

# Transcript

SIMON BELL: Hi, I'm Simon Bell. Welcome to this podcast celebrating the teaching and practise of systems at the Open University. I am an emeritus prof in innovation and methodology at the OU. My journey into systems began many years ago working in international development and being confused by the complexity of the world. Like many people in systems, and like some of my guests, I've tried my hand at many things, using systems in all kinds of ways.

For me, systems is mainly about the understanding of the world as relationships, the flows between things. That's what really gets me.

The conversation which follows is intended to be systemic. I'm interested in my guest telling me about themselves, their world, their shared world, and their communities, all from a systems perspective. Today, my guest is Paul Tucker. Hi, Paul.

PAUL TUCKER: Hello, Simon.

SIMON BELL: Hi. Just a few words about you. This is what I know, you can tell me more. You're a sustainability manager at Northampton Partnership Homes.

You've got an OU degree in environmental management and technology, something I'm personally very delighted by, because that involved two modules that I was involved in writing T219 and 319, nine which are brilliant environmental management systems modules, in my humble opinion. I'll you get a word in the minute, whether you want to deny that or not.

And at present, you're a student of Systems Thinking in Practise. So you're an ongoing student in our modules, which is brilliant. Paul, tell me just a little bit more about yourself. Where are you right now in your studies?

PAUL TUCKER: So, I've started doing master's course in systems thinking in Practise. I've finished the first module. And I've just enrolled for the second module.

And I found the jump up to postgraduate level quite a big jump. But the systems thinking module was really, really interesting. It's been really insightful, and I've really enjoyed it.

SIMON BELL: That's brilliant. I mean, obviously, you work in sustainability, and you have the background in environmental management. What does systems thinking bring to your work Practise, to you personally?

PAUL TUCKER: I want I want to bring you back to the module that you mentioned that you wrote in the Open University course I studied, T319 and T219, wasn't it?

SIMON BELL: OK, I was right, yep.

PAUL TUCKER: So they were the first modules that kind of introduced me to systems thinking. And when I first studied those modules, I didn't like it. I found systems thinking really tiresome, and I just didn't get it. I didn't like it at all.

The modules really kind of introduced the idea of soft systems methodology initially. And there was quite a lot of rich picturing and diagramming. And I found that really difficult to deal with. I didn't really like rich picturing and that kind of thing.

But I think that was reflective of the way that I studied and the way that I worked as well. I'm quite impatient. And I tended to study in a way that I read things. And then I wanted to do the coursework and the tests or whatever and then be done.

But eventually, I realised how helpful spending the time to sketch out a situation was to understand things, to actually spend the time on it. So it began to help me to understand things that were quite complex, to actually spend the time to think about things, have a bit more patience.

And that was a really helpful thing for me that's what I really liked about systems thinking so much. It helped me to understand complex situations in a different perspective, to understand my perspective of a system or a situation.

SIMON BELL: That's right. I love the idea that you found systems really off-putting to start with. So it was like a late labour to get you there, to get you into the space. So if you go with systems now, it's because you started off as a doubter and somebody who was annoyed by it, but who made it because you found value in it. Is that right?

PAUL TUCKER: Definitely, yeah. So the first module, I really struggled with. And when we got to the second module, that was when something just clicked, and I just realised how powerful it was. And it became something that I felt was really important to-- it really helped me with my studying and my work. But also, because I was because I intended to have a career in sustainability, it just felt so empowering to me to understand-- sustainability is such a complex thing. If you think about all of the problems of the unsustainable society we live in, it's so complex. And I felt that the systems thinking, the ideas and the Practise behind it was so important to actually make some serious headway in that. So it became to me something, I just felt it was so important for me to understand that better.

SIMON BELL: So that's a fantastic introduction. That's you making your journey to systems. How do you use systems in your approaches or in your work? How does it influence what you do?

PAUL TUCKER: So the thing that I said that upset me so much at first was the rich picturing. But that became my favourite tool in my toolbox, was rich picturing, eventually. It was a thing that I took away the most.

And I would go to work situations-- and I've never been a good note taker. But I just started drawing out things instead. If I went to a meeting, I would draw the meeting. I don't know-- if I did an assessment of a building, I would draw out what I saw rather than take notes of it. And that was kind of given me my perception in the snapshot of what I saw.

It's quite empowering to recognise your own perception sometimes. And I've always struggled with having a bit of a jumbled mess in my head. I find it difficult to understand things sometimes, because I have a lot of thoughts and ideas.

But if you sketch it out as a rich picture, that really helped me to understand some of the things that I was looking at and. I've done that in my work a lot. And actually, some people start to think that was a bit weird. But I quite like doing it.

SIMON BELL: So in terms of your work as a sustainability manager, for example, this idea of being able to sweep in complexity, being able to visualise it by diagrams, by being able to take into account other perspectives, that kind of stuff-- I don't want to lead you too far on this. But would you say that that helps, that's where it helps?

PAUL TUCKER: Yeah, definitely. And just to have a bit of patience sometimes to accept that when particularly when you're trying to create change, a system takes time to change. And if you understand where it is now and where you want it to go to, then you can kind of start to pick out the bits that you want to nudge a little bit. And I felt that was really important.

SIMON BELL: Just for interest sake, Paul, you mentioned that some people may not quite get what you're doing and why you're doing it. Do you find there's an appreciation of the systemic approach? Or do you think most people still find it a bit of a mystery?

PAUL TUCKER: To be honest, I still find it a bit of a mystery. When I try to explain systems thinking to people, I find it so hard to explain it. One of my favourite quotes is by Einstein. And he said "if you can't explain something simply, then you don't understand it properly." And I still struggle to explain systems thinking and systems Practise.

So actually, the way you introduce that as how you see the different relationships and how things are connected, that was quite a nice way to explain it. So perhaps I'll try and steal there.

SIMON BELL: (LAUGHS) By all means, feel completely free to steal that. It wasn't an original to me, anyway. It was--

[LAUGHTER]

PAUL TUCKER: But what I do find, though, just thinking about that kind of systemic understanding, what I find in my professional context particularly, that some of the really good leaders that I've met along the way, I think that they've got a kind of an unconscious systemic understanding of what's going on.

Just to understand if they do something here, it affects something over there. And there's understanding the whole system of what they're leading, rather than just the bits and in here and there. But I don't think it's explicit. I haven't come across many people that are really openly saying, I'm a systemic leader or I'm interested in systems thinking. That is rare.

SIMON BELL: I've always found this interesting, that people will quite often evidence something, so I'm a rationalist, or I like to think logically. And people will say that. But you don't get people saying, I think systemically, which I think is kind of like-- well, it's just an elaboration of logical rationalism, if you like. Systemicism is thinking about the gaps between, the weather map of the world the weather map of our relationships, the way that things affect each other. But somehow, even though, we've been teaching systems for 50 years, we still don't seem to have broken through as a sort of concept that people can own up to and say, yeah, I'm a systemicist and everyone gets it. So we haven't got there yet.

PAUL TUCKER: Yeah. But I think if you talk to people about being systematic, I think that's much more recognised. And one of the big insights that I've had since I've been doing my master's course is this. I'd come to think of systematic as bad and systemic as good. And I've come to realise that, actually, you need the duality of the pair to really be effective.

But I think that this idea of systematic kind of monitoring and reporting and controlling is very well recognised and understood. I work a lot in and around local authorities. And that's systematic process of management is really understood.

But the systemic kind of broader thinking around that, I think, is still lacking a bit. And I'm not quite sure how to break that.

SIMON BELL: I think either way it's a good observation, because I also think that's kind of like our emergency blanket is to be systematic, because that's kind of like, let's put all our ducks in a row, let's make a list, let's go through the recipe and do all that, and then we'll know that we're safe.

Whereas systemic feels like a little bit of an elaboration on that, let's think about who else we're affecting, let's think about the causal relationships we're setting up, let's think about the influences we're having and how they're influencing us, that's kind of like, well, I can do that second order. The main thing is to have my list.

So I agree with you, actually, I think systematic and systemic are balanced, poised in equipoise maybe. But we quite often focus on the systematic, because frankly, it's easier.

PAUL TUCKER: Yeah. It just seems to be deeply ingrained with us to do things systematically and to do things systemically has kind of been pushed out of us a bit, even though it feels like such a natural thing to do.

SIMON BELL: Well, we all know that the world is balanced relationships. But we also know that all our relationships need looking after. So maybe we need to be more systemic. Ah well, maybe the Open University will get there and actually develop this and people will start to become more systemic as our message gets out.

Paul, we're at a time I'm afraid. It's been great talking to you. It's lovely to catch up with you. And it's lovely to hear about your experience of using systems, particularly from the environmental management point of view, but also onwards into your postgraduate study. So good luck with that. And thank you very, very much for coming along today.