


Conversation Mapping




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
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Conversation Mapping

Generating probes to explore complex adaptive systems through critically systemic discourse.

Introduction to technique

One of the factors that can make a situation complex is the multiple perspectives held by different people about the situation. The banking system for example is attributed with different boundaries, different purposes and perhaps even different properties when described by a banker; a fraud investigator; a customer; a competitor; or a regulator.

The resulting ambiguity is confusing and makes the task of improving the system very problematic.

A systems practitioners way of approaching the complexity (mess to coin Ackoff's label) generated by different perspectives is to generate a model or diagram that captures the perceived parts of the system and their relationship to enhance an understanding of a particular perspective.

There are several approaches to modelling used by different schools of thought within the general intellectual activity known as systems thinking. The style of computer modelling popularised in the early 1970's by Meadows, Rander and Behrens in their best seller *Limits of Growth* is known as systems dynamics: this is a generalised method of modelling the identified concrete parts and their movement at any level of abstraction. (This is systems thinking approach listed by Snowden as a method relevant to the Knowable domain in the Cynefin 'sense making framework': it is a relatively small part of systems methodology today.)

The modelling technique outlined here is more akin to what Checkland (Soft Systems Method) calls a Rich Picture. However, the technique goes further than Checkland's perspective as it is generated by bring many different perspective of the problematic issue into the same model (called a map). The goal is to enable a 'reframing' (after Schon and Rein) of the problematic through observing the emergent properties when the different perspectives interact, revealing the depth of knowledge and energy they contain.

The technique for creating this model of a messy situation is known as Conversation Mapping. A Conversation Map is generated through engaging people with different perspectives of a nominated situation to have a conversation about a salient aspect of the situation (called the trigger) but instead of just talking they record the essence of their contribution for others to reflect on and if appropriate to subsequently respond to with a written comment.. This conversation which can have as few as four (depends on diversity for its value) or as many as you want, participants is captured

on large sheets of newsprint added to, as required, so the edge of the paper is never a boundary for the conversation.

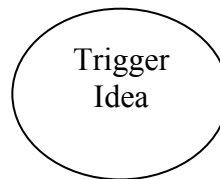
Once participants have exhausted their contribution both to the original focus and to each other's comments they join together to identify insights (new frames of reference) that emerge from the map of the mess they have jointly created. These insights or emergent properties of the situation can then be used to 'probe' the situation to assess whether they are possible ways to improve the situation.

An important characteristic of probes created in this way, when dealing with 'intractable problems', is that their parentage belongs to all those who generated the map enabling a wide range of stakeholders to share ownership.

The technique of Conversation Mapping

The process commences with the participant writing a word/phrase in the centre of a large piece of paper (or on a white board), that he or she considers might trigger a whole lot of ideas, observations, reactions, or feelings about the problematic situation.

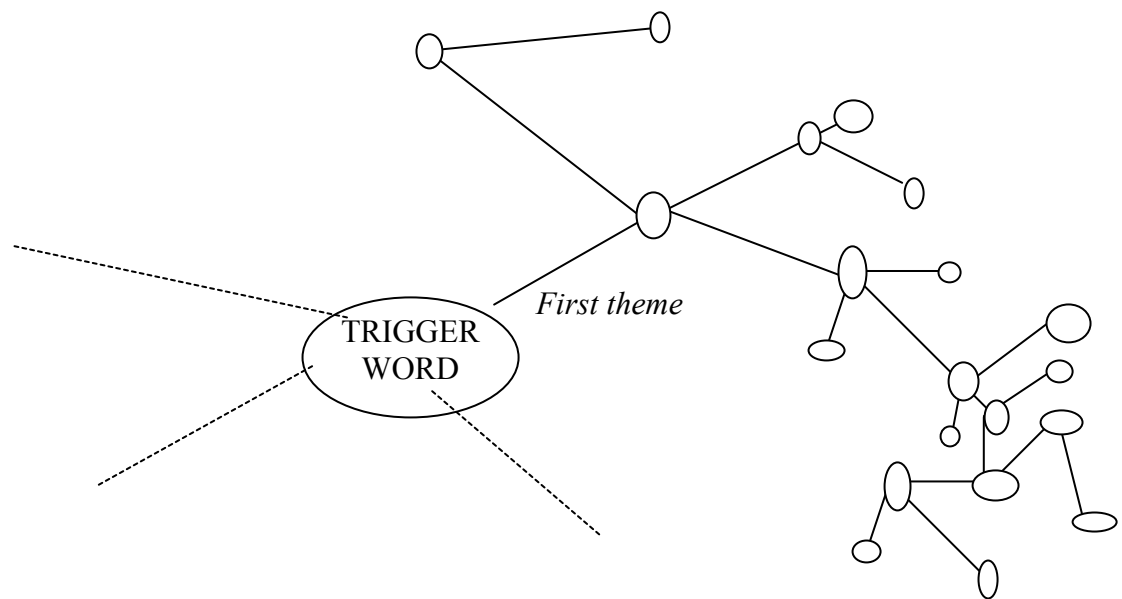
- A circle is then typically drawn around this trigger idea:



- A participant starts the conversation with any thoughts/feelings etc that they think pertains to the trigger idea. As a person is speaking they are recording their contribution on the paper and linking it with a single line to the trigger circle.
- It is best if each participant can have their own coloured pen, so their contribution is recognised.
- As others respond to this and subsequent contributions, they also write the essence of their contribution on the paper linking it by a single line to the earlier contribution it specifically develops. The lines and contributions gradually 'branch out' from the theme as it is explored. It is useful to circle each comment as it is made to delineate its boundaries.
- Some of the contributions might represent different items, than one might ordinarily list, or they might represent different aspects of the same item (often different, opposing points of view). The result typically looks like a branch which extends out into large twigs which themselves branch further into smaller twigs, with each point of branching reflecting different aspects of the problematic situation being explored. It is as if these are outcomes of some sort of internal conversation about this leading to that or that, etc.

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- Attempts to deliberately shape this branching *should be avoided*: Just let it happen and it will assume a shape of its own. If the edge of the paper is reached, new pieces of paper can always be appended.
- It is a truly divergent process with the recordings branching ever outward. As one theme becomes (temporarily exhausted) a further theme (major branch) should be pursued in the same divergent manner.



- It is very important at this stage that the participant avoid making any connections by drawing lines from issues in one theme line to another. That is a process of assimilation, and we are not ready for that for a while yet. As the process proceeds participants can patrol around the map, making new contributions on any theme of the conversation at any level of that theme's development.
- This process of divergence continues for as long as it is bearable! As it proceeds, the 'map' gets messier and messier – the 'picture' is getting richer and richer. And that is the whole idea!
- Eventually, and this process of divergence is of course limited by time in a workshop situation (the time and geographic issues are discussed below) as well as one's psychological predispositions for the activity, (and

tolerance of messiness!) there will be a need to shift gears from *divergence* to *assimilation*.

Assimilation

The trick with assimilation is to stay with the unfamiliar: To ‘look at’ and ‘deal with’ the divergent mess in unusual ways. This invariably means again avoiding the temptation of making the obvious connections between ideas and observations on one theme line with those on another. That said, there is huge advantage in making linkages across theme lines – but these should be as novel as possible, representing connections that perhaps have not been made before.

Now, more importantly, the ‘rich picture’ should be allowed to ‘talk to the observers’ as an emergent whole. It becomes like a work of art, where the overall picture often tells us more about what the artist might be attempting to ‘state’ than attention to its details, at least in the first instance. The shape of the ‘picture’ often has as many messages as the details of the words of themselves, particularly after some novel lines of connections have been made.

A focal question for the ‘sense making’ process at this point might be:

- “What does this ‘messy shape’ say about my perceptions of the issue or about the organization which spawned it?” Or
- “What would represent an improvement to the complex message that is being conveyed to me as (a) I stare at it in its entirety, and (b) I try to get into more detail?” (The so-called transformational messages).

And this in turn is often the trigger to send the observer back to the *divergence* stage to further enrich or explore either existing themes or new ones. Once this has occurred, there might be new “messages in the medium” – new thoughts or concepts that can be assimilated from the now enriched picture.

Of course emergence in this “systemic” sense is not always forthcoming, particularly to those who are new to the process. But in that case, the transformational messages will be found in the detail. They are always there as long as the ‘divergent picture’ is rich enough!

Another way for a group to initiate the search for emergent properties in the ‘map’ is to select a generic label that is considered may be indicative of an emergent theme. For example ‘communication’ may be chosen. The group then interrogates the map to identify all the comments that pertain in some way or other to the concept of communication. These identified comments are recorded verbatim from the map no matter from which part of the map. The group then strives to identify the essence of all the comments that have been extracted and construct an explanatory statement. In some cases it may require more than one statement to capture the full nuances of the extract comments.

- Make a list of these 'emergent issues' and then write an explanatory paragraph or two to articulate their specific nature with respect to the problematic situation being studied.

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- Select the emergent issues from the list, which the group believes may have significant leverage to improve the problematic situation. These issues can be used to;
 1. Probe to the complex issue to gain greater understanding of its behaviour when emergent issues are manipulated; or
 2. Design activities that will leverage improvement in the problematic situation. Soft Systems Methods are particularly useful for this process.

A final word

The Conversation Map is neither time nor geographically bound in its generation. The map can be moved from location to location to ensure many separated perspectives are captured. New participants can quickly engage with the conversation that has gone before adding their contributions be they new themes or additions to themes already presented. Similarly many successful mapping activities have been conducted by displaying the map in a public place for two to three weeks so that potential participants can contribute and re-contribute as they are able.

Conversation Maps can make the following contribution to work on an intractable problem:

1. articulate different perspectives of a situation and the interaction (relationships) between the several perspectives that are captured;
2. generate an opportunity for all stakeholders to understand the different perspectives of a situation and to modify their personal understanding in the light of others perspective; and
3. provide an opportunity for all stakeholders to mutually identify emergent properties of the problematic situation that were not previously available and which may be the basis for new probes to explore and improve the situation.

An example from Business