Collaborative Display is a Phenomenon[1]

Jeff Conklin
jeff.conklin@verizon.net
CogNexus Institute – http://cognexus.org

In his wonderful book *No More Teams: Mastering the Dynamics of Creative Collaboration*, Michael Schrage introduces a most important new distinction in collaborative technology: *shared space* -- "Shared space literally adds a new dimension to conversation, a dimension embracing symbolic representation, manipulation, and memory. … It takes shared space to create shared understandings."[2]

In the years since Schrage wrote those lines, the terms "shared space" and "shared display" have entered the mainstream vocabulary[3]. Often people use "shared display" or "shared space" simply as a fancy name for a white board or computer display in a meeting[3]. But this misses a critical distinction about shared display. The essence of shared display is the way that people interact with it … that it is truly shared. You may have a really big, brilliant computer screen, but if the people in the meeting are not looking at it, then it is not a shared display.

What makes the concept particularly powerful at this point in history is that people are just beginning to be accustomed to having a computer in the meeting room, and to looking at the screen. Most of the time, this display is just for presentations. When the presentation ends and the discussion starts, you might as well turn off the computer, because everyone knows that the computer has nothing to offer once people are talking to each other. This leads to another important distinction: if the group is simply passively observing the display, then it is not shared display. A crowd sitting in a movie theatre is sharing an experience, but (short of throwing rotten fruit) the display does not respond to their actions, so it is not a shared display.

Since shared display is fundamentally collaborative, we will use the more precise term "collaborative display."

Thus the art of collaborative display is all about getting the meeting participants to look at and pay attention to the screen (or white board) and to interact with it. Indeed, the ultimate success of collaborative display is when they pay as much or more attention to the screen as they do to each other. Because the real point of collaborative display is that it becomes the medium of the meeting. When used successfully the display mediates every interaction, and is the register of listening for the whole group.

It turns out that getting a group to put the display "in the middle" of their collaborative process is a skill, which can be learned. There are specific ways that one does and does not interact with the group, and with individual speakers as they speak. A basic requirement for a "technographer" is that you can listen and type at the same time. This knocks out a lot of candidates who just can't type. What's more, your typing has to be fast and accurate, and your spelling pretty good.

---

[1] This article appeared in *The Facilitator,* Fall 2001, http://www.thefacilitator.com.

[2] Schrage used the term "shared space" for all situations: "Shared spaces can be divorced from time or space, or both" (p. 95). More commonly now, "shared space" is used for asynchronous situations, such as putting a document on a file server, whereas "shared display" is used for synchronous meeting situations.

[3] On a recent airplane flight the pre-takeoff announcement included the injunction to "Remember that the overhead compartment is shared space – please position your stowed items to use that space as efficiently as possible."

But that's not all. You have to be willing to interrupt – to break into the stream of dialog and get the speaker, at least, to look at the screen and validate what you have typed. You have to be willing to guess at a summary of what someone is saying, and the really good technographers have a knack for guessing right. It's not uncommon for the speaker to not really know what they are trying to say, and by guessing and writing your guess down, you help them get clarity about their point. You also honor them in a way that is rare in the corporate world – you are actually listening carefully and you really care exactly what there are trying to say.

All of these basic collaborative display skills can be taught and learned. There is a simple mechanics to the cycle of listening to someone, guessing at a summary of their point, writing that guess down, and validating it with them. But beyond the mechanics there is something transcendental that happens when facilitating with a collaborative display is really working. It is beyond mechanical skill or cognitive understanding – there is a gestalt, a context, a relationship with the people in the group and the display and the conversation that is itself phenomenal. Literally, a phenomenon. Like excellence in sports or the performance arts (and technography is a performance art!), there is this moment when everything comes together and becomes a single thing – a dance. At this point you go beyond understanding collaborative display – you grok[4] it.

I've had the privilege of seeing this happen several times. You have all the mechanical skills, and you've been acting as a technographer for some time, and all in a moment you "get" collaborative display. You've been listening and typing, and getting frustrated that people won't look at the display, and struggling with when to interrupt to validate the display. It feels like you could go on a break and no one would even notice you were gone. Often you've been at it for hours in a long hard meeting. You're getting tired, and the group is too.

But then something happens. Suddenly, the group is looking at the display, and they know in their bones that they would be lost and stumbling in the conversation if that map weren't up there on the screen. They look at it, they study it, they find what they were looking for, they get the bigger picture – the higher order – of what they've been talking about, and they relax into trusting that they aren't as lost and confused as they thought they were.

And they start to interact with the display. It becomes their display. They point at it and comment on it. Instead of fighting with the group, the technographer is carried along by it. The speaking, listening, typing, reading, and validating all flow together into one harmonious dance. The technographer has a sense of merging with the collaborative display – no separation, just a smooth continuum from the inside of your brain to a big bright picture that everyone can see and is playing with.

This is what collaborative display is really about. It's a magical phenomenon of socially shared cognition. It goes beyond anything that most people have ever experienced in a corporate setting. Collaborative display is a fundamental breakthrough in the art and craft of collaboration. It provides a medium, a tool, a vehicle, a container for collaborative sense making. It is the missing puzzle piece for collaborative technology. It transcends technology or individual achievement – it is made of the same stuff as a choir singing divinely or a basketball team in perfect synch. It's not just about software or technology, although those are important ingredients. It's about this breakthrough in collaboration science that is emerging because its time has come.

---

[4] "To understand profoundly through intuition or empathy." www.dictionary.com