Integrating Project Learning, Community Discussion, and Program Evaluation to Inform the Nation
Thinking Well About Context

- Context is multidimensional and includes time and place as well as our perceptions of other important features.
- Observations and the meaning we make of them, involve our perception of context...the same observation in a different context will have different meaning and therefore different value.
- Some aspects of context are more fluid than others, but not all changes materially impact context.
- Because context is perceived it is subject to our perceptual field and dispositions.
- To understand how and why interventions work we must understand how those involved perceive and interpret the intervention not just what we intended for them to experience.
The things we will talk about today can be addressed at different levels of granularity or finer analysis, picking the right level of specificity and detail serves our cause well.

This is comparable to unit of analysis, but it is about the level of detail attempted in examining the unit of analysis.

Interventions aimed at the individual level require finer grained analysis that those defined at the group level.

The evaluation’s role or purpose is also key to determining how fine grained an analysis is needed.
Cultural Context

- Those elements of context that have cultural, discipline, legal, and power differential elements are both critically important and challenging to understand fully.
- Culture as lens through which context is viewed and cultural context elements are also interactive.
- Using the concept of stereotype threat we can better understand how this dual lens and context element combination works.
- Intersectionality and selective identity perceptions are presumably at work here.
Stereotype Threat Illustration

- Women engineers at Stanford
- Randomly assigned to two groups
- Both given the same math test
- One told it was a test that women found difficult, the other no comment
- The group anticipating difficulty had lower scores
- Highlighting a stigmatized element of a person’s self-identity can have an impact on their performance!
CSH as an attitude, tool and technique applied to teaching and learning

- It seems to me from reading the Critical Systems Heuristic Brief Introduction Document that in some ways what we will be up to in developing the boundary "attitude" requires us, is to dig very deeply into a philosophical mindset. Here a lot of critical thinking is demanded of us, translation to our local context, and reflective agility.
  - This is in fact true, although self-reflection and a critical posture are great generalizable orientations
  - When put into perspective with the philosophical underpinnings of our disciplines...we may be surprised by the outcomes
Model of the "networked" improvement community

- TIDES Community, in cooperation with Helmsley and AAC&U:
- Informs the research community regarding gaps in our underlying understanding of the interaction between how and what we teach and the lived experiences of our students. We understand more about the ways students from distant communities may fare in our classrooms than students who live a stones throw from the building in which we teach. Researchers have assumed that these differences in responding to material would be minimal yet our data suggest this is not the case...especially relative to retention.

- Challenges our professional societies to discuss the discipline biases we project into our curriculum and pedagogy. If we can strip away unneeded traditions, it will reduce barriers to those who trip over this part of the curriculum

- Engages our institution in a discussion of inclusive excellence from the perspective of holding our students to a standard of social engagement in the classroom that we prompt by the way we teach and conceptualize assignments.
Context definition/differentiation is everything!

- We have institutions in the U.S. who have successfully educated our target population in the same fields we teach. They do so in a context clearly marked by differences, but do we know which of those contextual differences matter?
- Shouldn’t we consider collaborative discussion to discern what context manipulation strategies are available to us?
- And from the student success literature shouldn’t we be able to expect to find ideas relevant to the reforms we wish the make?
Advantages of a Systems-oriented* Program Development and Evaluation Approach

*Care must be exercised to note if the system is our interpretation of what is real, or what is real and only approximated by what we refer to as a system.
1. Attention to Context

- Provides a uniform way to capture meaning of the intervention in terms that relate directly to the context
- Provides information to assist in determining salience and centrality of intervention influence
- Provides definition of conditions under which evaluand has been shown to work or not work
- Includes information key to understanding the “whys” of the outcomes and limits on generalizability of observations
- Honors the perceptual field of participants by including salient features that impact their interaction with the evaluand, into the evaluation...resulting in an evaluation more likely to match up with stakeholder lived experiences with the evaluand
- Captures relationships and priorities that serve as a backdrop to the evaluand.
What understanding of context could help explain your project to an external audience?
2. Matching Evaluand and Logic Model Explicitly

- When the fool learned the rules of the game...the players had dispersed - ensuring that the logic model that guided design of the intervention, remains the basis for evaluating the intervention.

- Reveals the places where ideology and established social paradigms can avoid detection and remain definitional.

- Illustrates how things will remain unless the intervention works to change boundary definitions, or create accommodations and assimilations.

- The logic model needs to be critiqued for its handling of the whole versus the parts of the environment where the evaluand performs.
Can you draw a model of the systems engaged in your project? What are the boundary markers?
3. Boundary Definitions Inform Evaluation

- To check for the improvement in our hot water system model, our probes would go in the bathroom sink and check for temperature at various times once the faucet has been opened.
- The change in boundary definition provides for a new element - the hot water return line.
- The boundary definitions also include the dishwasher and kitchen sink, providing two additional places to put an evaluation probe.
- And the designation of time and hot water as relevant variables, defines the data to collect.
For the boundary definitions you have identified, what evaluation probes are needed?
4. A Change In Important Boundary Definitions Connotes Transformation

- Assimilation and Accommodation do not require significant boundary changes, adaptation can occur without it.
- Because being what it once was, now requires making a change
- Because it does not require separate justification to continue, it relies upon or co-opts the rationale for the whole system
- Because future efforts begin with the new definitions
- Because a boundary change also alters context
- Confirmation of the boundary change, confirms the transformation
Is Your Project Change Assimilation, Accommodation, Or Transformation? What Boundary Definitions Will You Have Changed?
Systems Thinking Helps But Does Not Define Reality Fully – Use With Restraint
Restraint

- Systems are generally correlational rather than causal
- The patterns that define a system are often self-referential
- Fragmentation of the whole alters meaning
Is Your Evaluation Aligned With Your Boundary Definitions?
When you can help people see it, you can more easily persuade them of its validity.