



How to Address “Wicked Problems”

Use Dialogue Mapping to Build a Shared Understanding and Evolve a Group’s Thinking

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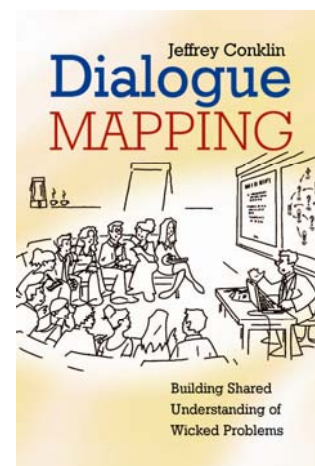
NETTING IT OUT

As the issues we deal with become increasingly complex and intractable, we need better ways for people to cope with complexity. One really powerful approach is to capture the evolving shared mental model of a group of people who are co-designing solutions.

Jeff Conklin is the father of a mature discipline he calls “Dialogue Mapping™.” This method has been used for over three decades to help the different stakeholders in large, complex projects achieve alignment, make decisions they can own, and move forward.

Jeff wrote a useful book called [Dialogue Mapping: Building Shared Understanding of Wicked Problems](#). It was first published in 2005 and is now available on [Kindle](#) as well as in print. Having worked with Jeff on complex problems in a state government setting in the past, I recently reconnected with him and decided to learn the art of Dialogue Mapping to help our clients as they engage with their customers, along with many other types of stakeholders, in designing new products and solutions.

I am confident that Dialogue Mapping will prove to be a powerful technique for my team to use in helping to design and evolve viable, thriving customer co-designed products and ecosystems. I believe it’s also a vital tool for any group of people to use if you are tackling an important “wicked problem.”



Dr. Jeff Conklin, teacher of Issue Mapping, creator of Dialogue Mapping and founder of the CogNexus Institute and CogNexus Group. He is perhaps best known for his work with the Issue Based Information System (IBIS) method and extensions of it, such as research tools (“gIBIS”) and commercial products (“CM/1™”, “QuestMap™”) that support IBIS. He is advisor to the Compendium Institute, which distributes the open source Compendium mapping tool.

Dr. Conklin also developed the Dialogue Mapping™ facilitation technique, a radically inclusive approach to knowledge management that allows groups to capture and make sense of unstructured knowledge during project meetings. Dr. Conklin has taught Dialogue Mapping™ to thousands of people all over the world.

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WHAT'S A WICKED PROBLEM AND WHY DO THEY ABOUND?

Wicked Problems are Complex and Increasingly Frequent

How many of us are immersed in dealing with big, complex issues in which there are many different well-meaning people all trying to wrap their minds around something important? It might be designing a new software application, or developing a new product, or planning a new transportation system, or dealing with a crisis of some kind—an unexpected hospital closure, or an environmentally harmful commercial development. These kinds of issues abound in our personal, business, and public lives. It is very easy for these kinds of discussions to become highly polarized and/or to get nowhere. Everyone comes with his or her own point of view. Many people are experts in some aspect of the issue. Everyone wants to create a win/win solution, but the process of doing so is frequently really uncomfortable and unpleasant and virtually impossible—it's often not exhilarating and fun, but instead devolves into polarized camps and us/them discussions.

These kinds of design problems are what urban planner Horst Rittel dubbed “Wicked Problems” over 40 years ago: they are seemingly intractable, complex and deeply embedded in social and political context (Who's on first? Who is in charge? Who gets to decide? What are their motivations?) In the early 1970's, Horst Rittel and his colleagues discovered and documented a class of problems that were ill-suited to the linear systems analysis approach that was then (and still is) used for design and planning. “He found traditional planning methods inadequate for the ill-structured problems he encountered in city planning,” Conklin writes. As an antidote, Rittel and his colleagues invented the Issue-Based Information System (IBIS) structure that Jeff Conklin uses as the basis for his Dialogue Mapping.



Horst Rittel (born in 1930) has been a practicing urban designer and professor of design at a number of universities, including the Ulm School of Design in his native Germany; the University of California, Berkeley; Washington University; and the University of Stuttgart. He conceived of IBIS (Issue-Based Information System) in 1968. It's a method to guide the design process and to reinforce deliberation and argumentation.

As Jeff Conklin explains, it's painful to try to address a wicked problem using tools and approaches that are designed for non-wicked (tame) problems. He writes:

“A tame problem:

- Has a well-defined and stable problem statement;
- Has a definite stopping point, i.e., when the solution is reached;
- Has a solution that can be objectively evaluated as right or wrong;
- Belongs to a similar class of problems that are all solved in the same similar way;
- Has solutions that can be easily tried and abandoned;
- Comes with a limited set of alternative solutions.”

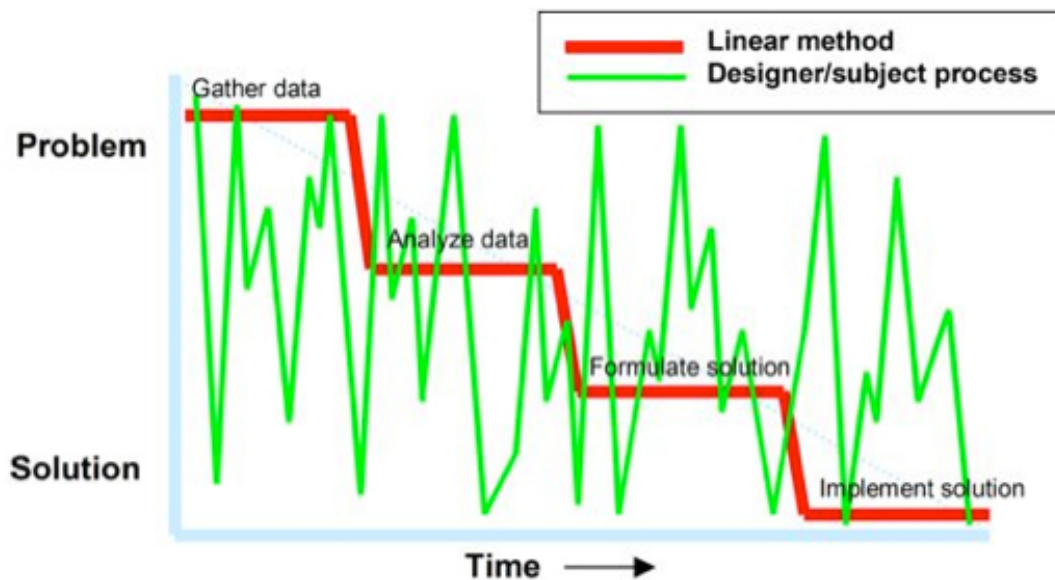
Now, think about it: How many of the projects, issues, and design challenges that you and your team face share the characteristics above? I know that most of our clients *are* our clients precisely because the new solutions they need to create to meet their customers' or citizens' needs don't fit those parameters very well. And they need to not only address their end-customers' needs, but those

of many other constituencies as well (regulators, investors, suppliers, partners, etc.). And they have very different ideas about the “best ways” to approach a viable solution. They even have different ideas about what “success” looks like (except in the broadest terms: e.g., “It’s a profitable \$100 million business and our customers and partners are fanatically loyal”).

What Makes a Problem “Wicked?”

One of the most important things I learned in reading Jeff Conklin’s book is why wicked problems are wicked. They aren’t solvable! There’s no right answer! And you have to start coming up with solutions in order to further understand the problem space. This idea of positing solutions before you fully understand the problem is not wrong. It’s actually the way humans deal with many kinds of design challenges.

How Humans Solve Opportunity-Driven Problems



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The Red Line is the way in which we’re “supposed” to solve problems or design things. The green line represents the way that experienced engineers typically approach a novel, complex problem—they begin by positing a solution to a partially-understood problem space and then bump into problems or constraints, solve for them, and keep learning and expanding their knowledge of the problem domain as they solve it. When you have a whole bunch of people from different perspectives doing this in parallel, you get lots of spikes as different people make progress and others run into bottlenecks. Opportunity-driven problems don’t lend themselves to a linear waterfall method, but we keep trying to shoehorn Wicked Problems into that linear approach.

Here's a synopsis of the characteristics of a wicked problem as Horst Rittel defined them and Jeff Conklin elaborated:

1. *"You don't understand the problem until you have developed a solution.* Every solution that is offered exposes new aspects of the problem, requiring further adjustments of the potential solutions. Indeed, there is no definitive statement of 'the problem.'...
2. *Wicked problems have no stopping rule.* Since there is no definitive 'the problem,' there is also no definitive 'the solution.' The problem-solving process ends when you run out of resources, such as time, money, or energy, not when some optimal or 'final and correct' solution emerges...you stop when it's good enough.
3. *Solutions to wicked problems are not right or wrong.* They are simply 'better,' 'worse,' 'good enough,' or 'not good enough.' With wicked problems, the determination of solution quality is not objective and cannot be derived from following a formula. Solutions are assessed in a social context in which 'many parties are equally equipped, interested, and/or entitled to judge [them],' and these judgments are likely to vary widely and depend on the stakeholder's independent values and goals.
4. *Every wicked problem is essentially unique and novel.* There are so many factors and conditions, all embedded in a dynamic social context, that no two wicked problems are alike, and the solutions to them will always be custom designed and fitted...
5. *Wicked problems have no given alternative solutions.* There may be no solutions, or there may be a host of potential solutions that are devised, and another host that are never even thought of."

Does this list of descriptive characteristics sound familiar? Do you have some projects that have at least some of these attributes? If so, you have a wicked problem on your hands, and a traditional linear/waterfall approach to design and development won't work. You'll need to rely instead on a more "agile" experiment and learn approach. You'll need to experiment over time, learn about what works and what new issues arise, and assuming that your team consists of more than one person, you'll need a way to capture your understanding and learning as you progress. Jeff Conklin adds:

"It turns out there's a slippery linguistic trap in the name 'wicked problem,' because the name implies there's a 'solution.' It's more accurate to talk about the degree of 'wickedness' in a situation (or perhaps how messy a given 'mess' is). (Framing the challenge in this way might help to break our addiction to racing around creating and exacerbating 'problems' with our 'solutions.')

The truth is that a wicked problem is a set of interlocking issues across many domains (i.e. political, environmental, economic, etc.), and any attempt to bound the scope of the challenge is arbitrary. Moreover, only a tame problem can be 'solved'—wicked problems can only be managed more or less effectively, more or less efficiently. The best we can do is to find more elegant and expedient interventions, but ultimately the human condition is that there's no getting away from the 'Whac-a-mole' phenomenon that even the most elegant intervention on a wicked problem will make some issue(s) more wicked for some stakeholder(s)."

Even getting started on coming up with a solution to a wicked problem is intractable. Everybody involved has a different definition of “the problem,” and all of those definitions are probably flawed because we (collectively) don’t yet know enough. Jeff Conklin explains:

“With social complexity, ‘not understanding the problem’ does not show up as innocent wonder about the mystery of the problem, neither does it usually occur as a thoughtful collective inquiry into the deeper nature of the problem. Rather, ‘not understanding the problem’ shows up as different stakeholders who are certain that their version of the problem is correct or at least that other versions are fatally flawed. In severe cases, such as many political situations, each stakeholder’s position about what the problem is reflects the mission and objectives of the organization (or country) they represent.”

Why Are We Faced with More Wicked Problems All the Time?

It’s inevitable that, as human beings evolve, we’re going to be tackling more and more of these wicked problems. Jeff Conklin concurs:

As we enter the new millennium, the forces of fragmentation appear to be increasing, and the increasing intensity of these forces causes more and more projects to flounder and fail. The bigger they are, the more intense the fragmenting forces, the more likely the projects are to fail.

We’re being faced with more and more, larger and larger, issues to work on all the time. So how do we cope?

SHARED UNDERSTANDING OF A WICKED PROBLEM IS ESSENTIAL!

Combat Fragmentation

How can you tackle the “blind men and the elephant problem?” Particularly when the elephant keeps morphing from an elephant to a gazelle to a flock of flamingos, along the way? Fragmentation—social context, organizational goals, different disciplines, etc. is a fact of life.

Build and Evolve a Common Mental Model

One solution is to work together to build a shared picture with all the stakeholders that accurately represents what we “know,” what different people assert, what we can try and learn from, and what we currently think are the relevant options. (Remember, there is no “right” answer!)

The way that Jeff Conklin prefers to do this is to have a Dialogue Mapper facilitate a face-to-face meeting with a shared display of the issues being raised in the conversation as it progresses. Everyone feels heard, and everyone’s ideas are captured. A good facilitator can move the group quickly through an entire thicket of thorny issues, capturing just enough context and then moving on. If there’s a tangential issue, it’s captured, and eventually it may form the root of a new discussion on another topic.

Applying Dialogue Mapping in a Government Setting. I have a vivid recollection from the time that Jeff Conklin used Dialogue Mapping to capture the varied opinions and assertions about what was wrong with the Commonwealth of Massachusetts’ human services delivery and reimbursement model. At the time, the state had a budget of \$6 billion for social services for Massachusetts residents.

There were many different social services and health and welfare agencies—many with conflicting agendas. There were the “customers”—the beneficiaries of the services—the people who needed help, their family members, as well as all the service providers (from social workers and psychiatrists and doctors and nurses and clinics to taxi drivers), and all the reimbursement entities (federal and state), and all the regulators. We ran a series of cross-departmental meetings to begin to frame a problem that we could use as a customer co-design opportunity. Dialogue Mapping was an amazingly useful tool! Everyone could see their issues, their constraints, their past successes and failures, their ideas about what could work, the pros and cons from all parties. We could also all see at a glance (including the Health and Human Services Commissioner) that the “system” was very broken. What was clearly documented in our shared dialogue and the way that everyone framed the problem space was that everyone’s energy was going into making sure that the care providers were getting reimbursed promptly for services delivered. And very little attention was being given to whether or not the necessary services were received or whether they actually benefited the recipients. When the Commissioner came into the room at the end of the meeting, Jeff expertly walked him through the Dialogue Map and the commissioner roared with laughter. He said, “You’ve captured in two days, what we’ve been trying to understand for four years! It’s completely ass backwards!” With that endorsement, we were off and running—we launched into an incredibly productive and successful cross-agency co-design initiative which is still paying off for the Commonwealth.

“You’ve captured in two days, what we’ve been trying to understand for four years! It’s completely ass backwards!”

~ Jeff Conklin

Create Shared Understanding and Commitment

Think about the tools you currently use to work together to frame an issue, to come up with solutions, to manage projects to “completion.” We get together in physical and virtual rooms and discuss things. We draw pictures on the wall. We attend endless online meetings punctuated by PowerPoint presentations and action plans and timelines. We have project managers and requirements documents and wire frames and prototypes. But what’s usually missing in all of this is an evolving model that we all have that accurately represents our current shared dialogue—what we each think and believe about the pros and cons of each potential solution, and what we’re learning about what works and what doesn’t work as we progress together in learning more about the problem space. Jeff Conklin:

“The Holy Grail of effective collaboration—is in creating shared understanding about the problem, and shared commitment to the possible solutions. Shared understanding does not mean we necessarily agree on the problem, although that is a good thing when it happens. Shared understanding means that the stakeholders understand each other’s positions well enough to have intelligent dialogue about the different interpretations of the problem, and to exercise collective intelligence about how to solve it. Because of social complexity, solving a wicked problem is fundamentally a social process.”

FACILITATE SHARED UNDERSTANDING THROUGH DIALOGUE MAPPING

Use Dialogue Mapping to Build Shared Understanding Throughout Your Project(s)

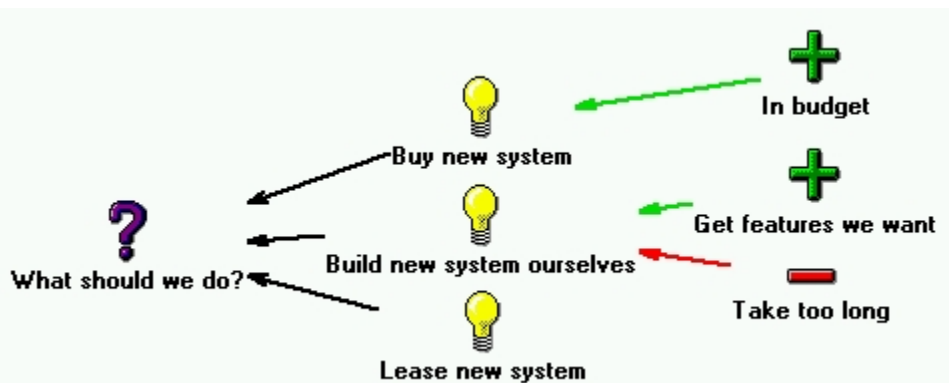
Jeff Conklin has spent over 30 years working with large and varied teams in many different industries and communities helping them address wicked problems.

Jeff is both a firm believer in, and an advocate of the method he calls Dialogue Mapping. He has taught this method to many facilitators and to entire teams. His book distills much of what he teaches in his workshops.

A very basic “Build vs. Buy” Dialogue Map. Each map starts with a question and some ideas about answers to the question. There may be pros and cons associated with each idea.

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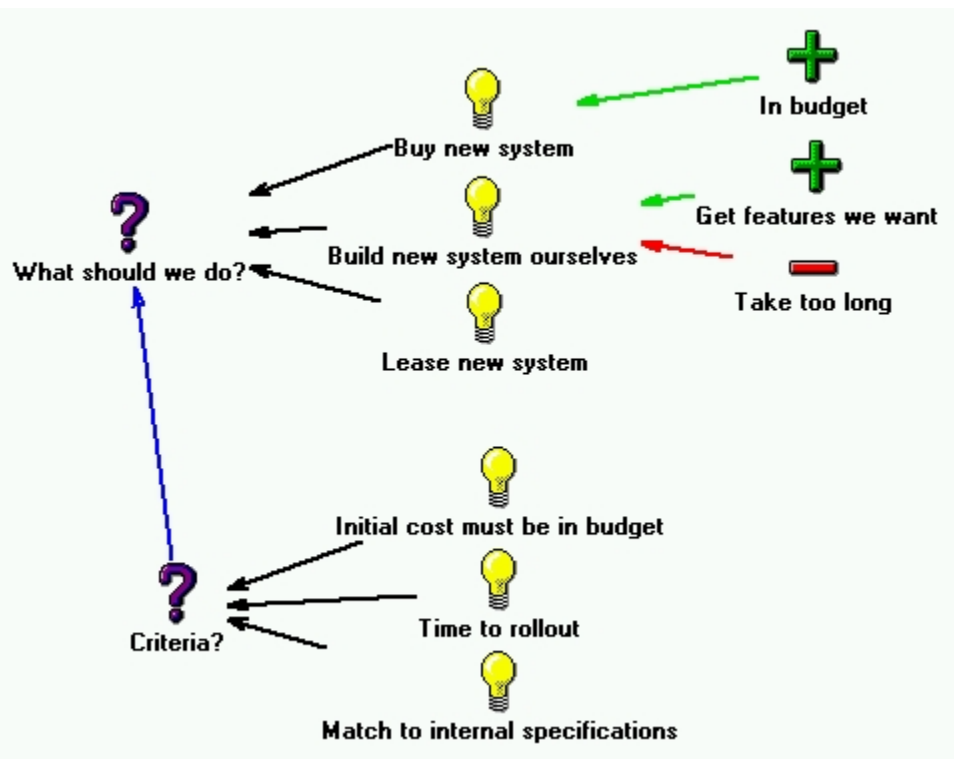
Beginning of a “Build vs. Buy” Dialogue Map



As the “Build vs. Buy” discussion continued, the fact that a new system needed to be “in budget” was moved from an argument in favor of buying a new system to being captured as a criterion along with other key criteria that would influence the decision, such as “Time to rollout.”

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The Evolution of a “Build vs. Buy” Dialogue Map



The benefits Jeff's clients have gained from Dialogue Mapping are that they've been able to address complex, difficult issues crisply and without rancor. They are able to make decisions much more quickly, to look at the consequences of those decisions and come up with new ideas and approaches quickly. All the way through what may be a multi-year, multi-stakeholder process, everyone has a shared record of the collective mental model—what they thought about the problem issue—at any point in time.

Ideal Meeting Room Set Up for Dialogue Mapping



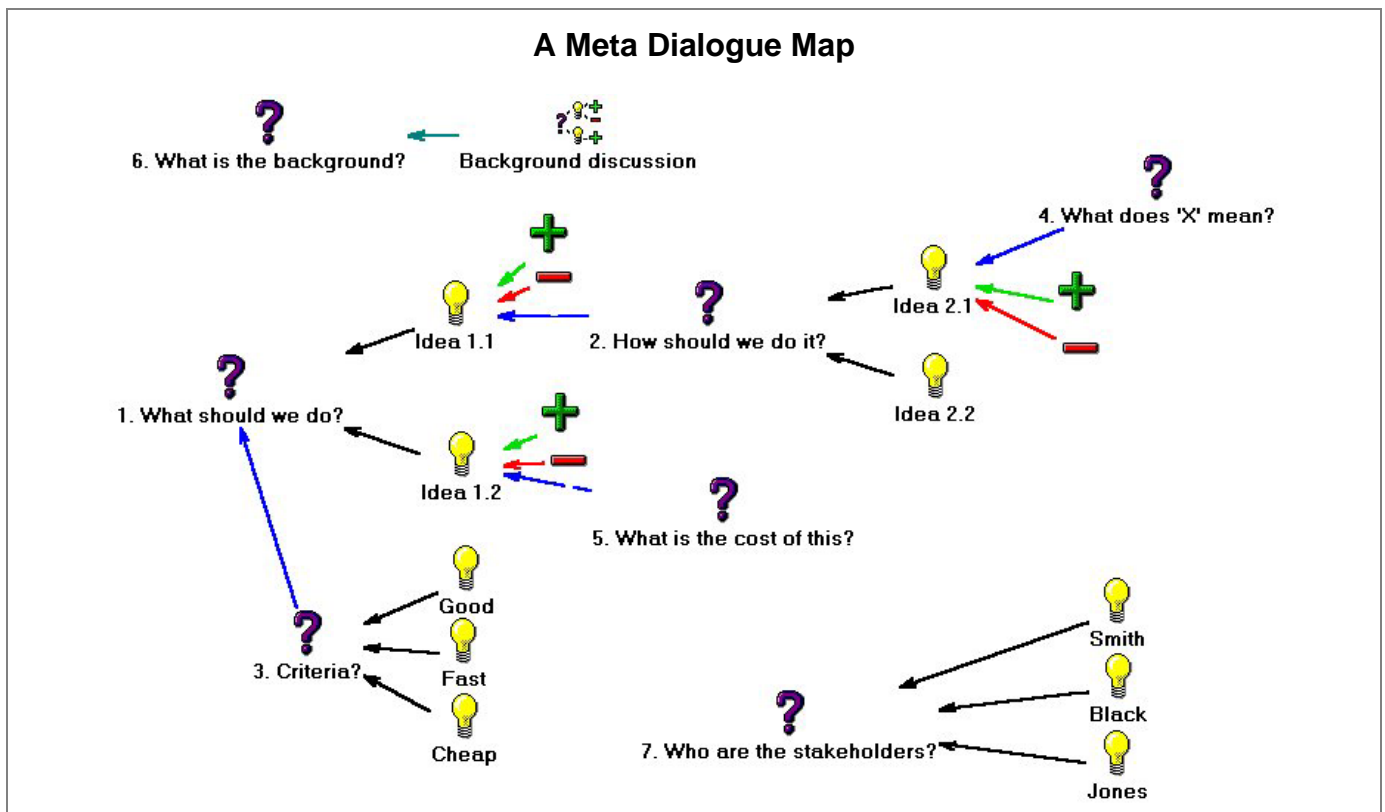
Credit: Open University's Knowledge Media Institute

Here's an ideal set-up for a typical small group meeting using Dialogue Mapping. People can present their ideas or make a case for something viewing one screen; And the discussion is mapped and validated on the other screen as people react, discuss, raise questions, or contribute ideas. It boosts the productivity of the meeting and produces great visual notes that participants can build upon in between meetings.

What Is Dialogue Mapping?

Dialogue mapping is a method that has been refined by Jeff Conklin and his colleagues. It includes three ingredients:

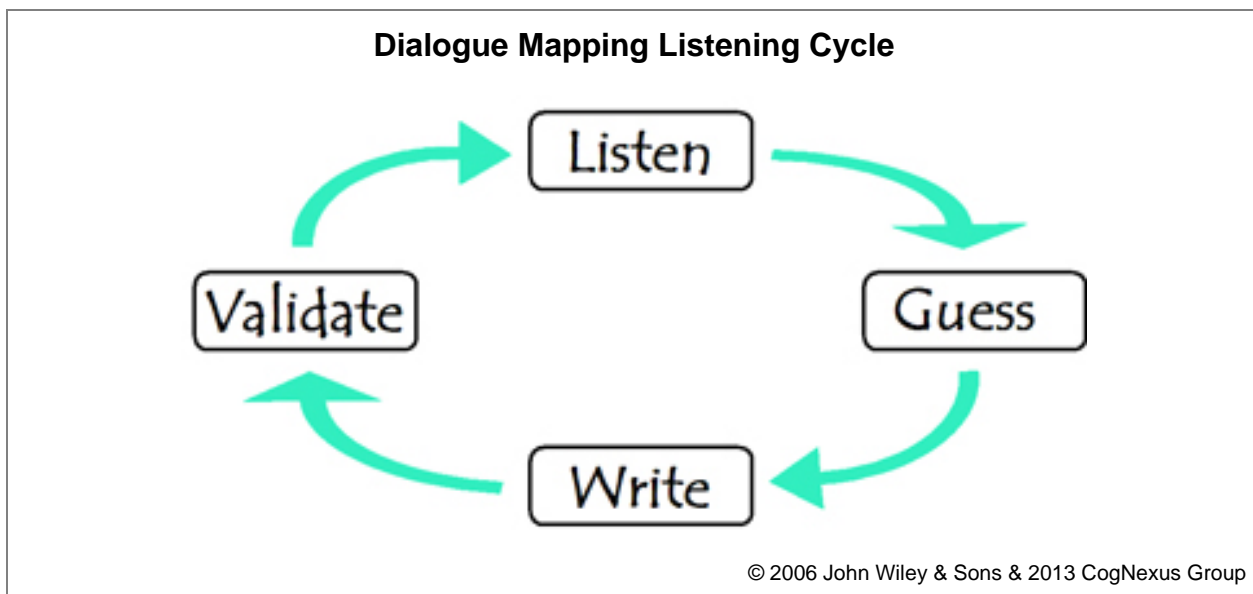
1. **A Collaborative Display.** This can be done by projecting from a computer screen onto a shared screen or wall in a meeting room, or by sharing the mapper’s screen during an online meeting. Instead of PowerPoint, you’re looking at the map of the evolving discussion. You can integrate slides, spreadsheets, and other exhibits (demos, videos) as nodes in a shared dialogue map. But the dialogue takes place in and around these artifacts.
2. **The IBIS notation:** This is simple and powerful, easy to master and understand, but, like all methods, the more you use it, the better you get and the more subtle “moves” you learn. It consists of the following:
 - **Question:** All dialogue maps start with a question; typically in the form of “What should we do about X?”
 - **Idea:** The response to a question is an idea—typically a possible answer or solution.
 - **Pros & Cons:** Rationale, opinions, facts, data, rhetoric are captured as pros (plus sign) or cons (minus signs) to an idea.
 - **More Questions:** You capture questions about any question, idea, or pro or con.



In his book, Jeff Conklin provides this “meta map”—he explains that most maps wind up using one or all of the patterns represented on this canonical map.

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3. **A Dialogue Mapper** who is actively listening to and capturing the “moves” of the conversation, crystallizing the points being made—and verifying them with the group. (There’s a trap that’s easy to fall into, particularly as you’re getting started—map a conversation privately without engaging the participants in validating the map as you go.) Jeff is quick to point out that “stealth mapping” is NOT Dialogue Mapping. The collaborative display and participation of the members of the group in the map of the dialogue that’s taking place is what makes it “Dialogue Mapping.” My own personal experience bears this out. While it’s fine to create private maps to “practice” and gain competency with the software, don’t expect the people who engaged in the conversation you mapped to “accept” your map of their conversation. It’s human nature. People won’t adopt the map as their own unless they were actively engaged in validating and building it as part of the meeting process.



There’s a great section in the book in which Jeff talks about how facilitators should listen, guess at what the person is actually saying, summarize it, and ask for validation. He points out that this may be hard for experienced facilitators to do because we have been taught not to interrupt. But, in Dialogue Mapping, you need to get validation that you captured the thought correctly so the group can move on. Jeff Conklin explains, “It is important to understand how different this listening cycle is from the common wisdom about listening. Common wisdom is that you wait until the speaker is finished, and you assume that they said precisely what they meant. When dealing with wicked and ill-structured problems, however, it is rarely the case that anyone is really certain about what they mean. Your job as dialogue mapper is to be a partner with the speaker, actively encouraging them on, and helping them with the difficult job of crafting a clear statement about an unclear topic. The second success factor in dialogue mapping is knowing that interrupting is OK if you do it in the service of listening. If you have taken the trouble to write down a paraphrase of what someone is trying to say, it will almost always be fine with them if you jump in to ask if you got it.”

The 'secret sauce' of Dialogue Mapping is a kind of performance art in which the display, the notation, and the mapper flow together and mingle with the flow of ideas and intentions of the participants. When this happens, the map provides real value during the meeting, and the potential for real value going forward after the meeting.

HOW TO GET STARTED

Read Jeff Conklin’s Book!

I highly recommend [*Dialogue Mapping: Building Shared Understanding of Wicked Problems*](#). What I like about the way Jeff wrote this book is that it’s both a “how to think about” and a “how to do it” book. Every time he tells you why something is important, he explains how to do it and uses real-world examples that are easy to relate to. He’s telling you stories about how groups of people typically converse and tackle different kinds of issues. As he does so, he shows you how the use of Dialogue Mapping crystallizes and cuts through the mire to clarify, crystallize and make it easy for people to move on. The book is a quick and easy read—the perfect “one plane ride” book. But it’s also something that you’ll want to keep coming back to, if you decide to try out these techniques.

*Issue mapping captures the essence
and the structure of a problem.*

As Jeff suggests, you’ll want to read the book, try this on your own, go back to reading the book, and probably engage with Jeff or one of his colleagues in an online “show and tell” discussion both to experience how Dialogue Mapping is really done, and to answer any questions you have about how it might be used in your own situation.

EXPERIMENT WITH ISSUE AND DIALOGUE MAPPING TECHNIQUES AND SOFTWARE

Dialogue Mapping Is Based on Issue Mapping

Issue mapping captures the essence and the structure of a problem using the Issue Mapping syntax developed by Horst Rittel. On his CogNexus Institute website, Jeff states:

“Though it has been slow to catch on, IBIS may be one of the most important inventions of the 20th century. It is intuitive and simple, using just three basic elements of human thinking—**questions, ideas, and arguments**—yet is powerful enough to capture the structure of the complex issues facing humanity, such as global warming, terrorism, and genetically modified organisms.”

Issue Mapping gives you the building blocks for Dialogue Mapping. Dialogue Mapping is done on the fly in a group meeting to facilitate the coherence of a conversation and the convergence of the participants by creating a shared understanding.

You may have been in a meeting in which a technographer creates a colored map illustrating the main concepts being discussed as an evocative record of the meeting. The map evokes the stories and the conversations that arose for those who participated in the meeting. And you can use it to convey some of the stories and learnings to someone who wasn’t there. But it doesn’t created shared under-

standing and coherence the way an Issue or Dialogue Map does. (Maybe there's an opportunity to meld the two techniques?—the colorful artwork with the rigor of issue mapping?)

Learn the Fundamentals of Issue Mapping

At the heart of IBIS's power is the amazing capability of *questions*, when framed in an open and systematic way, to create new distinctions and new clarity out of the fog of social complexity and collapsed meanings:

The Seven Question Types at the Heart of Issue Mapping:

1. Deontic: What should we do?
2. Instrumental: How should we do X?
3. Criterial: What are the criteria for success?
4. Factual: What is X?
5. Conceptual: What does X mean?
6. Explanatory: Why is X?
7. Contextual: What is the background?

Again, from the Cognexus Institute website:

“Issue Mapping can be used effectively for everyday business and personal decisions, but its potential is vast. Through the skillful use of questions, an issue map has unlimited capacity to represent and clarify diverse points of view, conflicting interpretations and goals, inconsistent information, and other forms of complexity. Issue Mapping can even be applied to [wicked problems](#) ... if the politics of the situation allows for transparency, clarity, and rigor!”

Practice Dialogue Mapping in a “Safe Space” First

Don't try to do your first public Dialogue Map for an important meeting. Use it with your small team, with your family members. This is the kind of craft that will take, if not 10,000 hours to master, at least several hundred!

Gain Competency by Mapping Fun Stuff

Jeff Conklin suggests that you start applying the techniques you'll learn from his book by mapping everyday things:

- “Privately map out a problem you are working on, one that matters to you (e.g., new job? move? new car?).
- Have a ‘meeting’ with a friend or family member about a problem you both care about and map out the conversation.
- Watch a TV sitcom and map out the ‘issues’ in the plot. (Easy!)
- Watch a TV news analysis show and map out the discussion of the issues. (Hard!)
- Analyze a newspaper or magazine article in IBIS.
- Privately map the group dialogue when you attend meetings.”

What Software Tools Should You Use?

There are many mind-mapping tools out there. But for Dialogue Mapping and Issue-Based Mapping, use the open source software that Jeff Conklin recommends and that has evolved over the years from his practice. It’s called Compendium. And it’s available [here](#) for free download.

The Dialogue Mapper will need to have the software loaded on his or her computer. Most groups or organizations that adopt Dialogue Mapping as a useful tool for capturing and evolving their shared thinking will set up an online, shared map in a secure online space. Then, people can add ideas, links, and supporting documentation for pros and cons in between meetings, starting each real-time meeting by sharing their additions with the group. (That means, of course, that anyone who wants to annotate a map needs to spend some time learning how to use the software and mastering the IBIS notation, but don’t worry. Maps evolve and can be “cleaned up” and organized by the group’s main Dialogue Mapper.)

Dialogue Mapping is done on the fly in a group meeting to facilitate the coherence of a conversation and the convergence of the participants by creating a shared understanding.

Jeff Conklin’s company, CogNexus Group, will provide a shared Dialogue Mapping space for groups of people to use, with or without his expert facilitation. But you can also create your own shared space to host this open source tool.

Facilitate Discussions Using Paper Mapping

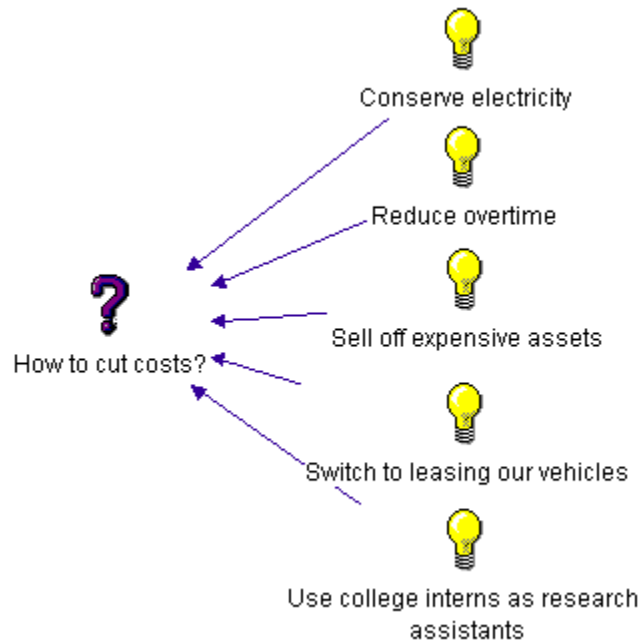
When he teaches his introductory two-day workshop, Jeff Conklin teaches students to map out dialogues using flip charts or (better) a large white board. That way you can learn the “syntax” of Issues-based mapping and the rhythm of the Dialogue Mapping listening cycle.

As Jeff points out, learning how to listen, summarize, and validate issues and to facilitate a discussion as a Dialogue Mapper uses different parts of the brain than learning how to quickly navigate and use the software tool. You’ll want to practice these techniques independently and gradually weave them together.

Get Coaching As You Learn

Jeff Conklin and his associates at the CogNexus Group are happy to provide coaching sessions. You can hire them to facilitate a discussion for you as a way of understanding and experiencing Dialogue Mapping. You can also share your initial attempts with them and get coaching about how to improve your technique.

The Beginning of a Discussion about How to Cut Costs for a Cookie Manufacturer



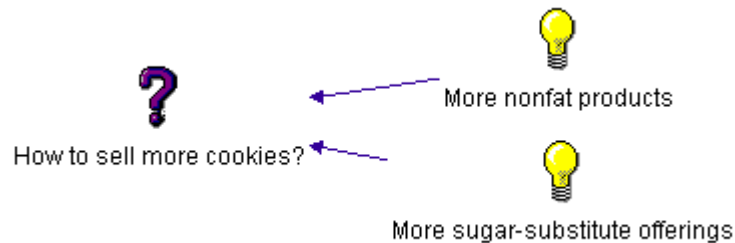
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Jeff Conklin describes this typical interaction:

"I was dialogue mapping a meeting for a group in the research division of a large cookie company. Part of the agenda for the meeting was to come up with ways to cut costs within the division. I started the group brainstorming on the Question, 'How to cut costs?' and the group quickly got into the game. Many people were coming up with ideas, and we were capturing them in the map (as Ideas)."

What Happens When Someone Wants to Raise a Different Question?

An Alternative Suggestion to Cost Cutting for a Cookie Manufacturer

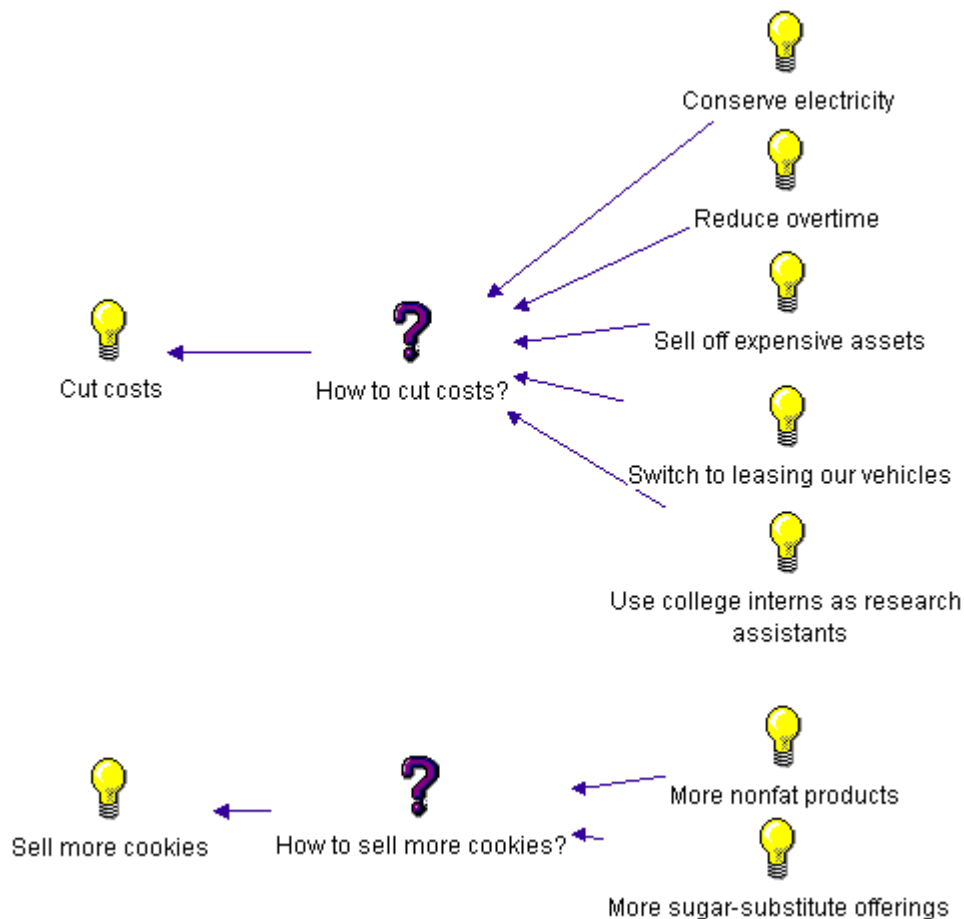


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“After a while there was a pause, as often happens during brainstorming, and a man named Jack at one corner of the conference room table almost spat out, ‘Why are we talking about this? Aren’t we a cookie company? Isn’t the whole point around here to sell cookies? Why aren’t we talking about how to sell more cookies?!?’ This was a defining moment for our fledgling dialogue mapping facilitation service. You could hear a pin drop in the room, and you got the feeling that this might not be the very first time Jack had made this kind of move in a meeting. All eyes turned toward me. ‘How will he deal with this grenade?’ was the silent question in the room. Without saying a word, I made some space under the first question and typed in the new Question, ‘How to sell more cookies?’ ‘Is this the question you’re asking?’ ‘Yes, it is,’ the man said. ‘And, do you have any ideas about it?’ I asked.”

~ Jeff Conklin

The Evolution of the Cookie Manufacturer's Budget Discussion

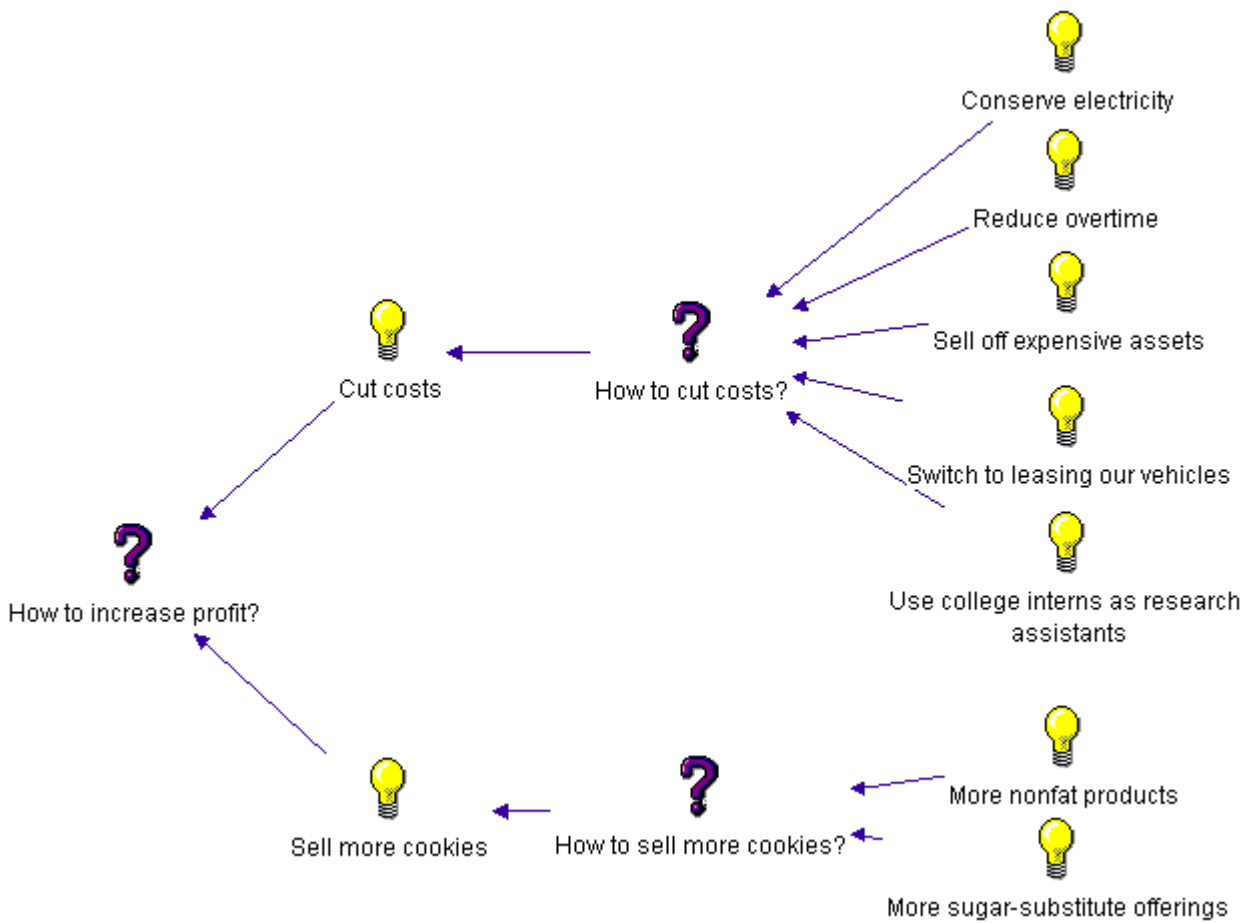


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"As a matter of fact, I do," he said, and he described his idea, which I captured in the map. Then I asked the group, 'Does anyone else have any ideas on this one?,' pointing to the Question in the display. One person raised her hand and I captured her idea. Then someone else said, 'I have another idea about cutting costs.' I scrolled the display up so you could see all of the cost-cutting ideas and said, 'Shoot.' And the group went back to their brainstorming session about cost-cutting measures. In short, the grenade didn't go off . . . there was no grenade. There was just someone who needed to have a larger frame for the discussion in order to participate. The root question of the map wasn't his root question."

~ Jeff Conklin

The Real Point of the Cookie Manufacturer’s Budget Discussion



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By accommodating the grenade thrower’s legitimate question of “how do sell more cookies” to the “How do we cut our cookie manufacturing costs?” discussion, Jeff Conklin was able to pop the discussion up a level to consider the larger, and perhaps more important question: How do we increase profits? This is a good simple example of how a Dialogue Map can and should evolve.

WHERE AND HOW TO APPLY DIALOGUE MAPPING & ISSUE MAPPING

Capture the Essence of a Wicked Problem Using Issue Mapping

Find a work or community project for which you need to create clarity—write a report, produce notes, capture the key issues being discussed—and use Issue Mapping to help you write the report and to illustrate the main issues in the report. An issue map is a good way to capture the current state of a wicked problem in order to move to the next step—which may be a group discussion using Dialogue Mapping.

Facilitate Online Discussions Using Real-time Mapping

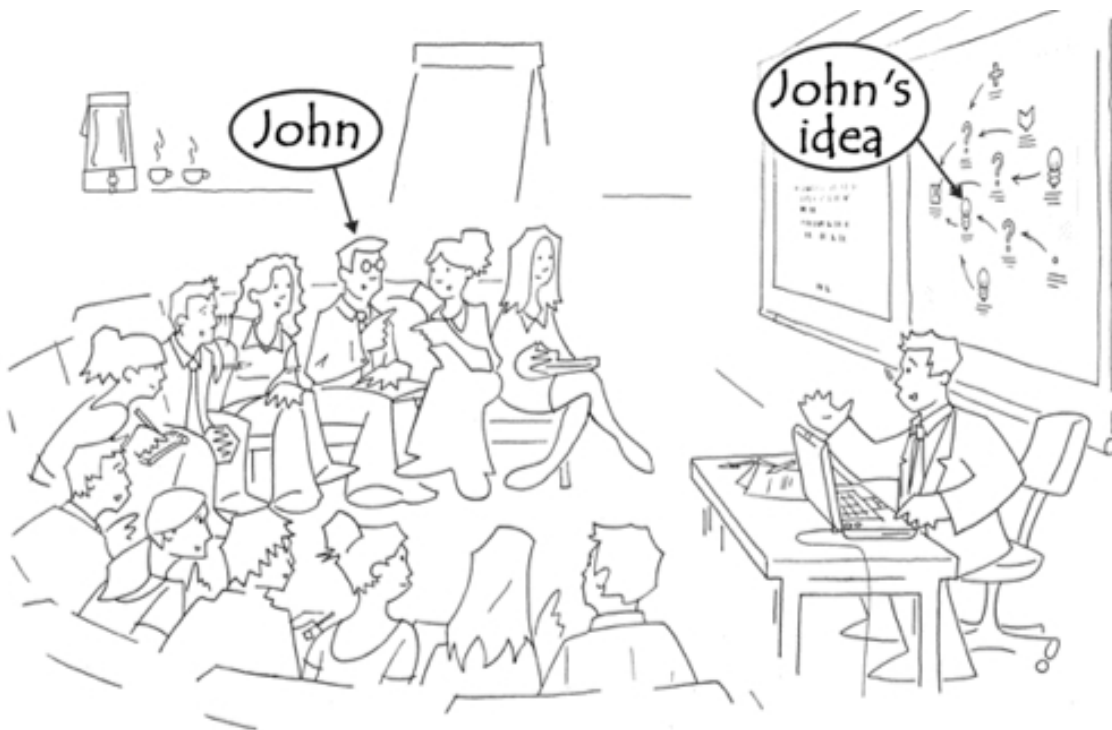
We've given some thought to how best to apply this technique in our own practice. Online meetings seem like a good place that a Dialogue Mapping service could add some real value. Most of the online meetings we attend tend to be pretty stultifying. You typically have a group of busy people moving from meeting to meeting throughout the day. Each meeting tends to have some PowerPoint. Most are status updates. But some are real problem-solving or brainstorming meetings. That's when it probably makes sense to switch gears and to quickly create a map for the group to help focus the discussion and make sure that everyone's ideas are captured.

Facilitate Group Meetings Using Real-time Dialogue Mapping

The place that Dialogue Mapping really shines is in a face-to-face group design and/or strategic planning session. It's a much richer tool to use than capturing ideas on flip charts. Don't forget, however, that just displaying the flow of the conversation doesn't really add a lot of value. Getting people to validate the ideas that are captured, to build on them, and to really own the map as an active part of their design process is where Dialogue Mapping really shines. Jeff Conklin describes the magic of Dialogue Mapping in a group setting this way:

"The power of collaborative display is that there is no scarcity of room to consider lots of Questions. Indeed, if a problem is wicked and/or if the social complexity quotient is high, there will be many, many Questions that the group cares about. Absent a collaborative display, the facilitator has to focus the group on just one or two of these questions. The group has to suppress the rest, or if they come up they get sent to the 'parking lot.'"

Dialogue Mapping in Action



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Ideally the Dialogue Mapper facilitates a group discussion, capturing their ideas and their assertions and objections and checking to be sure he catches the intent of each speaker. The fact that everyone's ideas are captured objectively helps keep the dialogue going. People are more engaged, less bored, and more committed to ensuring that the map captures ALL of the thinking of the group.

Capture Customers' Issues and Ideas. I'm really looking forward to using Dialogue Mapping to capture customers' issues and vision when we kick off a customer co-design session. We bring a group of customers together to talk about the issues they are having in their personal or work lives within the problem domain in which we need their help to design new solutions. We follow that discussion with a Customer Scenario Mapping exercise, in which teams of customers work with your cross-functional teams to design ideal solutions. I believe that Dialogue Mapping will add richness, context, and rigor to those discussions and also add value to the Scenario Mapping report outs as well. I believe that Dialogue Mapping is a great fit for co-design activities and/or for Customer Advisory Board meetings. You can capture the richness of the conversations and customers' context. You can gain consensus among customers about their priorities, capturing their pros and cons as you go. You'll be better able to quickly capture a list of the criteria that customers feel are critical for selecting or designing a useful solution for different contexts.

Continue to Evolve the Group Discussions/Maps Over Time

Today's design activities are far from "one and done." Usually you kick off a design project with a vague idea about the appropriate solution and, over time, through the shared dialogue, experimentation, and learning, you evolve your collective thinking and come up with better and better solutions through trial and error.

Asynchronous Mapping In Between Group Meetings. In between group meetings, participants can add to their section of a group map on their own time. They can add links and documents to the map as ammunition to bolster a pro or a con. They can add new ideas, along with sketches, text, or videos to provide really great examples for other team members to absorb at their own pace.

Capture Institutional Memory. One of the beauties of Dialogue Maps is that they can be time- and date-stamped and added to over time. You can then see a history of how your collective thinking evolved. Many of Jeff Conklin's clients really value the institutional memory that these maps provide over a long period of time.

Let the People in the Group Create *Their* Issue Map. Once a group of people have been using Dialogue Mapping for a period of time, they'll probably want to create their own "Issue Maps" to summarize quite clearly (perhaps for an external audience) what they see as the key issues and the critical arguments pro and con. Jeff's take: "There's a power in the progression, from introducing mapping to a group as a process that makes up for any intrusiveness with improved communication, to having the group working together to craft a comprehensive and neutral exposition of an issue."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



With 30 years of experience consulting to customer-centric executives in technology-aggressive businesses across many industries, **PATRICIA B. SEYBOLD** is a visionary thought leader with the unique ability to spot the impact that technology enablement and customer behavior will have on business trends very early. She assesses and predicts how new and evolving technologies will impact customers. She forecasts the ways in which both business and consumer customers will make new demands on companies in many different industries.

Seybold provides customer-centric executives within Fortune 1000 companies with strategic insights, technology guidance, and best practices. Her hands-on experience, her discovery and chronicling of best practices, her deep understanding of information technology, her large, loyal client base, and her ongoing case study research enhances the thought leadership she provides.

Seybold uses a coaching, mentoring, and learn-by-doing consultative approach to help clients achieve their goals as they transform their corporate cultures to be more customer-centric. She helps her clients' teams redesign their businesses from the outside in by inviting their customers to invent new streamlined ways of accomplishing their desired outcomes, using their own real-world scenarios.



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The CEO and founder, Patricia Seybold, is the *New York Times* best-selling author of *Customers.com* and *The Customer Revolution*. Patty's latest book, *Outside Innovation*, is [now available](#).

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