

SCiO

Systems and
Complexity in
Organisation

SysPrac25

Thinking Differently Together: A Long-Lived Systemic Inquiry into Growing Colleagues' Systems Thinking in Practice at The Open University

Anne Gambles

Talk

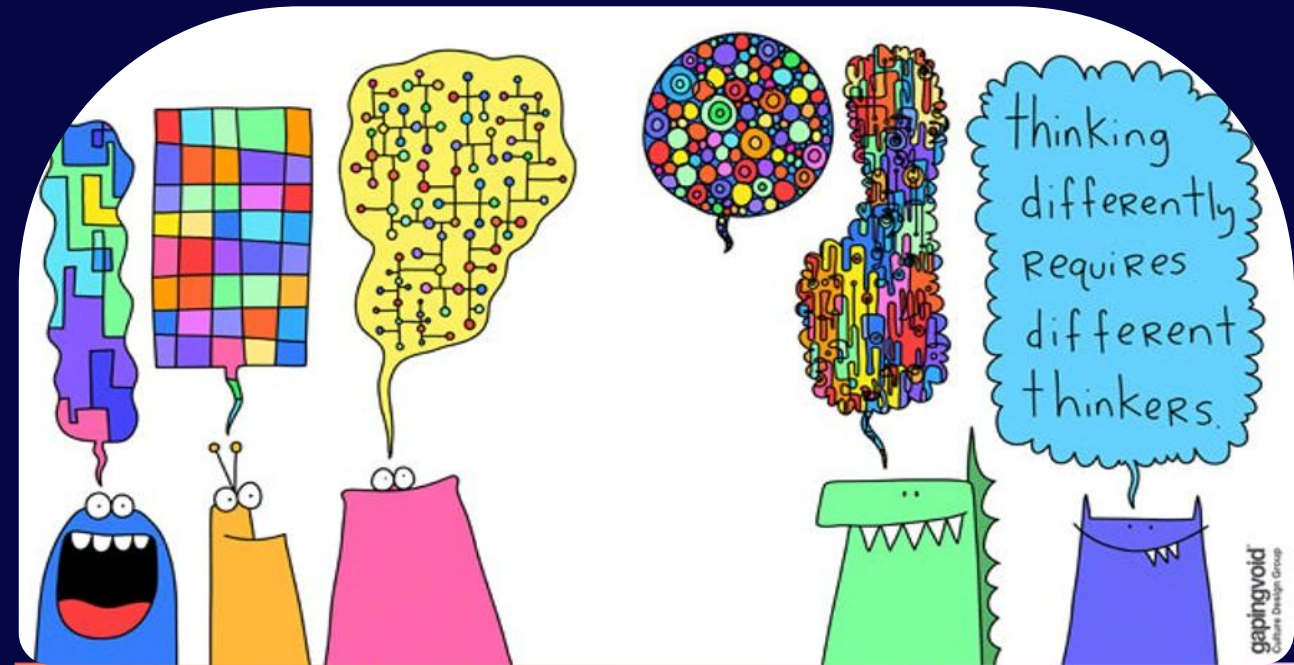
Hub Theatre
Day Two 15:00 – 15:20



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Thinking Differently Together: A Long-Lived Systemic Inquiry Into Growing Colleagues' Systems Thinking in Practice at The Open University

Anne Gambles – OU STiP CoP Co-Lead
Senior Manager, Change and Agility



The Open University

- Founded in 1969
- Almost 200k students
- Dedicated to distance learning
- Approx. 9k staff, >50% have always worked remotely
- Milton Keynes campus, regional centres across England and offices in UK Nations



Start with Why:

Why does growing Open University colleagues' Systems Thinking in Practice matter?

- Large University
- Challenging HEI environment
- Ability to deal with complexity, and act purposefully
- Support organisational agility and learning
- Create sustainable change

OPERATING MODEL



Maria Muir

<https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7343016252782669824/>

Systems Thinking in Practice (STiP) heuristic

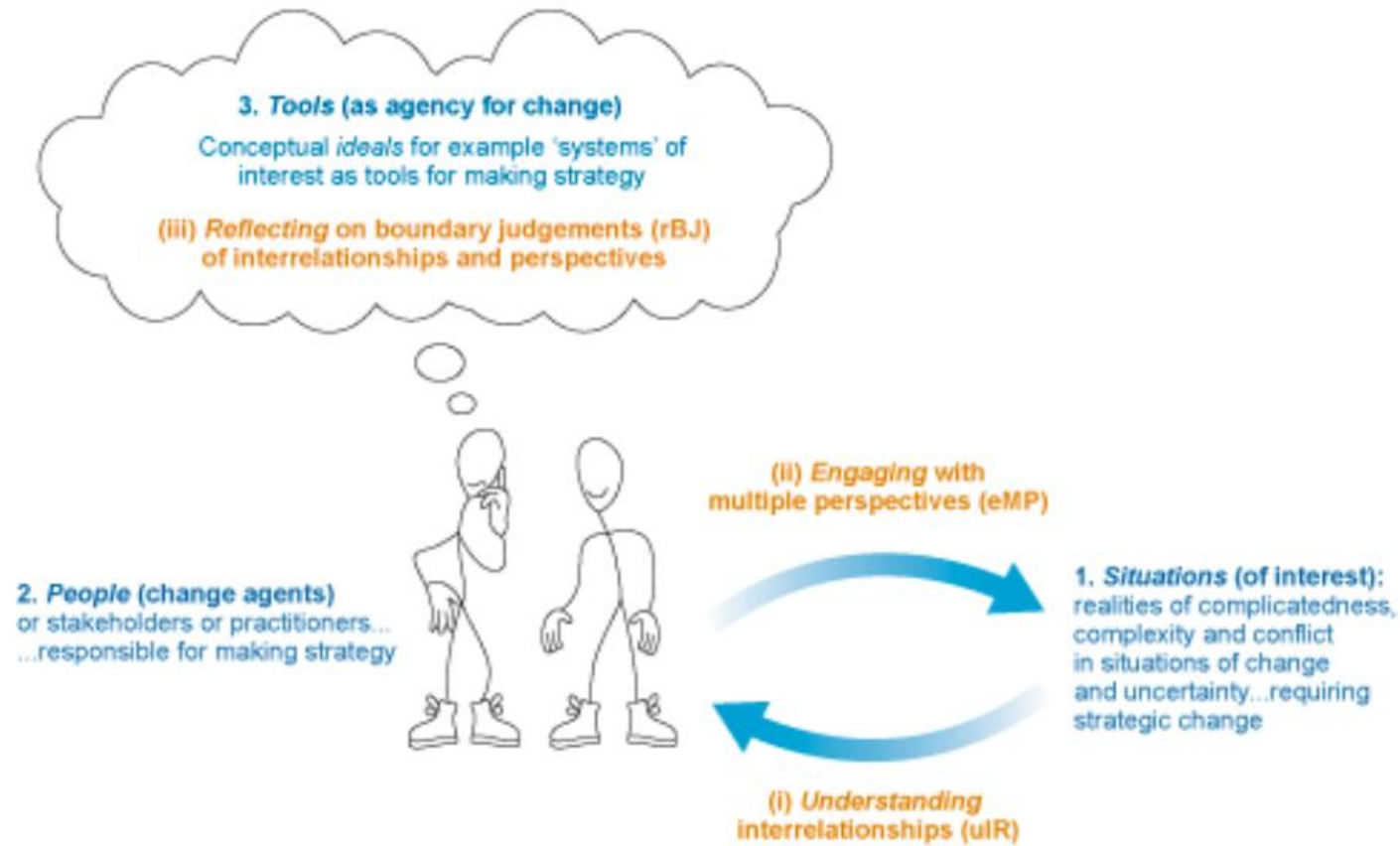


Figure 1.12 A mental model of a systems thinking in practice (STiP) heuristic comprising three entities: Situations of interest (real-world events), People (stakeholders), and Tools (e.g. systems and other ideas). Associated activities are: (i) understanding interrelationships (uIR); (ii) engaging with multiple perspectives (eMP); and reflecting on boundary judgements (rBJ).

How can the three core STiP ideas help with change?

eMP helps surface diverse views on what good team design looks like—especially across disciplines, hierarchies, and lived experiences.

uIR reveals how roles and structures interact with other parts of the system (e.g. funding, leadership behaviours).

rBJ encourages reflection on who is included in organisational design decisions, and what boundaries are being drawn around capability and accountability.

OPERATING MODEL



Maria Muir

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eMP fosters a culture where thinking differently is valued, not suppressed.

uIR helps teams understand how behaviours and incentives shape (and are shaped by) systemic patterns and anti-patterns.

rBJ enables reflection on cultural perspectives and inter-relationships – who gets to lead, what behaviours are rewarded, and how Ways of Working practices can include or exclude.

eMP supports inclusive strategy-making by engaging multiple perspectives on purpose, priorities, and value.

uIR helps map how governance, funding, and delivery mechanisms interact—surfacing bottlenecks or misalignments.

rBJ invites scrutiny of what work is included in the strategy, how we define success, and what gets funded or prioritised.

Key:

eMP – engaging with Multiple Perspectives

uIR – understanding Inter Relationships.

rBJ – reflecting on Boundary Judgements

OU STiP CoP Origins

➤ STiP CoP Teams Space created in May 2022

"A community space for you to ask questions, share resources and come together to build your own STiP."

Barry Verdin, former CoP Lead and OU STiP Tutor

➤ First STiP CoP meeting held in August 2022

We explored social learning and communities of practice

➤ Monthly sessions up until December 2023

Introducing STiP approaches, and discussions on topics including mapping the OU as a system.

~110 CoP Members

STiP CoP relaunch, March 2025 session:

What is Systems Thinking and how might we support colleagues with thinking differently?

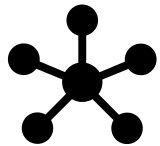
➤ **We started to consider –**

How might we best grow our systems thinking in practice, together?

Feedback from March STiP CoP Session



Appreciation that a Systems Thinking approach is being used at a high level in the University



Connecting with colleagues; sharing and iterating ideas



Establishing a shared understanding and common language

How we can support each other with thinking differently

Suggestions made by community

Asking Key Questions

**Role Model & Move
Beyond Standardised
Processes**

**Make it Psychologically
Safe to Fail**

**Clarify Reasons for
Restrictions**

**Holding Space for
Discussions**

**Shadow Other
Departments**

**Supportive Feedback
Loops**

2025 The Call to Inquiry: IdOO (Agendashift)

➤ Ideal

- A space for those with an interest in thinking differently and applying Systems Thinking in Practice
- Collective sense-making and learning

➤ Obstacles

- Different levels of STiP understanding
- Time poor colleagues
- Cognitive load

➤ Desired Outcomes

- A growing network of practitioners willing to deal with complex challenges, collaboratively develop their STiP within The Open University, and beyond.

The Approach

- **A Long-Lived Systemic Inquiry into Growing Colleagues' Systems Thinking in Practice at The Open University**
 - Outcomes-focused
 - Collaborative
 - Walk the talk – using STiP to grow STiP
 - Adapt to emerging needs, avoiding rigid planning
 - A Living Case Study
 - The CoP itself is the subject of the Systemic Inquiry

Outcomes

A *growing* network of practitioners willing to deal with complex challenges, collaboratively develop their STiP within The Open University, and beyond

Colleagues more able to view the University as a system

Colleagues more able to instinctively think and work across functional boundaries



Continuous improvement that delivers what matters to our customers

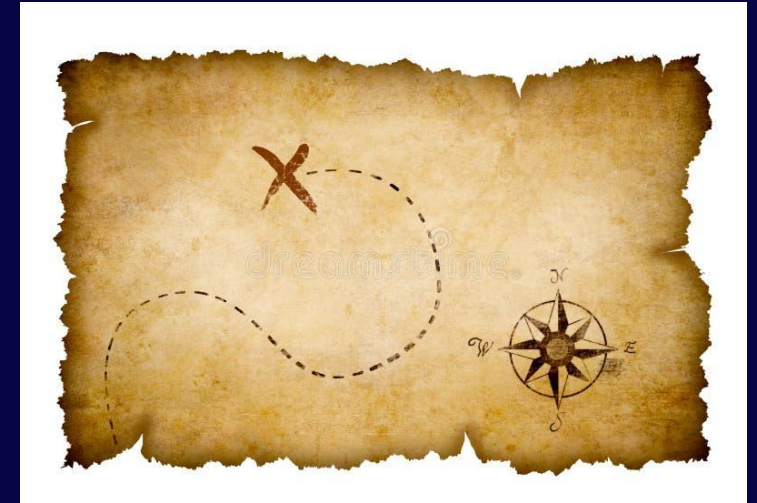
A common language to describe our working environment, and how it performs

Organisational agility and learning, creating sustainable change

The Journey

➤ **Soft Systems Methodology**

- Finding out about the situation:
 - ✓ Rich pictures
 - ✓ PQR and CATWOE analysis
 - ✓ Creation of a Root Definition



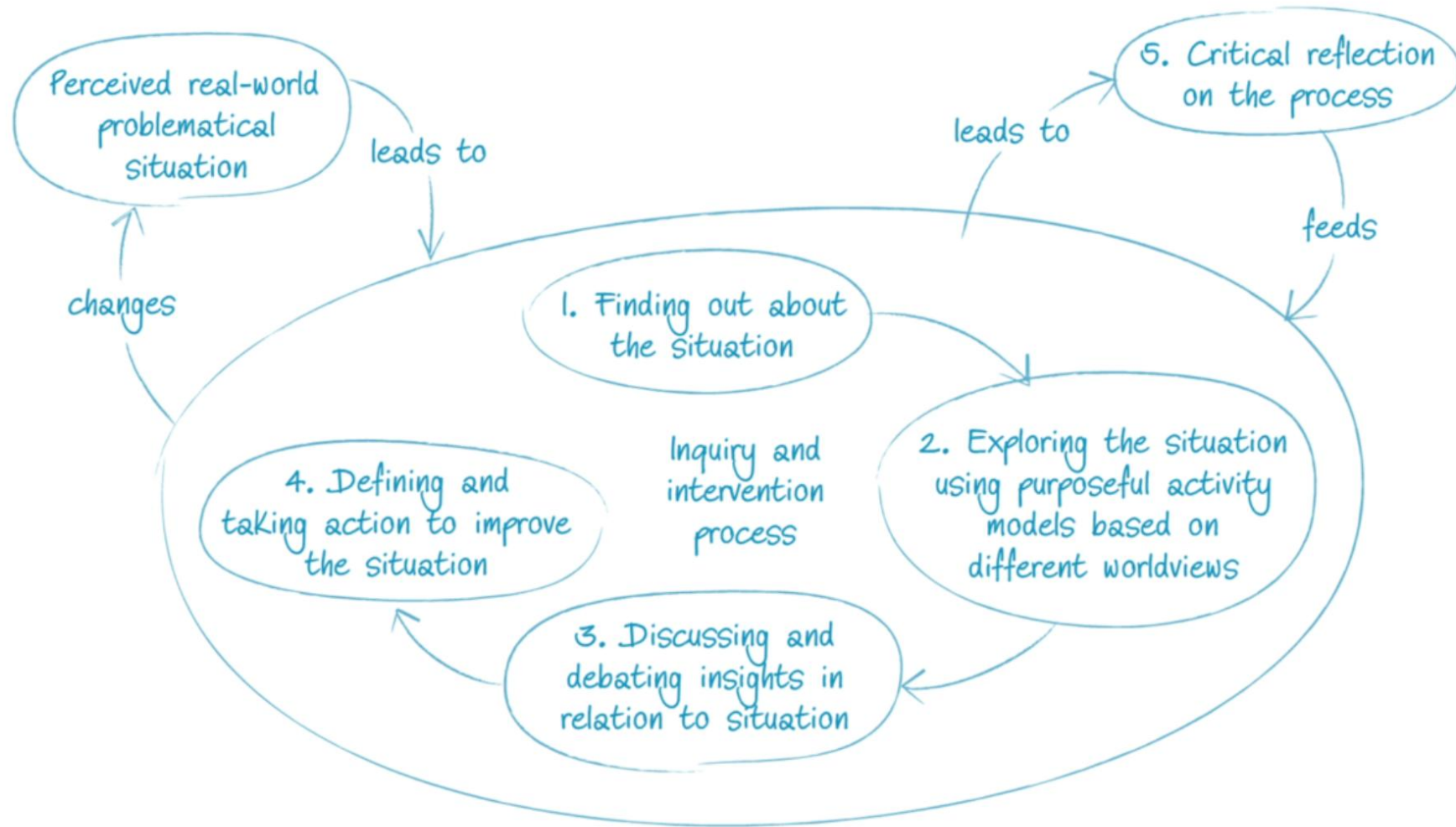
➤ **Developing a set of learning activities/resources**

- ✓ STiP CoP Handbook
- ✓ Past Events and Activities/Resources lists
- Action Learning Sets aligned with OU priorities

➤ **Forming a small Core Team supported by critical friends and a growing network of contributors**

➤ **Thinking big but starting small and iterating**

Soft Systems Methodology (Peter Checkland)



SSM – Finding out about the situation: Rich Picture(s)

OU STiP CoP and our key stakeholders in the context of the wider university and society



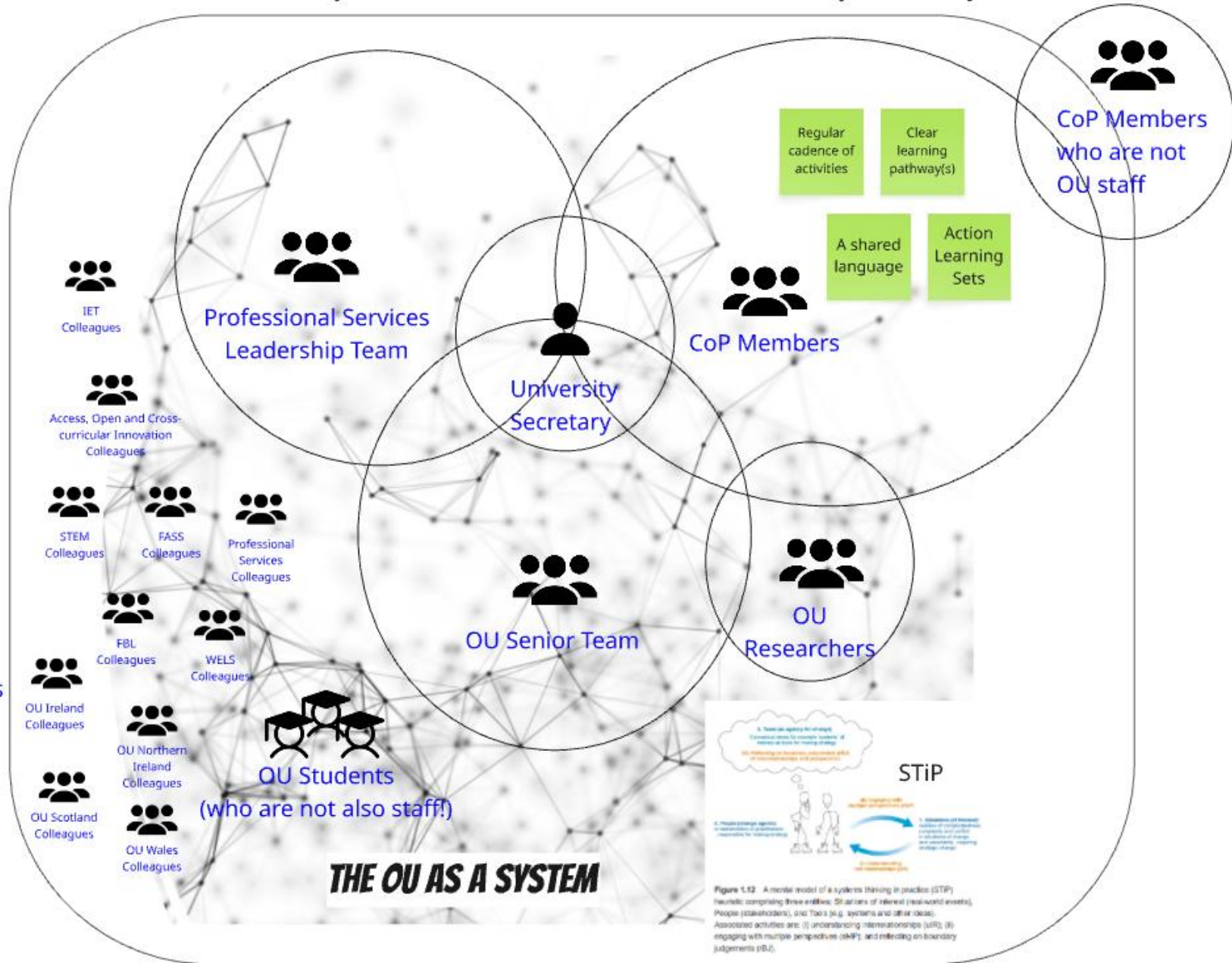


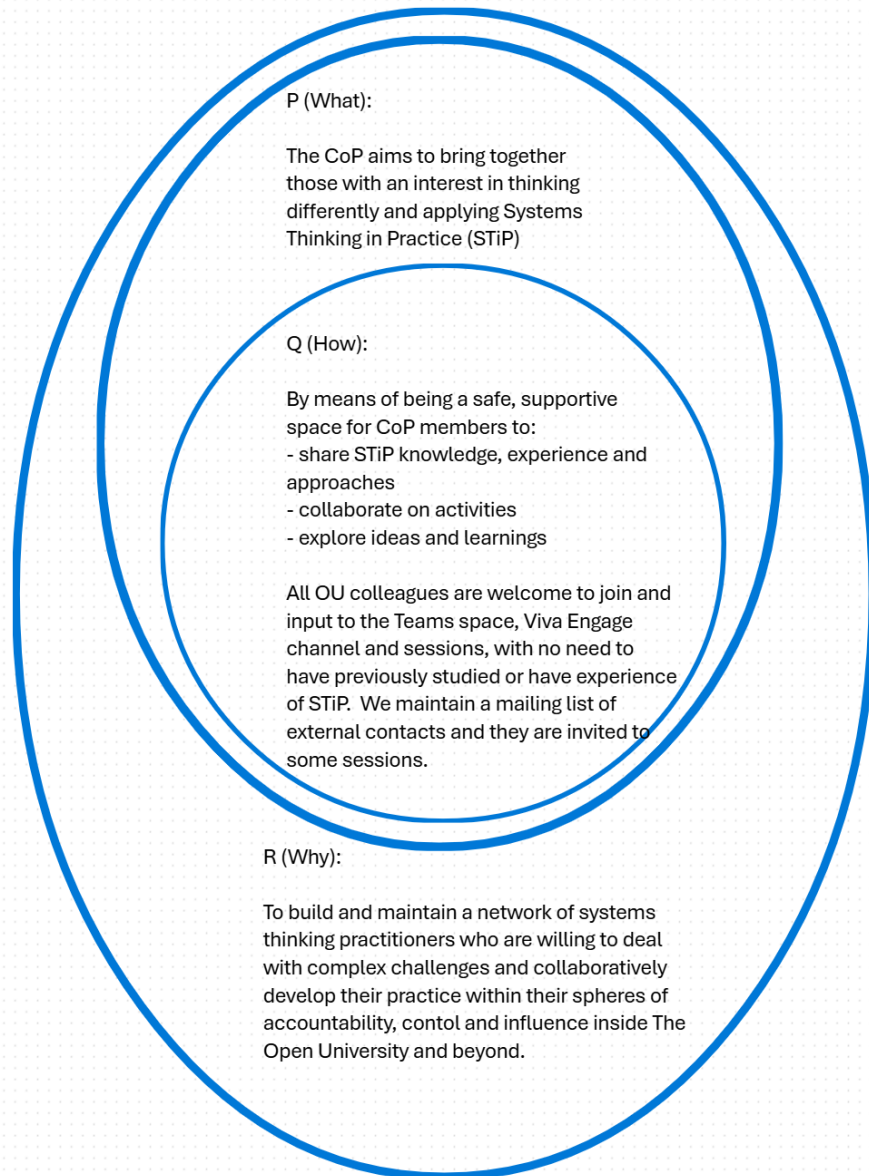
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SSM – Finding out about the situation: STiP CoP PQR Analysis

We consider our CoP as being a *system of interest* and we can also consider it as having a *purpose*

We can think of our CoP as being *A System to..* bring together those with an interest in thinking differently and applying Systems Thinking in Practice (STiP)





P (What):

The CoP aims to bring together those with an interest in thinking differently and applying Systems Thinking in Practice (STiP)

Q (How):

By means of being a safe, supportive space for CoP members to:

- Share STiP knowledge, experience and approaches
- Collaborate on activities
- Explore ideas and learnings

All OU colleagues are welcome to join and input to the Teams space, Viva Engage channel and sessions, with no need to have previously studied or have experience of STiP. We maintain a mailing list of external contacts and they are invited to some sessions.

R (Why):

To build and maintain a network of systems thinking practitioners who are willing to deal with complex challenges and collaboratively develop their practice within their spheres of accountability, control and influence inside The Open University and beyond.

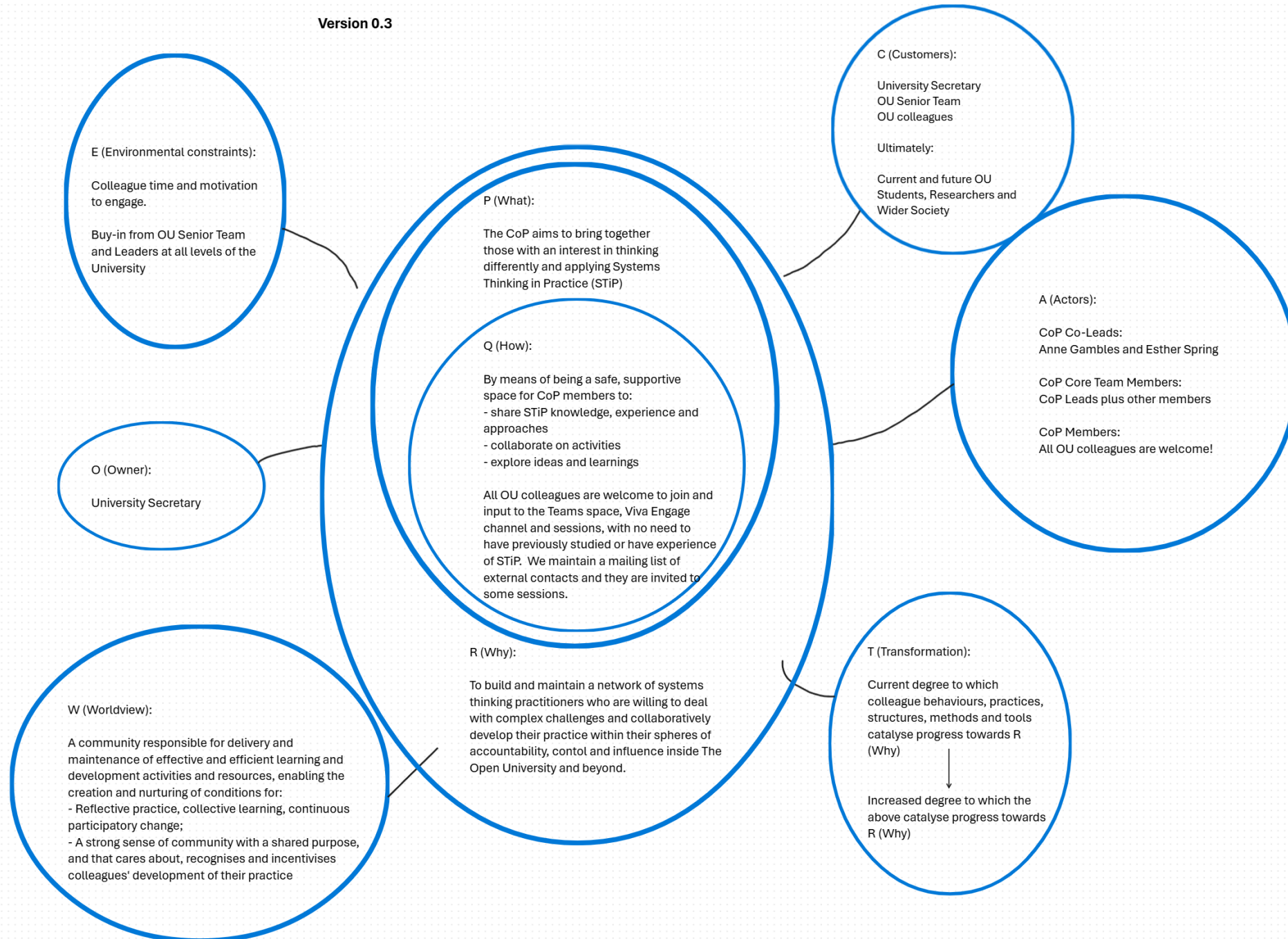
SSM – Finding out about the situation: STiP CoP PQR and CATWOE Analysis

To improve our understanding of our purpose we can add a CATWOE analysis to our PQR Analysis towards gaining what is described as a Root Definition of our OU STiP CoP



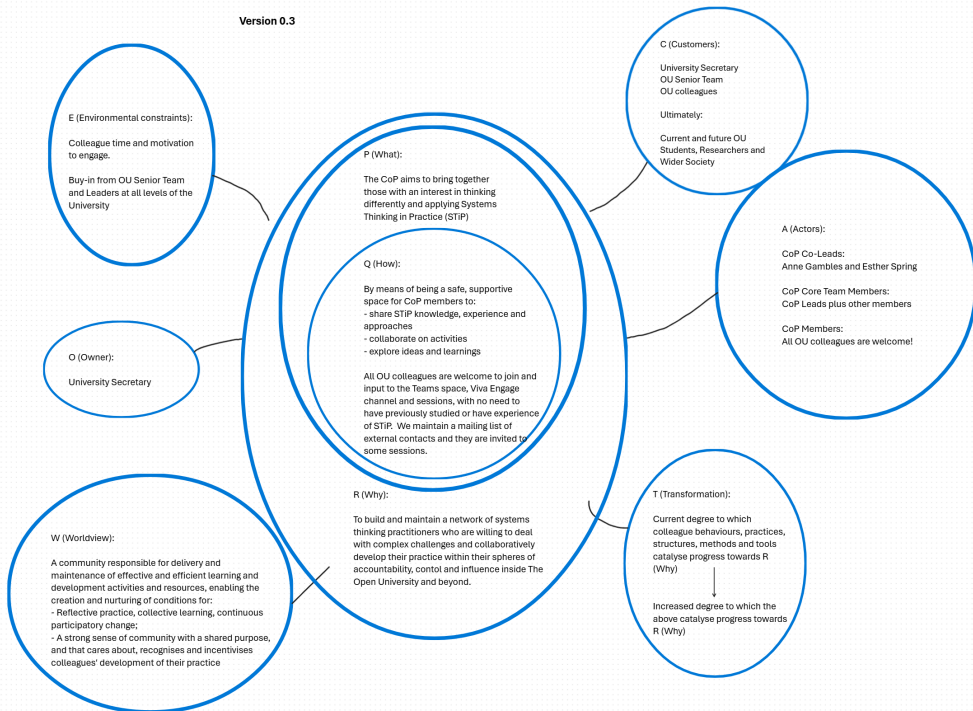
A root definition of the OU STiP CoP using PQR and CATWOE Analysis

Version 0.3



A root definition of the OU STIP CoP using PQR and CATWOE Analysis

Version 0.3



C (Customers): University Secretary, OU Senior Team, OU Colleagues. Ultimately: Current and future OU students, Researchers, and Wider Society

A (Actors): CoP Co-Leads, CoP Core Team Members, CoP Members

T (Transformation): Current degree to which colleague behaviours, practices, structures, methods and tools catalyse progress towards R (Why) → Increased degree to which the above catalyse progress towards R (Why)

W (Worldview): A community responsible for delivery and maintenance of effective and efficient learning and development activities and resources, enabling the creation and nurturing of conditions for:

- Reflective practice, collective learning, continuous participatory change
- A strong sense of community with a shared purpose, and that cares about, recognises and incentivises colleagues' development of their practice

O (Owner): University Secretary

E (Environmental constraints): Colleague time and motivation to engage. Buy-in from OU Senior Team and Leaders at all levels of the University

STiP CoP Root Definition Statement

2025-08-22

What & Why?

We are a University Secretary owned Community of Practice lead by Co-Leads in collaboration with Core Team Members for CoP Members (OU colleagues) to bring together those with an interest in thinking differently. To build and maintain a network of STiP practitioners who are willing to deal with complex challenges and collaboratively develop their practice within their spheres of accountability, control and influence inside The Open University, and beyond.

How?

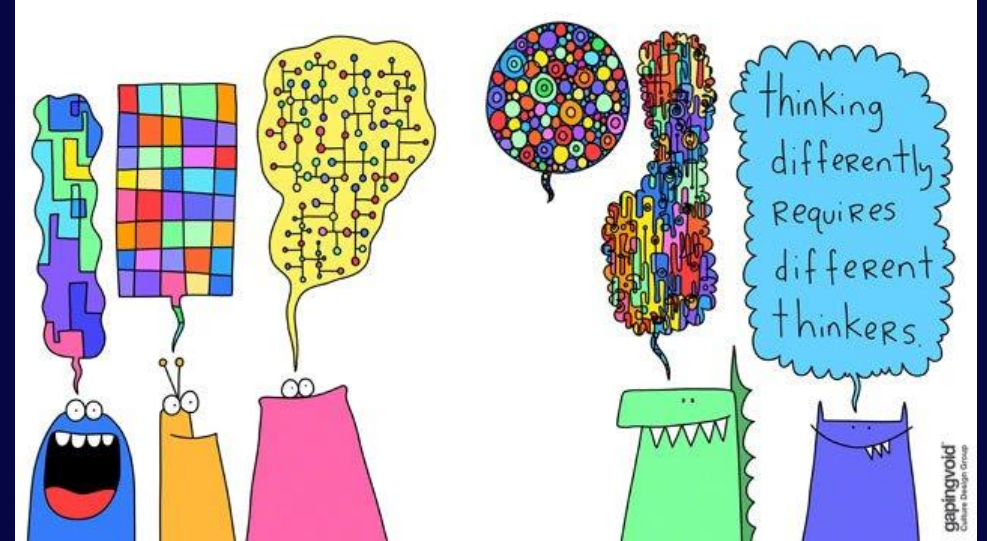
This is done by means of being a safe, supportive space for CoP members to share STiP knowledge, experience and approaches, collaborate in activities and explore ideas and learnings.

We are guided by a belief that as a community we are responsible for the delivery and maintenance of effective and efficient learning and development activities and resources. Also that we care to enable the creation and nurturing of conditions for reflective practice, collective learning and continuous participatory change.

We take into account colleague time and motivation to engage, and the need for buy-in from Leaders across the OU Team to support our STiP and CoP space.

The OU STiP CoP

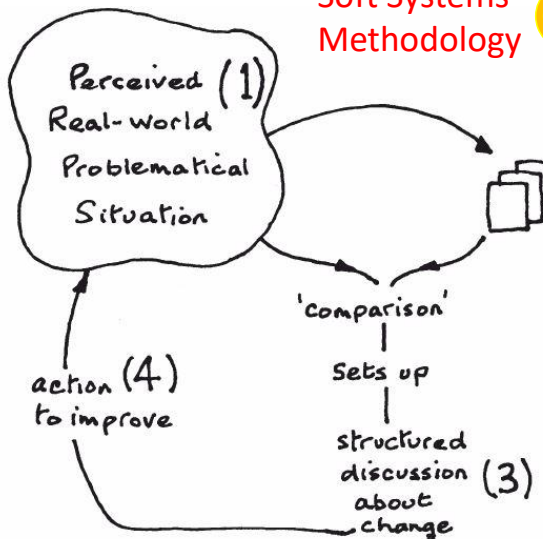
- We aim as a Community of Practice (CoP) to bring together those with an interest in Systems Thinking in Practice (STiP).
- All colleagues are welcome to join. You do not need to have previously studied or have experience in STiP.
- The CoP is designed to enable new members to start applying STiP (in a small way) immediately.
- Members share their STiP experience, approach, resources etc and collaborate in our [Teams Space](#), [Viva Engage Channel](#) and at our events/sessions.
- We aim to meet every month. All event details are posted in Teams and Viva Engage. **Please ensure you set channel notifications so that you don't miss anything!**
- Some sessions will be open to external contacts.
- To sign up to a session, please go to [My Learning Centre](#). You will then be sent the joining instructions



2025 Events List

- **March** – What is Systems Thinking and how might we support colleagues with thinking differently?
- **April** – A long-lived Systemic Inquiry: How might we support each other with thinking differently?
- **June** – Mapping The Open University
- **July** – Rooted in Purpose: Building Meaning, Shared Values and Measures
- **August** – Invite Dissent! (as opposed to drive consensus) workshop
- **September** – Reflecting on our Journey, Further Defining our Values and Looking Ahead

SSM
Soft Systems
Methodology



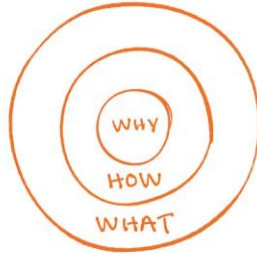
(2)
Purposeful
Activity Models
(based on declared
worldviews)



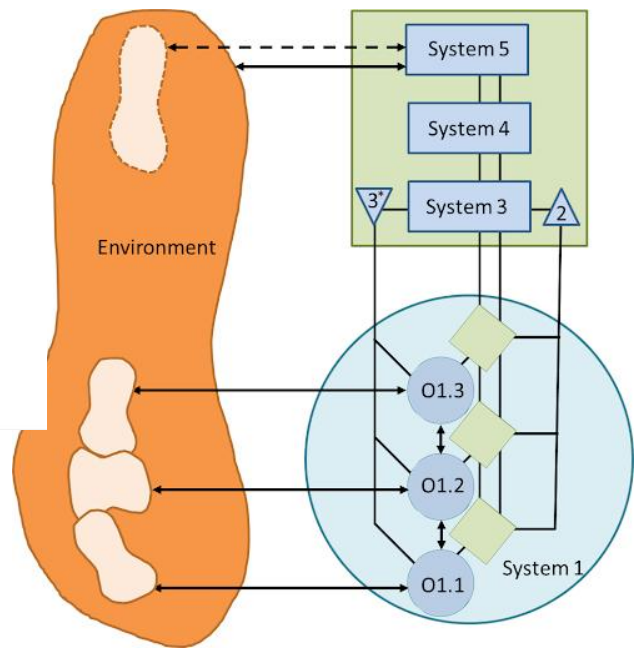
Rich Picture
© Esther Spring

PQR Formula
and Simon
Sinek circles

The PQR formula
Do P
By Q
In order to contribute
to achieving R.

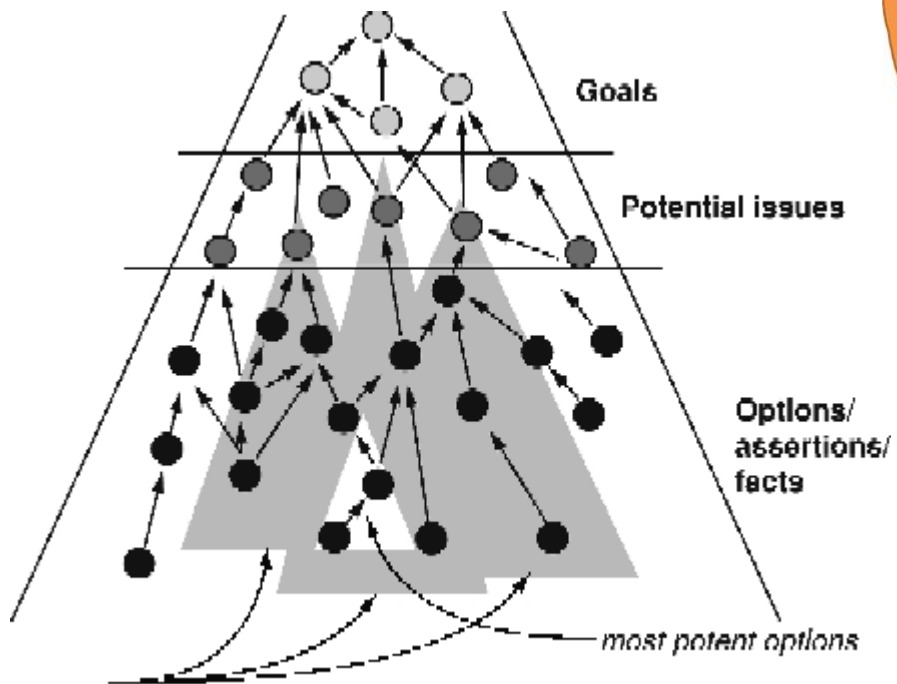


VSM
Viable Systems Model



Boundary categories	Boundary issues				
1. Client	Sources of motivation	Those involved			
2. Purpose					
3. Measure of improvement					
4. Decision-maker	Sources of power		Those affected		
5. Resources					
6. Decision environment					
7. Professional	Sources of knowledge			Those affected	
8. Expertise					
9. Guarantee					
10. Witness	Sources of legitimation				Those affected
11. Emancipation					
12. World view					

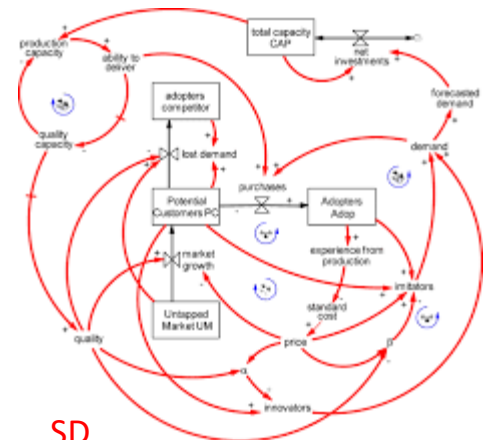
The reference system (system of concern) that determines what observations ("facts") and evaluations ("values") are considered relevant when it comes to assessing the merits or defects of a proposition



Hierarchical sets **SODA**
Strategic Options Development and Analysis

CSH
Critical Systems Heuristics

SD
Systems Dynamics – Causal Loop Diagram



Early insights and learning

Feedback indicates that the Community Values:

- Fostering a supportive community with senior-level support
- The importance of reinforcing foundational principles
- Clear overviews, practical examples drawing on staff expertise
- Need to keep the materials and conversation as accessible as possible
- Hybrid, online and in-person sessions, typically up to 10 attendees



Early insights and learning

- STiP CoP Membership – from 110 (pre relaunch) to 184 in September 2025
- Colleagues are willing to collaboratively engage in activities

Super grateful for these systems thinking spaces for people to come together

I'm grateful to everyone in the room for being present and caring about this

Many thanks for this superb CoP

Systemic Enquiry Next Steps...

Now –

- Draw further on our
 - STiP CoP Rich picture
 - PQR and CATWOE analysis and Root Definition
- Developing our STiP CoP Values
- Further developing our Mission(s) and measures of performance
- Planning future STiP CoP Sessions to include:
 - Supporting STiP Learning – raising questions, discussing possible answers
 - Action Learning Sets focused on OU priorities
 - STiP Practitioner Experience Reports
 - External speakers

Next –

- SSM – Applying purposeful activity models:
 - Analysis 1: The Intervention (Practitioner, Client, Owners)
 - Analysis 2: Social (Roles, Norms and Values)
 - Analysis 3: Political (Commodities of Power)

Future –

- End of year progress review
- Build further on our learnings to iteratively develop a conceptual model of a system to support each other with thinking differently

Engage with Systems Thinking at the OU...



Subjects > Society, Politics & Law > Systems Thinking Hub



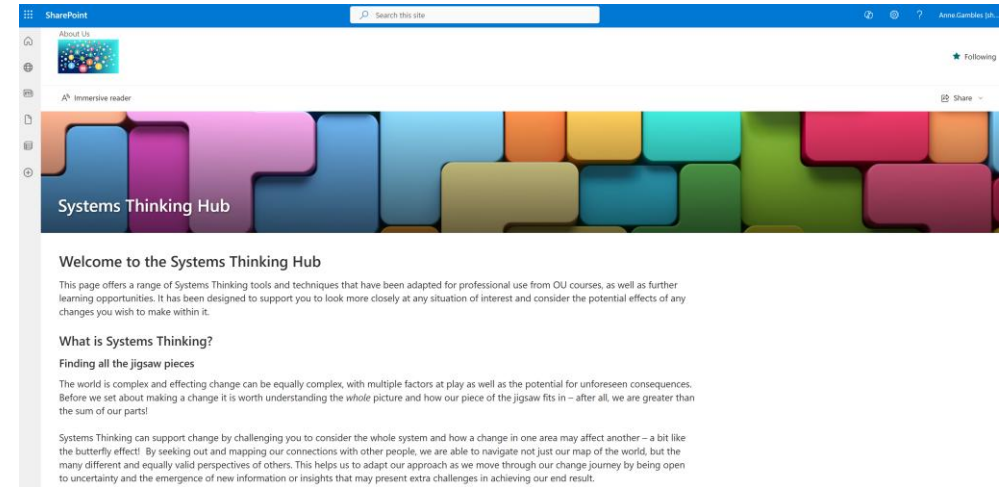
What can you study with the OU?

As an early pioneer of the subject, our qualifications in systems thinking in practice have broken new ground in how to teach systems ideas, and have been studied by more than 30,000 people.

We offer the following qualifications:

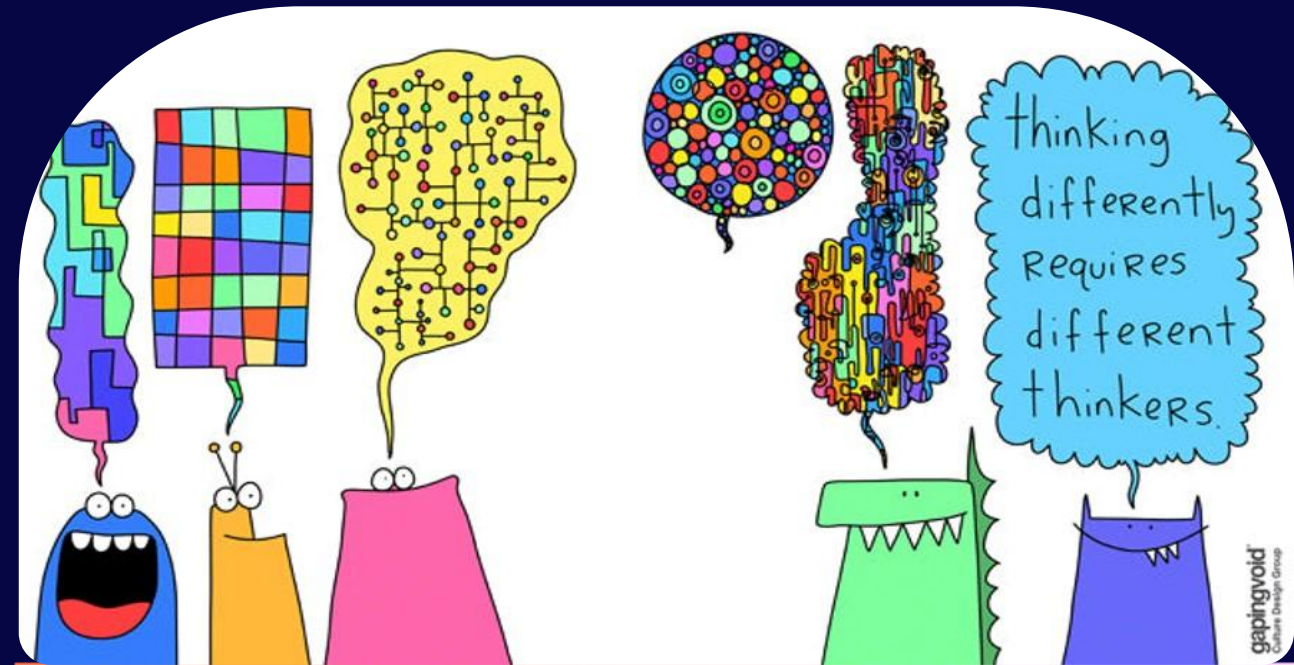
- [Postgraduate Certificate in Systems Thinking in Practice](#)
- [Postgraduate Diploma in Systems Thinking in Practice](#)
- [MSc in Systems Thinking in Practice](#)

OU Colleagues can join our Thinking Differently events and Teams spaces on My Learning Centre



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