

# Rationale for name change: Systemic Change → Systems Thinking and Change

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There are two rationales listed below regarding the name change. The first is a consolidated version and the second, an expanded explanation.

## Message from the STC President

For many years our Division has been known as Systemic Change. Last year, our Executive Committee gave serious consideration to changing the name of the division. The reason for this was twofold. First, we felt that systemic thinking was a critical process that could be applied to any learning system and organization. While change might indeed be an outcome of this process, the application of systems thinking was an important contribution to the efficacy and goal achievement for a learning system, environment, and organization.

Secondly, we wanted to recognize that change and transformation can occur at both a micro and macro level within a learning environment. Understanding and celebrating successful change should be part of the Division's mission.

The Executive Committee therefore voted on changing the Division name to Systems Thinking and Change to reflect a more inclusive role for the Division's membership and their own range of endeavors to apply systems thinking and to implement change.

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Division on Systemic Change 2014-2015

## Message from STC Board Member

By Eugene Kowch 2015

**Systems thinking** has evolved primarily from its roots in management contexts (Ackoff, 1972) in response to the challenge of managing interactions between purposeful members of a highly interdependent social conceptualization of organization. Ackoff (1971) presented what has evolved into a 'design' approach to thinking about systems where we try to create a feasible whole from infeasible parts. The founders of the **Systemic Change** division have combined holistic thinking about learning situations (primarily in school settings) to evolve a beautiful design for conceptualizing changes in education systems (organizations) based on principles of interactive learning and implicitly interactive learning leadership (Reigeluth's 2015 AECT Policy paper). This is the very fine bedrock of our thinking in the Division.

However this concept integrates the entire process of systems thinking with its implicit outcomes – change. That can be confusing for some because the first change required of anyone, by our account is a paradigm change (Reigeluth & Duffy, 2008) which some argue is actually an outcome of a recursive learning process itself (Schlechty, 2011).

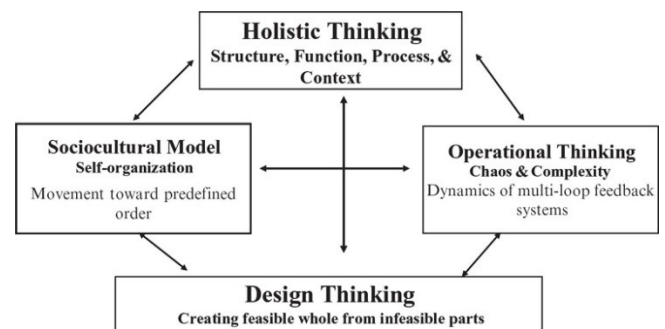
So in our Division, we use systems thinking with a design ideal to create change (in schools, primarily for learning and instruction). This is a tremendous leap forward from literature brought about to consider organizations (Ackoff, 1972 and how people work together (Senge, 1995).

**Designers choose to seek the future**, rather than to predict it. In the figure below (Gharajedaghi, 2011) design thinking is compared to other influential, interconnected systems thinking frameworks, where we have found that trying to predict system outcomes just doesn't work in the complex reality of our constant-flux, co-dependent world of nested systems (inclusive of, but extending well beyond 'the school').

**Today, our concept of a system is more open**, and it is expanding to include temporal, shifting nested systems that impact each other.

What is significant in this evolution of systems thinking, particularly in the education context is *a similar and parallel change in the evolution of **change thinking*** in education. It, too has evolved from principles about holistic, mechanical change (Simon, 1967) to holistic change in schools and school communities (Fullan, 1998; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2011). The language of 'transformation' is a rhetorical move to suggest an expanding concept of school and district level educational change (Gronn, 2002).

So systems thinking and change thinking have evolved in parallel to help us contemplate the design of better education systems in our changing world. Most of it is based on excellent research done by bounding the 'system' as one within a classroom, a school or a district, not as nested systems where the very way we conceptualize it all matters as well.



Separating '**change**' thinking (and output, really, in our current discourse) from '**systems thinking**' helps us consider the wider space of the possible when we contemplate contributing, in a high-impact way to the design of new organizations, leaders and learning situations where technology is deeply, purposefully embedded with a new paradigm for what the organization does. Considering our professional 'home' in AECT as a space for "Systems Thinking and Change" opens up a wider space for research, practice and discourse.

The idea is to be **more inclusive** because when we think about *nested systems* spanning organizational bounds we have studied (i.e. schools), we can include wider concepts of integrated communities, governments, stakeholders, histories, economics and social pulses in our research. We include other organization frames as well, such as universities and corporations – bridging and integrating, perhaps with the heavy work in **leadership, administration, public administration, business and organization** as well as **social justice, distributed learning and design theory** for example, perhaps from settings inclusive of hospitals, government agencies, the military, R&D and other institutional contexts (Clegg et al., 2011). So the gesture is more inclusive and cohesive in terms of designing learning and leading nested, interconnected systems. We can do this without thinking quite as much about the implicit 'change' or results of the design with colleagues bringing these diverse perspectives. So by separating the '**change**' from the '**systemic (thinking)**', we can consider the systemic thinking with less of an eye to specific utilities or outcomes from it. This is a liberating idea, yet it is daunting. The proposed name change "Systems Thinking and Change" reflects a less instrumental, more exploratory paradigm for examining the possible results of our designs – a paradigm that is less bound by institutional boundaries (i.e. schools) or by the results of ideas about evolving systems (systemic change).

For example, if I can imagine a learning setting that spans well beyond time or mastery boundaries in schools to include university or corporate settings, I must think about the results of my systems thinking in different terms - terms that again involve more of an ecosystem change possibility. Government budgets pegged on \$120 barrel oil and the impact on any 21<sup>st</sup> century high-cost tech-embedded learning system are examples of the need to conceptualize systems thinking with change thinking for specific, more adaptable designs for example.

The logic here is rushed for our meeting admittedly not fully developed – but the major idea is to evolve our division from its very strong roots to expand our thinking to include more 'space' for designing well beyond organizational and disciplinary contexts – including the necessary domains of leadership (for change) as well as learning situations, IT, economics, history and politics, for example. It builds on, not replaces the visionary work of our collective – to open up conversation and joint research to expand, not limit any thinking so far.