

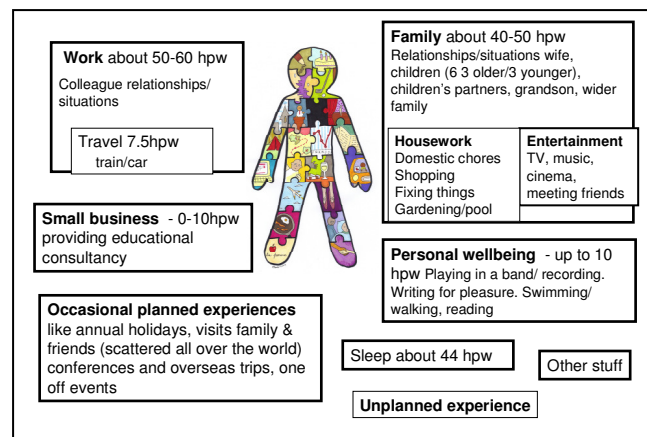
PODCAST 3

Dealing with situations

Guidance Notes

This podcast focuses on the topic of dealing with situations which is a central focus in the Surrey Lifewide Learning Award.

In the second podcast we looked at our whole life as a series of contexts in which day to day we interact and do things with different people for different purposes. Each of the areas in our map of life experiences is full of situations that we have to deal with. Learning to deal with and create situations lies at the heart of the way we learn and perform and it is a central focus for the Surrey Life-wide Learning Award.

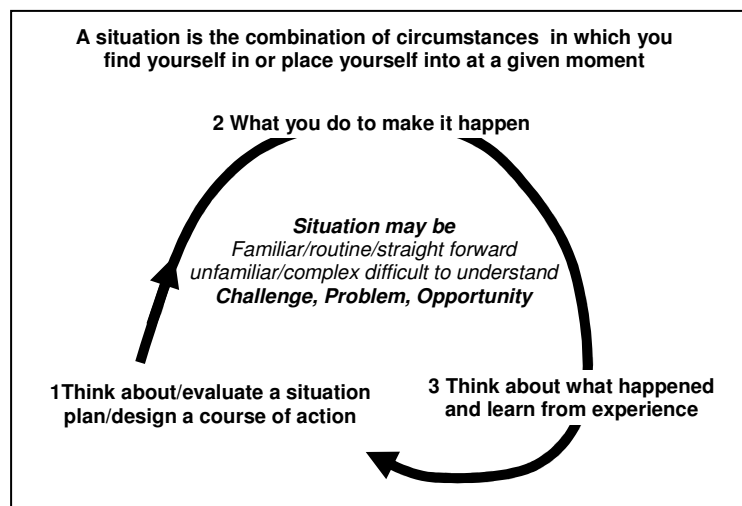


What's a situation?

A situation, in the sense of how we are using it in the Life-wide Learning Award, is the combination of circumstances in which you find yourself in, or place yourself into, at any given moment.

Situations are bounded in space and time but to achieve something significant we may have to participate in many (perhaps hundreds) of discrete but connected situations all linked by the intention to achieve a goal.

When we encounter a situation no matter what the context a pattern of thinking and action unfolds that is depicted in this graphic.



The first thing we do is try to assess it – this might be instantaneous, if its something we have to respond to in real time, or it might be over a long period of time if it is particularly difficult challenge.

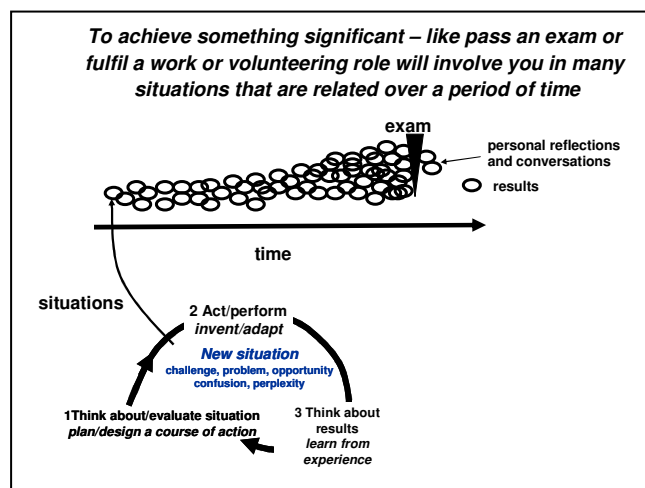
Having thought about it, we decide what to do. This might be instantaneous or it might require us to develop a plan if there are lots of elements to what we have to do. When we think about a particular situation and how we are going to deal with it we draw on past experiences especially if they are similar to the one we are encountering. If we don't know how to deal with the situation our first thoughts are concerned with how we might find out more to understand it better.

Then we act.. we do whatever it is we think is necessary in order to make whatever it is we need to do happen. **Our performance** is everything we do to deal with the situation. Some situations are such that we cant work out everything in advance and we only really understand the performance requirements when we are already performing . While we are performing we monitor the effects of what we do and if necessary adjust our actions when we decide that there are better ways of doing it.

After we have acted we may think about what happened in order to either enjoy the experience again or, make more sense of it or perhaps. If things did not go as well as expected we think about it and work out what went wrong and why, and ask ourselves whether we could have done anything differently so that next time we encounter a similar situation we will be able to deal with it better.

The life-wide learning award is designed to develop your appreciation of how you deal with situations and promote those aspects of capability that are particularly important to this process. Such capability is of central importance to being employable and to the role of being an effective professional. Your Lifeskills Portfolio should contain numerous stories of you encountering or creating a situation and reveal how you responded to it.

To achieve something significant – like pass an exam or fulfil a work or volunteering role will involve you in many situations that are related to a goal over a period of time

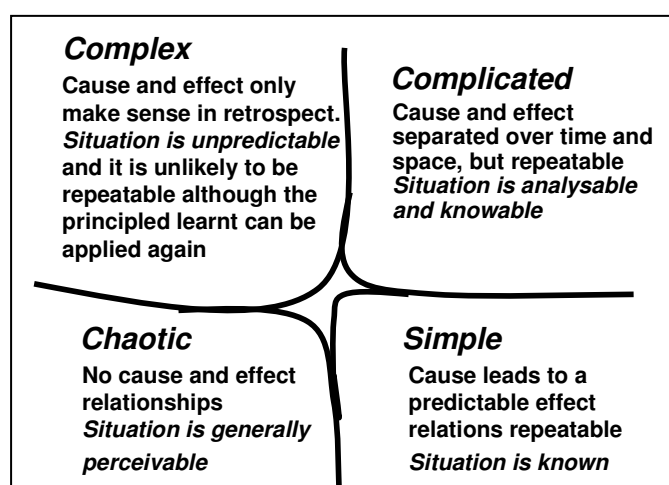


Recognising different sorts of situations

The human condition is to try to understand situations in order to make good decisions about how to act (or not act). Some situations are easy to comprehend, they are familiar and we have dealt with them or something like them before and we are confident we know what to do. Others are more difficult to understand and some are impossible to understand until you have engaged with them.

Sometimes we need tools to help us think about something and the Cynefin (Kinefin) framework developed by Dave Snowden, is a tool that can help us think about different types of situation. It was originally developed to describe and explain complex change situations in organisations, but the concepts in the tool can be used for any situation or set of related situations.

There are four domains within the framework. These domains describe how things happen in situations involving different levels of complexity.



In the **simple domain** things have a simple cause and effect – you do X and you are very likely to get Y. The environment is familiar and understood. You will probably have had many similar experiences that can be directly relate to the situation. A cause, for example ‘what you do’, will lead to a predictable effect. And if you did the same thing in a similar situation the result will be repeatable. Writing an essay is an example of this type of situation. You will have done it many times before and you know what you have to do to complete the task on time to get a good mark.

At the other extreme is **chaos**. In the chaotic domain there is no perceivable relationship between cause and effect. If this situation happens in your life you feel totally out of control and totally overwhelmed. In these situations our natural response is to act, sense what happens and then act again until we get ourselves into a more stable situation.

Between these two extremes there are two other types of situation that require us to think and behave in different ways.

Complicated situations are often unfamiliar and its likely that you will have to do a number of things over a period of time in order to do what needs doing. There are cause and effect relationships but you have to put some effort into working out the relationship through an analysis and look for possible answers. Engaging in these sorts of challenges is the way you become more expert in doing a particular thing. An example of this might be if you are working in a shop dealing with a complicated customer enquiry that does not conform to a routine procedure. It requires you to make your own enquiries perhaps seeking help from people more expert than you before you can respond. It may involve you having to invent some new practice or policy to deal with it. At the end of it you will have developed new knowledge and expertise in dealing with this type of enquiry and others may turn to you for help in future.

Complex situations are even more difficult to understand because the cause and effect relationship is so intertwined that things only make sense in hindsight and sometimes well after the events have taken place. In the complex space its all about the inter-connectivity of people and their evolving behaviours that are being encouraged or nurtured (not controlled) through your actions.

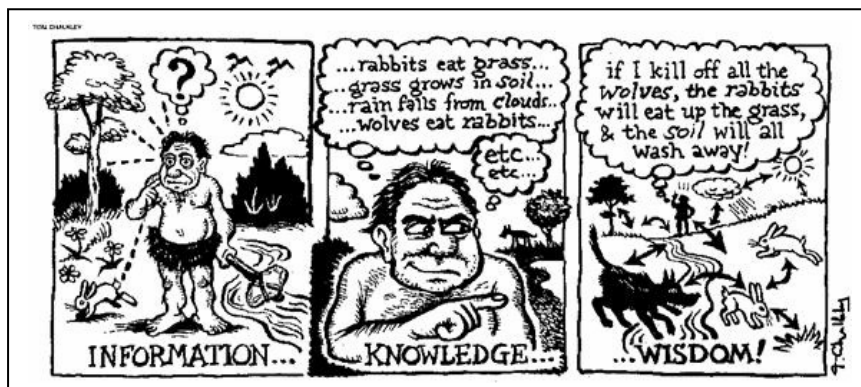
The complexity arises from the fact that everyone involved is responding to lots of situations, some of which may affect what you are trying to accomplish. Such people make choices that you cannot control so you have to adapt to their responses.

The results will be unique to the particular situation and cannot be directly repeated. In these situations relationships are non-linear and things are unpredictable in detail. People involved may not know the cause of the change that they have been involved in or ascribe the source of change to something that is quite removed from the trigger for change. The sort of things you are dealing with in the complex space are things like culture, trust, politics, leadership and the way you make progress in understanding what is happening is to sense the patterns of change and respond accordingly.

A significant and sustained challenge, involving other people may provide you with an example of life in the complex activity. For example you might be asked to lead a group of people who don't want to be led on a challenging project. You have to persuade them to be involved, get their ownership for the project, facilitating collaborative working, enabling the group to make decisions and to act on decisions, monitor what happens and adapt plans and your responses according to what happens.

When we are dealing with complicated and complex situations we are having to use not only our abilities to think and reason critically but also to use our imaginations to envision, predict or see things from different perspectives. We have to draw upon our theoretical and skill-based learning from formal education and training experiences and the many other experiences of our lives through which we learn informally. Our ability to integrate our thinking, experiences and practice is the foundation for our own capability (everything we know and can do to bring to a situation).

The picture captures very well the sort of integrated and connected thinking we have to do to understand and act in a complicated or complex situation.

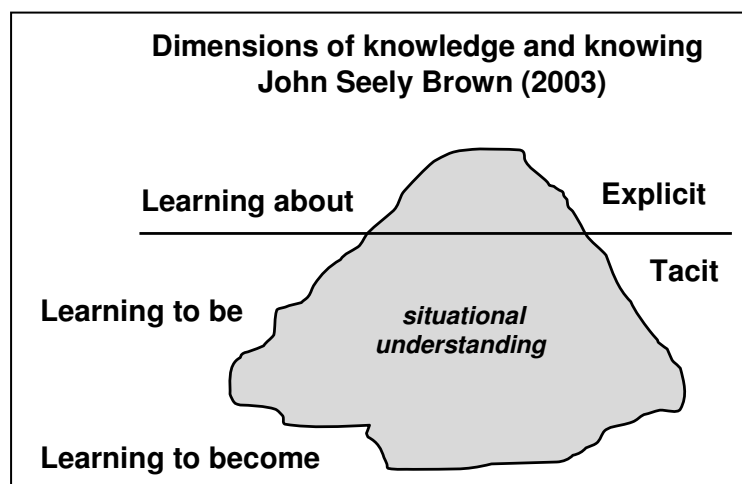


Such a representation begs the question what is knowledge – did the hunter in this picture reach the deep level of understanding of his actions by reading a book or did he become wiser by doing things, seeing their consequences and perhaps learning from the experiences of others?

Different sorts of knowledge

Higher education is concerned primarily with *explicit* or codified (book) knowledge and with its utilisation by learners in hypothetical problem solving situations. Handling complex information in this way is an essential process for enabling people to learn how to think about and work with complex and incomplete information.

But most of our learning in the world outside formal education is not book knowledge, it has to be learnt through the experience of doing things, of trying things out and learning how or how not to tackle something. This highly personalised, experiential knowledge is also known as *tacit* knowledge and the relationship between our explicit and tacit knowledge is shown in this graphic.



The Life-wide Learning award is promoting a comprehensive understanding of what knowledge is. A richer view than is normally promoted in higher education.

Life-wide learning allows us to utilise a much richer conception of knowledge and knowing. For example, Michael Eraut (2010) describes personal knowledge as including:

Codified [book] knowledge in the form(s) in which the person uses it
Know-how in the form of skills and practices
Personal understandings of people and situations
Accumulated memories of cases and episodic events
Other aspects of personal expertise, practical wisdom and tacit knowledge
Self-knowledge, attitudes, values and emotions.

It is these sorts of knowledge and learning that we are trying to recognise and value through the Life-wide Learning Award.

Developing knowledge, learning (and unlearning) is a continuous processes. As the world (the situations in which we find ourselves) changes we have to develop and learn new knowledge and capability for using it in order to adapt to the new situation.

There are three senses in which learning or knowing happens in relation to personal and external change. The most basic sense is “*learning about*” which corresponds to contexts in which information is stable. We learn about things which are stable and consistent and not likely to change over time. Much of our learning in formal education is learning about.

The second sense is “*learning to be*,” which requires involvement with a community of people who are performing in ways that we want to be like. It provides us with a sense of immersion in practices which allow us to participate and learn how to learn and eventually (when we have learnt how to be) to shape practices within that community. When we join a club or society, take on a part-time job and start working in an organisation or become a student at a university we are learning to be by observing and participating in the community and the situations of that community.

John Seely Brown sums up the idea of learning to be thus

Learning to be involves: enculturation into the practices and ways of being, seeing and knowing in the field. It involves sensing what constitutes an interesting problem; knowing what constitutes a good or novel solution, and being able to engage in productive enquiry – deliberately seeking what we need in order to do what we need/want to do.

The third sense of learning, which emerges out of a context of rapid and continual change, is a sense of *becoming*. This sense of learning is itself always in a state of flux, characterized by a sense of acting, participating, and knowing as the world around you changes. We live in a world of rapid and continuous change and learning how to cope with change is a key requirement for us all.

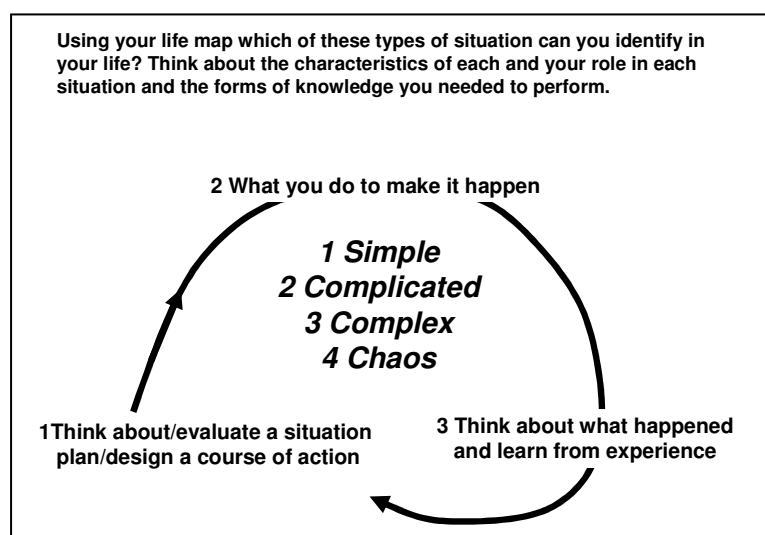
The life-wide learning award with its focus on learning through doing is primarily promoting, recognising and valuing the second and third senses of learning. But the information we are providing in the Guidance notes and podcasts is largely based on explicit knowledge derived through research.

Recap

- 1 We examined why learning how to appreciate and deal with situations is central to our capability to make things happen
- 2 We considered the patterns of thinking and behaviours associated with dealing with a situation and used a simple tool, *the Cynefin framework*, to help us think about the level of complexity in different situations
- 3 And we looked at the different forms of knowledge that the award recognises and values and the differences between codified knowledge and tacit knowledge

So how can you use this knowledge?

Using your life map can you identify these different types of situation in your life? Think about your role in each situation and the forms of knowledge you needed to perform.



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