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Dear Phil,

Thanks for your letter and the related materials. Thanks also for paying some attention to my "Construing Systemicity" pages. They have never been anywhere close to publication and the dozen or so private copies distributed over the last decade were met with deafening silence, your response counting as infinitely more than all those zeroes. There are, as you suggest, very serious (actually hilarious) difficulties in moving from one paradigm to another as my old "Re-framing ..." paper urged people to do. There are too many mindsets in concrete and too many vested interests. Habits are cybernetic, and nothing can change until some set points change.

In 1994 at the ISSS meeting, Heinz von Foerster gave a stem-winding plenary about how the toroidal heterarchies set forth by Warren McCulloch in the 1940s had yet to be appreciated in the 1990s. Afterward, various attendees who had previously dismissed my "doughnuts" congratulated me on having at last been vindicated in heterarchy ... and a day later they were all back to their hierarchical dogmas as if nothing had happened. Even our good Stan Salthe has been heard to say that the subject matter of the world really is heterarchical, but that hierarchies are more tractable, so that is what we must model and study! The spherical paradigm people will be harder to dislodge than the flat earth people (actually they're the same bunch topologically), and it won't happen in my lifetime, but until dynamic, volutionary heterarchy in toroidal topologies takes center stage, no real progress can be made in construing systemicity, or much else. Exactly once during the years when I was making conference presentations someone came up to me afterward and said, "Why didn't somebody tell me before?" I think, however, that it would be possible to get twice as many converts (2) if I would complete the "Construing ..." pages, and maybe ten times as many (10) if the artwork were to be animated to suggest its inherent dynamism. Whatever inadequacies my materials have, they will always remain valuable to me as the tools for my own paradigmatic adaptations which have allowed me to clear away more than 80% of the questions I once had about *what is going on*. Many a paradox resolves and many a problem dissolves in an appropriate topological setting. My "What's Going On ..." paper at the SEED website offers a different approach to some of the same subject matter, and I am inclined to build upon that nowadays, taking "volution" in general to be the core metaphysic of systemicity and the true unit of organization (much as William Powers does in Behavior: The Control of Perception). To that end, I am experimenting with a consolidated version of "Construing what's going on ..." this season.

As you can see, my approach is rather "opposite" to yours in that I try to use various perspectives as visual metaphors, as paradigmatic guides, and as ostensive proofs-by-inspection while steering clear of any real data which might tend to confuse me. There is certainly room for and a need for both approaches, and if they are correct they are essentially the same. Out of my prejudices I interpret your images of "resource factors/subject process/product factors" and "collection-transformation-distribution" as the cores of toroidal orders. Your sigmoids which trace a development from one order to another provide a meeting space for our disparate approaches also: what you call "discovering opportunity" and "discovering constraint" I have

also elaboration
& perfection
(as refinement)
laurels &
corrections

variously called “imagining the possibilities” and “realizing the limitations” or perhaps “making opportunities” and “having restraint,” i.e., in the realm of deliberate development. Some of my interpretations such as the meanings which can be assigned to derivatives beyond the second order have been borrowed from Arthur M. Young’s The Reflexive Universe and The Geometry of Meaning, where he drew attention to the obvious, e.g., that a rate of change of acceleration indicates “control” and that (on the Argand plane) a fourth derivative of an imaginary brings one back to the zeroth derivative angle, hence to a “goal” as a “position” but at a higher order. For me, it is nice to be able to use heterarchical toroidality to dismiss bad theories (for example, “hierarchies of human values” such as Maslow’s which violate McCulloch’s remonstrance about the inherent *heterarchy* of values in neural nets having more than a trivial number of nodes and interconnections) even as I find toroidal cybernation necessary to an intuitive understanding of how it happens that attempts to change a system without changing its set points only make that system more intractably unchanging. Life cycles as a whole and their rates (and rates and rates of rates, etc.) of change are poorly appreciated at best, even when interesting words such as “immaturity” and “adolescence” and “senescence” and “geriatric effect” are spoken right out loud. As for *organization* itself, it is inherently distributed around a dynamic evolutionary loop in any toroidal holarchy. All this the ISSS people never understood — or at least never seemed able to articulate — and the ASC people weren’t much better. I think one has to study “control system engineering” in some depth and then also “fluid dynamics” beyond my depth to gain enough technical savvy to begin a competent philosophical comprehension of systemicity. A few of the systemists almost got it: Stafford Beer, Jay Forrester, Peter Senge, Barry Clemson, Heinz von Foerster, H.T. Odum, maybe Gregory Bateson and Kenneth Boulding and Ross Ashby. You would think the “Principia Cybernetica” guys (Joslyn and Heylighen, and Turchin, their mentor) would get it, but their commitments to hierarchies seem always to block them. In any event, anything that “goes on” has to cybernate with negative feedback, and anything which develops has to cybernate with positive feedback, and every cybernation is toroidal. And now let the congregation stand for the benediction: May all invariants be artifacts of volutions, now and forever more. Amen. (If you can stand for that kind of benediction, there is hope for you.)

Unfortunately, as you have noted, nobody passes the collection plate and takes up the offering for the applied philosophy of systemicity, especially not nowadays since the demise of the systems movement. I tried on a few occasions to teach software engineering development in these terms, but received no plaudits. Once in a while I made presentations at management seminars to try to break the habits of seeing enterprises as hierarchies or “matrices” or whatever other fantasy was popular at the time, but again nothing registered with the audiences except that the torus would make a cool corporate logo. Certainly, during the heyday of “systems consulting,” the way that systemists such as Ackoff and Flood and Checkland, etc., funded themselves was to package a lot of buzz phrases and odd speculations into a “consciousness-raising” and to charge high rates for their interventions. As I have mentioned previously, I think it is wrong to take half-baked pseudo-systemicity out for sale. Unfinished systemology does, however, need to be tested and enhanced and is, I believe, suitable for helping shed a different light on education. The enclosed “syllabus” represents what I would nowadays like to teach ... or actually to learn.

I suspect that a lot could be made from a critical review and consolidation of your materials and mine, and if we ever get to sit at the same table and work on them collaboratively, the worst that could happen is that nothing will change. Or one could hope for the best. I have enclosed a few orphan pages of trivia which you may find inflammatory or flammable.

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Best regards,
Jon