

Dialogic Design: Harnessing Collective Wisdom for Democratic Design and Action

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ABSTRACT

The proposed tutorial presents a half-day experiential process engaging participants in learning Structured Dialogic Design (SDD). Dialogic design is a radically democratic design perspective and set of methods for engaging mixed stakeholders in design and consensus action for complex sociotechnical problems shared in common. Based on a systems thinking methodology developed from principles of communicative action, dialogic design facilitates diverse groups in disentangling core issues from complex, interconnected problem areas and leads to genuine consensus for action. The SDD method deploys a mix of dialogue types with computer-assisted information displays to generate and maintain a shared common ground throughout dialogue.

Keywords

Dialogue, Design, Boundary-spanning, Mixed-stakeholder engagement, Sociotechnical systems, Wicked problems

INTRODUCTION

The primary goal of this tutorial is for participants to learn the principles and applications of dialogic design for use in participatory design of sociotechnical systems. We will present and engage participants in the dialogue method of Structured Dialogic Design (SDD). SDD integrates dialogue and information structuring to show the evolution of dialogue toward consensus, and it preserves the autonomy of all participants in ways that uniquely mitigate the effect of mixed power relations in multi-stakeholder dialogues. SDD is relevant to the Participatory Design community, in providing a range of dialogue and design tools, a deeply-researched approach, and a socially-relevant philosophy of design based on principles of authentic engagement of *all* stakeholders of a problem.

Background

Dialogic design represents a class of methods for facilitating design thinking for complex problems, adopting a radically democratic design perspective and a set of methods for engaging mixed stakeholders in design and reaching consensus action. SDD deploys a mix of dialogue types with computer-assisted information display to generate and maintain a shared common ground. Its rules are designed to enable constructive dialogue in everyday language that can be managed logically and transparently. The SDD rule structure enables participants to reach consensus in design situations even in cases of extreme power differences among stakeholders. The Cognisystem software used in the process displays the formation of “influence networks” as people collectively create a shared problem description as a coherent visual map

Dialogic design honors the life experience, observations, and wisdom of people as they try to navigate their way in a complex world. It has been designed from its inception as a universally applicable process to settings ranging from civil society community building, policy formulation, multi-stakeholder agreement on complex technical problems (such as WHO disease management), and other social systems design problems.

SDD sessions typically take about a day for a committed group of participants to complete a full cycle. The tutorial will only simulate the process. Given the requirement to facilitate a simulated dialogue experience, we plan to admit no more than 15 participants to the tutorial. At least 5 participants are necessary to ensure a meaningful number of responses to the dialogic inquiry. Participants will receive electronic copies of materials and articles that will help them further understand the process and its applications after the tutorial. We also plan for time to discuss the process, its relationship to design and applications in domains of interest to participants.

TECHNIQUES

The core method introduced in the tutorial has roots in democratic participation for building consensus on approaches to address complex, interconnected (wicked) problems. SDD is based on theories and methods

developed by Özbekhan (1970), implemented in multiple models of practice over the years. Christakis' software package (Cognisystem II) is often used to structure dialogue contributions and display the unfolding relationships of ideas to dialogue participants. We will present the methodology as an experiential process, and introduce the Cognisystem to illustrate its key role in organizing dialogue contributions for the evolution of group understanding.

We intend to present SDD as a experiential exercise based on problems presented by participants. If closer to 15 participants, the instructor(s) may use a known base of issues (problematique) for experiential participation in the method. We will ensure that the class exercise demonstrates its use in a non-trivial problem, such as sociotechnical systems design, socially engaged decision making, or a multi-symptom "wicked problem."

Unlike the few other practices considered similar (e.g. Conklin, 2006, Basadur, 2006), dialogic design engenders and encourages the practice of boundary-spanning dialogue over the entire lifespan of sociotechnical system design and implementation. It gives equal attention to problem understanding, design, and action planning. Most other methods of dialogue explicitly consider *problem understanding* to be sufficient (allowing for some degree of emergence to ensue following stakeholder engagement). The SDD method ensures that stakeholders reach consensus about *all items* contributed in the dialogue setting.

RELEVANCE

Dialogic design is a form of participatory design and decision making that employs a structured and scalable group dialogue process, systematically eliciting individual contributions to defining a complex problem domain. In this context, dialogue is "the participation of observers engaged in creating meaning, wisdom, and action through communication and collaborative interaction." The original foundations of structured dialogue were rooted in a positivist epistemology, hence the software algorithm supporting its facilitation. Through its use in democratic design situations (called Co-laboratories of Democracy), SDD allows power and strategic conflicts inherent in a shared problem to be resolved by agreements made in their articulation in stakeholder dialogue. We present the framework as a complete instrument for resolving the inherent conflicts in situations which require both the understanding and the agreement of multiple perspectives.

Dialogic design honors the life experience, observations, and wisdom of people as they try to navigate their way in a complex world. It has been designed from its inception as a process universally applicable to settings ranging from civil society community building, UN-level policy formulation, multi-stakeholder agreement on complex technical problems (such as WHO disease management), and other social systems "design" problems. It is highly relevant to PDC in that its methodology scales from the organizational

to the multi-national units of analysis and action, thereby positioning it as a powerful instrument of democratic decision making in a design context of non-designers (problem stakeholders).

ACTIVITIES AND SCHEDULE

Given the requirement to facilitate a simulated dialogue experience, we expect to admit up to 15 participants to the tutorial. We need at least 5 participants to ensure a meaningful number of responses to the dialogic inquiry.

The tutorial is planned as a half-day workshop over a four hour period with a single scheduled break. The schedule of activities will proceed along the following timeline.

30 min. - Introductions and presentation of dialogic design.

20 min. – Group discussion on sociotechnical problems shared in common among group. Determination and initial selection of a tutorial group-based problem statement.

20 min. – Breakout groups deliberate on triggering question to be used in SDD. Each group (of 3-4) develops candidate focus questions, which are discussed in plenary group and a candidate question is selected to drive the session.

15 min. – Break

30 min. – Presentation of SDD methodology and toolset, including computer-based Cognisystem software.

90 min. – The group writes responses to focus questions (NGT method). Responses are structured and entered in Cognisystem II software. SDD dialogue session is facilitated using CSII to display results of dialogue structuring.

30 min. – Final discussion of SDD process, questions and answers.

Materials

Materials available to participants include handouts of materials and a CD of research papers and presentation materials. Additionally, the recent book by Christakis and Bausch (2006), upon which the tutorial is based will be made available to participants if they wish to purchase it.

REFERENCES

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