Introduction to the September 2020 Special Issue: Harnessing Systems Thinking to Inform Meaningful Change Efforts in Organizations

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The Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT) is home to the Systems Thinking and Change (STC) division—focused on harnessing systems thinking to inform meaningful change efforts in organizations.

Change, including systemic change, is inevitable in any organization, anywhere in the world. Managing change successfully requires study, understanding, and an awareness of the unique nuances prevalent in each individual organization. Our field of Instructional Design & Technology is founded upon preparing for and managing change—our focus on instruction is intended to prepare learners to adapt to the evolving situations in their personal and professional lives. As evidenced by the breadth of settings of the articles within this special issue, our work is therefore present and impactful anywhere there are people. Furthermore, AECT boasts that its members may be found “around the world...in places where educational change is underway” (https://www.aect.org/about_us.php).

Thinking in systems and studying the process of change are foundational skills for the betterment of any organization. Implementation of any innovation does not happen in a vacuum, rather it takes an understanding of the system for implementation. In STC, we acknowledge that utilizing innovation and managing change in organizations is not so easy, and that the role of systematic examination of these ideas and processes will inevitably lead to an increased understanding, which allows us to better learn both from those who have been successful in these efforts, and those who have not.

This special issue highlights a variety of ways that systems thinking and change can be implemented in different contexts. Any key principles which can be drawn from the breadth of knowledge and theories regarding systems and change rely upon understanding and engaging the interconnectedness of various systems. Intuitively, we acknowledge the integral relationships between various systems, and the importance of acknowledging the roles that each of us play within them. Just this year we have witnessed something smaller than 5 μm (10–6) per single droplet, well beyond the reach of the unaided human eye, have an unprecedented global impact. The reality of COVID 19 has had profound effects on all of our personal and professional lives, and permanently shaped change in every institution in the world. Its presence has sounded an alarm among every educational organization, forcing us to wrestle with fundamental questions about who we are as educators and instructional designers. In the process, it has challenged many of the foundational assumptions of what it means to “provide learning”, and for the first time, given many of those outside our field their first glimpse at the importance of what we do — often as we are called upon to help guide them through the emergency process of reframing their work to succeed in an online environment during these unprecedented times. The Covid 19 particle demonstrated a key principle of systems—powerful leverage can move large systems.

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Conversely, we have witnessed another key principle regarding systemic change that can have unfortunate consequences; there can be powerful resistance to change in systems, even if those systems have a negative effect on society. The hearts, minds, and actions of humans do not move easily when enculturated. The hidden role of systemic racism is embedded in the foundational elements of our society. Those who feel racism's presence, and those who actively advocate for Black Lives, desire meaningful systemic change for a just society. Unlike the force brought about by COVID 19, removing systemic racism must occur as the result of intentionally examining our processes to ensure that our systems equitably serve those who have been oppressed. The vision of STC supports this call. "We envision people using systems thinking and collaborating to imagine, plan, transform, achieve, and continuously improve learning and human performance in diverse organizations" (STC Bylaws). And so, STC encourages members to take up the mantle of racial equality even more than we have, implementing and studying ways to make our organizations more equitable places for all people through the power of our work.

This special issue does not focus on the challenges of systemic racism, nor the pandemic's influence, both of which require steadfast labor. Instead, this special edition seeks to cultivate an understanding of systems thinking and change drawn from the standpoint of learning organizations and researchers immersed in systems thinking and change in several environments. Each article takes this innate understanding of interrelatedness, systems, and the change process to apply particular theories which help us to better understand change.

The organization of the issue begins with a historic lens, then focuses squarely upon Instructional Design & Technology. From there, we consider several settings,

including higher education, corporate settings, and K-12 environments. Throughout the issue, the authors of each article draw upon a range of systems theories to construct multiple interpretations and deliver an understanding of how, in each situation, the abstract can be made practical. The articles within this issue are empirical, conceptual, theoretical, and collectively provide an important glimpse into systems thinking and change in a wide variety of settings.

Each article fulfills part of the STC mission: "We will promote, lead, and work with others in designing, creating, and transforming organizations using systems thinking and systemic change toward an innovative and successful future" (STC Bylaws). The editors are both thankful to the authors and proud to have had the opportunity to deliver this issue to you, and we hope that your study of its contents is as impactful for you as our journey through constructing it has been for us. We wish you the best, especially as we all continue to grapple with rapid change, both in our personal and professional lives.

Sincerely yours,

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