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*The Integral Process  
For Working On  
Complex Issues <sup>tm</sup>*

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**By Sara Ross**

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*Logo art by Andrew Campbell, Oxford, UK*



## Introduction



We aim this introductory information at a broad audience. By doing so, we hope to convey that *The Integral Process For Working On Complex Issues* (TIP) is a basic approach to dealing with the complex questions and issues that people face practically everywhere—whether as individuals, groups, organizations, publicly-funded agencies, governing bodies, or communities. It provides a method that closes the gap between facing complex challenges and meeting them effectively.

The audience for this process may include citizens, officials, social services, organizational managers, consultants, activists, philanthropists, non-profits, board members, foundation program officers, legislators, and others. Regardless of which hats we wear, or where we wear them, we each seem to encounter similar challenges that this process is designed to benefit.

Generically, some of those challenges may sound like:

- What makes this problem so hard to get our arms around?
- How do we get beyond settling for band-aid solutions?
- How do we know we are asking the right questions?
- How can we start working together instead of against each other?
- How do we get the “undiscussables” safely out in the open so we can address them?
- Why do decisions and policies that are supposed to solve problems end up creating new ones?
- How do we get everyone heading in the same direction?

More specifically, issues that challenge us to meet them include perennial ones such as adversarial situations, poverty, homelessness, uneven education, crime and gang activity, land use decisions, and a host of other social issues. In recent years, other complex issues have entered mainstream concerns. These include, for example, the tugs and pulls involved in efforts to: transition to more democratic methods of governance; coordinate the environment’s welfare with our stakes in current economic impacts; develop new organizational and government cultures; and navigate many competing interests and values in order to feel secure in today’s world.

By their nature, decisions on such issues are complex because (a) they impact the welfare of people and the environment they live, work, and play in, and (b) people who are affected have different perspectives on *whether* anything should be done, *why* something should be done, *what* should be done, *who* should do it, and *how much* it should cost.

*The Integral Process For Working On Complex Issues* serves those who face such challenges. It includes steps that develop our assumptions, analyses, decisions, and actions so they fit the circumstances and so they get healthier, comprehensive results.



### Instead of “business as usual”



“I’m real excited that there really can be a process for getting into these complex issues, that there’s a process that *recognizes* that things are complex, and it can be done. There’s appreciation that things are complex but they can be divided, and there are lenses that you look through at things and to separate them.” K.M.

“I definitely learned the importance of certain steps in group decision-making on a problem or big problems, the different steps to understand what people think is a problem, to look at those problems and figure out which of those are just surface parts of other problems and looking at where they originate from and who the problem affects.” G.K.

“I have greater appreciation that we go into these things with our own personal definitions about what’s right or wrong. It’s having a better appreciation for how complex some of those issues really are. What I thought was a fairly definable issue was a lot more complex. This process helps sort out that complexity, so there’s an understanding of what the issue really is. The whole approach was an enlightenment.” S.S.



### In brief, *Who, Why, What & Where*



#### **Who**

- Any individual, organization, community, etc. with a stake in current and future events, willing to invest in that stake—such as serious questions, issues of concern, decisions and policies, action strategies and their implementation, and the future.
- Groups of any size, where people have:
  - commitment to working on issues and answering difficult questions
  - willingness to work productively with other committed people

#### **Why**

- Because diagnoses and solutions based on simpler assumptions of “cause and effect” have failed us
- Because what is really going on is almost always more complex than meets the eye
- Because today’s systemic issues and complex questions—and decisions and actions on them—require more comprehensive, methodical, and sustained attention than they traditionally get



- Because we need to coordinate and to *use* our different perspectives, values, and priorities
- Because we cannot solve problems using the same kind of thinking, approaches, and conflicts that created them

### **What**

- A *different way* to work on complex questions and issues while using what we already do: identifying what is important to us to change, sequencing our priorities, deliberating the pros and cons of possible approaches, decision-making, strategizing, and taking action.
- A *different way* to assure democratic inclusion of all perspectives *and* the systematic use of all perspectives
- Using what we learn, to make a difference
- Crucial steps that prevent the gaps that otherwise sabotage our best efforts

### **Where**

- Wherever complex issues and questions are...
  - In the community
  - In the organization
  - In governing bodies and their committees
- In educational, leadership, and capacity-building programs where people want to learn how to think about and work on complex issues
- Ideally, at each layer of human activity where the issues concern or affect others (e.g., departmental, local, regional, state or province, national, international)



## **What people say... a sampling**



○ “I’d had the tendency to try to make things simpler so they’re easier to deal with. My thinking has changed to accept that sometimes it just needs to be messy and not everything in its place. And for public issues, that’s probably especially true: in order to come to a successful place: that’s necessary to go through. It’s probably not advisable to skirt that, or try to skirt it.” J.N.

○ “It helped me keep in mind how the tone I take and the intention I have when interacting with people can affect the outcome, apart from what the words are actually saying...that’s been really valuable.” B.B.

○ “What did I learn? That I’ve got to quit looking at it like an us vs. them thing, because it’s not an us vs. them, it’s a “we.” We’ve got



to do this together. And if I can minimize your responsibility and you can help minimize my responsibility, and we can get a good end result, and get everybody on the same page, that would be tremendous. We would all be happier, and feel more secure in what we're doing, and not worrying about having sides or building barriers and walls." L.S.

“I got a different way of actually thinking and living. I use it every day in my way of thinking and living. It's changing me. I'm curious to see where I'll be in another 20 years. It kind of gave me a little spark to live, because for a long time, I just wanted to give up and die, I just wanted to get out of this world. It actually gave me a reason to live now. So, it's changed me. It really helped me a lot. And I'm glad for it. Thank you." L.S.



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A three-page Appendix follows this page. It gives an overview of TIP's steps and outcomes in two different formats.



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Education. Social Science. and the Public Good*

ARINA's mission is to teach, research, and implement practical integral approaches that address complex issues and foster healthy individual and social change and development.

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## APPENDIX

### TIP's steps, purposes, and outcomes

TIP is made up of sequential steps with distinct purposes and outcomes. Even so, which steps are used will depend on the circumstances. The table below lists the full array of steps. Following the table is a graphic overview of the entire process for those who are interested to view it.

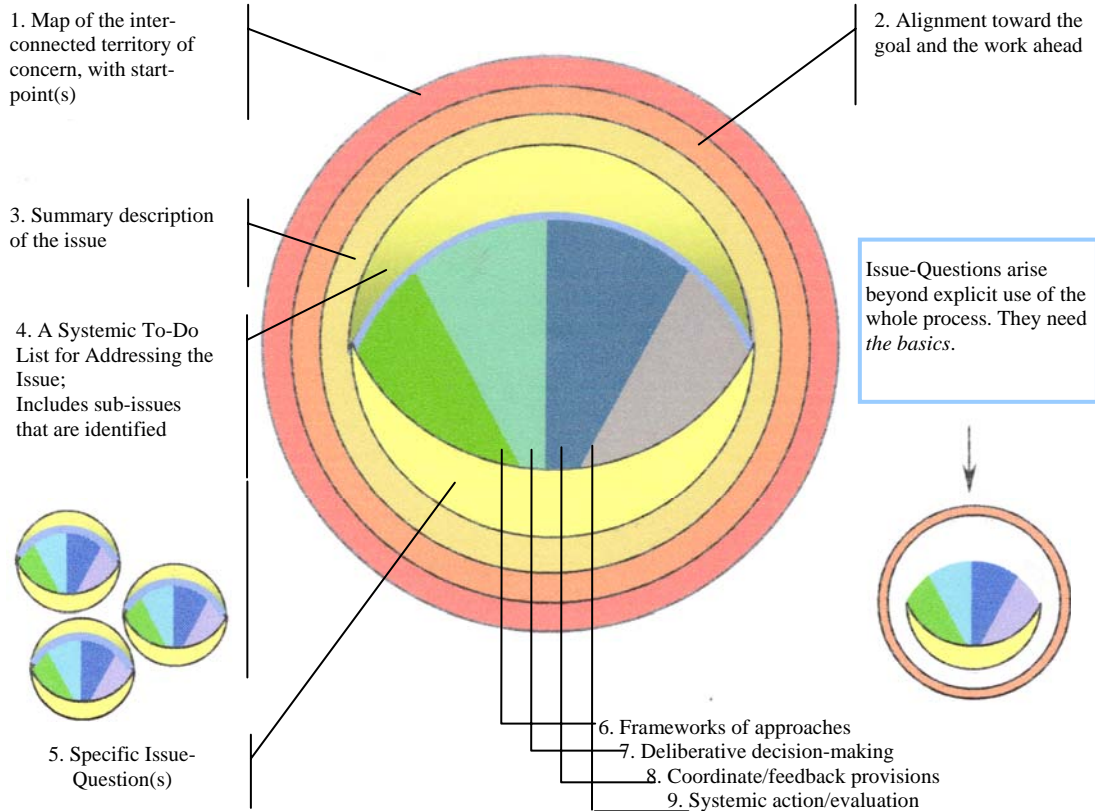
	<p><b>Purpose:</b> Develop an informed basis for choosing start-point(s), which may be one-at-a-time or concurrent.</p> <p><b>Step:</b> Identify all topics of concern and how they interconnect and impact each other. Use that work to inform the choice of start-point.</p> <p><b>Outcome:</b> Map of the territory.</p> <p><b>Note:</b> This is a one-time step in most circumstances.</p>
	<p><b>Purpose:</b> Surface people's differences in key assumptions about the work that could later confuse it or create unnecessary conflicts.</p> <p><b>Step:</b> Deliberate about how to use and coordinate people's different tones and intentions toward the work's focus.</p> <p><b>Outcome:</b> Alignment toward the goal with clarity about differences</p> <p><b>Note:</b> Sometimes the "charge" of an issue requires this extra attention.</p>
	<p><b>Purpose:</b> Understand the factors that produce the topic of concern so they can be worked on.</p> <p><b>Step:</b> Identify the impacts and causes; decide initial issue(s) to work on; get a clear picture of the conditions behind the selected issue.</p> <p><b>Outcome:</b> Summary Description of the Issue</p>
	<p><b>Purpose:</b> Understand that an array of actions is necessary to make positive, systemic impacts on the issue, and what it needs to 'look like.'</p> <p><b>Step:</b> Identify the array of changes to reactively and proactively impact the issue, which can be done by an array of appropriate actors; identify which ones represent discrete sub-issues.</p> <p><b>Outcome:</b> An "action-system:" a systemic "to-do list" to address the Issue</p>
	<p><b>Purpose:</b> Develop the reasoning behind an Issue-Question.</p> <p><b>Step:</b> Articulate the precise Issue-Question, or 'name,' of the sub-issue or complex decision that needs to be worked on.</p> <p><b>Outcome:</b> The specific, open-ended question that needs deliberative decision-making to answer it.</p>



	<p><b>Purpose:</b> Expose the array of approaches to the Issue-Question that are driven by different perspectives on it. <b>Step:</b> Use the issue-framing template. <b>Outcome:</b> Framework of Approaches</p> <p><b>Note:</b> The template assures all perspectives will be included.</p>
	<p><b>Purpose:</b> Create an informed basis for complex decisions. <b>Step:</b> Deliberate the pros and cons <i>within</i> each possible approach, and the pros and cons <i>across</i> all approaches; make decisions about which elements of each approach are needed for a thorough, integral approach. <b>Outcome:</b> Deliberative Decision-making</p>
	<p><b>Purpose:</b> Assure coordination and continued work on sub-issues. <b>Step:</b> Divide into task groups, arrange oversight, develop and coordinate ongoing feedback and evaluation loops, etc. <b>Outcome:</b> Coordination and feedback loop mechanisms are in place.</p> <p><b>Note:</b> This is about organizing coordination at various points in the process.</p>
	<p><b>Purpose:</b> Effective systemic action, change, or development. <b>Step:</b> Individual and institutional action, reflection, deliberation, evaluation, communication systems, adjustments, etc. <b>Outcome:</b> Institutionalize a systemic array of action, evaluation, and iterative learning at needed scales</p>



## A Graphic Overview TIP's Outcomes



### Terms Used

**Topic** – the way we usually refer to a problem or challenge, e.g., education reform, economic development, crime, violence, land use, poverty, apathy, conflict, etc.

**Issue** – a mixture of related conditions that need action

**Sub-issue** – one of the sets of conditions within an issue that needs specific attention

**Issue-Question** – The neutral, open-ended ‘name’ of (1) a well-defined sub-issue, or (2) any complex decision