

THE NEXT GENERATION: HIGH TECH MEETS HIGH TOUCH

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To create sustainable organizations, we need to have effective and sustainable conversations on complex and challenging issues. Yet what is a sustainable conversation? What are the kinds of conversations that can help sustain our relationships, our organizations, our communities, our biosphere?

In order to make progress, it can often help to examine how we might be getting in our own way. How does our current "conventional wisdom" with regard to meetings, tend to discourage and limit sustainable conversation? Somehow, we have come to hold the limiting belief that productivity and effectiveness depend upon our disengaging from our whole selves, sacrificing our passion and creativity to suffer through what are, at best, mildly boring and half-alive meetings.

Questioning the assumptions of our current practice can lead us to consider what might we do differently. How might we encourage and support sustainable and sustaining conversations, with regard to the most complex and challenging subjects?

Let us begin with the first question. By "sustainable conversations", we mean conversations that feel alive, where participants are deeply engaged with both mind and heart. We have all experienced conversations that leave us feeling energized rather than drained; inspired rather than deadened; curious rather than bored. Even the rough spots and difficulties add to the sense of aliveness; we find ourselves inspired by the challenges, refreshed and renewed by the breakthroughs, wanting to continue the conversation. These conversations seem to have a life of their own, carrying themselves forward, not just during the actual encounter but continuing to unfold afterwards, as well.

Now imagine what might happen if all of our "meetings" were filled with "sustainable conversations"! We are NOT talking here about "making meetings fun", nor about "building in" or "adding on" energizers or creative activities to an essentially unchanged format. We ARE talking about re-thinking the deep structure of our meetings, and learning how we might tap into and support the underlying power of self-organization, the dance between form and chaos.

We want to illustrate these concepts by inviting you to experience two complementary tools for facilitating sustainable conversation. The heart of this workshop is the experiential component. We will be engaging in dialogue using Dynamic Facilitation, a distinctive, non-linear approach to practical problem-solving and collaborative design created by Jim Rough. While bearing some similarities to other non-linear group processes, such as T-groups and Bohmian dialogue, Dynamic Facilitation is a distinct method with its own history, supporting theory, and specific applications.

Our group dialogue will be recorded in two ways: 1) with markers on chart paper, and 2) using Dialogue Mapping and Compendium software. The purpose of this dual approach is to demonstrate the wide range of adaptability of the underlying approach. You do NOT need "high tech" to facilitate creative and highly productive sustainable

conversations on challenging issues. At the same time, there ARE high-tech tools that can be used to support and enhance this non-linear, dialogic approach to collaborative design.

We will begin by offering some basic theory, as a framework for what you will be experiencing. Also, even though the experiential component is central to this workshop, those of you who were unable able to attend may find some of the conceptual material helpful in its own right.

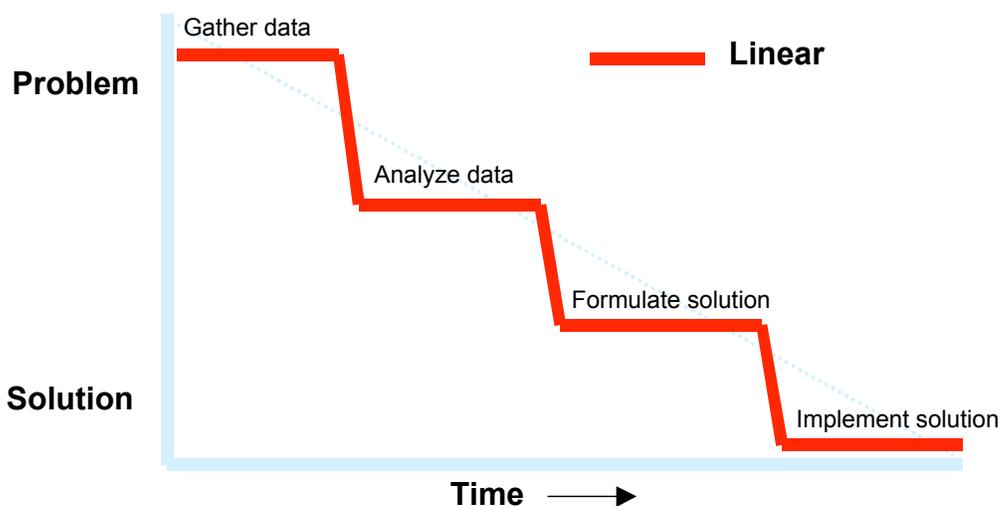
I. A Touch of Theory

A. Overview of Supporting Research

Both Dynamic Facilitation and Dialogue Mapping belong to an emerging set of new approaches for facilitating collective intelligence in groups. One way to understand how these approaches work is "opportunity-driven problem-solving", or ODPS.

"Opportunity-driven problem-solving" is a descriptive model derived from cognitive science research on how creative people actually think and solve problems¹. In the original research, the "problem" was the challenge of designing something to meet a certain set of criteria. Therefore, if we are operating from the perspective of Appreciative Inquiry and prefer not to use the word "problem," we could rename the theory "opportunity-driven creative design". In this workshop, we will use both terms.

The basic finding of ODPS is no surprise: creativity works in a non-linear fashion. Yet these scientists were observing very specific details of HOW the non-linear creative process operates in an individual. They discovered that, contrary to their expectations, in reality there was NO "smooth and steady" progress from an "unknown" to a "solution" (figure 1). Instead, the creative process leads us fairly quickly to naturally create a "first approximation of a solution". It is through examining that "solution" that the deeper problems become apparent, leading us back into an "unknown" space, and then to another draft "solution", which uncovers further considerations, and so on (figure 2).



¹ See *Wicked Problems and Social Complexity*, at <http://cognexus.org/id26.htm>.

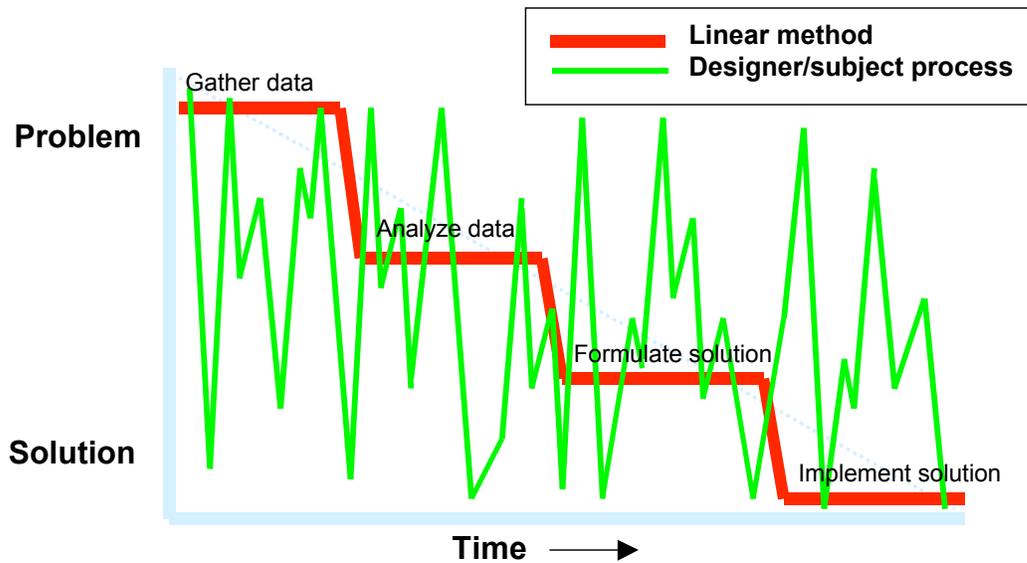


Figure 1

Figure 2

B. Implications and Applications

While the research that led to the ODPS model was done on the individual creative process, it may well have implications, at a higher systems level, for how the natural creative process might operate in a group setting. In any case, it certainly explains why individual creativity feels so constrained in most group meetings! With the best of intentions, the "conventional wisdom" is to "lead" a group through a carefully structured process: let's first "define the problem", then develop criteria, then generate possible solutions, then evaluate each of the solutions against the criteria... However, as we have seen above, this linear sequence does not mirror the reality of the creative process.

What might happen if instead...

1) Rather than "banning" initial solutions, we welcomed them, indeed invited participants to elaborate upon them-- not just as a way to help "welcome everyone into the room," but also as a way of beginning to understand the different perspectives and assumptions with which everyone is operating?

2) We threw out the notion that we needed to begin by having the group "agree" on a shared definition of the problem, and instead welcomed all possible viewpoints with regard to what the "real" problem is? (Of course, we would also be inviting participants to offer their own creative solutions to their own perceptions of the problem!)

3) We abstained from constraining participants to follow a pre-established agenda or order, and instead, encouraged the group to follow an "emergent agenda", inviting each participant to contribute in whatever way he or she felt to be the most significant?

II. Putting It Into Practice

Some of you might be thinking that the three principles described above would be a sure recipe for chaos. And indeed they could be, were it not for a few simple guidelines, or "initial conditions" designed to support the process of self-organization.

In the workshop, Rosa will be introducing the guidelines, facilitating the dialogue, and recording the dialogue on the flip charts. Meanwhile, Jeff will be recording the dialogue on his laptop using Dialogue Mapping and Compendium².

To keep the integrity of each process intact, we won't be sharing the computer-supported version of the notes with the group until the end of the dialogue. That way, the group will be able to experience fully the low-tech version of the process, while at the same time, seeing later how technology can be used as an enhancement.

These are the four simple guidelines Rosa uses when introducing a group to the Dynamic Facilitation process:

- 1) "My primary role here as 'facilitator', is to be a 'designated listener'. I want to listen well to every person, to make sure that everyone is fully heard."
- 2) "I can only hear well when I am listening to one person at a time. So, if more than one person wants to speak at once, I will need to ask you to take turns."
- 3) "If things get heated between two people, I will need to step between you and ask each of you to please address your comments to me. That way, others can 'overhear' you, instead of feeling 'put on the spot'."
- 4) "Everyone here holds a key piece of the puzzle. Especially when you are feeling that you hold 'minority view', it's really important that you please DON'T STIFLE YOURSELF! We all have a lot to gain from each point of view being fully heard, regardless of how 'out on left field' it might appear."

After asking if folks are willing to work with these guidelines, Rosa offers the following framing to help folks feel more comfortable with the non-linear movement:

" This process is a bit like working on a 500-piece jigsaw puzzle: at one point we might be working on the sky, at another point on the trees, then we might jump over to the lower edge of the puzzle. Still, while we are not following any particular order, as each of the pieces of the puzzle is added, the overall picture starts to become clearer."

When working with an intact group, we would then begin the dialogue by asking the group if anyone would like to offer their perspective on what are the issues that the group is facing. Usually, the same person who offers a "problem statement" is then encouraged and supported in offering their perspective on what the "solution" to the problem might be. This naturally sparks concerns, or different solutions, or different problem statements from others, and the group is off and running.

In a workshop setting, working with a "stranger" group, the process is more challenging. We need a real issue that engages participants, around which they have some energy and passion. Therefore, we usually invite folks to consider human issues that

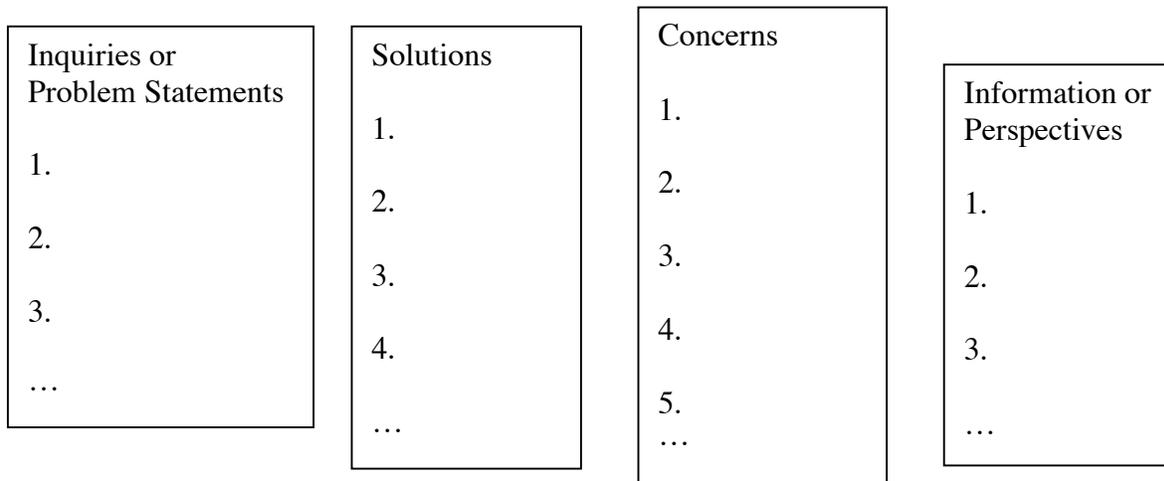
² The Compendium software is available for free by downloading from <http://www.compendiuminstitute.org/download/download.htm>

affect all of us, in one way or another: Homelessness? The crisis in education? What shall we do about health-care? How do we deal with the massive environmental issues we are facing as a society? Once we have found an issue that engages a sufficient number of participants, we proceed with the process as described above.

III. Debriefing the Dialogue

Participants' experience of Dynamic Facilitation in action is followed by a group debrief. While the debrief is driven by the participant's observations and comments, the following points are likely to be explored as part of the discussion:

- 1) The facilitator's use of the four charts to record each participant's contributions, as they emerge, on one or more of the four charts, to create a shared "map" of the everything that is in the room.



- 2) There is no need for group to learn a "new grammar" prior to engaging in this approach. Attitudes are caught, not taught. Schein's theory of how culture forms is very applicable here: when an approach works, its embedded assumptions become part of the culture of a group. If what the facilitator does is working, participants will naturally begin to adopt the practice of listening with open curiosity to one another, without needing to be "urged" to do so.
- 3) The essential work of facilitation: what do we do if we're NOT busy trying to get participants to "stick to an agenda" or follow a linear process?
 - a) taking all sides
 - b) drawing out divergence, welcoming emotions
 - c) holding space open for creative possibility
 - d) knowing and trusting ourselves, knowing and trusting the process
- 4) The value of "third-party listening": an ancient human tradition, from indigenous reconciliation practices to modern family therapy. As we ourselves are deeply listened to by the designated listener, and as we have the chance to "overhear"

what others are saying without being "put on the spot", the natural pattern-recognition ability of our brain begins to synthesize conflicting information into higher-order meaning.

- 5) Breakthroughs: the enormous energetic difference between "managed consensus" and a "spontaneous meeting of the hearts and minds". Instead of attempting to negotiate consensus, we are paradoxically encouraging the fullness of each individual perspective. The story of the five blind men and the elephant: we are saying, "Tell me more about that tusk! Yes, I see, the elephant is hard and pointy." "Tell me more about that tree! Yes, I see, the elephant is a wide, rectangular column." "Tell me more about that rope! Yes, I see, the elephant is long and thin, with a frayed bushy paint brush at the end." We ourselves often have no idea what the "elephant" will look like; we trust participants to discover a larger "shared understanding" that integrates the various pieces, allows the emergence of "co-sensing," and leads naturally to energized, coherent, and creative action.

IV. Dialogue Mapping and Compendium -- Overview and Debrief

In this last part of the workshop, we turn on the projector so that the group can see how Jeff recorded their contributions, using Compendium to create a computer-supported map of the dialogue we experienced earlier. Jeff then gives a brief overview explaining:

- 1) Particular applications for which Dialogue Mapping with Compendium can be especially useful, such as keeping track of large amounts of complex information
- 2) Various additional features of the Compendium software, including nested levels of maps for keeping track of highly detailed or focused explorations within a larger conversation.
- 3) Other related uses of Compendium for knowledge management, including asynchronous use.

The categories used to record participants' varied contributions with Compendium --Questions, Ideas, Pros, Cons, and Information-- are very similar to the ones used in Dynamic Facilitation. One minor difference is that, instead of bundling both Ideas and Pros under "Solutions", in Dialogue Mapping we tease them out into separate categories.

One of major differences is that when we use Compendium to map the dialogue, we end up with a flow chart that shows which Question a given Idea was responding to, what Idea gave rise to a particular Concern, etc. Without proceeding in a linear manner, we end up with a cognitive map that depicts the linear connections among each idea.

In some ways, this is analogous to a point Edward deBono makes about creativity. In hindsight, one can always draw a logical and neat path between the END PRODUCT of a creative endeavor and the starting point. However, when we are in the middle of the process, in order to arrive anywhere new we need to be able to "take a leaps" into the unknown as we move forward. These creative leaps will only be logical in hindsight.

Of course, the technology itself is neutral. Just as computers in education can be used to support very control-oriented, step-by-step programmed instruction, Compendium could be used as a fancy way to take minutes for a meeting run with

Robert's Rules of Order. There is nothing inherent in the technology itself that guarantees that it will be used in a creative manner. Our goal here has been to show you that it is POSSIBLE to do so, that technology CAN be used to support and enhance the process of creative dialogue for practical, collaborative design. Yet even with chart paper and markers, a non-linear, self-organizing approach allows us to nurture powerful and sustainable conversations by fully welcoming both our differences and our wholeness.

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