't have one without the other.

SIMON BELL: It's this kind of iteration between Practise and thought, isn't it? It's the way that we complete. But there's an issue there about constant reflective Practise, isn't there? What do you think about reflective Practise?

MO VERNON: I think reflective Practise is vital-- absolutely vital, because if you don't reflect on your own Practise, how can whether or not you're doing things-- I won't say correctly, because I don't personally feel there is a correct or incorrect way, but in an effective way.

And so you have to not just reflect on your own Practise, but reflect on why you're reflecting on your own Practise, so reflection on reflection as it were, and so on. So I think that is important as a practitioner.

SIMON BELL: Because this is one of the things that sometimes drives some of our students a bit nuts, doesn't it? Because we encourage them to reflect, and keep journals, and think about what they're doing. And quite often it takes them a while to see the value in that.

MO VERNON: Oh, absolutely. And I have to say that when I'm teaching on systems courses, I always say right at the start, keep a learning journal, because it's the only way you can reflect on what you're reading, what you're doing, and you will find obviously at the end it will help you with your end of module assessments as well.

And those that do, when I do my final tutorial at the end-- and I always ask the question, how many of you did actually listen to me and keep a journal? And not as many as I would like say yes, but some do. And they have benefited greatly from keeping that learning journal, and I'm always honest and tell them I keep a learning journal. I always have done for many, many years, and will even be writing up from that tutorial what went well, what went not so well, how my life can improve in the future, because you don't remember these things if you don't think about them straightaway afterwards and write them down.

SIMON BELL: It is this process, isn't it, of taking what we know and not assuming that we're going to know it forever. Writing it down somehow, going through the process of transforming our thoughts into a written word, somehow helps-- or even a diagram, somehow or other-- helps us to retain it.

MO VERNON: No, absolutely. I completely agree. Well, we've known each other a long time, Simon. You know I really use diagrams a lot. They're really-- for me they're a really important part of working, you know?

Whenever I'm working on any sort of situation, I'll always do a rich picture to be honest, because they're so useful for capturing information. And I try to say to students, use those pictures if you can.

[INAUDIBLE] what they look like. They're your thoughts. They're your reflections. You might find there's an easier way of doing things.

And what I say to them is it's like being in a police drama. When you watch any police drama, they have a board, and they put up everything they know. They put up the suspects and their weapons and they make connections.

And I said, it's like-- it's being in a police drama, and you're collecting all your evidence. You're putting it all together, making those connections, because there's always connections. If there's no connections, then there's possibly not even a real problem.

But making those connections between things, and thinking about you have something like what's involved, what's not, what people are involved, who's involved, what are their roles, what are the conflicts-- and put everything that you can think about into your rich picture. And that's the same with your reflection. Think about everything.

SIMON BELL: Yeah. When you wrote to me earlier on saying that you think your teaching helps to change people's problem solving and problem thinking capabilities for the better, how do systems help us to manage or improve our problem solving capabilities?

MO VERNON: I think that systems thinking, in my view, improves all problem-solving thinking, whether you're looking at it as a high level-- looking at high level issues like environmental concerns-- or whether you're looking at it sort of at a community level. If you don't think in a systemic way, I think you're missing an awful lot.

So for example-- if I give you an example of local community issues, because I think people can relate to that best. Nowadays, we tend to find that increasingly we have traffic problems-- traffic congestion. And you always hear, oh, we need to be building new roads. New roads are the only way forward, and they talk about it all the time.

However, [INAUDIBLE] building more roads to address that congestion, which would have an effect on the environment apart from anything else, systems thinking can help us to think of new ways for people to move around. So by using systems thinking, we can find fresh approaches to things-- fresh approaches to solve challenges that we all meet almost on a daily basis. And these can bring not just new ecological benefits and new economic benefits, but also benefits to us and our Practise.

So in my opinion, to really develop benefits for everybody, whether it's the world, or just the wider community, or just ourselves, we really need to develop systems thinking champions. I would love to see systems thinking champions so that people start to think a bit differently about how they make changes. Because even the smallest group of people who are working towards change can benefit from developing their systems thinking in Practise.

So if we could through education make people aware of just how beneficial thinking in systems is, and how beneficial systems thinking in our Practise is, I think we would end up with much more sustainable changes in our world and in our communities. I'd even like to see it in schools, if I'm really honest-- to start coming out in schools. But that's how I see it being of benefit to people.

SIMON BELL: Thank you, Mo. Mo, we're going to have to draw a line under it now, because we're running out of time. Just as a final comment for the podcast, I'd like to offer this podcast up to the memory of Eddie Hurst. You mentioned Eddie early on. You also mentioned that we need champions, and Eddie was a great champion. We lost him to COVID. He's a great guy, and I'd like to offer this particular podcast in memory of Eddie Hurst, because he was a great friend.

MO VERNON: Simon, thank you so much for that. I can't tell you how much that means to me. He was a huge champion, and his students still remember him to this day when I talked to any of them. He had a

big impact on their lives, but he had a massive impact in mine, because I wouldn't be doing what I do without him. He was a fabulous mentor and a great friend, so thanks for that.

SIMON BELL: And a great systemicist as well. There you go. Thank you, Mo. Thank you ever so much for being with us today. It's been great talking to you.