

A Necessary "Core Capacity" in Every 21st Century Leader's Toolbox, January 19, 2010

By Jacqueline Wasilewski "Intercultural Consultant" (New Mexico, USA)

This review is from: The Talking Point: Creating an Environment for Exploring Complex Meaning (PB) (Paperback)

This is a Practitioner's Review. I have worked, since 1985, with the U.S. national Native American advocacy organization, Americans for Indian Opportunity (AIO), talked about on pages 182-183 of this book, an organization that has "internalized" computer-assisted, Structured Dialogic Design (SDD) as a "core capacity" in its operations. The computer-assistance has enabled Native Americans to bring their preferred consensus-based decision-making into the 21st century.

I also used SDD to design and implement a four year North East Asian Dialogue Project funded by the Japanese Ministry of Education that brought together Japanese, Chinese, Korean and Russian students and civil society members to discuss the history and future of intercultural relations in the region. (Please see Wasilewski J. [March, 2005]. The Boundary-spanning Dialogue Approach (BDA) Project; background and previous outcomes. International Christian University Social Science Research Institute Journal of Social Science 55, 69-94 and Wasilewski, Jacqueline [2006]. "The ICU-COE Boundary-spanning Dialogue Approach (BDA) Northeast Asian Forum." International Christian University Social Science Research Institute Journal of Social Science 57, 409-435.)

It is my opinion that this computer-assisted, "social technology," SDD, should be in the figurative "toolbox" of every 21st century leader as a "core capacity," not only, as listed on pages 187-197 of the book, in the "toolboxes" of project managers, organizational change agents, civic activists, educators and visionaries, but, in fact, in the "toolbox" of anyone working in the political and/or public sector. SDD enables us to be cultural change agents, transforming the way we collectively address so-called "wicked" problems ... that is, problems that are so complex, that require the integration of so many perceptions from such diverse stakeholders across such diverse domains of human expertise, that we are overcome by cognitive overload. In other words, the complexity of the problem usually trumps our ability to pool our knowledge and understanding and to learn from each other.

While SDD is not a panacea, it is critical for managing the point when diverse stakeholders converge to address the wickedly complex problems described above. It enables people to effectively manage and not waste that critical point when they are finally willing to talk with each other. It enables people, even people with long negative histories with each other, to pool their knowledge effectively and to learn from one another.

Failed "talking points" have cost us much in human history, pre- and post-conflict. Failing to include all stakeholders, and failing to pool our understanding comprehensively has cost us a lot. For instance, if we had learned about the cost of the reparations that the French had imposed on Haiti at the beginning of the 19th century, maybe the Treaty of Versailles would not have imposed reparations on Germany after WWI at the beginning of the 20th century, and then, maybe, we could have avoided WWII, but the Haitians were not stakeholders in those deliberations. There was no way they could share their understandings.

Dr. Christakis' previous book (written with Kenneth Bausch), *How People Harness Their Collective Wisdom and Power to Construct the Future in Co-Laboratories of Democracy*, gives the scholarly background of SDD. This book, *The Talking Point: Creating an Environment for Exploring Complex Meaning*, emphasizes practice and tells us how to implement Structured Dialogic Design. It tells us how to identify and take a group of diverse stakeholders into boundary-spanning collaboration, so that they are sitting side by side (rather than opposite each other) solving a problem so that eventually they can figuratively walk together in the same direction into a mutual future. And to do this, people do not have to "believe" in all the same things. They just have to figure out how, practically, they can mutually address an issue that is facing all of them.

The First Section of this book, *The Arena*, identifies five key challenges facing problem-solving environments made up of very diverse stakeholders: 1) how to create a common language with which to discuss the "wicked" problem, 2) how to develop a common comprehension of the problem that includes everyone's perceptions, 3) how to deal with power dynamics that emerge in dialogic situations (basically how to create Habermas' "ideal speech situation" where the power dynamics outside the dialogue are put aside), 4) how to set priorities or how to decide what is important and 5) how to deal with information overload.

The seven chapters in the Second Section, *The Practice*, takes one through the whole process of designing and implementing a SDD event, including an extensive discussion of the roles of Brokers, Sponsors, Stakeholders (Designers) and of the Knowledge Management Team (the Process Experts), who include the Project Manager, the Stakeholder Researcher, the Dialogue Manager, the Recorder(s) and the Production Manager(s).

This book is a major step in enabling SDD to be a part of every 21st century leader's repertoire, especially when linked with the Institute for 21st Century Agoras, a 501 (c) (3) organization, which is prepared to support individuals and organizations, through experiential learning with the support of experienced SDD practitioners, in how to use SDD to address problems that have not yielded to existing alternative approaches (p. 197). In short, SDD enables us to apply authentic participatory democracy to the complex real world problems facing us all (p. 198).

I cannot recommend SDD and this book highly enough.