



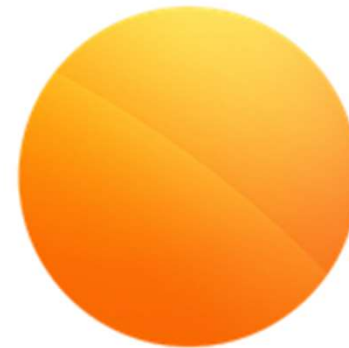
# Adaptive Learning

Elizabeth Dozois

*Word on the Street Ltd*  
&  
*Human Venture Institute*



## Engaging Men in Violence Prevention Learning Collaborative



# Three Key Components to the Project



1. Working in settings where men already congregate

# Settings where Men Congregate



- Schools
- Workplaces
- Health Care Settings
- Sports and Recreation
- Places of Worship
- Fatherhood Settings
- Military Settings

*Engaging Men and Boys in Domestic Violence Prevention: Opportunities and Promising Approaches*  
(Wells, Lorenzetti, Carolo, Dinner, Jones, Minerson, & Esina, 2012)

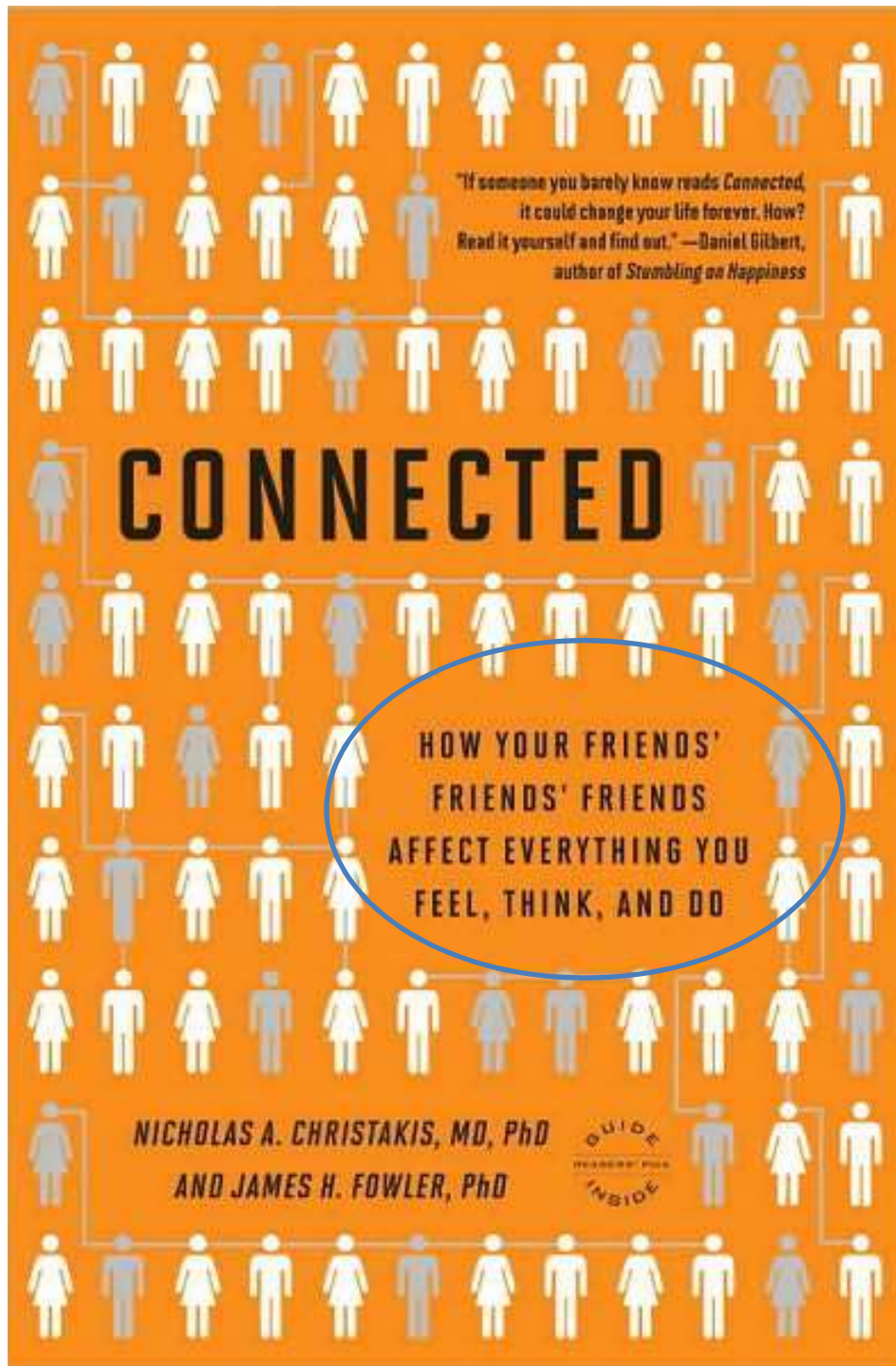
# Three Key Components to the Project



1. Working in settings where men already congregate
2. Leveraging the power of social norms to influence behavior

# Leveraging the power of social norms to influence behavior

Elevator video



How are social norms transmitted?  
Disrupted? Amplified?



# Three Key Components to the Project



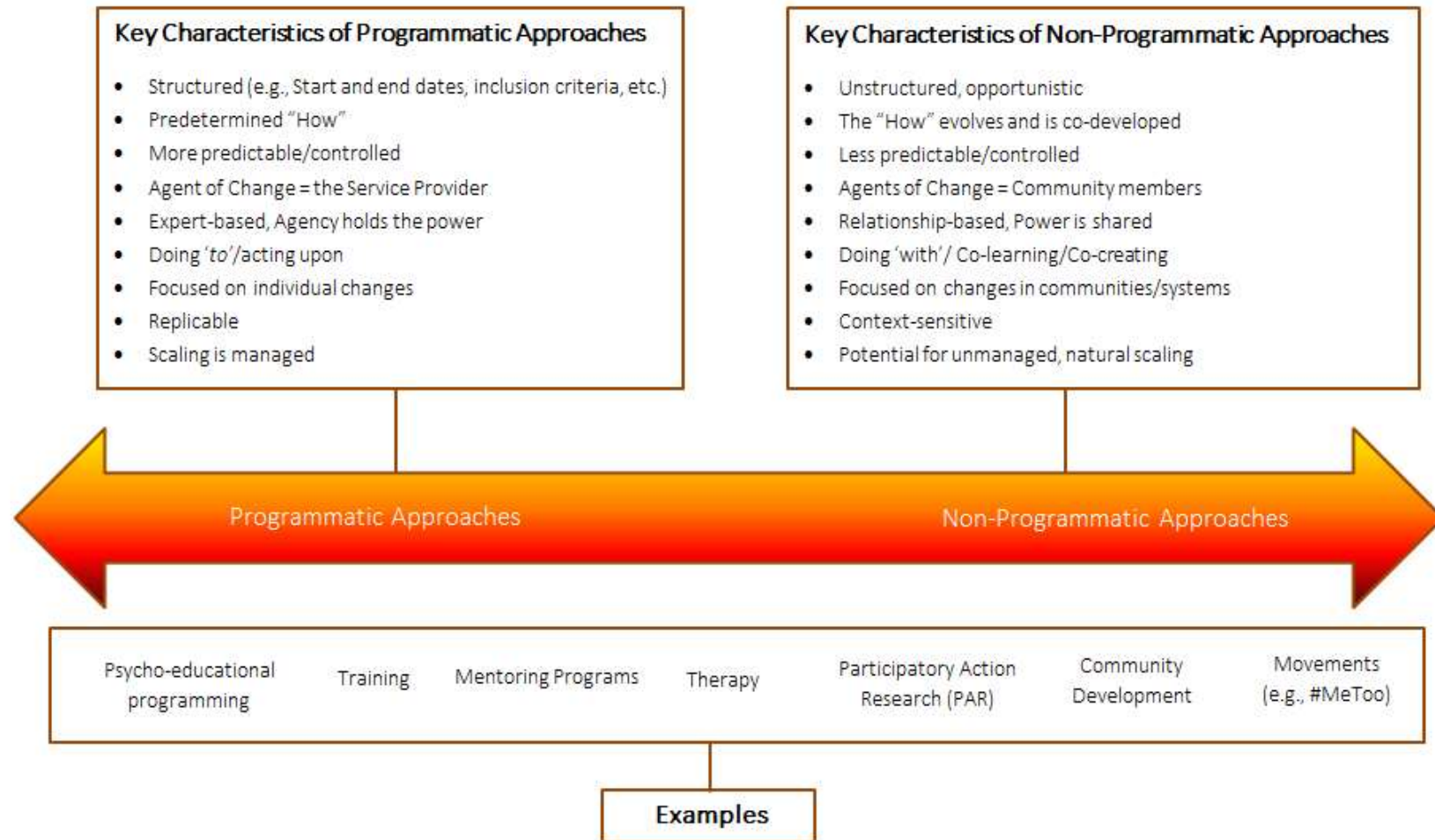
1. Working in settings where men already congregate
2. Leveraging the power of social norms to influence behavior
3. Working in non-programmatic ways



# Non-Programmatic Approaches

## Programmatic/Non-Programmatic Continuum

Programmatic and non-programmatic approaches are not separate entities; they exist along a continuum.



## Paired Discussion

- How might this idea apply to your work?
- Do you see value in using non-programmatic approaches in adult learning environments? (Why/why not?)
- What ideas do you have for ways to integrate non-programmatic approaches into adult learning initiatives?

What are your  
associations with  
learning?

Learning = Adaptation

“To fit”

Learning = Adaptation

Fitting capacities to context

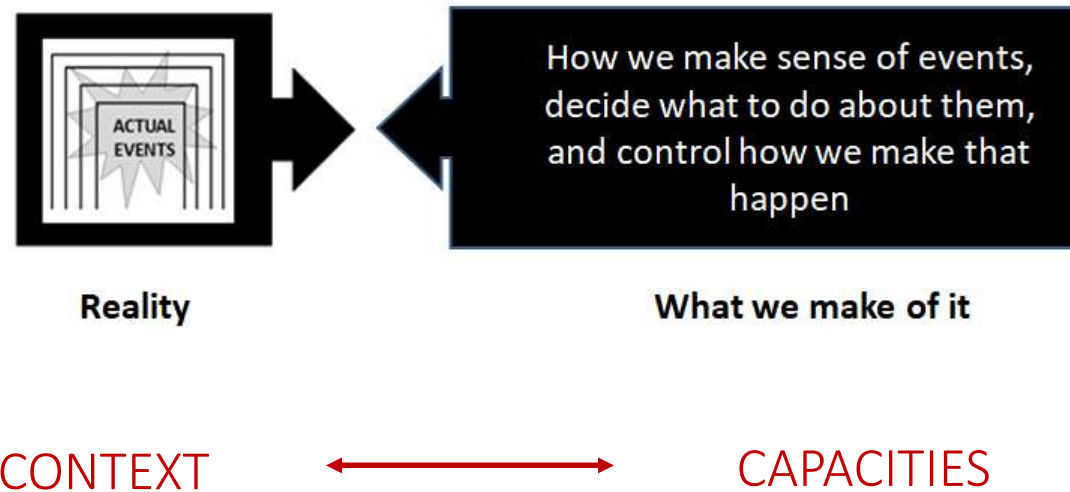
Learning = Adaptation

Fitting capacities to context

Learning is 'adaptive' to the extent that the capacities we develop actually fit the context – i.e., equip us to manage the challenges in our environment.



## The Learning Process (High Level)



## Foundational Concept:

We don't act on reality, we act on  
our perceptions of reality  
(and our perceptions are always  
limited)

Map

Territory



Perceptions/Mental  
Models

Reality

What are the implications?

We need to be learning how to  
develop increasingly more accurate  
and comprehensive representations of  
reality

# Three Barriers to Adaptive Learning and How We Can Begin to Address Them

Barrier #1:  
We see what we  
want/expect to see

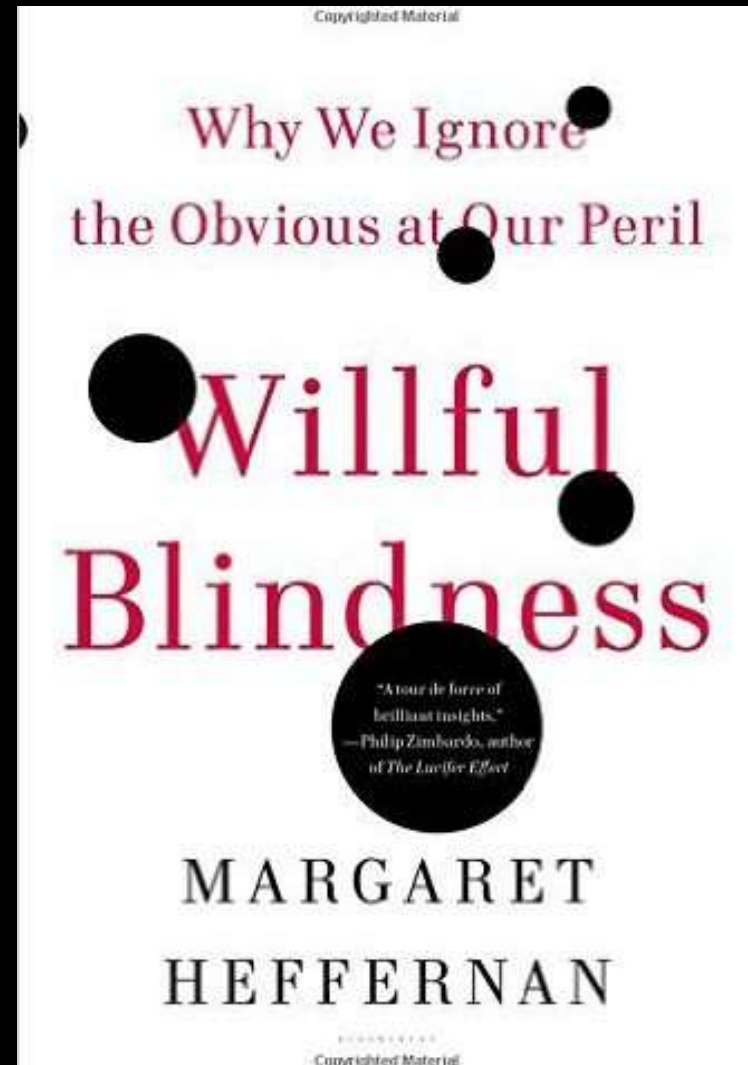
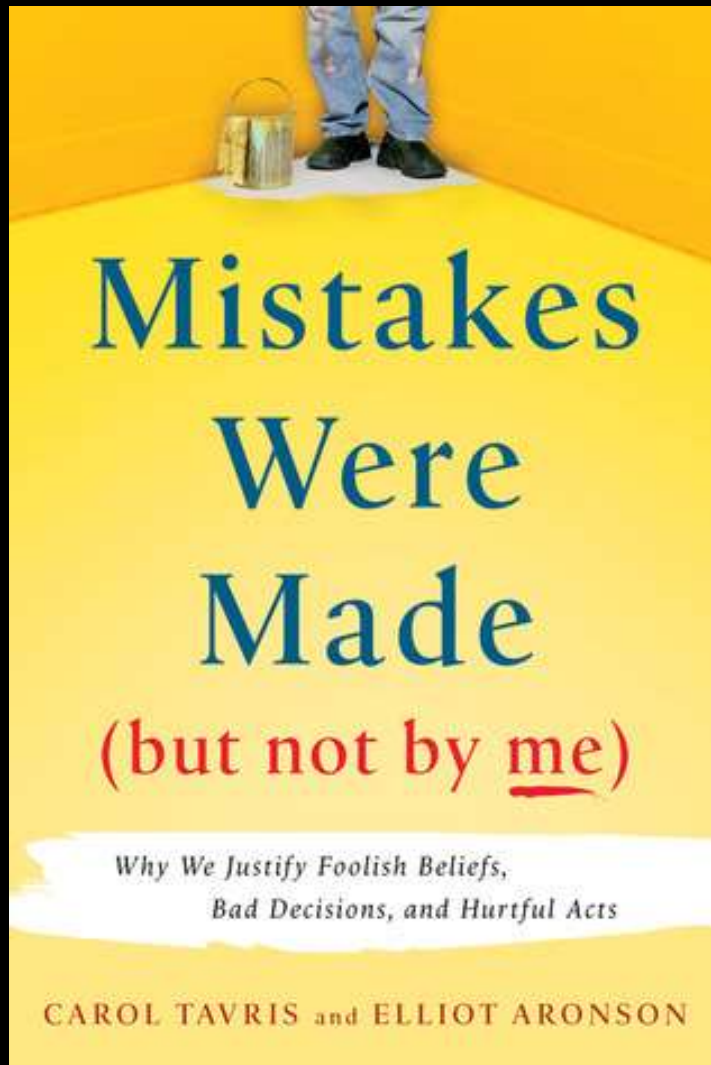




Known Issue:

Explanatory stories have the most power and appeal when they fit our inner world of hopes, fears, reassurance needs, allegiances, habits and prejudices.

## a) Cognitive Dissonance/Motivated Reasoning



## Alice Stewart story:

Incidence of childhood leukemia on the rise at a rate that looked epidemic – especially among children aged 2-4. Conducted a large, well-designed study that compared families with a child who had died from leukemia to those who had not and discovered that the common factor among those who had a child who had died from leukemia was that the mom had had an xray while pregnant. Obstetric xrays were shown to double the risk of cancer (even with brief exposure). Stewart published her findings in the BMJ in 1958. At the time, a child a week was dying from the practice in the UK, so she thought that doctors would stop x-raying on the mere suspicion that the findings were sound. To the contrary, doctors carried on x-raying pregnant mothers for the next 25 years. Not until 1980 did a major American medical org finally recommend that the practice be abandoned. Why did it take so long? Lots of potential reasons – all of which might have contributed - but the main reason is the mental turmoil. Think about the dissonance that would create. Knowing you, a doctor, who are in the profession to save lives have in effect been killing children. Easier to maintain existing beliefs than to go there.

Doing good is more  
important than feeling good

## b) Belief Systems & Habits of Thought

Photo of  
woman in a  
translucent  
box

We don't  
have beliefs;  
Our beliefs  
have us...

We dwell within the pool of our shared cultural system, much as fish dwell within water. Most of the time, fish pay no attention at all to the water. They are one with it. They move within it and are moved by its currents. It is their medium.



Similarly, human beings dwell within their meaning-making systems without thinking about the system itself. In this way children grow into a complex web of acquired habits of thought and action without even trying to do so. It just seems to happen.

But what is a people to do if the aggregate effect of their collective habits of thought and behaviour is life-threatening to themselves and future generations?

- Judie & Michael Bopp



Developed by:

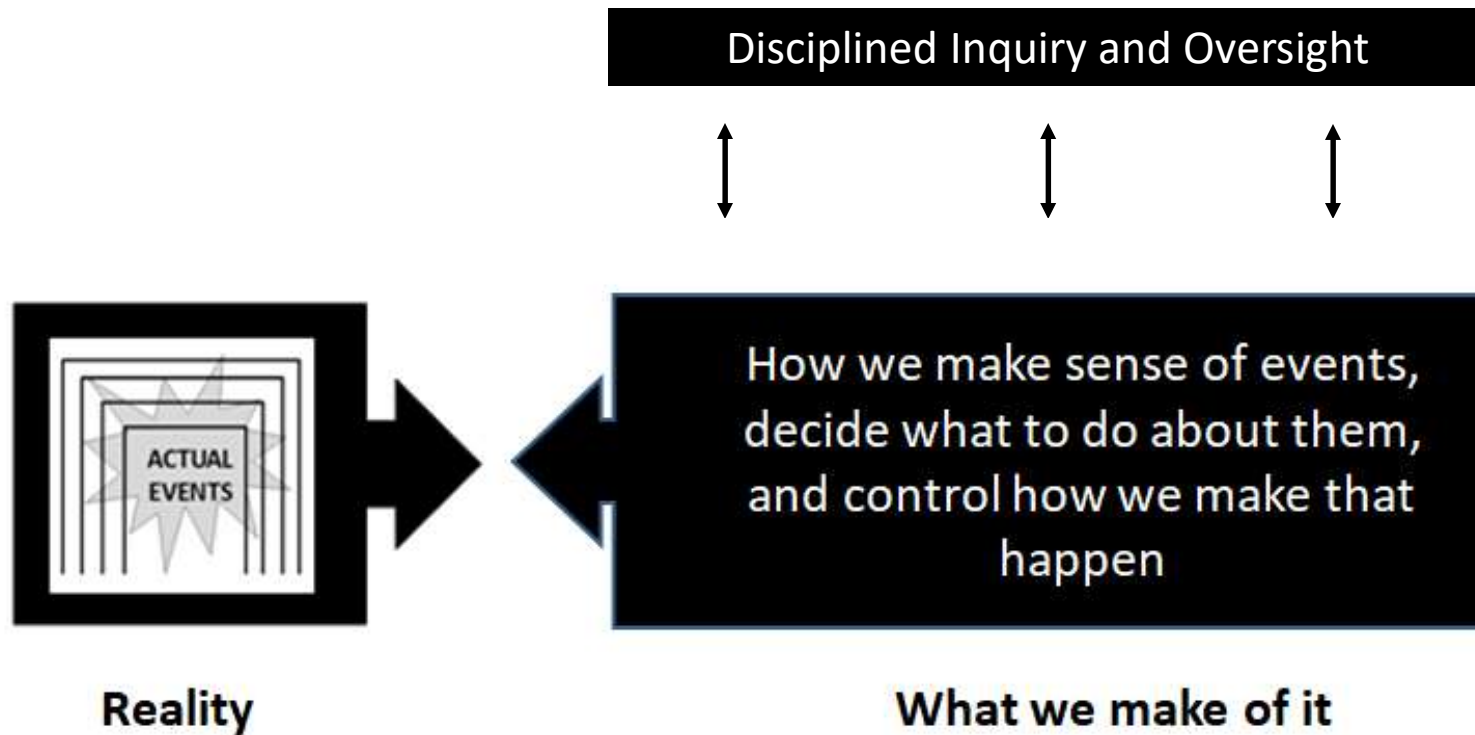
The Change Collective,  
Calgary, Alberta  
2017

# **Working with Vulnerable Youth to Enhance their Natural Supports: A Practice Framework**

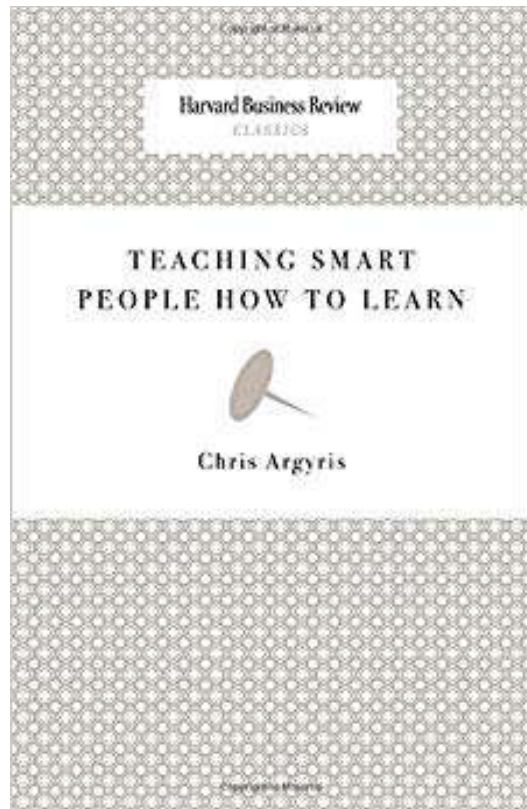
Barrier #1:  
We see what we  
want/expect to see

What It Takes:  
Ability to manage biases,  
beliefs and defense  
mechanisms

# Meta-Cognitive Processes



# Double-Loop Learning



[M]ost people define learning too narrowly as mere ‘problem solving,’ so they focus on identifying and correcting errors in the external environment. Solving problems is important. But if learning is to persist, managers and employees must also look inward....[T]hey must learn how the very way they go about defining and solving problems can be a source of problems in its own right.”

-Chris Argyris

The first principle is that you must not fool yourself and you are the easiest person to fool.

-Richard P. Feynman

Be as honest with yourself as you can and ask...

1. How could I be fooling myself?
2. How could the need to feel good about myself be getting in the way?
3. What are some alternative explanations for what I'm seeing?
4. How could I test my assumptions, beliefs, and/or ideas?
5. What *disconfirming* evidence should I be looking for?



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DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

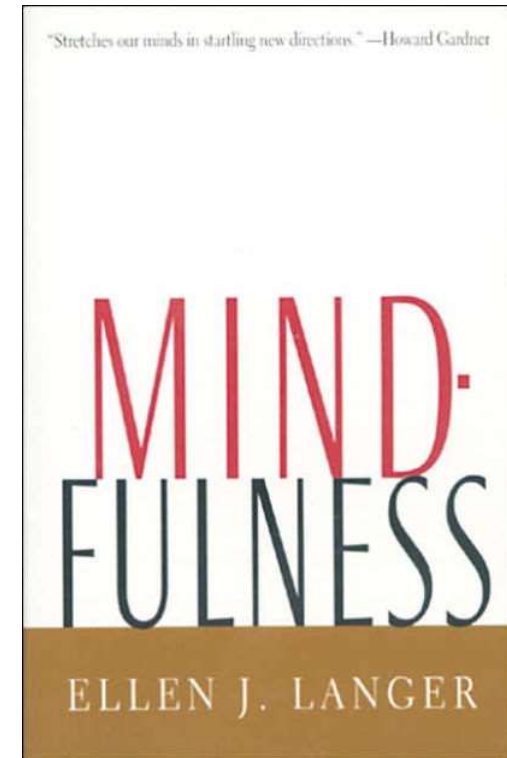
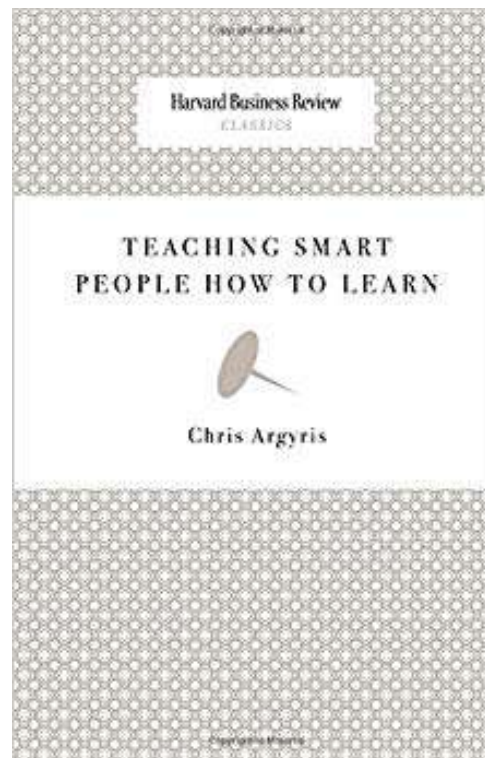
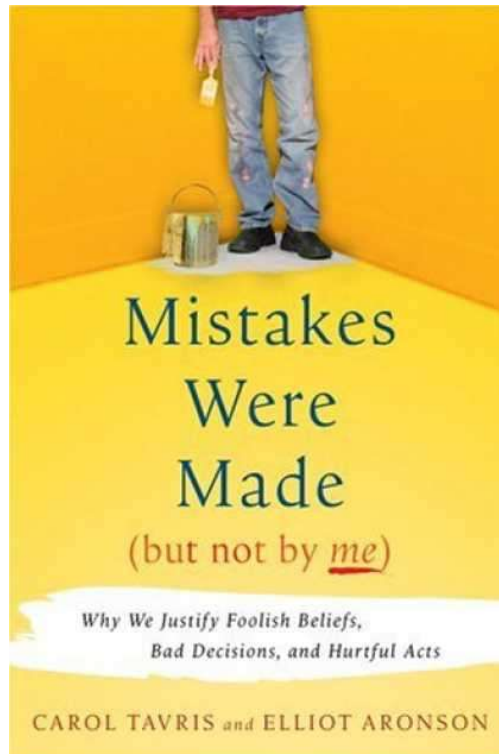
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- One of the most helpful things that we've developed to this point is a Noticing Activity designed to help wake people up to power, privilege and gender inequality dynamics in their settings. (This is a practice that we can all integrate into our personal and professional lives every day).
- We've had to examine our own assumptions and beliefs and consider ways we may be contributing to gender stereotypes & inequality.
- We've had to examine our assumptions about the efficacy of the work we've been doing – which is challenging. We all want to feel like we've contributed positively.

# Recommended Resources

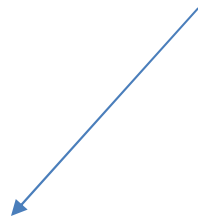


Barrier #2:  
Emotional responses to  
complexity and  
uncertainty

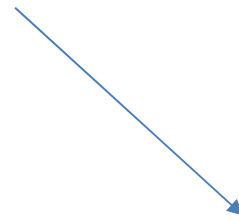
One of the most difficult aspects of adaptive learning is that it generates feelings of frustration, incompetence, uncertainty...

Learning = Adaptation

Fitting capacities to context



Conventional  
(copying existing patterns)



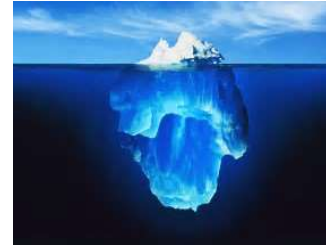
Innovative-Adaptive  
(creating new patterns)

## Conventional Learning



- Based on mimetics
- Quick and easy
- Focus on form
- Limited capacity for diagnostics and design
- No capacity for innovation

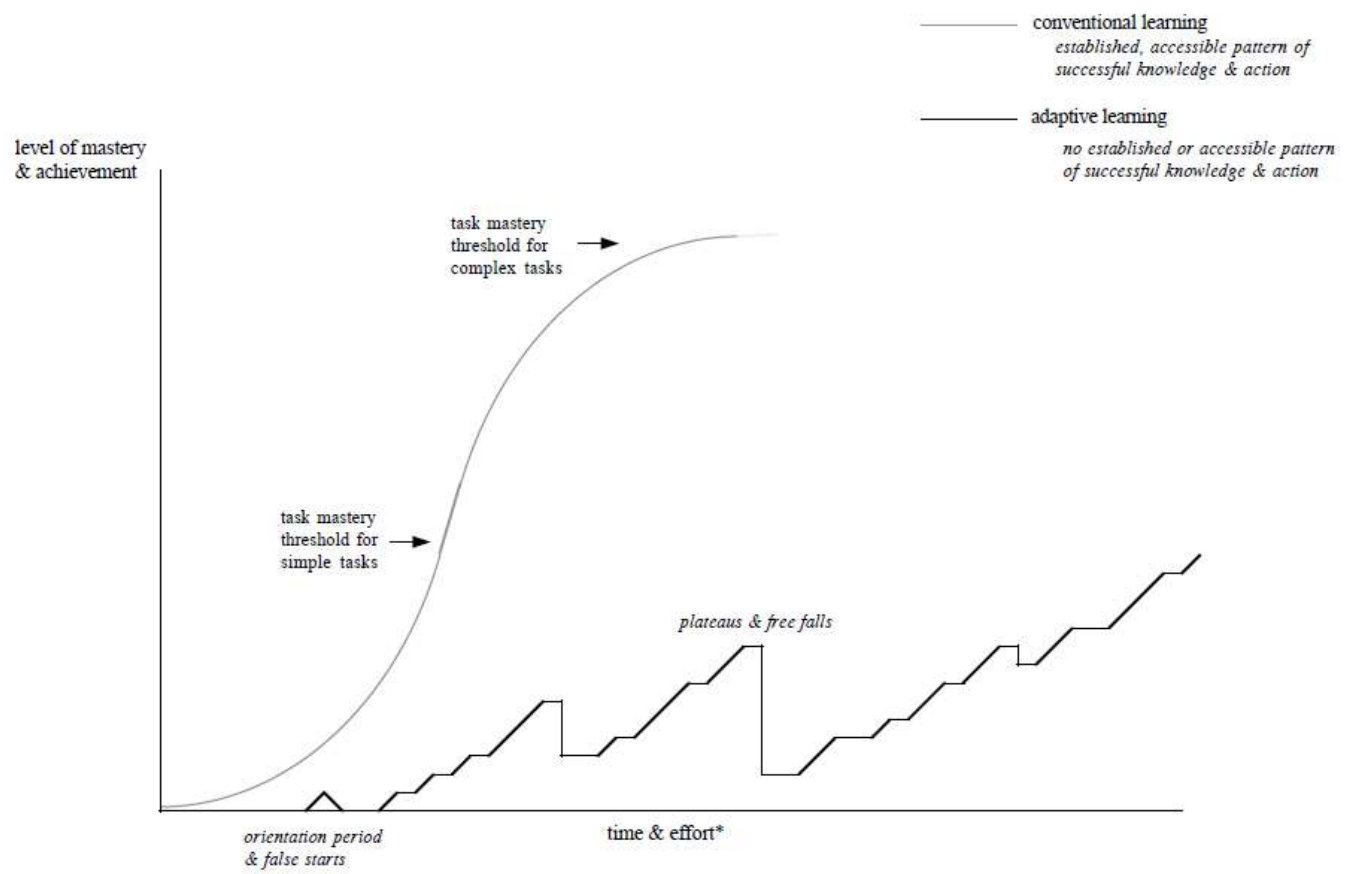
## Innovative-Adaptive Learning



- Supports innovation
- Slow & arduous
- Focus on function
- Supports diagnostics and design

# a) Path Finding

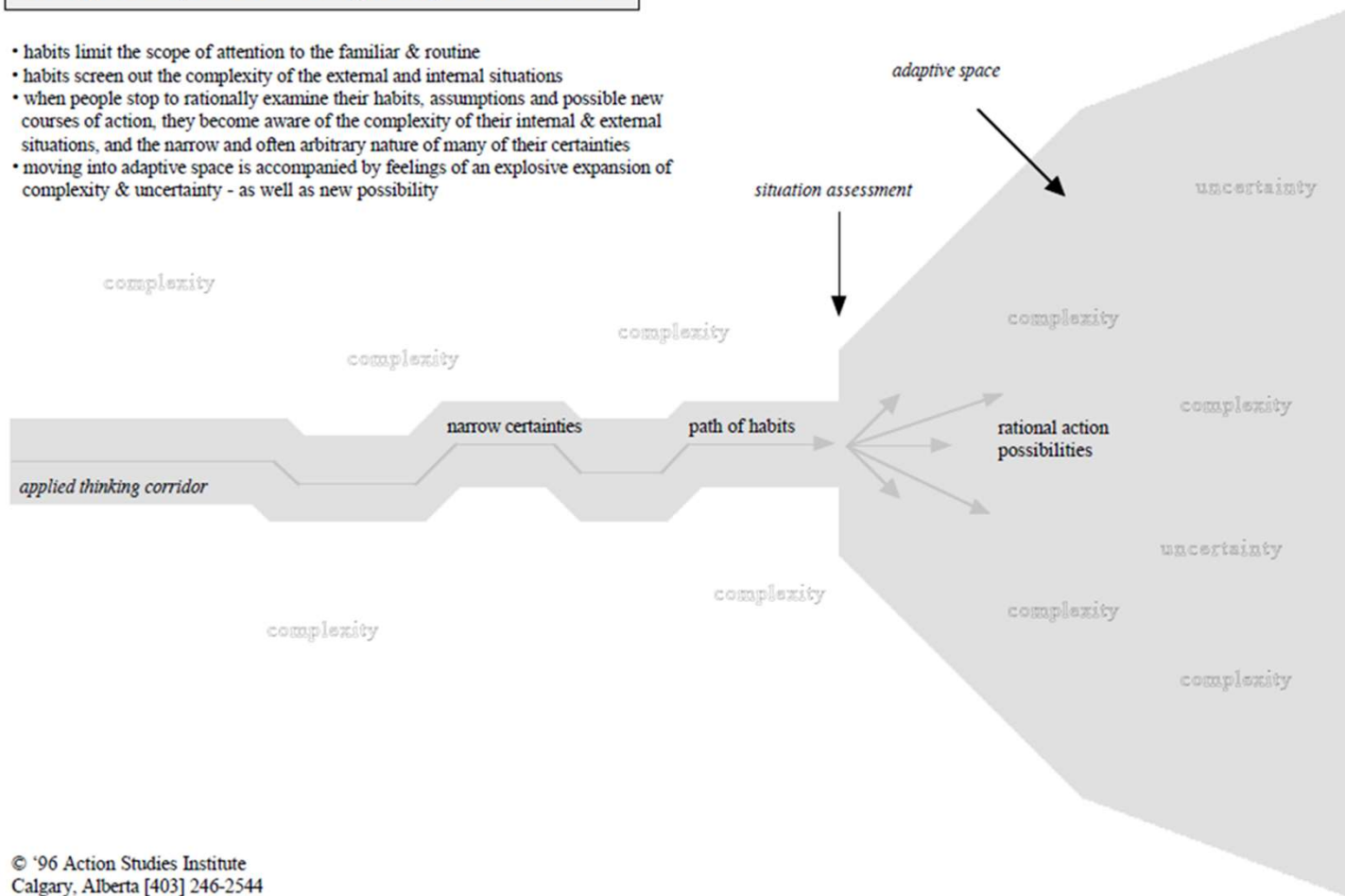
## Conventional & Adaptive Learning Paths



## b) Complexity

### Adaptive Space & Complexity Awareness

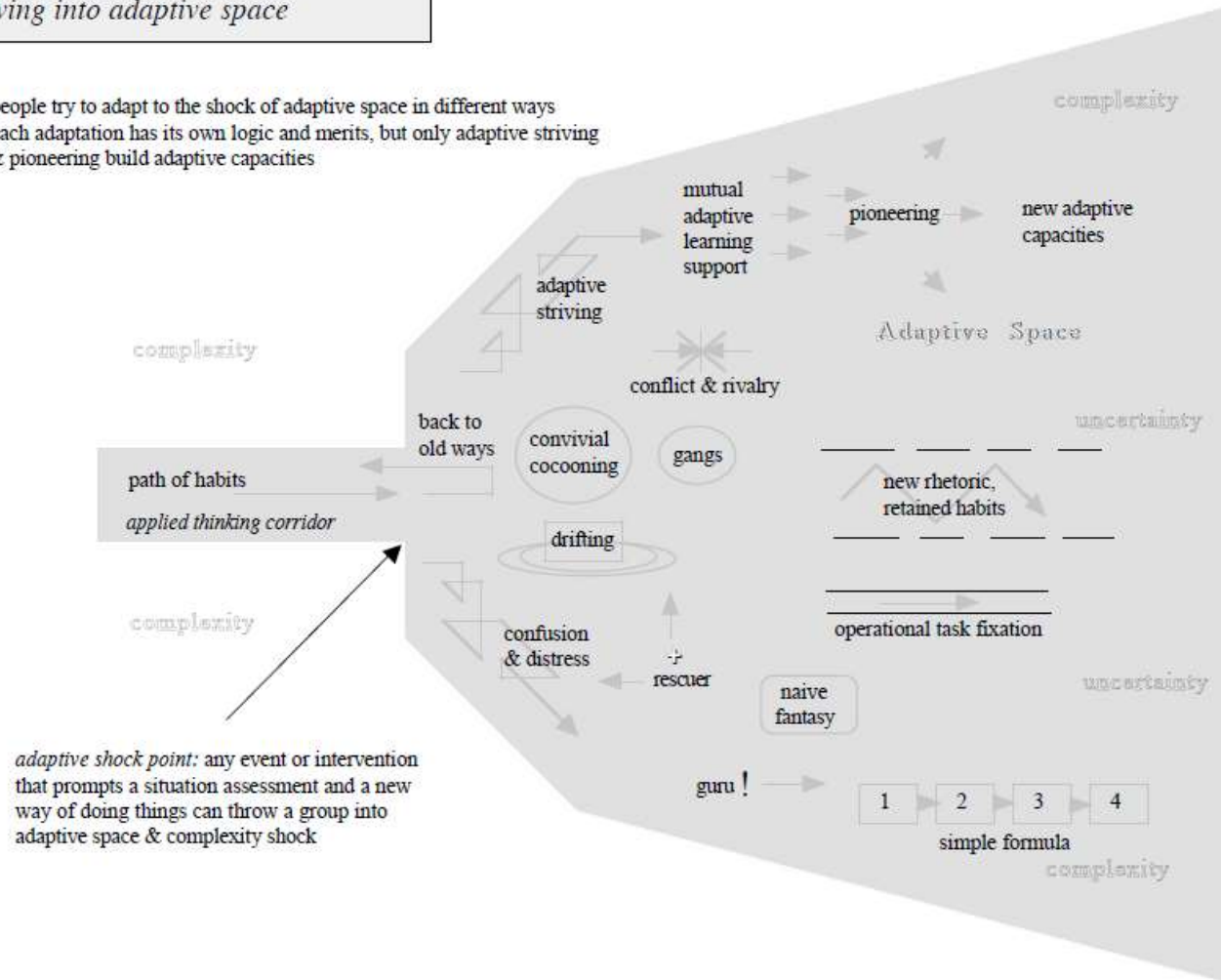
- habits limit the scope of attention to the familiar & routine
- habits screen out the complexity of the external and internal situations
- when people stop to rationally examine their habits, assumptions and possible new courses of action, they become aware of the complexity of their internal & external situations, and the narrow and often arbitrary nature of many of their certainties
- moving into adaptive space is accompanied by feelings of an explosive expansion of complexity & uncertainty - as well as new possibility





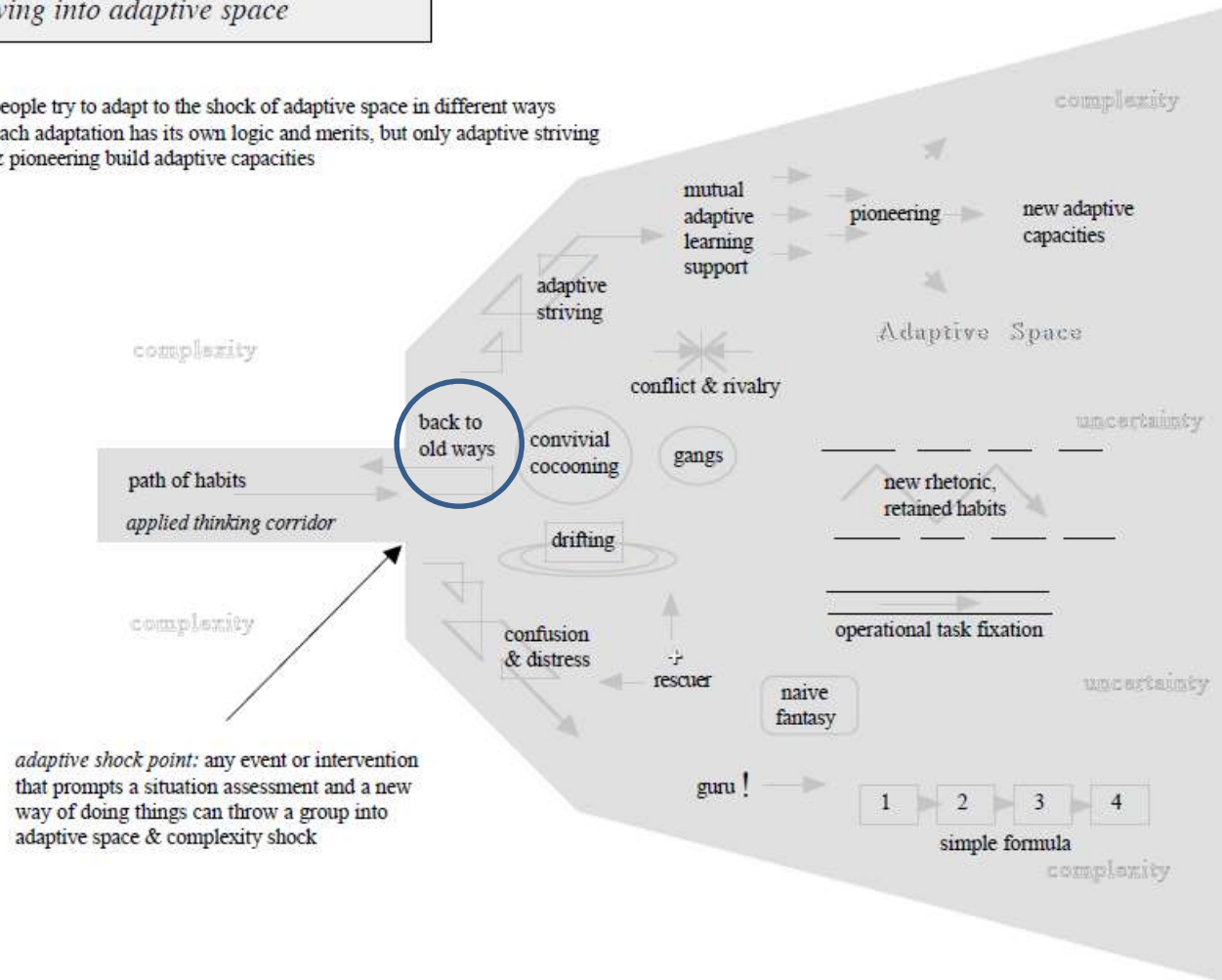
## Complexity Shock Reactions - moving into adaptive space

- people try to adapt to the shock of adaptive space in different ways
- each adaptation has its own logic and merits, but only adaptive striving & pioneering build adaptive capacities



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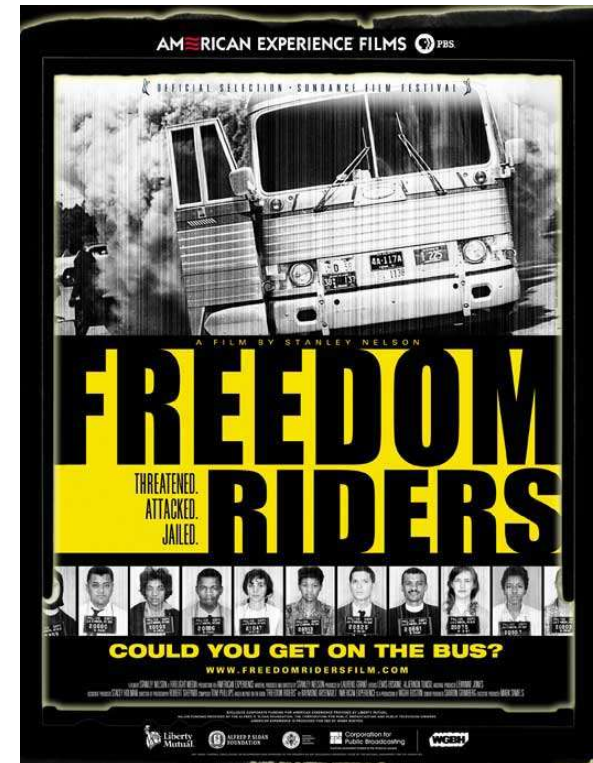
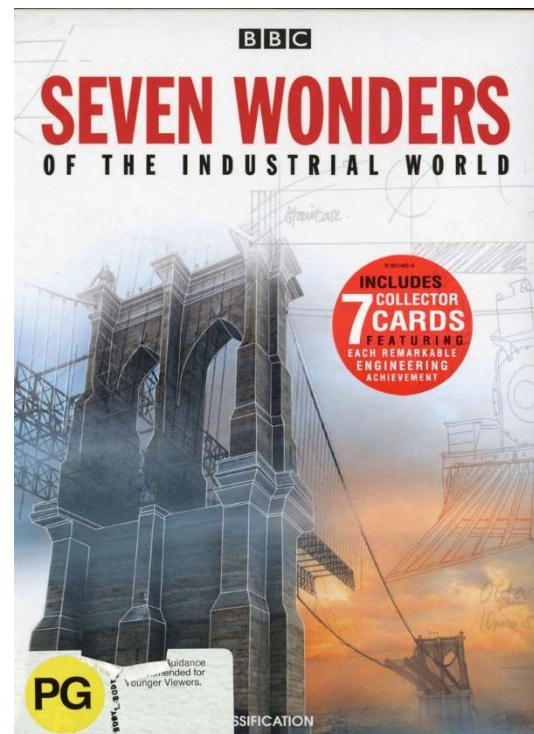
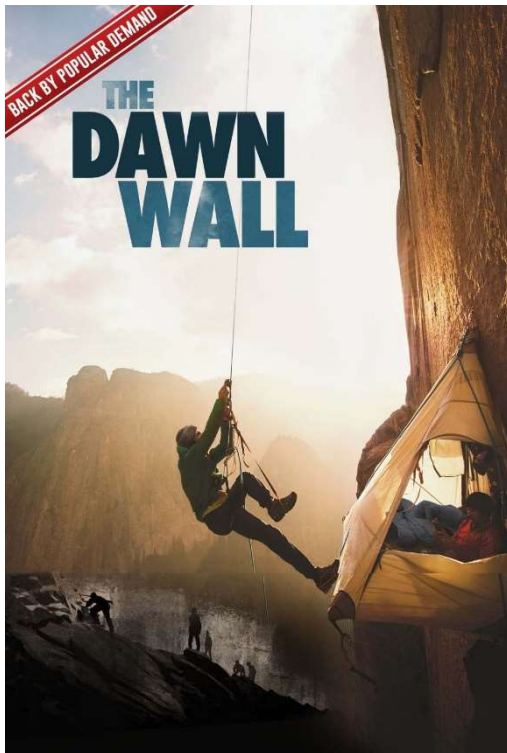
- Feeling incompetent is REALLY uncomfortable. We know how to do programs, so they make us feel good. We've had to guard against defaulting to more familiar territory.
- Helping the group anticipate how this would feel and normalizing frustration has been really helpful. (This was something we had to revisit several times)
- The group still wants us to give them the 'answers.'

Barrier #2:  
Emotional responses to  
complexity and  
uncertainty

What It Takes:  
Predict & Prepare

- Normalize frustration. (Frustration is a simply a signal that there's a gap between what you can do now and what you want to be able to do. If you're never frustrated, it's likely that you're never working at your edge).
- Draw on the patterns associated with complexity shock reaction to anticipate how you/your group is likely to respond. Gently help one another to name it when it emerges.
- Look at other examples of adaptive persistence. These provide a reality check as well as inspiration.

# Recommended Resources



## Barrier #3:

We underestimate the depth of understanding required to intervene in complex systems (and the time and effort it takes to cultivate that)

# User Level Understanding vs. Diagnostic/Design Understanding

Photo of a car



## Harlem story:

This story begins in East Harlem in the late 1930s. East Harlem was a very lively place during those years, but it was beset by some fairly serious problems, including poverty, overcrowding, rundown housing, rat infestations, health issues, and racial tensions. By the early 1940s, over a quarter of a million people were packed into 1.2 square miles, and apartments built for one family often housed three or more. Something had to be done.

In 1941, a third of the buildings in East Harlem were razed and the first public housing high rises went up in their place. Commonly referred to as “The Projects,” these high-rises made good sense in theory. They provided a way to increase living space without increasing land use. However, they were ultimately a disaster. Poverty increased, violence skyrocketed, and frustrated residents grew increasingly resentful. “[T]he most amazing event in the whole sorry tale,” Jane Jacobs would later write in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, was that “people who sincerely wanted to strengthen great cities should adopt recipes frankly devised for undermining their economies and killing them.” The “recipes” these planners adopted were derived from modernist ideals that valued form over function and emphasized visual order, uniformity, and single-purpose districts. The problem was that all of this had very little to do with real-world cities with all their functional diversity and messy interdependencies.

Had the planners spent some time observing East Harlem before they slated it for demolition, they would have seen a complex ecology of functions. Tucked in among the residences were thousands of small businesses – hardware stores, bakeries, barber shops, tailors, coffee shops, and more. The buildings also housed social and political clubs, as well as religious institutions. When this complex ecology was replaced with single-purpose buildings, residents lost most of what made their community work. The 4,000-plus people who were employed by the 1500 businesses that were lost with the demolition lost their means of livelihood, and were thrown into greater poverty and dependence.

The Projects also destroyed the means of informal policing among residents, leading to higher rates of violence. Jane Jacobs, who understood cities deeply, coined the term '**eyes on the street**' to describe the kind of casual surveillance that happens when people are using and enjoying the streets.

Prior to the demolition, the streets of East Harlem had been lively: Folks sitting on their front steps, neighbours chatting, children playing, people frequenting the many small businesses that peppered each block. But when East Harlem went from human-scale multi-functional buildings to massive 'superblocks' comprised of single-purpose high-rises, the streets around the projects became deserted. There were no longer eyes on the street. And even if people were observing from windows several stories up, they were unlikely to intervene in the way they might have if they were sitting on their stoop.

A key barrier to learning is thinking that we can just rely on what the experts tell us – do a quick scan of the literature, integrate best practices, away we go. We have to be developing a functional understanding of how families and communities work if we're going to intervene in ways that are likely to be successful. And that takes time.

Stupidity is the same as evil  
if you judge by the results.

- Margaret Atwood

It is far from clear whether 'good intentions  
plus stupidity' or 'evil intentions plus  
intelligence' have wrought more harm in the  
world.

-Dietrich Dörner

Barrier #3:

We underestimate the depth of understanding required to intervene in complex systems

What It Takes:

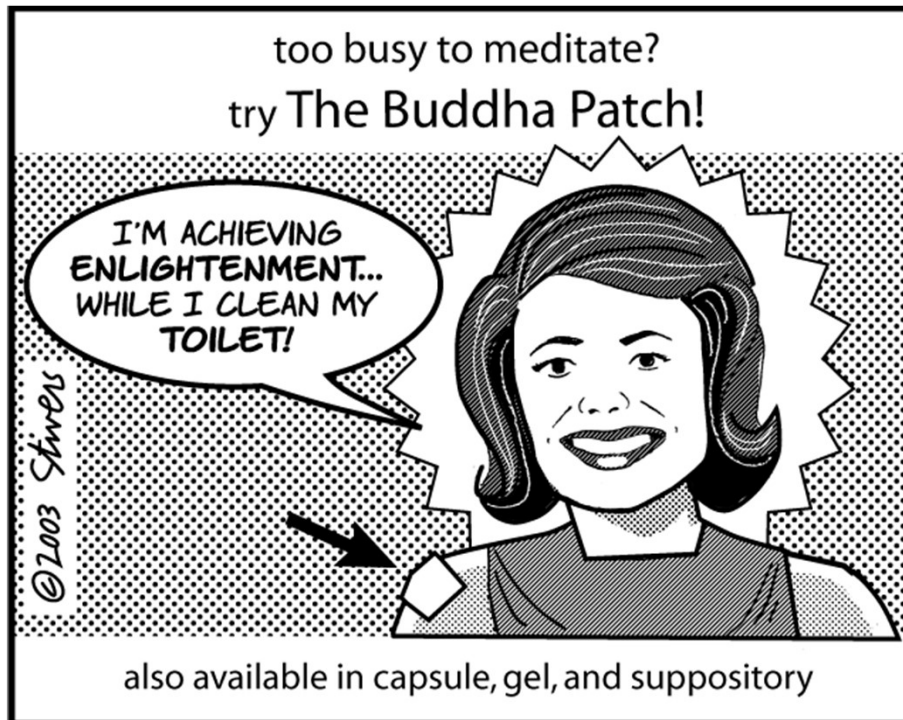
The confidence, time and capacity for effective inquiry

Coming back to the Harlem story – in developing their mental representations of what would be helpful, the planners were drawing on planning orthodoxy of the time. It's easy for us to do the same thing – to be overly reliant on the thinking of others – to never question the status quo or try to figure things out for ourselves.

In contrast to those planners, Jane Jacobs spent time really trying to map out how cities worked – what the dynamics were. This went beyond needs assessments or consultations – although, had the planners considered those approaches, it would certainly have helped. But Jacobs actually tried to understand the dynamics. Things like “eyes on the street” probably wouldn't have come from a consultation. It came from careful observation, asking the right types of questions, and investing time and effort into figuring out how the social, economic and political ecology of Harlem functioned.



Restructuring our work  
lives...



Shifting our expectations  
about the time and effort  
required for adaptive  
learning



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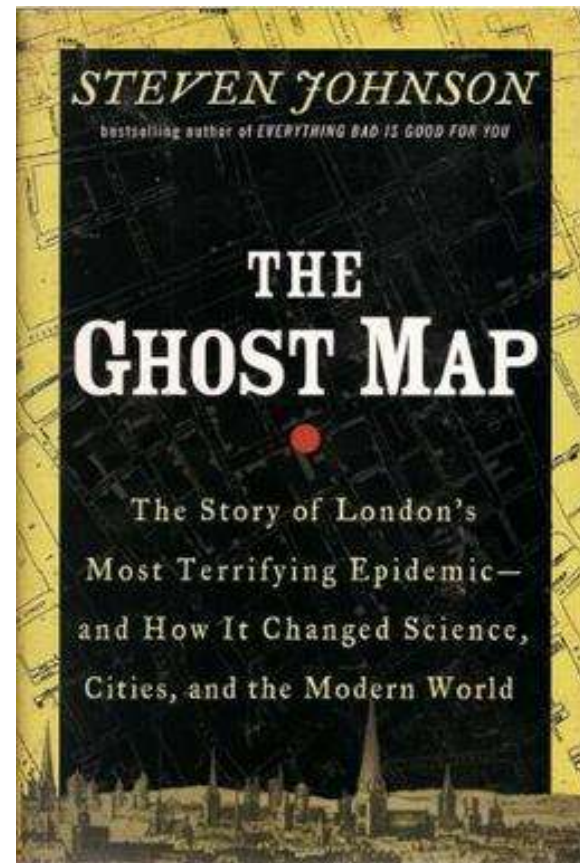
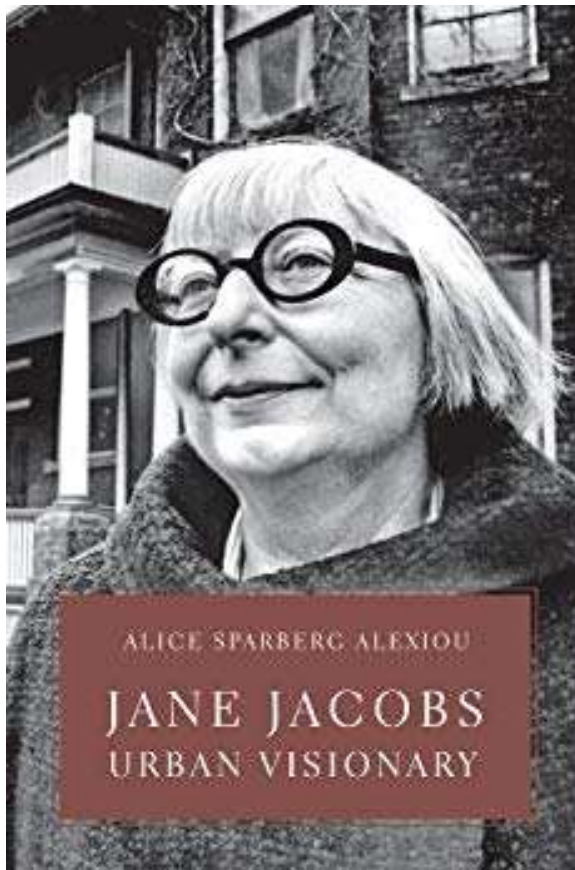


- EMC members have been taking the time to map out the social ecology of the settings in which they're working, including key influencers, resistors, leverage points, patterns, etc. This has taken a lot of work and a really long time...
- Had to adjust our expectations (progress is excruciatingly slow)
- Had to adjust our timelines (extended the project)

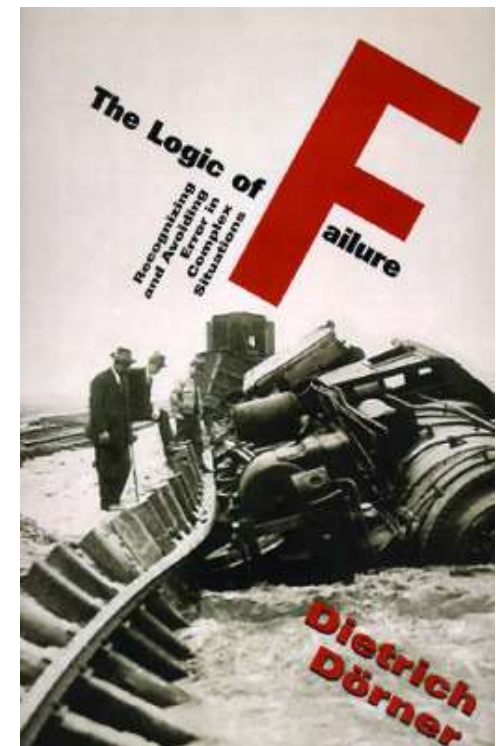
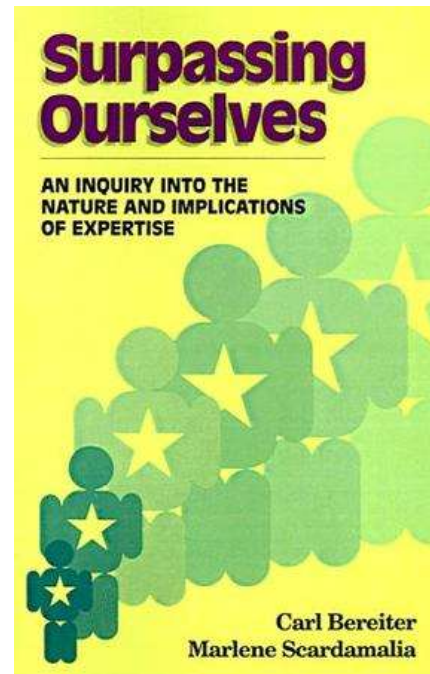
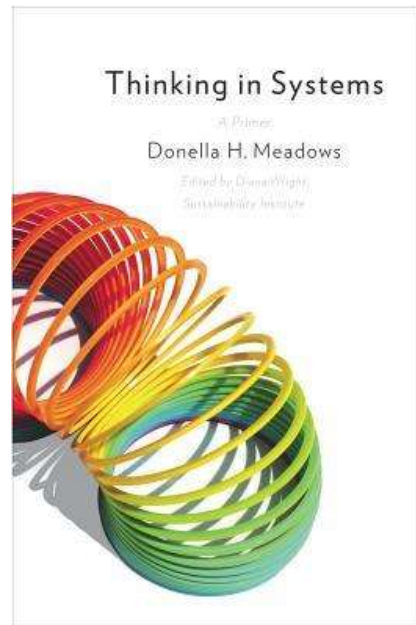
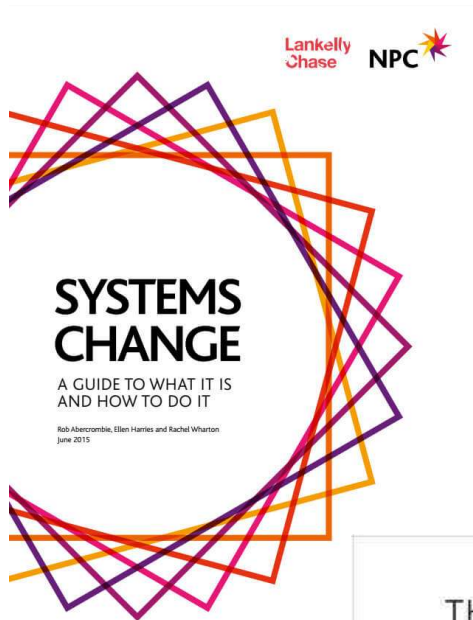
# Acknowledging the need to learn

Photos associated with the Erin Gruwell story

## Recommended Resources



# Recommended Resources



Barriers	Enablers
We see what we want/expect to see	Ability to manage biases, beliefs and defense mechanisms
Emotional responses to complexity and uncertainty	Predict and prepare
We underestimate the depth of understanding required to intervene in complex systems	The confidence, time and capacity for effective inquiry

- What stood out for you and/or piqued your curiosity?
- What are the implications for your work?
- What questions do you have?

Questions/comments?

Feel free to contact me at  
[elizabeth.dozois@outlook.com](mailto:elizabeth.dozois@outlook.com)

You may also want to check out HVI resources and  
programs at [www.humanventure.com](http://www.humanventure.com)

