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DIALOGUE METHODS FOR RESEARCH INTEGRATION

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## DIALOGUE METHODS FOR RESEARCH INTEGRATION

Gabriele Bammer, David McDonald and Peter Deane

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*Dialogue is one of the key strategies through which research integration is achieved and here specific integration tasks are linked to particular dialogue methods. Several dialogue methods are available for integrating judgements: Citizens jury, Consensus conference, Deliberative polling, Delphi technique, Nominal group technique, Open space technology and Scenario planning. Fewer methods were found for other aspects of research integration. Appreciative inquiry and Future search conferences are dialogue methods for integrating visions, Principled negotiation for integrating interests and the Ethical matrix for integrating values. Some dialogue methods integrate more than one element. Most significant change technique integrates visions, values and interests, Strategic assumption surfacing and testing integrates world views, visions and interests, and Soft systems methodology integrates visions and world views. We are not aware of other research that has tried to link integration tasks and dialogue methods, but we conclude this is a profitable line for further enquiry.*

*Integration Insights is a series of digests of concepts, techniques or real-world examples of integration in research.*

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### INTRODUCTION

Research tackling complex problems requires integration between the insights of different disciplines. For example, examination of how best to manage the encroachment of housing on farm- and bush-land in periurban areas can benefit from the expertise of ecologists, economists, hydrologists, sociologists, soil scientists, demographers and so on. Further, the perspectives of those affected by the particular issue under consideration, such as farmers, recreational users of the bushland, and families requiring housing, will also contribute to understanding and solving the problem. Finally those in a position to make decisions about the issue, such as government policy makers, regulators, and land developers also have valuable expertise and insights. For researchers to contribute to effectively understanding and dealing with such an issue, this range of perspectives requires synthesising. This involves not only drawing together the different knowledge held by the relevant groups, but also developing an appreciation of their interests and values, visions for the future and so on. Such research integration is a complex task with many elements.

One of the key strategies by which research integration is achieved is through dialogue (see *Integration Insights #1*). While there are a range of dialogue methods and toolkits available (eg Start, 2004; Urban Research Program, 2006), these do not focus on dialogue from the standpoint of research integration. Our aim is to provide more effective ways for researchers to bring together multiple perspectives – from disciplines, decision makers, and community groups – to address complex problems, therefore we tease out different tasks for research integration and link them to specific dialogue methods. This Integration Insight summarises a more detailed monograph (McDonald et al., 2007).

The overview presented here is necessarily brief and precludes detailed presentation of the dialogue methods. Our aim is to alert integration researchers to a range of methods that they may find useful, to encourage them to seek further information and training and to inspire them to make the linking of research integration and dialogue methods an area for further research.

We next provide brief overviews of research integration and of dialogue. We then describe five categories of methods and briefly outline the techniques we have found in each of them.

## OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH INTEGRATION

Research integration has three dimensions:

1. the synthesis of a range of knowledge, information and perspectives to improve understanding of an issue or problem;
2. using research knowledge to support decision makers in various domains, including public policy, business, professional practice and community activism; and
3. using research knowledge to underpin the implementation of decisions in effective social change.

These three dimensions are generally not sequential, but are often intertwined.

Within these three dimensions, there are numerous aspects of research to be considered in an integration process, including visions, interests, values, judgements, epistemologies, time scales, geographical scales, and world views. This is not a comprehensive list but, as we outlined in our opening illustration, is aimed at giving a flavour of the tasks research integration must accomplish. For example, those involved in a research project may have different visions of what the ultimate aim of the research is, they may have different motivations (interests) for being involved, their approaches may be underpinned by different epistemologies and the results may be useful at different time scales. To achieve integration, such differences need to be identified and addressed. Most importantly, different dialogue methods are generally suited to only one or a small group of these integration tasks. In other words, method A may be suited to integrating judgements but not interests, whereas the opposite may be the case for method B.

## OVERVIEW OF DIALOGUE

We draw on Franco's 2006 definition of dialogue, which highlights a core common element of key references in the field (Bohm, 1996; Isaacs, 1999, 2001; Yankelovich, 1999; Roberts, 2002). Franco (p. 814) considers dialogue to be conversation with a particular purpose, namely:

*... "participants listen to find strength and value in another's position and work together towards a mutual understanding (Yankelovich, 1999) ... Dialogue involves the suspension of judgment or pre-conceptions, an equal participation in the conversation by the parties, empathetic listening, and the mutual probing of assumptions (Roberts, 2002). The goal of dialogue is to jointly create meaning and shared understanding between participants (Bohm, 1996; Isaacs, 1999, 2001; Yankelovich, 1999; Roberts, 2002)."*

## OVERVIEW OF DIALOGUE METHODS FOR RESEARCH INTEGRATION

Our considerations focus on *"jointly create meaning and shared understanding"* ABOUT WHAT? The 'about what' question is answered by the particular aspects of research integration under consideration. As we have outlined above, some dialogue methods are well suited to creating meaning and shared understanding about the judgements people have on how best to move forward on a problem. Others can provide mutual insights into the different interests involved in the problem and still others into the different visions for how the problem might ideally be solved.

To date we have identified five categories of dialogue methods for research integration, namely for integrating judgements, visions, interests, and values, as well as methods that are useful for integrating more than one of these elements. So far we have identified 14 dialogue methods for research integration within these categories:

Dialogue methods for integrating judgements

- Citizens jury
- Consensus conference
- Deliberative polling
- Delphi technique

## DIALOGUE METHODS FOR INTEGRATING JUDGEMENTS

Nominal group technique  
Open space technology  
Scenario planning

Dialogue methods for integrating visions  
Appreciative inquiry  
Future search conferences

Dialogue method for integrating interests  
Principled negotiation

Dialogue method for integrating values  
Ethical matrix

Dialogue methods for integrating multiple elements  
Most significant change technique (visions, values and interests)  
Strategic assumption surfacing and testing (world views, visions and interests)  
Soft systems methodology (visions and world views).

Some of the methods we describe are quite limited in their application, while others are broadly useful. Further, some methods may be used in conjunction with others, either sequentially or nested.

The majority of methods we identified are useful for integration of judgements. Here we define judgement as:

*"ability to judge justly or wisely, especially in matters affecting action; good sense; discretion", and*

*"the forming of an opinion, estimate, notion, or conclusion, as from circumstances presented to the mind" (Macquarie Dictionary, 2005).*

Yankelovich (1999) adds to this that in making a judgement people take into account the facts as they understand them, their personal goals and moral values, as well as their sense of what is best for others as well as themselves.

Integration of judgements is particularly important when research data alone are not sufficient to provide a) a full understanding or b) a clear path for action, or c) when action needs to be taken before all the necessary research can be conducted. Synthesising a range of informed judgements is then often the best way forward.

Integration of judgements may therefore have one or more of the following dimensions:

- enabling individual participants in the dialogue process to form an integrated judgement about an issue that brings together their own experiences and views with information provided by subject matter experts, advocates and other stakeholders who are involved in the dialogue;
- enabling the formation of a combined judgement between the participants in the dialogue process; and
- enabling decision makers and other practitioners to take into account such integrated judgements.

Three of the dialogue methods for integrating judgements – Citizens jury, Consensus conference and Deliberative polling have their roots in deliberative democracy. They aim to provide a range of expert knowledge and stakeholder views to a representative group of ordinary citizens to enable them to come to an informed judgement individually and, for Citizens jury and Consensus conference,

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## DIALOGUE METHODS FOR INTEGRATING VISIONS

as a group. These judgements are then made available to decision makers.

The Delphi technique and Scenario planning are most commonly used to integrate the judgements of experts. The Delphi technique is an iterative process where judgements are systematically solicited and collated through sequential questionnaires, with information from earlier responses summarised and fed-back to respondents. Scenario planning has a particular emphasis on dealing with uncertain futures. Both the development of scenarios about likely futures and their application involve the integration of judgements.

The Nominal group technique provides a method for ensuring that everyone in the group has an equal opportunity to have their say, while Open space technology aims to harness energy and spontaneity, in a process which builds on what happens in good coffee break discussions at a conference.

We use vision here in the sense of a mental view or image of a goal that does not yet exist in place or time. Visions are important in research in terms of the overarching aspirations that a particular study seeks to contribute to. Integration is important for developing a shared vision or for accommodating different visions. For example, within the same study, some researchers may have a grand vision such as alleviating national poverty, while others may be focussed on improving employment opportunities for a particular group.

The process of developing a shared vision is useful for increasing understanding of an issue and having a shared vision can greatly facilitate the implementation of research findings into decisions and subsequent action.

We found two methods for integrating visions – Appreciative inquiry and Future search conferences.

Appreciative inquiry focuses on what is working well (rather than what is not working) and brings together members of a team to clarify, develop and integrate their visions for how they do their work by identifying what is good about it and how to move it, as an entity, to a higher level of goal attainment.

Future search conferences generally deal with complex urgent issues and aim to get participants to focus on the whole system before narrowing down to decide on specific actions to take.

## DIALOGUE METHODS FOR INTEGRATING INTERESTS

Interests are what motivate us. Making a profit, personal advancement, concern about those less fortunate, and desire to protect a piece of wilderness are all examples of interests. Such motivations provide the reason stakeholders and researchers choose to tackle a particular problem. As well, there are interests for getting involved in a particular research project, such as publications, access to data or ensuring a point of view is heard.

Interests are important for research integration because conflicting interests can prevent progress from being made on an issue. Resolving such clashes in motivations can be essential for research to lead to effective decisions and practice based change.

Negotiation is the usual method for resolving divergent interests, but many forms of negotiation are about one side winning at the expense of the other. These are not consistent with the aim of dialogue to "*jointly create meaning and shared understanding*" (Franco, 2006). However one form of negotiation, Principled negotiation, stands out as consistent with the aims of dialogue. Principled negotiation can also be useful early in the research when an understanding of different motivations can be used to shape the details of the research and the rewards for the various research participants.

Principled negotiation aims to help participants better understand their own and each others' interests, to creatively find ways of meeting them and choosing a fair solution. It is described in more detail in *Integration Insights #3*.

## DIALOGUE METHODS FOR INTEGRATING VALUES

Values are the moral stance that underpins the research. We use here a definition from the Oxford English Dictionary (1989): "*the principles or standards of a person or society, the personal or societal judgement of what is valuable and important in life.*"

Values are important in research integration because, as with visions and interests, shared values and accommodation of different values is an important aid to understanding and to decision support and action.

We identified one method for integrating values, namely the Ethical matrix. This allows for rational analysis of a range of values, based on 'common sense morality' (Mepham et al., 2000, p 167). It has three principles – wellbeing, autonomy and justice – each of which forms a column in the matrix. Each row lists an interest group or stakeholder. The task is to identify and document the ethical impacts of the matter under consideration in each cell of the matrix and, through discussion, assess their relative importance.

## DIALOGUE METHODS FOR INTEGRATING MULTIPLE ELEMENTS

While it is feasible to distinguish between elements like visions, interests, values and world views, in practice these are often closely entwined and some dialogue methods deal with more than one element at the same time.

We identified three such methods:

- Most significant change technique which integrates visions, values and interests
- Strategic assumption surfacing and testing, which integrates world views, visions and interests, and
- Soft systems methodology, which integrates visions and world views.

The Most significant change technique focuses on monitoring and evaluation and has at its core the generation, analysis and use of stories. Strategic assumption surfacing and testing is based on the premise that we live our lives based on the assumptions we make about ourselves and the world. Surfacing and challenging these assumptions is the core of the method. This then leads to synthesis through some assumptions being discarded and other being drawn together in new ways. Soft systems methodology aims to deal with complex issues by examining the whole system and moves from finding out about a problem situation to taking action in the situation by organised explicit systems thinking.

## CONCLUSION

Our aim in producing a compilation of dialogue methods is to start a process of differentiating aspects of research integration and corresponding dialogue methods. It is clear that if we want integration in research to be more than ill-defined talking to each other, we need to untangle the variety of elements involved in bringing together multiple perspectives to address complex problems. We have started to make a list of those elements which include: judgements, visions, interests, values, epistemologies, time scales, geographical scales, and world views. Further we have started to identify dialogue tools which deal with some of these elements, singly or in combination.

We conclude that:

- further research linking individual dialogue methods with specific aspects of research integration is warranted;
- researchers in areas where integrated research is important are likely to benefit from applying these methods and documenting and publishing the outcomes; and
- there is room for improvement of the dialogue methods through critical analysis and evaluation.

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## REFERENCES

We are not aware of other research that has tried to link integration tasks and dialogue methods and we encourage fellow researchers to not only test the value of these methods by applying them in their own investigations and documenting the outcomes, but also to develop additional methods for the integration of the various elements central to research on complex problems.

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## PREVIOUS ISSUES

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