Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications
and other research outputs

So what's a metaproject for?

Journal Item

For guidance on citations see FAQs.

Version: [not recorded]

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1023/A:1013122210672

oro.open.ac.uk

So what's a metaproject for?

Magnus Ramage[1]

Abstract:

Curious Reader: So what's the point of this paper?

Author: To give readers a sense of how the Systems Discipline sees the coherence of its course provision, and how those ideas are developing.

Curious Reader: And that's called a metaproject? Funny term.

Author: It's been kicking around in the Systems Discipline for a few years. The idea is partly to ensure that there's a common thread within all our courses (from level 1 to postgraduate) and partly to create common elements which can be reused within several courses. It also relates to commonality in our research, consultancy, external workshops etc.

Curious Reader: Sounds like a recipe for lots of arguments!

Author: Yes, and they're still going on - the paper outlines the dialogue that has happened within the Discipline, and forms part of that dialogue itself. And it's written (as you might have noticed) in the form of a dialogue …

Keywords: Systems thinking and practice, systems teaching, coherence

Contact Address:

Email: m.ramage@open.ac.uk

Paper: Systems Discipline, Faculty of Technology, Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA

Tel: 01908 659779
Fax: 01908 652175

Word-count: 3667 (total, except for text within diagrams)

---

[1] Systems Discipline, Centre for Complexity & Change, Open University, UK

So what's a metaproject for?[2]

Magnus Ramage

Confused New Systems Academic: I keep hearing about this OU Systems Metaproject. But what exactly is it? What does it look like? How would I recognise it if I bumped into one on the cycle-path?

Wise Experienced Systems Academic: Well, I'm very glad you asked that question. The answer depends who you ask. For some people, it's a grand plan to make everything we do in Systems fit into a single coherent narrative, so that there's a chance to reuse materials where there's significant overlap in ideas. Others would limit that from 'everything' to 'core Systems tasks/teaching'. Others still regard this as constraining their work, and would limit it to the teaching of our two core undergraduate courses & summer school (T205 *Systems Thinking: Principles and Practice*[3], T306 *Managing Complexity: A Systems Approach*, TXR248 *Experiencing Systems*), as supported by the T55x packs (T551 *Systems Primer*, T552 *Diagramming*, T553 *Modelling*) which are used in both courses and the summer school. And there's a few who see the metaproject as only being about the T55x packs themselves.

Confused New Systems Academic: How very convoluted! Is there no official line? OK, so getting OU Systems people to agree on a definitive statement of anything is like herding particularly self-opinionated and independently minded cats; but surely someone's put it down on paper somewhere?

Wise Experienced Systems Academic: Why yes. After the old Systems Department was restructured as the Centre for Complexity and Change (CCC), the new Systems Discipline (one of three sub-disciplines of CCC) did a lot of thinking about its future tasks and role. The resulting paper, written by Andy Lane who was then Head of Discipline, but with the ideas of the rest of the Discipline behind it (and with annexes written by others), was dated 5/11/1998 and entitled *A radical plan to transform the systems curriculum and the activities of the Systems Discipline for the new Millennium*. In it, there's a section entitled *The Discipline as a meta-project team,* which begins:

> "Members of the Systems Discipline will work as a meta-project team on the full range of inter-related component activities … Within this meta-project there are 7 types of component activities that need to be handled as sub-projects:
>
> a) Award level co-ordination activities required to present a qualification externally e.g. The Diplomas and MSc in Environmental Decision Making.
>
> b) Co-ordinating the development and/or presentation of a specified course at a specified level, some of which are Systems led, some by other curriculum areas e.g. Information Systems.
>
> c) Specific teaching components for use as part of courses at Levels 1, 2, 3 or PG, some components being Systems led, some by other curriculum areas, e.g. Management.
>
> d) Generic teaching components that could be used in more than one course at different levels e.g. a module on diagramming.
>
> e) Research and scholarship activities based on existing and new work that can also be used for educational or training purposes and that helps to raise funds and profile e.g. authored and edited books, case studies based on research.

---

[2] The title was inspired by Chapter 17, "So what's a meta for?" of Bateson & Bateson (1987).

[3] OU course codes are unpacked in an appendix at the end of this paper

f) Consultancy and training activities that use generic teaching materials, proven course design principles and reversioned materials to meet the need of specific clients.

g) Maintaining the Open University Systems Society as a direct means of involving our past and present Associate Lecturers and Students in many of the other activities."

Confused New Systems Academic: Quite a list! And it's very noticeable that the T55x packs only appear as one item, and not until point d) on the list. But it looks a bit of a catchall, a description of everything Systems was doing at the time. Even if we just talk about teaching for now, where's the 'meta' about all this?

Wise Experienced Systems Academic: That begins to be found later in the document, in a section headed *A new academic project*, where Andy wrote: "our main purpose should be to encourage and foster the use of systems thinking and practice to as wide a range of individuals and institutions as possible through a co-ordinated set of teaching materials and other publications that can be assembled into courses and qualifications but do not necessarily have to be embedded in a specific course". This is one way in which the document talks about a common thread running through the various courses offered by the Discipline.

Confused New Systems Academic: So that would be T205 and T306, yes?

Wise Experienced Systems Academic: Yes, those two, but also a set of other courses. There's a good diagram in the document that shows these two (plus the summer school) at levels 2 and 3, but also a set of courses at levels 1 and M (figure 1).
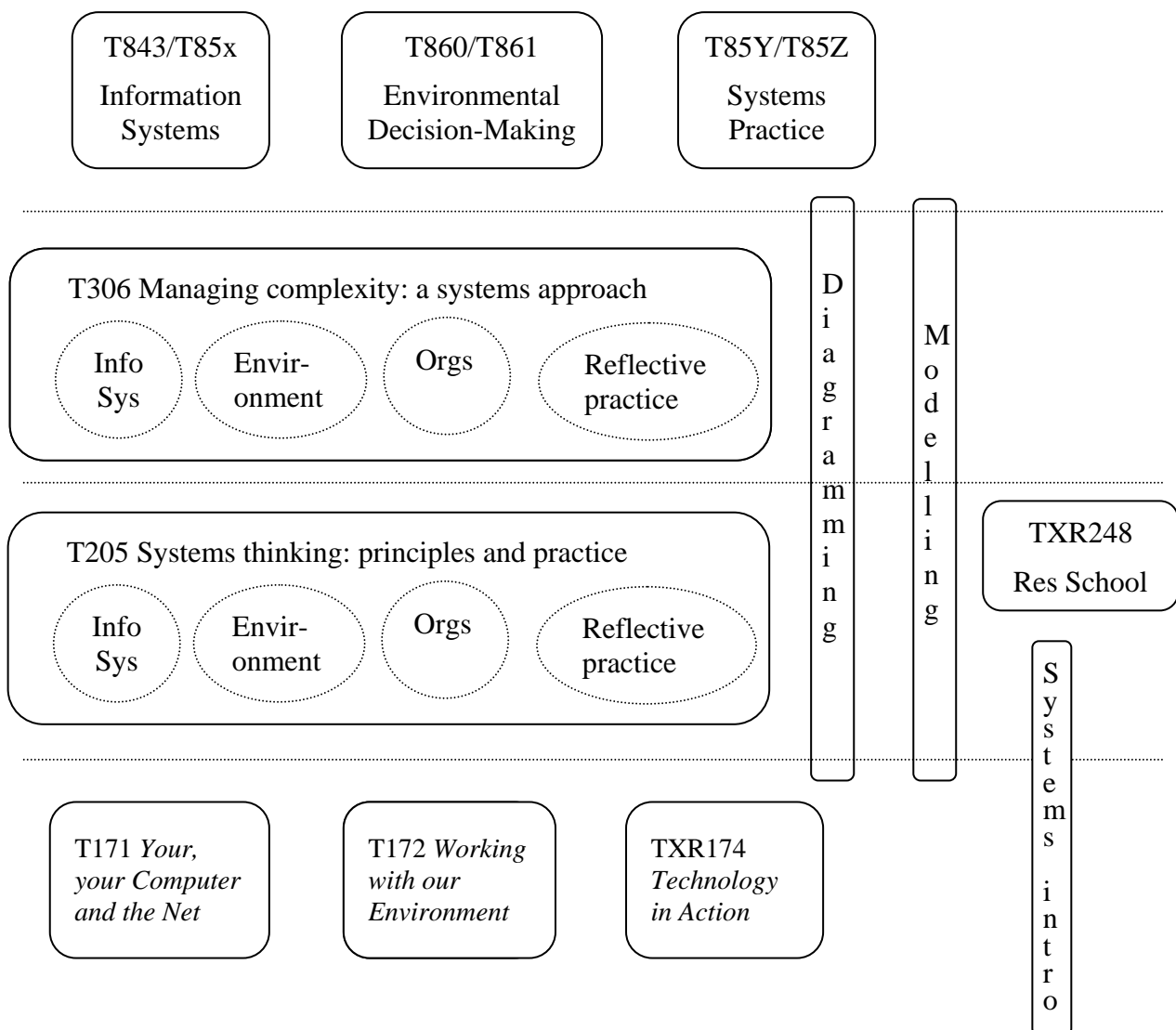
Figure 1: A forward-looking view of the Systems course suite (Nov 1998)

Confused New Systems Academic: Phew! Indeed, quite a lot of courses besides T205 and T306. And the three vertical strands are the packs?

Wise Experienced Systems Academic: Sure. You'll notice that two of the three M level boxes (IS and Systems Practice) are still incomplete, though they may eventually get done. But the level 1, 2 and 3 courses shown there are all running - a pretty big achievement!

Confused New Systems Academic: Sorry to keep picking, and maybe I've missed something, but surely there's more to the integration lark to deserve this 'meta' title?

Wise Experienced Systems Academic: Well there's sections on integrating packaging and some approaches for integrating content; on levels of learning; and on appropriate assessment methods for different levels. There are also two additional annexes about non-teaching matters: research and 'external activities' (the Open Systems Group), and how those fit in with the rest. Knowing you, you'll be asking next about the levels of learning?

Confused New Systems Academic: Quite right! You're getting good at this…

Wise Experienced Systems Academic: That's an annex by Tony Wright, entitled *Defining levels*, about what the characteristics of the different levels is. It's quite a helpful guide. On page 13, he says: "working systemically … involves four different (but interrelated) aspects, namely systems concepts, techniques, methods and action". A simple input-output diagram (figure 2) guides us through those stages in the old suite of Systems courses, including a level 4 project (T401 - now T402 *The Open Technology Project*) - feedback between the sub-systems has deliberately been left out to keep the diagram simple.
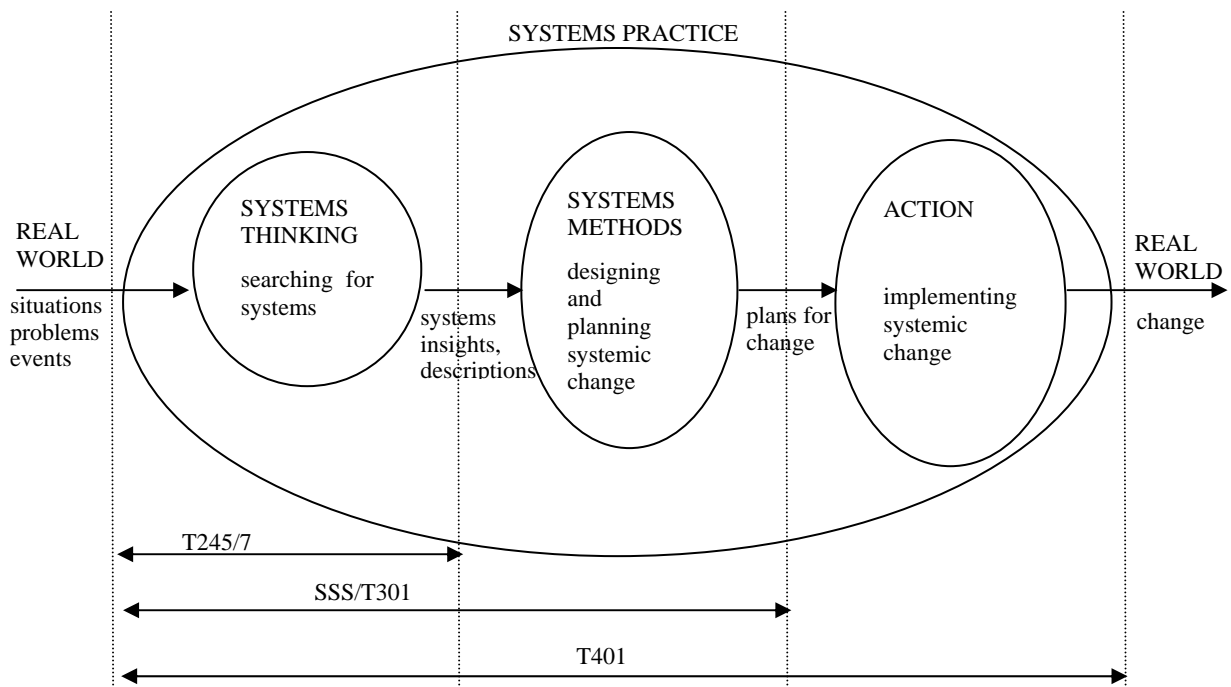
Figure 2: An input-output diagram of the old suite of Systems courses (Nov 1998)

Confused New Systems Academic: Looks sensible enough, and it's still the way lots of us talk about the new courses as well. But it's a bit linear! And surely people do action at earlier levels? After all, at the end of T306 students can be awarded a Diploma in Systems Practice.

4

Wise Experienced Systems Academic: Well quite, which is Tony's next diagram (figure 3) changes the above in a number of ways - included the level 1 and M courses, recognising "that there are elements of theory and praxis at all levels (i.e. action is not just at one level) and that there is feedback between them", and suggesting that courses beyond level 3 are concerned with systems philosophy instead, "with more consideration of the epistemology as opposed to ontology of systems thinking and practice, with personal reflection on theoretical frameworks, methodological developments, etc."
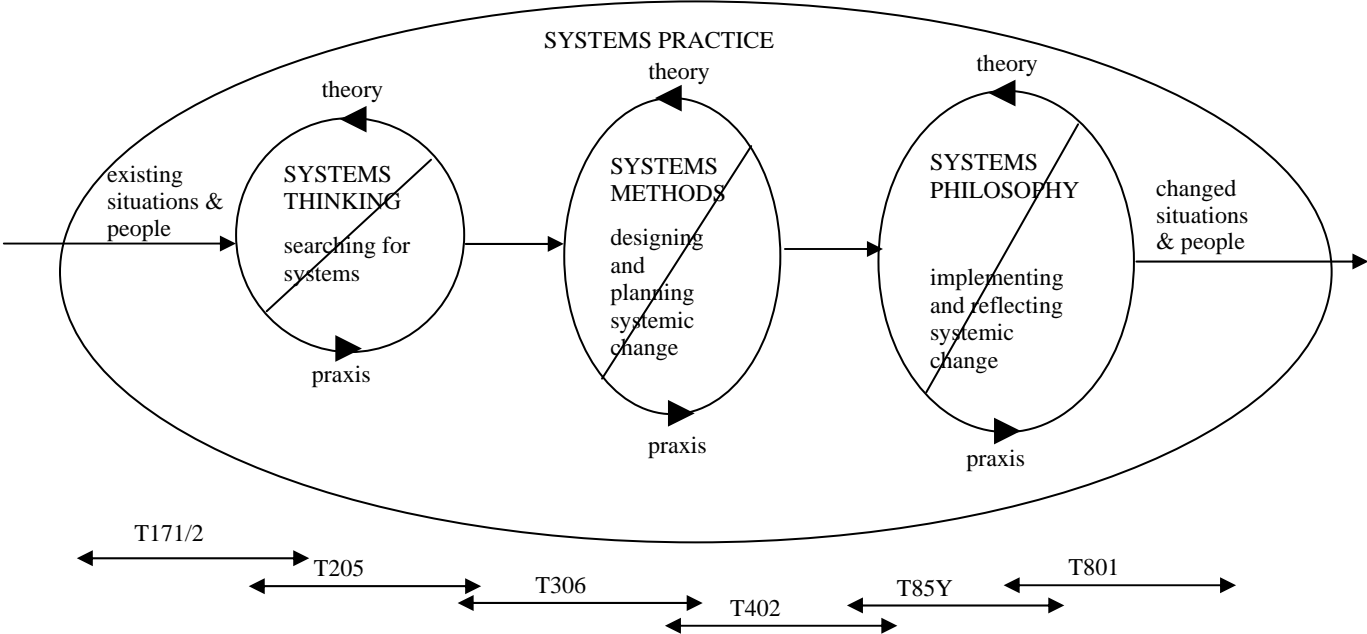
Figure 3: An input-output diagram of the new suite of Systems courses (Nov 1998)

Confused New Systems Academic: Much more like it! (Though I think the positions of one or two of those arrows with course codes on them could be questioned.) So: is that a description of the initial state of the metaproject?

Wise Experienced Systems Academic: One more diagram (figure 4) might help. This is by Andy Lane, and appears as an appendix to a report by Ray Ison (Professor of Systems) called *Delivering the Systems curriculum in the new millennium: staffing & synergies*, dated November 1999.
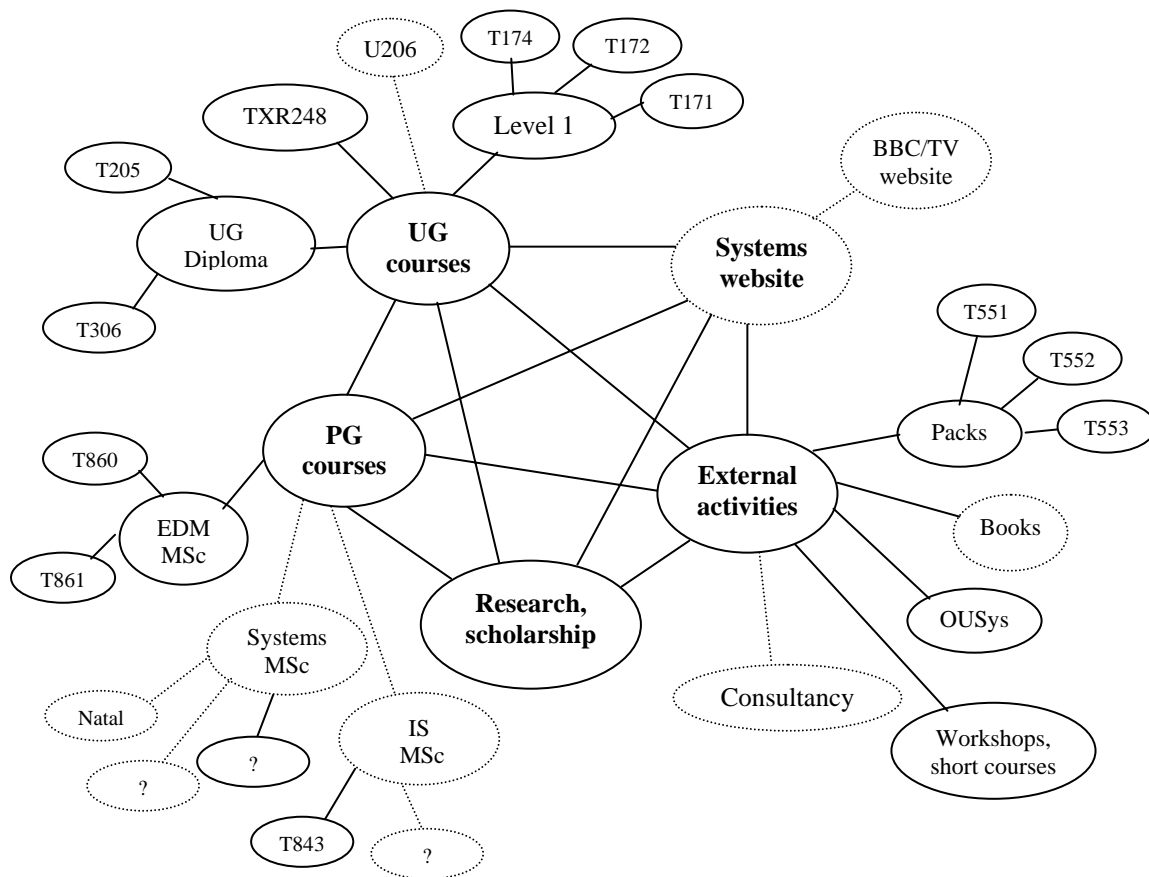
**Figure 4: A relationship map of collective Discipline projects,
as seen by Andy Lane (Nov 1999)**

Wise Experienced Systems Academic: …And I think *that's* as good a description of the initial state of the metaproject as you're getting just now. Although memories vary, and maybe some would say this wasn't a fair representation of the *discussions* that were held. I haven't mentioned the rule of thumb about what courses fitted into the metaproject: those that were deemed sufficiently core to need a backup person within the Discipline, so that if the main person fell under a bus, the work wouldn't be lost.

Confused New Systems Academic: Let's move to the present day, then. We have a set of courses with some shared material between them; what next for the metaproject? What does it mean today?

Wise Experienced Systems Academic: I was rather hoping you'd tell me that... What about that curriculum task group meeting the other week? What happened at that?
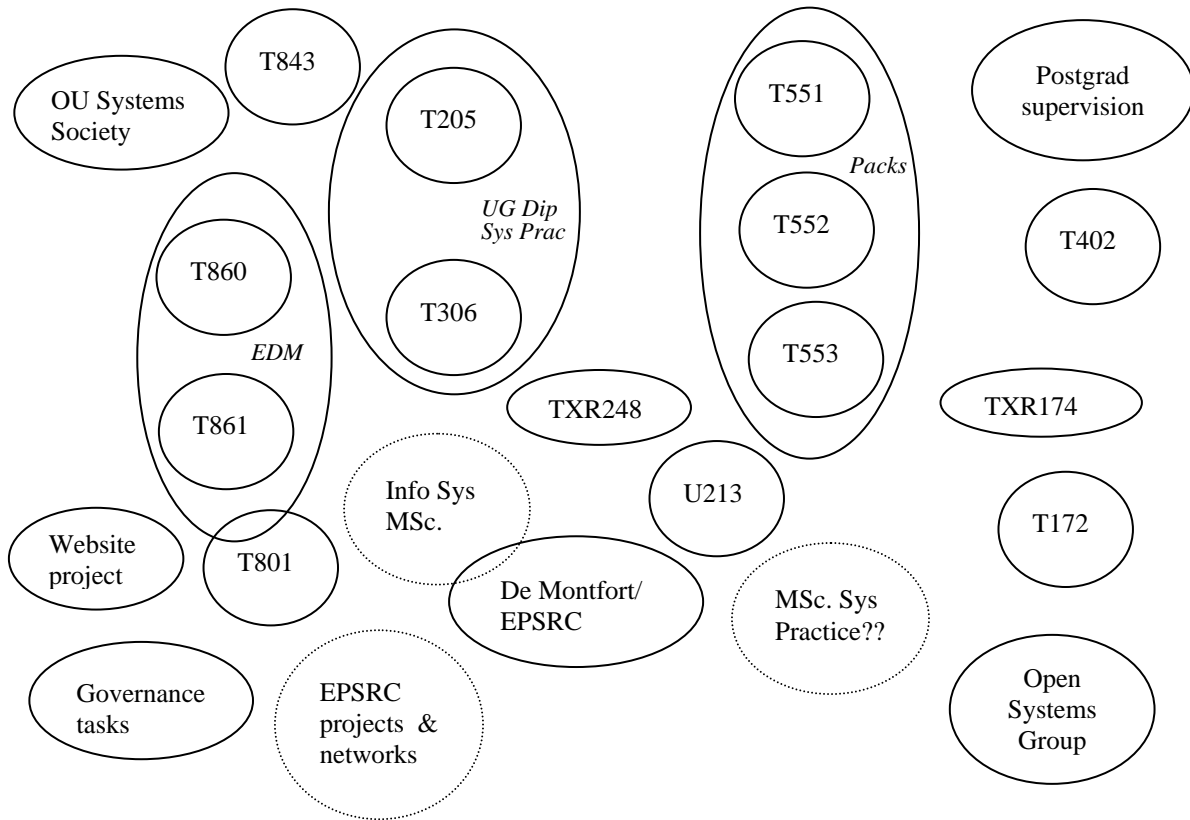
Confused New Systems Academic: Ah yes, that meeting. Never been so tired after a meeting in my life. Well, we began by asking why we should take a fresh look at what the metaproject is. We decided that this was to do with the time that had passed since the discussions which are described above; the growth of new courses and activities; and the arrival of new staff.

Wise Experienced Systems Academic: OK - so how wide did you make your scope for the metaproject?

Confused New Systems Academic: We decided not to make a decision yet about what the metaproject includes or doesn't include. But we did two things - we drew a systems map

(figure 5) of the activities that the Discipline currently engages in corporately; and we outlined some issues as to why there should be a concept of the metaproject.

Wise Experienced Systems Academic: A systems map sounds good… I suppose it'll be incomplete, though. And people will want to add things.

Figure 5: A systems map of the Discipline's corporate activities (March 2001)

Confused New Systems Academic: It would be surprising if they didn't! It's broadly the same list of tasks as in the horsetrading spreadsheet, though.

Wise Experienced Systems Academic: Phew! Makes you a bit breathless to look at it.

Confused New Systems Academic: Yes! But we did think it's a fair record of activities conducted by more than one member of the Discipline, as part of the Discipline's work. Of course, we all do other things that aren't in here - especially research work - and some of it may be with Discipline colleagues. This is the core stuff. And there may be more…

Wise Experienced Systems Academic: You were going to tell me next about the reasons why the task group thought the metaproject existed.

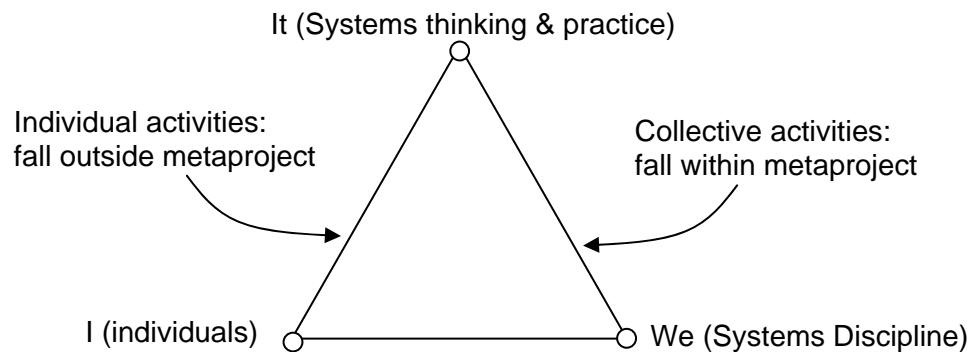**Confused New Systems Academic:** OK - what we reckoned was:
- Coherence in the Systems curriculum & its expected learning outcomes
- Seeing connections between our work
- Making clear the progression within the Systems course offering
- (Part of) a shift from autonomous course teams to suites of courses and course components

7

- Putting boundaries on collective responsibility - making it clear what's collective and individual (leader and shadow model)
- A model of innovation
- A mechanism to say no
- A mechanism to generate more efficient ways of doing things
- A mechanism to generate agreed conventions, e.g. in diagrams

Wise Experienced Systems Academic: It seems to me that this is mostly summed up by the point about boundaries on collective responsibility - figuring out what counts as the Us stuff and what counts as the Me stuff.

Confused New Systems Academic: That reminds me of the triangle of I, We & It[4] that we worked with a bit at our Discipline away-day last October (figure 6). If we take 'It' to be the furthering and dissemination of systems thinking & practice; the 'We' to be the Discipline; and the 'I' to be each of us as individuals - then I think the distinction is between what's on the line from I to It and what's on the line from We to It.

It (Systems thinking & practice)

Individual activities:
fall outside metaproject

Collective activities:
fall within metaproject

I (individuals)   We (Systems Discipline)

Figure 6: The relationship between individual and collective activities

Wise Experienced Systems Academic: Could be… Although there's still the question of how tightly we want to draw that boundary. Some people in the Discipline do feel strongly that it should only be drawn around T205, T306 etc (as was said at a recent Discipline meeting).

Confused New Systems Academic: That's an option of course. But then how do we ensure coherence between those courses and our level 1 and M offerings in the chart (to say nothing of other things)? Or maybe that's just too complicated to achieve.

Wise Experienced Systems Academic: One thing you must take into account is that the earlier metaproject discussions, and the subsequent writing of T551 in particular, took place through a careful and inclusive process. Both the scope of the metaproject and any outcomes from it need to be regarded as owned by the whole Discipline: they present our collective perspectives on what it is we mean by systems thinking.

Confused New Systems Academic: So we need some process which will take the discussion forward. What shape should that process take? I'm not sure.

---

[4] Derived from the Theme-Centred Interaction group facilitation approach

Wise Experienced Systems Academic: Something to think about further. You'll also need to consider one of the issues which so far in this discussion you've carefully managed to avoid: packaging. The packs, T205 & T306 were given packaging with a common appearance in a format that allowed for rapid updating of sections. Are either of these goals still desirable? Is the formatting currently right? Some people in the Discipline answer 'no' to the last question.

Confused New Systems Academic: Yes - we had a paper from John Martin at the Curriculum group, suggesting changes to the presentation of the packs. The group's also in the process of appointing a pack chair, who will presumably have a view on the presentation question. The issue here for me though is whether presentation is necessarily connected with the metaproject, or if they're separate issues…

Wise Experienced Systems Academic: Another one for further thinking! From my perspective the web-project is critical as well - it is not just about presenting who we are but a learning resource with scope for interactivity. It thus may be a major arm of our teaching, researching and marketing. So, do you have an answer to your initial question yet? What's the metaproject for?

Confused New Systems Academic: My view - others might disagree - is that it's about the conceptual linking of a core stream of Systems courses (at the moment T205, TXR248 and T306, plus the Environmental Decision-Making programme, but eventually also the two new MSc programmes), so that they can share elements which are used in common, and so that they don't contradict each other. It's also about maintaining a thread of systems learning so that students have a sensible study path from level 1 to level M; with some sort of connection between these courses and non-course offerings for groups such as alumni/ae and one-off workshops for a range of groups. To me, this goal has been most clearly achieved through the T55x packs and unified packaging, but those are results of the metaproject and not the thing itself. How the metaproject itself goes forward is a matter for a great deal more discussion, though.

Wise Experienced Systems Academic: This is necessary but not sufficient - it needs an operational praxis. This is where horsetrading and collective responsibility comes in. As does the ongoing presentation and updating of the courses and other learning resources. And these in turn are monitored and evaluated through an appropriate Governance structure, which at the moment is one of our main action research projects…

Confused New Systems Academic: I wonder whether the discomfort for some people about the concept is that they see it more as a 'megaproject'. It could be accused of trying to take in everything - a kind of modernist enterprise (totalising rhetoric) with Fordist overtones (componentisation of course elements). Of course, some of this is due to the wider university culture: there's a tension (creative or destructive?) between the Discipline's need to question these issues, as part of being Systems practitioners, and our need to be part of the university's corporate enterprise, with the restrictions that implies. I don't know whether changing the name under which we think of the metaproject would help, as an exercise in reframing. Perhaps it would just be seen as semantic game-playing.

Wise Experienced Systems Academic: So where does that leave you now with regard to the metaproject?

Confused New Systems Academic: Well, I'm a lot further forward in understanding where it came from and the different perspectives people have on it. And perhaps a little further in understanding where it might be going…

Wise Experienced Systems Academic: And do you think it has lessons for Systems teaching at other places from the OU? Or is it purely of local interest?

Confused New Systems Academic: I'd say it has some lessons others could consider. Two important ones are about coherence and about boundary. If we take seriously the notion of looking at whole systems, does that mean we should look at the whole system represented by a suite of courses about Systems? In that case, what does it mean to ensure coherence between them? Is this necessarily a totalising enterprise, or can it be a framework within which many different kinds of activities can be seen? And should the coherence best be seen as intellectual coherence, or as coherence at a more concrete level (such as ensuring common use of diagram types and a common format for materials)?

Then there's the question of boundaries. It seems helpful to establish a boundary around a core suite of courses which a department covers, and to say that courses within that boundary are especially important and *must* happen. Within that boundary, the kind of coherence I've just mentioned can be more clearly put into practice. On the other hand, as we've seen above, if many people are involved in teaching courses which *don't* sit within the boundary - does that mean you need to widen the boundary? Is it helpful to distinguish between the courses taught by a department and the courses taught by members of a department?

And I guess that hovering in amongst these questions is something about emergence: if we define a curriculum and its learning objectives at a modular level, what does it mean to say that the whole degree programme has learning objectives? Are those simply the sum of the learning objectives of the modules? Or should we expect there to be emergent properties of the modules taken together? Do those arise ten minutes after the degree programme has ended, or not for ten years? If the latter (which might very well be so for Systems courses), how on earth can these be measured? And in a curriculum with a lot of options about which modules to take, what emergent properties can be defined? For many universities, this is of great practical relevance just now, given the importance which many governments place on clearly definable outcomes in education.

Wise Experienced Systems Academic: Lots of questions! Nor does the OU experience necessarily provide answers for others; but it might help others to look at these questions as well.

Reference
Bateson, G., & Bateson, M. C. (1987). *Angels Fear: An investigation into the nature and meaning of the sacred,* Rider, London.

Appendix: Glossary of abbreviations and OU course codes
NB. Current courses are described in more detail at http://www3.open.ac.uk/courses/

CCC: Centre for Complexity & Change
EDM: Environmental Decision Making (postgraduate diploma/MSc)
OSG: Open Systems Group
OUSys: OU Systems Society
SSS: Systems Summer School (discontinued predecessor to TXR248)
T171: *Your, your Computer and the Net*
T172: *Working with our Environment: Technology for a Sustainable Future*
T174/TXR174: *Technology in Action*
T205: *Systems Thinking: Principles and Practice*
TXR248: *Experiencing Systems*
T245: *Managing in Organizations* (discontinued predecessor to T205)
T247: *Working with Systems* (discontinued predecessor to T205)
T301: *Complexity, Management and Change: Applying a Systems approach* (discontinued predecessor to T306)
T306: *Managing Complexity: A Systems Approach*
T401: Technology project course (discontinued predecessor to T402)
T402: *The Open Technology Project*
T55x: set of three stand-alone packs (**T551** *Systems Primer*, **T552** *Diagramming*, **T553** *Modelling*)
T801: Masters dissertation in Technology
T843: *Management information systems* (discontinued course)
T85Y: Masters module in Systems Practice (not yet available)
T860: *Environmental Decision Making: A Systems Approach*
T861: *Environmental Ethics*
U206: *Environment*
U213: *International Development: challenges for a world in transition*