Preface

How would concepts solve the problem of my car breaking down? If it did, I might, explicitly or implicitly, generate a list of what I might do next. This list might include:

- fix it myself;
- breakdown service;
- friendly local mechanic;
- get new car;
- burn and run.

If I decided to use the first of these, ‘fix it myself’, I might move on to using one of the concepts below:

- fuel;
- engine mechanics;
- electrical;
- transmission;
- computer chip

Then I might use the concepts of ‘fix’, ‘replace’ or ‘work around’.

Pragmatic concepts are experienced patterns of activity. This includes numbers, colours, sounds, feelings and objects. Things are what they do.

This book offers a process for conceiving of and enacting solutions to complex, ‘wicked’ (see p. 11, this volume), messy, swampy or socio-technical problematic situations. It explains how and why pragmatic philosophy provides a preferable means of solving this sort of problem. Pragmatism argues that humans use linguistic concepts, words, to perform complex thinking. Thinking, including scientific, practical and complex problem-solving, is an act of using concepts. These concepts are often named, sourced from past social interaction experiences. Humans only have language, memories, past experiences, social interaction and a pattern-recognition capacity to think with. What pragmatic concepts are, and how they provide a means of making sense of large and complex problems, involving numerous conflicting stakeholders, is explained and applied in this book.
Another, more relevant, example may help. Think about the global issues of immigration, the environment, poverty and the impact of new information technologies. You cannot think about these unless you have some past experience of these four conceptual ideas (linguistic concepts). You know what immigration, the environment, poverty and new technologies do, and you have emotions or feelings associated with each of them. To be able to think about any one of them you need some other concepts to use. For immigration this might be justice, security, culture or the environment. For new technologies it might be immigration, the environment or poverty. Each new concept will make you remember different things. Thinking is a process of using linguistic concepts, implicitly or explicitly. Conceptualizing problems is therefore a process of selecting the set of useful concepts which will be used to think about the problem situation. Actions that follow from these reasons will seem rational.

To explain why and how to formulate reflective, pragmatic or concept driven problem-solving, this book uses the conceptual ideas or concepts of:

- pragmatic inquiry;
- stakeholders’ concerns;
- idea networking;
- solution concepts;
- paradoxical outcomes; and
- intent (with related actions).

The first chapter explains the role of reflection in thinking. The next chapter explains the pragmatists’ understanding of thinking as a social process of inquiry. It is assumed that complex problem-solving is a participatory process of human inquiry that cannot use strictly scientific research methods. The book then moves on to the practical task of how to collate stakeholders’ concerns using idea networking into a handful of useful concepts or organizing principles. These are used to make sense of, or structure, future actions related to solving the problem. Once a set of concepts and related actions have been agreed these need to be communicated as decision-making criteria.

At the end of each chapter is a short section called ‘Application’. It is hoped that this book will be read with a particular problem situation in mind. This end section will make suggestions as to how you might apply the contents of each chapter to your problem. This provides a chapter-by-chapter (step-by-step) process of using concepts to solve problems. The last step suggests you draft a report justifying how and why you recommend a problem be solved.