

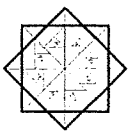
Foundational concepts for complexity practice

Complexity transcends the division between our inner and outer worlds. We are complex beings living in a complex world. Our minds and bodies are complex systems as are the places and contexts in which we live, work and play.

Complexity I/O recognizes that becoming a skillful complexity worker means that we can apply core practice concepts in every domain. It means that the practice we have for working with complex problems is essentially the same whether those problems are inside of us or outside of us. It also means it is necessary to bring awareness and complexity informed practice to each of the domains from inner to outer systems.

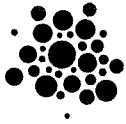
Here are 10 foundational concepts that underlie our approach. You will find these ten foundational concepts span the entire spectrum of inner system work and outer system work and have correlations across that spectrum. We use them to develop or choose practices and interventions to address complexity in a myriad of contexts.

Work with patterns



Complex systems exhibit emerging and repeating patterns that can be either beneficial or unhelpful to what we are doing and where we want to be going. As human beings we make sense of the world by seeing and 'sensing' patterns. When we are stuck we can look for patterns to better understand and work on, whether those patterns are habits of mind or behavior, or bigger issues such as conflict, racism or inequity. We take the stance that in complex contexts, problems can't be "solved" but can only be addressed by shifting patterns towards more beneficial states.

Work at a level of fine granularity



This concept comes directly from the work of Dave Snowden. When we are working with information in a complex system, we are better off working at fine levels of granularity to be able to discern patterns and allow different perspectives to come into play. This brings more understanding and gives us insights that extend beyond the specific, granular objects (or parts of the specific situation) to the larger patterns and dynamics at play. We cannot map all the information in a complex system (Nor do we need to, in order to act), but we can collect a multitude of diverse anecdotes and observations about the system. Taken together these finely grained objects can be used to seek out patterns. Working with fine grained objects helps to interrupt our mind's tendency to oversimplify and re-confirm our pre-existing, often biased overarching stories. We are more able to see and include the differences that provide valuable information when we are working at a fine granularity. Whether we are working with our own thinking and inner system patterns, or a collective experience in an organization or a team, collecting many small anecdotes about the situation gives us many more resources for working on it.

Action is iterative and moves us in a direction, not towards a goal.



In complex systems, there is no final end state. Instead of setting goals and achieving them, we set a direction of travel and gauge our progress against that direction through sensemaking. This has significant implications for how we initiate and carry through on action. To that end we use iterative approaches such as:

- Terry Borton's "What? So What? Now What?"
- Dave Snowden's "Probe - Sense - Respond"
- Glenda Eoyang's Adaptive Action (Based on Borton's cycle)
- Cynthia Kurtz's Participatory Narrative Inquiry and Confluence work
- Michael Quinn Patton's, Developmental Evaluation

- Ongoing inner-system practices based in inquiry, awareness and reflection that inform action.

Each of these approaches shares these phases:

- We experience what is.
- We perceive the tension between what is and “better.”
- We reflect on our experience and what it means for where we want to be
- We take small actions to shift us towards “better.”
- We act and re-iterate.

Awareness is critical



In complexity, we are embedded in the problems that we are seeking to shift. In order to do this we need to effect what Robert Kegan calls a “subject object shift.” This shift is the result of developing greater and more objective awareness of a situation that allows us to see and include more perspectives, and sometimes even see information that was not available to use when we are overly entangled in the situation. When we are experiencing the increased uncertainty, vulnerability and change that is often present in complex situations, we are more likely to fall into reactive patterns of mind that limit our perspectives and reduce both our self- and situational awareness. Whether we are working to shift our own inner system patterns and behaviours or working with interpersonal or systemic patterns, employing awareness practices to effect a subject object shift allows us to gain enough distance from our experience to better see and respond effectively to the patterns that are at play.

Inquiry and curiosity



Complex problems defy easy answers. We cannot rely on experts or ‘best practices’ to give us the answers in complex situations where context plays a critical role in making complex problems unique. Rather we need to seek and genuinely consider multiple, diverse perspectives in order to fundamentally shift underlying patterns and find new ways

forward. This includes asking relevant and powerful questions, and listening deeply to a diversity of answers with the kind of genuine curiosity that changes our own thinking and opens up new possibilities. This can include asking and listening with others, and also reflective questions and listening to ourselves. Reactive, limiting patterns of mind often show up often under the conditions of complexity and can block effective sensemaking, learning, innovation and genuine change. Inquiry based practices, applied with genuine curiosity can help us to interrupt these reactive patterns of thinking and help us to reconnect to the capacities of mind that better support complexity work.

Working in complexity requires dialogic practice



It is tempting to diagnose a problem and prescribe a solution, but complexity demands instead that we engage in dialogue with ourselves, with others and with the system in order to be able to better understand it and develop ways of addressing our current situation. A dialogic approach to working in complexity honours voices and perspectives and acknowledges that action needs to be co-created. Dialogue also helps us to find ideas and answers from places where we least expect them, because it is through language, metaphor, and image that we understand the world around and within us. The learning we share and the relationships we build through genuine dialogue are a key part of sustaining the ongoing work of engaging complex problems, from the level of individual relationships to movements. Individual and collective capacity to both share insight and experience through voice and to genuinely listen to learn are key. Process design using dialogic methods is an important part of complexity work.

Diversity is required



Complex systems exhibit massive levels of diversity and in order to address complex challenges we need to rely on diversity. Most times when we find ourselves stuck in a repeating pattern it is because we have tried everything we know how to do. Opening the situation up to diverse perspectives and voices leads to finding new ways to approach a situation. In a resilient, complex system, diversity is the resource that keeps the

system healthy. Individual and collective capacity to invite and genuinely engage with diversity is a key to effective complexity work. We often need to work to cultivate a mindset that welcomes and can engage with a diversity of perspectives, including those we disagree with or that threaten our comfort, sense of control and knowing.

Obliquity as a source of action



“Obliquity” refers to something that comes at us indirectly, often in surprising ways. Because complex systems defy planning and prediction, creating the conditions for new approaches involves finding ways to work indirectly towards “better.” It can be counter intuitive to engage in a practice of action that seems to take us away from goals or targets, and yet practices that encourage obliquity and interrupt overly entrained thinking and can open us up to many more possibilities for action, increasing the possibility that we may find practices we can stabilize and build upon.

Polarities and paradoxes abound



In complex systems one encounters many paradoxes and polarities that defy resolution. Complex systems can be characterized by a bounded space in which many things are possible at the same time. Thus we have unjust ways of pursuing justice, outer work that is transformed by inner work, systems which require change and adaptability in order to maintain stability and continuity. Much of the work we do in this world requires us to work with polarities and to live in the ongoing unsolved paradoxes of our situations. Developing the inner capacity and mindset to allow and consider paradox enables us to work more creatively and effectively in the reality of complexity, seeing more that when we insist everything make logical linear sense. In becoming good at working with polarities and paradoxes, we become more resourceful in dealing with the reality of what the world throws at us.

Stories are the vehicles of meaning making



In every complex human system we see what is going through the use of stories, anecdotes, fragments of meaning, images and symbols. We perceive and believe reality through the stories we hear, and we make sense of our actions based on these stories. Stories can be trustworthy pieces of data in complexity because regardless of their empirical reality, we use them to assemble patterns of meaning and they influence behaviour and action.