A Systemic Approach to Systemic Change

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Abstract

This presentation concentrates on systemic change and how to incorporate systemic thinking into change initiatives in academic libraries. What is systemic change as compared to systematic change? Why are we change averse? By approaching change initiatives with systemic thinking within our own context, we will strengthen the resulting changes. This paper includes a case study on creating an Indigenous Studies collection that goes beyond books.

Keywords: systemic change, change aversion, academic libraries, organizational culture, communication, initiatives

Today's session is entitled "A Systemic Approach to Systemic Change." We each come to this session with experience, context, and background. I am DeLa Dos, the Senior Director, Learning + Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at the Association of Research Libraries. Brittani Sterling is the Social Sciences and Interdisciplinary Studies Librarian at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), and a 2022 Association of Research Libraries Leadership & Career Development Program Fellow. Grounding myself, last week I was in Hawaiʻi for the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity, and in the coming weeks I will be traveling to Chicago and Ontario for conferences. In Spokane, we are gathered on the traditional and indigenous lands of the Spokane

tribe. I live and work on the same ancestral lands as the Association of Research Libraries (ARL). ARL is a mobile-first, binational organization, with staff spread out across the United States. While ARL represents 127 institutions from the United States and Canada with their own contexts, the main office resides on the ancestral lands of the Nacotchtank (or Anacostans), and neighbors the ancestral lands of the Piscataway and Pamunkey peoples. I use They/Them pronouns. I offer this visual description of myself: I am gender queer, gender nonbinary, transracial, transnational Korean-American adoptee, with no physical disabilities. I'm standing about five feet eight inches, with black shoulder-length hair pulled into a ponytail right now.

I speak to you as someone who has never worked in a library. I got my job with the Association of Research Libraries after working in higher education administration. While the vast majority of ARL member institutions are universities, our membership includes governmental institutions and public libraries. As an administrator, I worked in multicultural affairs and social justice education departments. My graduate degrees are in clinical mental health counseling, so I have this unique overlap with how I see and perceive and experience the world—both my lived experiences and through my roles. I will be doing the opening context setting, and while I do not work inside a library, I work for an association that supports the amazing people who do this work. I am excited to be joined, supported, and led by a person who will be taking through the content and really helping to make sure that this content makes sense for you in your context. A big part of this work for me is to understand what content connects you all and why and learn how we can support you in the field.

I am Brittani Sterling, and I thank you for letting a public services person infiltrate your conference. Just like DeLa, it's important for me to orient to my space and establish where I came from as well as where I am now. The University of Nevada Las Vegas is on the traditional homelands of the Nuwu, Southern Paiute people. They are descendants of the Tudinu, or desert people. Those who settled Las Vegas have had mixed experiences with the people indigenous to the area.

Indigenous studies fall under Interdisciplinary studies, which we will discuss later in the presentation. My positionality in the world is as a first-generation undergraduate student, now Assistant Professor, cis Black woman, and my research expertise is the lived experience of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) librarians at the crux of organizational culture. Systemic change is everyone's job. We will be talking about the macro and micro and how it applies to you.

As organizations are required to balance the pursuit of goals with the realities of their present context, many leaders encounter challenges to implementing sustainable change. While there is no single solution that guarantees success for every situation, this session explores strategies for conceptualizing how to pursue systemic change in an intentional, contextually relevant manner. We invite you to consider how to apply the content in your respective setting. Our goals for this vision session include:

- Describing the concept of systemic change
  - What it is
  - Why should you care?
  - How is it relevant in libraries?
  - What can we all do to help systemic changes go more smoothly?
- Identifying one area of systemic change you can contribute to through your own participation
- Identifying opportunities for application at the committee, organizational, and/or institutional levels

Our primary goal is to discuss systemic change in a way that enables you to apply what you can in your lives, in your work, and in your contexts.

There are a number of ways to think about systemic change. What does systemic mean? In generic definition, systemic is related to a series of connected things or part of a complex whole. We want to offer another definition with more flavor and greater understanding behind it: systemic relates to a series of policies, practices, and

principles that create and enforce values and beliefs. We invite you to consider this second definition as we discuss systemic changes in a sustainable way. How do we define systemic change? The changes within and to a system to create a lasting effect. In particular,s we want to focus on the kinds of changes in structures that have lasting and widespread effects.

Fighting Fire with Fire

We encourage you to take a systemic approach to fighting for systemic change. There is a reason for this. In system design, redundancies articulate multiple ways for the system to work. I recently overheard someone recounting the meaning behind the floppy disk as the save icon on most programs. While I recognize and remember that the icon is a disk, younger generations would not recognize the disk from first-hand knowledge and instead would understand it only as the save icon. Most programs present and position multiple different, yet redundant, ways to save. If one fails, you can choose another option. Redundancy also works in different directions and in time. Redundancies last and are not meant as temporary options. The Seoul transit system, while not the biggest in the world, is expansive and boasts many ways to get to the same location. Some are more or less efficient, but even if you miss one you can find another option. If you only make single changes without looking at the full context as a system, you lose out on the redundancies, time factors, and creative solutions that you find with systemic change.

I want to introduce three conceptual strategies. Brittani will take us through the content and application. Three strategies: identifying connections between components; redefining structures: "centering the margins"; and reviewing the collective impact and implications of individual decisions. For the first concept, what are the organizational structures that can create challenges to identifying those connections? Silos. Silos exist for a reason. They produce organizational efficiency,

but also, they produce organizational inefficiency. While we need to find balance between the two, silos typically create these efficiencies and inefficiencies simultaneously. Can we identify when this happens, and in what ways? Also, organizations have multiple levels and layers, and here again there are pros and cons to these structures; understanding these levels and layers makes you aware of what frontline service may be tied to a high-level policy. If these connections become hard to recognize, assess if you have the right people, perspectives, and methods to examine connections across the organization. Often, it's hard for one person to do this. This analysis needs to happen in teams.

The next concept: redefining structures, "centering the margins." If you look at a flat piece of paper, what happens if you try to take those edges and move them into the center? In my mind, I was thinking you have a folded piece of paper. But in a broader sense, it creates a three-dimensional shape, such as a torus. This process to recenter the margins is not static but continues. When you think of marginality as a static concept you may miss aspects of it. Redefining structures and pulling in marginality becomes an ongoing, iterative, and multidimensional approach.

Finally, reviewing the collective impact and implications of individual decisions. This concept goes beyond the domino and butterfly effects to recognize the web of connectivity. If I make a decision in my department, in my area of control or influence, what is the impact on another colleague or department? It may not be possible to pause on every decision to look for these connections. But by establishing a systemic approach or anticipated plans to consider decisions made and their implications, you move away from reactionary analysis and the possible problems that may come with it. Remote work during the pandemic is an example; who gets to work remotely? The decision that one part of the organization works remotely, no matter how supportive or well-intentioned, impacts multiple positions and processes across the institution. This is an example of how the individual decisions create collective impact, and recognizing this connectivity is an essential part of any planning process.

Systemic Change in the Library Context

Turning our attention to the library context, systemic change creates challenges in academic libraries. Libraries, created as an extension of academic institutions, are a system within a system. While we may want to make changes, we may not be allowed to make them in the ways that work best for libraries. Many of you understand or have experienced the discomfort of change. In some cases, you may not have had good experiences with change implementations at your institutions. But the discomfort associated with change does not stem exclusively from problematic implementations.

Remembering that libraries are a system within a system, we should recognize the differences between a systemic approach and a systematic approach. Systemic approaches describe habits or processes that impact or are embedded throughout a system; from bottom to top, from your area to my area, and from special collections to library leadership teams. Systematic explains an organized approach or process used within a system; what goes on in the library as compared to the campus level, for example.[1] Academic libraries belong to everyone and no one. While libraries are the "heart" of campuses, they cannot command the institution on their own. In addition, silos within the library prevent our cohesion. Our jobs within the library not only have varying processes, but priorities as well. Yet, our stakeholders benefit from all of us working together towards unified goals, regardless of our titles.

Systemic change in academic libraries seeks to address deeply ingrained issues by fixing the root causes of an issue rather than zeroing in on its symptoms. While it is tempting and cheaper to fix the symptoms, this will not solve problems long term. Rather than concentrating on our individual perspectives, broadening our views to the organizational level will aid us in systemic change by adjusting core elements in the system to create lasting impacts. Libraries are not neutral spaces, nor are our materials, nor our processes to collect, process, house, and display our collections. As a profession, we need

to challenge our belief that academic libraries are inherently good places, especially to make them better.[2] The good work we do should not prevent us from assessing, maintaining, and changing from time to time. Our various functions try to frame us and our work as neutral, but that is just not true.

As I read change narratives in preparation for this presentation, I found that the primary hindrance to systemic change tends to be individual emotional responses to proposals. I offer these five concepts to illustrate the relationship between strategic thinking and systemic change. First concept, to observe: What are the hard facts of this opportunity? Will it alleviate the stains of past initiatives? What will it look like when we begin the program? Second concept, to analyze: How do the hard facts limit or expand our choices? Thirdly, to infer: How is this project like other projects we've done in the past? Fourth and key point, to communicate: What is everyone else thinking? How do we get everyone on board? And the final concept, to problem solve: Where can we go from here?

To prime us for this thinking, we recommend asking the following questions: On a scale of one to nine hundred, how much trepidation do you feel at the thought of systemic change? Do you feel a sense of integration with your colleagues in other departments and what does that answer continuum look like? What is your preferred method of change in the workplace, between systemic or systematic? When a big shift is announced, are you more likely to go with the flow? Do you offer constructive feedback? Do you have a neutral response? Do you grumble in your office and refuse to participate? How does your feeling of team or belongingness affect how open you are to change? What factors make it difficult to get attached to an organizational vision of systemic change?

To help you consider your own context, we offer this suggested activity. Write down a key problem that your organization has been trying to tackle for a while. List three ways being on the other side of this problem would make your life easier, with or without your direct input. List three ways the overall organization could benefit from your

solution to this problem. List three reasons you haven't tried to tackle it yourself yet or provide that input in a larger setting. What's the roadblock there? These questions need your perspective on your organization and your individual contributions.

The number one commonality in responses to what makes systemic change difficult is the lack of clarity. Not wanting to hop on board with an initiative that lacks a defined scope is understandable. However, there may be more at play with this situation.

Change aversion is the not-so-enthusiastic reaction to the modification of a product, service, workflow or new set of duties. Why are people so averse to change? Is there communication with those people who are not getting on board? Do we ask them why? Boston Consulting Group offers these five reasons for change aversion: Project-specific factors include type of change, length of time for the change, and if employees are told to make the change with inadequate resources. Probability of success increases when we consider or recognize change plateaus or the need to assess. In addition, there are individual factors such as connection to emotion, complexity of circumstances, and level of agency.[3] If you chose the "go grumble in your office" option previously, sometimes that response is necessary. Change aversion itself is not uncommon.

Why would we be change averse? Sometimes, we are burned out by too many new initiatives. After almost five years, are we post-COVID-19? Or, do we still have the residual impacts to our personal and professional lives? During the pandemic we endured budget cuts, migrations, vendor relationship management, working in new configurations, all while remaining malleable. Disempowerment from past experiences, no allowance for trying things out, or when suggestions are dismissed, all may prompt change aversion.

How do individual contributions affect the overall success of an organizational change? Individual perspectives on how to enact change make a difference. How can "we" make a good collective decision if all the voices are not included in the conversation? Advocating for your own voice feels uncomfortable, and sometimes, there are

certain voices who are always heard. Individual insights shine a light on the shadowy places. The technical services in the library are the root system of the public experience. Don't devalue yourself by not saying anything. Regardless of whether or not we want the change, we need your voice. Your suggestions are valuable, and together we can accomplish more than we can alone.

Proposed changes can heighten our change aversion, but also can put our minds at ease when done systemically. Lack of clarity causes frustration in systemic change initiatives. But, the five Ws—who, what, where, why, when—should alleviate these frustrations. Incorporating these questions into our committees and task forces can help. Resistance causes confusion, anxiety, feeling overwhelmed, and adds stress. Those whisked into a sudden systemic change initiative may have a hard time separating their personal feelings from the business need of the mission. It can be a hard balance between the personal and the professional.

When trying to overcome change aversion think of Assess, Ruminate, and Contextualize (ARC).[4] Assess: what is the pared down, bare bones issue you are trying to fix? Ruminate: systemic shifts don't tend to happen at the speed of light. Contextualize: now that you've identified your problem, what are the necessary details that could produce forward movement? Having a conversation free of consequence is another strategy to combat change aversion. Participants can be more honest when they feel a measure of safety in transparency. Valuing differences within these conversations and including all perspectives may expand the ideascape, so long as they are not dehumanizing or oppressive of others. Everyone's perspectives can add something to the conversation. Also, your involvement may influence opportunities for others within the proposed change. Whether you hold a formal or informal leadership title, you still have influence. If you vocally oppose a change, how does this impact others? How about when you support it? While what we want to happen may not come to pass, what does happen may be exactly what we need.

Ask yourself if you understand your role in the change process. Do you have a legitimate problem with the process, or do you have a

better suggestion for how to do it? Sometimes people are too busy to understand some of the suggestions. Speak up, although this might be difficult in some teams. Do you just like things the way they are? You can develop that voice to advocate for sticking to the system that you have if it makes sense.

A Model of EDI Efforts through Systemic Change at UNLV

My area of research expertise is at the intersection of the lived experience of BIPOC librarians and organizational culture. I wanted to give an example from several projects I have participated in that required big changes, beginning with my application of some strategic plan initiatives. Much of the strategic plan for the UNLV Libraries includes external-facing goals that concentrate on serving our community. I want to highlight one in particular: "Cultivate a welcoming, inclusive, and accessible environment that values the diverse experiences and needs of our users and ourselves." For our internal-facing showcase, I also want to highlight one that addresses how we work within the university libraries: "Nurture a culture of inclusivity, respect, and trust within the libraries."[5]

A project I co-produced was called *Crafting Contemporary Indigenous Studies Collections in the Age of Algorithms: A Case Study*, which highlighted the importance of disrupting vendor-controlled algorithms in Collections Development.[6] At my institution none of the Ethnic Studies programs have an individual budget. One way was to purchase materials for related fields, such as Sociology or Political Science, but this wasn't ideal and also not a long-term solution. We took a look at our catalog and saw that we have many titles that treated ethnic peoples as historical objects and not as humans, following a settler or colonial narrative. My supervisor and I wondered how we could better serve these programs, especially our Indigenous Studies minor program.

The interdisciplinary and ethnic studies department is a relatively new department, and only offers a minor. I am the liaison. My supervisor and I took a chance and submitted a proposal to the Annual Library

Advisory Board (LAB) for funding. First, we determined a scope. We needed to determine what we should collect and for whom. Besides our own crawls of the catalog and looking at the subject headings, we surveyed faculty and student groups. Las Vegas is an interesting place for those with indigenous identities. We have a number of students from Hawai'i, Micronesia, Melanesia, Asian American and Pacific Islander students, a number of students who identify as Mexican-Americans Indigenous peoples, and some as members of the Southern Paiute tribe. We contacted the Paiute tribe and some of our Indigenous Studies faculty. We determined a cross between community interest and what people would need to get into graduate school programs in Indigenous Studies to determine how to best collect for the program.

In addition to the work on the collection, our project also evolved into a case study of the limits on vendor algorithms. We found that the vendors' systems were overly broad, which resulted in receiving many materials that contributed to the settler colonial narratives. Its setup at the time could not provide us with enough specificity in tribal affiliation, geographical importance, or create order for anything regarding identity perspectives, and had no way to prioritize Indigenous authors. Taking a holistic approach to collection development, we wanted to live our values through creating a collection that acknowledged the humanity of our campus community, local community, and prepared our students for future study.

We considered the human factor; algorithms see information and LC designations, but they do not see people. We considered more than just books. Because Indigenous Knowledge has historically been undervalued, we wanted to account for a multiplicity of learning avenues. When we received our funding we went outside the vendor packages, and we collected materials ourselves through Indigenous bookstores. Also, we proposed programs for our makerspace that related to Indigenous ways of knowing in the form of weaving, beadmaking, and creative expressions in Native languages. We did not set out to propose an all-library change, but we ended up creating it anyway.

In 2020, the pandemic interfered with our planned programming, however. We postponed the makerspace programming. Students could not enter the library for a while. While we could not follow up with our original survey populations at the Mx. Native UNLV Pageant, the Snow Mountain Pow Wow, or the Res2022: Reservation Economic Summit, we ended up switching our programs to virtual livestreams from our broadcasting studio. I helped to co-create a few, "We Need To Talk: Conversations on Racism For A More Resilient Las Vegas" streaming panel sessions, particularly relating to the way Las Vegas was settled, and how racial segregation shaped the city and its communities.

Before we got to the other side of the project, we learned to check our assumptions at the door. Holistic consideration allowed us to make a more accessible collection. Collaborative programming helped give the collections enhancement a goal. Community connections within the campus, scholar, and local area should be a part of the deliberation. For us, this started when we saw a gap. If you see a gap, you can close it with some creativity and grit. In a way, this project turned into a systemic change for the entire library. We will continue to partner with the community, grounded in this enhancement long after the materials are purchased.

The UNLV Libraries engage in other projects to showcase their commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). We lived our values by forming an additional inclusive and antiracist collecting working group to better understand how our current practices did or did not facilitate the inclusive collecting goals it set out for itself. This allowed them to identify and implement necessary changes to profiles and priorities for the rest of the library. Looking at the human factor, our Inclusion and Equity Committee (IEC) took a programmatic approach to creating spaces for conversations and stories about biases, differences, ways to learn about our own challenges, and improve our culture with monthly hybrid meetings where robust conversations ensue. With the concept of more than just books, our Educational Initiatives Department holds Wikipedia Edit-athons a few times a year to fill in the canon with feminist works, non-binary artists profiles, and other intersectional, underrepresented peoples as their primary project group.

Conclusion

Often times at conferences, best practices are sought or questioned. From my experiences working with DEI initiatives, I have concerns with this idea. While the principle behind a best practice makes sense, the language itself can be misleading. If we identify a best practice, it can be rapidly and unthoughtfully applied in every situation. Instead, I offer this slight reframe: make them *informed* and *intentional* best practices. Make sure you recognize what would work best in your own context, making them your own. We will have a higher success rate if we take the ideas generated here or from other colleagues and bring them into our own context in a meaningful way.

Finally, I offer the concept of cultural humility. Defined as "having an interpersonal stance that is other-oriented rather than self-focused, characterized by respect and lack of superiority toward an individual's cultural background and experience" where "[a] cultural humility perspective encourages a less deterministic, less authoritative approach to understanding cultural differences."[7] Cultural humility came out of the nursing profession.[8] Nursing students would have training on multicultural issues and cultural sensitivities for different populations. Sometimes these worked, and sometimes they did not. With cultural humility, the professionals continued to have these as a reference point, but also let the patient tell you their story. I translate this concept into our context as letting people be the agents and authors of their own story and experience. Just because I studied something, does not make me the expert on someone else's experience, narrative, or perspective. I can use that to inform my approach, but I let the person, people, and communities with which I'm engaging tell me their stories. I shouldn't fill it in for them. This can help take what is received as a best practice and apply it in a way that is more informed. Applying this to a library setting can allow you to have a more effective systematic approach to advancing systemic change.

Questions

One attendee requested pictures of the results of the interactive session, which will be made available with the slides. Another asked how to handle situations where others in the organization disagree, particularly in this current political climate. While extreme voices receive the most attention many times, turning your attention to the waverers, or those who are willing but not passionate, would shift the critical mass and make it harder for the limit opinions to go against it. Most likely, the limit or extreme opinions will not change, no matter how hard you try. But the waverers will help to create an organizational shift. Also, we need to be mindful of how quickly we allow that broader narrative to shut down efforts, rather than acknowledging the pain and frustration, hurt, and harm that occurs. Rather than just concentrate on what you cannot do in your particular context, it is important to focus on the broader support you have around you. But, it is important for all of us to listen to our cohorts in other areas, not only to support them, but also to prepare us for what may come our way, too.

Contributor Notes

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Notes

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