Using Virtual Co-Laboratories for Structured Dialogic Design

Dr. Alexander N. Christakis and Ms. Gayle Underwood

The Structured Dialogic Design (SDD) process enables diverse groups to use democratic planning to address complex, boundary-spanning challenges. (Please read http://genericwiki.wetpaint.com/page/Structured+Dialogue-Introduction for more information on SDD)

Important components of the SDD process are Co-Laboratories. Co-Laboratories are face-to-face meetings of diverse groups who need to generate consensus on organizational and inter-organizational strategies.

Experience has shown that people need to feel authentically engaged in the design of action plans whenever outcomes depend upon group participation and commitment. Co-Laboratories respect and protect the autonomy and authenticity of all participants, and utilize an array of consensus tools - including discipline; technology and graphics - that allow the stakeholders to engage in disciplined the dialogue.

Recently, pioneers in the development of SDD have begun to experiment with deploying the methodology through the Internet. Early success includes the use of the methodology to structure the backbone of the Civil Society Dialogue Project aiming to revitalize the peace process in Cyprus (see: http://www.blogora.net/page/Cyprus+Civil+Society+Dialogue).

Dr Christakis and Ms Underwood's project includes the use of internet technologies, specifically Wikis and Blogs for conducting mixed presence SDD co-laboratories, i.e., asynchronous and synchronous. The asynchronous interactions (different times, usually at different places) are primarily focused on the tasks of generation, clarification, and voting on the relative importance of the factors describing the problem situation and its resolution. The synchronous interactions (face-to-face at same place, or different places at the same time) are focused on the task of exploring relationships of similarity and influence among the factors and the discovery of graphic patterns, such as Root Cause Maps.

They have created a generic Wiki for applying the virtual SDD process of authentic dialogue. This Wiki is used as the starting point for creating other wikis that are customized to meet the specific needs of projects using the SDD process. (See: http://cyprusmedia.wetpaint.com/ as an example of a Wiki that was customized from the Generic Wiki)

The use of a Wiki is for several purposes. First it is a storage place for all the information participants need to participate in the SDD process. Information about SDD, directions for using the Wiki, as well as information about their specific issues are all stored on one site, in easy to access pages of the Wiki.

Another purpose of the wiki is for all stakeholders to create an on-line community for structured dialogue. The WetPaint Wiki includes a feature that allows participants to hold virtual conversations consisting of someone posting a statement and others replying to the post, similar to a Blog. When a participant enters information on the Wiki their picture is automatically included next to their information. This helps to humanize this approach.

Probably the most important purpose of the Wiki is that it allows the SDD process to be self documenting. The virtual conversations are captured in one place for everyone to see, the tables and reports generated through the Cogniscope software are placed on the Wiki, participants can watch the process unfold online as well as be able to go back to it years from now to revisit their project.

Participants of this training will learn what a Wiki is, how to create one and how it can be used in the SDD process. Activities during the training include:

- Introduction to Wikis and Blogs
- Small groups create their own Wiki
- Introduction to the Generic SDD Wiki
- Customizing the Generic Wiki (Observation of Cyprus Media Wiki)
- Tips and Tricks for working with Wikis
- Discussion on using Internet Technologies for SDD