PAPER
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Dialectical processes

Bob Dick (2002) *Building agreement from disagreement: the anatomy of dialectical processes*. Chapel Hill, Qld.: Interchange.

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Preface

A recurring experience I have had in consultancy work is that I learn or discover or invent some process, to find on examination that it is the same process which I already use in different settings. The surface differences have concealed the underlying identify.

On other occasions I perform some minor fine tuning to a process in the heat of the moment, and it changes character before my very eyes.

This has been particularly true of dialectical processes, the processes which generate agreement out of disagreement. For years I tinkered with a number of processes for managing information, only to discover eventually that just a few essential principles were being applied. Or I dealt a little differently with a consensus-identifying process and, chameleon-like, it was transformed.

A fascination with delphi helped me to recognise the family resemblances of the processes I now call dialectical. This monograph documents some of the conclusions I was eventually drawn to.

It is written primarily for people who are called upon to design processes. Those who will find it most useful, I think, are the growing numbers of people who practise social consultancy. Large amounts of human endeavour are squandered in meetings which are intended to solve problems, or set goals, or make decisions. Many such meetings use unstructured conversation to make decisions, at the cost of little progress and much ennui.

When meetings are structured, the structures are often adversarial: they aim not for resolution but merely for a decision. Or they are consensual, which assumes that agreement is easily achievable. When resolution is possible but difficult, dialectical processes are instead indicated.

Over the time that I have been interested in process design, and in the differences between dialectical and other processes, I have continued to experiment in my teaching and consultancy with different processes. I

thought a lot about the important dimensions. Most of this, however, took place in my head. For some years now I have intended to write something on process design, but other imperatives pushed aside the task. The advent of an International Congress on Process Management seemed too good an opportunity to miss. It provided the initial encouragement for me to explore some of these issues in print.

Acknowledgments

Overview

Collective human action requires collective decision. So there are processes for carrying out these decision-making activities. Most of those in common use are adversarial: in the common jargon, win/lose. One person's gain is another's loss. The key players in the activity try to present their case in a way which improves their chance of being on the winning side, so to speak.

There is another family of processes with different qualities. They try to satisfy all parties; so they are commonly known as consensual or win/win. If there is enough agreement between people to provide the beginnings of a resolution, consensual processes can yield better collective outcomes. But they sometimes do not work. Some situations are beyond their resolution, especially when there are important conflicts present.

A third family of processes is often regarded as part of the consensual family. The differences are so great, however, that this may be a poor categorisation. Certainly, these processes are win/win in intent. The way they go about achieving the outcomes is in marked contrast to the approaches common in consensual processes. Focussing on *dis*agreements, they seek to turn them into agreements. Out of the dialectic between opposing views a greater understanding emerges. They may be called dialectical processes.

Their style, too, is very different. Within minutes of experiencing a dialectical process you would recognise it as something quite apart from either adversarial processes, or those which you might call soft consensus.

As I have begun to explore such processes, I have learned slowly how they operate. And in this regard, I find that delphi provides a clear illustration of their mechanics. A cyclic technique often used for forecasting future trends, delphi is conducted by mail with a panel of experts. As the panel members exchange information about their opinions and the underlying evidence, they grope

collectively towards a consensus. As it is usually by mail, the mechanics are less overlaid by relationship issues.

In this monograph, [1] therefore, I analyse the operation of a mail delphi. In the anatomy of delphi I uncover the consensus-producing mechanisms and explore them in some depth. The result, I believe, is a practical exposition of how a dialectic can operate.

As the panel members don't meet face to face, their adversarial instincts are less likely to be triggered by the situation. Separated by distance, and often anonymous, they find their egos less under threat. Their communication more easily remains constructive.

In this monograph I first describe a conventional mail delphi. I analyse it to explain its dynamics. After a comment about the management of relationships and processes, I then provide a description of a face-to-face variant. It is a time-efficient alternative for collective decision making where there is a high potential for conflict. Other dialectical processes are then identified and briefly addressed.

Delphi, conventionally

As I said, the common approach is to conduct delphi by mail. [2, 3] A panel of experts, people with relevant knowledge, provides the information. The purpose of the delphi is for the panel to reach agreement on some issue where

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1. An earlier and somewhat more primitive form of this paper appeared under the title *Delphi as a dialectical process: generating agreement out of disagreement*, Paper distributed a the International Conference of Conflict Resolution Trainers, Sydney, 1989.
2. There are numerous descriptions of delphi. See, for example, the summaries of delphi and other forecasting techniques in J. Scott Armstrong (1978), *Long-range forecasting: from crystal ball to computer*, New York: Wiley, or Delbecq, A.L., Van de Ven, A.H. and Gustafson, D.H.(1975), *Group techniques for program planning: a guide to nominal group and delphi processes*, Glenview, Ill.: Scott Foresman.
3. Or, currently, by email.

they may not initially agree. In other words, its purpose is to generate agreement out of disagreement.

The most common use of delphi is in forecasting. Most often it is done in a form which allows the information to be numerical (such as the year by which a certain event is expected to occur). Numerical information is easier to collate and communicate. It consists of multiple rounds. In each of them the panelists exchange information.

(Though delphi was much used in the 1960s and early 1970s it receives little use these days. [4] The reason, I suspect, is because of a savage critique by Sackman. [5] As Sackman has quite misunderstood the nature of delphi [6] I won't attempt to answer his critique here. Even if his were an accurate critique, an analysis of delphi is still appropriate for present purposes.)

Here is a description of a typical procedure... [7]

The facilitator decides the research question. For ease of analysis and communication, as already mentioned, it is most frequently one which can be answered numerically. For example it could be...

> *"By what year will natural voice recognition be readily available for personal computers at a cost less than $2000?"*

The panel is recruited, and presented with the research question by mail. They are asked to respond by mail with their estimate. This is the first round.

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4. That is changing, I think. There seems to have been an increase in the use of delphi since this paper was first written.
5. Sackman, Harold (1975). *Delphi critique: expert opinion, forecasting and group process*. Lexington, Mass.: Heath.
6. Coming from a background of quantitative psychological research, and at a time when such research was often quite constrained, Sackman was not well placed to carry out his critique. He analyses delphi as if it were a research process rather than a decision making process; this leads him to offer criticism which is unfortunate and in my judgment inappropriate.
7. Parts of the argument in this monograph also appear in my brief monograph *Rigour without numbers: the potential of dialectical processes as qualitative research tools*, Interchange, 1989.

The facilitator collates their responses and notifies the panel members of the results. This is where numerical approaches have an advantage: you need report only some indication of the midpoint and of the spread of responses. The midpoint can be reported economically as a mean or median. Common measures of the spread are standard deviation or interquartile range (if you don't know what these are it doesn't greatly matter).

Subsequent rounds are a little more complex for both the panelists and the facilitator.

On the second and later rounds, panel members have a choice. They may either vary their estimate in the direction of an emerging consensus, or offer reasons for standing their ground.

As there is now both numerical and textual information provided, the facilitator has a harder job. The numerical information can again be summarised by an indication of a midpoint and of the spread. The textual information also has to be collated in some way. The nature of the task addressed by the delphi will influence this; it may be enough to choose some representative quotes to present views mentioned more than once. Extreme views may be reported in their entirety, perhaps shorn of polemic or rhetoric. Otherwise, some form of content analysis [8] could be used.

In short, the main features of delphi are...

■   the use of a panel of people expert in the relevant fields;

■   the conduct of the process by mail; and

■   the use of multiple rounds

■   the feedback of collated information to panel members between rounds.

Figure 1 summarises the process.

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8.   O.R. Holsti (1969), *Content analysis for the social sciences and humanities*, Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, is probably still the bible.

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┌─────────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────────┐
│ researcher decides  │─────▶│ researcher selects  │
│  research question  │      │ and briefs panel by │
│                     │      │        mail         │
└─────────────────────┘      └─────────────────────┘
           ┌─────────────────────────────┘
           ▼
┌─────────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────────┐
│ panel responds with │─────▶│ researcher collates │
│  estimate by mail   │      │      estimates      │
└─────────────────────┘      └─────────────────────┘
                                        │
    yes      ◇ round              no    ▼
     ◀───────  n?  ──────────▶  ┌─────────────────────┐
              ◇                 │ researcher informs  │
              ▲                 │    panel by mail    │
              │                 └─────────────────────┘
              │                            │
┌─────────────────────┐                   ▼
│ researcher collates │      ┌─────────────────────┐
│estimates and evidence│◀────│ panel responds by   │
└─────────────────────┘      │ mail — converge or  │
                             │ provide more        │
                             │    information      │
                             └─────────────────────┘
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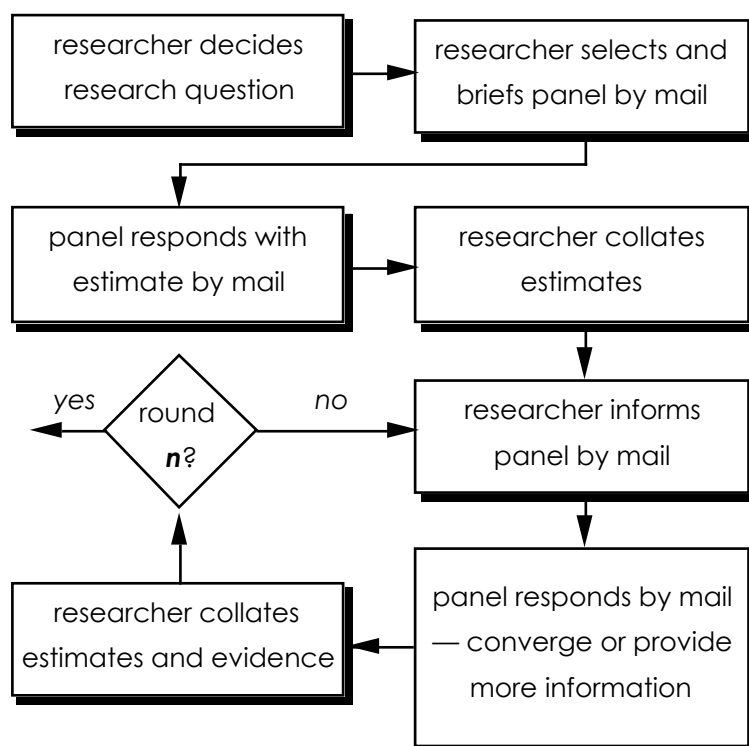
Fig. 1

A conventional mail delphi

I would have expected there to be some debate about the number of rounds, but this isn't evident. Ideally one might continue to cycle through the process until consensus emerges. In practice it is common to limit a delphi to three rounds. I expect that there are two main reasons for this. First, three rounds usually generate something approaching consensus (I'll return to this later). A second reason is that users often have to estimate costs ahead of time to obtain funding; so they try to predict the smallest number of rounds that will work. Three rounds do produce convergence (though there is some debate about whether they increase accuracy). [9]

What most typically happens is that by the third round, panel members converge towards a single estimate. On occasions there is only partial convergence,

9. There is some evidence provided for this, for example by Roger J. Best (1974), An experiment in delphi estimation in marketing decision making, *Journal of Marketing Research*, 11, 448-452.

towards two or more different estimates; this may be a sign that the estimates depend to some extent on values or ideology.

It is instructive to analyse just what is happening in a mail delphi. This follows.

The anatomy of a mail delphi

To make delphi more amenable to analysis, I'm going to make a number of simplifying assumptions. This will facilitate the initial analysis. I will then revoke the simplifications so that we have addressed delphi in its complexity.

Initially I'll consider delphi merely as a decision-making device. The panel I treat as a single and rational entity, where relationships are not an issue. This will get us started. I will then revoke in turn the assumptions about a single entity, the rationality, and the relationships. The operation of delphi becomes more realistic as the assumptions are abandoned.

For the analysis, any decision-making model will suffice as background. I will use the one I am most familiar with, the Fido model shown in Box 1. I use it as a generic model for communication, problem-solving and decision-making.

In the form shown in Box 1, it is intended as a model of priorities in decision-making, problem-solving and communication. It can also be used as a model of the stages of such processes. In that event you proceed upwards from outcomes to information, defining each, and only then do you work back down towards outcomes...

1   Define the future outcomes which are desired

2   Define the present decisions required to achieve those future outcomes

3   Define the information required to make the decisions

4   Collect and analyse the information

5   Make the decisions

6   Develop an implementation plan

7   Implementation and review

It is capable of further elaboration beyond this. [10]

Feelings   which are
  • positive to outcomes, processes, people, self
  • not strongly negative towards anything
  allow the interchange and understanding of

Information   which if
  • specific, adequate, accurate and relevant
  • understood and accepted by all
  helps those present to make more effective

Decisions   If these
  • have the commitment of those affected
  • specify who will do what by when
  • include monitoring and coordination
  then the desired

Outcomes   are more likely to be achieved

The Fido model of decision-making

It will serve as a background model, so that I can check my dissection of delphi against it.

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As mentioned, initially I'll consider delphi from the simplest perspective — as a process for decision-making, treating the panel as a single and rational entity.

10. See, for example, my *Helping groups to be effective: skills, processes and concepts for group facilitation*, Chapel Hill: Interchange, 1987.

The panel as a single and rational entity

The task of the unitary and rational panel is to make the best possible decision on the information available. It appears then, that the requirements for an effective decision are

■   that all of the relevant information is available to and understandably by the panel;

■   that this information is taken into account in the decision; and

■   that the panel is capable of making the most rational decision implied by the information.

This identifies some issues in the design of delphi. The adequacy of the information is one. The capacity of the panel to understand and use it is another.

In terms of implementation, two of the conditions have implications for the choice of panel. First, *coverage*. The decision can be expected to be more accurate if it is possible to choose a panel which has access to all of the relevant information. In terms of Figure 2, if the irregularly-shaped area represents the relevant information, the panel members (the ellipses) must between them access all of this information.

Second, *skills*. It is appropriate to choose panel members for their expertise in some relevant area. It is also important that they have the ability to understand the information and take it into account.

There are also implications for the process. It will work better if it provides encouragement for panel members to take the information into account in making the decision.

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Revoke the assumption about a unitary panel, and the situation becomes at once more complex.
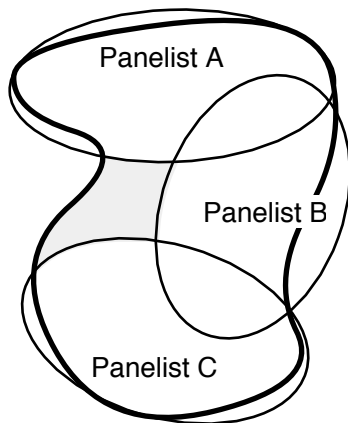
Fig. 2

If some part of the information base (the large area) is not accessible to the panel (the ellipses), the missing information (shaded) may prejudice the accuracy of the decision

A collective but rational panel

With a collective but rational panel, it is necessary for information to be exchanged between panel members. I must therefore add three conditions to those already listed...

- the panel members must be aware of the information on which their individual judgment is based; that is, their decisions must be conscious;

- they must be capable of communicating it in a form which others can understand; and

- they must be capable of understanding information from outside their own area of expertise, and willing to do so.

To complicate matters, the facilitator acts as a go-between in this endeavour. There are thus the further conditions that the facilitator must be able to understand the information and communicate it in understandable form. (The facilitator might quote panelists verbatim, but must still have enough understanding to select the appropriate information unless she merely reproduces all views.)

Obviously the chosen approach depends to some extent on the topic of the delphi and the actual task to be done. In general, however, the analysis above adds to the criteria for choosing panel members. It also suggests that under some circumstances the choice of facilitator may be important, as well as the methods used to collate and communicate the information.

Now, in the move to realism, remove the assumption that panel members are rational. The relationships are now all that is still missing.

A delphi without relationships

If we acknowledge the panelists as people, we have to accept that their psychological needs may influence their behaviour. Not all experts are renowned for their cooperative nature or their openness to others' ideas.

To approach this issue, imagine that you are a panelist whose estimate is at some distance from the midpoint of the estimates of all panelists. Consider the influences acting on you.

On the one hand, other people are developing estimates working from different knowledge bases. This thought in the back of your mind may qualify your insistence on your own estimate. Perhaps they have information which you do not. The less of the total information base you know, then (all else being equal) the more likely you are to decide that others may know better than you do. The less assured you are of your own information, the more willing you may be to change.

On the other hand, you may be assured of your own information and be relatively familiar with much of the information base. You are then more likely to stay with your estimate, and provide the reasons.

There is a further pressure to stay with your estimate, and that is the loss of face if you acknowledge that you were wrong.

The further you are from the emerging consensus, the greater the pressures in both directions. If you are almost at the point of consensus, then it may matter little whether you change or not. If you are a long way from it, then there are two very different possibilities. It may be that you are very wrong, hence the strong pressures to conform. But on the other hand, it may be that you have access to important information, and few others do. There is pressure to stay with your estimate.

This issue may have important design implications. It is not apparent how panelists might distinguish between being very wrong and having important information. But if they can make that distinction, then the delphi may identify and share precisely that information which is important but generally lacking.

With this examination to provide the context, I can now propose some modifications to the criteria already developed.

- panelists are more likely to change their estimates when they know they lack some relevant information (this suggests, too, that delphi may be better suited to large and complex multi-disciplinary issues)

- it will help if the process is one which encourages people to provide missing information

- the panelists are protected in some way against loss of face

- information which is relevant and important but obscure must be brought out into the open.

The facilitator may be able to influence all of these in the way the panelists are briefed.

In a short while I will attempt to bring together the different conditions in a discussion of the conduct of delphi. There is, however, one simplifying assumption which has not yet been revoked: I have not yet considered the effect of relationships between panel members.

In fact, a mail delphi manages relationships by ruling them out of order. Information is exchanged by mail, and usually anonymously. If necessary, the researcher can edit the information of its more libellous or attacking pieces. I will therefore disregard the final assumption for now, and take it into account later in the consideration of face-to-face versions of delphi.

Delphi reconsidered

With benefit of the prior analysis, I will now describe in some detail how a mail delphi might be conducted for best results. The main phases are:

1   determine the research question

2   recruit and brief the panel

3   ask the question — panel members provide an estimate in response

4   collate and distribute the responses

5   panel members adjust their estimate or provide reasons.

Steps 4 and 5 are repeated ideally until convergence — more often until a preset number of rounds have been conducted.

The research question

The research suggests that the cyclic nature of delphi does have some effect. The use of experts, on the other hand, is questionable. Armstrong (1985:92), for example, summarises the results of forecasts by experts (not just using delphi):

> *"Evidence is available from well over 100 studies on the value of experts. Of these studies, only a few suggested that expertise improved forecast accuracy, and, even here, the gains were small."*

Armstrong's objection isn't to experts offering information on subjects they are familiar with. It's in making forecasts. The importance of delphi, then, isn't in

the forecast which experts provide. It is in the information they give within their area of expertise.

The advantages of cyclic processes are immediately apparent. In much decision-making, there is a tendency for people to leap to solutions without first checking the adequacy of information. In a cyclic process there are multiple opportunities for information to be considered.

All that is required is for there to be some mechanism for missing information to be identified and brought to the panel's notice. In a mail delphi, this is provided by the requirement that, if a panel member retains an estimate, she is expected to provide information to support her decision. As we have seen above, there are dual pressures. Panelists either defend an estimate and to conform to an emerging consensus.

In other words, an important part of delphi is the emphasis given to discrepant information. Those panelists who have access to important information that is not widely known are motivated to provide it.

To provide a framework for analysis, consider first just what functions a delphi serves. The user of the delphi hopes for the best possible estimate. And accurate estimates depend upon...

- adequate information;
- accurate information;
- a thorough analysis of the information.

It is the responsibility of the panelists to provide the information. The *adequacy* of the information depends upon choosing panelists who between them have the necessary information. If the irregularly-shaped area of Figure 2 above represents the entire body of relevant information, the panelists must be chosen so that between them this area is fully covered.

In a sense, the panelists are there in two roles. They are representatives of the information base. They are also the decision-makers who are to use that information. If there is some part of the information which is not "represented" (the shaded part of Figure 2) there is a risk that the decision will be poor.

It is therefore important to the conduct of a mail delphi that the panelists between them have access to all of the relevant information. In this respect, I would expect choice of panelists to be an important task of the user of a delphi.

Note, too, that in a typical delphi no one panelist initially has access to all the information. There is otherwise little point in using a delphi. If any one person has access to all the information, you may not need a panel. [11]

There are other characteristics of the panelists, too, which can be identified. Even if the panel as a whole can access all the information, it is still necessary that all of the information is taken into account. The panelists must therefore be able to take information outside their own area into account when it is provided to them.

As mentioned, the ideal is to have a group of people who between them cover the entire range of relevant information. In addition, each of requires skills at drawing conclusions from a large body of information.

When the panel has been chosen, the *logic* of the process is what enables agreement to emerge out of the different views of panel members. This might be called the "task" aspect of delphi. It might be expected, then, that ...

■   the first round generates the initial estimates; from this, each panel member learns the range of estimates, and where her [12] own estimate sits within them

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11. This is not entirely true even if all panelists have access to all the information. Different panelists may give priority to different elements of the information they have. Delphi may then serve the purpose of encouraging them to reconsider the priorities.

12. Feminine pronouns are to be taken as referring to both genders except when the context determines otherwise.

- the second round generates some convergence, but presumably mostly on the part of those who were not strongly committed to their estimate

- the third round gives sharing of critical and relevant information, and thus generates further consensus.

The task aspect of a mail delphi

We have already discussed that, on any one round, panel members have a choice. They may adjust their estimate in the direction of the emerging consensus. If they do not wish to do this, they must *provide more information* to explain their estimate. You might almost say that both agreement and disagreement are encouraged. Those who are most convinced that their judgment is based on the most relevant information are least likely to change their estimate. This may be particularly true if they have reason to believe that they have important information which others lack.

If you think about this, most of the exchanged information is likely to come from the "deviants" [13] — those whose views are more extreme but who have access to information justifying it. Complex issues are often those for which a large body of information is relevant. It often happens, therefore, that many different pieces of important information are each known only to some panel members. The process helps to identify the most important information and make it available to all.

To put it differently... At the start of the first round, each panel member has access to a somewhat different base of information. She makes her decision on the basis of this limited information. By the end of the final round, the most important of this information has been pooled. Each panel member then has a wider range of information to draw on in making her decision.

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13. And, as the literature on change informs us, it is from the deviants that change very often comes. See, for example, R.M. Kanter (1983), *The change masters: corporate entrepreneurs at work*, London: Unwin.

A premium is thus placed on judgments which people hold with some confidence, and which tend to *disconfirm* the emerging consensus. This is what distinguishes dialectical processes from consensual processes. The latter focus more on those aspects on which people initially agree.

The amount of relevant information available to each person increases as information is pooled, as already stated. A well-constructed delphi is a process of mutual education. The quality of information can also be expected to improve. As the delphi proceeds people are likely to become more detailed in their defence of their position. They may also become more careful in response to the challenge which others provide.

Notice what makes this a dialectic process. Firstly, it focusses on the information which is *discrepant*. Secondly, it seeks to use this information to improve the collective final decision. Multiple cycles enable the gradual exchange of critical and relevant information. Building up a better information base allows the participants to make better decisions. As participants become more similar in the information base they have, so they also converge towards a common conclusion.

This completes for the moment our consideration of the "task" aspect of the process. It provides for better decision-making by giving people access to more and better information. There is also a "relationship" aspect to collective processes, as many theories of group process have attested. [14]

Relationship aspects of a mail delphi

As I have said, when it comes to managing relationships it is an important feature of the activity that it is conducted by mail. In effect, this manages the interpersonal dynamics by partly *removing* them. Many of the usual

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14. The best known of them is probably that due to R.F. Bales (1950), *Interaction process analysis: a method for the study of small groups*, Cambridge, Mass.: Addison-Wesley.

interpersonal issues are lessened. There is less pressure to conform. There is also likely to be less posturing and less defensiveness as people strive to maintain face. All else being equal, it is therefore easier to achieve a high quality of information.

There is still *some* pressure to conform. People with deviant estimates either have to adjust their estimate, or reveal their evidence and reasoning to other panel members. Competition still prevails, too, though in a less harmful form. People are encouraged to provide information which supports their own view. These twin forces of competition and conformity help to create the agreement out of disagreement. But as the panel members are anonymous, it is less costly to their ego to change their mind as they acquire better information and understanding.

These are the same dynamics which have to be managed if a delphi is to be run face to face. The *logic* of the process can be applied to a variety of situations, from large group decision-making to diagnostic interviews [15] to conflict resolution. [16] Provided the interpersonal aspects are managed well enough, the same logic can be applied to a face-to-face delphi process.

Delphi face-to-face

A face-to-face delphi offers considerable time economy. It can be run in a single half-day or day (or even less), instead of being spread out over several weeks or months. It allows complex and unquantifiable issues to be addressed relatively easily. It doesn't require as much ability from the facilitator to understand and be able to summarise the information presented. [17]

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15. I have described a dialectic form of interviewing elsewhere, including in the monograph *Convergent interviewing*, Chapel Hill: Interchange, 1987.
16. For descriptions of my approach to conflict resolution see either *Frameworks for conflict resolution* (mimeo, 1989) or *Learning to communicate*, Interchange and University of Queensland Bookshop, 1986.
17. This was written before groupware was in common use.

These advantages arise because it *is* face to face. The disadvantage is that it does require some level of facilitation skills from the facilitator. For safety, in fact, it is useful if she is quite experienced, and also has good conflict resolution skills as part of her repertoire.

Here is a summary description of the process. [18] A more detailed consideration of some of the issues appears later.

1. *Introduction*. The facilitator explains the process, and encourages both honesty and respect for other people.

2. *Individual work*. Each person works alone to respond to a question which defines the required information. At this stage, only a response is required, not an argument or justification.

3. *Small group information collection*. Participants collect together in groups with people from a similar background. They prepare a group list of information, arranged in order of importance.

    The use of groups of *similar* people makes it likely that information important to a particular category of participant will reach the whole-group list. With groups of dissimilar people, minority information may be ignored.

    The small group also gives individuals a chance to rehearse their arguments before revealing them in the riskier environment of the large group.

4. *Whole group information collection*. The facilitator gathers the important items from each group on newsprint. To do this, she asks each group in turn to contribute the one most important item which is on the group list but not yet on the plenary list. Several rounds of the groups can be used to capture all of the important information.

    If it is numerical information, each will will typically provide a single estimate.

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18. Based on the description in my *Helping groups to be effective: skills, processes and concepts for group facilitation*, Chapel Hill: Interchange, 1987.

5. *Whole group information analysis*. A voting procedure (in which participants have multiple votes) is used to rank the items from most to least important. A natural cut-off point is chosen between items with high scores, and those with low scores.

6. *Individual reconsideration*. Each person considers what changes she wishes to make to the group list in the light of the plenary list.

7. *Small group reconsideration*. Small groups compare the list of top items on the group list to those on the plenary list. Where the group list differs from the plenary list, the group has two options — change its list to conform to the plenary list; or develop evidence for changing the plenary list more in the direction of the group list.

    This is done as follows. The group adds to its list those items from the plenary list which were previously omitted, but it is now prepared to accept. [19] It prepares a brief report supporting any of the items from its list which it believes should be added to the plenary list.

    This is important: The group spokesperson is not to persuade others to the group's point of view, but to *present evidence* which her group thinks that others may have overlooked.

    Each group documents its revised list on one sheet of newsprint, and its evidence (in note form) on another.

8. *Whole group report back*. Groups report back. Their revised lists are displayed without comment. Each group in turn displays its sheet of evidence and speaks briefly to it. A facilitator manages the process by drawing immediate attention to any persuasion or advocacy.

    Each group report is followed by a brief session of questions. These must be questions *for clarification only*, and not debate or argument.

Steps 5 to 8 form the loop of the cyclic process. Cycling can continue until consensus emerges or the available time is exhausted.

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19. I sometimes require groups to make changes by substituting a small number of items from the plenary list for the same number of items on their group list.

The central part of this process is shown diagrammatically in Figure 3.

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┌─────────────────────┐        ┌─────────────────────┐
│ individuals prepare │───────▶│ small alike groups  │
│  answer to initial  │        │    are formed       │
│     question        │        │                     │
└─────────────────────┘        └─────────────────────┘
         ┌──────────────────────────────┘
         ▼
┌─────────────────────┐        ┌─────────────────────┐
│  small groups list  │───────▶│ small groups report │
│ responses to initial│        │ their position to   │
│     question        │        │   whole group       │
└─────────────────────┘        └─────────────────────┘
         ┌──────────────────────────────┘
         ▼
┌─────────────────────┐        ┌─────────────────────┐
│individuals revise   │───────▶│ small groups revise │
│their position in    │        │ their position in   │
│light of info        │        │ light of info       │
│available            │        │ available           │
└─────────────────────┘        └─────────────────────┘
         │ no                            │
         ▼                               ▼
       ╱─────╲              ┌─────────────────────┐
      ╱       ╲             │ small groups report │
     ╱consensus?╲◀──────────│ their position to   │
      ╲       ╱             │   whole group       │
       ╲─────╱              └─────────────────────┘
         │ yes
         ▼
       EXIT
```
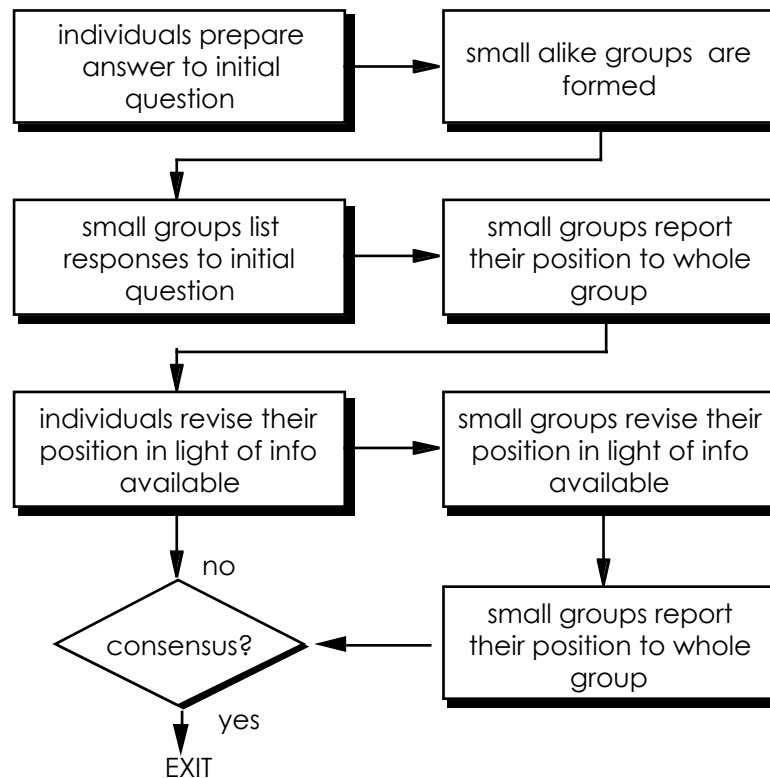
Fig. 3

The central part of a face-to-face delphi

If the process is managed well enough this can yield good results in quite a short time. It might be used, for example, as a more rigorous substitute for the focus groups, or group interviews, [20] which are common in marketing research. As with many such processes, the interpretation of information is done by the participants rather than by the facilitator. This makes it particularly suitable for qualitative information.

20. See for example A. Hedges (1985), Group interviewing, in R. Walker, ed, *Applied qualitative research*, cited above.

You will notice that the essential logic of the process is not greatly different from a mail delphi, except in two respects...

■   The first round has the additional function of identifying people of like views, so that small groups can be formed on this basis. In fact, one can leave panel members working as individuals; but I find a process based on alike small groups offers some advantages in time, and in giving more weight to minority views.

■   The summary of information and identification of agreement need not be explicit. Each participant reaches her own conclusion from the information pooled and the collected votes on the importance of that information. This both excuses the facilitator from needing specialist information in the field, and allows qualitative information to be used more readily. Again, there is no reason why quantitative information cannot be used.

As mentioned earlier, you can see that the task process is not all that different from the more usual variety of delphi. The relationship aspects, however, are very different.

Managing relationships in a face-to-face delphi

It is already apparent, I imagine, that a face-to-face delphi does require reasonably skilled facilitation. This can be done by managing the pressures to conformity and individuality in such a way that they are constructive rather than destructive. In this section I consider how this might be done.

An important part of this is the introduction the facilitator provides, and the effects of the very early stages of the activity. Some initial relationship-building or "ice-breaking" is useful. (One of the most powerful I have used is the "personal history trip" [21] described in other documents.) So are initial

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21. For example in B. Dick and T. Dalmau (1988), *To tame a unicorn: recipes for cultural intervention*, Chapel Hill: Interchange.

instructions which encourage people to exchange information in such a way
that ...

■ they are as *clear and informative* as they can be; but ...

■ they don't paint themselves into a corner; that is, they are willing to *let go* of
their own position in the light of new information;

■ throughout, they *respect* other people as people; and ...

■ that in any information exchange they concentrate on *informing rather than
persuading*.

To this end, the initial instructions might go something like this ...

> *"It is absolutely essential to the process that you speak out about your own point of
> view. It is extremely helpful if you do that in such a way that you don't back
> yourself into a corner, and that you treat people with respect even while you are
> challenging their views.*

> *"The purpose of the activity is to learn from one another. We can make more
> informed decisions based on more and better information than any one of us is
> likely to bring to this activity.*

> *"From time to time during the activity you will be asked to report your own view, or
> that of a small group. It will help if you recall at these times that the purpose of
> your report is to inform, not persuade. Our intention is not to have one view
> prevail, but to arrive collectively at a view that is better than any of the individual
> perceptions we bring with us."*

It doesn't hurt to have a summary chart or overhead visible throughout the
activity. An example follows.

The purpose of these interventions is to encourage a combination of honesty and
concern for others. Participants are asked to be direct and open, but also to be
specific and to respect others' opinions. Those of you familiar with Chris

<div style="border: 1px solid black; text-align: center;">

Groundrules

Clarity and honesty

Willingness to let go

Respect for the person

Information, not persuasion

</div>

Argyris' Model 2 conditions [22] may have noticed the similarity. You might view the outcome as constructive and manageable conflict.

Destructive conflict may still emerge at times between groups. If it does, the facilitator can use conflict management processes. As these are also dialectic processes, they are a natural extension of the face-to-face delphi.

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