

# INTERSUBJECTIVITY: INTERACTIONAL TROUBLE SOURCING AND 'PROBLEM' PICTURES

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## ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the notion of intersubjectivity in workshop activities. The analysis suggests that because participants need not be engaged in the same activities simultaneously, they are unable to monitor each others activities and contributions within the workshop at all times. As a result, misunderstandings, disagreements, lack of understanding and other breaches of intersubjectivity are not necessarily solved instantaneously, which in turn may lead to the forming of fuzzy concepts for design, a fuzziness that then later has to be resolved in order for the participants to reach a joint understanding of the outcome of the workshop.

## INTRODUCTION

In institutional settings various types of workshops are often encountered. Whether based on product development, networking, idea generation or the like, one aim of such workshops is to engage all participants in a joint collaboration and a joint process. We somehow expect that at the end of such a process, there will be a result and if the process is collaborative, then the result will also be jointly constructed. Research in workshop activities has shown that participants do collaborate and orient towards a joint collaboration (Heinemann et al 2009) and that such a co-operation is a highly coordinated vocal and nonvocal interaction, which includes both objects and space (Landgrebe and Wagner forth.).

A condition for participants to jointly engage in a task, however, is that they have reached the same understanding, or in fact have reached an understanding at all.

This paper illustrates that this may not, in fact, always be the case. Based on the theory and method of Conversation Analysis (Garfinkel 1967; Heritage 1984a; Schegloff 1984), I draw on video data from a workshop activity to show how participants in certain aspects fail to reach joint understanding. Thus, this paper aims to illustrate how this can be traced back to the first signs of potential interactional trouble, and how this failure is ultimately displayed in the interaction. Hence, I follow this trace sequentially to show how the trouble accumulates and how joint understanding

is not restored for a certain time span during their workshop activity.

## BACKGROUND

There are four participants (referred to in the remainder of this paper as A, B, C and D) in the workshop group. The group's task is to develop concepts, which focus on new ways of doing school sports. For this purpose, they are building a model, which they divide into three dimensions; the individual, the group and the society, respectively. The individuals are represented in the inner circle, the group in the middle circle and society (what the participants refer to as 'structure') in the outer circle. Figure 1 depicts the model with the three dimensions.

While simultaneously engaging in defining concepts, the participants orient to the physical construction of the model, the task of adding pictures onto the three dimensions, attaching green labels to the cardboards etc. However, the focus for the remainder of this article is the interaction involving the conceptualisations in the latter dimension; society. Within this dimension, four of the concepts are (early on) well defined, whereas no 5 and 6 are (later on) tentatively formulated as illustrated in figure 2.

The first four conceptualisations are introduced by participant A. Simulta-

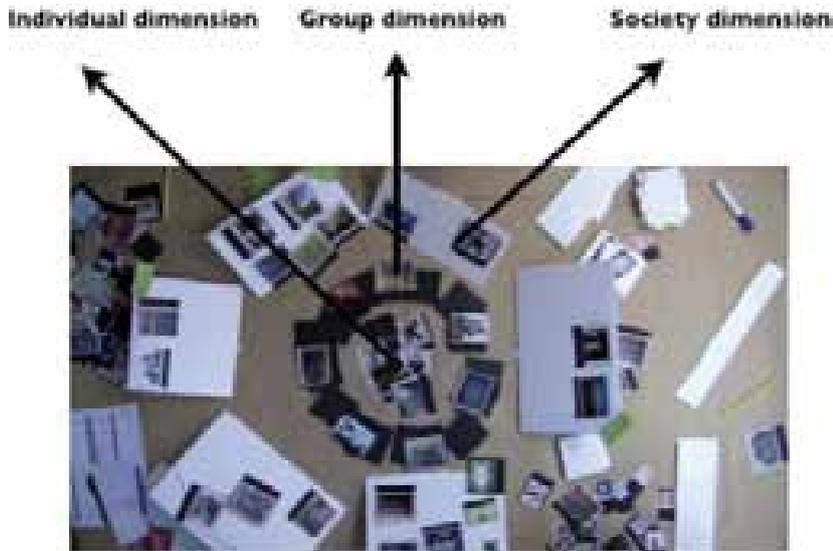


Figure 1: the model, with three dimensions.

neously with an introduction, A places a picture on to each relevant white cardboard. A performs this task while the three other participants are mainly orienting to constructing the physical model and adding pictures. None of those four concepts are later on challenged, which suggests that pictures can be used as resources identical to material objects in workshop activities (Landgrebe and Wagner forth.).

By contrast, cardboard no 5 is introduced (also by A) in a much less precise fashion, as "challenge- this is also something about nature", and without the simultaneous positioning of a picture on the cardboard. At the point at which this is done, none of the co-participants exhibit any trouble with the less precise "something about nature", but as we shall see in the analysis of subsequent sequences within this workshop, cardboard no 5 and its accompanying "fuzzy" concept will turn out to cause problems for the participants in terms of mutual understanding and agreement.

#### DATA AND TRANSCRIPTION

Kim Sandholdt, Roskilde University, has kindly allowed access to the data for the purpose of subjecting it to a CA-analysis. The transcription conventions employed are originally developed by Gail Jefferson (Jefferson 2004), and adapted to the CLAN transcript system and the CLAN software (MacWhinney 2000).

#### LITERATURE AND THEORY

The research methodology employed

for this paper is conversation analysis (CA), the systematic analysis of talk-in-interaction (Sacks 1984). CA is based on transcripts of naturally occurring interaction on video or audio and is used for the analysis of both mundane interaction as well as institutional interaction (Hutchby and Wooffitt 2008). Institutional CA examines the work of social institutions (Heritage 2004).

Drew & Heritage (1992, p. 22) argue that in institutional interaction, participants orient to a core goal or task. In the pursuit of orienting towards such a core goal or task, the notion of intersubjectivity i.e. achieving common understanding among interactants is vital (Femø Nielsen and Beck Nielsen (2005:111-112). In interaction a breakdown of social order is uncommon, and when it does occur, participants jointly try to solve this matter and re-establish social order at the least cost to all participants (Schegloff 1992; Pomerantz 1984; Emmertsen and Heinemann 2010). Hence, one could expect that the participants in this workshop monitor their co-participants for potential breaches in intersubjectivity (Clark and Krych 2004), be it in terms of misunderstanding, lack of understanding, or disagreement. However, conversational mechanisms and social structures are sensitive to the number of participants in a group (Sacks et al 1974) and the way affiliations are formed (Goodwin and Goodwin 1990; Lerner 1993; Egbert 1997). With participants of four (or more), the conversation may split up into two

(or more) conversations. This practice is referred to as schisming (or schisms), originally coined by Sacks et al (1974). One particular type of schisming is the schisming-inducing turn (a SIT) (Egbert 1997). When initiating a SIT, a participant produces a shift in topic or action, and establishes a new conversation with one or more participants, while others continue the prior conversation. This is a phenomenon overwhelmingly present in the data examined in this paper. And as I hope to illustrate in my analysis, such schisms may result in participants failing to monitor co-participants' talk and actions because they are themselves engaged in concurrent, but divergent activities. First I describe a sequence of the workshop activity in which we see the first signs of potential interactional trouble sourcing after which I describe how multiple conversations (schisming) and activities may cause interactional trouble and how this trouble may accumulate, because the participants do not orient to maintaining, monitoring or restoring intersubjectivity in situ. I will finish by describing a sequence in which trouble accumulates and illustrates a visible break down of intersubjectivity towards which the participants accordingly orient to.

#### ANALYSIS SECTION

##### THE FIRST INTERACTIONAL TROUBLE SOURCING

The first signs of potential trouble emerge in the stretch of talk after which A has vocally defined concepts for the cardboards and placed pictures onto some of these (though not no 5).

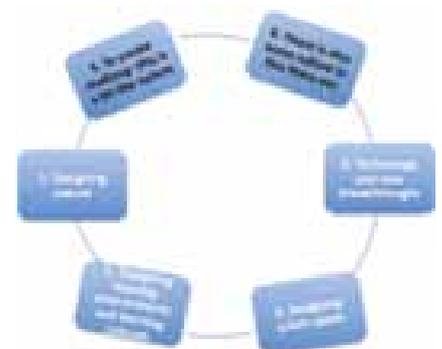


Figure 2: The initial six conceptualisations in the society dimension (the conceptualisations have been translated into English; source language is Danish). The numbering illustrates the sequential order within which the concepts are initially vocally introduced.

While A was engaged in this activity, the three other participants engaged in various other activities such as constructing the model, adding pictures, debating various issues concerning the model, as well as engaging in talk unrelated to the ongoing tasks. While some of B, C and D's activities may thus have been directed at construct-

254	*B:	så- de her dimensioner \ er der noen der li ka forklare→
255		(0.3)
256	*A:	jamen jeg tænkt vi ku- å så ku vi begynd å:: gruppere ik=>
257		+=>fordi jeg har e:n (.) jeg tænker der enlig er en her der
258		handler om at designe naturen \
259	*B:	jaer^
260		(0.8)
261	*A:	å her er en der handler om designe o:h- læringsmiljø å
262		læringskulturer
263		(0.2)
264	*B:	u:hm
265		(0.2)
266	*A:	her \ er noget omkring (.) d: designe (0.4) byrum
267	*D:	\ det designe byrummet ikk: ^
268		(0.4)
269	*A:	å her er noget omkring (0.3) teknologi og nye
270		landevindinger \
271		(0.2)
272		men jeg ved ik- det er bare mit bud
273	*C:	ja ^er \
274	*B:	u:hm
275	*A:	\ det her: op å skabe udfordr- (.) det ligger lidt op a
276		naturen \
277	*UNK:	o: nå: ^eh: ^ \
278	*A:	o:h men (.) ku man (0.4) \s: kri: ve:
Translated:		
254	B:	so- these dimensions here \ can someone just explain
255		(0.3)
256	A:	yes but I thought we could- and then we could start to::
257		group right=>
258		+=>because I have o:ne (.) I am thinking there is actually
259	B:	yes^
260		(0.8)
261	A:	and here is one which is about designing u:h- learning
262		environment
263		and learning cultures
264	B:	u:hm
265		(0.2)
266	A:	here [ is something about (.) d]esigning (0.4) urban space
267	D:	[this designing urban space right] ^
268		(0.4)
269	A:	and here is something about (0.3) technology and new
270		breakthroughs \
271		(0.2)
272		but I don't know ^ this is just my suggestion
273	C:	ye ^ah \
274	B:	u[hm]
275	A:	[this here] up about creating challeng- (.) it is a bit like
276	UNK:	o: o: ^h: ^ \
277		(1.0)
278	A:	u:h but (.) could you (0.4) [w:ri:te]

Excerpt 2: B's (1st) occasioning of restoring intersubjectivity

ing the model, just as did A, the following extract suggests that not all of them have been able to monitor A's activities at the same time. Thus, in line 254, B explicitly asks for an explanation of the different concepts (dimensions).

B's request for an explanation clearly signifies a problem of intersubjectivity: though the participants in this workshop presumably are to construct a joint model, B (and perhaps C and D) is at present not quite aware of what exactly they are doing. A responds as requested, by providing an explanation – or at least a definition – of the first four concepts: designing nature (lines 257-258); designing learning environments and cultures (lines 261-262); designing urban space (lines 266-267); technology and new breakthroughs (lines 269-270).

All four explanations are responded to with acceptance, the first two in the form of minimal acknowledgement tokens (yes, uhm) (Jefferson 1984), the third in the form of a collaborative completion (Lerner 2004) from D and the fourth in the form of a minimal acknowledgement token “yeah”, though this is only delivered after A has pursued such acceptance by adding to her turn the epistemic downgrade “but I don't know – this is just my suggestion”. By contrast, the fifth explanation, delivered in the same fuzzy form as earlier “it is a bit like nature” is responded to with the change of state token “nå” (oh) (line 276), with which the recipient marks that he/she is now informed where he/she was previously mis- or uninformed (Heritage, 1984). The different responses to A's explanation of the various concepts illuminate the differences with which these concepts were originally introduced by A, with the first four being precise concepts accompanied by pictures, whereas the fifth concept was described merely as “having to do with nature” and was not accompanied by the placing of a picture. This fuzziness, is, then, in excerpt 2 displayed by the way in which the participants respond to A's explanations, fairly readily accepting the first four, but marking the fifth explanation as providing with new information. In this way, excerpt 2 retrospectively reveals that the concept for cardboard no 5 had either not been heard, understood, or had even been



Figure 3: A's non-vocal proposal of the green labels.

misunderstood when it was initially introduced presumably because of its fuzziness. Excerpt 2 thus constitutes a first place in which the participants directly orient to this fuzziness and, as a consequence thereof, could attempt to solve it before progressing to something new.

Instead, however, the participants at this point move on to a different activity, initiated by A suggesting that they write down on the green labels (lines 278-280), while holding these labels out for inspection by the others (figure 3).

At this point, then, the fuzziness of cardboard no 5 and the consequential trouble this has for the participants reaching intersubjectivity in the form of mutual understanding, has not been solved. In the following section I look at how the participants' shift between different activities and different participation frameworks further contributes to the development of fuzziness.

#### DEALING WITH MULTIPLE ACTIVITIES AT A TIME

In the following excerpt, B and C are engaged in a mutual activity, attaching a string to the cardboards. A is engaged with the green labels. At this point, D introduces a picture by holding it up for inspection by the others (figure 6). Whilst B and C sustain their ongoing activity, A responds both verbally and through gesture to this introduction, suggesting that D place the picture on cardboard no 6, which has “something



Figure 6: D introduces a picture.



Figure 7: A suggests placing a picture on cardboard no 6.

385	*D:	men det oss noget med at bruge vejret som det nu er
386		(0.4)
387	*A:	ja (.) det oss noget (med ø::h det u::dendo::rs)
388	*B:	□ska de hæng sådan her eller ska de vær på
389	*A:	det må være her □et eller andet sted
<b>Translated:</b>		
385	*D:	but it's also something about using the weather as it is
386		(0.4)
387	*A:	yes (.) it's also something (with u::h the ou::do::rs)
388	*B:	□should they hang like this or □should they be on
389	*A:	it must be here □somewhere

Excerpt 3: D's (the 2nd) occasioning of restoring intersubjectivity.

to do with the outdoors" (excerpt 3, line 389 and figure 7). Once A has delivered this proposal, she disengages from this activity and attempts instead to engage with B and C, prefacing that shift verbally three times, first with the beginning of a question "so you want::" in line 400, see excerpt 4, (only the first attempt is shown in excerpt 4 due to limitations of space).

However, A does two other attempts, one with "u:::h" and finally, with a request for confirmation "there was o:ne abou: u::h- designing u:h (0.5) urban space right". Though she succeeds to gain only B's attention in her third attempt, it is clear from her attempts that she is orienting to B and C, rather than to D, who is in the process of placing a second picture on cardboard 5.

According to Clark and Krych (2003) speakers monitor receivers for understanding and if necessary alter their utterances in the unfolding interaction. In return receivers cooperate by displaying and signalling their understanding. It seems that in the above excerpt, the participants are prevented from doing that because multiple activities are going on at the same time. Thus A, because she is currently attempting to engage with B and C, does not monitor D to see whether he agrees with and accepts her proposal.

As figure 8 illustrates, D, does in fact

not follow A's proposal (whether this is because he does not agree or because he does not interpret it correctly is uncertain). Instead, he walks to the other side of the table, from where he places his picture onto cardboard no 5. Shortly after, while A, B and C are otherwise occupied, he places a second picture onto the same board so that there are now at least two of the pictures on this board that have not been accepted or even acknowledged by the others and where one in fact was proposed by A to go onto a different cardboard. In other words, because there are multiple activities going on here at the same time, D manages to position two pictures on cardboard no 5, without any of the others monitor this placing. This means that there is no chance for the participants at this point to realize that there may be trouble, yet alone to solve it. In the following, and last, analytic section, we see how this trouble finally comes to the forefront and thus, how the participants eventually have to address and solve this trouble.

396	*C:	ø:::h ja å så ska vi ha □meget længere snor fordi
397	*B:	□så ka jeg bare sæt noget snor på der
398	*C:	vi har enden på snoren her ??et sted??
399	*B:	□ja
400	*A:	□nå i vil ha::
401		(0.3)
402	*B:	ved du hvad skal jeg ik bare sæt selve den dims her på
403		fordi så er det uafhængig af snoren
404	*C:	ja \
<b>Translation</b>		
396	*C:	ø:::h yes and then we need a □much longer string because
397	*B:	□then I can just attach some string there
398	*C:	we have the end of the string ??somewhere??
399	*B:	□yes
400	*A:	□so you want::
401		(0.3)
402	*B:	you know what shouldn't I just place the actual thing here
403		because then it is independent of the string
404	*C:	yes \

Excerpt 4: A's attempt of engaging with B and C.



Figure 8: A places a picture on cardboard no 5.

## THE ACCUMULATION OF TROUBLE

D's action of inexplicitly placing the 'problem' pictures onto board no 5 has interactional consequences for the ongoing interaction, and the accumulation of trouble in the form of lacking intersubjectivity becomes explicitly apparent in the following excerpt (5), when C points to one of the pictures placed by D earlier and inquires what "it is". As illustrated in excerpt 5, this inquiry prompts three different explanations from the other three participants, which rather painfully illuminates their lack of mutual understanding.

Each version of what the picture represents is faithful to what each of the participants have repeatedly explicated previously in the workshop activity. Such repeats have been shown to be employed by participants to display that they are not responsive to what has transpired in the interaction since the previous saying Schegloff (1996:200-201). Here, this further suggests that A, B and D have not been monitoring each other's actions and as a consequence each of them have different versions of the event so far. This shows that intersubjectivity has not yet been achieved in relation to concept no 5. The fuzziness, however, is now out in the open due to the participants' identical repeats of their own prior talk. Following shortly after excerpt 5, B occasions yet an explication of one of the problem picture, see excerpt 5, and she does this in a non-vocal manner similar to C's occasioning, namely that of pointing to the same 'problem' picture, but different in formulation. Thus, B's

468	*C:	hva var det her
469	*A:	ja::: det var □noet med nye sport: sarenaes ikk→
470	*D:	□det var å- så brug-
471	*B:	ja å:: □igen måske det der med □perspektiv:+
472	*D:	□å så bruge vejret som det er ikk □
473	*B:	+ at hvordan- hva sport er:+
474		(0.3)
<b>Translated:</b>		
468	*C:	what was this here
469	*A:	ye:::s it was □something about new sport: sarenaes right→
470	*D:	□it was u- to use-
471	*B:	yes a:nd □again perhaps the thing with □perspective:+
472	*D:	□and then use the weather as it is right □
473	*B:	+ that how- what sport is:+
474		(0.3)

Excerpt 5: C's (4th) occasioning of restoring intersubjectivity by pointing to a 'problem' picture.



Figure 9: B asking about the ‘problem’ picture.



Figure 10: D defends his picture.

inquiry is explicitly formed as a challenge, initiated with a challenging “jamen” (yes but) (Steensig and Asmuss 2005). Further, non-vocally she visibly turns her face in the direction of D, orienting directly towards him. By doing this she shows that she knows D is responsible for those two pictures and holds him accountable. As a response D utters a third repeat of his utterance “it was- it was something about using the weather as it is”, once again producing an identical repeat of his own prior talk. This time he substantiates his utterance by a gesture placing his hand above B’s hand, which is still close to the problem picture (see figure 10).

His gesture forces B to retract her hand and she accepts his defence of his picture by uttering “o:h yeah”. This functions as a realization token, which is used to remedy problems of intersubjectivity by claiming that its producer has now understood or remembered something, which he/she has previously failed to understand or remember (Emmertsen & Heinemann, 2010). Whilst B and D thus at least on the surface appears to have now reached a joint understanding, C and A still appear to be countering D. C uses a negative interrogative “wasn’t it new sport-types” to introduce another possibility for what cardboard no 5 was meant to be. The negative interrogative format has been shown to be used as a type of hostile question, which in fact asserts, rather than questions some matter

(Heritage and Clayman 2002), and the initiating “but” in line 501 furthers this impression.

That A is aligned with this take on things is evident from her turn at talk in line 504, where she also claims the cardboard to be representing sports arenas and perspectives. A problem of misunderstanding or lack of understanding, which this initially appeared to be, has thus turned into a problem of agreement, with A and C having one version of a concept for cardboard no 5, a version which is in competition with the version provided by D (and possibly supported by B). Breaches of intersubjectivity that have to do with disagreement are more problematic than those that “merely” have to do with understanding (Pomerantz 1984), and so at this point the participants are more or less forced to solve their problem or else face a full-blown argument. And indeed, as illustrated by excerpt 6, all four participants now, for the first time, orient directly to this problem and finally appear to find a solution.

Thus, B, C and D orient to the (by now) apparently problematic pictures on cardboard 5, whilst A attaches a green label onto cardboard no 5 and stipulates “look here are new sports

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494 *B: hva- (.) den der hvorfor er den xxxxx
495 *D: det var- det var noget med at bruge vejret som det er
496 (0.9)
497 *B: □nå: ja□
498 (0.2)
499 *B: a-
500 (0.3)
501 *C: jamen var det ikk □nye s:ports'grene'□\
502 *B: □men□
503 (0.3)
504 *A: nye sp:ortsarenaer og persp:ektiver

Translated:
494 *B: wha-(.) this there why is this xxxxx
495 *D: it was- it was something about using the weather as it is
496 (0.9)
497 *B: □oh yeah□
498 (0.2)
499 *B: a-
500 (0.3)
501 *C: but wasn't it □new s:ports'types'□\
502 *B: □but□
503 (0.3)
504 *A: new sp:ortsarenaes and persp:ectives□
    
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Excerpt 6: B’s (5th) re-occasioning of restoring intersubjectivity by pointing to the ‘problem’ picture.

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521 *A: □se□ her er nye □sport:sarenaer
522 *B: □ja□
523 *A og perspektiver på hvad sport er □ikk□/
524 *D: □ja□
525 *C: jow □så det vil sige at de her to skal herover□\

Translated:
521 *A: □look□ here are new □sport:sarenaes
522 *B: □yes□
523 *A and perspectives on what sport is □right□/
524 *D: □yes□
525 *C: yes □so it means that those two here has to go
overhere□\
    
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Excerpt 7: Cardboard no 5 is conceptualised.

arenas and perspectives on what sport is right”. It is uncertain whether D and B respond to this, but C produces a strong accept of A’s stipulation by both vocally accepting it and non-vocally she physically moves the two ‘problem’ picture and places them on cardboard no 6, see excerpt no 7.

## CONCLUSION

From the analysis, it suggests that the notion of schisming, i.e. a conversation between 4 (or more) participants, which splits up into two or more conversations, is consequential for the interactants and their orientation to reaching and/or restoring intersubjectivity and thus mutual understanding. Further to this, multiple concurrent but divergent activities may contribute to the complexity of the interaction thereby hindering the participants in monitoring their co-participants, their talk and actions in full. This again may allow for the formulation of less precise concepts, which then ultimately may lead to accumulation of trouble and a visible break down of intersubjectivity towards which the participants are accordingly forced to orient in order to reach a joint understanding of the outcome of the workshop.

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