

The Evolution of ICA's Facilitation Methods¹

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One of the most frequently asked questions for the ICA staff is: Where did these methods come from? What are their sources?

ICA began in the 50s as a study and teaching group, then a study-teaching-action group. Its concern was bringing methods and spirit to a wide public. At the heart of its methods was phenomenology or existentialism. Its mentors were people like Kierkegaard, Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Camus, Ortega y Gasset etc. All these teachers were a response to industrialism and the lopsided vision of scientific thought (truth out there). The scientific approach had gutted religion and left man (woman) without a self. These authors were all attempting to re-establish that the meaning of life was to be found in the depths of life and not in abstractions. You are existing (not when you are thinking about it) when you are self-consciously immersed in living. The ICA methods have always served to immerse people in the reality of their own situation and their own depths at the same time.

THE FOCUSED CONVERSATION METHOD

(aka the Artform Method, aka the Discussion Method)

History's greatest failure of dialogue, World War II, happened in our modern and technological age. People devoted to understanding, be they artists, theologians, or mothers, watched in horror as whole societies tried to systematically destroy each other. But perhaps no social group was more deeply disturbed than the surviving soldiers, who came home from the war often unable to speak of what they had seen. In whatever ways they could, they tried to fathom that fearsome failure of civilization. They searched for a way to understand the incomprehensible they had experienced.

One of these searchers was an army chaplain, Joseph Mathews, who had accompanied the US Marines in the Pacific Island landings of Tarawa, Saipan, Iwo Jima and Okinawa. When he returned from the war to his university professorship, he was consumed with the need to help people process the events of their lives. But how could people build their own meaning out of their own trials? And how could they achieve that together?

One person who proved most helpful to Mathews was an art professor². She showed him that any encounter with art involves a triad—three-way conversation—between the art, the artist, and the observer. Thus, it is relatively useless to ask a pianist, for example, what is meant by a certain composition. All the musician can do is to recreate the experience by playing it again, and letting the listener respond to that.

The professor went on: "First you have to take the work of art seriously by observing carefully what's there, and what's not. Then you have to look just as seriously at what is going on inside you as you observe the art to see how you are reacting, what repels you, what delights you. You have to peel back layers of awareness so

¹ This paper was written in January 2002. I don't think it was ever actually published.

² The "art professor" was Suzanne Langer. Her ideas were definitely a major factor in conceptualizing the conversation method. I'm sure she would have approved of the way Joe - and probably Jack Lewis - applied her ideas. The methodology itself probably came more directly from Bultman's application of Heidegger's hermeneutic (interpretive) phenomenology in demythologizing. I used the Gaely paper and a book on Bultman's thought by Schubert Ogden to isolate the demythologizing steps that laid the foundation for the "levels" of the method, but the more direct source would have been Bultman. "Jesus Christ and Mythology" is one place where Bultman discusses his approach. There are other books by him that go into it, but they are not easy to find any more.

that you can begin to ask what it means to you." Art, the professor explained, is like listening. You must work to create your own meaning from an artwork, or a conversation.

Suddenly lights went on in the professor's mind. This was connecting with things he was reading in the 19th century Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, and some 20th century European thinkers. Kierkegaard and the phenomenologists described the self as a series of relationships or awarenesses that observed what was going on in life, reacted internally to those observations, created meaning or insight out of both of these, and drew out the implications or decisions implicit in that insight or meaning.

Mathews decided to create a format for conversations using this approach, and to experiment with conversations on various art forms with his university community. He tried it first with Van Gogh's painting, *Starry Night*. He went on to use group reflections on ee cummings and on a current movie, *The Waterfront*. He began calling his method, "the art form conversation."

In a conversation on Picasso's *Guernica*, Mathews asked his students to describe the objects in the painting. Then he invited them to look at their inner response. "OK," he said, "Now I want you to think what sound you hear coming from the painting? I'm going to count to three, and then all of you make the sound you hear. Make it as loud or as quiet as you feel it should be. Ready? One, two, three!"—the room exploded in howls of pain or rage. The door flew open and two students from the hallway stuck their heads in, their expressions resembling the faces in the painting itself. In stunned silence, they heard the teacher ask, "Where do you see this painting going on in your life?"

The results were startling. These students had thought of art as "a cultural thing", or "a decorative object". Now they saw their lives intimately involved with and reflected in art. They saw the art form as a force challenging their habitual stance towards life. Said one participant, "Suddenly I saw that these art forms were making a claim on me. They were saying, "Wake up! Live your real life."

Mathews' peers at the university joined his experimental approach to teaching. They tried various styles of participatory reflection in different courses. Eventually, they developed a format fluid enough to fit many subjects, yet structured enough to be described as a method. Voilà!—the birth of the art form conversation.

Five years later, in the 1960s, Mathews and some colleagues moved to a Chicago urban slum to work with local community leaders. There they put the art form conversation to heavy use, enabling neighbours to reflect together. This became an essential part of the ICA's community-building efforts around the world.

Thirty years later in the 1990s, organizations and government departments were in the throes of change. People were asking, "How can we process what is going on in our lives, how can we move through our crises, pool our wisdom, and create the new forms? We need a way to participate in this change, to make our own decisions in our own groups and move things along. We are tired of the shark tank of office politics. We need ways to talk with our managers and our peers, and work things through in an open way. Can you help us with these problems? We need something we can use."

The scene is a conference room at Generic Corporation. A facilitator at the front of the room asks, "What are the main issues you face? What seems to block you in dealing with those issues? What do you see as the next steps you need to take?"

The questions have changed slightly, but the method remains the same. It is the art form method with a new name, the focused conversation. This approach to reflecting together is being used by organizations in many places across the world.

THE WORKSHOP METHOD

I first came across the phenomenon of brainstorming somewhere round 1961 when I was doing a teacher refresher course in pedagogy. A speaker who had recently done some research in the US introduced us to brainstorming. A question was posed and our group was instructed to shout out our ideas as they occurred to us. The instructor wrote them on a flip chart. We were told to lose our inhibitions and advised that no ideas would be judged. So we were free to shout out any ideas at all without feeling uncomfortable. We were further told that we should build on the ideas called out by other participants. The purpose was to obtain as many ideas as possible for later analysis.

As I recall, there was an immense amount of shouting. The facilitator managed to get down lots of ideas (not all of them, naturally.) At the end, we were expected to marvel at all the thoughts we had produced. We were told they would be analyzed later.

At the time, it seemed a very novel idea, but inconclusive. I remember not being favorably impressed; It seemed, in Macbeth's words, like a lot of "sound and fury, signifying nothing." And I had experienced before what happens with things that "get analyzed later." At this stage in the development of this method, there was no way to pull all the ideas together into a synthesis. The method was exciting, but impotent. Synthesis was to come later.

Alex Osborn's "Brainstorming"

My Internet research indicates that one source for the brainstorming part of the workshop method was an advertising executive by the name of Alex Osborn. In 1941 Mr. Osborn found that conventional business meetings were inhibiting the creation of new ideas and proposed some rules designed to help stimulate them. He was looking for rules which would give people the freedom of mind and action to spark off and reveal new ideas. To "think up" was originally the term he used to describe the process he developed, and that in turn came to be known as "brainstorming". He described brainstorming as "a conference technique by which a group attempts to find a solution for a specific problem by amassing all the ideas spontaneously by its members". The rules he came up with are the following:

- No criticism of ideas
- Go for large quantities of ideas
- Build on each others ideas
- Encourage wild and exaggerated ideas

He found that when these rules were followed, a lot more ideas were created and that a greater quantity of original ideas gave rise to a greater quantity of useful ideas. Quantity produced quality.

Using these new rules, people's natural inhibitions were reduced, inhibitions which prevented them putting forward ideas which they felt might be considered "wrong" or "stupid". Osborn also found that generating "silly" ideas could spark off very useful ideas because they changed the way people thought.

The development of this original technique was considered revolutionary at the time. You can read Alex Osborn's original approach in his book *Applied Imagination*. Since its birth in 1941, brainstorming spread throughout the world.

The Delphi Process³

Another possible source was the Delphi Process, originally developed in the 1950s by Olaf Helmer and Norman Dalkey, both scientists at the Rand Corporation. It served as an iterative, consensus-building process for forecasting futures. The process unfolds like this:

1. Each member independently and anonymously writes down comments and suggestions about ways to deal with a problem or issue.
2. Ideas are compiled, reproduced, and distributed to members for observation and reaction.
3. Each member provides feedback to the entire group concerning each of the comments and proposed solutions.
4. The members reach consensus on which solution is most acceptable to the group as a whole.

This has similarities with the Osborn method, with two differences. First, it gives participants time to think up their ideas, and second, there is a degree of processing of results, in which a consensus is reached.

ICA's Contribution

ICA revolutionized the brainstorming technique with the addition of *gestalting* which it acquired from Piaget's writings on gestalt psychology. (ICA was studying Piaget at the time for his contribution to educational theories.) The word *gestalt* is German, and can be a verb. It means things like organizing or making a whole pattern out of many parts. According to Gestalt Psychology, images are perceived as a pattern or a whole rather than merely as a sum of distinct component parts. Gestalt emphasizes the tendency in the human mind towards integration, organization and co-operation.

ICA used gestalting as the third step of the workshop method. Today, we are a little coy about using this word, unfamiliar to most people. We use instead the grouping and naming steps. But gestalting is what is going on. In front of the group may be a cluster of 10 to 20 cards. We use the steps of the gestalting process to enable a whole new creation to crawl out of the cluster of cards. The process is part rational, part intuitive.

The addition of the gestalt was the equivalent of putting a Formula-1 engine into a T-model Ford. Workshopping became a powerful instrument of formulating consensus.

ICA began using the workshop regularly as a standard tool in the 1960s. As ICAs spread round the world in the late 60s and early 70s, the workshop was the standard problem-solving tool. By then it had acquired its contexting step.

When ICA's work spread to working with corporations in the mid-70s, the Living Effectively in the New Society (LENS) Course was taught all over the world. It was a series of four workshops: vision, contradictions, proposals and tactics aimed at catalysing global responsibility in the corporations. Later in the 70s this planning method was adapted to the holding of community consultations in less developed countries.

In the mid 80s, ICA developed training courses on the workshop and the planning methods. These courses are increasingly taught around the world to pass these methods on and to train future facilitators. Although "the definitive" paper on workshopping was written in 1971, subsequently, the methods have been endowed with

³ Delphi is also an iterative process. Joe et.al. may have been familiar with it, but I couldn't find any real evidence that it played a direct or substantial role in the development of our methodology. It's aim is to bring the focus from many to one. It is a process of selection. The workshop method seeks to synthesize thought patterns among ideas resulting in a unified image.

increasing sophistication in process and understanding. Recently, its fifth step was named “Resolve”, rather than “Consensus” or “Reflection.”

THE FACILITATED PLANNING METHOD

aka the LENS method, aka the Consult Method, aka Strategic Planning

In 1971, the Institute sent invitations out to a 1000 people to work on a strategic plan for social transformation. Using the Social Process triangles as a screen, they used a new method of planning which had just been created. Using the balanced model of the social process as a vision for the future, the participants operating in three centres, spotted, analyzed, and wrote a 100-page document on the contradictions, or obstacles, that had to be dealt with in social transformation. The next step was to brainstorm and organize 77 'proposals' (along the lines of Jean Jacques Servan-Schreiber's book which had just hit the bookstores.) Then, using the proposals as a jumping off point, participants went to work to create action tactics to deal with the key arenas of contradiction.

After this research assembly, work began on a new course (the Convoy Course, the NINS Course (New Individual and New Society) for getting corporations to think and make plans for responsible global-local action. This wedded the *problemat*, the contradictions, proposal-making and tactics creation into a new course called LENS (Living Effectively in the New Society). The intent was citizen involvement in the local, but out of global context. In 1973, it was tried out on large corporations, after some design turns on the dial, and with considerable success.

Around 1978, it was refocused to fit the needs of corporations and other organizations. LENS has been used by many in the ICA network ever since with many of the companies listed in the Fortune 500 and with hundreds of others. It has set many companies back on their feet.

In 1974, a foreshortened form of the LENS program was tried out in urban neighborhoods, first styled, "The Local Community Convocation" and then "Local Community Meetings" (or, in the U.S., "Town Meetings"). ICA led about 6000 of these meetings in communities round the world, between 1976 and 1979.

These participatory methods received their real test, when, between 1975 and 1984, ICA launched community development projects on every continent except the then Soviet Union. Human Development Training Institutes were set up in every main development location to train village leaders in these methods. Once we started doing the vision, contradictions, proposals, tactics and implementaries format on the consults for beginning community development projects around the world, it carried over to the LENS process.. So, we redesigned LENS to have the same methodology as the consults. So, the LENS method is really a copying of the consult method used to launch community development projects. It seemed to work much better with the business community after that..

Then, in 1985, some in ICA began to raise the question of how to train the general public in these methods. In many offices round the world people experimented with courses training people in the discussion and workshop methods, as well as in facilitated planning. These courses have been picked up by several other ICA offices on several continents for training local people in facilitation methods. They are now global courses with well-developed manuals in great demand particularly by communities, service groups, and local government. Now, ICA offices are dedicated to "facilitating a culture of participation" through bringing these methods to every sector of society'.