The role of
FACILITATION IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION
Jeanette Leagh

THE ROLE OF FACILITATION IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

*A thesis submitted to the School of Design,
Carnegie Mellon University, for the degree of Master of Design
in Communication Planning and Information Design.*

Jeanette Leagh, MDes 2011

Dan Boyarski, Advisor

ABSTRACT

Facilitation is the use of dialogue as a strategic communication tool. It leverages the power of conversation to build shared understanding, generate new thinking, and affect an intended course of action. In the context of business communication, where complexity and change are mainstays, facilitation surfaces as a valuable communication tool for transforming unbridled complexity into meaningful knowledge.

As a case study, The China-US Business Leaders Round Table (CUSBLR) provided a unique platform to explore the use and impact of facilitation on improving the level of discussion and participant engagement in business communication. My goal was to remodel the round table conversation as a facilitator. The experience of learning how to facilitate uncovered a number of insights and connections between facilitation and other domains, including design, leadership, and improv. This project therefore documents a process of inquiry and offers a new framework for understanding facilitation.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

FACILITATION IS THE use of dialogue as a strategic communication tool. It leverages the power of conversation to build shared understanding, generate new thinking, and affect an intended course of action. In essence, facilitation is a soft skill that enables richer, more substantive communication that traditional methods of discussion allow. In the context of business communication, where complexity and change are mainstays, facilitation surfaces as a valuable communication tool for transforming unbridled complexity into meaningful knowledge.

My interest in facilitating business communication stems from my case study of the China–US Business Leaders Round Table (CUSBLR), an annual business conference that invites the two countries' top business executives and industry pioneers to meet and discuss economic development issues of the day. I attended CUSBLR's inaugural event in April 2010 as a volunteer and observer. During the day-long series of speeches, panel discussions, and closed-press round tables, I made note of missed moments for deeper discussion and more

engaged participation. From these initial observations, I saw the opportunity for a thesis project emerge.

As a case study, CUSBLR provided a unique platform to explore how the design approach may be applied to fields where designers do not normally venture into. The business conference is one such domain. I saw facilitation as the answer to improving the level of discussion and engagement at CUSBLR. My goal was to remodel the conversation at one CUSBLR round table as a facilitator. The experience of learning how to facilitate uncovered a number of insights and a striking connection between design and facilitation. As such, this project offers designers a new framework for understanding and using facilitation to foster communication in business settings and beyond.

On a more personal level, I have been interested in the role of *femininity* in business leadership. By femininity, I do not mean gender. I see soft skills—like facilitation—as feminine in *character*; they are more emotive and intuitive than traditional hard skills. However, I have observed that women in leadership positions are often more masculine than their male counterparts. This is counter-intuitive.

Women have a natural capacity for feminine or *soft skills.* Such skills as communication, creativity and collaboration are business buzzwords, but in reality, they still manifest as distortions of their intended meanings. In my experience in working with MBA students and business executives over the past year, soft skills are more often misconstrued and misused than they are understood and practiced.

In 2010, women outnumbered men in the workforce for the first time in US history. Colleges and universities are witnessing a similar pattern. With female presence in the economy and society shifting, I believe women can (and should) assert themselves as natural leaders who cultivate and teach essential soft skills.

Over the past year, a common theme emerged from the business articles I read for research in publications like Harvard Business Review, Fast Company, and McKinsey Quarterly. Regardless of industry or country, there is an undeniable need for soft skills in business. In our global economy, a soft skill like facilitation is no longer a luxury or add-on, but a necessity, in creating meaning and understanding. This is where my value as a facilitator emerges as well as my struggle. Could facilitation really transform communication in business settings? My thesis project therefore documents both a personal journey of self-growth and a design investigation into facilitating business communication.

MY RESEARCH SERVED two key functions—developing my conceptual thinking and directing my design decision. In this section, I will cover the research areas that informed my conceptual thinking: cross-cultural business, conferences, stakeholder interviews, rhetoric, leadership, and facilitation. Later in generative research, I will distill how facilitation, design, and improv influenced my final design decision.

EXPLORATORY RESEARCH

CROSS-CULTURAL BUSINESS

"Where [people] come from matters. They're products of particular places and environments." —MALCOLM GLADWELL

Wanting a better grasp on the cross-cultural business relationship between China and the US, I started my exploratory research learning about what it means to be culturally competent in international business and, more specifically, the evolving and at times tenuous China-US business relationship.

One book in particular crystallized my understanding of the important, subtle influence of culture on the current China-US relationship. *The China Strategy* by Edward Tse provided great insight into the deep-rooted cultural differences that impact the economic challenges facing China and the US. One illuminating example is how intellectual property in China— or lack thereof— has spawned a standing debate and cultural divide between Chinese and American companies. However, the motivations and behaviors behind a sensitive issue like this are culturally driven, and informed understanding requires thoughtful discussion and keen observation.

In China, a reason for both innovation and controversy is the proliferation of *shan zhai* goods. These popular low-cost consumer products, ranging from handbags to medicine, first surfaced as a rebellious reaction to the tightly government-controlled market. "Today is it shorthand for a multitude of knockoffs, fakes, and pirated products" that flourish in a diverse and competitive marketplace. And thanks to China's robust manufacturing infrastructure, these disruptively innovative and affordable products prevail among consumers.

Perhaps "the most salient quality of many *shan zhai* companies is their willingness to take chances and learn from their experiences." This statement echoes the entrepreneurial spirit of American businesses that many companies abroad emulate

in an effort to be innovative. But from the American perspective, such blatant and rampant intellectual piracy is cause for protest and, more importantly, distrust in working with Chinese companies. According to Tse, although "it is widely accepted that fostering a culture of innovation is a must, many Chinese businesspeople have not fully grasped what this entails."

Tse believes China is entering a new renaissance. But he is careful to explain that "Chinese people see themselves not as dominant, but as participants in the world as a whole." This is key because in order to overcome culturally-sensitive challenges like intellectual property, both Chinese and US business leaders must first reach a shared understanding before they can find a meaningful solution. After all, the actions of global business have widespread effects on us all.

The example of *shan zhai* products causing a rift in the China-US business relationship is just one of many culturally-driven issues that have complex economic repercussions. Consider then the participants of CUSBLR, who are business leaders with conflicting cultural models representing diverse industries, agendas, and beliefs. While CUSBLR provides a platform for discussing pressing global economic issues, navigating culturally-sensitive discussions requires far more acumen and empathy than the 2010 organizers had perhaps foreseen.

CONFERENCES

What makes some conferences memorable and meaningful while others are considered dull and inconsequential? And where did CUSBLR fit on a spectrum overloaded with industry conferences all claiming to be the best, first, or different? A 2006 Harvard Business Review interview with Richard Saul Wurman was particularly telling. The title, "What Are Conferences For?" grabbed my attention as I was asking myself this very question. The conference business is huge, Wurman explained, with the average company spending 20% of its marketing communications budget on event marketing.

"The truth is that many people go to these gathering only to network and play golf. Marketers attempt to draw people to these events by paying high fees for speakers who give canned, predictable talks. Panel discussions are often sequential, unrelated ten-minute speeches. Nobody gets inspired [and after] the conference is over, nothing sticks."

Against the dismal picture Wurman painted of the standard industry conferences, the man behind the reputable TED conference likened the antidote to a great dinner party with "people who spark smart

conversations with and among each other." Wurman advised, "Look for cracks between disciplines—particularly finding out similarities and differences—because that's where good, inspiring concepts come from."

Lastly, "begin all the conversations with questions."

CUSBLR

It was helpful to compare Wurman's vision of a great conference experience with my own observations at CUSBLR 2010. Hosted at the New York Stock Exchange, the conference was founded on the belief that hosting intimate, in-depth discussions with industry leaders could transform global economic problems into innovative opportunities. Hence, at the core of CUSBLR is a series of 90-minute closed-press round tables each discussing a particular economic issue. However, my observations revealed that the discussions were neither intimate nor in-depth.

I observed the 2010 round table on consumerism and manufacturing. It was a discussion moderated by two participants—one Chinese and the other American, and it included 20 participants representing various industries, from travel and leisure to glass production. Because many of the Chinese participants did not speak English, and nearly all of the American participants did not speak Chinese, simultaneous translators were needed. This addition, while necessary, absorbed almost 30 minutes of discussion time. The remaining hour was not enough time for 15 diverse participants, most of whom were meeting for the first time, to engage in a thorough and in-depth discussion.

The moderators posed numerous questions about consumerism and manufacturing, but they were broad and rather unfocused. The goal of the discussion was unclear. A few people dominated the discussion. Several of the participants appeared disengaged midway through the 90-minute round table. I caught one participant nodding off.

What the round table lacked was a focal point that resonated with the participants. What the moderators did not do was leverage the participant's unique backgrounds and expertise to invite them into the discussion. In short, the participants were not truly participating. One example that stuck with me was when the discussion turned to gym membership in China.

One participant, representing a prominent sports league, expressed a concern over the low gym membership rates in China. He offered a few ideas on how to increase the numbers. People nodded and the discussion was directed elsewhere, to the lack of branding in China. No one asked why gym membership was low China. Were the Chinese unhealthy and unaware? Or did their lifestyle lend itself to other forms of exercise? An interesting and rich discussion on the cultural differences between China and the US could have taken place. And such a discussion could have provided valuable insight into Chinese consumer needs and behavior had the significance of cultural differences, as espoused by Edward Tse, been better acknowledged.

In theory, the round table provides a great platform for meaningful discussion because of its relatively small size and the presence of moderators whose job it is to guide the discussion. Instead, the round table began and ended without consequence, and the participants were shuffled off to lunch.

The truth is that very few conferences are like what Richard Saul Wurman envisions–the great dinner party that pairs diverse individuals together for unexpected conversations and surprising outcomes. As large as the conference business may be, the impact of such events seems negligible on those who travel long distances to participate. Why, then, did people come to CUSBLR?

STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

One common sentiment shared by organizers and participants alike was the excitement they felt in being a part of CUSBLR. Some attributed it to CUSBLR being the first conference of its kind to have been initiated by the Chinese. Others were eager to strike new business relationships and ventures. To get a deeper understanding of CUSBLR stakeholders, I began conducting 30-minute to hour-long directed storytelling sessions and semi-structured interviews with key organizers of CUSBLR and its participants.

My goal was to understand stakeholder perspectives on the objective and intended outcome of CUSBLR as an event and organization, as well as their personal motivations for participating. As stated in the invitations and press release, CUSBLR participants were convening to "discuss global economic development opportunities" between China and the US. What I discovered through my conversations was that both organizers and participants had rather divergent interests and expectations behind their involvement.

In some cases, participants were uncertain as to why they were invited. In most others, both participants and organizers expressed conflicting ideas about what "discussing global economic development opportunities" really meant. While it would be a while longer before I discovered facilitation, I had a hunch that somewhere in this discrepancy and confusion was my design opportunity.
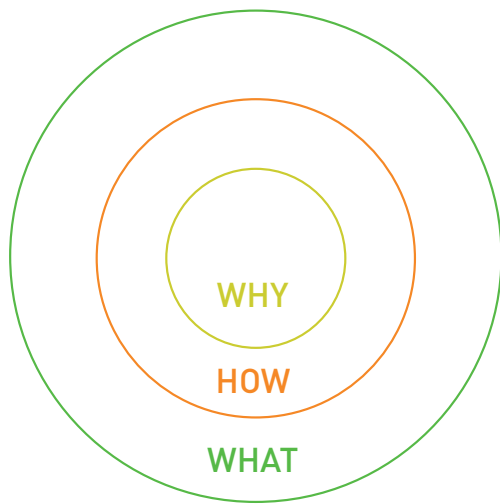
THE WHY

Simon Sinek's 2009 TED talk, "How Great Leaders Inspire Action," made all the difference for me in uncovering that opportunity. Drawing on cognitive science and using illuminating real world examples from Apple to Martin Luther King, Sinek advocated that people are more likely to align with an organization if they know and believe in its purpose. "Start with the why," he proclaimed. I saw a clear connection between Sinek's message and what CUSBLR was lacking: a core purpose around which to align its diverse stakeholders.

Discussing global economic development opportunities" sounds important, but it is also a vague statement which contributed to the inconsistent and conflicting views I uncovered in my stakeholder interviews. During one conversation, one of the key organizers revealed that articulating a core purpose never came up as a priority in the planning process. But what was to be CUSBLR's core purpose?

Looking at Sinek's three-ringed "Golden Circle" model of purpose-driven action (fig. 1), I could see a link back to the round table on consumerism and manufacturing that I had observed. The participants were very comfortable talking about the logistics (the *how*) and outcomes (the *what*) of an issue, but not once did mention of purpose or beliefs (the *why*) surface in their discussion. It was difficult for me to understand this phenomenon at first because in design we are taught to be process-oriented and value-driven. In contrast, business people are accustomed to leading with results and outcomes, not purpose.

fig. 1

Golden Circle

But Sinek draws an interesting and compelling link between the Golden Circle and the human brain (**fig. 2**). He explains that the *why*– purpose and beliefs–appeals to our limbic system (inner brain), which controls decision-making, behavior, and feelings. The *what*–outcomes and results–correlates directly with our neocortex (outer brain), which governs rational reasoning, analytical thought, and language.

fig. 2

a revised Golden Circle
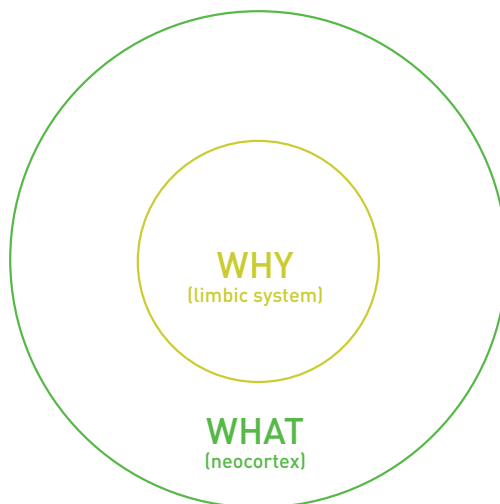
Applying this framework to the 2010 round table discussion helped me to see why the participants were so comfortable talking about logistics and outcomes. It is simply what they were used to and expected to do. Feelings are generally left out of business communication in exchange for logic and efficiency. But perhaps it was time to bring emotion back into business, and along with it, a sense of purpose and beliefs, too.

To illustrate the power of the why, Sinek gave the example of Martin Luther King whose dream happened to be a belief shared by millions across the country. His sense of purpose galvanized people to rally with him in a unified effort against racial injustice. True leaders inspire us, and we follow them because we *want* to not because we *have* to, asserted Sinek.

I could not help but think about the CUSBLR participants who were leaders in their own right, many of whom had pioneered entire industries. How might CUSBLR inspire the participants so that they, as leaders, could in turn inspire people in their respective companies and industries?

LEADERSHIP

My research turned to leadership in an effort to understand what it is that leaders do and how they think. A significant discovery was the difference between *leaders* and *managers*. Abraham Zaleznik's formative article, "Managers and Leaders: Are They Different?" offered great insight into this distinction:

"Managers' goals arise out of necessities rather than desires; they excel at diffusing conflicts between individuals or departments [...] Leaders, on the other hand, adopt personal, active attitudes towards goals. They look for the potential opportunities and rewards that lie around the corner, inspiring subordinates and firing up the creative process with their own energy."

Necessity versus opportunity. Diffusing conflicts versus inspiring action. Managers and leaders are inherently very different kinds of people, Zaleznik explained, and yet this distinction is often neglected or misunderstood in business. In thinking about CUSBLR 2010, it dawned on me that the organizers had treated the participants more as managers than leaders. The lack of inspired discussion at the round table I observed was starting to make sense upon reading Zaleznik's article. "Where managers act to limit choices, leaders develop fresh approaches to long-standing problems and open issues to new options." The 2010 round table moderators had inadvertently forsaken lively debate in exchange for peaceful regulation.

I also drew a link between Zaleznik's article and Sinek's talk

on how great leaders inspire others to act. "Leaders tolerate chaos and lack of structure," Zaleznik explained. "Managers seek order and control." Leaders conceptualize, managers strategize. Revisiting Sinek's Golden Circle, I saw a connection in the chaotic, less tangible nature of beliefs (the *why*) that speaks to leaders and the orderly, more tangible nature of outcomes (the *what*) that resonates with managers. The format of the round table, and business communication in general, did not align with participants' latent needs and strengths.

Armed with new thinking on conferences, business, and leadership, I found myself with more questions than answers. My research was telling me that a core function of CUSBLR had to change; I just was not sure what or how. I had an inkling that I should focus on one aspect of the conference in particular, but my direction was still murky and inchoate.

RHETORIC

In an effort to find my direction, I interviewed the founder of CUSBLR and the futures market in China, Lawrence Tian. A man of vision and enthusiasm, he possesses many qualities that both Sinek and Zaleznik discussed. Challenges seem to excite him. He turns obstacles into opportunities. He juxtaposes faithful friendships with strategic allies. Perhaps most revealing is the way in which he speaks and connects with people; he is able to align diverse perspectives around a common goal. His approach is very rhetorical.

In *Rhetoric*, Aristotle espoused rhetoric as a productive art, which "is identical with a state of capacity to make, involving a true course of reasoning. All art is concerned with coming into being." Rhetoric is a method of invention through speech. Aristotle likened rhetoric to medicine and architecture, because all three disciplines are grounded in *theory*, but serve their true purpose in *practice*. Therefore, rhetoric is meant to be used as a productive tool in driving action.

Leaders, like Tian, assume rhetorical roles. They leverage the three modes of persuasion—*ethos* (character of speaker), *logos* (rational message), and *pathos* (emotional appeal)—in connecting with people and affecting a certain course of action. According to Aristotle, there are also three types of rhetoric—*deliberative* (future-oriented), *forensic* (past-oriented), and *epideictic* (present-oriented).

I was especially drawn to the *deliberative* type of rhetoric as it correlated with my developing understanding of leadership and CUSBLR. Discussion at the round table was meant to look into the *future* of China and the US, but in reality it was mostly rooted in talk

of past and present issues. Reading *Rhetoric* was a decisive moment in my research as it supported what I would soon discover in facilitation.

FACILITATION

It was through informal conversations with fellow designers that I came across *facilitation*—the emergent communication tool that Tony Goldsby-Smith uses at Second Road, a unique business consultancy in Australia. Facilitation initially struck me as, well, magical. The notion that we can reach shared understanding and build new thinking together by leveraging the power of *conversation* seemed inherently human and surprisingly innovative. I had to learn more.

I began my research on facilitation, googling key terms and combing through articles, but I soon realized that not many people have written on the subject. Amy Bickerton's 2010 Master of Design thesis, *Cultivating Conversation and Facilitating Change*, was one resource I found both accessible and informative for someone unfamiliar with the art of facilitation. In reading, the magic of facilitation started to dissolve, and I began to see facilitation as a strategic communication *tool*. It is a means to a greater end—a focused goal. Facilitation is a *process-focused* and *outcome-driven* method for externalizing diverse perspectives on a given topic to reach a common understanding. Building this shared understanding serves the larger purpose of generating new thinking in a collaborative, guided conversation.

I came across an article that reminded me very much of Wurman's interview about conferences. "The best way to energize thinking is to hold conversations rather than meetings," Goldsby-Smith wrote in a 2011 Harvard Business Review article, "Hold Conversations, Not Meetings." The expert facilitator explained that conversation is a natural and enjoyable human activity, in contrast to business meetings which have become mired in negative connotations of being stuffy, pointless, and dreaded. The creative process of having a conversation enables people to "explore issues, invent solutions, and find ways forward through messy circumstances." Of course, Goldsby-Smith did not suggest we replace all meetings with conversations. What he offered was a different, more productive and engaging framework for thinking and communicating.

There is a natural connection between the art of facilitation

and that of rhetoric. In his dissertation, *Pursuing the Art of Strategic Conversations*, Goldsby-Smith suggested that facilitation is closely linked to the (lost) verbal art of rhetoric, one of the three ancient arts of discourse—*grammar*, *logic*, and *rhetoric*—that one can pursue in search of truth. While logic dominates today (like in business communication), it is not the only road to truth. Aristotle's "second road" to truth is rhetoric. Whereas logic is impersonal, rhetoric is personal—leveraging the persuasive power of ethos, logos, and pathos to communicate and connect with diverse audiences.

According to Goldsby-Smith, facilitation lives in the "domain of human decision and discussion where all is possibility until the decision is made," not merely analyzed or described. Recalling Zaleznik's assertion that leaders turn chaos into opportunity, I wondered if facilitation, not moderation, was the better format to engage CUSBLR participants in round table discussions. Another correlation in which Goldsby-Smith echoed Aristotle is that "rhetoric seeks to invent." Goldsby-Smith stated in his dissertation that *deliberative* rhetoric deals with questions of the future. This kind of inquiry ultimately guides people to act, not only to know or understand. Both rhetoric and facilitation serve to drive decision and inspire action. Interestingly, this is also what leaders do.

INDIRECT LEADERSHIP

Goldsby-Smith asserts that facilitation involves developing a "new style of leader." I came to a corresponding conclusion through my own experience of learning to facilitate. I believe facilitation is a form of indirect leadership, a term Howard Gardner introduces in *Leading Minds: an Anatomy of Leadership.*

"When we think of leaders, we usually envision the political or military giants of an era—Alexander the Great, Napoleon Bonaparte, Abraham Lincoln." But deeper inquiry reveals that leadership is a multifaceted term. There are different forms of leadership. One that resonated with me in relation to facilitation is what Gardner called *indirect leadership.* I adapt his definition of indirect leadership as it applies to facilitation.

Indirect leaders "have the advantage of more time for reflection and revision; and often their impact proves more enduring, if slower to emerge." According to Gardner, those who lead indirectly spend large portions of their efforts working alone or in small groups. Their leadership is more subtle than overt, and their influence is more systemic than particular.

To help clarify why I believe facilitation is a form of indirect leadership, it is important to identify what facilitation is not. It is not *mediation*, which serves to resolve group conflict and reach a compromise or agreement that satisfies the parties involved. Nor is it *moderation* or arbitration, which are methods for monitoring group dynamic and discussion to ensure a peaceful and fair exchange. Whereas mediation and moderation use dialogue to reach or maintain a shared understanding, facilitation serves a different purpose. Facilitation helps groups to build a common understanding so that they may successfully collaborate in generating new thinking. Thinking about the new is a core focus of facilitation. Furthermore, while moderation and mediation help groups solve internal problems, facilitation helps groups envision an external future that often extends beyond their own lives.

In fact, whereas facilitation can be defined as a form of indirect leadership, mediation and moderation are forms of *management*. Let me explain. Leaders and facilitators help groups deal with change, align diverse perspectives around a common goal, inspire action, and conceptualize. In contrast, managers and moderators/mediators help groups establish procedures, organize, control and solve problems, and strategize. Leaders and managers function differently, just as facilitators and moderators/mediators do. Of course, we need both leaders and managers. However, it is important to understand how their roles differ and why, especially in business communication where the distinction is easily misunderstood. In the context of CUSBLR, it became clear why the moderated round table discussion left several participants disinterested and uninformed.

More often than not, what appears to be a single problem is in fact a cluster of interdependent, subordinate problems, each of which must be solved before a solution to the larger one can be found.

Young, Becker, Pike

FINDING MY FOCUS in facilitation was both a source of excitement and relief as it was time for the December thesis poster session, which marked the beginning of my generative research phase. In the spring, I devoted my coursework to classes that would help me gain experience in facilitating business communication in preparation for CUSBLR 2011.

GENERATIVE RESEARCH

MODELING CONVERSATION

For the December poster session, I summarized the project background on my involvement with CUSBLR and presented my new goal of redesigning the conversation the 2011 round table. To explain how I planned to do this, I provided a visual model of a *facilitated conversation* based on my developing knowledge of facilitation and Sinek's Golden Circle.

I saw CUSBLR participants as very comfortable in talking about what they do (industries) and how they do it (expertise) to achieve outcomes (preferred state). This was a logical approach to discussion. However, I was curious to integrate why they do it (purpose) into the conversation as a facilitator.

I adopted the Golden Circle as a way to model a purpose-driven conversation, starting with the *why* (**fig. 3**). I placed CUSBLR's key stakeholders, *organizers* and *participants*, in the center because I felt they were integral to driving the core purpose of CUSBLR. (The *sponsors*, while a separate stakeholder group, were largely made up of organizing parties and participating companies.) Sinek advocated the importance of starting with the why, but the why begins with people. I believed that, in order to improve and enrich the round table discussions in 2011, the participants had to engage in facilitated value-driven conversations.

I was developing a conceptual understanding of facilitation, but I had no experience as a facilitator. *Mental Notes*, a collection of reference and idea cards by Stephen Anderson, and the conversation cards, a facilitation guide deck from Bickerton's thesis proved enormously helpful in formulating possible conversation path or scenario (**fig. 4**). However, at this point, everything was still theoretical.

The feedback on my design direction, while positive, helped me to realize that in order to move forward with facilitation as my design focus, I had to learn how to facilitate.
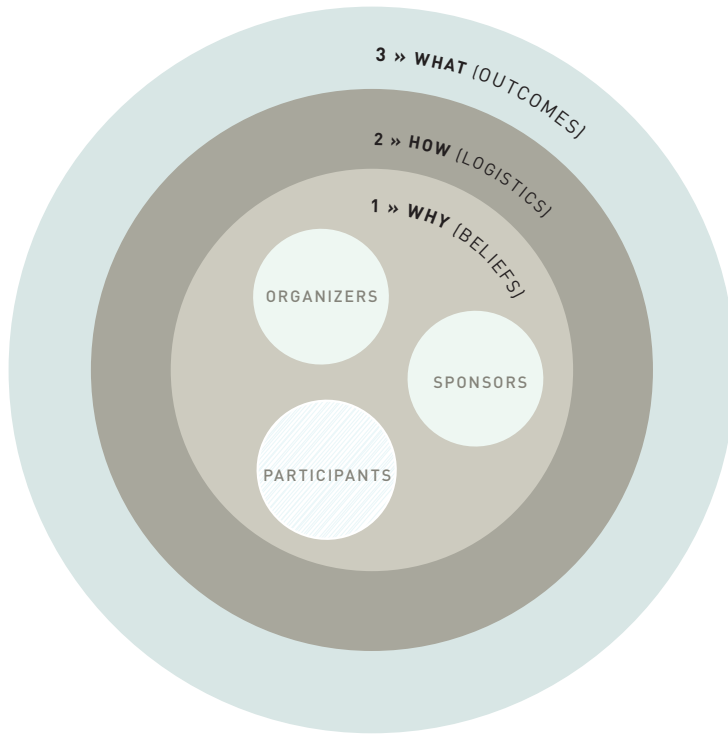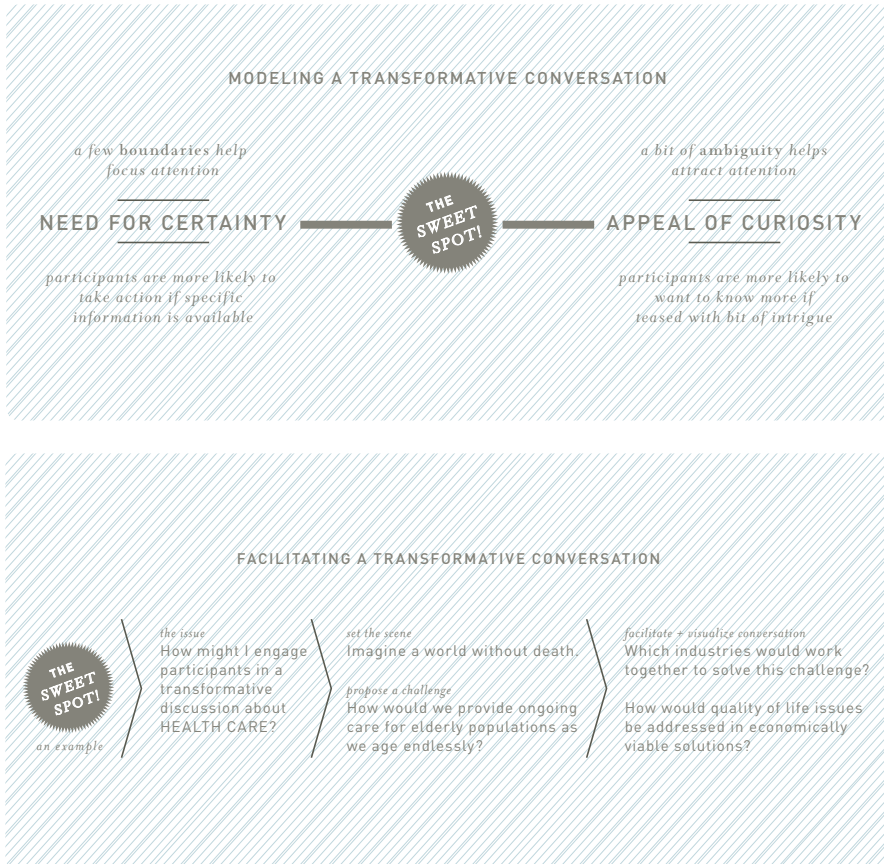
fig. 3

*modeling a
purpose-driven
conversation*

3 » **WHAT** (OUTCOMES)

2 » **HOW** (LOGISTICS)

1 » **WHY** (BELIEFS)

ORGANIZERS

SPONSORS

PARTICIPANTS

fig. 4

*a hypothetical
conversation
scenario*

MODELING A TRANSFORMATIVE CONVERSATION

*a few boundaries help
focus attention*

*a bit of ambiguity helps
attract attention*

NEED FOR CERTAINTY

THE SWEET SPOT!

APPEAL OF CURIOSITY

*participants are more likely to
take action if specific
information is available*

*participants are more likely to
want to know more if
teased with bit of intrigue*

FACILITATING A TRANSFORMATIVE CONVERSATION

THE SWEET SPOT!

an example

the issue
How might I engage
participants in a
transformative
discussion about
HEALTH CARE?

set the scene
Imagine a world without death.

propose a challenge
How would we provide ongoing
care for elderly populations as
we age endlessly?

facilitate + visualize conversation
Which industries would work
together to solve this challenge?

How would quality of life issues
be addressed in economically
viable solutions?

FACILITATION IN PRACTICE

In the spring, I took two courses that allowed me to develop my skills as a facilitator. In the studio course, Designing and Leading a Business, I worked as a design consultant on two team-based projects where I designed and facilitated workshops for a startup client (Connect Solutions) and a sponsored client (Phipps Conservatory). I also took Rhetoric and Leadership, a seminar which helped me solidify my understanding of leadership and practice facilitation. Through these two courses, I was able to experiment and develop practical knowledge of the benefits and challenges of facilitation in a safe setting. Because I was not afraid to question, test and fail, I learned quickly what worked and, more importantly, what did not work. I probably learned more by doing than I did in reading.

I developed and facilitated two *envisioning workshops* which served to establish a shared group understanding of current situations and generate new thinking for the future path. For Phipps, the challenge was to engage three key employees from different levels of seniority and areas of expertise in a workshop to uncover a collective vision for the non-profit organization's potential new for-profit arm. In designing the workshop, I thought it would be important to first uncover any obstacles in Phipps' current operations that may hinder future success, and planned my activities accordingly.

However, during the workshop, I very quickly realized how uncomfortable this approach made the participants. Despite my assurance that the workshop was meant to be a safe space free from judgment or repercussions, they were reluctant to share their thoughts and refrained from speaking. They did not want to speak negatively about Phipps in front of their superior, and understandably, their superior did not want to delve into what they may be doing wrong.

Seeing my mistake, I shifted the discussion from *current issues* to *future visions*. I had each participant write a brief, descriptive story of their personal vision for Phipps ten years into the future when the for-profit arm is successful. They were much more receptive to thinking about and sharing their vision stories. Once we shared the visions as a group, it was much easier to refocus the discussion on improvements and changes to Phipps' current operations in service of their new future vision.

This may seem like common sense, but the experience was eye-opening for me as a new facilitator who was learning through trial and error. I was starting to see just how difficult facilitation is. First, everything happens very quickly. It is crucial for facilitators to build *trust* and rapport with the participants early on, especially if the discussion topic is a sensitive one. Facilitators must ask *good questions* and catch *emergent ideas* as fodder for an in-depth conversation. *Adaptability* is another key ability for facilitators to have. Had I continued down my original path, it would have been disastrous. Facilitation is a *conceptual experience* that requires participation. So I had to shift gears to keep the participants from disengaging. *Empathy* was the final key takeaway for me as an new facilitator, but it is better discussed in my next example.

I applied the lessons I learned from Phipps to the workshop I facilitated for the startup client, Connect Solutions, who needed help defining its high-level internal vision and external messaging. This time, I started the workshop with the future, not the past or present situation. However, in planning the workshop, I struggled to find the right questions to ask. Empathy, which surfaced in my previous experience, played a key role here. While I earnestly wanted to help Connect Solutions, my mistake was not seeing their problem as my own. Once I realized this, I arrived with had more questions than there was time to ask.

Besides empathy, I learned just how difficult *communication* can be and how we take it for granted. The issue of miscommunication underscores the value of and necessity for facilitation, which offers a unique platform for inclusive and collaborative dialogue. Facilitation takes a holistic approach to communication, leveraging—rather than ignoring—the natural complexity of human interaction to enrich group communication. Initially, I thought the hardest part about facilitation was just getting participants to talk. But helping everyone to *understand* each other is the real challenge.

In subsequent client meetings, I facilitated conversations in a less structured manner. All the while, I remained vigilant of little successes and failures along the way. Eventually, I learned to have fun. Facilitation is about making a human connection with a diverse group of people. The purpose may be to solve a problem or find a path forward, but the process should be enjoyable. CUSBLR 2011 was on my radar and while I was looking forward to the opportunity to facilitate one round table, I still had much to do in preparation.

DESIGN

Learning to facilitate helped me to see just how many commonalities exist between facilitation and design. Facilitation, like design, is a *social process* that is participatory and holistic in approach. Both disciplines aim to imbue a sense of participant *ownership* over the outcome—a designed artifact or a facilitated conversation. They leverage abstraction and ambiguity as a resource in finding concrete solutions to complex problems. Facilitators and designers work to capture and distill developing patterns and themes to uncover meaning and value. Empathy is a cornerstone of both disciplines. Design and facilitation are productive (and somewhat invisible) rhetorical arts aimed at affecting a course of action.

And just as design strives to plan and create preferred states of the future, so too does facilitation in thinking about and inventing the new. Facilitation transforms participants of a conversation into agents of creation through a collaborative process of sharing and thinking. The goal in both design and facilitation is to empower people to become catalysts for change. For the designer and facilitator, the future is never too far from reach. Perhaps the most compelling similarity between design and facilitation is that they can be used *proactively* in preventing problems, not just in reaction to problems that already exist.

IMPROV

It was clear that design and facilitation share a similar conceptual framework and mindset, but do they share artifacts as well? I recalled a lecture Shelley Evenson gave in Graduate Studio II last year. In service design, what Evenson called the *Five P*'s—*people*, *product*, *place*, *process*, and *performance*—are the key artifacts of a service. As I was learning to facilitate, I had started to think about facilitation in terms of a *performance*. Now using Evenson's *Five P*'s as a guide, I identified the other artifacts of a facilitation conversation.

The *people* are the participants of the conversation, the *place* is the meeting space, the *product* is the conversation, and the *process* is the series of activities or the flow of the facilitated conversation. However, in service design, the performance is more choreographed and linear than in facilitation. While a facilitated conversation is goal-driven, the process of reaching that goal is rather organic and dynamic. So taking the performance metaphor a step further, I likened facilitation to *improv* (improvisational theatre).

Improv is a type of unscripted performance where actors perform spontaneously, taking input from the emcee and audience members to act out a certain scene or use particular props. As a performance,

the co-creation and fluid interaction among actors, emcee and the audience is reminiscent of the nature of facilitation. I matched the artifacts of improv with those found in facilitation.

The *actors* are the participants of the conversation, the *stage* is the meeting space, the *scene* is the conversation that unfolds, and the *emcee* and *audience* form a hybrid role as the facilitator. I also add *premise*, which is set at the beginning of a scene; in facilitation it would be comparable to the goal of the conversation. Like improv, the process of meeting a goal can take a rather unpredictable and surprising path in a facilitated conversation. Returning to CUSBLR, I compared the facilitated conversation model of conversation (**fig. 5**) against a model of the moderated 2010 round table discussion (**fig. 6**).

fig. 5
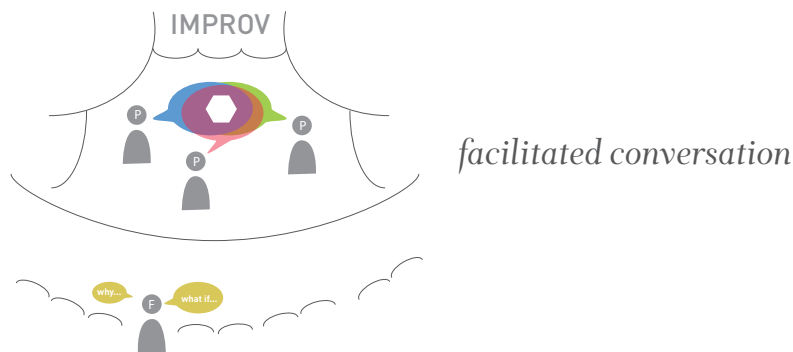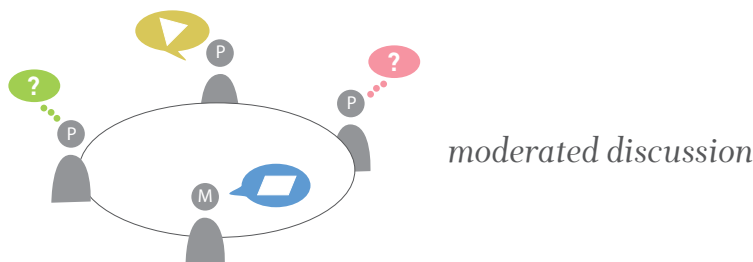

facilitated conversation

fig. 6

moderated discussion

Whereas the participants are waiting for the moderator to pose questions and lead the discussion in the old moderation model, the participants take center stage in the new facilitation model. The facilitator guides the conversation, but it is the participants who are the focal point of the conversation because in facilitation, the participants are the *content holders.* It is a more participatory and dynamic experience. And it may even be what John Dewey would consider *an* experience.

SYNTHESIS

IN PREPARATION TO facilitate a round table in 2011, I modeled an ideal timeline of a facilitated conversation (**fig. 7B**). and compared it against the timeline of the moderated round table discussion that I observed in 2010 (**fig. 7A**).

The main difference is the flow of dialogue and level of participation. In the old model, the moderator oversees the discussion, beginning with a concrete introduction and ending with a rational conclusion. Notice how in this model, the discussion does not guide the participants toward a level of *abstract thinking*, which is essential for generating new ideas and innovative thinking.

In a facilitated conversation, the use of logic (the concrete or the *what* from Sinek's Golden Circle) is strategically placed at the beginning and end of the conversation. This provides participants with the comfort of familiarity at the start of the conversation and a sense of purpose or a call to action at the end. In contrast to the old model, the new model of facilitation invites participants to move away from the *concrete* and into a conversation that leverages *abstraction* as a resource in generating the new together.

The resulting conversation may be visualized as a group of participants who share in the collective experience of generating new thinking and ideas that build upon each other to produce the product or conversation (**fig. 8**).

At this point, I felt nowhere close to expert as a facilitator, but the past few months had provided me with the essentials tools and enough confidence to head back to New York for CUSBLR 2011 in early April.

CUSBLR 2011

In the days leading up the 2011 conference, there was a flurry of last minute changes and serious bouts of miscommunication. I arrived at the New York Stock Exchange not knowing which round table I would facilitate or whom the participants would be. Shortly upon entering, I received an agenda. I was to facilitate the round table on real estate with 15 participants from various backgrounds. A topic had been predetermined: how to deal with the problem of the real estate bubble in China. I had no idea there was a real estate bubble. But that was not the biggest surprise. The round table was now four hours long with a lunch in between.
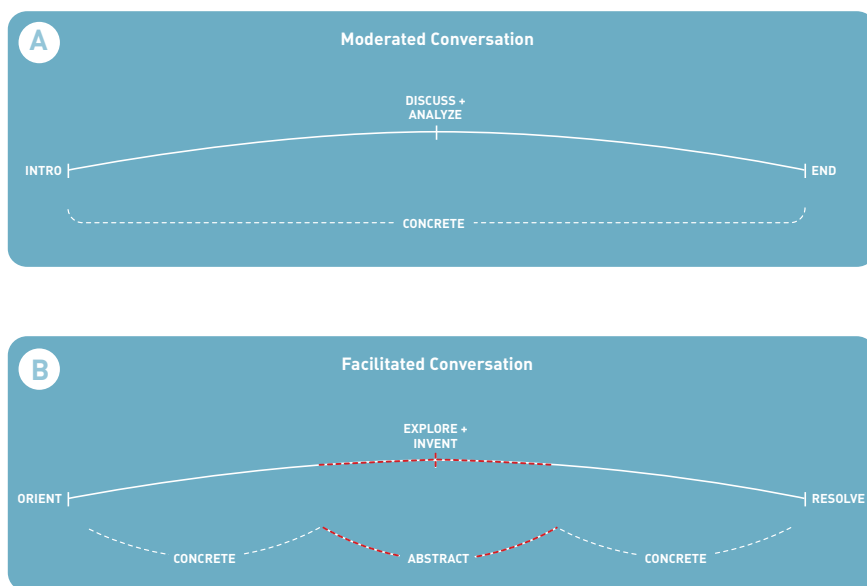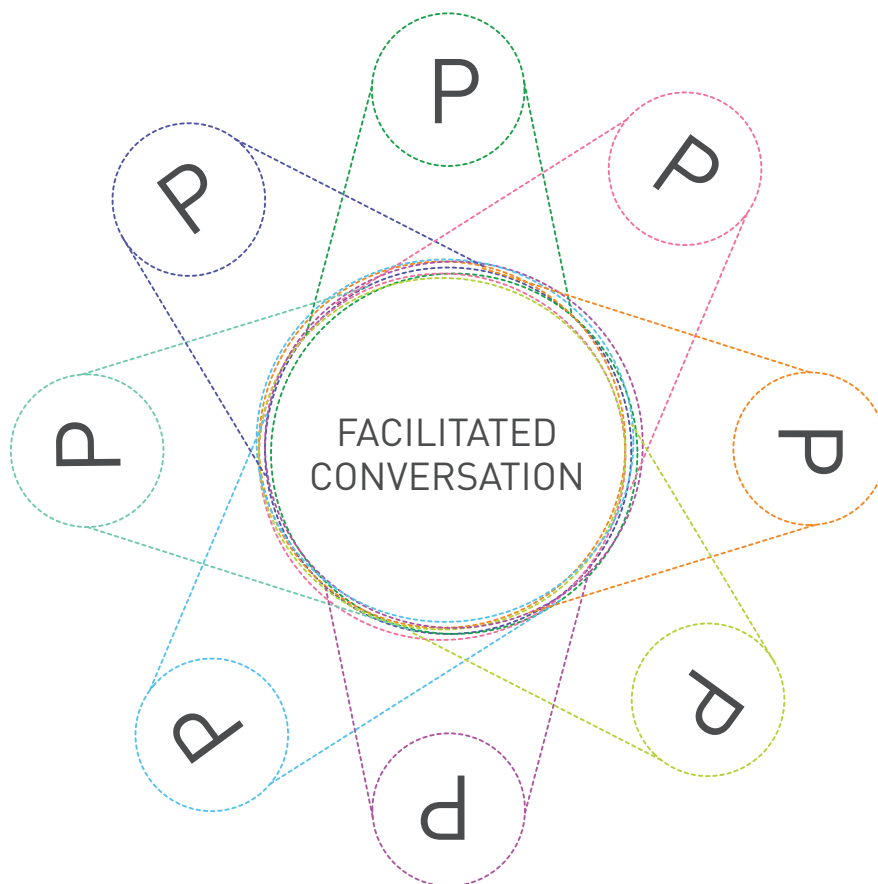
fig. 7

*conversation
timelines*

A Moderated Conversation

DISCUSS +
ANALYZE

INTRO

END

CONCRETE

B Facilitated Conversation

EXPLORE +
INVENT

ORIENT

RESOLVE

CONCRETE   ABSTRACT   CONCRETE

fig. 8

*a shared
experience*

FACILITATED
CONVERSATION

A man named George from a large management consultancy was to be my co-facilitator. And for some odd reason, the moderators of the other round tables were all called "facilitators" now, too. I realized I had to use all the skills I had learned in the past few months to pull off such a feat.

After a surreal start to the day, I reviewed a long list of questions that had been prepared for the real estate round table. I met with George, very briefly, to try to get on the same page in the minutes before the round table.

Despite being four hours in length, the round table went very quickly. While it was initially intimidating to facilitate a conversation on a subject over which I had no expertise, I simply stuck to asking questions of *why*, hoping to foster a purpose-driven conversation. George took the lead on posing more industry-specific questions to the group. In the end, I believe our dynamic worked out well, considering all the miscommunication that preceded the event.

Perhaps the turning point of the round table was being able to steer the conversation away from treating the real estate bubble as a *problem* to approaching it as an *opportunity*. It was an attempt to align with what I had learned about leadership, and it helped guide the conversation toward a more positive and proactive direction. One participant mentioned that many Chinese property buyers have been investing more money abroad, in places like the US and Europe. Others nodded in agreement. But the overseas investment was not due to the high prices in China—the buying power was quite robust. Rather, it was the Chinese government imposing new taxes and regulations that have driven domestic investors abroad.
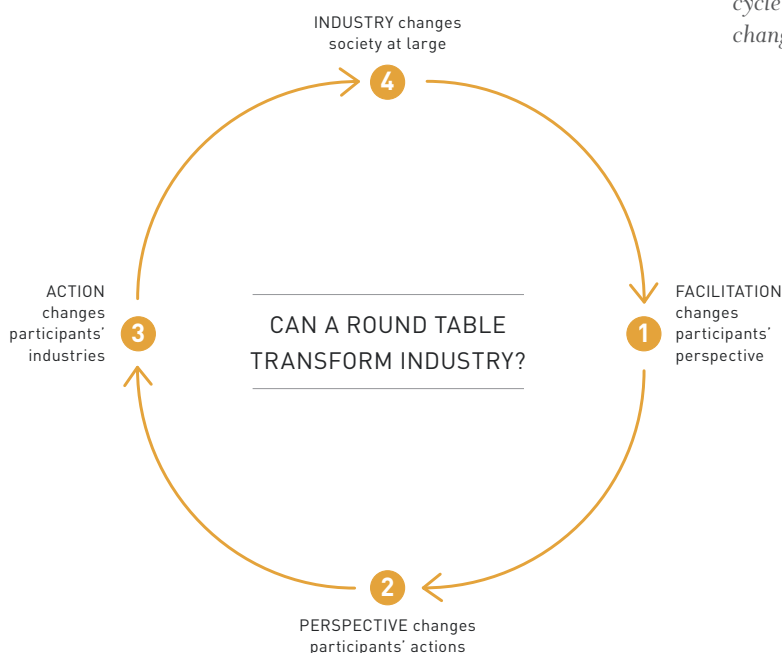
I asked about the reasons driving the need to buy. Business interests, immigration, and their children's education topped the list of reasons to invest in property overseas. In fact, education is the most influential reason driving Chinese property investment abroad. Many Chinese families send their children to live and study in the US at a young age. Despite China's rapid economic ascent, educating their children in the US remains a sign of cultural advantage and monetary wealth. However, many of the children, once grown, return to their native China to leverage the benefits of their foreign degrees in the professional sphere. Were there unforeseen consequences on the US educational system and real estate?

We never explored this in-depth. Scheduling a lunch with a panel discussion in the middle of the round table was both a disruption and a welcomed break in the four-hour session. It was very difficult to refocus the conversation. The process of reintroducing the

round table topic and recapping where we left off, along with the simultaneus translation, took up nearly an hour of time. In a way, it was like facilitating two separate conversations. However, some of the returning participants from 2010 did find this year's round table to be a more productive and fulfilling experience.

This was in part attributed to the shift in the conversation, from *problem-solving* to *opportunity-finding*. Fundamentally, I believe it was through a facilitated conversation that a round table on the problem of the real estate bubble in China gradually evolved into a conversation about opportunities for long-term investment in joint educational institutions and ventures between China and the US.

INDUSTRY changes
society at large

4

ACTION
changes
participants'
industries

3

CAN A ROUND TABLE
TRANSFORM INDUSTRY?

FACILITATION
changes
participants'
perspective

1

2

PERSPECTIVE changes
participants' actions

NEXT STEPS

A valuable next step would be to synthesize the conversation into a brief document to send to the round table participants. This way, they can revisit the key takeaways and insights from the conversation, and perhaps we will indeed see new investment opportunities in education emerge between China and the US in the future. It will be interesting to see what new China-US partnerships may emerge from this year's facilitated round table.

It is important that both organizers and participants view CUSBLR as a continuum, not a one-off event. Transformation through facilitation is a slow process that needs continued communication. It is my hope and belief that participating in a facilitated conversation can spark a chain reaction in CUSBLR participants' perspective that gradually transforms their respective industries, and ultimately society at large (**fig. 9**).

In an effort to incapsulate my own experiential understanding of facilitation, I am also creating a working primer on facilitation that others may find useful and applicable in fostering communication in business settings and beyond.

"There are limitless ways to be heard, but we don't hear each other."
—CHERYL HELLER

Consider just how often we mishear, misread, misunderstand people in daily encounters. This is especially relevant in business communication, where existing industry conferences and meetings are more about individual agenda-pushing than collaborative agenda-building. There are many forms of communication, from speeches to panel discussions, which aim to raise a issue, offer a solution, and galvanize action. But what often impedes clear communication is the perceptual gap between what we say and what people hear.

Having a multitude of communication lines is meaningless if we do not know how to communicate. Both design and facilitation are rooted in *communication.* We must embrace this natural connection wholeheartedly and strategically. The world is growing more complex, and our roles are becoming more hybrid. I believe what we need more than ever is to simply make sense of the complexity of our lives through designing and facilitating the intangible—experiences and conversations, which is not simple at all.

This project has been a challenging and rewarding experience of inquiry and discovery. Working with CUSBLR was a unique opportunity that I am grateful for, but it certainly offered its own layer of difficulty and discretion. That, of course, is the double-edged nature of a real world case study. In the end, I hope the experience I offered as a facilitator was of value and meaning.

As a facilitator, I still have a long way to go. I realized recently that the round table is not the culmination of my personal journey to becoming a facilitator—it is but one milestone. Through my process of developing new skills and making mistakes, I have gained a greater sense of self-awareness in my own abilities, tendencies, strengths, and weaknesses. For me, it has been an incredible opportunity to learn as a designer and grow as a person.

REFLECTION

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I must thank Dan Boyarski, my sage advisor, for his encouragement and direction during a whirlwind year. And I thank my family, for their unconditional love and support.

REFERENCES

BUSINESS

Clay, Jason. "How Big Brands Can Help Save Biodiversity." TED. Oxford. Jul. 2010. Lecture.

French Gates, Melinda. "What Non-Profits Can Learn from Coca-Cola." TEDxChange. New York. Sept. 2010. Lecture.

Hofstede, Geert, Cheryl A. Van Deusen, Carolyn B. Mueller, and Thomas A. Charles. "What Goals Do Business Leaders Pursue? A Study in Fifteen Countries." Journal of International Business Studies 33.4 (2002): 785-803. Print.

Johnson, James P., Tomasz Lenartowicz, and Salvador Apud. "Cross-cultural Competence in International Business: toward a Definition and a Model." Journal of International Business Studies 37.4 (2006): 525-43. Print.

Rabinder James, Michael. "Critical Intercultural Dialogue." Polity 31.4 (1999): 587-607. Print.

Senge, Peter M. "A Shift of Mind." *The Fifth Discipline: the Art and Practice of the Learning Organization.* New York: Doubleday/Currency, 1990. 68-92. Print.

Tse, Edward. *The China Strategy: How to Win the New Game of Global Enterprise.* New York, NY: Basic, 2009. Print.

CONFERENCES

Fryer, Bronwyn. "What Are Conferences For? A Conversation with Richard Saul Wurman." Harvard Business Review Case Studies, Articles, Books. June 2006. Web.

Goldsby-Smith, Tony. "Hold Conversations, Not Meetings."Harvard Business Review Blogs. Web. Apr. 2011.

Morgan, Nick. "Three Ways to Make Conferences Better." Harvard Business Review. June 2009. Web.

DESIGN

Berger, Warren. *Glimmer: How Design Can Transform Your Life, Your Business, and Maybe Even the World.* Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2010. Print.

Buchanan, Richard. "Keynote on IxDA". Interaction '11 Conference. Boulder. Feb. 2011. Speech.

Dewey, John. *Art as Experience.* New York: Perigee, 1980. Print.

Heller, Cheryl. "Language, Design and Social Innovation." Design the Future lecture series. Pittsburgh. Mar. 2011. Lecture.

Pink, Daniel H. A *Whole New Mind: Why Right-brainers Will Rule the Future.* New York: Riverhead, 2006. Print.

FACILITATION

Anderson, Stephen P. *Mental Notes.* 2010. Reference and idea cards.

Bickerton, Amy. *Cultivating Conversation and Facilitating Change.* Thesis. Carnegie Mellon University, 2010. Print.

Coyne, Shawn T., and Kevin P. Coyne. "Seven Steps to Better Brainstorming." McKinsey Quarterly: Online Business Journal of McKinsey & Company. Mar. 2011. Web.

Glei, Jocelyn K., and Scott Belsky. "Brainstorming 2.0: Making Ideas That Really Happen." The 99 Percent. Web.

Goldsby-Smith, Tony. *Pursuing the Art of Strategic Conversations.* Diss. 2001. Print.

Mathers, Alex, Jocelyn K. Glei, and Scott Belsky. "The Power of Uncertainty." The 99 Percent. Web.

Porter, Michael E., and Mark R. Kramer. "The Big Idea: Creating Shared Value." Harvard Business Review. Mar. 2011. Web.

Rico, Gabriele L. "Clustering: The Doorway to Your Design Mind." *Writing the Natural Way: Using Right-brain Techniques to Release Your Expressive Powers.* Los Angeles, CA: J.P. Tarcher, 1983. 14-39. Print.

Weinzweig, Ari. "Step Into the Future: The Power of Visioning." Inc.: The Magazine for Growing Companies Feb. 2011: 84-91. Print.

HUMOR

Mohan, Shivani. "Humor and Design." IIT Institute of Design, 2009. Web.

Valerio, Paul. "What's So Funny About Innovation?" Method 10x10 (2010). Web.

LEADERSHIP

Gardner, Howard, and Emma Laskin. *Leading Minds: an Anatomy of Leadership.* New York, NY: Basic, 1996. Print.

Gladwell, Malcolm. *Outliers: the Story of Success.* New York: Little, Brown and, 2008. Print.

Kotter, John P. "What Leaders Really Do." Harvard Business Review on Leadership. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School, 1998. 37-59. Print.

Moss Kanter, Rosabeth. "The Traits of Advanced Leaders." Harvard Business Review. Feb. 2011. Web.

Rosin, Hanna. "The End of Men." The Atlantic. Jul. 2010. Web.

Sinek, Simon. "How Great Leaders Inspire Action." TED. Washington. Sep. 2009. Lecture.

Tomasdottir, Tomas. "A Feminine Response to Iceland's Financial Crash." TED. Washington, DC. Dec. 2010. Lecture.

Zaleznik, Abraham. "Managers and Leaders: Are They Different?" *Harvard Business Review on Leadership.* Boston, MA: Harvard Business School, 1998. 61-88. Print.

RHETORIC

Aristotle. *Aristotle on Rhetoric: a Theory of Civic Discourse.* Trans. George Alexander Kennedy. New York: Oxford UP, 1991. Print.

Young, Richard Emerson, Alton L. Becker, and Kenneth L. Pike. "Preparation: Identifying and Stating the Problem." *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change.* New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970. 89-98. Print.