Systems Mapping

Introduction

One tool to help us start to see the big picture in various environments is through systems mapping. Systems maps provide an exploration of the system, communicate understanding, and allow for the identification of knowledge gaps, intervention points, and insights.

Mapping the systems at play in your current context can begin to reveal the people, events, and processes that are interacting and forming patterns. This is a practice we can do individually as a reflective practice or with students to help them develop a big picture outlook. The below map is a starter map that once completed can be built upon with more complex mapping tools.

What is it?

Why use it?

What you need:

- 10-20 minutes
- The attached instructions and example
- 3 or more people
- Large flip-pad or some other large sheet of paper
- Different colored markers
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Instructions

Step 1: Lay out your supplies
Grab a large piece of paper and some markers/pens (different colors help, as you can start to use them to explore the different elements of the system).

Step 2: Identify a main idea
Start by identifying what you want to explore and writing it in the center of the page (this could be a topic, question, or idea).

Step 3: Make sure everyone contributes
Make sure everyone working on the map has a pen (this is not a scribbling experience where one person writes what others say; it should be that all people are contributing to the map).

Step 4: Write down anything related
Start to write down everything that relates to the arena you are exploring (there is no wrong concept, word, or idea here — just connect all the parts that make up the system).

Step 5: Draw connections
Once you have a page full of random works/concepts/elements, then start to draw connections between them (here is where you can create a key and use different colors to define different patterns and themes).

Step 6: Define interconnections and insights
Keep going until you have filled your page and it’s a complete mess or intermingled lines and words. Then, start to identify the key areas of interconnection and seek to define three new insights that have evolved from the exercise.

*adapted from Tools for Systems Thinkers: Systems Mapping

Example on following page
In a cluster map, begin by throwing a topic, question, or arena down in the middle of a page, and then associate elements within the system around it. There are no wrong or right words or ideas here, as everything is interconnected. Quickly moving from one part to another, we begin exploring the elements of the system along with all of the connected relationships and connections. Once all of the elements have been mined, the key part is to draw connections and relationships between them teasing out the ambiguous parts and seeking to develop a more complex view of the system you are exploring.