Dialogue Mapping Thinking

Idea In Short

Most meetings leave no trace of how the group reasoned. People remember conclusions, forget the objections, and argue later about what was said. Dialogue mapping changes that by drawing the conversation as it happens, on a screen everyone can see, using a simple grammar of questions, ideas, and arguments. The method comes from Jeff Conklin and builds on the Issue-Based Information System that Horst Rittel devised to tackle wicked problems. This article explains how dialogue mapping works, why a shared visual helps groups think, how to try it without special software, how it connects to wicked problems and social complexity, and what limits to keep in mind.

A team argues for an hour about whether to rebuild a legacy system. Each person repeats a favorite point. Someone raises a concern that nobody answers, and ten minutes later someone raises it again. Now imagine a screen on the wall that shows each question, each proposed answer, and each argument as a branch. The repeated concern gets noticed, the unanswered question gets answered, and the group sees where it stands.

What dialogue mapping is

Dr. Dobb's Journal describes dialog mapping as a meeting facilitation technique invented by Jeff Conklin, a way of visually mapping a group's conversation using the grammar of the Issue-Based Information System. The article points out that a shared display is a critical component, and that the technique differs from other live transcription methods because it uses the specialized IBIS grammar.1

Wikipedia's entry on IBIS explains that issue mapping is the basis of dialogue mapping. In dialogue mapping, a facilitator uses IBIS notation to record a group conversation while it is happening, on a display that all can see, so that the map accurately represents the group's thinking.2

The key point is that the map grows during the conversation, not after it. People can correct it on the spot, which keeps the record honest.

The IBIS grammar

IBIS works with a small set of node types. An issue is a question the group needs to answer. A position is a possible answer or idea. An argument is a reason for or against a position.

The grammar is deliberately simple. Anyone can learn it in minutes, and its simplicity keeps the mapper from losing the thread of the discussion. A Knowledge Cartography page from the University of Technology Sydney notes that IBIS has emerged as a lingua franca, and that the aim is to make the structure of the dialogue visible as a tree or network, so that you can literally see what you are saying.3

Because every contribution has a place, the map exposes gaps. An issue with no positions signals a question the group has not tried to answer. A position with only supporting arguments signals that nobody has tested it.

Where the method comes from

A chapter on dialog mapping in a Springer volume explains that the notion of wicked problems and the IBIS framework both derive from the work of Horst Rittel. It adds that Compendium, a software tool, is itself based on a facilitated approach to computer-supported argument visualization called Dialog Mapping.4

Dr. Dobb's reports that Rittel and his colleagues at the University of California at Berkeley devised IBIS in the 1970s to help tackle what Rittel called wicked problems.

The University of Technology Sydney page credits the work of Jeff Conklin, Al Selvin, and Maarten Sierhuis in building software to support reflective deliberation around complex dilemmas. That lineage matters because the method rests on decades of use, not on a single book.

Wicked problems and social complexity

Conklin's book Dialogue Mapping: Building Shared Understanding of Wicked Problems

opens with a chapter on social complexity. A copy of that chapter hosted by Aalto University recalls complaints that many managers will know, such as how to get work done with all these meetings, and that there is always time to do it over again but never time to do it right.5

In an interview published in Rotman Magazine, Conklin names wicked problems and social complexity as the two most intense forces affecting organizations today, and explains that Rittel characterized wicked problems by a set of properties.6

In practical terms, a wicked problem has many stakeholders with different views, no clear definition, and no obvious right answer. Dialogue mapping suits such problems because it keeps many views on the table without forcing early agreement.

Why a shared visual helps thinking

A group has limited working memory. When a discussion runs for an hour, nobody can hold every point in mind. A map acts as shared external memory, which links to the idea of externalized cognition covered earlier in this series.

Seeing the map also changes behavior. People tend to restate points less often, because they can see that the point is already there. They are more willing to disagree with an idea on the screen than with the person who offered it.

A visual map also helps latecomers and absent colleagues. They can read the structure of the discussion and see which questions remain open, which beats a summary email.

Trying it without special software

You can start with a whiteboard or a large sheet of paper. Write the central issue as a question in the middle or at the left. As people speak, translate their contributions into short statements and attach them as positions or arguments.

Keep each node brief, in the speaker's own words where possible. Check with the person: is this what you meant? The check keeps the map accurate and shows people that they are heard.

If you work online, use a shared whiteboard or a mind-mapping tool. Assign one person to map while another facilitates the discussion, at least until you gain confidence.

After the meeting, share a photo or export of the map. Ask participants to correct it. Use it to open the next session.

Using it in consulting and leadership work

Consultants can use dialogue mapping in workshops where stakeholders disagree about the problem itself. The map becomes a neutral object. Participants direct their comments at it, and the facilitator can ask which branch a new comment belongs to.

Leaders can use it in strategy sessions and project kickoffs. A map of the open questions from the first session gives the team a shared agenda and prevents the same debates from restarting.

Use the map to track decisions as well. Mark each issue as open, decided, or parked, and note who owns the follow-up. The status marks turn a record of a conversation into a working plan.

Questions to ask while mapping

A few prompts keep a map useful. Which issue are we on right now? Is this a new question, an idea, or a reason for an idea? Does this point answer an existing question or open a new one?

When the group stalls, look at the map. An issue with no positions invites brainstorming. A position with no arguments invites scrutiny. A heavy branch with many arguments may need a decision.

Close by reading the map aloud from the top. Ask whether it matches the group's understanding, and fix what does not. That final pass creates the shared understanding that gives the method its name.

A hypothetical example

Imagine a hypothetical software company debating whether to rebuild its billing system. The CTO favors a rebuild, finance fears cost overruns, and support worries about customer disruption. A consultant maps the discussion live. The central issue reads: how should we deal with the limits of the billing system?

Positions appear: rebuild, patch, or buy a vendor product. Arguments attach to each. During the session, the map shows that nobody has addressed a question that support raised, namely how customers would migrate. The group pauses to answer it, and the answer changes the ranking of options. The company is invented, but the case shows how a map reveals an unanswered question that a spoken debate had buried.

Cautions

The mapper holds power. A facilitator who rewrites contributions to fit a preferred conclusion can steer the group without anyone noticing. Keep the wording close to the speaker's, and invite corrections.

Do not map everything. Chatter and side comments clutter the display. Capture the contributions that bear on the central issue, and let the rest pass.

Finally, remember that a map shows structure, not truth. A well-organized map of a weak argument is still a weak argument, so combine mapping with real scrutiny of evidence.

- 1Dialog mapping: solving wicked problems, Dr. Dobb's
- 2Issue-based information system
- 3Knowledge cartography for mapping wicked problems, University of Technology Sydney
- 4Dialog mapping chapter, Springer
- 5Wicked problems and social complexity, Conklin, Aalto University
- 6Building shared understanding of wicked problems, Rotman Magazine interview

Summary

Dialogue mapping thinking means making a group's reasoning visible by drawing the

conversation live in a structured notation. Jeff Conklin's technique uses the Issue-Based Information System grammar, developed by Horst Rittel in the 1970s for wicked problems, and a shared display so that everyone can see what has been said and how it connects. The map helps groups hold complexity, spot missing questions, and avoid repeating points. It does not replace judgment, and a map can mislead if the mapper filters poorly. In your next complex discussion, draw the central question on a board and record each idea and argument beneath it as people speak.