

Systems Storytelling Initiative Synopsis of Community of Practice Session #4, March 25, 2022

CCL System Storytellers **Melanie Goodchild** and **Sibusiso (“Sbu”) Nyamakazi** opened the session by sharing more about their work, particularly how audio elements of systems storytelling such as music incorporate indigenous wisdom traditions and different ways of knowing. Melanie shared her doctoral research to decolonize systems theory, complexity science, and resilience thinking. She continued:

"Relational systems thinking is a theoretical framework to think about healing self and systems. I published Relational Systems Thinking after a series of conversations I had with Mohawk Elders of the Six Nations, who shared with me the teachings of the two-row Wampum belt, as well as Peter Senge and Otto Scharmer at MIT. The white beads in the Wampum belt represent the river of life. The central metaphor is that the Dutch and the Mohawk share the river of life together, and they would help each other.

Common to indigenous knowledge systems around the world is that we use metaphor and stories. So I wrote the article in a two-row visual code as a metaphor for reasoning synergistically between multiple ways of knowing. On the left is Western systems thinking. On the right is our Anishinaabe epistemology, our way of life. And in the middle between is relational systems thinking. We're all sharing the river of life together.

RELATIONAL SYSTEMS THINKING

A dynamic interface theoretical living model for reasoning in the sacred space between ways of knowing



Systems Thinking

From Aristotle, Goethe & Bertalanffy to Senge, Meadows, Scharmer, Stroh, & Westley, **irreducible wholeness** arises from the interaction and relationship between the parts of a whole; awareness-based systems change; complexity, resilience, non-linearity, living systems; symptomatic/fundamental solutions to wicked problems; mental models; technologies of systems modeling; deep ecology; holistic thinking; vicious/virtual cycles



Relational Systems Thinking


The sacred space between ways of knowing, two vessels sharing the river of life together; **Tekani teyothata'tye kaswenta** Haudenosaunee Two-row Wampum Belt is the central metaphor for *reasoning synergistically* between multiple ways of knowing; equal but differentiated; 3rd space; spiritual, mental, physical & *emotional frequencies*; cultural fluency; relational methodology; *healing self & systems*; tea & yarn *masikiki* (medicine)



Anishinaabe Mino-bimaadiziwin (Good Life)

Anishinaabe **Gikendaasowin & Inendaamowin** (original ways of knowing & wisdom); relational & spiritual way of life; **Miinigowiziiwin** (sacred knowledge bundle); **gakiikwe'inan** (teachings); **Gichi gakinoo'imatawin** (the act of great or deep teaching); **Anishnaabemowin**; traditional technologies; Native Science; ancestor mind; prophecy; all my relations; four directions

Figure 1. Presentation of relational systems thinking by Melanie Goodchild, Mar 25, 2022.



The in-between state is a place of fractured identity for many. Indigenous leaders talk of walking in two worlds. When we come into places with people who don't share our worldview, we have to fracture ourselves and put our authentic selves to one side to be able to relate. But instead of choosing sides, we can also think about the space in-between as the space where healing happens. Where we can dance with two ideas until a third presence emerges. To quote Arkan Lushwala, "I can now practice a way of reasoning that does not take sides but instead allows two opposites to dance together until the face of a third presence starts showing up."


The musician Jeremy Dutcher, a classically trained operatic tenor, is also a member of the Wolastoq First Nation. And the music he creates exists in this space in between. He takes the recordings of our most sacred music that anthropologists recorded of my people years ago when we were the 'dying, vanishing race' - recordings that mostly exist in museums - and he modernizes them. To me, songs like Jeremy Dutcher's Death Chant are the sonification of relational systems thinking. They help us let go of binary, hierarchical thinking. They are the vocalization of healing."

Next Sbu shared the origin story behind the global non-profit organization Playing For Change, which started in South Africa in 2002 and since then has developed 17 music programs across 13 countries. He continued:

"It didn't start as a movement. It started as a tool for filmmakers who were looking for inspiration back in 2002, and my co-founders ended up creating this powerful documentary about Roger, who was singing Stand By Me with so much heart and passion. Different renditions of Stand by Me sung in South Africa, Spain, the US, and around the world were fused into one song. That documentary built relationships and then sparked a movement.

Playing for Change is a movement that provides music education in the townships. Our public systems don't invest in music education. No kid in a township takes piano or saxophone classes - only kids from privileged backgrounds in private schools have access to music. So we launched a crowdfunding campaign and built a music studio in a shipping container in the crime capital of South Africa. It humbles us to know we can offer role models to children they can look up to. Then we started hearing from people around the world asking, "What can we do together?" Over the years, countries like Mali, Ghana, Mexico, Thailand, Bangladesh replicated the Imvula Music Program.

We use music to change the narrative. The African songs we create tell of struggle and our terrible past of apartheid. We use music to send a message - we might be from townships, from places where crime and drug abuse and unemployment are high, but there's so much talent. The students give world-class performances. We need to encourage children to become creatives. Someone has to heal people creatively, through dance and musical expression. Our program exists to meet that gap and tell our stories. More than anything for us to thrive as humanity, we need peace. And we use the means of music to encourage peace."



During the interactive group discussion that followed, several areas for reflection emerged sparked by the stories and insights offered by Melanie and Sbu.

1. The space in between ways of knowing

When we think about systems storytelling, two things come together and a third way emerges. There's always light and shadow. There's never one way of seeing things. The healing that comes from the dance between multiple ways of knowing is a wonderful theme to have emerge in our storytelling.

The in-between space as a reality speaks to a broad range of experiences. That's where a lot of the meaning is made.

Tracking multiple levels of narrative simultaneously is something unique about narrative form. When Sbu was telling his story, for example, he was talking about how music carries the narrative but also telling the narrative of music. Communicating multiple levels of narrative allows meaning making to happen across these multiple levels.

2. In-between places: Creativity and play

How do we think about the capacity for systems thinkers to not interpret things literally? Underneath a story, there are always multiple onion layers to peel. In that sense, poetry is an interesting form because you have to interpret meaning differently. It's not just what the line says, it's also the subtext of what is not said and what feeling and emotion the line can generate.


There's something inherently playful about narrative. The space in between, the ability to play with ideas. Music as a form turns up the penchant for play. Some of the more creative dimensions accentuate that feature of play - the notion of playing with ideas and forms.

3. Boundaries: binaries and conventions

I'm thinking about this idea of connection across boundaries - not just geographic boundaries but the boundaries across our hearts and minds; just expanding, connecting, and understanding each other differently.

It's paradoxical, because narrative turns on conventionality. We make meaning out of narrative because it has a conventional form. It's an interesting tension that exists in narrative. Our ability to use it to think in unconventional ways is contingent on it being conventional.

Whenever I ask a friend to draw the moon, we always draw the moon here [holding a hand up to show a 'conventional' moon shape], how the moon is. But at the equator, you don't watch the moon like that. It's going up or coming down but it's never going across the horizon. I'm amazed how we learn from the stories and images we get but not from our actual experience. Since we are kids, we are taught the moon is in a way that we will never actually experience it.



A systems thinker is an interpreter. In Western education, things are usually presented in binary thinking. And yet, there's more. We need to put aside what we know and embrace other things that we don't know that we know. And this is all about presence. In order to see these things, hear these things, connect to the nuance, you've got to be present and not distracted. When you are present, there's an honoring of human beings as spiritual beings. There's an honoring of language. There's an honoring of the fact that dance might be the language or music might be the language.

I realize how much of a binary I operate in. What else could be possible if not for that?

4. Storytelling as transformational

Systems are made up of many things. How do we bring them together so people can see them? Like the sacred and the secular. For example, burning sage is a sacred ritual. Sometimes we need courage to bring this forward, as if to say, "This is my way of being with you. Do you have the courage to walk with me in this way and to trust that it makes as much sense as your way of being?"

In chemistry, the process of nucleation is when you bring different elements together (like hydrogen and oxygen) and you get something else that has completely different properties than either element on its own. It's an entire phase change. So if you bring in smudging for example, suddenly you have a complete phase change of that conversation. Each element is not just additive, it's transformational. So there's the place in between. But there's also the composite that is completely different with each added element in its whole essential meaning. That's a different mental model of what systems change storytelling can be.

5. The power of silence

Silence is one of the most under-utilized techniques in meaning-making and storytelling. If you give enough room for silence in the story, a range of possibilities emerge. One, you can make a more direct link to the emotional core of the story. Scientifically it's been shown that if you sit in silence after hearing something or hearing a question, part of what it does is help people bypass their short term memory to go to long term memory and pull from their own life experiences. It helps people notice the emotion and then make sense of that emotion. It helps them hear what they said and then make sense of it.