



**The system you see is bigger than it appears....**

**Richard Brynteson**

# SETIG Newsletter

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## SETIG Leadership Team Notes

by Meg Hargreaves

The Systems in Evaluation Topical Interest Group (SETIG) was organized a decade ago to explore the use of systems thinking in evaluation, including the use of system properties (such as boundaries, perspectives, and interrelationships), complexity theory (complex adaptive systems, emergence, self-organization, and nonlinear dynamics), and methods that can be used in the planning and evaluation of complex systems change initiatives (such as system dynamics, soft systems methodology, critical heuristics, causal loop diagrams, social network analysis, outcomes mapping, etc.) and evaluation approaches and frameworks that are designed for complex conditions (such as developmental evaluation).

The conference theme for Evaluation 2015, "Exemplary Evaluations in a Multicultural World: Learning from Evaluation's Successes across the Globe" (<http://www.eval.org/Evaluation2015>), provides SETIG an opportunity to showcase successful use of systems thinking in evaluations from around the world and to explore the features that make them great, including:

1. **International applications of systems thinking in evaluation.** Many SETIG members are working outside the U.S. Their work brings a fresh perspective, both intellectually and culturally, to the systems-based evaluation work being done in the U.S. We welcome conference proposals that are co-sponsored by the International TIG, presenting international evaluations that use systems concepts and methods.
2. **Exemplary applications of systems thinking in evaluation.** The SETIG sponsored several conference sessions in 2014 that explored the question of how to improve and expand the use of systems thinking in evaluation. The feedback included calls for many more case studies demonstrating the successful application of systems thinking.
3. **Successful applications of systems thinking in evaluation.** Several Evaluation 2014 sessions also discussed the need for more advice on how to expand demand for, and appropriate use of, systems concepts and methods in evaluation. To address this, the SETIG is organizing a work group to develop a draft set of principles regarding the use of systems thinking in evaluation, which will be presented for discussion at the 2015 conference. We encourage you to join this work group by contacting Meg at [mhargreaves@communityscience.com](mailto:mhargreaves@communityscience.com).

SETIG Leadership Team  
Notes

Systems Learning Network

Charrette Projects



## UPDATE: Systems TIG Design Charrette Teams

Our learning journey as systems thinkers and evaluators has often been a solo one. The systems design charrette activity, initiated during the 2013 TIG business meeting, was an early step to building a community of practice for TIG members around systems thinking and evaluation.

In early 2014, **four learning teams** came together around the four systems perspectives selected during the business meeting charrette – soft systems, developmental evaluation, complex adaptive systems, and network analysis. Each team approached the charrette task (design a systems-based evaluation of the AEA conference) in ways that provided team members with applied learning and practice in each team's perspective.

During the Denver conference, the four teams came together during two demonstration sessions to share their experiences. Some **key takeaways shared by team members**:

- While each team approached their task in a different manner, all agreed that having an applied problem to use was an important element for learning as a group and as individuals. That said...
- It can be a challenge to maintain focus and commitment over the long haul when dealing with multiple work schedules that require different levels of attention and focus across the year.
- Using a mix of asynchronous (email, Dropbox, and other forms of document sharing) and synchronous platforms (conference calls and online meeting systems) for communication was critical for keeping people connected across time and geography.
- Learning together had great value. There were successes and stumbles, but the notion of community while learning was described as an important outcome of the process.

On Saturday in Denver, team members came together for a presidential panel session discussing the challenges of using systems thinking in evaluation practice. Using Beverly Parson's model of **6-word stories**, panelists and audience members (*Not just me; not just us*) were asked to describe their experiences at the intersection of systems thinking and evaluation (*Intuitive interest; alarming confusion; better design*) – several of which are included in this article. A key outcome of the discussion that emerged during the session was that the challenge of systems thinking is not promoting "systems" approaches to use as tools (*"Ought" shaping "Is" – mine, yours, ours*). Rather, it is to engage in **systems thinking as fundamental to how we view the world as individuals and evaluators** (*Bring open mind...open heart...aspirin*).

## Learning through Self-Investigation: Applying Systems Approaches to Studying AEA

The SETIG design charrette activity provided a space for team members to more deeply investigate four systems approaches. An outcome of that process has resulted in development of a SETIG proposal to the AEA Board to engage in an evaluative self-study of AEA itself using systems thinking to guide design and implementation of the project. A draft outline was developed emphasizing two key outcomes:

- (1) to create a practice space for charrette team members and other TIG volunteers that will strengthen participants' understanding of how to apply systems thinking to evaluating complex situations, and
- (2) to engage AEA in a process of self-study and inquiry that will create action-oriented information to guide the AEA Board in making strategic planning and policy decisions and identifying directions for future association work, policy, and advocacy.

During the 2014 December Board meeting, the TIG leadership team was given approval to work with the Board's Evaluation Task Force to engage in the project.

Work on a more fully developed project design is being coordinated by Jan Noga and Mary McEathron in conjunction with Board members Aimee White and Nicole Vicinanza. We will use the website and TIG newsletter to keep TIG members informed about progress as well as opportunities for volunteer participation in the study as work progresses.