



DEMOSOPHIA

COLABS USING STRUCTURED DEMOCRATIC DIALOGUE

Welcome!

We bet you are curious about these things called “Colabs”. We prepared this document to provide you with some background information on the expectations, the process, and the experience. If you are able to participate, you will be guided through the process, so don’t feel as if you first need to deeply understand each element of one; most people learn about them by participating.

What is a Colab?

A Colab is a unique and powerful type of facilitated meeting that is ultimately unlike anything you have experienced. “Colab” is the name of the gathering of stakeholders who together share, learn, and create a deep understanding of a complex problem using the Structured Democratic Dialogue (SDD) process. There may be some elements of a Colab using SDD that seem familiar on the surface. When finished however, you will find the experience truly remarkable and well worth the personal investment.

Why conduct a Colab with SDD?

There are problems in the world that can’t be completely solved. They are too complex and strongly resist change. They actually don’t have an ultimate solution. For example, consider trying to prevent any student from dropping out of high school. The academic literature calls this type of problem “Wicked.” Colabs are specifically designed to address wicked problems by efficiently tapping into the collective wisdom of a wide variety of stakeholders.

What is the basis for SDD?

The SDD process used in the Colab was researched and developed over 40 years and provides today’s best chance to make progress on wicked problems we face. As the science behind SDD evolved, six principles were established:

Six principles

1. *Dialogue must be structured* so that participants can think clearly by ensuring they are not overloaded with too much information.
2. *Each idea must be protected* so that its independence and genuineness remain.
3. *The whole group learns* and evolves as each participant sees how their ideas influence those of others.
4. *A diversity of viewpoints is essential* when engaging stakeholders in a dialogue for defining and resolving a complex issue.
5. *Participants will understand the relative importance of their ideas* only when their ideas are compared with others.
6. *Through understanding how different people's ideas relate*, participants become wiser about the meaning of their own ideas.

SDD software benefits

To enable these principles and better manage the activities, the creators of SDD developed software to support the dialogue and track the outcomes. Use of this software is imperative as it:

- Reduces the cognitive demands on participants;
- Increases the speed of the design process;
- Tracks logic expressed by participant decisions;
- Generates documents and visual representations of individual contributions and the group's collective decisions; and
- Supports revisions at any phase of the dialogue.

Preparing for a Colab

The first step in the process is a rigorous **Discovery Phase** led by a core planning team (i.e., a small group of people knowledgeable about the problem and about the environment in which the problem exists).

During the Discovery Phase the vital stakeholder groups are identified. Each group must be represented in the Colabs to form a complete picture of the problem. Some preliminary work is done to understand the variety in these perspectives and is presented in a report sent in advance to Colab participants.

The report helps prepare Colab participants to hear a variety of perspectives beyond those they have considered. The final product is the **Triggering Question**. It's the question around which the entire Colab is focused.

What happens in a Colab?

When you walk into the room, you will see tables formed into a U-shape with a specific seat assigned to you. Food is provided as well as comfortable chairs and reasonable breaks so that you can be fully engaged whenever the dialogue is underway.

Roles & Responsibilities

Along with the Colab participants, there are other specific roles:

- **The Sponsor** is the person who convened the Colab, and has overall responsibility for using the output from the Colab to address the wicked problem.
 - ✓ The Sponsor launches the Colab by making a statement that reminds all participants of the importance of the work that they will do.
 - ✓ This statement is followed by a second statement that puts a specific charge to the group. This charge is presented as a “Triggering Question” (TQ) that will continuously guide the dialogue and deliberations of the group.

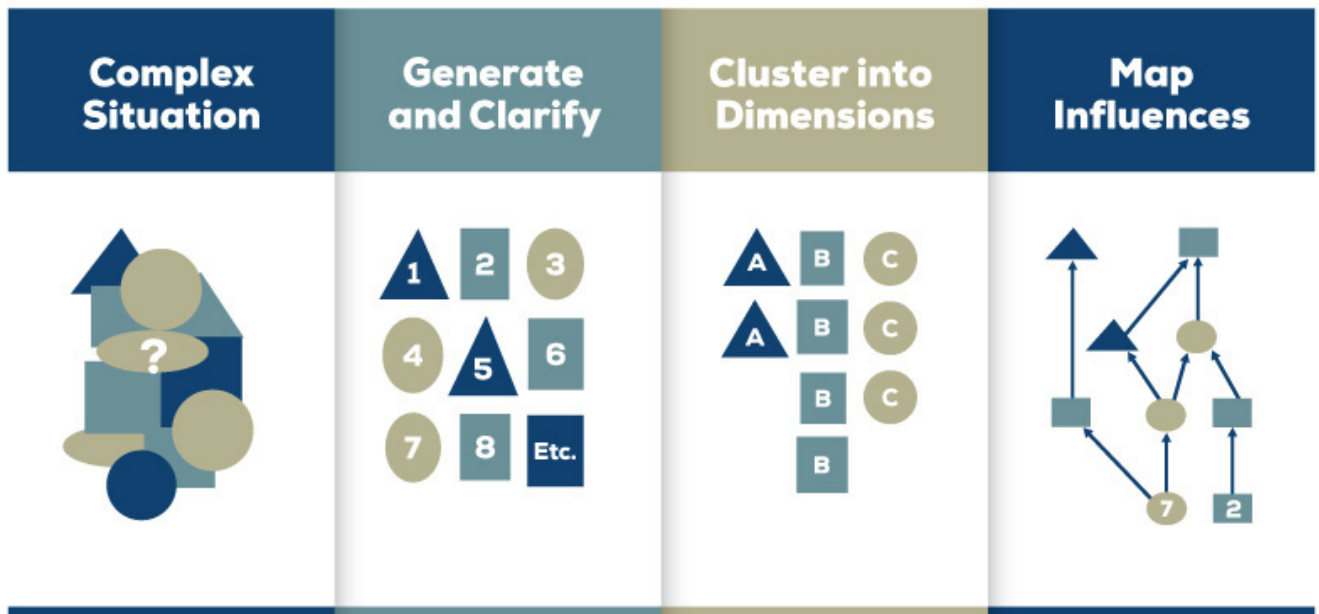
- ✓ This TQ is fully clarified with the group at the beginning of the Colab. If the group has concerns about the TQ, the sponsor can agree to change its wording.
- **The Dialogue Management Team (DMT)** consists of a
 - ✓ **Dialogue Manager** who controls the SDD process and directs the activities of the DMT. The Dialogue Manager ensures the six SDD principles are followed during the Colab.
 - ✓ Supporting the Dialogue Manager are typically a Production Manager, an Assistant Production Manager, and a Professional Recorder.
 - ❖ The **Production Manager** and **Assistant Production Manager** ensure all the technology operates effectively and captures the content that is generated by the participants. Since this is often more than a one person job, there is typically an assistant as well.
 - ❖ The **Professional Recorder** electronically captures, in real time, exactly what each participant says at specific points in the SDD process. Often this role is performed remotely.

Process

SDD follows a process that is pictorially represented below.

TYPICAL COLAB FLOW

Triggering Question: What are the barriers to solving this particular problem?



Create Narratives

Individual meaning based on the co-created understanding depicted in the Influence Map

The process starts with a complex situation. Responding to the triggering question, first silently, then shared out loud when asked, Colab participants generate ideas. Each participant gives their idea a brief headline and explains and clarifies their idea based on questions from other participants.

After there are no more new ideas, participants explore similarities among the ideas. If ideas are similar, they are clustered together; if not, a new cluster is formed.

After all the clusters are created, they are named to represent the various dimensions of the problem. Each participant then votes for their five most important ideas. The group's results provide the basis for selecting an initial set of important ideas that are used as the group determines how the ideas significantly influence one another.

The influence is found by having the computer select and present two ideas for the entire group to review, and then the group determines if one significantly influences the other. If a super majority of the group (more than 75%) determines there is a significant influence, then one is recorded. If not, that is recorded as well and the computer picks two more until the group has completed all their necessary discussions and decisions.

When all the necessary pairs are reviewed, the SDD software displays an influence map showing the group's collective decisions. The most influential ideas are shown at the bottom of the map with arrows showing what they influence and how this influence spreads through the system. The participants then create individual stories that explain what the map means to them. Using these narratives, each person can communicate this new understanding to others.

What can you expect from a Colab?

As you participate in a Colab using the SDD methodology, you will be part of a team engaged in creating a deeper understanding of a complex problem and paths toward its resolution. You can expect some things to occur and some results to be achieved. Overall, the Colab:

- Honors the diversity of perspectives
- Enables participant-driven deliberations
- Presents information at a pace and in a way that keeps people thinking clearly
- Ensures stakeholders supply the wisdom and knowledge (the DMT only manages the dialogue process)
- Establishes shared ownership of the wicked problem
- Finds where significant leverage exists
- Enhances commitment to collective action

Because of SDD, the participants generate a deeper understanding and better designs for improvement than they can in any other way.

What are the expectations of Colab participants?

We value every participant's input, so it is important to start with some ground rules or expectations:

- Be all in
 - ✓ Be present throughout the Colab
 - ✓ Be on time
 - ✓ Be fully engaged – Please do not use electronic devices for personal reasons
- Come prepared
 - ✓ Read the report that will be sent to you before the Colab
 - ✓ Reflect on the day before and after
- Listen to and be considerate of others
- Share your thinking and trust your instincts
- Assume everyone has something equally valuable to contribute
- Let your passion shine while keeping your emotions from getting the better of you
- Evaluate your own opinions and examine your own ideas, beliefs, and rationale
- Be humble. Learn and change

These expectations are serious. If you commit to participate, you commit to upholding these.

Thank you

Hopefully, you now understand a bit more about what you can expect from a Colab. With this deeper understanding, we hope you want to become a Colab participant. We know this will be a unique and powerful experience for you. We are looking forward to hearing your wisdom!

References and Acknowledgements

Flanagan, T. R., & Christakis, A. N. (2009). *The talking point creating an environment for exploring complex: Meaning a collaborative project of the institute for 21st century agoras*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Pub