College of Public Health & Health Professions

PHC-6103 Systems Thinking for Public Health

Summer, 2017

May 9 – July 6 2017
Tuesday and Thursday 9:30 am – noon
HPNP G210
Course Managed on Canvas

N.B. this course is conducted over eight weeks. (Summer A plus an individual project lasting an additional two weeks). The initial six weeks require both classroom and site visit attendance. The final two weeks can be flexibly scheduled.

Instructor Information

Ralph E. Horky
352-273-5420

HPNP Adjunct Office
By appointment - Please contact the instructor through the Canvas website

Course Overview or Purpose

Overview: The course will investigate the fundamental attributes of the systems that influence modern environments and the complexity inherent when diverse types of systems interact. Public Health examples will be emphasized. Both “closed” (biological, mechanical, algorithmic) and “open” (social, political, economic) system will be discussed. Analytical and systems approaches will be contrast and compared as tools for managing change.

Purpose: To prepare students to approach the practical realities of modern multi-system work environments. To provide an initial experience in parsing such complex environments.

Course Objectives and/or Goals

Upon successful completion of the course students should be able to critically describe multi-system interrelationships, envision a desired future state for a complex situation and suggest interventions with clear milestones. Students will learn to combine empirical and narrative methods and accommodate financial, political, social, scientific and other points of view. These skills are important in managing organizational change, for developing position papers, creating strategic and business plans, and in effective hypothesis formation and grant writing.
Course Materials and Expectations of Students

Required: Thinking in Systems by Donella H Medows (complete prior to May 16)
Required: The Fifth Discipline" by Peter Senge (complete prior to May 30)
Suggested: "Systems Thinking: Managing Chaos and Complexity" by Jamshid Gharajedaghi

Other articles and readings will be assigned or suggested over the course of the semester.

Evaluation and Grading

Downstream Consequences Exercise - Narrative and Diagram (20%) May 25, 2017
Test: Multiple Choice and Interpretive Problem (25%) Tentatively June 8, 2017
Final Project Diagrams and Narratives (40%) July 13, 2017
Attendance, Participation and (“stickers”) Course Contributions (15%)

Session Outlines (timing and order subject to change)

Session 1: Class Introductions, Practical Information

Discussion: Student Career Goals – Survey Monkey
Presentation: The General Content of the Course
Whitewater - Nature of the Problem and State of the Art
Formal Theory of Systems (Bertalanffy, Ackoff, Boulding)
Field Visits: Natural and Social Systems
Parsing Subsystem Interactions
Diagramming Practical Approaches – Flow Charts to Causal Loops
Mental Images, Shared Visions and Desired States
Senge’s Archetypes
Intervention in a Complex System - Individual Exercise
Discussion: Student Evaluation Methodology
Presentation: Textbooks and Materials
Assignment: Review and Study Boulding’s taxonomy of systems

Session 2: Introduction to Systems

Presentation: Managing Complexity – Four Big Theory Gaps
Emergent Properties (the whole is not the sum of the parts)
Time (can distort our perception of systems)
Shifting Context (constantly changing boundaries)
The Illusion of control (limits to our influence)
Discussion: Data, Information, Knowledge, Understanding and Wisdom
Presentation: Systems Thinking Fundamentals
Open and Closed Systems, Boundaries, Interfaces
Environments, Systems within Systems with Sub-Systems
Natural Systems – Models in Nature
Mindless Mechanical and Electronic Systems
Purposeful Systems - Organizations and Cultural Systems

**Assignment:** Read Ackoff’s “Systems. Messes and Interactive Planning”
**Assignment:** Read Bellinger “Data, Information, Knowledge and Wisdom”

**Session 3: Field Visit #1 Human Systems and Natural Systems** *(this session will be held offsite at either Millhopper State Park or Sweetwater Branch Park in Gainesville)*

**Discussion:** Relating site visit observations to Boulding’s Taxonomy
**Presentation:** Patterns in Nature
  - Identifying Immediate, Proximate and Remote Influences
  - Criticality
  - Nested, Hierarchical, Peer Systems in Environments
  - Control vs. Influence
**Assignment:** Read and prepare to discuss Peruvian Guano NYT Article
**Assignment:** Complete Reading Thinking in Systems, Donnella H Medows

**Session 4: Parsing Complex Systems**

**Discussion:** Site visit retrospective
**Presentation:** Planning
  - Blueprints, Roadmaps and Compasses
  - Black Swans to Demographic Near Certainties
**Discussion: Structures**
  - Processes to Cultures and all that Lie Between
  - Accretion and Atrophy
  - The Negative Entropic Character of Social Systems
**Group Exercise:** Diagraming Simple Decision Trees
**Discussion:** The Peruvian Guano Problem

**Graded Assignment:** Downstream Consequences: The Guano Problem (20%)

**Session 5: Simple Closed Systems (Metaphors from Mindless Systems)**

**Exercise:** Wiring and Circuits (RadioShack Models)
**Discussion:** Metaphors from Electronics
  - Cycles of Throughput (Current)
  - Pathways, Conductivity, Resistance and Uneven Throughput
  - Batteries, Capacitors and Storage
  - Components and Modularity
  - Capacitors as Buffers
Transistors as Leverage
Branching Logic and Boolean Math
Accelerating and Stabilizing Influences
Interfaces and Interactions
Noise, Short Circuits
Feedback Loops
Discussion: Electrical Wiring as a metaphor

Session 6: Purposeful Systems and Organizations

Exercise: 20 Questions: Deductive and Inductive Logic
Presentation: Analytical vs. Systems Approach
  Goal Seeking Systems – Growth and Efficiency
  The Paternalistic Model of Ownership and Control
  Division of Labor and “Staff” Level Management
  Financial, Operating and Management Control
  Decision Support Systems
  Market (Simple Goal) v. Mission (Higher Order) Motivation
  Success and the Ensuing Issues of Large Scale
  Roles vs. Positions
  Ownership, Governance, Management and Production
  The Marriage of Mechanical and Human Systems
  The Centralize to Decentralize Pendulum
  Complexity: “Predict and Prepare”
Assignment: Read Smith’s Five Postures (Article)
Assignment: Read and Study Diagramming Causal Loops (North)

Session 7: Bridging Theoretical Underpinnings and Practical Application

Discussion: Causal Loops: Balancing and Reinforcing influences
Presentation: Philosophical and Theoretical Underpinnings
  Dialectical Properties: Chickens and Eggs
  Cumulative Qualities Human Knowledge
  Multi-Minded Organizations
  Predestination and Free Will
  Google, Facebook and the Wiki World
  “Bubbles”
  Alignment: Mental Models, “Desired States”, Shared Objectives
Discussion: Telling, Selling, Asking, Consulting and Co-Creating
Assignment: Complete Reading Senge’s “Fifth Discipline”

Session 8: Senge: Leadership Styles and Practical Application
Presentation: Personal Mastery, Team Learning and Systems Thinking
   Discovering Underlying Structures
   Consensus, Unanimity, Plurality
   Dialogue and Discussion
   Conflict, Coalition, Competition, Cooperation
   The Role of the Facilitator
   Seven Learning Disabilities of Organizations

Presentation: Envisioning Alternative Futures – Scenario Planning
   Mental Models and Shared Vision

Discussion: Topics for scenario planning exercise
Discussion: Assignment of Archetypes for Student Presentations
Assignment: Individual students prepare presentations of Senge Archetypes

Session 9: Archetypes Presentations and Scenario Planning Part 1

Class Exercise: Scenario Planning
   Enumerating Variables – the Exhaustive List
   Identifying Controllable and Uncontrollable Influences
   Reducing Variables to a Critical Set
   Interrelating Multiple Subsystems
   Nicknames Evoking Mental Models
   Narrative Development

Assignment: Each student to prepare to present narrative for one scenario “quadrant”

Session 10 (Tentatively June 8, 2017) Test Multiple Choice and Interpretive Questions (25%)

Session 11: Didactic Wrap Up

Discussion: Test Decompress
Student Presentations: Quadrant Narratives
Discussion: Preparation for Open System Site Visit
Discussion: Meeting Schedule for individual Projects
Discussion: Continuous Improvement
   How can the course be made better for the next cohort?

Session 12: Field Visit #2 Open Systems in Community Public Health (this session will be held offsite at a social service or public health agency - venue to be determined)

June 26-July 13 - Final Two weeks - Individual Projects. 5-7 well annotated power point and word slides (40%)

Individual projects will parse, diagram and describe the salient features (environment, major structures, processes, organizations, pathways) of a complex system (of the student’s choosing).
Each student is responsible to schedule two 20 minute one on one meetings with the Instructor.

Meeting 1: Approve subject matter in concept and identify a desired state
Meeting 2: Critical review of intervention plan and project outline.


Note: The sequence of sessions is subject to change.

Statement of University's Honesty Policy (cheating and use of copyrighted materials)

Academic Integrity – Students are expected to act in accordance with the University of Florida policy on academic integrity (see Student Conduct Code, the Graduate Student Handbook or this web site for more details: www.dso.ufl.edu/judicial/procedures/academicguide.php).

Cheating, lying, misrepresentation, or plagiarism in any form is unacceptable and inexcusable behavior.

We, the members of the University of Florida community,
Pledge to hold ourselves and our peers to the
Highest standards of honesty and integrity.

Policy Related to Class Attendance

Attendance and Make-up Work – Students are expected to attend and participate in all class sessions and will be graded on the quality of their participation. Material will not be repeated. Unusual personal issues with respect to class attendance or fulfillment of course requirements will be reviewed on an individual basis but, after two excused absences, students should generally expect a reduction in their grade for additional absences.