The School of System Change as a system change
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Working Paper

Authors: Anna Birney, Laura Winn, Corina Angheloiu and Zahra Davidson

Affiliation: Forum for the Future

1. Introduction

Forum for the Future, a global sustainability non-profit founded in 1996, has been developing the School of System Change as a learning platform that aims to equip emerging leaders with the ability to catalyse systems change for sustainability and to grow the global community of change agents. This article introduces the approach we have been taking over the last two years to develop the School of System Change. It was and is our intention to develop this initiative as a system change endeavour in itself, so as to practice what we teach. The School uses five core capabilities for system change (Birney, 2016) as its organising framing and as such this will be used as the organising concept for the article. By presenting our background intentions and methodologies, and by reflecting on the challenges of implementing we hope to invite others to support the development of the School.

1.1 Why a School of System Change for sustainability?

Over the last few decades, calls for ‘earth-literate leaders’ (Martin and Jucker 2005) have intensified with growing recognition of the interconnectedness of sustainability challenges which span beyond the triple-bottom line (Elkington, 2004, Scott and Gough, 2006) of social, environmental and financial systems. Increasingly we are having to look at the closely intertwined issues of governance, justice and decision making when considering what “sustainability” implies in a dynamic and complex world.

The Western education system has long been diagnosed as not fit for purpose for a post-Industrial world (Fox, 2005, Fay, 2006, Jickling and Spork, 1998). Trends in education since of the 1980s have been turning more and more towards the practical and real world challenges – for example the growth in business and management schools and disciplines such as design education (Cross, 1982) and action research (Bradbury and Reason, 2001). However these disciplines still fail to widely address the systemic nature of the challenges we face, or prepare people to tackle interconnected “wicked-problems” such as climate change, biodiversity loss and inequality (Capra and Luisi, 2014). Management and business education is failing to train people with the skills organisations will need to operate in an increasingly uncertain world (Roobeek and de Mitter, 2016). Although sustainability education has been on the rise and has called for ‘the necessary transformation of higher education towards the integrative and more whole state implied by a systemic view of sustainability in education and society’ (Sterling, 2004), change has been slow to come about.

This is partly because the adoption of systemic approaches critiques not only the curriculum but the paradigm of education itself, questioning how we might need to learn these new capabilities. Across formal education disciplines teacher-centred pedagogy is the dominant paradigm (Souleles, 2017). Students and
teachers still follow the learning patterns of the apprentice-master power dynamic. This is in antithesis to notions that will be needed for system change for sustainability – such as empathy, the ability to develop deep human-centred understanding, to adopt different viewpoints and to develop a mutual understanding.

This is where the School of System Change initiative seeks to intervene.

1.2 Methodological framework of a system change endeavour

One of the first steps when developing the School was to establish what the key capabilities that are required to create systems change. Through Forum for the Future’s own practice and organisational competency framework as well as through analysing others’ practice and programmes, five key capabilities were established (Birney, 2014, 2016):

- Systemic diagnostic
- Strategy design
- Innovation for impact
- Collaboration and engagement
- Leadership and learning

Figure 1. Five core capabilities for systems change

As a system change endeavour itself, the School of System Change seeks to implement its strategy through these five capabilities. This article will use this lens to describe how we have developed the School thus far. Although examined in the above order, we do not consider these to be a linear progression, but rather a structure that can be layered onto a dynamic and iterative process to help comprehend its systemic reach.
2. Applying the five core capabilities to the design of the School of System Change

2.1 Systemic diagnostic

Diagnosis is an ongoing process and is used to gain understanding of the current external landscape and it therefore helps to inform design and implementation. A systemic diagnosis will seek to understand the dynamic and interplay of multiple factors operating at different scales.

The diagnosis starts with the framing of a systemic challenge, in our case “How might we support a growing number of people learn new capabilities to lead system-level change for a sustainable future?”. This inquiry question is explored through extensive research, using systemic tools to help analyse the findings.

1. Forum for the Future: researching an alternative learning programme

Forum for the Future is a global sustainability charity founded in 1996, which offered a certified one-year Masters programme in Leadership and Sustainability from 1998 to 2016 as the education-focused part of its charitable purpose, producing a strong alumni of over 250 people.

In 2015 we knew that it was becoming harder and harder to recruit participants to the Masters programme. Our hypothesis was that this was because we no longer offered a unique value proposition to our target audience of recent graduates.

We plotted forty sustainability, innovation and leadership learning programmes against Forum’s change curve to try to understand where the focus of their offering lay in terms of the change capabilities they build. We found that the focus of the majority of their curriculums centred around the earlier three phases of the change curve: experiencing the need for change, diagnosing the system and creating pioneering practice. We looked to business accelerators to understand what we might plot further up the curve in terms of curriculum, knowing that commercial incubator programmes were not designed with sustainability practitioners in mind, unless their work centred around the development of a business proposition.

In this way we identified a gap in what was on offer to sustainability practitioners: helping them to develop the capabilities they would need to enable tipping points within systems and to sustain transitions. The decision we made was to work to contribute something unique in the marketplace that would complement other offers. This helped us form a hypothesis that our target audience would not be the recent graduates that had participated in the Masters, but practitioners with more experience who had already become competent with the earlier end of the change curve.

In order to test this hypothesis we engaged in a series of 30 interviews with mid-career and more experienced sustainability practitioners to understand more about their learning journeys and current learning needs. We spotted an opportunity with the mid-career audience who told us that they wanted to build their capacity but struggled to find options that allowed them to continue working at the same time (this was the top ranked attractor when choosing from different propositions).

We tested our various assumptions and hypotheses through use of the Lean Canvas. Identifying that Forum’s ‘unfair advantage’ and resources lay within our growing global network of practitioners, combined with an insight from the interviews led us to place the idea of community at the heart of the emerging value
proposition. Community superseded the idea of a learning programme which neither exploited Forum’s most valuable resource, nor fully spoke to an audience who intend to stay in work and engage flexibly alongside it.

2. System mapping

When moving from market research to systemic diagnosis of our findings, the first step was to identify the boundaries of our system. Initially, we explored the system of learning, and the intersection between sustainability education and education for management, and more specifically change. This might be represented as a nested system diagram (see below) and helps to identify the niche and boundaries we are working with.

![Nested system diagram identifying the boundaries we are working within.](image)

Figure 2. Nested system diagram identifying the boundaries we are working within.

We have also used a framework we often explore in our projects at Forum for the Future: the Multi Level Perspective framework from Sustainability Transitions (Geels, 2011, 2012). Although this framework has been developed to understand change as it unfolds historically, we have applied it to understand the changing dynamics of a systems and to see where our unique role and leverage might be. Here is an analysis
of the research into education and learning across the three levels of the system.

Figure 3. Applying the Multi-level perspective to diagnose the dynamics of the sustainability learning system. Adapted from Geels (2011).

There are a number of landscape-level trends around learning from which we can draw insights to inform our design choices:

- The digital revolution in learning has not yet fulfilled its promise of challenging the dominant hierarchical paradigm (Souleles, 2017) that currently sets up teachers as experts who deliver or broadcast their knowledge to learners;
- Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) have become very popular, but do not fulfil the role of bringing more students into face-to-face learning offers (Farrow, 2017). They are more a reputational tool or dissemination tool than a direct business development activity for recruitment;
- There is a growing body of evidence around the transformative power of experiential and social learning (Jiusto et al., 2013, Farrow, 2017, Morgan, 2016, Wenger, 2016) and the need for people be learning through their work and with others, as a way to reflect on and embed new practices.

In mainstream (or current regime) education in management and sustainability current practices are not serving the goal we are seeking to address:

- Leadership and sustainability education has become mainstream, but has largely failed to integrate complexity and interconnectedness as the central context;
- Management and business education is failing to train people with the skills organisations will need to operate in an increasingly uncertain world; (Roobeek and de Mitter, 2016)
● Existing propositions rarely address the personal capacities needed to be a leader in sustainability today, focusing on technical, knowledge-led approaches, rather than aiming for transforming their capacities and mind-sets and providing them with the learning and personal resilience to continue addressing challenges.

In the emerging field of system change – the niche level – there are a growing number of learning providers addressing different core capabilities for system change. However, we identified a gap for our School offer:

● There are very few offers addressed at diverse cohorts combining people from business, civil society, social enterprise, and the public sector;
● Very few offers provide a full overview of the emerging field of system change and the diverse capabilities needed for this practice, particularly in a short programme format. Most programmes focus on one or two of the capability areas, or on one particular methodology for system change;
● There is not yet a global community of practice for system change, a platform where accomplished and aspiring practitioners can share resources, learn together from and through their work.

We also plotted the user research on a map representing development of system change practice, and the needs of different people at different points in this development, belonging to different audience categories.

Figure 4. The diagram represents the insights / recurring patterns from the early user-testing for the School (2015).

Some of the insights from this research include:

● There is an increasing need for more connection – between people, between organisations, between initiatives so as to increase learning and provide a bigger impact;
● People need to think and act more systemically, yet be able to translate that into actionable strategies in their own contexts;
● There is a need to discover what possible value exchanges might be beneficial between the different stakeholders, that go beyond purely financial, to include knowledge, time, visibility, recognition, assets, etc.;
● There are two framings of interest for the school: those looking to engage with the cutting edge of sustainability thinking and work to inform and those who specifically seeking to improve their practice of systems-inspired methodologies.

As a development team we are constantly reflecting and updating our systemic diagnosis, creating numerous images, maps and diagrams to help us iterate our approach.

2.2. Designing strategies

Systems change requires emergent strategies that set ambitious intentions and visions and seeks implementable ways to experiment and iterate the proposition finding different leverage points and paths around key principles.

The School of System Change is designed to interconnect three strategic areas - Courses, Resources and Community - that we are developing through an emergent approach, rather than having a fully articulated five year plan and business model from the start. Our initial first year (2017) aimed to:

1. [Courses]: Prototype a new learning offer that helps aspiring system change practitioners navigate the emerging field, while developing their own capabilities across the five core areas.
2. [Resources] Curate a living platform of key resources to build the wider field of systems change; this stream of activity has started off with the development of the Frameworks of the Field, an interactive map which visualises the different frameworks, methods and fields which contribute to the field of systems change.
3. [Community] Start to grow a wider learning system connecting accomplished and aspiring practitioners and responding to their different and converging needs to continually learn and expand their practice.
2.3 Innovation for impact

Innovation is the process of seeking where the edge of any given market/field is and finding your unique value proposition. Our strategy has not been to create a significantly innovative product, but to innovate by contributing something new to the system we are operating within, the field of system change itself. Our key innovation in each of our strategic areas would be linked to the connective tissue the School creates, supporting the emerging field.

1. A pilot course: Basecamp

Our first experiment was to deliver a five month programme: Basecamp, initially in the UK. Basecamp is an introductory learning experience that enables practitioners to navigate system change, start to build their own practice and be prepared to continually develop and learn going forward. Basecamps are a system, and as such they have:

- A function: The learning outcomes and curriculum they are trying to deliver
- A pattern: The structure and flow of the learning experience based around principles and assumptions about learning for system change
- Relationships: Between the participants, hosts, coaches, contributors, fieldwork partners and the content

Basecamp #1 was also an opportunity to start to build different elements of the School. This basecamp enabled us to:

- Build a flexible curriculum and model;
- Pull together resources and tools from across the field of systems change;
- Test a learning offer for cross-sectoral participants;
- Bring in contributors, to provide learning content but also to invite them to learn with the participants and other contributors and contribute to the wider endeavour;
- Grow relationships with other experienced practitioners as a way to understand the needs of the wider systems change community.

2. Building a learning system

Around this Basecamp programme we have also been seeking ways to develop the learning systems of resources and community. Having explored third party online learning environments, in the spirit of an innovation minimal viable product approach we decided to use very low key, standard tools for this first experience. We coupled Slack for the conversational side, with Google documents to share resources and guidance with the participants. This allowed for maximum agility and easy iteration and sharing.

To support the provision of content, in parallel, we worked on mapping the field of system change, as a set of disciplines, frameworks, tools, methodologies and references. We created a map called Frameworks of the Field as a Kumu systems map, using the five core capabilities as an overall structure. As part of the
programme we provide a Navigation Guide to help participants create their own personalised learning journey. Our intention is to catalyse thinkers and practitioners into co-creating a pool of resources that can evolve over time and be useful both for beginner and more experienced practitioners. We are investigating how to best adopt an open source process for this, and how the School might support and curate this process.

Figure 6. Frameworks of the Field Beta map, designed on Kumu. Accessed from https://systemschangelab.kumu.io/system-change (November 2017).

We have also started to investigate platform models. We have done this through a week long design sprint, drawing on participants from the first cohort and other contributors as well as using tools such as the Platform Design Kit (Cicero, 2016), and Hagel’s work on learning platforms based on principles of trust and collaboration (Hagel, 2015).

This culminated in the creation of a mini webpage presenting a 9 month process for collaboratively building the community and the open source resource tools, and was shared at a gathering of interested parties who were able to test and revise the initial proposition.
2.4. Collaboration and Engagement

Relationships are key in any system. To support a growing field and to scale our impact we knew from the outset that we cannot reach these ambitions alone. The School of System Change is therefore from the outset designed around building engagement and relationships and intends to be a collaborative endeavour. It is collaborative through our learning approach, and critically, through how we work with partners.

1. Collaboration as a framework for co-learning

Living systems are learning systems (Wheatley, 2017), in which learning is as much, if not more, a process of the individual as it is of the social system (Wenger, 2010). Learning by its nature is social. Our systemic learning philosophy is:
● People learn by doing – especially if it is applied to real life challenges;
● People learn socially – by working and reflecting together;
● Learning is not a linear process, rather a necessary process of reviewing and deepening knowledge and practice;
● Learning is a lifelong process of growing and evolving;
● Everybody learns differently and everyone is a learner (and therefore everyone is a contributor and participant) and as such they need a personalised path;
● People need to take responsibility for their own learning.

In order to deliver this philosophy we use collaborative learning and hosting methods from action inquiry and research, as well as collaborative tools such as Art of Hosting. Learning in teams or action learning sets is a core delivery mechanisms, for both working on a shared fieldwork challenge as well as to support each other applying learning in their own context. This is both one of the most challenging but also most rewarding part of the learning process.

3. A collaborative approach to partnerships

Initially, we had the intention to develop a partnership strategy with clear criteria for levels of engagement. We explored what these different levels would be in an early strategy document (December 2016):

“So as to ensure the model can scale successfully, we are taking a spiraled / fractal approach to the strategy for partnerships. This means involving sufficient diversity at the outset for the core partnerships to be a seed group which can then grow into a global community.”

As we have developed our strategy, the process of partnership development has been more organic and evolving from the encounters and conversations we have been having, seeking places of clear alignment and converging of interests as opposed to creating an overarching structured and transparent partnership mechanism. Our overall framing and design principles have been the guiding elements in engaging others, rather than a predetermined categorisation or governance structure.
9. Spiral approach to partnership development.

However, we do not see the role that is required or the one that we are playing as being in the centre of this endeavour, but more as the conveners and hosts of the partnerships. We see ourselves as the nurturers of the School where others are providing seeds and contributions. We have the ambition to move beyond a hub and spoke model where everything is channelled through a core team, to a distributed or reticular model where collaboration can occur spontaneously within the community while respecting core principles established by the community itself as it grows.

Figure 10. Different developmental pathways for networks. Adapted from Baran, 1962.
2.5. Leadership and learning

The School of System Change is seeking to operate in the liminal space between pioneering system change practitioners, many of whom have been on a fairly lonely learning journey themselves, and aspiring practitioners who are seeking to navigate this new field and consolidate system change practice through their work. As a team driving forward the School of System Change, we often ask ourselves, what does it mean to lead such an endeavour? If we are to design a learning system that can support the building of the field of systems change, then what might be required?

What we have learnt over the last few years is that our role as leaders is not about leading through advocating our way of systems change, but about holding a space for others to grow and excel. Our role is both about setting an ambition, based on listening to the field, as it is about connecting different parts of the ecosystem together.

This takes trust building, credibility in our own practices as well as humility and authenticity to model the principles you aspire to. It is also about being open and transparent about our strategy, which is why we are publishing this paper.

As well as iterating our strategy, we have also learnt key lessons through these first phases and which will inform our ongoing strategy include:

- It takes a long time to develop a new initiative; we spent 2 years developing and finding the our place within the ecosystem (based on years of relationships and experience). The diagnosis process is critical in bringing this together to help to both engage the governance of Forum for the Future as well as to engage partners.

- An emergent strategy within parameters has been successful and rewarding, by being able to be adaptable to the changing environment we have both managed to stay within our financial constraints but also build a proposition that is ambitious and impactful.

- It always takes longer to develop prototypes than you first think, but there is also huge value in just getting moving and putting something out there – we would not have created the partnership and potential without demonstrating what we were talking about in action.

- Critical to success is going to be finding a collaborative leadership model that allows the School to keep driving forward but also brings in wider ownership and engagement.

3. Conclusion

In this article, we have explored how the School of System Change has been designed and run as a system change endeavour. We have sought to tell a story of how the School has developed from a proposition into an identified initiative in the emerging field, sharing some of the successes, challenges and ongoing questions.

We would like to invite others in the field to engage further with this initiative and this process, supporting us to improve as we advance. We hope that the collaborative inquiry around an open source platform on which to share resources for system change will be an opportunity to receive constructive criticism and creative ideas around growing into a global platform, a large-scale opportunity for learning and renewed practice, and ultimately to make a contribution to accelerating pathways to a sustainable future.
4. Bibliography


