FORMS OF

PRESENTATION

AND THE FUTURE

OF COMPREHENSION

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Collection of papers mainly presented to the Forms of Presentation sub-project of the Goals, Processes and Indicators of Development project of the United Nations University.

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Introduction

The work on the recent papers collected here was largely associated with the forms of Presentation sub-project of The Goals, Processes and Indicators of Development (GPID) project of the United Nations University. Many of the themes had however been explored in earlier papers which are also reproduced here when appropriate.

The first group of papers on Constraints on Presenting Action-Oriented Information contains different attempts to focus on the range of obstacles to the communication of new insight concerning social change. The first paper does this through a thought experiment whereas the second may either be taken as humour or as a serious statement (as was done in one book which reprinted it without the final punch lines in small print). The third paper reviews problems in the United Nations long-term strategy to "mobilize" people in support of its action on the problems it perceives as relevant. The fourth paper attempts to summarize the implications of the previous papers for any new world order. The basic dilemma is presented visually in the final paper.

The second group of papers focuses on Language as a Constraint. Here "language" is taken in a very broad sense to clarify the challenge of communicating concepts and distinctions between languages within the international community. These papers were prepared for a symposium of the Union of International Associations (Paris, 1976) in collaboration with the Committee for Conceptual and Terminological Analysis.

The third group of papers is specifically concerned with Societal Learning and the International Community, namely with the problems of how the international community learns collectively and with how it may be comprehended as a whole in all its diversity. The first paper was written for the 2nd World Symposium on International Documentation (Brussels, 1980). The second was originally presented to a GPID Network Meeting but was subsequently expanded as an introduction to Global Action Networks, a classified directory of the international bodies described in the Yearbook of International Organizations.

The fourth group of papers is concerned with Information Mapping, namely techniques for representing items of information on a "map" in such a way as to bring out significance from the network of relationships. THe first paper was prepared at the request of the Commonwealth Science Council. The last one reflects a continuing concern with the use of computers to plot out such maps. This is being further explored as a way of presenting the information in the new edition of the Yearbook of World Problems and Human Potential (1985). A special concern is with generation of an atlas of "maps" of sections of the network of over 3,000 problems embedded in a network of over 12,000 relationships of different types.

The fifth group of papers considers a variety of topics associated with Complexity and Comprehension. The first considers complexity as a constraint on social innovation. The second draws attention to a conceptual de-patterning device. The third paper considers ways in which comprehension might be considered to evolve in the future and what that could imply for ordering comprehension at the present time. The fourth explores ways of designing more meaningful "maps" of social action through coding its complexity onto processes whose integration is essentially more comprehensible. The final paper compares the current document handling system to the kind of information which would enhance ability to work creatively with available concepts.

The first annex is the report of a GPID meeting on Forms of Presentation. An overview of the forms of communication is presented diagrammatically in the second. The third annex identifies 14 anti-developmental biases which handicap current efforts to design classification systems. The fourth explores the possibility of designing a non-verbal structural language as a catalyst for social innovation. The fifth annex stresses the value of computer-aided visualization (in contrast with more conventional approaches) as a means of comprehending complex structures and processes, whether organizations or problems. The sixth annex discusses the problems of representing and communicating complex patterns of needs.

Aspects of the question of forms of presentation and the future of comprehension are explored in separate volumes: Patterns of Conceptual Integration (notably the significance of music as a model for some subtle forms of comprehension) and From Networking to Tensegrity Organization (which contains papers to which reference is made in Annex 6). Many of the papers have been reprinted from the journal Transnational Associations.

Many approaches to forms of presentation focus on audio-visual and dramatic techniques. Without denying the merits of these, the approach explored in this paper is primarily concerned with finding ways of maintaining the integrity of sets of concepts when they are presented through more readily comprehensible forms. Attractive forms are not sufficient (however enthusiastic the audience is about them as forms) if they fail to maintain the conceptual integrity which is the fruit of the intellecutal endeavour. The concerns of the two volumes above are therefore closely linked with this theme. In fact, together with the volume on Transformative Conferencing, these may even be considered as specialized supplements to this volume.