Conversation is a cybernetic technology.

some collective recipes
for speaking together
and learning from each other.

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Conversation is a cybernetic technology.

When we speak in a group together, we operate within the bounds of unspoken, shared norms. We take note of who is listening, and how they are listening. We adjust how vulnerable, thoughtful, and open we can be, depending on the atmosphere of the group. We make eye contact, look at faces, share a joke.

There are many cybernetic feedback loops woven into conversation; we self-regulate how we converse based on the expressions of our friends. Maybe we're telling a story, and our friend looks bored, and so we finish the story a little bit quicker, or we try to make it more exciting. Maybe we are discussing something with a collaborator, and become excited when they are excited. Regardless of how we react, it seems clear that conversation is not an 'open loop', where we speak and listen without noting the reactions of who we communicate with. Conversation is a closed loop.

There are no unstructured conversations.

In the wonderfully thoughtful article, The Tyranny of Structurelessness, Jo Freeman talks about her

experience participating in the Women's Liberation Movement in the late 60s, and her thoughtful critique of so-called "structureless" organizations:

> Contrary to what we would like to believe, there is no such thing as a structureless group. Any group of people of whatever nature that comes together for any length of time for any purpose will inevitably structure itself in some fashion. The structure may be flexible; it may vary over time; it may evenly or unevenly distribute tasks, power and resources over the members of the group. But it will be formed regardless of the abilities, personalities, or intentions of the people involved. The very fact that we are individuals, with different talents, predispositions, and backgrounds makes this inevitable. Only if we refused to relate or interact on any basis whatsoever could we approximate structurelessness -- and that is not the nature of a human group.
>
> [...] "Structurelessness" is organizationally impossible. We cannot decide whether to have a structured or structureless group, only whether or not to have a formally structured one.

While Freeman is talking about the organizational and decision-making structure of groups, I think this applies very well to conversational structures within a group. She writes: "Thus structurelessness becomes a way of masking power". Avowedly structureless conversations, too, can be ways of masking power, or at the very least, of masking how these conversational structures are constructed.

When we don't actively address how we speak, (which is most of the time), it means that we are using the default conversational norms of the context, whether it is a classroom, in bed, around a conference table, or a dinner table, or at a gathering.

Who sets these default conversational structures? How do these norms relate to power, gender, or race? If, in a given context, the default conversational structures come from whiteness, or white culture, or toxic masculinity culture -- how would you know? And how would we tell each other so?

All conversations are structured. Or, to paraphrase *The Tyranny of Structurelessness*:

We cannot decide whether to have a structured or structureless conversation, only whether or not to have a formally structured one.

Inventing cybernetic social technologies.

Let's consider conversation as a cybernetic technology that is often informally, unconsciously structured.

If we think of conversation as cybernetic technology, what kind of playful programs, algorithms, or code exercises can we enact to formally structure how we converse, and how our feedback loops tangle with each other?

In my personal experience, when we formally structure our conversations with each other, we can create conversational containers and spaces to talk about things we may not have otherwise spoken about. By placing the focus on the conversational structure, we are not just talking, but talking about how we are talking, which is a chance for us to change how we are talking.

When we consensually set explicit norms and boundaries, we can play with being more vulnerable, more direct, more understanding, more shared.

Having formal or explicit structures doesn't mean conversation has to be solemn or rigid. Playground games are a form of formally structured rules ("you hide, I'll go seek") that create a playful system -- hiding, searching, running, chasing, laughing. BDSM practitioners take formal structures and explicit consent seriously, towards the safe, sane, consensual, and caring exploration of new kinds of sexual and emotional relationships.

Rituals, practices, prayer, games, Robert's Rules of Order, facilitation practices -- these are all cybernetic technologies with long histories. By thinking of them as technologies, maybe we can apply the same sense of critical invention that we do with other technologies.

On being contrived.

Lastly, some of these exercises might sound contrived, or staged, or socially awkward. I think you're right! So are all other social norms. The only difference is that you and I have grown accustomed to the social norms that we are familiar with. Social norms are inevitable. However, they quickly make themselves invisible for those who are comfortable with them.

These exercises might also sound very organization-y and managerial, or kindergarten-like! I think that a deliberate structuring of social relations is really fascinating, and shouldn't be dismissed as corporate business or child's play. There is space for an every-day articulation and experimentation with social structures.

Consider these exercises a series of experiments in making those norms explicit and defamiliarized, by exploring new norms. All norms are strange and interesting in their own way.

The following patterns are an incomplete list of exercises that have worked for me, collected over the past five years of teaching, cooperative decision-making, and collaborating. Many of these have long histories from facilitation and organizing contexts. Perhaps some will work for you. Hopefully you will want to make your own.

Don't eat these recipes !

These patterns are like recipes.

We cannot eat recipes. Recipes are not meant to be savored on their own.

We can cook with them. If we have ingredients, and a kitchen, the right kind of tools, and the right kind of skill, then the recipe helps us create something delicious.

The deliciousness of the food is not contained within the recipe. Reading the recipe will not help us experience how the food tastes. Cooking with the recipe is the fullest way to understand how the food tastes.

Reading these patterns will not help us understand how a conversation may happen.

It is only in the act of participating that we can understand how a conversation may happen.

And lastly, recipes are made to be altered, substituted, improvised with, even forgotten. Playful cooking happens in experimentation, when you can make something without thinking about it.

Opening check-in
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I do this all the time in classes, meetings, groups, amongst friends.

It's really nice and friendly, and a bit silly. I consider it to be an organizational palate cleanser of a sort -- a way to form a break from whatever meetings or organizational context that everyone was coming from.

It's nice to actively listen to others, to speak and feel heard from the entire group. An exercise in gently flexing our feedback loops with the entire group.

Structure:
1. Question

"What's one single word that represents a flavor to represent your past week?"

"We'll then pass it on to another person."

2. Example

*"I'll start: my word is 'salty-sweet'.
I'll pass it onto Taylor."*

(This example step is very important; without an example, default social norms will prevail, such as

introducing themselves, talking about work, etc. By explicitly passing it onto another person, a social tone is set for everyone to look and listen to Taylor to say their word, rather than jumping in and interrupting each other.

If this is a new group that doesn't know each other that well, go clockwise in a circle.

3. Everyone participates.

Occasionally, the ritual creator or facilitator may have to step in to remind people that they should nominate the next person to say their word *"Who do you nominate to go next?"*.

4. End.

Depending on the group, you can all take a deep breath together, meditate, or just start.

In some groups we elaborate, or come up with the question together. I think it's important that the question has no socially wrong answer -- for example, a question like "how are you feeling?" might put pressure on participants to share that they're feeling good.

Shared critiques for small groups (under 6 people).
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I enjoy this structure, especially when teaching, because it creates an explicit structure to both celebrate a work, critique a work, and compare two different projects.

The questions are a bit difficult, but I've found that it can be really helpful and generative for everyone to hear and actively give constructive feedback.

Structure:
Everyone pins up / shares their project on the wall. Each person takes a turn.

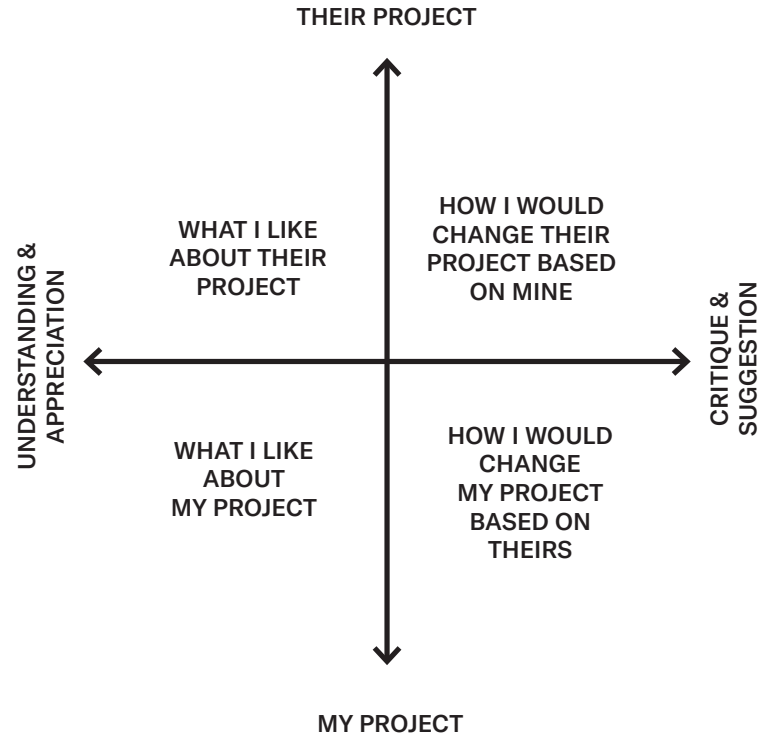Each person talks about their project and the next project to the right.

They answer four questions:

"*What do I value about my own project?*"

"*How would I change the other project, based on my project?*"

"*What do I value about the other project?*"

"*How would I change my project, based on the other project?*"

THEIR PROJECT

WHAT I LIKE ABOUT THEIR PROJECT

HOW I WOULD CHANGE THEIR PROJECT BASED ON MINE

UNDERSTANDING & APPRECIATION

CRITIQUE & SUGGESTION

WHAT I LIKE ABOUT MY PROJECT

HOW I WOULD CHANGE MY PROJECT BASED ON THEIRS

MY PROJECT

What/Why

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I really like this process. It's fun and generates a sense of camaraderie. I've tried this many times - at the NYC Real Estate Investment Cooperative, and at Prime Produce, a cooperative guild for social good in NYC.

It's incredibly helpful when a group has a lot of fun ideas, but has trouble agreeing. More often then not, I've found that this happens with nice, enthusiastic, imaginative people with strong opinions. I think this is because we are trying to agree on ideas, but are not able to understand *why* we each like the ideas that we do.

By brainstorming ideas and sharing them, and then making our values or reasons underlying the ideas clear, it makes it easier for us to emphasize and collaborate with each other.

It initially feels very playful to share 'what' ideas, but very focusing/collectivizing to synchronize on 'why' ideas. And every time, there will be shared reasons and values that helps everyone understand each other and collaborate each other.

In the many times I've tried this method, this has been incredibly helpful for gathering a group together towards a shared ideal. As a cybernetic technology, this process is so helpful.

Structure:

1) Taking three minutes, everyone writes down, on two different stickies/pieces of paper: *'A project direction/idea I think the group should work on'*, and *'Why the idea is important to me'*.

A project/ direction/idea I think the group should work on	Why the idea is important to me

2) Going around a circle, everyone shares one idea at a time.

3) For five minutes, everyone writes down some more ideas, and shares them afterwards. This is because invariably everyone will have new ideas listening to others' ideas.

4) Together, everyone places the 'Whys' up on a board or table and discusses them.

5) Cluster similar 'Whys' together and labeled/group them.

Continue discussing! I've found that, by this time, everyone is enthusiastic and has found several main ways to find agreement together.

Pluses and Deltas

During a feedback session, a group offers feedback in the form of pluses and deltas. I think this is really helpful, and it's interesting to note how easy it is to accidentally provide negative feedback, rather than a delta feedback.

I think this is because feedback that is negating ("don't do X") rather than positing ("do Y") is easy to say, but difficult to process & act on by the listener.

By specifically framing feedback as a suggestion / item for action, those giving the feedback are actively brainstorming and thinking on behalf of the group.

Structure:

During a feedback session, a group offers feedback in the form of pluses and deltas.

Pluses are things that went well, things that someone enjoyed, and other encouraging feedback.

Deltas are: a suggestion of something to change. Deltas are not negative feedback ("I thought the room was too cold"), but a suggestion that can be acted on. ("The heater should be turned up, because the room was too cold.")

Silent Feedback

This was learned from a co-teacher, Violet Whitney.

I like this because it creates a nicely contemplative space.

It also provides a context for project feedback that doesn't privilege the spoken word. This is important, because most social conversations amplify those who have more persuasive or charismatic ways of speaking. Finding ways to converse with written language is helpful in listening to everyone and the different kinds of communication technologies (mouths, voices, languages) that they use.

Structure:
Projects are presented with blank pieces of paper next to them. Projects can be pinned up on the wall, or placed on a table.

Everyone slowly walks around the room once, looking at the work.

Then everyone is asked to write plus-delta feedback on the blank pieces of paper (what's good, what they would change). Feedback is given silently.

(A variant could be done with computers and a shared doc.)

Impersonation Presentation

I like to do this exercise when teaching. It works well with formal or visual work, and when the group is friendly with each other.

It can provide real feedback that students can use. It's really interesting and surprising to hear someone else describe your work, and can help see it with fresh eyes.

It can also be very funny, in a nice way.

Structure:

Each person presents someone else's project. The more unfamiliar they are with it, the better.

They describe it, they talk about which parts they enjoy, and which parts they are thinking about changing or exploring differently.

ORID framework

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While this sounds dry, I tried it once with a group of close collaborators on a summer day. I was introduced to it by organizers of vTaiwan, a participatory democracy project.

It's not the best for deciding what to do, but it was really helpful for us to know where exactly we were coming from and what we were feeling.

While it seems strange to start with 'objective' questions, I found that explicitly stating them was actually very helpful for us to start being on the same page. Objective questions are easy to answer easily -- ("We started this project eight months ago", "The three of us have known each other for a few years"), and can help build a solid emotional common ground on which to build the reflection and interpretative points.

The reflective questions open up space for emotional, personal responses. The interpretive questions help us share and brainstorm ideas.

Structure:
With pens and sticky pads or paper, ask these questions to each other. Answer them. Discuss slowly, preferably sitting on the ground barefoot.

1) Objective questions:
What are some facts?
What's a relatively objective statement that we can all agree upon easily?

2) Reflective questions:
How do we feel about some of these statements?
What do we believe?

3) Interpretive questions:
What did we learn? What does this mean?
What could have changed things?

4) Decisional questions:
What can we do differently? What could we act on?

Deliberate listening

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I really cherish this one. I was first introduced to it by a group of Loomio cooperative members at a cooperative organizing session.

It requires a facilitator to keep time and be a little heavy-handed in notifying everyone of time. But it works because of this, and it can really create nice spaces for people to listen to each other.

It turns out that ten minutes is an incredibly long time when you're speaking without being interrupted, and it can be a short time when you're listening. I've had really thoughtful, caring, open conversations when the time has been twenty minutes.

For many of us, these spaces are rare occasions when you can be explicitly and deliberately listened to with intention. By framing these roles, I think it allows us to be more open, because the constraint of time and the defined roles lets us speak in different ways than we would otherwise normally.

I think these kind of self-imposed strong roles can be freeing and exploratory. It's worthwhile thinking about the 'strength' of default roles (for example, "the interrupter" sometimes seems like everyone's role in heated conversation").

Structure:

(This needs to be guided through by a facilitator or a timekeeper.)

Find a central prompt, or a question. It could be an open-ended question about one's own personal history; it could be a project they're working on.

Everyone then organizes into groups of three. Use counting off (counting numbers) in order to do so.

Each group has three roles: a speaker, a question-asker, and a listener.
- The speaker shares their thoughts, feelings, and is the one doing the talking.
- The question-asker mostly listens, and occasionally asks follow-up questions of the speaker.
- The listener just listens, without speaking. They are there to thoughtfully listen and witness.

Each group takes ten minutes to perform their roles. After ten minutes, the time keeper will loudly let everyone know that time is up. Everyone's roles rotates counterclockwise in their group.

After thirty minutes, end or bring the group together and share some thoughts in a group discussion.

Bibliography

Like most recipes, these thoughts and patterns mostly come from experiences savoring, tasting, sharing, collaborating. Often, these experiences are rarely written down. When they are, they seem to lose their flavor. That's because they turn into recipes.

The conversational technology is not in these recipes, but in the conversation.

These technologies have been learned from savoring, cooking, and collaborating with:

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