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Trans-contextual learning, warm data, and unforeseen connections

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Abstract

This article explores practices of trans-contextual learning, warm data, making unforeseen connections as approaches to address the complexities of interconnected systems. Trans-contextual learning involves collaborative, adaptive, and feedback-informed learning across different contexts and disciplines. It emphasises breaking down silos to find innovative and sustainable ways to go on. Warm Data Labs, developed by Nora Bateson fosters relational in- and outsights and emergent understandings by engaging participants in non-hierarchical, reflective, and dialogic processes. It seeks to move beyond reductionist and mechanistic approaches to embrace the complexity of interconnected systems. Transformation happens in unforeseen connections within a field of many possibilities. Trans-contextual learning might be crucial in the face of what is described as a "poly-crisis" — multiple, overlapping crises with cascading effects. People concerned explore how they collaboratively, trans-contextually learn, step by step, stumbling, and feedback informed, in complex systems, within multiple contexts.

Keywords:

complexity,

warm data labs,

transcontextual learning,

feedback,

poly-crisis,

collaborative learning communities,

systemic practice

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Introduction

There will be no community without first communing
(Nora Bateson, 2024)

Together with Dutch and Flemish colleagues we co-develop a community of systemic practitioners and a systemic knowledge network that we call 'Metalogue'. We invite systemic practitioners, working in multiple fields, to collaborate and learn trans-contextually. We encourage them to 'meet and not match' (Bateson, 2024) across different fields of study and practice. Trans-contextual learning is crucial in finding ways to go on, to live and work together, differently and sustainably, in complex interconnected systems. A person who learns about ecological systems in biology might contribute solving urban planning challenges, co-creating

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sustainable city designs. With “Metalogue’ we intend to open up space for as many unforeseen connections as possible, from which different and sustainable transformations can occur.

In our times we live and survive in a poly-crisis. We need to co-develop different approaches to many complexities. Mainstream linear, analytic, problem- and purposive focused approaches do not work in complex systems. Everything is connected and we don’t oversee the consequences of the consequences of the consequences (Bateson, 2024). Because of contextual blindness, people lose their ecological awareness. They divide, categorize, and unintentionally make things worse in repetitive reinforcing patterns of interaction. Could a systemic approach make a difference, could it be implemented and become a multi-disciplinary collaborative practice to be used?

In this article I write about two projects of trans-contextual learning. In one project we form collaborative learning communities with people who share concerns and assignments. In the case I’ll describe how therapists, civil servants, researchers, politicians, justice workers, and citizens collaboratively plan, work, and learn together, finding meaningful ways to go on, in complex systems with many interconnected actors. In the second project we had invited Nora Bateson to initiate a ‘Warm Data Lab’ together with 150 civil servants in the Dutch government. Participants shared personal experiences and stories. In the Warm Data Lab participants deepen their understanding of complexity and interdependency, cultivate collective intelligence and develop ways of thinking and collaborating beyond binary, reductionist, mechanistic and purposive approaches.

Where can we land?

> Nourish the possibilities we do not yet know will be needed
> (Nora Bateson, 2024)

Reading any newspaper is incredible difficult and painful these days. We read about war, climate change, ecological disasters, racism, sexism, polarisation, distrust, accelerationism and ignorance towards international laws, conventions, and democracy. We find ourselves in what some people call a poly crisis. The poly crisis is a situation in which multiple, interconnected crises simultaneously occur, affecting each other and creating complex cascading effects that are impossible to predict and manage. Nora Bateson compared the poly crisis with ‘Hydra’. In Greek mythology Hydra is a serpentine, a water monster with multiple heads. Hydra had a fearsome regenerative ability. When one of its heads was cut off, two more would grow in its place.

In the book ‘Where Can We Land’ philosopher Bruno Latour (2018) expresses his concern about the state of humanity in the face of climate change, ecological crisis, and political instability. Latour introduces the concept of ‘the terrestrial’. ‘The terrestrial’ refers to the earth and its inhabitants, a whole, an ecological system. Latour uses this concept as a call for humanity to recognize its embeddedness with the Earth’s systems. ‘Landing’ in this sense means ‘landing on earth’. ‘Landing’ involves rethinking politics, science, and economics to prioritize the interconnectedness of humans and nonhumans, the local and the global, the social, and the ecological. ‘Where can we land?’ is a question about finding new ways to inhabit the earth – one that reconciles human activity with the ecological realities of our shared home. Latour suggests we should ask ourselves the following two questions repeatedly: Who and what do we depend on to exist? How do we contribute maintaining and developing a habitable ecological environment for all earth’s inhabitants?

Conscious purpose versus Nature

> There was once a Garden. It contained many hundreds of species-probably in the sub tropics-living in great fertility and balance, with plenty of humus, and so on. In that garden, there were two anthropoids who were more intelligent than the other animals. On one of the trees there was a fruit, very high up, which the two apes were unable to reach: So they began to think. That was the mistake. They began to think purposively. By and by, the ape, whose name was Adam, went and got an empty box and put it under the tree and stepped on it, but he found he still couldn't reach the fruit. So he got another box and put it on top of the first. Then he climbed up on the two boxes and finally he got that apple. Adam and Eve then became almost drunk with excitement. This was the way to do things. Make a plan, ABC and you get D. They then began to specialize in doing things the planned way. In effect, they cast out from the Garden the concept of their own total systemic nature and of its total systemic nature. After they had cast God out of the Garden, they really went to work on this purposive business, and pretty soon the topsoil disappeared. After that, several species of plants became "weeds" and some of the animals became "pests"; and Adam found that gardening was much harder work. He had to get his bread by the sweat of his brow, and he said, "It's a vengeful God. I should never have eaten that apple.
>
> (Gregory Bateson, 1968)

In a 1968 lecture Gregory Bateson offered a reinterpretation of the biblical story of Adam and Eve, emphasizing the consequences of human purposive action on ecological systems. In his reinterpretation Gregory Bateson illustrates how human's intervention driven by conscious purpose, can disrupt ecological balances and lead to unintended consequences. *The major problems in the world are the result of the difference between how nature works and how people think (Gregory Bateson, 1972).* The question than is: how does nature work and how do we develop practices maintaining and developing habitable ecosystems (a terrestrial) for all earth's inhabitants?

Nora Bateson (2024) compares social life with life in a meadow. All organisms in the meadow are connected in interdependent relationships, in communication with each other. If you change a part, it affects the whole. A meadow is not a machine. Nature never does one thing at the same time. The poly crisis is an ecological crisis. Most problems were solutions for earlier problems, attempts to control outcomes in uncertain situations. *Lack of systemic wisdom is always punished (Gregory Bateson, 1968).* We need systemic wisdom and to make trans-contextual descriptions of what happens.

The solution is not present within the description of the problem itself. We can search in places where we were not looking, opening up space for unforeseen connections, mutual learning, and moving in between different contexts. How are we relationally response-able/ response-ible in an ecology together, how do we not break patterns that connect, how do we communicate, learn and share personal stories from within?

Responding to complexity

> Do we have the right approach to complexity; do we really understand what it is? Man's attempt to learn how to deal with complexity more efficiently by means of storing and

> evaluating ever more information with the help of electronic data processing is proving increasingly to be the wrong approach. We are certainly able to accumulate an immense amount of knowledge, yet this does not help us to understand better the world we are living in; quite the contrary, this flood of information merely exacerbates our lack of understanding and serves to make us feel insecure.
>
> (Díez Hochleitner, 2000, p. 7)

The quote of Hochleitner (2000) reminds me of what systemic practitioners call “the paradox of control”: The more we try to exert control over certain aspects of our life, the less control we may have. We overestimate our ability to control outcomes in uncertain situations. Different situated problems demand different approaches. We can distinguish three types of problems:

Single problems. There is an identifiable cause. This involves an approach of analysis, planning, implementation, and monitoring.

Complicated problems. They arise because many different actors in a network have simultaneous influence, interpret situations differently and act without exchange and overview. This involves an approach in which cooperation is coordinated and deployment aligned.

Complexity. Complexity arises when interactions between participants are complicated by multiple, mutually reinforcing influences. The absence of a clear connection between cause and effect makes unambiguous, obvious, and generalised solutions fall short. There are different interpretations of what the issue is. There are conflicts of goals, values, and interests. It is not clear when problems are solved. The issue is so intertwined with society that every solution creates new unforeseen problems and issues. Here is an approach appropriate, in which participants in a collective share responsibility, and learn trans-contextually, collaboratively, adaptive, step-by-step, stumbling, and feedback informed, finding ways to go on in complex systems, within multiple contexts.

Trans-contextual learning and unforeseen connections, example 1

> Safety and security don't just happen, they are the results of collective consensus and public investment [...] We owe our children, the most vulnerable citizens in our society, a life free of violence and fear.
>
> (Mandela, 2002, p. ix)

An example of trans-contextual learning is the project I helped to develop in collaboration with civil servants, law enforcement officers, legal professionals, youth care and mental health care workers. The project was a pilot study in which professionals and stakeholders developed an approach, a methodology, that aims to break the intergenerational transmission of crime and violence in family networks. The methodology was developed by the National Outreach Team (LOT), which is part of the Centre for Crime Prevention and Safety (CCV), commissioned by the Ministry of Justice and Security in the Netherlands. The LOT aims to help professionals 'intervene safely in coordinated cooperation' to prevent, if possible, the exploitation of minors in 'criminal family networks', reduce their criminal activities, and thus increase their chances of a safe future.

Van Hennik (2021, 2024) developed a systemic consultation approach for collaborative issues in complex systems, in which professional and social stakeholders together form collaborative learning communities around an agreed upon narrative and focus. In this approach, participants initially map

the network, explore relationships and form a 'collaborative learning community' or 'puzzle team'. The collaborative learning community aligns cooperation using three future scenarios. Together, they evaluate agreements, collaboration, and developments to learn how they learn to navigate complexity (Van Hennik, 2017, 2021, 2024).

Organising a collaborative learning community is based on four principles:

1. With complex problems, no one can make a difference alone. We can only do it if we work well together, become an effective team.
2. A characteristic of complex systems is that there are many different actors and subgroups of actors active, each with their own interests and pursuits. Fragmentation between actors leads to inefficiency and/or opposition within and between subsystems. It is important that the different actors perceive a shared and overarching interest, assign a shared importance and agree on a common focus.
3. In complex problems, there is too often a focus on mere difficulty, conflict and danger. It has proved important to direct focus on exceptions, positive developments and constructive relationships in the network. To take stock of that, we ask the question: 'Who is involved and can be of positive influence?'
4. Developments are unpredictable. The learning community learns adaptively, step by step, based on feedback and evaluation.

In practice we learned in this pilot study how important it is to evaluate and improve the quality of collaboration in the team of professionals and stakeholders. With the risk of danger professionals and stakeholders easily get stuck in dysfunctional interaction patterns, a complementary escalation, navigating between repression and care. We have learned that it is important to open up dialogical space for different values and opinions. They do not have to be eliminated. If participants in the learning community trust each other, the cooperative relationship can be strong enough to bear differences or even conflict.

We initiated a cross-domain coordination of assistance with both preventive and repressive measures. In one case while a family member was detained for a crime, a resident minor girl, who was suspected of being forced into prostitution, was taken in and placed in a safe facility. In another case the police, at the request of a family coach, did not yet arrest a juvenile because he has just been faithfully attending a day care project with activities. It is important to focus on the relationships and collaborations that are promising, where there is some openness to change. For example, we can help increase the resilience of women and children in the family network. We can also help residents in the neighbourhood, who are threatened by a family, to organise themselves and collectively resist these influences more strongly.

It should be noted that this is work in progress. We are still investigating whether this way succeeds in making a difference in an unruly practice. Developments in these complex situations are slow and unpredictable. We work with relatively ‘closed’ systems. There is distrust to the outside world and institutions. Simple solutions do not last. Coordinating repression and care is important, but often inadequate. We work with complex, ‘wicked’ problems and challenges. Sometimes we can make a difference, step by step, small adjustments, unforeseen connections in unpredictable circumstances. It is important to keep seeing possibilities and opportunities for change, without downplaying the

seriousness and danger of violence and crime. This requires firm investment in cooperative relationships, patience, and perseverance. By the end of 2023, the pilot was positively evaluated by the Ministry of Justice and Security. The project will be followed up.

Trans-contextual learning and unforeseen connections, example 2

> If you don't become the ocean; you'll be seasick every day.
>
> (Leonard Cohen, 2000)

A Warm Data Lab is a collaborative, conversational process developed by Nora Bateson (2016, 2024), designed to help participants to explore circular patterns of interaction and meaning making between interdependent actors in complex systems, within multiple contexts. Participants in the Warm Data Lab are divided into small groups. They explore, moving through various groups and conversations, how (chosen) themes manifest, sustain and transform within particular contexts and in between multiple contexts (for example family, ecology, ethics, education, technology, economy, health, culture). Participants switch groups, conversations and contextual perspectives. They make (see) connections across the different conversations and contexts creating a web of relational insights, invitations and opportunities for joint actions. There are three key principles for Warm Data Labs: There is no hierarchy of knowledge. There is no pressure to reach conclusions or outcomes. There is an emphasis on relationships, connections, and emergent insights, invitations and opportunities. By engaging in Warm Data Labs participants become equipped to navigate the uncertainty and complexity of living systems.

Nora Bateson was invited to present systemic ideas and to organise a Warm Data Lab with 150 civil servants. The civil servants, who joined the Warm Data Lab, work in different departments, ministries, with varying assignments in the Dutch government. They work in a goal-oriented culture. Linear control thinking is dominant. This dominant culture dictates that civil servants run and fly, do not reflect or ask critical questions, and dismiss certain ideas in advance because there is no time for that. Politicians, civil servants and citizens demand an enormous problem-solving capacity from the government. The pressure is therefore enormous. A systemic approach might make a difference that matters in this context.

The day with Nora Bateson at the Dutch government was organised by the team 'Dialogue and Ethics'. This team encourages civil servants to reflect ethically in inner and outer dialogues (with colleagues and stakeholders) about governmental policy and practices, consequences of consequences. Civil servants reflect in dialogues about ethics. They explore questions like: How we do the right thing for who? How do we take a relational responsibility for what we are making together? Is the argumentation behind our assumptions valid? What is the moral consideration behind choices made? Does collaboration meet moral standards? Who in our dialogues has been heard and involved? Which voices are marginalized? Has everyone's role, talent and expertise been taken seriously?

In the Warm Data Lab civil servants explored the question: 'What is home in a turbulent, ever-changing world', from different perspectives, multiple contexts. The systemic approach resonated with daily challenges. Civil servants need their own observations, feelings and emotions as a source of information for their work. They look for patterns that connect, unforeseen connections, opportunities for trans-contextual learning, finding ways to go on, step by step and feedback

informed. We talked about gardens, growing our own food, nomadic lives, playfulness of children in danger zones, refugees looking for a home, intolerance, creating homes in unfamiliar places, inviting strangers for dinner, the feeling of being welcomed in a foreign country. The feeling of having a family with people who aren't your relatives in any way. We experienced ambiguity, we could hold the tense of opposites, without losing the connection, co-creating something, making a difference that makes a difference that matters in turbulent times, times of monsters, where the old world is dying and a new works struggles to be born (Gramsci, 1992).

An official who helped shape Middle East Policy wrote a poem 'Promised Land'.

> *I keep asking myself:*
> *What I did wrong?*
> *Why I'm so terrible?*
> *And yet so desirable?*
> *Why am I so tormented?*
> *And yet so adored?*
> *I don't understand.*

Here speaks 'the promised land', and an official. One of the many civil servants who are reinventing themselves, and thus the government, the becoming of an ecosystem.

Epilogue: Becoming an eco-system

When you swim not too close to the edge of a waterfall it is possible to swim against the current. When you do swim too close to the edge of the waterfall you desperately need help from others swimming upstream. In these difficult times, a poly crisis, we can't save ourselves alone and we, earth habitants, we need each other. We need to form communities (by communing) and develop collaborative, ecological approaches, finding different and sustainable ways to go on.

Today I contribute to a collaborative learning community with the assignment to reorganise the department of youth care in a large mental healthcare organisation. Manager Anne Maaskant invited an architect Kornelia Dimitrova to join the learning community. The multi-disciplinary dialogues open up space for unforeseen connections and trans-contextual learning. Kornelia Dimitrova reflects on this collaborative and creative process and writes:

> Transformations in the healthcare world are never simple or fast, we know that just by looking at their history and the variety of ways in which these transitions succeed (or stumble) in practice. Many different stakeholders, needs and perspectives come together. While resources are ever scarce. That's why, in my work, I focus on identifying what's truly needed to create impact and take the next step. Visualizing ideas can unlock so much: space for dialogue, testing assumptions, building deeper understanding, and creating actionable steps in complex transition processes.
>
> (Dimitrova, 2025)

We intend to write about this project a future article 'Trans-contextual learning, warm data, and unforeseen connections, part 2'.

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