Polyperspectivism Presentation – Speaking Notes

Slide 1 – Title

Good [morning/afternoon], I'm John Challoner. Today I want to talk to you about Polyperspectivism — a practical and reflexive approach to working with multiple perspectives in complex environments.

Slide 2 – Definition

Polyperspectivism is about engaging with multiple perspectives to achieve a deeper, more flexible understanding of reality — without collapsing them into a single truth, and without treating them all as equally valid.

Slide 3 – Why?

The extent of potential knowledge in the world is far greater than our individual capacity to hold it.

Slides 4–7 – The Problem

So, as knowledge grows, it leads to progressive specialisation — for example from medicine to pathology, to histopathology, to neuro-histopathology. We understand more and more about less and less. This is functional for expertise….

Slide 8 – The Problem

…but can lead to epistemic isolation.

Slide 9 – Barriers

This is not just a structural problem. There are psychological and cognitive barriers too. These make it harder to genuinely engage with unfamiliar perspectives.

Slide 10 – Effort After Meaning (1)

One example of a psychological barrier is "Effort After Meaning". Seeing an image in this random inkblot is "Effort after Meaning" in action.

Slide 11 – Effort After Meaning (2)

We seek meaning in communications by fitting them into our existing schemata. Sometimes, however, this meaning may not be what the originator intended.

Slide 12 – Effort After Meaning (3)

…and this applies to words – particularly more abstract technical ones – which may carry different meanings for the speaker and the recipient.

Side 13 – Motivated Symbolic Interpretation (1)

Another example of a cognitive barrier is Motivated Symbolic Interpretation.

Certain words can carry an emotional content based on our past experience. We often use it to pre-filter communications subconsciously. If the associated experience was bad the word will trigger avoidance behaviour. We will not engage with the communication. If the experience was good it will trigger approach behaviour.

Slide 14 – Motivated Symbolic Interpretation (2)

Here's an example: "Bureaucracy" – avoidance or approach?

Slide 15 – Motivated Symbolic Interpretation (3)

And another: "Discovery" – avoidance or approach?

Slide 16 – Reflexivity
Reflexivity is key. It helps us recognise these barriers within ourselves and helps us to overcome them.

Slide 17 – Barriers

Overcoming these barriers helps us to see beyond them.

Side 18 – Effective Comunication

There are numerous techniques that support respectful and productive engagement with other viewpoints. Here's a list. But I will only look at two in detail.

Slide 19 – Steelman Technique

The Steelman Technique involves restating an argument in its strongest, most reasonable form before responding to it. It builds mutual respect, reduces defensiveness, and fosters more constructive, truth-oriented dialogue by showing that you've truly listened and understood.

Slide 20 – Reflexive Meta-Framework
A meta-framework is a higher-order conceptual tool used to compare, coordinate, or

integrate multiple frameworks or perspectives without reducing them to a single viewpoint.

An example is the reflexive meta-framework that I am working on at present.

It is a human-centred complement to systems science. Instead of asking what is, it asks what does this perspective do for humans? What need does it meet? What harm does it help avoid?

Slide 21 – Not All Perspectives are Equally Valid

There are many tests of validity. Again, I will look at just two in more detail.

Slide 22 – Utility

The utility of a perspective refers to how effectively it helps us understand, navigate, or respond to a particular situation, challenge, or human need. Specialist theories can have great utility in their own domain - but fail in others. A unified theory is more general but interpreting it in particular circumstances requires much greater effort. So, the goal is to coordinate perspectives — not flatten or dismiss them.

Slide 23 – Coherence

Another test of validity is coherence. How well does the perspective fit existing ones. If it fits no other perspectives, is it really valid?

Slide 24 – Productive Coordination
This is the essence of productive coordination: using different perspectives together without forcing them into one system.

As Jackson says in Critical Systems Thinking: "no methodology is universally applicable".

Slide 25 – Institutional Relevance
This isn't just an individual mindset — it's a practical framework for interdisciplinary and cross-sector collaboration. When scientists, policymakers, and communities approach problems differently, poly-perspectivism helps them coordinate — not collide.

Slide 26 – Summary (1)
To recap: complexity and specialisation fragment understanding.

Slide 27 – Summary (2)

This is because cognitive barriers block shared meaning.

Slide 28 – Summary (3)

The solution is reflexivity and respectful communication.

Slide 29 – Summary (4)

Perspectives should be evaluated by their function in meeting human needs and avoiding harms.

Slide 30 – Summary (5)

The reflexive meta-framework is a useful tool for this.

Slide 31 – Summary (6)

The approach applies to communication between individuals, institutions, and sectors.

Slide 32 – Summary (7)

The outcome to aim for should be productive co-ordination of perspectives. Not their collapse or conflict.

Slide 33 – Thank You
Thank you. I'd be happy to take questions or continue the conversation later via the contact details here.