Systems: Lesson 1

Terminology

# Introduction

The purpose of this lesson is to practice perhaps the single most effective technique for identifying the important concepts within a system. That technique is simply to ask an expert in that system to talk about it, and listen for the special words that he or she uses to describe the objects, relationships and behaviors of the system.

These kinds of word collections go by many names such as terminology, vocabulary, nomenclature or, more pejoratively, jargon. The relevance for the system thinker, however, is that the these labels and the meanings assigned to them are immensely revealing with respect to the understanding of the system by the individuals who inhabit or study it.

# Objective

Your objective in this lesson is to identify and define 10 important concepts referenced in the terminology for a particular area of interest. The items in the list of concepts will turn out to be some mix of a great many things such as ideas, theories, measurements, signals, outcomes, and more.

You will uncover these things in the following way:

1. Each of you will select an area in which you have some technical knowledge. You will then pair up, and share the area you have selected with your partner.
2. Each of you will then, separately, spend 20 minutes researching this area online in order to develop a simple interview script.
3. Next you will take turns interviewing each other. You will ask the 'expert' to describe this area, the activities and challenges it offers and the methods and approaches for managing it.
4. While the expert is speaking you will keep an ear out for words that either you do not know, or you know, but begin to suspect have a special, specific and technical meaning to the expert that differs from the colloquial meaning.
5. Any time you encounter one of these words, note it, and ask the expert to help you define it, understand it, and parse its nuance.

# Discussion

This is a lesson about identifying system concepts but it is also an excellent opportunity to practice skills that you will be working on in your classes in user research and storytelling.

With respect to the user research component, what you are doing for this lesson is an interview. There are three keys to a successful interview: preparation, listening, and a willingness to diverge from your plan once you find the area most interesting to your subject.

The storytelling component comes into play to help you understand what your subject is telling you. In other words, if you assume that your subject is trying to tell you a ‘story’ about his area of speciality, this will help you organize the order of your questions and set your expectations for the kinds of answers you will get.

# Submission

You will submit a written document consisting of the following parts:

1. Your name, date, the name of this lesson and the name of this class
2. A name that identifies the area described to you by the expert.
3. A 1 or 2 sentence description of the area
4. The name of the individual who you interviewed about the area
5. A list of 10 words, each followed by a definition, that describe important concepts in this area. Make the definitions as concise as possible, while still capturing all of the nuance and specificity that you learned from the expert.
6. As appendix, the interview script you used

# Grading Rubric

| **Quality** | **Unacceptable (0)** | **Good (1)** | **Weight (%)** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Completeness | Does not contain all the required element or presentation is sloppy | Contains all the required elements, presented clearly | 25% |
| Preparation | The interview script is lacking specificity, disorganized or bears little connection to the area of enquiry | The interview script is organized and demonstrates sensitivity to the area of enquiry | 25% |
| Content | Summary and definitions are fuzzy, ambiguous or otherwise difficult to understand | Content presented is clear, thoughtful and communicates an understandable overview of the area of enquiry | 50% |