A GUIDE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Making things change

A young person’s guide to systems, power, and practical action



Benjamin P Taylor

SYSTEMS | CYBERNETICS | COMPLEXITY

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Start with something that matters to you

A rule at college. An impossible shift pattern. A river being polluted. A service that keeps sending you somewhere else. You may already know more about the problem than the people paid to explain it.

This guide offers ways to investigate what's happening and work out what you can do. It's written for teenagers and young adults, without assuming previous study. Bring your experience, and expect to question the account here too.

Read from the beginning, or follow the page references below. A fictional college bus problem runs through the guide. Its events, people, and figures are invented to show the reasoning; they aren't evidence about a real college. Other examples help you try the ideas elsewhere.

You'll need something to make notes on, a situation you care about, and, when possible, someone who sees it differently. Some enquiries need specialist help. You can still ask useful questions before you have all the answers.

03–08 **Describe the situation**
Systems, boundaries, purposes, perspectives, and power.

09–15 **Investigate what keeps happening**
Feedback, accumulation, delays, evidence, and organisation.

16–20 **Find ways to act**
Working across differences, conflict, stories, and intervention.

21–29 **Do the work and learn**
Decisions, tests, outcomes, collective action, and a worksheet.

30–32 **Keep it to hand**
Sources, further reading, and questions for your next move.

The bus is late. You get the warning.

Imagine your morning bus repeatedly reaches college after registration. You receive a warning for lateness. The next bus would be later still; the earlier one would mean leaving before your caring responsibilities allow. ‘Try harder’ doesn’t give you another journey.

A tutor sees missed teaching. An administrator sees an attendance code. The bus company sees a route with tight timings. A parent sees another threatening letter. Each account may contain something true. None, by itself, explains how the situation keeps happening.

Follow what connects them: the timetable, traffic, registration rules, the information staff receive, who can make exceptions, and who can pay for changes. The warning might also make you avoid asking for help, so staff hear less about the transport problem.

Systems thinking can help you investigate these relationships and their consequences. It also asks what your description leaves out and how your own actions affect what happens next. You don’t need to call yourself a systems thinker to do that work.

THE EVENT CAN ACQUIRE SEVERAL EXPLANATIONS

Student	College record	Enquiry
Transport barrier	Attendance code	How are they linked?

TRY THIS

Choose one recurring difficulty. Describe an actual occasion before explaining it. What happened, to whom, and what happened next?

Sources 09, 10 · notes on pp. 30–31

What are you treating as a system?

A useful starting point is a set of connected things whose relationships help produce behaviour over time. A bus route involves vehicles and people, but also roads, money, information, working arrangements, and rules. Listing those parts won’t tell you how the service behaves.

What matters is how they work together. A timetable with no recovery time can turn one delay into several. A complaints process can keep information away from the person able to change the timetable. These relationships give the list explanatory value.

‘The system’ can mean a computer application, an institution, or an account of a much wider situation. Ask which meaning is in use. Calling everything a system doesn’t explain anything, and a large diagram isn’t automatically a better explanation.

There are real buses, real constraints, and real consequences. There is also a choice about what to include in your investigation. Examining punctuality, access to education, or a company’s finances will bring different relationships into view.

TRY THIS

Complete this sentence: ‘We’re treating ___ as a system to help us decide ___.’ Which important relationship does that framing reveal?

Sources 01, 09 · notes on pp. 30–31

An invented landscape, seen through different openings.



Draw a boundary. Then question it.

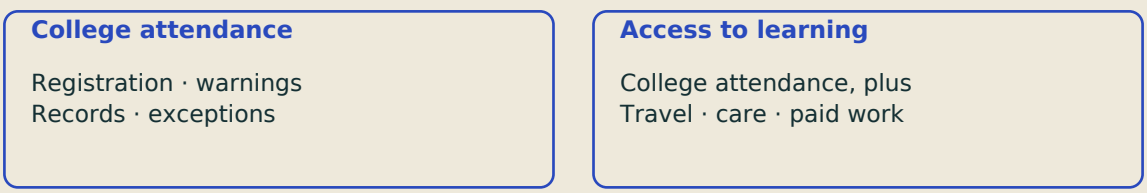
You can’t investigate everything at once. A boundary sets the scope: people, places, activities, and time periods you’ll consider. It might follow an organisation’s border, but the consequences of its decisions rarely stop there.

It can also make the enquiry unmanageable. You don’t have to solve housing policy before improving registration. Choose a scope that helps you act, and record important conditions beyond it. Revisit that choice when the explanation stops making sense.

Ask who benefits from the current boundary. A business may count cheaper deliveries while neighbours carry the cost in noise. A campaign may celebrate a local victory while pollution moves elsewhere. Time boundaries matter too: a cheap decision this month can leave a costly obligation next year.

Put yourself on the map. Your organisation, friendship group, funding, and preferred explanation affect what you notice. Someone absent from your meeting may have good reason to draw the boundary differently. Invite that challenge before the diagram becomes the official version.

TWO POSSIBLE BOUNDARIES



Observer and question: students investigating access to morning teaching.

TRY THIS

What becomes visible if you widen the boundary? What becomes possible if you narrow it? Who carries the consequences outside either version?

Sources 02, 09 · notes on pp. 30–31

Purpose is a question people argue about

A college may describe its purpose as education. Students may want qualifications, friendship, a route into work, or somewhere safe to learn. Managers may be accountable for attendance and finances. These purposes can support one another, or pull in different directions.

Separate what people say they want, what they're required or rewarded to do, and what repeatedly happens. If attendance enforcement pushes students away, the contradiction needs investigating. It doesn't prove that every member of staff secretly wants exclusion.

Stafford Beer's suggestion to examine what a system does is a useful challenge to official claims. Treat the resulting account as something to test. Persistent effects can arise without a shared intention, and a situation may sustain several competing purposes.

Ask people what they're trying to achieve and what prevents it. Then compare their accounts with decisions, resource allocations, and results. Where purposes conflict, make the disagreement discussable. Agreement on a slogan won't settle who gets the budget or whose need can wait.

COMPARE THREE ACCOUNTS

Said	Rewarded	Experienced
Education	Attendance figure	Missed teaching

Then investigate the contradiction.

TRY THIS

Whose improvement are you seeking? What would they recognise as better in their life? Who might reasonably dispute your answer?

Sources 06, 10 · notes on pp. 30–31

People inhabit different worlds

You can sit in the same room and be dealing with different realities. The person waiting for help, the worker responding, the manager allocating resources, and the board answering for results encounter different parts of the work. They also face different risks.

In the bus example, a warning letter feels personal to the student. To an administrator, it may be the automatic result of a code. A manager sees patterns across hundreds of records. What looks like indifference from one position may be overload or restricted authority from another.

This doesn’t excuse harmful conduct. It gives you more to investigate than character. Ask what information reaches each person, what choices they have, and what they’re expected to protect. You may find a deliberately unfair decision, a poorly designed process, or both.

My ‘five worlds’ prompt keeps attention moving between people’s lives, service work, management, leadership, and learning. These are ways into an enquiry, rather than five boxes into which people permanently belong.

Try describing the incident from another position, then check your description with someone who occupies it. Their correction may change the enquiry. Ask what your own position makes difficult to see.

MOVE BETWEEN WORLDS

People’s lives | **Service work** | **Management** | **Leadership** | **Learning**

Different pressures, information, choices, and consequences.

TRY THIS

Ask: ‘What happens from where you sit? What do you know that I probably don’t? What would make a difference to your ability to act?’

Sources 08, 10 · notes on pp. 30–31

Find out where power sits

Power includes the ability to approve spending, set rules, employ people, withhold information, or decide what counts as evidence. It also includes organising support, refusing cooperation, creating alternatives, and making an ignored problem visible.

Authority is an accepted or formally assigned right to decide. Influence may work without it. A sympathetic tutor might influence the attendance policy but lack authority to change it. A governor might have authority over policy but know little about its effects.

Find out who can change what, who can block it, and what constrains them. Verify this through actual decisions. A contract, regulator, or budget may limit someone’s apparent authority.

Werner Ulrich’s boundary questions help expose choices hidden inside apparently technical decisions. In plain language: who benefits, who decides, whose knowledge counts, and who can challenge the account on behalf of people affected but absent? Ask how things are and how they ought to be.

Apply those questions to your own group too. Who sets the agenda? Who can disagree without losing their place? Being invited to speak is different from controlling a decision. Ask what will happen to your contribution, who must respond, and by when.

ASK ‘IS’ AND ‘OUGHT TO BE’

Benefit	Whose interests?	**Decision**	Whose authority?
Knowledge	Whose expertise?	**Challenge**	Whose voice is missing?

TRY THIS

Write down one decision you need. Name the person or body with authority, their constraints, and a route through which affected people can challenge the decision.

Sources 02, 10 · notes on pp. 30–31

When consequences come back around

A feedback loop occurs when the consequences of an action feed back to influence what happens next. The circle matters. A causes B is a chain; it becomes a loop when a route leads back to affect A.

Suppose missed teaching increases the backlog of work. The backlog makes lessons harder to follow. That can encourage avoidance, leading to more missed teaching. This is a possible reinforcing loop: a change returns through the circle in a way that strengthens it.

‘Reinforcing’, sometimes called ‘positive’, doesn’t mean good. The same type of loop can strengthen mutual help or deepen exclusion. It can also reinforce a decline. What matters is the direction of the relationships around the whole circle.

A loop diagram is a proposed explanation. For each link, ask what would have to happen, how you know it happens here, and whether another explanation fits. Missing a lesson may have quite different consequences for different people.

A POSSIBLE REINFORCING LOOP



‘+’ means more of the first tends to produce more of the next, other things equal.

TRY THIS

Trace one possible circle. Explain every arrow in an ordinary sentence. Which link is least supported by evidence, and how could you check it?

Sources 04, 10 · notes on pp. 30–31

Feedback that corrects a gap

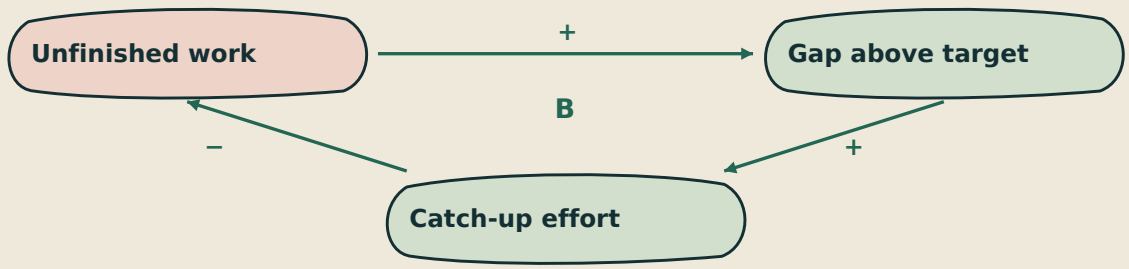
A balancing loop counteracts a gap or disturbance. Imagine comparing your unfinished work with the amount you can manage. As the gap grows, you arrange more catch-up time. Completing work reduces the backlog and, eventually, the extra effort needed.

This is often called ‘negative’ feedback. It can increase something that is too low, as well as reduce something too high. A heating system warming a cold room is an everyday example. ‘Negative’ describes the correcting relationship around the loop, not criticism or decline.

Ask who sets the goal, what is sensed, and what response is possible. A college that monitors attendance codes but misses transport barriers may respond energetically to the wrong signal. Accurate information is useful only if someone has the capacity and authority to act on it.

Balancing mechanisms can preserve arrangements you want to change. Complaints may trigger just enough concession to keep people attending an ineffective process. Investigate whether a response removes the problem or merely reduces the pressure for a larger change.

A POSSIBLE BALANCING LOOP



Target: a manageable backlog. More effective catch-up reduces unfinished work.

TRY THIS

For one attempt to correct a problem, identify the goal, the signal, the response, and the result. Does the response actually reduce the relevant gap?

Sources 03, 04 · notes on pp. 30–31

What is building up?

Some things accumulate: money owed, water in a reservoir, unfinished applications, or work you need to catch up on. System dynamics calls an accumulation a stock. A flow changes it over time: new work adds to a backlog; completed work removes it.

Suppose there are 20 unfinished tasks. Eight new tasks arrive each week and six are completed. The backlog grows by two tasks a week. Working faster helps, but the backlog won't shrink while arrivals exceed completions. A plan needs to say how those rates will change.

Keep the units straight. Tasks are a stock; tasks per week are a flow. If tasks differ greatly in size, counting them may be misleading. Hours of work might be a better measure. Then check whether the available hours are realistic.

Use numbers when they help, and don't invent precision where it doesn't exist. 'Trust' can be a useful subject for enquiry, but it isn't a tank with an agreed measuring scale. Ask what you can observe: whether promises are kept, people return, or help is sought earlier.

COUNT THE ACCUMULATION AND BOTH RATES



One week later: 20 + 8 − 6 = 22 tasks waiting.

TRY THIS

Name something that accumulates in your situation. What adds to it, what removes it, and in what units could you reasonably track the change?

Sources 04, 10 · notes on pp. 30–31

Give causes and consequences enough time

A change can begin working before its effects become visible. A new timetable must be published and understood. A catch-up arrangement takes time to reduce missed work. People may wait to see whether a promise will last before trusting it.

If you interpret every delay as failure, you may replace a useful intervention too early. If you interpret every failure as ‘it needs more time’, you can protect a bad idea indefinitely. Decide in advance what should change first, what may take longer, and what would make you stop.

Timing can also create instability. When several people independently react to old information, they may overcorrect together. Think of a group buying extra food after a shortage: several large orders arrive after the need has passed. Then nobody orders, and the shortage returns.

Draw the pattern over time before deciding why it happens. Is lateness steady, growing, seasonal, or linked to particular days? Label the time period and units. A rise after your intervention doesn’t, by itself, show that you caused it.

Choose review dates that fit the expected effects. Watch immediate harms while waiting for slower benefits, and involve the people carrying those costs in deciding whether to continue.

AGREE A TIMING EXPECTATION BEFORE ACTING

Now	Soon	Later
Protect access	Check the response	Review learning

TRY THIS

What should change first? What will take longer? Set a review date and an early warning that would justify acting sooner.

Sources 04, 10 · notes on pp. 30–31

Use more than one way of understanding

Systems, cybernetics, and complexity form a broad, overlapping field. Those labels can obscure differences as readily as explain them. You'll get further by asking what a particular concept or method helps you investigate, what it assumes, and where it fails.

A timetable analysis can expose a missed connection. A feedback model can explore how warnings and withdrawal reinforce one another. An organisational enquiry can reveal who can authorise an exception. A discussion of different purposes can expose why an apparently sensible proposal is contested.

These accounts needn't collapse into one master explanation. They may disagree in ways you need to retain. Counting journeys won't settle what a fair allocation of transport money would be; hearing people's experiences won't tell you a vehicle's carrying capacity.

Looking closely at parts and examining relationships across a wider whole are both useful. Trouble comes when one level of explanation claims to exhaust the situation. You can study a footballer's muscles without explaining the offside rule. You can understand the rule without knowing why this team keeps losing.

People also respond to being investigated and to the changes you make. What worked once may behave differently later. You can make disciplined predictions, learn, and organise better while accepting that the world will retain more possibilities than your account captures.

TRY THIS

Try two different explanations of the same incident. What does each reveal, what does each hide, and what decision does each help you make?

Sources 01, 07, 09 · notes on pp. 30–31

Make a map you can argue with

Begin with the people, activities, rules, resources, and relationships that appear relevant. Put the question at the top and the date beside it. Include people affected who aren’t present, and mark important uncertainties. Leave enough space to change your mind.

Use arrows carefully. Does one mean money moves, information is passed, a decision is authorised, or a change causes another change? Give different relationships different labels. A line between two boxes doesn’t establish causation.

You may need several drawings. A rich picture can gather tensions, experiences, and competing accounts. A process map can follow what happens from arrival to resolution. A causal loop diagram proposes circular influences. Each does different work.

Beside the map, separate observation from interpretation. ‘Six students reported a late bus’ is a report about a sample. ‘The bus explains all lateness’ is a much stronger claim. Ask who wasn’t asked and what records could challenge it.

Take a rough version to someone likely to disagree. Ask which relationship is missing or misleading. Keep a record of the correction. If your map becomes clearer, smaller, or less flattering to your preferred solution, that may be progress. Its value lies in improving the enquiry and decisions, rather than covering the wall.

KEEP THE STATUS OF A CLAIM VISIBLE

Report	Six people say their bus was late.
Hypothesis	Transport helps explain the pattern.
Check	Compare journeys, records, and exceptions.

TRY THIS

Choose one arrow. Label what it means, the evidence supporting it, and an observation that would make you remove or change it.

Sources 01, 09 · notes on pp. 30–31

Organisation gives people room to act

Knowing what would help is frustrating when nobody can act. Organisation matters: who notices a problem, who can respond, what resources they can use, and how their decisions fit with everyone else’s. More goodwill won’t repair missing authority.

Cybernetics offers useful questions about this. Ross Ashby’s work on requisite variety asks whether a regulator has enough relevant responses to handle the disturbances it faces. In practice, one rigid answer may fail people in very different circumstances. This is a practical application, not the full mathematical law.

Staff need judgement, information, time, and authority to match support to circumstances, with routes for challenging an unfair decision. More options are useful only if people can actually use them.

Stafford Beer’s Viable System Model asks how work is coordinated, resourced, checked, adapted, and held to a purpose. You can use those questions without renaming every department with a number. Check whether the person doing the work can resolve ordinary problems, and whether exceptional ones reach someone able to help.

Decisions exist at several levels: a student group, a college, a transport partnership, a government. Find the level capable of addressing the issue. Sending everything upwards can overload it; leaving everything local can conceal a rule that only a wider authority can change.

TRY THIS

What can people decide for themselves, what needs consultation, and what is fixed? If nobody can give a clear answer, investigate the resulting delay and harm.

Sources 03, 06, 10 · notes on pp. 30–31

Work across differences without erasing them

Find out what each person means by the proposed activity. In Soft Systems Methodology, different accounts of purposeful activity are used to ask questions about a situation. They aren’t competing claims to have photographed its one true structure.

For example, compare organising transport to meet published times with organising access to learning for people with different circumstances. Each suggests different activities and different tests of success. What would need to change for either account to make sense in practice?

Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner describe systems convening as work that enables learning across boundaries. Someone has to connect the student, tutor, transport planner, and decision-maker, and build enough legitimacy for them to engage. An invitation alone doesn’t remove differences in power.

Give that conversation a real task and an honest account of what participants can decide. Record agreement, disagreement, and commitments. If an affected group needs a separate space before meeting an authority, protect it. Being able to work together doesn’t require everyone to surrender their own judgement or identity.

TRY THIS

What could these people usefully do together while still disagreeing? Who can legitimately invite them, and what authority would the conversation have?

Sources 01, 05 · notes on pp. 30–31



An invented setting for people working across different positions.

Understand resistance. Choose your response.

A refusal can mean many things: no authority, no money, a genuine concern, an interest being defended, or an excuse. ‘They resist change’ tells you very little. Ask what the proposal would change for them and what they would have to give up.

Understanding a position doesn’t oblige you to accept it. Some disagreements concern competing interests or unacceptable harms. A meeting designed to produce agreement can silence the person who needs to challenge the arrangement.

You have several possible responses. Collaborate where joint work can make a difference. Negotiate where interests overlap partly. Build an alternative where you can provide something people need. Organise pressure where those with authority won’t act. These approaches can support or undermine one another; choose deliberately.

Before escalating, decide the change you seek, who can make it, what support exists, and who bears the risk. Get advice from people with relevant experience, such as a student representative, union, community organiser, or trusted adviser. A person dependent on a service may face costs that an outside supporter doesn’t.

CHOOSE IN RELATION TO THE ACTUAL OBSTACLE

- **Collaborate**
- **Negotiate**
- **Create an alternative**
- **Organise pressure**

TRY THIS

What is the refusal protecting? Which response fits the actual obstacle? Who has agreed to the risks, and who could be exposed without choosing them?

Sources 10 · notes on pp. 30–31

Stories change what people can see

‘Students don’t care about attendance’ directs attention towards motivation and discipline. ‘Students can’t reliably reach teaching’ directs it towards access. A different description can make a previously unthinkable action seem reasonable. Naming is one way power works.

Both descriptions need testing. Some students may have transport problems, some may be disengaged, and some may face both. A story that gives every incident one cause can become another obstacle to understanding.

Tell an account that connects experience to an explanation and a possible action. Show whose experience it is, what supports the explanation, and what remains uncertain. Invite correction. If someone shares a personal story, agree how it may be used and whether they want to be identifiable.

Material conditions matter too. A different account of renting can support a campaign, but a landlord’s legal rights, housing supply, wages, and enforcement still affect what happens. Changing how people understand those arrangements can help change them; it doesn’t remove the work of changing them.

A CHANGE IN FRAMING CHANGES THE ENQUIRY

‘They don’t care’	‘They can’t get there’
Investigate motivation and discipline	Investigate access and transport

TRY THIS

What does your explanation make easy to notice, and what does it hide? What would someone need to show you before you changed it?

Sources 07, 09 · notes on pp. 30–31

Choose an intervention that fits

An intervention is a deliberate attempt to influence what happens. It might provide immediate help, change a rule, alter information, shift resources, redistribute decision power, or create a different arrangement. Its value depends on the situation and its consequences.

Donella Meadows's discussion of leverage points widens the search for possibilities. Read it as an invitation to investigate, with the humility she asks for. A position in a list doesn't tell you what is feasible, legitimate, or effective here.

The familiar iceberg can prompt questions about events, patterns, arrangements, and assumptions. It isn't a depth gauge measuring the value of an intervention. Repairing a dangerous crossing may matter immediately and for years. A workshop on beliefs can achieve very little.

Compare options against your explanation of the problem. What relationship would each change? Who can do it? What resources and permissions are needed? What might others do in response? What could get worse? Choose a connected set of actions you can explain and review, rather than the one with the grandest description.

COMPARE ACTIONS BY HOW THEY MIGHT HELP

Immediate support	Protect access now
Rules and resources	Change what makes the problem recur
Decision rights	Change who can shape the arrangement

TRY THIS

For two possible actions, name the mechanism, the person able to act, the resources, the expected benefit, and a plausible harmful consequence.

Sources 04, 10 · notes on pp. 30–31

Connect a local change to the wider problem

Ask where the pattern repeats, what connects those places, and which decisions shape them. Several colleges may face the same contract rule. A campaign for a different funding settlement needs a different coalition and timescale from a change to one registration process.

Passing on a useful practice is more than copying its visible form. Find out what made it possible: authority, relationships, skills, money, and local conditions. Give another group the reasoning and evidence, including what failed, so they can adapt it.

Protect what already works. An informal support network may be effective because people trust it and can respond quickly. Formalising it might provide stable funding, or burden it with procedures that drive people away. Ask participants what needs preserving before replacing their arrangement.

Consider more than one future. What if demand doubles, the grant ends, a key organiser leaves, or the transport provider changes? You don’t need a confident forecast to prepare. Identify what would make your approach fail, what signals you could watch, and which relationships or capabilities would keep other options open.

TRY THIS

Which part of your problem can be changed locally, and which needs action elsewhere? What must be preserved while you build the ability to act at that wider level?

Sources 10 · notes on pp. 30–31

Turn the proposal into a decision

‘Improve transport’ is a concern, not yet a decision someone can make. Work towards a proposal with enough detail to be accepted, amended, or refused. The detail should expose real choices rather than pretend everything is settled.

For the college example: ask the attendance lead to authorise a three-week change for students using the unreliable route. Record transport-related lateness separately, suspend automatic warnings for those verified delays, and provide agreed catch-up access. The purpose is to protect learning and test whether the response helps.

Name what the proposal cannot do. It won’t make the bus arrive earlier. Missing teaching may remain the larger problem. Include the route to the person who can consider the timetable or funding, and the evidence they will need.

Agree who will do the work, their authority, available resources, and the date for review. ‘We support this’ is incomplete if nobody can approve the staff time. Ask what happens when an exception or disagreement arises.

A DECISION REQUEST NEEDS ENOUGH TO ACT ON

Who?	What?	With what?	By when?
Attendance lead	Authorise a trial	Agreed staff time	A dated review

TRY THIS

Write a decision request: who is being asked to authorise what, for which purpose, using which resources, by when, and subject to what review?

Sources 10 · notes on pp. 30–31

Make a test you can learn from

State a prediction before acting. ‘If we stop automatic warnings for verified bus delays and offer protected catch-up time, students will ask for help earlier and complete more missed work.’ Then ask which observations would support or weaken it.

Record the starting position and keep definitions consistent. Agree what counts as a bus delay, missed teaching, completed work, and a warning. Ask the people involved whether these measures reflect their experience. Limit collection to information you actually need.

Set boundaries around the test: participants, duration, resources, consent where relevant, and who can stop it. A small experiment isn’t automatically harmless. If it removes support or exposes someone to retaliation, the cost may be large for that person.

Protect access and keep an alternative available. Give participants a way to report trouble without having to complain through the person running the trial. Staff and students need to know which existing arrangements continue and what will happen after the trial ends.

RECORD BEFORE YOU ACT

Starting position	Prediction	Stop condition	Review date

TRY THIS

Write: ‘We expect ___ because ___. We’ll look for ___ by ___. We’ll change or stop if ___.’ Who gets to challenge those terms?

Sources 10 · notes on pp. 30–31

Measure what people gain, and what it costs

An output is something done or produced: a meeting, a travel pass, a new process. An outcome concerns what changes in people’s lives: reaching teaching, learning what they need, avoiding an unaffordable journey, or being treated fairly.

Your action contributes within a wider situation. Fewer warnings might follow your trial, a change in staff, or a period of reliable buses. Describe the evidence for your contribution and what else might explain the result. Complexity doesn’t excuse a claim you can’t support.

Look beyond averages. A later start may help one group and make another miss work. A digital form may save staff time while excluding people without reliable access. Report who benefits, who doesn’t, and whose experience remains unknown.

Keep returning to the original purpose. If your measures improve while students still miss the same teaching, something is wrong with the account of success. Invite people affected to review the result and help decide what follows. They should be able to contest the conclusion, including a conclusion that flatters you.

LOOK AT THE RESULT FROM PEOPLE’S LIVES

Benefit	Effort	Harm
Can I reach teaching?	What must I do?	What has got worse?

TRY THIS

Choose one measure of lived benefit, one of effort or cost, and one possible harm. Whose experience could an average conceal?

Sources 10 · notes on pp. 30–31

Watch how the old pattern returns

An announcement can change while everyday work stays the same. A new policy may be ignored because staff lack time, information, or authority. A pilot may depend on one person repeatedly bending the rules. When they leave, the improvement disappears.

Other responses can neutralise a change. A route gains passengers and becomes overcrowded. An easier application process attracts people whose unmet need was previously hidden. A target to close complaints faster encourages staff to record closure before the person has been helped.

Ask what keeps the present pattern stable. Which measures, budgets, contracts, habits, relationships, or interests support it? There needn’t be a secret organiser. People responding sensibly to their own pressures can collectively recreate a result nobody says they want.

Also recognise deliberate obstruction or capture when evidence supports it. A student panel might be given publicity duties while spending decisions remain closed. Ask what changed in actual authority, resources, access, and accountability. A new name isn’t evidence of a new relationship.

LOOK PAST THE ANNOUNCEMENT

Authority	Resources	Accountability
Can anyone decide?	Can anyone do it?	Can it be challenged?

TRY THIS

Suppose the improvement has disappeared six months from now. What probably happened? Which of those conditions could you address before it does?

Sources 10 · notes on pp. 30–31

Build a group that can keep working

Find people who care about the issue, including people who understand parts you don’t. Shared experience can build solidarity. Differences in experience, skills, and commitments can make the work more capable, provided the group has ways to handle them.

Barry Oshry’s work suggests attending to specialisation, shared learning, individual contribution, and collective purpose. In a campaign, that might mean distinct responsibilities, time to compare discoveries, room for personal judgement, and a clear agreement about what you’re trying to achieve.

Agree how decisions are made, money is handled, people are represented, and disagreements can be raised. Include a way to change organisers or leave without punishment. A friendly group can still reproduce exclusion or rely on someone’s unpaid labour.

Make participation possible: meeting times, access, travel costs, language, and alternatives to speaking in a room all affect who can contribute. Divide work so someone can rest or step away. You need an organisation that can survive an ordinary Tuesday, including the Tuesday when its most dependable member is unavailable.

FOUR DYNAMICS TO INVESTIGATE TOGETHER

Specialisation
Develop distinct capabilities

Shared learning
Connect what people discover

Individual agency
Use judgement and talent

Collective purpose
Coordinate the contribution

TRY THIS

Who does the invisible work? What happens when they stop? Agree one practical change that shares the burden and makes decision-making clearer.

Sources 08, 10 · notes on pp. 30–31

Take responsibility within your actual power

You can take responsibility for a contribution without accepting blame for a situation you didn’t create or cannot control. A young person trying to improve access to college isn’t responsible for repairing the entire transport economy.

Responsibility includes examining what your actions make possible or harder for others. Who bears the risk of the campaign? Who gave permission for their story to be used? Are you asking someone to disclose distress because it would make a persuasive presentation?

Notice your own rewards. Recognition, a role, funding, or belonging can make it difficult to admit that an intervention isn’t helping. Keep contact with people who can challenge you, and make it possible for evidence to change your position.

You may choose to join others, negotiate, organise, refuse, or leave. Staying involved isn’t always the right decision. Ask what support and protection you need, and what work belongs to those already paid or authorised to do it. A sustainable contribution has room for your life as well as the cause.

TRY THIS

What can you influence, what is outside your control, and what responsibility belongs elsewhere? What would make continuing unacceptable to you or to someone affected?

Sources 07, 10 · notes on pp. 30–31

Return to the bus. What did we learn?

In this invented example, the college authorises the three-week trial described earlier. Students help define the measures. Staff check which warnings concern verified bus delays, protect time for missed work, and keep a record of access to teaching.

Suppose warnings fall and students say asking for help feels safer. One student’s backlog drops from 20 comparable tasks to 14: eight arrive and ten are completed each week for three weeks. These are useful changes, with a plausible account of how catch-up support contributed.

But missed teaching remains unchanged. Some students can’t attend catch-up because it clashes with paid work. Staff are doing extra administration. The trial has reduced some harm while leaving the transport barrier and part of the access problem in place.

At review, continue protection from unfair warnings, redesign catch-up with those excluded, and take the journey evidence to the transport decision-maker. Compare an adjusted connection, an alternative service, and a change to first-session arrangements, including their effects on other passengers and students.

Ask for a dated decision and reasons, including costs and authority. Keep the findings that complicate the story, so the next decision can address what remains unresolved.

TRY THIS

What would you recommend now? State the evidence, what remains unresolved, the decision-maker, and the people who should help judge the next step.

Invented example and figures · see p. 2

A page for your own situation

Use this as a working record. Write short answers you can check. Revise them with someone who sees the situation differently. A blank answer marks something to investigate; it needn’t become an invented certainty.

01 **The situation**

What happened, to whom, and what keeps happening? Which evidence do you have?

02 **The framing**

What are you treating as the system? For what purpose, over what period? What are you leaving out?

03 **People and power**

Who is affected, who can decide, who can block action, and who is absent? Who can challenge the account?

04 **The explanation**

Which relationships, accumulations, rules, or responses might produce the pattern? What would challenge this explanation?

05 **The proposed move**

Who could change what? What authority, resources, support, and protection would they need?

06 **The prediction**

What should improve, for whom, by when? What might get worse, or be displaced elsewhere?

07 **The review**

What will you observe, who will judge it, and when? What would make you stop, revise, or continue?

When you update this page, record what changed your mind. Keep earlier versions so you can see what you learned.

Develop a practice you can question

Choose a method for the question. If purposes and accounts differ, investigate them through Soft Systems Methodology. If a proposal hides who benefits or whose knowledge counts, use Critical Systems Heuristics. If accumulation and circular effects matter, learn system dynamics. If organisation cannot coordinate or adapt, investigate with the Viable System Model.

These are starting points, not a complete menu or instructions for mastering four approaches in an afternoon. Study enough to understand what a method asks of you. Practise on examples, compare your reasoning with a more experienced person, and notice what the method leaves out.

After an intervention, distinguish changing the action from changing your explanation. You might also need to reconsider your role: perhaps you began as a spokesperson and should become an organiser, or began as an expert and need to become a learner.

Keep notes on decisions, surprises, and consequences. Ask what you now notice that you missed before, which relationships have changed, and who has more room to act. Those are things to investigate in the next piece of work. You don’t have to settle what kind of systems person you are.

TRY THIS

Choose one question from your current situation. Which approach could help you investigate it, and who could help you learn to use that approach well?

Methods and learning · notes on pp. 30–31

Where these ideas come from

This guide brings together established ideas and my own teaching. It offers an introduction to using them, rather than a substitute for learning the methods. The page references show where each source is especially relevant.

01 **Peter Checkland and John Poulter**

Learning for Action (2006). Soft Systems Methodology uses models of purposeful activity to support enquiry and action in situations understood differently. See pp. 4–6, 14, 16, and 29.

Publisher and sample chapter ↗

02 **Werner Ulrich**

A Mini-Primer of Critical Systems Heuristics. For examining boundary judgements, who benefits, who decides, knowledge, and legitimacy. The four prompts on p. 8 condense themes from the full framework; they aren't its twelve questions. See pp. 5, 8, and 29.

Free introduction and further readings ↗

03 **W. Ross Ashby**

An Introduction to Cybernetics (1956), especially Part III on regulation and control. The practical discussion of requisite variety on p. 15 is an application, not a statement of every condition of the theorem. See also p. 10.

Free book from the Ashby archive ↗

04 **Donella H. Meadows**

Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System (1999); Thinking in Systems, edited by Diana Wright (2008). For dynamic relationships and a wider range of interventions. Notice the cautions against easy recipes. See pp. 9–12 and 19.

Free essay and routes to her other work ↗

05 **Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner**

Systems Convening: A Crucial Form of Leadership for the 21st Century (2021). For learning across boundaries, legitimacy, identity, agency, and power. The discussion here is my brief synthesis. See p. 16.

Free book; CC BY-NC 4.0 ↗

Continue the enquiry

06 **Stafford Beer**

Designing Freedom (1974; later editions available). For organisation, freedom, and the capacity to respond. Diagnosing the System for Organizations (1985) develops the Viable System Model. See pp. 6, 15, and 29.

Publisher: Designing Freedom ↗

07 **Heinz von Foerster**

Understanding Understanding: Essays on Cybernetics and Cognition (2003), including ‘Ethics and Second-Order Cybernetics’. For examining our participation in what we describe, and the responsibilities that follow. See pp. 5, 13, 18, and 26.

Publisher and chapter list ↗

08 **Barry Oshry**

Seeing Systems, second edition (2007). For understanding systemic positions and recurring responses; his Organic Systems work informs the discussion of groups. See pp. 7 and 25.

Publisher: Seeing Systems ↗

09 **Benjamin P Taylor**

Systems Leadership, Systems Change, Systems Theory, and Systems Practice (and Systems Convening), Open University systems community talk, 28 June 2023. For distinctions, framing, agency, power, multiple approaches, and learning. See especially pp. 3–8, 13, and 16–20 of this guide.

Public presentation ↗

10 **Further practice and teaching**

My teaching on outcomes in complex adaptive systems, power, clarity, four dynamics, intervention, and learning informs pp. 15 and 20–29. The public work library provides routes into the material. SCiO offers further systems practice learning and resources.

Public work library ↗

The worked example and its figures are invented. Diagrams were drawn for this guide. Illustrations use generative AI, with visual references to Hockney, Haring, Ravilious, Moore, Hepworth, Meštrović, spomenici, and Armenian textile traditions.

Systems practice resources: https://www.systemspractice.org/

KEEP THIS PAGE TO HAND

Before your next move

01 What are we trying to change, and for whom?

02 How have we framed the situation? What does that leave out?

03 What keeps happening, and what might be producing it?

04 Who can act? Who carries the consequences?

05 What could we try, with whose agreement and support?

06 What would we expect to see? What could make us change our minds?

Take a question into a real situation. Make a record of what you find. Let the people affected help judge what happens next.

Benjamin P Taylor
antlerboy.com
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