Researching Real Life: the experience of a paradigm shift

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The complex real world

set of ideas in our head
The Shape of the Talk

1. History
2. Action Research
3. The Research Programme
4. Learning: The Paradigm Shift
5. Conclusion
DON’T
TACKLE THE HARD TASK PIECE BY PIECE!
USE A SYSTEMS APPROACH!
The core systems concept:

an adaptive whole which can survive through time

- Layered structure
- Processes of communication and control
- Emergent properties
Four key moments in the development of SSM

1. Model purposeful activity

2. Declare the worldview for each model
What is a prison?

1. A punishment system?

2. A re-education system?

3. A system to protect society?

4. A system to train criminals?

------ etc
Four key moments in the development of SSM

1. Model purposeful activity
2. Declare the worldview for each model
3. The process of inquiry: a learning system
4. Work on information systems
SSM’s learning system

Perceived real-world problem situation

Action to improve

Structured debate about change

Find change

Purposeful models based on declared worldviews

W1

W2

W3

systemically desirable

culturally feasible
The Concorde Project

London

Paris

sign

Treaty

build

Concorde

BAC (Bristol)
Aviation Sud (Toulouse)
Design Eng

Hydraulic Eng

Crisis Task Force

("The hinge on the nose does not work")
Using the system idea (1)

systemicity here: HARD ST

set of ideas in our head

system

systemicity here: HARD ST
Using the system idea (2)

systemicacy here: SOFT ST

set of ideas in our head

system
In ‘soft’ systems thinking the focus is on the process of inquiry into the complexity of real situations
Why is progress in understanding this so slow?

1. Shifting mental furniture is very difficult for most people.

2. The new paradigm calls for engagement in real life situations: not popular with most researchers!
Systems Thinking, Systems Practice (1981)


Information, Systems and Information Systems (1997)

Learning for Action (2006)