We Help You When 'Keep It Simple' is Not Good Enough

Simplicity tends to be seen as a virtue and we are often told "keep it simple, stupid". Supposedly, keeping things simple is the key to getting things done, to become efficient, and to stay efficient. Indeed, when simple works it's great. But simplicity is not the only characteristic of the world in which we live. Much of our world depends on interactions with other people, with things, with the environment, with the context — and interactions are seldom simple.

How do you cope when 'keeping it simple' fails, when trying to turn the complicated or the complex into something simple just isn't working? The answer is you have to ask questions. You ask where the failure lies: is it in the lack of requisite variety, is it in the kind of narrative you're telling, or is it in the kind of model/description that you are using, or some combination of these?

Are you presenting a model which can be acted upon or are you merely offering a description? Does your story encompass enough context to address the situation at hand or the problem that you were trying to address? Is your story open or closed to the current context of your listener? Is your story being told using language the listener/reader can relate to? And if not, for any of these, what do you need to know, to do, or to change so as to turn that no into a yes?

Applying the science of context means developing the skills you will need to use when your simplifications fail – either due to inappropriate models or the lack of agreement with the models of the others you need to deal with. Learn more about appropriate models at our next event.

We Help You Control, Guide and Manage Systems

The science of context is based on what we call the Law of Requisite Variety. This law states that control depends on the relationship between variety of a controlled element and the variety of its controller, whereas variety refers to degrees of freedom, or variables available for manipulation. If control is to be achieved, then he variety present in a controller needs to match the variety of what is to be controlled by that controller. Mismatches between the varieties of controller and controlled result in ambiguity and out-of-control relationships. The Law of Requisite Variety applies at technical, human, and social levels. It is oftentimes up to us as humans to decide whether we desire or require in-control or out-of-control relationships at all these levels.

Applying the science of context means developing the skills to both judge if requisite variety is present and how to bring the variety of the system and the variety of the "controller" into better balance. Learn more about requisite variety at our next event.

We Help You Develop Reflexive Perspectives

Reflexivity refers to circular relationships between cause and effect. A reflexive relationship is bidirectional with both the cause and the effect affecting one another in a situation that does not render both functions causes and effects. Reflexivity thus refers to self-referential relationships where examination or action 'bends back on', refers to, and affects the entity instigating the action or examination. The 'heart of recursion is the conversion of the present to the future.' (Rosen 1991) Reflexivity is a critical ingredient in anticipation. Many actors anticipate the consequences of potential actions before they take them and then reflexively consider potential outcomes of those actions before undertaking them. Actors who lack reflexive perspectives are often unable to see how their background assumptions, available resources, frames of thought, and belief systems impact both the availability of opportunities and the actor's ability to see the same. Reflexive anticipation includes feed forward and feedback loops which act as both enablers and constraints in reaction to the opportunities which are both presently available in a context and recognized as such by the actor.

Applying the science of context means developing the reflexive skills to question the role your beliefs and background assumptions are playing in your modelling of situations and in your proposed actions. Learn more about reflexivity at our next event.

We Help You Develop Better Attention to the Role of Context

Context is often ignored or down-played only at our peril. Action by sentient beings is most often the result of reflexive anticipation. This implies that when we are projecting the actions of others we need to take into account the context, history, attention and forecasting abilities which those others will bring to the situation at hand. To

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attribute to others a non-thinking non reflexive response — as we do when we make use of a probability distribution to assert what others will 'likely' do — is to ignore the power of reflexive anticipation to not only affect the choices others make but also the situations in which they allow themselves to be in. Thus, in nearly every context, it is critical to ask what reflexive anticipation is occurring. When actions are the focus, context is critical. Basing actions and reactions on models or descriptions which fails to explicitly and adequately take context into account will lead to error.

Applying the science of context means developing the skills to better appreciate the simple idea that "context matters" always. Learn more about the centrality of context at our next event.

We Help You Open Narratives to Better Include Others

In situations of reflexive anticipation abstract representations seldom provide sufficient information to answer the key questions of "what if?" or "how?". Linear representations of cause and effect fail to take into account the effects of feedback/feedforward, learning, attention, and situation. Narratives do. But, it is not just any kind of narrative which works — instead it is narratives which purport to tell a story of explanatory mechanism, a "how come" or a follow-on to a "what if". These narratives allow the observer to retell the story from his/her own perspective and to make substitute "what if" conditions. Explanatory narratives are spun from cues observed when a situation is examined for both the availability of opportunities and the actor's ability to see the same.

Applying the science of context means developing the skills to understand how your listeners are reacting to and modelling the situations you describe. The stories you tell need to be open to the listeners' interpretations from their perspectives not yours. Learn more about the role of listeners in narratives at our next event.