

CHAPTER 6

Systemic Approaches to Transforming the University

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Abstract

This chapter explores some of the problems of contemporary higher education (HE) and discusses how a more participatory perspective on knowledge and meaning-making can inform some of the changes that are needed in the world. It offers a model of inquiry as a way of stimulating and supporting the process of transformation that is needed in HE. It highlights the importance of multi stakeholder participatory processes, to understand the system dynamics that hold the status quo in place, and to change them.

Preamble

I am a 59-year-old research professor who has been based at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Sus-

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sex, in the United Kingdom (UK), for the past 12 years. Prior to this I worked for eight years as a professor at the University of the West of England, and before that I worked as a teacher and researcher at the University of Bristol. So this reflection is rooted in a variety of higher education (HE) contexts.

While my early career centred on citizen participation and decentralisation, in my mid and later career, I have focused on the development of participatory research methodologies, in particular systemic action research, which I see as an evolution of participatory action research. Most of my work has been with people who experience extreme marginalisation, including enslaved persons and bonded labourers, children in the worst forms of child labour, people living with disabilities, and people living in war zones. Methodologically, my interests have centred on how to enact participatory processes at scale while maintaining deep participation. I am also deeply concerned with the importance of understanding how change happens. Many participatory processes bring people together to identify desired changes, yet without an understanding of the systemic and complex nature of change processes, they will often fail to achieve that change, or create changes that are limited to a very localised context or are unsustainable. I work within a tradition of participatory research with a strong emphasis on systems thinking and complexity theory. Unlike some authors in both of these camps, I do not see these as incompatible.

Systems thinking helps us to see some of the complex causal patterns that have structured past outcomes. It cannot predict future outcomes from past patterns, but it offers these as potential pathways that invite inquiry questions for the action researcher. Complexity theory enables us to identify how change happens. Systemic action research has evolved to comprise a multi-staged process that typically takes 18 months to 2 years. The first step involves building trust and relationships among those who are involved, which can take up to three months. The second step, which can also take up to three months, is for peers to gather the evidence of those who are most affected by the issue that has brought them together (evidence that often, but not exclusively,

takes the form of life stories). The third step is to collectively analyse these stories (often, but not exclusively, through a process that causally maps both individual stories and the collectivity of stories). This process seeks to identify the key interrelated issues that are the subject of action research groups. The fourth step is to collect more evidence on the specific issues being explored, and the fifth step is to generate theories of change for action.

The steps that follow from there are to open out the cycles of action research—plan action, take action, evaluate action, re-evaluate, and so on. These steps enable people to not only recognise the complex system dynamics that drive the issues and problems they are looking at, but also identify who needs to be involved in the ongoing inquiry process, since to resolve systemic problems, it is necessary to engage the people across a system who impact it (Burns, 2021). In a HE context, this would mean bringing students, local and other communities, researchers, academic managers, human resources managers, and so on into either multi-stakeholder or parallel stakeholder inquiry processes. I offer an embryonic example of how this can work later in this chapter.

A number of publications have particularly inspired me in the development of my work with systemic action research, the earliest being Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (Freire & Ramos, popular edition). Snowden, and the University of Hertfordshire complexity team, have published a body of work on complexity and complex adaptive systems. Midgley's (2000) *Systemic intervention*, and Wadsworth's (2001) *The essential U and I*, both elaborate on how action research can be harnessed to support systemic change. Hoggett's (1992) *Partisans in an uncertain world* and his broader work on the importance of emotions in organisations and change processes have been influential. Gilligan (1982), in *In a different voice*, articulated the notion of an 'ethics of care'. Johnstone's (1979) *Impro: Improvisation and the theatre* explained how to improvise in response to a constantly changing world. The Club of Rome's (1972) *Limits to growth* was significant for me, and one of its authors, Donatella Meadows (1972), was

also a foundational writer on systems thinking. Also influential was E. F. Schumacher's *Small is beautiful* (1973).

Growth itself is an interesting example of a dynamic system patterning that self-perpetuates. Universities, like most organisations, feel compelled to grow, and like most organisations often lose their heart in this quest. If we are able to understand how to limit growth, we may be able to understand how to positively change society.

Ideas about how a systems approach can bring about positive change in higher education

Here I focus on four main ideas and the actions these can inspire to initiate or support systemic change:

- existential questions,
- research programmes built on participants' knowledge and skills,
- new models of knowledge production based on collaborative and participatory work, and
- action against false news and artificial intelligence.

1. Focus energy on the existential questions, and engage with them in a systemic and action-oriented way

In my view, the great issues of our time are existential questions. How do we regulate and control technological development, in particular artificial intelligence (AI)? How do we take the action necessary to prevent the worst ravages of climate change (it is already too late to prevent major impacts), and what do we need to do to prevent the continuing and increasing threat of nuclear and biological warfare? How do we learn the lessons of the recent COVID-19 pandemic? What would happen if something worse developed? I feel amazed that the wheels of the academy continue to turn as if nothing is going on out there. Yet if we fail to deal with these issues, there will be nothing else to deal with. I have sup-

ported most of a decade's participatory research work on slavery and bonded labour and on worst forms of child labour, but the gains from this sort of work will likely be wiped out entirely by the impact of climate change. Similarly, the work that I and others have done on peacebuilding will quickly unravel as people fight for resources and land, and safe spaces and food, as the effects of climate change really start to hit.

Understanding the hidden complexities and dynamics of these problems is critical, in order to identify the leverage points for changing them. So teaching people to understand the systemic connections between things is perhaps the most important educational task for the next decades.

This research needs to be intrinsically linked to action. Action research posits that we learn as much through doing as through our intellectual analysis of a situation. It is an iterative process that involves taking a step and then viewing the world anew, and each time asking these questions: Are we asking the right questions? Do we have the right people to answer our questions and/or to take action? What have we learned from what we have done? What can we see anew that we could not see before? What new knowledge do we need in order to act further? What methods do we need right now that perhaps we did not need before? This approach is necessary in order to engage with fast-moving complex issues, but it stands in radical opposition to what are usually two key enablers or disablers of research. One is that most institutional research ethics committees require projects to detail in advance key questions or lines of enquiry, action that will be undertaken, and tools or other materials that will be required. The other is that most donors want to know what the results will be before we even know what the most appropriate questions to ask are.

2. Build research programmes around the skills and knowledge of those who live with the issues

One of the things that I find most troublesome about the concept of HE is the implicit assumption that people who have been

through the ‘education system’ are somehow more intelligent than people who have not. The people who are mostly assumed to have little or no research skills are often the ones who are the best analysts.

I have facilitated large-scale processes with illiterate enslaved persons and bonded labourers, child labourers, people living with disabilities in almost unimaginable poverty, and people living in active conflict zones. What these people generally have in common is the ability to analyse, to see the bigger picture, to understand causal chains and feedback loops, etc. Most marginalised people every day navigate complex risks that most academic researchers will never come close to facing in their whole lives, and they frequently have to make what are life or death decisions. Living like this compels people to develop deep analytical capacity based on both experiential knowledge and reasoning. When I work with professionals and other university-trained researchers, I rarely see this capacity. It takes far longer for them to ‘unlearn’ the way they deconstruct and atomise knowledge. Of course, this is not universally true, just as it is not universally true that marginalised people are good analysts. But it is true enough to blow away the hierarchical assumptions that pretty much the whole of social science rests upon.

3. Develop new models of knowledge production that incentivise collaborative and participatory work

Peer-reviewed journal articles are an outdated form of knowledge dissemination that needs to be replaced. They represent the few (usually elites) talking to the few. So called ‘high impact journals’ actually have an incredibly small average readership. Blind peer review is never blind. Any reader can identify the work of well-known writers because of their citations and reference lists, and the context provided in the articles. Busy academics will often review submissions in tiny fragments of time because of everything else they are called on to do. Reviewers have no accountabil-

ity to the writers. There is no critical dialogue. The whole system is constructed around a fiction that few dare to call out.

Collective analysis is of central importance to participatory work. Meaning is always interpreted, and the more people who are implicated in the issues being explored and who can contribute to that meaning-making process, the more robust the analysis will be. This runs against strong currents in social science, which perpetuate the practice of single researchers analysing data that pertains to large numbers of people, and which privilege sole authorship of research. The result of collective analysis should be joint authorship, but researchers facilitating this important work will often not be named or acknowledged at all. This means that as far as the academic system is concerned, their work is invisible.

The phenomenon frequently cited in relation to women and people of colour—they have to work harder and longer in order to be promoted—is also true for participatory researchers. The ‘invisible’ participatory research they conduct across their full-time career is not acknowledged as ‘research’ according to the understanding dominant in most universities, so participatory researchers also have to produce a traditional academic output in order to get promoted. They will likely need to work on more than twice the number of publications than those on mainstream academic trajectories will have to work on. Importantly, then, how is this work assessed? Even in the IDS where I work, which has been espousing participatory methods for more than three decades, the promotions committee comprises mostly mainstream academics who require IDS researchers to indicate how many academic journal articles they have produced in order to be considered for promotion.

4. Act against false news and artificial intelligence

Universities need to re-enforce their early mandate to be places that are home to, and cultivators of, creative and critical thinking. It is almost impossible to think critically or work collaboratively if we do not know what is real and what is not, in a world where AI

can be used to fabricate artificial reality in ways that are more or less impossible to detect, and in which reality itself can be erased. Without these anchors to shared reality, democracy can be ever more easily wrenched away by dictatorship. Even more serious is the existential threat that AI poses to humanity. Despite the ease and immediate gratification it appears to offer, AI is extremely dangerous. Far from ‘embracing’ these technologies, universities should be warning society about actual and potential dangers of AI given its uncertain—possibly destructive—capability, and carefully exploring alternative knowledge models that will benefit society in a sustainable way.

Postscript

In the end, I think two things are critical in the quest for HE to fully embrace a participatory world view in generating knowledge. First, we must continue to model participatory practice and build on the critical mass of practice that shows participatory and learning-based approaches are at least as robust, if not more robust, than mainstream approaches (and they are also more ethical!) (Burns et al., 2021).

Second, we who care about HE need to work together to change the institutional environment. It will not be enough to build change solely around a vision. People seeking to craft positive change in and through institutions will need to understand the complex ways in which long-established system dynamics prevent change. To understand, navigate, and respond effectively to these system dynamics, those who seek to initiate and embed positive change in HE institutions will need to integrate participatory inquiry and action research methods into their own change processes. In other words, it is not enough to promote participatory methods in university research, teaching, and so forth. The university itself needs to build these methods—indeed, the understanding and practice of participation, inclusion, collaboration, critical thinking, democratic process, recognition of multiple sources of knowledge, and

other hallmarks of systemic action research—into its own learning and change processes.

In the practical example I provide in the following section, the identification of common patterns relating to specific themes opened up pathways for action. Institutions need to move from a planning model to this sort of participatory inquiry and action research process as the primary vehicle to drive institutional change. The problem we face is that these sorts of processes take time to establish, and we have little time. Yet the alternative road seems only to lead inexorably toward dictatorship and loss of freedoms, opportunities, and capacities in response to what appear to be impending crises. I believe that modelling and living our vision of the future for HE, as I've outlined here, is the only way to draw the millions needed towards it. An education system that models the values of inclusion, engagement, and active citizenship at least has a chance of seeing these values mirrored in society.

Practical suggestions for consideration, discussion—and action

Rather than summarise what I have discussed above, here I offer an example that clarifies what might be done in HE to bring about positive systemic change. In 2009/2010, I was asked to facilitate a process that might be seen as an embryonic version of what the inquiry processes to identify and seed such positive change could look like. I worked with the National Coordination Centre for Public Engagement, and Heather Squires in particular, on an action research project designed to explore the changes that HE institutions need to make to become more publicly engaged, i.e. with public input in the decision-making process so all participants are aware of the range of associated interests and points of view, to help ensure decisions are widely informed and sustainable. It was quite an experimental process, and reflecting on it I can see both gaps and major flaws. But conceptually it provided a foundation for identifying and thinking about critical issues and how to constructively engage with them. Box 6.1, presenting an excerpt

Box 6.1: Example of suggested pathways for action by multiple stakeholders

The national action research programme convened a series of parallel learning streams. These drew together participants with different organisational relationships to public engagement into a series of small inquiry groups that met between three and six times (depending on the group). As key issues emerged across the groups, facilitators inter-connected them. The facilitators attended all of the group meetings allowing effective integration. Each of the groups had a central starting question around which their inquiry was structured:

1. *Heads of departments* How can we balance the competing demands on staff time to ensure that public engagement is embedded in the university?
2. *Beacons* [When we started this process a small number of educational institutions were designated as Beacons of Public Engagement tasked with modelling different approaches to higher education engagement.] How can an intensive investment in PE projects translate into sustainable PE across the universities?
3. *Vice Chancellors and other senior management* What are the strategic drivers which affect PE and what strategic changes need to be made in order to ensure sustainable public engagement?
4. *Human resources* How do work practices, performance management systems, appraisal, recruitment and promotions systems, etc. need to be changed to support public engagement?
5. *Experienced public engagement academics* What can we learn from our public engagement work about how best to embed public engagement in higher education?
6. *Additional stakeholder input* The sixth strand of the programme involved insights streamed in from other universities and other initiatives. This included a workshop of student volunteers, and a whole organisation learning process initiated within the University of the West of England.

We made considerable efforts to ensure that each of the groups represented a mix of different types of university. More than 40 Higher Education institutions (HEIs) had participants in at least one of the action research groups. The total number of active group members was approximately 50. ... In July 2010 we carried out a detailed analysis of all of the action research group transcripts identifying a number of key themes from across the streams. These were collated into a set of theme papers providing the basis for a cross stream workshop – with approximately 70 people attending. Participants took the theme papers as the starting point for discussion. They were provided with these in advance, but were also given ten minutes at the start of each session to read (or re-read). The ideas and views contained within the papers were then subjected to scrutiny and further developed. (pp. 4–6).¹

from the Introduction to the report that Heather and I prepared on this project, explains how the process was constructed (Burns, Squires et al., 2011).

While the process did work with a small number of community organisations that were connected to the University of the West of England, overall the biggest weakness of the process was that it remained largely within the organisations themselves. A stronger version of this process would have run in parallel action research groups of students and of community organisations that have relationships with HE institutions.

All institutional inquiries would differ from each other, but this process elicited some important cross-cutting patterns:

- Reputation and reputational risk. Here the inquirers explored how reputational risk inhibited institutions from taking risks or making radical changes.
- Organisational responsiveness and the need for an approach to engagement that is more emergent than the highly planned

approach to organisation still characteristic of HE institutions. Here the inquirers were interested in how universities could respond to real-time issues. Their systems were seen to inhibit rapid responses.

- Recognition and incentives for change. Here the inquirers were interested in exploring in more detail how, for example, what counted in the promotions and recruitment processes would have to change.
- Equity at departmental level when some are involved in public engagement and others are not; and the organisation and management of public engagement. Here the inquirers wanted to explore how to manage inequities in the workload system, when some people were able to do more engaged work, and others were locked into more traditional work.
- How to make HE spaces and places more conducive to public engagement. Here the inquirers were interested in how to make universities more open and welcoming places that do not intimidate local community members ...
- The opportunities afforded by the impact assessment of the Research Excellence Framework.

Inquiries of this sort could become embedded within the HE system, but they should not be isolated from HE policymakers. Policymakers should be invited into the inquiry groups from where they would learn directly about what is needed and what can be done.

Questions for discussion

1. In what ways can HE be underpinned by a systemic understanding of how things happen and how things can change?
2. Who are the stakeholders who maintain the status quo in HE, and are there new or other stakeholders who can effectively champion change from within and/or from outside the HE system?

Notes

- 1 The full report can be accessed at https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-11/action_research_report_0.pdf.

Recommended reading

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