

Course Overview for PoCS

Last updated: 2026/08/19, 12:39:43 EDT
DOI:

Principles of Complex Systems,
Vols. 1, 2, 3D, 4 Fourever, V for Vendetta

Deliverator: Calla Beauregard
Showrunner: Prof. Peter Sheridan Dodds

Computational Story Lab | Vermont Complex Systems Institute
University of Vermont | Santa Fe Institute

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Outline

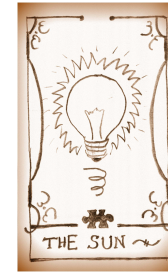
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Describe | Explain | Create | Share | Ethos: Serious Play



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Vermont Complex Systems Institute (2006–):

-  Diverse research and teaching portfolio.
-  Funding from many sources: NSF, NIH, DARPA, Microsoft, MassMutual, Google, foundations, philanthropy.
-  Global press coverage: NYT, BBC, WaPo, NatGeo, CNN, ...
-  Conferences: “Big Data, Big Stories”, “Big Scale, Big Fail”, “Prediction: the Next Big Thing”, [NetSci 2019](#) , [ALife 2020](#) , IC2S2 2026.
-  Fully developed educational platform in Complex Systems and Data Science.
-  Complex Networks Winter Workshops in Quebec City
-  Faculty hires of true Complex Systems scholars.
-  NSF CAREER awards (including PECASE).
-  Connecting Graduate and Undergraduate Students across campus (SCRaPS).
-  Paper Shredder, Research Jam, and ComplexiTea.
-  Talkboctopus 

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Some Major support:



Leveling up—Scaffolded educational mission:

-  Data Science Undergrad.
-  Graduate Certificate in Complex Systems and Data Science
-  Fall, 2015–: MS in Complex Systems and Data Science
-  Fall, 2018–: PhD in ~~The Study of Interesting Things~~ Complex Systems and Data Science



All the words: <http://vermontcomplexsystems.org> 

Dipoloma-posters:



- | | | |
|---|---|--|
|  Sociotechnical systems |  Complex Networks |  Public Policy |
|  Social Contagion and Influence |  Epidemiology |  Health and Medicine |
|  Happiness and Well-being |  Pandemics |  Brains Brains |
|  Language and Stories |  Climate |  Neuroscience |
|  Meaning |  Biology |  Food systems |
|  Ethics |  Ecology |  Organizations |
|  Social unrest |  Geomorphology |  Economics |
|  Robotics |  Space |  Wealth inequality |
|  Artificial Intelligence |  Complex Fluids |  Financial Systems |
| | (Smart) Power Grids | Conflict |
| | Critical infrastructure | Defense |

Core courses for CSDS:

- 🌀 Data Science I and II
- 🌀 Modelling Complex Systems (MoCS) I and II
- 🌀 Principles of Complex Systems (PoCS) Vols. 1 and 2

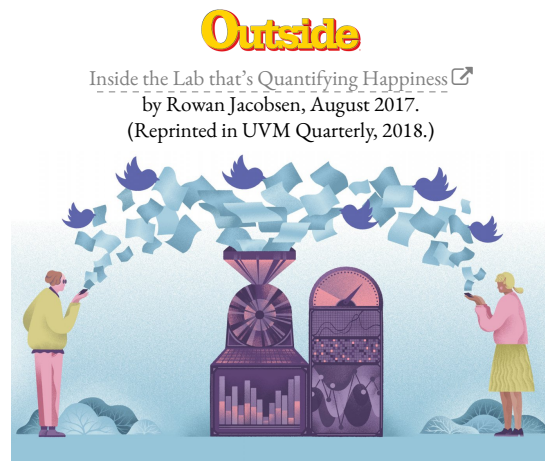
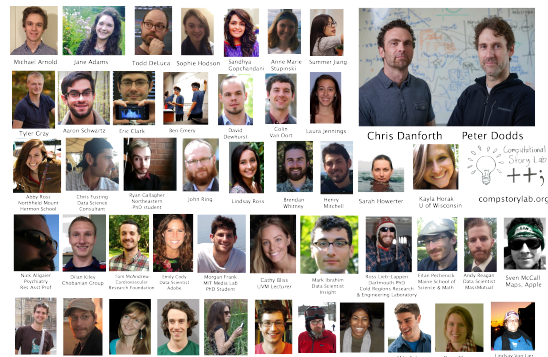
Graduate Certificate in Complex Systems and Data Science:

- 🌀 Principles of Complex Systems is one of three core requirements for UVM's five course Certificate of Graduate Study in Complex Systems [↗](#).
- 🌀 Modelling Complex Systems I and II
- 🌀 Data Science I and II
- 🌀 Principles of Complex Systems Vols. 1 and 2

Framing (funfully):

Science = Area of study + Instruments of study

- 🌀 Stars and Telescopes = Astronomy
- 🌀 Rocks and Hammers = Geology
- 🌀 Water and Partial Differential Equations = Fluid Dynamics
- 🌀 Brains and Giant Imaging Machines = Neuroscience
- 🌀 People and Deception = Social Psychology
- 🌀 Mathematics and Mathematics = Pure mathematics
- 🌀 Mind and Mind = Psychotherapy, Insight meditation, ...
- 🌀 Complex Systems + Data Science = Postdisciplinary Systems Science

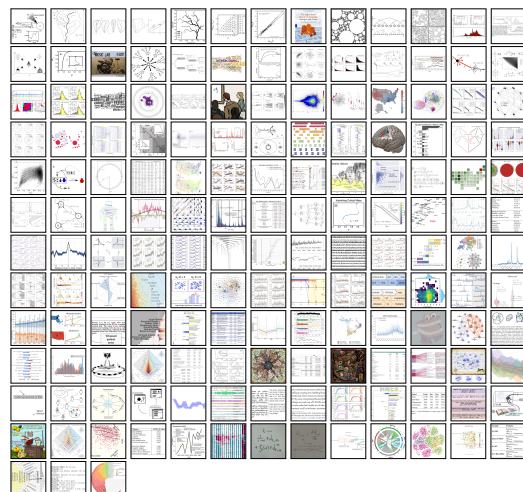


Courses:



- 🌀 CSYS/MATH 300: Principles of Complex Systems ([@pocsvox](#) [↗](#))
- 🌀 CSYS/MATH 303: Complex Networks ([@networksvox](#) [↗](#))
- 🌀 MATH 124/122: Matrixology (Linear Algebra) ([@matrixologyvox](#) and [@svdthematrices](#) [↗](#))
- 🌀 MATH 237: Numerical Analysis ([@MachEps237](#) [↗](#))
- 🌀 MATH 266: Chaos, fractals & dynamical systems ([@NonperiodicFlow](#) [↗](#))
- 🌀 MATH 330: Ordinary Differential Equations ([@dallthethingsdt](#) [↗](#))
- 🌀 Courses act as research incubators and have helped generate many papers [↗](#)

🌀 Funding: NSF, NIH, NIDA, NASA, MITRE, James S. McDonnell Foundation, ONR, DARPA, MassMutual, Google, Computer Associates; [YOUR WONDERFUL FUNDING AGENCY HERE]



Basics:

- 🌀 Instructor: Calla Beauregard
- 🌀 Lecture room and meeting times: Cohen Hall, 10:05 am to 11:20 am
- 🌀 Office: (in theory) The Ether and/or Innovation, fourth floor
- 🌀 email: calla.beauregard@uvm.edu
- 🌀 Course Website: <https://pdodds.w3.uvm.edu/teaching/courses/pocs> [↗](#)
- 🌀 Course Twitter handle: [@pocsvox](#)

Potential paper product:

- The Syllabus and a Poster.

Office hours:

- See Teams calendar, The Ether and/or Innovation, fourth floor

No laptops in class:

- Please take notes with pencil/pen and paper.
- Also okay: Writing on a flat tablet.

Approved etiquette mechanisms:

- Raise hands for questions (always feel free to ask questions).
- The class is a G rated environment (of course, sometimes we have to discuss bad things, science-style).

Yet more super exciting details:

- This is Season 22 of Principles of Complex Systems, Vols. 1 and 2.
- In-person lectures will be called Stories Episodes (a more elevated framing than “Streams of consciousness”)
- Slide-specific curated episodes are online, and are broken into clips.
- Goal for all in-person lectures: Record with ScreenFlow, curate, send to Youtube.
- Office hours will run over Teams and be recorded.
- Some new clips may be recorded in a pretend studio.
- All lectures are bottle episodes.
- Other tropes will be involved.

Grading breakdown:

- Assignments (66%)—All assignments will be of equal weight and there will be 10 ± 1 of them.
- Projects/talks (24%)—Students will work on semester-long projects. Students will develop a proposal in the first few weeks of the course which will be discussed with the instructor for approval.

Details: 8% for the first talk, 8% for the final talk, and 8% for the written project.
- General attendance/Class participation (10%)—Everyone is expected to behave well.

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Exciting details regarding these slides:

- Three servings (all in pdf):
 - Fresh: For in-class Delivery.
 - On toast: Flattened for page-turning joy.
 - Freeze-dried: Pack-and-go, 3x3 slides per page.
- Presentation versions are hyperly navigable: $\leftarrow \rightarrow \equiv$ back + search + forward.
- Web links look like this.
- References in slides link to full citation at end.^[1]
- Citations contain links to pdfs for papers (if available).
- Some books will be linked to on Amazon.
- Brought to you by a frightening melange of Xe_{La}TeX, Lua_{La}TeX, Beamer, perl, PerlTeX, fevered command-line madness, and an almost fanatical devotion to the indomitable emacs.
#totallynormal

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Wonderful foundational support for PoCS Vol. 1, PoCS Vol. 2, and PoCS Vol. 3D, has come from the NSF:

- “CAREER: Explorations of Complex Social and Psychological Phenomena through Multiscale Online Sociological Experiments, Empirical Studies, and Theoretical Models.” 2009–2015.
- SES Division of Social and Economic Sciences
SBE Directorate for Social, Behavioral & Economic Sciences
- Abstract is here.
- People have also said nice things about PoCS.

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How grading works:

- Questions are worth 3 points according to the following scale:
- 3 = correct or very nearly so.
 - 2 = acceptable but needs some revisions.
 - 1 = needs major revisions.
 - 0 = way off.

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More super exciting details:

- We use Open-Sans EB Garamond and make math look good:

```
%% \setmainfont[Ligatures=TeX]{Open Sans}
%% \setsansfont[Ligatures=TeX]{Open Sans}
%% \usefonttheme[onlymath]{serif}
\setmainfont[Ligatures=TeX]{EB Garamond}
\setsansfont[Ligatures=TeX]{EB Garamond}
\usefonttheme[onlymath]{serif}
```
- Still working towards putting the course on Github/Gitlab
- And finishing writing the books ...

Team PoCS

Microsoft Teams + Slack

- Teams = main place for discussions about all things PoCS including assignments and projects.
- Slack = main place for students and faculty in Complex Systems and Data Science to talk about everything.
- Teams—Automatic if enrolled in the course.
- Slack—Once invited, please sign up here: <https://csdsgsgrads.slack.com/>
- Very good: Install Microsoft and Slack apps on laptops, tablets, phone, cats, dogs. Nothing will go wrong.
- Everyone will behave wonderfully.



Important things:

- Classes run from Monday, August 28 to Friday, December 8.
 - Add/Drop, Audit, Pass/No Pass deadline—Monday, September 11.
 - Last day to withdraw—Monday, October 30 (Sadness!).
 - Reading and Exam period—Saturday, December 9 to Friday, December 15.
- Do check the course Twitter account, @pocsvox, for updates regarding the course (part of the course site).

Academic assistance: Anyone who requires assistance in any way (as per the ACCESS program or due to athletic endeavors), please see or contact me as soon as possible.

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Popular Science Books:

Historical artifact:



“Complexity: The Emerging Science at the Edge of Order and Chaos” [a](#) [🔗](#)
by M. Mitchell Waldrop (1993). ^[16]



Shout-out: Dr. Andrew P. Morokoff [🔗](#),
MBBS PhD FRACS D.Thau (Bug) [🔗](#)

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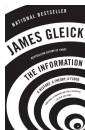
Popular Science Books:



“Simply Complexity: A Clear Guide to Complexity Theory” [a](#) [🔗](#)
by Neil F. Johnson (2009). ^[9]



“Complexity: A Guided Tour” [a](#) [🔗](#)
by Melanie Mitchell (2009). ^[12]



“The Information: A History, A Theory, A Flood” [a](#) [🔗](#)
by James Gleick (2011). ^[6]

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It's all about algorithms (stories):



“The Engine of Complexity: Evolution as Computation” [a](#) [🔗](#)
by John E. Mayfield (2013). ^[10]



“On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction” [a](#) [🔗](#)
by Brian Boyd (2010). ^[5]



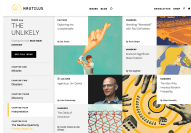
“The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human” [a](#) [🔗](#)
by Jonathan Gottschall (2013). ^[7]

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Other inputs:



Complexity Digest:
<http://www.comdig.org> [🔗](#)
<https://twitter.com/cxdig> [🔗](#)



Nautilus Magazine:
<http://nautil.us/> [🔗](#)



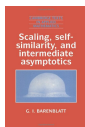
Aeon: <http://aeon.co/> [🔗](#)



Quanta Magazine: <https://www.quantamagazine.org/> [🔗](#)

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Books on Complexification:



“Scaling, self-similarity, and intermediate asymptotics” [a](#) [🔗](#)
by G. I. Barenblatt (1996). ^[3]



“Creation of the Universe” [a](#) [🔗](#)
by Zhi and Xian (1989). ^[17]

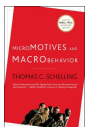
See Freeman Dyson's [🔗](#) The Key to Everything [🔗](#).

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On complex sociotechnical systems:



“Human Behaviour and the Principle of Least-Effort” [a](#) [🔗](#)
by G. K. Zipf (1949). ^[18]



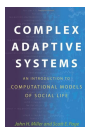
“Micromotives and Macrobehavior” [a](#) [🔗](#)
by Thomas C. Schelling (1978). ^[14]



“Critical Mass: How One Thing Leads to Another” [a](#) [🔗](#)
by Philip Ball (2004). ^[2]

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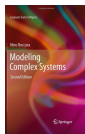
A few textbook books (dated):



“Complex Adaptive Systems: An introduction to computational models of social life” [a](#) [🔗](#)
by Miller and Page (2007). ^[11]



“Critical Phenomena in Natural Sciences” [a](#) [🔗](#)
by Didier Sornette (2003). ^[15]



“Modeling Complex Systems” [a](#) [🔗](#)
by Nino Boccara (2004). ^[4]

Eventually: “Principles of Complex Systems”

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Centers:

- Santa Fe Institute (SFI)
- Networks Institute at Northeastern
- Northwestern Institute on Complex Systems (NICO) [🔗](#)
- MIT Institute for Data, Systems, AND Society
- New England Complex Systems Institute (NECSI)
- Michigan's Center for the Study of Complex Systems (CSCS) [🔗](#)
- Some Data Science groups (highly variable)
- Also: Indiana, Davis, Brandeis, University of Illinois, Duke, Warsaw, Melbourne, ...,
- Us!!!! Vermont Complex Systems Center [🔗](#)



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The nature of PoCS:

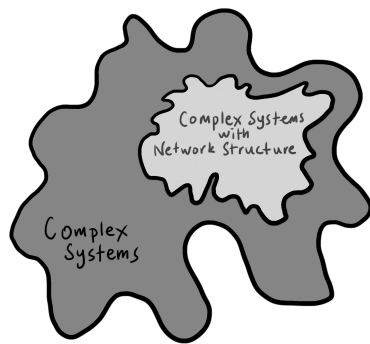
- Transitional from standard coursework to research-focused work. **#alittlescary**

Major themes:

- The Complexity Manifesto [🔗](#);
- Complex Systems $\equiv$ Modern, Normal Science;
- Roles and limits of Data, Theory, and Experiment;
- Emergence;
- Universality and Accidents of History;
- Structure and Stories: Micro-to-macro Mechanisms;
- Elements: Scaling, Surprise, Networks, Robustness, Failure, and Spreading.
- The Theory of Anything: Why Complexity?
- It's all about stories.**

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Complex Systems are the Big Story:



- ☞ Only a bit networky: Fluids-at-large (the atmosphere, oceans, ...), organism cells, ...

Topics:

Robustness—Integrity of complex systems:

- ☞ Generic failure mechanisms.
- ☞ Highly Optimized Tolerance (HOT): Robustness and fragility.
- ☞ How to build optimal forests.
- ☞ Minimization of risk as a driver of heterogeneous structures in complex systems.
- ☞ How to optimally locate facilities: hospitals, schools, and coffee shops.

Fundamentals of Complexity:

- ☞ Emergence: More is Different.
- ☞ Measurement and mismeasurement.
- ☞ Universality versus path dependence.
- ☞ Complexification (it all starts with gravity^[17]).

Topics:

Collective decision making:

- ☞ Wisdom and madness of crowds.
- ☞ Systems of voting.
- ☞ The role of randomness and chance.
- ☞ Success inequality.
- ☞ The paradox of unpredictable global fame.
- ☞ Bonus knowledge: How to make things spread.
- ☞ Bonus knowledge: Fate does not exist in a world of fame.

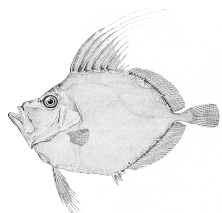
Large-scale social patterns (maybe):

- ☞ Movement
- ☞ Cities
- ☞ Happiness
- ☞ Social media

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Cryptolect:

Course mascot:



- ☞ What's the Story?
- ☞ What's the John Dory?
- ☞ What's the John Dory for Rhyming Slang ↗?
- ☞ Hemiteilea: beers ⇒ Edward Lear ⇒ Edwards.
- ☞ Also: Taxis ⇒ Boris Spasskies ↗ ⇒ Borises

Topics:

Complex networks:

- ☞ Statistical Mechanics
- ☞ Structure and Dynamics
- ☞ Phase transitions
- ☞ Random Networks
- ☞ Scale-free Networks
- ☞ Small-world Networks
- ☞ Why your friends are better than you.
- ☞ More in PoCS, Vol. 2 in the spring.

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Season's Narrative Arc (or Places We Will Go):

- ☞ Overview of Complex Systems with bonus Manifesto ↗.
- ☞ Thread of Understanding Sociotechnical Systems.
- ☞ Allometric scaling in complex systems.
- ☞ Size distributions of system elements:
 - ☞ Power-law size distributions.
 - ☞ Description and Mechanisms of Becoming.
- ☞ Robustness of Complex Systems.
- ☞ Complex networks—how system elements are connected:
 - ☞ Structure, Growth Mechanisms, Processes on Networks.
- ☞ Social Contagion, Voting, Fame and Fate, Stories.
- ☞ Complexification: The Theory of Anything and the Rise of Algorithms

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Topics:

Scaling phenomena:

- ☞ Allometry.
- ☞ Scaling of social phenomena: crime, creativity, and consumption.
- ☞ Scaling in biology (elephants and platypuses).
- ☞ Dimensional Analysis and Renormalization.
- ☞ Power law size distributions and non-Gaussian statistics.
- ☞ The 80/20 rule, the 1%.
- ☞ ZipF's law.
- ☞ Order from randomness.
- ☞ Fundamental mechanisms for generating power law size distributions.
- ☞ The rich-get-richer mechanism.

Topics:

Sociotechnical Systems:

- ☞ Biological and social spreading models
- ☞ Schelling's model of segregation^[13]
- ☞ Granovetter's model of imitation^[8]
- ☞ Collective behavior and synchrony
- ☞ Global cooperation from bad actors
- ☞ Global conflicts from good actors
- ☞ Stories (Homo Narrativus)
- ☞ The Sociotechnocene

Projects

- ☞ Semester-long projects, teams.
- ☞ Develop proposal in first few weeks.
- ☞ May range from novel research to investigation of an established area of complex systems.
- ☞ Two talks + written piece.
- ☞ Usage of the VACC ↗ is encouraged (ability to code well = super powers).
- ☞ Massive data sets available, including Twitter.
- ☞ Possible: Work with Twitter data and Story Lab on socially meaningful problems.
- ☞ Academic output (journal papers) resulting from Principles of Complex Systems and Complex Networks can be found here ↗. Add more!
- ☞ We'll go through a list of possible projects soon.

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- 1 to 3 word encapsulation = a soundbite = a buzzframe,
- 1 sentence, title,
- few sentences, a haiku,
- a paragraph, abstract,
- short paper, essay,
- long paper,
- chapter,
- book,
- ...

References I

- [1] P. W. Anderson.
More is different.
Science, 177(4047):393–396, 1972. [pdf](#) [↗](#)
- [2] P. Ball.
Critical Mass: How One Thing Leads to Another.
Farra, Straus, and Giroux, New York, 2004.
- [3] G. I. Barenblatt.
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Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- [4] N. Boccarra.
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Belknap Press, 2010.
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- [10] J. E. Mayfield.
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Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2007.
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- [15] D. Sornette.
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