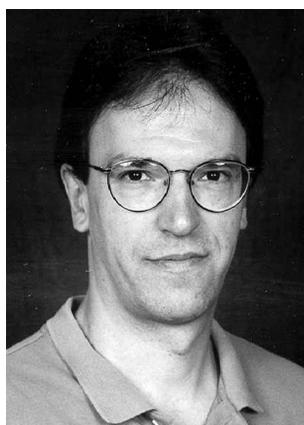
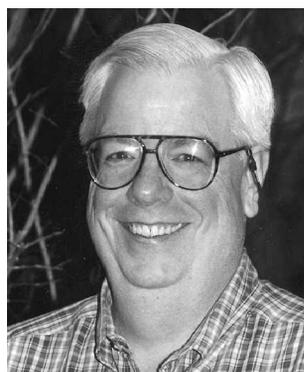


# Putting Something in the Middle: An Approach to Dialogue

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Conversation is conducted atop layers of meaning. How we understand each other depends quite a bit on what's underneath the conversation because the basis of what we hear and say lies in inferences, assumptions, values, feelings, and information. For example, people talking about trends in the financial markets need to have some basic understanding in common for the conversation to go anywhere. Often, that shared understanding is adequate. But if the topic is saving for retirement and the conversation is between two people, one of whom is financial adviser to the other, then something close to dialogue needs to occur. That is, the parties in the conversation need to deliberately dig down into the layers of meaning and mutually examine things like personal values, assumptions about the future, and income data. The process of digging includes the possibility that substratum meanings will be discovered or clarified in the course of the dialogue, and that something new might be created (for example, new career goals). Obviously, in this example, the technical methods of the financial adviser will help guide the conversation, but the danger in not having a dialogue is that actions will be based on fundamental misunderstandings or that a narrow set of options will be entertained.

Dialogue at its best is a way of creating profound levels of shared meaning in a group so that the wisest courses of action can emerge. We view dialogue as a desirable component of leadership, especially in the face of adaptive challenges within our increasingly networked society (Heifetz, 1994). In shaping practice to needs, as sponsored by the Center for Creative Leadership, we have taken guidance from the work of David Bohm (1990), William Isaacs and Peter Senge (1994), Chris Argyris (1993), and Nancy Dixon (1996). Along with our colleagues and clients, we have experienced great rewards in taking part in dialogue in organizations, typically in service of leadership development initiatives. Yet we have found (and these authors acknowledge) that learning dialogue and practicing it effectively can be difficult. In this article, we discuss some of the reasons for this and offer an approach that we have begun to test that addresses some of the difficulties. We call this *mediated dialogue*.

A critical aspect of dialogue is what Bohm calls *suspending assumptions*: "You literally suspend them in front of the group so that the entire team can understand them collectively" (Isaacs, 1994: p. 378). The term *assumptions* is to be taken in its broad sense as the underlying basis for what one thinks and feels—the layers of meaning underneath the conversation. For example, Chris Argyris describes these layers as a sequence, a chain of reasoning toward increasing abstraction, which he calls the *ladder of inference*. The ladder starts at the bottom rung with data and objective events, then on the next higher rung is selected particulars from such data, followed by ascribed meaning, more generalized assumptions, conclusions, and finally adopted beliefs.

According to William Isaacs, suspending assumptions consists of three roughly sequential activities. The first he calls *surfacing*, or becoming aware of one's assumptions. Another is *display*, lifting assumptions in front of the group, so all, including the holder, can perceive them. *Inquiry* is the shared exploration and reconstruction of the accumulated knowledge held in the middle of the group.

Suspending assumptions is difficult in all three of its components and is often misunderstood. The phrase itself is misleading; it sounds at first as if one is being asked to stop using or suspend the logical foundations of one's thinking. Nancy Dixon (1996) observes that the technique of dialogue can take almost a year of steady practice to master; internalizing the values can take even longer. One quickly realizes how far dialogue is from the ordinary conduct of conversation.

We observe two aspects of suspending assumptions that are, in practice, especially hard to grasp. First is the notion of the "middle." The figurative space into which people are asked to speak and place their meanings is seemingly empty and ephemeral. The prevalent Westernized mode of communication is for people to keep this metaphorical middle space *within* themselves and speak to a similar space *in* other people ("me" to "you"). The temptation during dialogue is thus to focus on other individuals in the group and to locate the activity of making meaning as wholly *in* them or *in* oneself. One group we worked with remembers dialogue as the activity "where you look down at your shoes when you speak"—a device introduced to avoid the habit of seeking face-to-face agreement or disagreement. The dialogic request to "speak to the middle of the group" can be hard to fathom.

Second, the idea of "constructing" meaning is difficult to grasp. The deliberate construction of meaning is a dialectic between crafting and taking apart. More commonplace is the notion that a person gets a good idea and therefore tries to influence others, or the notion of changing one's mind in the face of a compelling argument, or the gut reactions of agreement and disagreement.

Constructing meaning during an extended dialogue implies a prolonged neutral zone in which meaning is "under construction" and in which the "construction site"—the group's shared understanding—is in a bit of chaos; this is not unlike the "Big Dig" currently underway in the city of Boston, in which the central artery of the city's highway system is being radically rebuilt while everyone in the city tries to go to work every day. Testing the edge of chaos so close to the self is a fair approximation of madness (or road rage, in this case), suggesting that some empathy is in order for those who don't wish to go there.

Overlapping the two problems above are epistemological difficulties related to developmental challenges:

- Dialogue calls on people to let go temporarily of the idea that they "own" their ideas, feelings, or perspectives (it's hard to "hold your ideas lightly," as our colleague Robert Burnside points out).
- Dialogue invites people to participate in the creation of something that may challenge their "own" ideas and feelings (as a participant in dialogue, you open yourself to change and to discovering the limitations in what and how you think).
- Dialogue asks people to take in others' ideas and feelings as if they are worthy both on their own terms and in relation to one's own terms.

These problems seem formidable. Many writers on dialogue assume that they can be overcome only by (1) prolonged exposure and practice of dialogue techniques, and (2) personal development to transcend the epistemological barriers.

We have been experimenting with an approach to dialogue that overcomes some of these difficulties, called *mediated dialogue*, the topic of the rest of this article. Our thesis is that dialogue is a process that occurs by putting meanings to be explored and reconstructed in the middle of a group. Placing a mediating object in the middle, under the right conditions, is a way to enhance the experience of dialogue.

We want to emphasize that mediated dialogue itself is not a technique; nor is it our invention (though we are inventing techniques which take advantage of it). It is a natural mode of communication that can be enhanced.

## Mediated Dialogue: Origins in Theory and Practice

In this section, we describe the origins of mediated dialogue, emphasizing connections to our research and practice at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL). We and our

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colleagues at CCL have long been exploring ways to facilitate conversations that promote insight and learning. A common way of doing this has been through experiential learning. Of special relevance to dialogue is the experiential learning paradigm in which a group, which is debriefed for perceptions and lessons, engages in a task. Thus, a skilled conversation akin to dialogue takes place, resulting in a reappraisal of shared and individual meanings (assumptions about work, relationships, identity, and so on). The “something in the middle” is a virtual object—the shared experience still vivid in memory—or a real object, as when a group builds something together.

In the early 1990s, a form of the something-in-the-middle learning process evolved utilizing what we call *identity objects*. (Drivers for this evolution included the surge in organizational restructuring that destabilized individual and social identities.) These are figurative representations of the self in context, so that a person crafts meaning about who he or she is, values, aspirations, challenges, hopes, and fears.

A *touchstone* is an identity object, a three-dimensional collage in which natural objects are assembled into an aesthetic articulation of sense of purpose (De Ciantis, 1995). The invention of the touchstone by Cheryl De Ciantis was an important step toward the notion of mediated dialogue, as it used a meaning-invested constructed object to scaffold the three steps in suspending assumptions: bringing meaning to the *surface* by attaching significance to an object (in this case, by making the object), *displaying* it by placing it at the center of public view, and then *inquiring* into its various meanings by the person

who made it and by the others who view it and make sense of it.

Another type of identity object is the autobiographical fictional character sketch used to help managers comprehend individual leadership profile data (psychometrics, 360 degree feedback, and so on). The basic instruction is:

Write the story of a fictional character whose profile happens to be in some ways much like your own. How did that character get where it is? Where is it going? The character may be a person, an animal, or an object. You have full artistic license to make an imaginative portrait of this character, to tell a story.

The sketches bring meaning to the surface by projection, discovery, construction, and perception. The stories are then read to the group (display). Other group members respond to each sketch (inquire) by giving their impressions of the character and its experiences *per se* (as opposed to their direct impression of the real person, the teller of the story). Perspectives are unearthed and created *in the middle*, as a shared endeavor. The person telling the story is not in the spotlight so much as the story is. Teller and listeners typically benefit from the fictional frames of the sketches, what we will later define as *aesthetic distance*.

The *postcard exercise* uses several hundred radically diverse postcards and photographs culled from personal collections. Each person in a group intentionally selects three postcards (surfacing) while browsing the entire set; each shows something essential of her life in the past, the present, and the future. Selection tends to be intuitive and metaphoric, although it can be literal. (This striking mix of real facts, warts and all, and fantastic possibilities are what a poet once described as “imaginary ponds with real frogs in them.”) Participants share images with each other (display), presenting their own and commenting on others’ (inquiry). The purpose is so people can explore their own development. They see patterns and possibilities and watch and help others do the same.

The Leading Creatively Program (LCP) is based on the idea that the competent perception and construction of meaningful images, representations, and (more broadly, spoken) ideas is a vital resource for communities trying to make sense of complex challenges (Palus and Horth, 1996, 1998). For example, participants make print-image collages about specific challenges they face in their work (surfacing). The collages are hung together as a gallery (display).

Inquiry within LCP uses a technique adapted from Montague Ullman (1996) called the *star model*—a process that has become the basis for our current practice of mediated dialogue. The star model locates group members as if they were points of a star, with the

center of the star a common area for meaningful artifacts. The main flow of discourse runs between the center and the points of the star, rather than from person to person. People give and take meanings from the common area by choice—offering perceptions, making connections, noticing patterns, and so on. In the case of complex-challenge collages in the LCP, participants comment on each others’ representations in language such as, “When I look at that I see . . .” or “If that were my collage, I might think about . . .” or “Building on that last observation . . .” The maker of the collage at first simply listens and, in the end, reassumes the authorial voice and reclaims his own understanding of the challenge being faced. The sense-making process here tends to be very fluid. People take input from each other. For example, a person can establish the meaning of her own situation as she examines the collage made by another.

Mediated dialogue consists of three generic steps:

1. Constructing or selecting an object and charging it with meaning.
2. Sharing the object and its meaning with others.
3. Opening the object and the meaning to inquiry, including the construction of shared meaning.

## Two Techniques for Conducting a Mediated Dialogue

In this section, we describe two techniques—Visual Explorer and movie making—that we invented for conducting dialogue. We invite others to test the methods and invent new ones. It is important to use these techniques in the context of good organization development practice, that is, responsible and competent stage-setting, facilitation, and follow-up.

We illustrate the techniques with the disguised case of senior managers at a company called Angstrom Inc. (a pseudonym). We used both techniques during a meeting of several days, with cumulative effect. The dialogue we were facilitating was larger than this single event, at the level of the long-term strategic conversation of the group. No brief technique can substitute for sustained dialogue. We offer these techniques as stepping stones, not the entire path (but useful where the path fades from view).

### *Visual Explorer*

Visual Explorer combines aspects of the postcard exercise, collage, and the star model (described in the previous section). It was first designed as a versatile aid to sense-making in the face of complex challenges; as we used it, we frequently noticed that better dialogue took place.



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Instead of postcards, we use a large library of digitized images from which we have selected 156 for this application (although postcards are still a good option). The images are printed in color on letter-size paper. This large format affords better viewing than postcards, and digital color provides sharp, compelling visual qualities. We used two overarching criteria in choosing the images, which are derived from our experience using the postcard tool. First, the images have a wide variety of visual styles (for example, photographs, eighteenth-century oil paintings, abstracts) and portray various human conditions (for example, culture, gender, emotional range). Second, the images are “interesting” or lead to psychosocial metaphors. One example is a stunning photograph of a group of hikers roped together while traversing a vast white glacier. Compelling aesthetic features often help an image meet the criterion. Other images are interesting because they hint at layers of meaning or hidden perspectives. For example, several images require close examination to determine which side is up.

The senior managers at Angstrom Inc. met one weekend to determine strategy in the face of significant change, fast-paced competition, and ambiguity. First, they listened to a number of expert presenters discuss studies of the industry. The task for the Angstrom group was to make sense of a flood of information in a context of ambiguity while planning for the future—a situation calling for competent sense-making (Weick and Meader, 1993) and an opportunity for mediated dialogue. The seed question we asked was, “What stands out, above all else, from this morning’s presentations and why?” The instructions we used are summarized in table 1.

What we are learning by using the Visual Explorer is that it produces surprisingly good dialogue. In this case, it was a minimal dialogue that lasted only 30 minutes or so within the small groups of three or four. Yet it was a good start on a subsequent session of dialogue at the same meeting of Angstrom executives using the movie-making method described in the next section.

One picture, selected by an executive whom we will call John, shows a person fishing through a hole in ice. John used the image to describe the simplicity and the demands of fishing. Angstrom is a high-tech business, yet for John, the work came down to certain basics: patience, focus, and a bit of suffering. John’s group noticed the wooden stick and simple metal tool lying on the ice and tried to determine what those represented in their business. They noticed the person was alone and wondered why.

Mary chose an image of a rock climber. She talked about the exhilaration and fear she experienced at Angstrom. Someone noticed that Mary was holding the image upside down—the trees in the distance belonged at the bottom. The conversation shifted to perspective: What happens if you *invert* certain key assumptions that Angstrom had made?

**Table 1** Using the Visual Explorer at Angstrom Inc.

	<i>Rationale and Comments</i>
<p><b>This exercise’s purpose</b> is for participants to process what they heard from speakers and to raise and examine the points that are most salient to the group and its challenges.</p>	<p>The group wanted help with this and found the purpose compelling. Work with what is most salient or important to the individuals involved.</p>
<p><b>Instructions to group</b></p>	
<p>1. <b>Think about</b> one topic or detail you heard among all the presentations that stands out for you in its importance or possible implications.</p>	
<p>2. <b>Write down</b> your thoughts on what stands out for you (three to five minutes). What you write down in your journal will be private unless you choose otherwise.</p>	<p>A journal is a good companion to dialogue. Occasional brief periods to organize and write down private thoughts are a valuable complement to the public verbal exchanges.</p>
<p>3. <b>Browse through the pictures</b> on the tables and find one or two that evoke the thoughts you wrote down. The connection between the thoughts and the images may be intuitive, emotional, or literal. The image may “speak to you” in ways that are hard to verbalize. Do this without talking (speaking interferes with the browsing). Take your time and look at all the images (five to ten minutes).</p>	<p>The images have been displayed on tables before the start of the activity.  Music played during this step gently enforces silence.</p>
<p>4. When you have found your image, return to your seat and <b>write</b> first what you see in the images and second a few thoughts about the connection to your thoughts (three to five minutes).</p>	<p>Introverts especially need more time to write in their journals.</p>
<p>5. <b>Break into subgroups</b> of three or four.</p>	<p>These groups can be formed in various ways familiar to all facilitators.</p>
<p>6. <b>Share and discuss</b> the images (repeat all these steps for each person):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Describe your image</b> to the group, paying attention to the details and to the image as a whole. What is it? What’s going on? Why were you drawn to that image? What do you wonder about in the image? <b>Explain what the image means to you with respect to your thoughts.</b> How is it connected to your thoughts? What does it mean to you? Does it bring out anything that you hadn’t thought of before? (three to five minutes).</li> <li>• Each person in the group then describes what he or she sees in the same image and any connections. Each person speaks to the group rather than directly to the individual who selected the image, using language such as, “What I see in this image . . .” or “If this were my image . . .” (three minutes for each other person in the group).</li> <li>• The person who selected the image has a chance at a “last word” about the images and possible meanings and connections to the topic (one minute).</li> </ul>	<p>This is a variation on the star model.  Summarize these steps for the group on a chart or handout.  It is important that people spend time paying attention to the image itself before going on to describe its connection to their thoughts.</p>
<p>7. Again write your thoughts in your <b>journal</b>.</p>	
<p><b>Save the selected images</b> for the next phase of mediated dialogue.</p>	<p>An optional activity can move into debriefing or decision making.</p>

We observed the following kinds of mostly positive behavior and outcomes in this case and similar cases while using Visual Explorer:

- When they first encounter the Visual Explorer process, people are often suspicious of it as being “too soft” for serious business. Yet the overall reaction at the end is usually favorable.
- Participants often report that the quality of the conversation improves in various ways, in terms of the quality of insights about issues, and in the way people treat each other during the conversation.
- The bottom line for the Angstrom group was that they felt they had obtained valuable insights, while avoiding some ruts (“rat holes” as they call them) that frustrate them in their usual discussions.
- The images facilitate a flow of ideas from the person speaking.
- The images facilitate a flow of appreciative and constructive observations by the listeners.
- Each person in the group examines elements that stand out in the images so that points of view are not entrenched.
- The images become the center of a conversation rich in metaphors.
- People often find personal connections to their own and others’ images, adding a degree of interpersonal richness and self-disclosure.
- The images lend themselves to visual jokes, so there is a sense of play and a lot of laughter.
- The images also lend themselves to serious themes, by content (death, war), as a screen for values and beliefs (parent/child, cultural themes), and as a vehicle for emotion-laden issues.
- Topics are hanging at the end of the activity; this is troublesome if this is just an “exercise.” Some frame for closure or continuation is required.
- It is not easy to preserve potentially valuable insights from the dialogue, although the images show promise as durable artifacts. (For example, people often ask to keep the images they selected, and we have seen them framed and hung in offices and corridors.)

Several typical comments we hear in debriefing Visual Explorer sessions are:

- “I thought I knew what the picture I picked was all about until other people said what they saw in it” (referring to the image *per se*, not the interpretation).
- “I thought I had the connection of my picture to my challenge nailed down until I heard how other people would connect it to their challenge. The meaning of the image just seemed to grow.” (His sense of challenge grew as others made their interpretations of the image.)
- “I felt like whatever I said about my picture was accepted by the others in my group even though they had different ways of interpreting it. Their disagreement about the nature of the picture did not make any difference to the feeling of having my own views accepted and appreciated.”
- “I learned something about a person in my group whom I have known for years. I got an insight into the way he thinks about things by listening to him describe his image and how it was connected to his concerns about the future.”
- “The conversation we had went far, fast. Yet we also looked at a lot of details.”

### *Movie Making*

The movie-making technique is based on three sources: *Collage*—arranging disparate images into a meaningful representation of something—is used to understand complex challenges. It is a method well developed in the LCP and often adapted by program alumni in their own leadership situations. *Storytelling* includes earlier work we had done on autobiographical stories in support of leadership development. *Literature* on strategic scenario-building (for example, Schwartz, 1991) is another source.

We facilitated a movie-making session at the weekend Angstrom meeting. Our purpose was twofold: (1) to imagine the future in order to think about strategy and prepare

for unexpected events, and (2) to learn to work more interdependently. The movie-making exercise followed Visual Explorer; each was a way to practice dialogue in support of group interdependence and dealing with the unexpected. Instructions are summarized in table 2.

The group produced four wall-sized collage-movies, showing imaginative “what if” scenarios about the company’s possible futures, such as, “What if Cuba suddenly opened its borders and transformed into a showpiece for business growth?” “What if our employees all became free agents in ‘the connected society?’”

One of the most revealing commentaries on this activity resulted from a mistake we facilitators made: we removed the movies from the wall that evening to prepare for the next day’s activities. The next morning, the participants were rightfully upset; they wanted to continue the dialogue. They wanted to stand again in front of the movies they had made and continue the in-depth conversations.

The group agreed that the quality of their conversation was better than usual for them, both during the making of the movies and during subsequent dialogue.

We observed the following behavior and outcomes in this case:

- People voiced some initial concerns about the movie making as being too “touchy-feely.” These concerns completely faded during the dialogue.
- This process raised and explored many business issues at a detailed level.
- The movie medium allowed the dialogue to leave and then revisit issues; the movies stayed on the wall.
- When the groups first started making the movies, the conversation tended to be very abstract and analytical. It helped to suggest that they go to the wall and start sketching.
- It also helped to advise them to preface remarks with the word “pretend” (for example, “pretend Angstrom goes into these new markets”).
- As the exercise proceeded, there was more levity and more laughter.
- The groups used the images from the previous Visual Explorer activity in the movies, linking the two activities.
- The groups created many metaphors.
- The movies tended to be more nonlinear than a traditional story. They contained inserts or digressions that were riffs on the theme but were not well integrated. They were unedited drafts rather than polished scripts. This happened when the groups split into smaller units to create different segments of the movie, but seemed to help rather than detract from the ensuing dialogue.
- One suggestion that helped when the movie making bogged down in disagreement was to make the disagreements come alive by putting them into the movie, such as having two characters with differing viewpoints.
- Shifts in the patterns of conversation tended to occur when the groups “went to the walls,” that is, when they got up from their chairs and sketched the movies.
- Hanging the completed movies on the wall for shared reflection means that, when the debriefing ensues, people are looking at the wall rather than each other (another variant of “the middle”). Eye contact can interrupt dialogue and turn it into discussion.
- The movies were *not* complete until the participants viewed and reconstructed them in the process of dialogue. Observations and interpretation of the larger group compelled new shared understandings of the work that each small group had done.



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**Table 2** Movie making at Angstrom Inc.

	<i>Rationale and Comments</i>
<p><b>The purpose of this exercise</b> is to better perceive and understand possibilities that are currently unexpected in a deliberately interdependent way.</p>	<p>The group members had already set goals for themselves.</p>
<p><b>Instructions to group</b></p> <p><b>1. Break into four groups</b> of seven or eight people, one for each of four previously identified strategic themes (customer relations, new services, new products, and innovation).</p>	<p>This is the strategic work of the group.</p>
<p><b>2. Create an imaginative story</b> set in the near future—a fictional future for Angstrom. The story will illustrate a disruptive yet possible set of events and circumstances in your market—inspired by the presentations you heard earlier in the meeting. Emphasize the strategic theme your group has been given.</p>	<p>There were two set-ups:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presentations by experts on dynamic forces in the business (Angstrom called this “provocative discovery”).</li> <li>• Input was gathered from group members using a prompt: <i>Imagine an event that would have significant impact on Angstrom’s business. Describe the event. Imagine a headline that captures the dilemma or event. What are the implications?</i> We collected the answers and distributed them to the group before the meeting.</li> </ul>
<p><b>3. Create an illustrated story</b> or movie on the white paper covering the wall, using the magazines and photos provided, images from Visual Explorer, glue, string, tape, paint, and anything else.</p> <p><b>A story has these parts:</b>  <i>Once upon a time</i>—Introduce the characters, set the stage;  <i>Then one day</i>—A provocative event occurs that challenges the status quo;  <i>And so</i>—What happens? How does so-and-so respond?  <i>And in the end</i>                      Make scenarios memorable, compelling, vivid, and provocative.                      Take two hours for making the movies.</p>	<p>We used a yard-wide roll to paper the walls. Each group had its own wall.</p> <p>The movie is a kind of storyboard, illustrated script, projection screen, motion picture.</p> <p>Invoking a familiar story pattern seems reassuring and helps people organize their material.                      Facilitation points:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sketch at the wall rather than argue about the plot around a table.</li> <li>• Embody any disagreement you have into characters or plot elements.</li> <li>• Pretend, play, improvise, imagine.</li> </ul>
<p><b>4. Share and discuss</b> the movies (repeat for each group in turn):  <b>A group shows (presents, narrates) its movie</b> to everyone (15 minutes each).                      After, have a dialogue focused on the movie:  <b>Start with observations</b> about the details, characters, surprises, ambiguities, and so on as you might discuss a film you have just seen with friends. Language such as “I noticed,” “I wonder,” “When so-and-so died, I thought. . .”  <b>Ask the movie makers</b> about their choices, their process in making the movie, their assumptions, and so on.</p>	<p>This is a variation on the star model and a form of dialogue.</p> <p>Keeping the primary focus on the movie allows the process of suspending assumptions to continue.</p>
<p><b>5. Look at the meanings and broader implications</b> of the movie for Angstrom. What does the movie help us to see about the present situation? What are our assumptions, compared to the ones in the movie?</p>	<p>We made an error by removing the movies from the walls too soon. The group was eager to continue having a business conversation with the movies on view spurring dialogue.</p>
<p><b>6. Locate key strategic points</b> across all four movies: Participants get five red and five green sticky dots. They place the green dots next to portions of the movies that they think illustrate Angstrom’s key strategic strengths. They place the red dots next to portions that show strategic weaknesses.</p>	<p>Voting can be done on any salient dimension on which you want to poll the group. The dots help keep the conversation close to the movies, that is, to the constructed middle of the dialogue.                      Save or digitally photograph the movies for future review by this group and their staffs.</p>

## Conclusion

Dialogue can be valuable in addressing complex challenges. In practice, dialogue is often difficult to initiate if not already present. Putting something in the middle—mediation of the conversation with various kinds of “objects”—has always been a way to achieve dialogue. The notion of mediated dialogue points the way to doing this deliberately and with skill.

What happens before and after dialogue also determines its success. Mediated dialogue sustains connections to art, especially in the sense of skilled craftsmanship and the disciplines of building (Booth, 1999). The best conversations have always been intertwined with the things we make and with the processes of making. The common area in the middle of a dialogue benefits from having an artistic bridge. Mediated dialogue means building artistic bridges for communication.

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## Commentary

by William N. Isaacs

In his book, *Serious Play*, Michael Schrage raises the important insight that the way organizations reflect on and manage their innovation prototyping process is critical to stimulating innovation (2000). This is because the prototyping process is essentially a learning process. It can force reflection on underlying mental models and the social context that guides action by enabling people to make their choices, preferences, and biases explicit. The central idea here: explicit thinking can become refined thinking.

This is, in part, the premise behind Palus and Drath’s article on mediated dialogue, which approaches the same ground by suggesting that mediating objects or processes can stimulate dialogue. Mediating objects are like conversational prototypes, letting people give form to the unformed or unarticulated assumptions they have. Yet while their article proposes two interesting mediating techniques, which I believe can be valuable in liberating energy, they do not quite go far enough and have the potential to be misleading. This is because it is the very perils and difficulties of dialogue that their techniques seek to help people overcome that contain some of the most important information people need to achieve genuine dialogue and breakthrough thinking.

Palus and Drath argue that dialogue is difficult, and one core aspect of it—suspending assumptions—especially so. They propose visual techniques that allow people to externalize their unconscious or tacit thinking and so make it available for reflection. It does seem to be the case that transitional objects like the ones they propose do allow people to externalize their thinking and do promote cognitive development.

Yet the question arises as to why dialogue is difficult at all. Palus and Drath suggest, in essence, that it is because people either do not have the competencies to construct meaning live, in front of others, or are too defensive to allow it to happen. They propose techniques to help people through these limits.



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I believe the problem lies deeper in the fragmented tacit infrastructure of our thought, which produces deep divisions of identity and experience among people, and in the social rules we have adopted that tend to inhibit the free and open speech that we idealize. We see evidence of this everywhere: subcultures within organizations always seem to arise that have different ways of seeing the world and that compete with one another for predominance and control. We feel these fundamental divisions, in other words, yet our civilizing social rules tell us that to raise difficult issues is to make trouble, and so we tend to try not to. Of course, these things leak out (or are shouted out) anyway, and trouble ensues.

Palus and Drath cite several comments from people who feel liberated as a result of their approach, because it gives them a sense of connection, releases energy, and produces insight. But did these people use these techniques to challenge themselves and challenge one another's thinking, or merely come to the point of feeling secure in their own, because they were able to articulate it or discover something about it? A technique that gives people the chance to avoid trouble with one another can feel liberating, but it may bypass an essential phase of conversation that leads to genuine dialogue: breakdown. A breakdown is an explicit collapse of the smooth surface of coherence that the civilizing processes of our organizations insist we maintain.

The challenge is to find a way to inquire into these very forces that lead to breakdown, if we are to actually produce sustained change. Making thinking explicit is an important step, but if it is not coupled with active engagement in the differences that arise, and the reasons for those differences, they can in the end actually delude people into thinking they had a powerful exchange, when in fact they stayed safe and did not venture into the more dangerous, but ultimately more fruitful domain of inquiry into difference and into the fascinating strangeness of the *other*.

## References

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## Response

by *Charles J. Palus and Wilfred H. Drath*

Certainly William Isaacs is right in asserting that dialogue ideally helps people in obtaining "free and open speech" across the "fragmented tacit infrastructure of our thought." Helping people make sense and meaning together across boundaries, when they see things differently, is our explicit goal. And, yes, people are bound by "civilizing social rules" that do often get in the way of such shared meaning-making. However, the very point we were hoping to make in the article is that the "perils and difficulties" of achieving "genuine" dialogue need not stop people from beginning the journey of *learning* dialogue. Too often, the very mention of the word seems to frame an activity in which only the achievement of "true" dialogue will be judged a success, so that in-between steps of not-quite-regular discussion and almost-dialogue are taken as failures.

Object-mediated dialogue seems to encourage certain initial forms of what Isaacs calls "breakdown" early in this learning process. The use of physical objects viewed and handled in common often reveals profound disparities in what people notice and how they name things. Such disparities—relatively small breakdowns in the web of shared meaning—are often quite surprising, even humorous, and can rapidly become an explicit subject of the dialogue. This is a good place to start learning about a new way to talk, even as the dialogue moves to more difficult forms of breakdown over core issues. Our experience has been that people usefully take small steps toward dialogue, and that the experience of achieving something that is not quite a normal conversation, that goes (even if only a little) beyond the conversational routines of day-to-day work, affords people a preview of deeper and more useful dialogue (perhaps what Vygotsky would have called an experience in the zone of proximal development). We think such a preview can support development in the desired direction. To answer Isaacs' question, yes, people use mediated dialogue to "challenge themselves and challenge one another's thinking," but the degree and nature of the challenge is at the edge of what can be supported, not beyond it.

## Reference

Vygotsky, L.S. *Mind in Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).

# Commentary

by Roger Harrison

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Effective ways of focusing dialogue are always welcome. Palus and Drath make a creative contribution with their approach to mediated dialogue. The idea of focusing on "something in the middle" should lead to further innovation. As a facilitator with interest in useful ways of making dialogue work, I appreciate their sharing of inventions and especially their willingness to share a mistake they made. I find I learn as much or more from my own and others' mistakes as I do from successes.

The article stimulated me to reflect on the distinction between "running" dialogue and approaches that promote self-determination by participants. Because of client pressures for quick results, consultants are always tempted by participants' preference for something being done to them, rather than muddling through the learning process themselves.

Good practice of our art need not be complex and mysterious. It is possible, indeed preferable, for willing participants to manage their own inquiry into the deeper meanings behind differences without having to accept arcane and mystical definitions for ordinary words. Christina Baldwin, for example, describes an elegant and effective approach to the self-management of dialogue. Baldwin's work currently provides the approach to learning dialogue used in Margaret Wheatley's worldwide community building project, "From the Four Directions." Having used both Bohmian dialogue and Baldwin's circle work in my own attempts to make dialogue accessible, I believe that all well-managed efforts to promote inquiry lead to a deeply satisfying communion of minds and hearts. This being so, we should choose those approaches that are most accessible and easily owned by clients. Our world needs powerful and effective clients more than it does powerful and effective consultants.

## References

Baldwin, C. *Calling the Circle, the First and Future Culture* (New York: Bantam, 1998). See also <http://www.peerspirit.com>.