
The art of conversation: All of us are smarter than any of us

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We all like to have a chat with friends from time-to-time. Recent research is showing that this is not only a good thing to do, but that conversation can actually improve the performance of groups, help us to be more innovative, and even make us individually smarter. In this follow-up to his December article, "Communities and Collaboration" (2010) 24 OLC 287, Keith De La Rue looks closer into this basic element of collaborative working, and examines how to get the best out of it. This includes an overview of research findings, a look at some relevant tools and group facilitation techniques, and how emerging social media tools can contribute to the conversation.

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT

Conversation is a meeting of minds with different memories and habits. When minds meet, they don't just exchange facts: they transform them, reshape them, draw different implications from them, and engage in new trains of thought. Conversation doesn't just reshuffle the cards: it creates new cards – Theodore Zeldin.¹

Communication is fundamental to human existence, and conversation is at the heart of communication. Conversation exists in many forms and contexts – it can be conducted face-to-face or via various communications technologies. Even today's emerging social media tools are all about conversation.

In most organisations today, people are driven by an increasing pressure to meet targets or key performance indicators. One of the paradoxes of this pressure is that we are discouraged from spending time in "idle" conversation around the proverbial water-cooler; yet we seem to spend countless hours in meetings that frequently don't seem to help us achieve these targets.

Recent research activity has reinforced the importance of conversation to many of the fields of work that we are now realising are the most important – collaboration, creativity, innovation and knowledge sharing.

All change

Theodore Zeldin, born in 1933, is an English philosopher, historian and author. Zeldin has written extensively about conversation. In his work, he has highlighted the importance of the *kind* of conversations we have. His particular interest is in *transformative* conversations – the type of conversations from which we are "prepared to emerge a slightly different person".²

Many organisations seem to expect us to compartmentalise ourselves – we are expected to be in some way a different person when in the office to the person we are at home or with friends and family. Zeldin's point of view is that we "risk impoverishing ourselves more than we know if we sideline the personal dimension of life".³ If we close off part of ourselves, we risk losing all the richness of life and experience that we can bring into our workplace conversations. The way we talk shapes what we are able to achieve in any area of life.

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¹ Gurteen D, "When Minds Meet by Theodore Zeldin", *Gurteen.com* (2011), <http://www.gurteen.com/gurteen/gurteen.nsf/id/X00039436> viewed 15 March 2011.

² Gurteen, n 1.

³ Gurteen, n 1.

Zeldin draws on Socrates' idea that when two individuals are put together, they are able to achieve more than either individually. Now, just over 2,400 years after Socrates, research is supporting this idea. Zeldin also highlighted how this connection leads to innovation – “invention and progress comes from finding a link between two ideas that have never met”.⁴

Zeldin's ideas are central to the Knowledge Café concept, as practised by David Gurteen. As Gurteen states, “conversation is intrinsically creative”.⁵

COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE

Having a bunch of smart people in a group doesn't necessarily make the group smart.⁶

Conversation can lead to the whole being greater than the sum of its parts. Research by Woolley et al⁷ in 2010 found evidence for a distinct collective intelligence in groups – an intelligence that was not related to the intelligence of the individual members of the groups.

Group intelligence was found to relate to *how* the members of the team worked together. This depended on the *social sensitivity* of the group members, and the readiness of the group to allow members to take *equal turns* in the conversation. Conversely, in groups where one person dominated, “the group was less collectively intelligent than in groups where the conversational turns were more evenly distributed”.⁸

Women and conversation

One additional finding also emerged from this research – teams with a higher number of women present in the group exhibited higher collective intelligence. This was an unexpected result, and was not a designed part of the study. (Although many readers may not be surprised by this finding!)

Further analysis indicated that this result was due to females, on average, having greater social sensitivity than males; in practice, the presence of socially-sensitive people of either gender produced better team performance.

The idea monopoly?

The implications of these findings for work teams in organisations are potentially significant. In many organisations, teams are constructed with a “manager” role included as part of the structure. If this person plays a dominant role, then from this research it can be expected that the team performance will be lower than if all members were allowed to play equal roles.

This type of team conversation will also be different to the structure of business meetings held in many organisations, where a manager or chairperson will normally dominate the running of the meeting.

The results of this research indicate that team performance in organisations can be improved by the selection of team members, and by teaching team members to interact in more socially-sensitive ways. In any organisation where status, hierarchy or individualism are important, this approach may be challenging to implement effectively.

This may also be a personal challenge to team members with special expertise in the field of the team's task. Although these people may have a great deal to contribute to the team, they need to allow others to take turns in conversations. They may have expertise in their field, but there is no monopoly on ideas.

⁴ Gurteen, n 1.

⁵ Gurteen, n 1.

⁶ Dizikes P, “Study Finds Small Groups Demonstrate Distinctive ‘Collective Intelligence’ when Facing Difficult Tasks”, *Physorg.com* (30 September 2010), <http://www.physorg.com/news205076011.html> viewed 15 March 2011.

⁷ Woolley AW, Chabris CF, Pentland A, Hashmi N and Malone TW, “Evidence for a Collective Intelligence Factor in the Performance of Human Groups” (2010) 330(6004) *Science* 686.

⁸ Dizikes, n 6.

CONVERSATION AND INNOVATION

Progress is more about one door leading to another door – Steven Johnson.⁹

In his book, *Where Good Ideas Come From*,¹⁰ Steven Johnson examines the process of idea generation. He challenges the common belief that major discoveries and inventions come about in a “eureka” moment from a genius working alone.

Johnson’s study of history reveals that major ideas are almost never born in this way. In fact, most major ideas have come to fruition through the sharing and recombination of previously unrelated ideas.

The adjacent possible

Before any major breakthrough can be made, certain other things need to already have been put in place. Johnson uses the term “the adjacent possible” for this process. At any given stage of human development, only certain things are achievable. It is only after these adjacent possibilities are achieved that the next steps can be taken.

For instance, before the printing press could be developed, three other things had to have already been invented: paper, ink and movable type. Without these first existing, then there could have been no invention of the printing press – the idea could not have existed in any practical sense.

This process also gives rise to the “multiple” – the simultaneous occurrence of a major discovery or invention in different parts of the world. Once the appropriate basic steps have been taken, then the next breakthrough becomes available to all.

Picking up the pieces

Good ideas are thus “built out of a collection of existing parts”.¹¹ Given this understanding, it then follows that in order to innovate and generate new ideas we need to bring existing ideas in contact with each other as much as possible. This will allow us to increase the options for the next possible move.

One of the best ways to do this is through conversation. Get people with different knowledge and experience together; expose people to new ideas, different arguments, and both related and opposing ideas. Use these discussions to mix-and-match the ideas, and see what new things emerge from the melting pot.

Some of the most creative periods in history have been the times that such disparate gatherings have been commonplace, such as in the coffee-houses in Europe during the Enlightenment in the 17th century. Innovation requires similar places where different ideas can be brought and openly discussed. Hoarding ideas and keeping them secret will actually hinder innovation.

The development of the internet has provided a platform for connectivity between people on a massive scale – not only physically across the globe, but across areas of knowledge and all of the historical chasms between culture, language and class. In particular, the recent emergence of social media is providing the modern equivalent of the coffee-house conversation.

The subtitle of this article – “All of us are smarter than any of us” – is based on the work of James Surowiecki, documented in his book, *The Wisdom of Crowds*.¹² Surowiecki states that groups can produce performance that is superior to any of the individuals in the group when addressing certain types of problems, given the right conditions. In summary, the conditions for a smart crowd are:

⁹ Burkeman O, “The Slow Hunch of Genius”, *The Age* (23 October 2010), <http://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/books/the-slow-hunch-of-genius-20101022-16xxt.html> viewed 15 March 2011.

¹⁰ Johnson S, *Where Good Ideas Come From* (Riverhead Hardcover, 2010). A brief summary of Johnson’s book is available in the form of an animated video on YouTube at Riverhead Books, *Where Good Ideas Come From* (2010), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NugRZGDbPFU> viewed 8 February 2011.

¹¹ Riverhead Books, n 10.

¹² Surowiecki J, *The Wisdom of Crowds* (Abacus, 2004).

- it has a diverse membership;
- the members are able to think independently; and
- the group has a way to effectively pool its knowledge.

This indicates that the more we can provide places for broad, disparate groups of people to meet and hold open conversation, the better we can solve problems and innovate. As Johnston states: “It’s not that creative individuals don’t matter; it’s that connectedness makes us more creative.”¹³

THE BENEFITS OF FRIENDSHIP

These findings highlight the connection between social intelligence and general intelligence.¹⁴

Another recent study has investigated the impact of social interaction on *individual* intelligence. This research, by psychologist Oscar Ybarra,¹⁵ shows that certain types of conversation actually improve individual mental function. The type of conversation tested was a brief, friendly conversation – the type of conversation you have when getting to know another person. These conversations only need to be brief; 10 minutes is enough to make an impact.

Ybarra’s team looked at one specific aspect of mental function: executive function. This includes working memory, self-monitoring and focus – skills that are critical to problem-solving.

The study results suggested that the improvements in performance “come about because some social interactions induce people to try to read others’ minds and take their perspectives on things”.¹⁶ So the more you try to put yourself in someone else’s shoes, the more you improve your own mental performance.

One important finding of the study was that this effect only occurred after *friendly* conversations. Conversations that were of a more competitive nature were found to have no effect on mental function.

The practical application of this research in organisations is significant. It implies that introducing people around the table at a meeting can actually improve the problem-solving capabilities of the group. To be effective, these introductions should not just be a simple “name and position” litany, but should allow for sufficient sharing for people to actually get to know each other as friends.

Conversely, it again implies that holding meetings in a competitive environment actually suppresses the ability of the attendees to effectively solve problems.

At a personal level, another lesson from this is that before we launch out on a major task, such as a major presentation or test, it would help to have a brief social chat with a friend or colleague!

THE CONVERSATION TOOLKIT

In summary so far, recent research has found that we can improve the performance of groups (and each group member) and maximise innovation by taking the following steps when entering group conversations:

- enter with a willingness to be changed;
- be open and personal;
- be socially sensitive towards others in the group;
- allow all members to take equal turns;
- ensure that no single person dominates;
- bring in and share as many ideas as possible to maximise innovation;
- get to know other team members socially;
- try to put yourself in the shoes of other group members;

¹³ Burkeman, n 9.

¹⁴ Swanbrow D, “Friends with Cognitive Benefits: Mental Function Improves after Certain Kinds of Socializing”, *University of Michigan News Service* (27 October 2010), <http://www.ns.umich.edu/htdocs/releases/story.php?id=8063> viewed 15 March 2011.

¹⁵ Swanbrow, n 14.

¹⁶ Ybarra, cited in Swanbrow, n 14

- be constructive, not competitive; and
- realise that conversation and connection make us more creative.

Community

There are many conversational knowledge-sharing tools that can be used to achieve these goals. A previous article, “Communities and Collaboration”,¹⁷ looked at the use of Communities of Practice (CoPs) in organisations. This technique can be effectively used to support the types of conversation presented here.

By their nature, CoPs operate outside the hierarchical control structures common in most organisations – they are intentionally a meeting of peers. This helps to prevent domination of group meetings. They are not operating in a competitive environment, and they are aimed at encouraging peer support. This allows members to hold positive conversations. CoPs are also based on trust, which emerges as members come to know one another at a personal level.

One potential limitation of CoPs in the full range of conversations discussed here is that CoPs are intentionally focused on the needs of a group of people *within* a specific common area of practice. This could mean that true innovation may be stifled by lack of exposure to ideas from outside their field. Thus, if the members of a CoP want the community to be more innovative, they could benefit from meeting with either individuals or other groups from other fields of expertise to share ideas more broadly.

Facilitated conversations

A number of facilitation techniques are available to support the style of conversations discussed here. These can be provided by external facilitators, or used within organisations by trained practitioners.

The Knowledge Café, as practiced by David Gurteen, “brings a group of people together to have an open, creative conversation on a topic of mutual interest to surface their collective knowledge, to share ideas and insights and to gain a deeper understanding of the subject and the issues involved”.¹⁸

The Knowledge Café involves a number of small group conversations around round tables. A speaker may briefly introduce a topic for conversation, and pose questions for discussion, but the conversations themselves take place at the tables, with all people taking equal turns in the conversation. After an initial conversation, the attendees are then asked to swap to other tables, where another conversation will take place. At the end of a few rounds of conversation, all participants will then join in a brief plenary discussion.

One of the notable principles of the Gurteen version of the Knowledge Café is that usually no agenda is used, and no notes or action lists are collected – the entire point of the session is the *conversation*. Other conversational tools may be more targeted at specific outcomes.

This technique can support innovation, as it is just the *topic* of discussion that is defined. Provided that people with a broad cross-section of backgrounds and perspectives are invited to attend the café, the principles of innovative conversations discussed above can be achieved.

The Gurteen Knowledge Café approach is based on the World Café (<http://www.theworldcafe.com>) concept, which is also widely used. The World Café approach operates in a similar way, but places more emphasis on a set of design principles, and is often also more focused on producing specific outcomes than the Knowledge Café approach.

Some other facilitated conversational techniques include: Peer Spirit Circle (<http://www.peerspirit.com>), where discussion takes place in a large circular format; and Open Space Technology (<http://www.openspaceworld.ning.com>). Open Space Technology is a self-organising format based on a simple set of rules aimed at encouraging emergent conversations and outcomes.

¹⁷ De La Rue K, “Communities and Collaboration” (2010) 24 OLC 287.

¹⁸ Gurteen D, “Knowledge Café”, *Gurteen.com* (2011), <http://www.gurteen.com/gurteen/gurteen.nsf/id/kcafe> viewed 15 March 2011.

Many of these techniques are practised by open communities that have organised around one or more of these approaches. One such community is The Art of Hosting (<http://www.artofhosting.ning.com>), which combines a number of these techniques for different outcomes.

Extending the conversation

Many of today's conversations may need additional support from technology. An additional finding from Woolley's research team was that group intelligence could be improved by equipping groups with "better electronic collaboration tools".¹⁹

As we can't always meet face-to-face, our conversations may also take place partially or totally online. As mentioned above, the internet has provided a platform to support this in ways not previously possible.

The capability of the internet to support conversation has improved significantly over time. The development of the world wide web and the wider availability of internet access have assisted with this, but the more recent emergence of Web 2.0 and social media have boosted this dramatically. One of the fundamental distinctions between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 is the conversational nature of social media.

Social media has not always been viewed in this light. There has been a tendency to think of social media as causing people to become more easily distracted and *less* social.

In a recent report,²⁰ the Pew Research Centre has found that internet users²¹ are in fact significantly *more* likely to actively participate in voluntary groups or organisations than non-users – "80% of internet users participate in groups, compared with 56% of non-internet users".²² These figures were even higher for social media users, with 85% of Twitter users found to be active group participants.

The most significant impact of the internet on group activity was reported to be the improved ability for groups to communicate with members.

Give us the tools

Social media tools provide many of the functions needed to enhance conversations between groups of people. Some tools support face-to-face meetings; others provide platforms for virtual conversations between people who are unable to meet face-to-face.

The tools used for supporting CoPs discussed in the earlier article, "Communities and Collaboration",²³ are generally applicable in other conversational environments.

Yammer (<http://www.yammer.com>) is a particularly useful platform for online conversations within organisations, where conversations are started by the prompting question: "What are you working on?" Yammer promotes a conversational style and immediacy that helps to keep conversations at a level where effective interaction can take place.

Instant messaging or chat services allow participants to see which of their friends are online at any given time. This "ambient awareness" function can be useful for geographically dispersed groups or teams. The casual "good morning" when a team member arrives in a physical office can be replicated by an online greeting when their message service icon is turned on as they log in from a remote office. Such simple greetings form the basis of the friendly conversations discussed above.

One of the criticisms often levelled at the microblogging service Twitter (<http://www.twitter.com>) is that it is mostly used for mundane conversations about breakfast food and the weather. However,

¹⁹ Dizikes, n 6

²⁰ Rainie L, Purcell K and Smith A, "The Social Side of the Internet", *Pew Internet* (18 January 2011), <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/The-Social-Side-of-the-Internet/Summary.aspx> viewed 15 March 2011.

²¹ This survey focused on groups within the United States – it is expected that similar activity occurs in other countries.

²² Rainie et al, n 20.

²³ De La Rue, n 17.

many face-to-face conversations – particularly when first meeting someone – tend to commence with similar discussions as part of the necessary process for getting to know another person.

Social media can also be used to expand our networks. Tools such as Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com>) allow members to build networks based on personal connections, and real-time chat is also supported. LinkedIn (<http://www.linkedin.com>) provides a networking function with a more business-oriented function. It is through these networks that conversations can take place.

As Johnson has suggested, it is through building these broad networks that we can “find other people who have that missing piece that will complete the idea we are working on”.²⁴

WE MUST TALK!

From the information presented here, it can be seen that when used in the right way, conversation can improve the performance of people, both in groups and as individuals, as well as improving creativity, innovation and problem-solving.

It is also through conversation that we can address the complexity we find in today’s organisations by more effectively engaging people. Another benefit of conversation is that it can be personally beneficial – as Zeldin has also stated, “I want to show how we could make our work a lot less boring and frustrating if we learned to talk differently”.²⁵

In the spirit of Johnson’s work, it can also be observed that the three key pieces of research used in this article came together in a somewhat serendipitous way. One was referred to by a colleague in a discussion on a business project. The other two were mentioned by people followed by this author on Twitter.

A conversational test

Organisational teams are formed and meetings held for a range of reasons. Much has been written about effective meeting practices. The research presented here specifically addresses groups of people that come together to perform defined tasks or assignments, solve problems or produce innovative ideas.

Whenever groups are formed with these aims, it may be useful to be armed with a tool for judging meetings and conversations on their ability to produce superior performance. Such a tool may look something like the following:

- Has this meeting commenced with introductions that tell me something about all the people present and helps me to understand them personally?
- Are all the participants entering this conversation with openness and a willingness to be changed as a result of the conversation?
- Is everyone being allowed an equal turn in the discussion?
- Are the discussions friendly, constructive and supportive?
- Do we have people with a sufficiently wide range of expertise and viewpoints present in the conversation?

If a meeting or conversation seems to be missing out on these basic elements for success, it may actually be in the interests of all present to either draw it to a close, or seek to address the shortfalls as soon as possible.

²⁴ Riverhead Books, n 10.

²⁵ Gurteen, n 1.