

# THE GEOMETRY OF DIALOGUE

## CHAPTER TWO

### METHODOLOGY AND JUSTIFICATION: WHY BUILD A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL MODEL OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION?

The Six Dimensions model described in this study is a many-faceted, many-layered, facilitative interpretation of interpersonal communication and human experience. Because the web of human communicating, experiencing and relating is profoundly complex, even simplified models of it will tend to be quite complex.<sup>19</sup> In creating the Six Dimensions/Five Transformations model I have tried to overcome at least some of this difficulty by using multiple-layered, three-dimensional diagrams introduced at the end of the Introduction. The drawing of diagrams, which has a long history in mathematics, is slowly becoming accepted as a cognitive tool in many fields because it allows one to present an overview of a complex web of relationships, a task that would be much more difficult using sentences or propositions.<sup>20</sup>

I realize that following my exposition and arguments concerning such a six-dimensional, five-layered, multiple-feedback-loop model will demand a great deal of patience and effort from my readers. Therefore, in this chapter I will try to show why a model as complex as Six Dimensions/Five Transformations is necessary and worthwhile. My discussion will make the following major points: First, the study of communication includes most of what we know about human life. Second, the practice of teaching

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<sup>19</sup>This is an inference I draw from Ashby's law of requisite variety, as described by Cliff Joslyn, "The Law of Requisite Variety" in *Principles of Systems and Cybernetics, An Evolutionary Perspective* (World Wide Web, 1993).

<sup>20</sup>See Alvin I Goldman, *Philosophical Applications of Cognitive Science* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1993), 55. Other cultures have extensive traditions of using diagrams to convey philosophical and psychological ideas. For example, Navajo sand paintings and Tibetan mandalas.

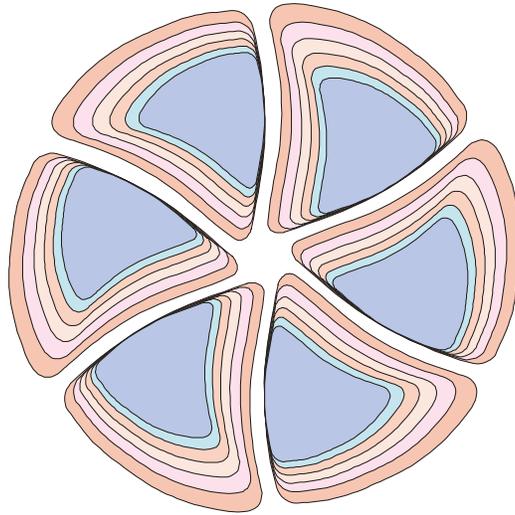
communication skills raises the issue of how all these facets of human life fit together, even though that is a difficult, if not impossible, question to answer. Third, the Six Dimensions model organizes a significant amount of material from psychology and communication theory *from the point of view of communication skills learners and trainers*. And fourth, the first-person approach of the Six Dimensions model emphasizes awareness, exploration and action rather than causal determinants, because a first-person-action description supports the emergence of new action better than the typical third-person view. (Since the name "Six Dimensions/Five Transformations," although accurate, is too long for comfortable reading, I will often refer to the model as just "Six Dimensions.")

### **2.1. The study of communication includes most of what we know about human life.**

As a multi-disciplinary activity, the study of human communication includes much of psychology and the social sciences, and touches on many facets of the humanities as well. Since interpersonal communication is woven through all aspects of living and is meaningful only in the context of living, when we try to understand and teach communication we cannot escape these larger integration issues. Perhaps as a result of this contextuality there is an amazingly wide range of scholarly reflection about communication. So much information is available, in fact, that I sometimes have a difficult time imagining the single subject matter to which all this information relates. Stephen W. Littlejohn's *Theories of Human Communication*<sup>21</sup> includes material on cybernetics, semiotics, sociology, hermeneutics, and feminism, and this list is only a brief sample of the topics introduced.

It sometimes appears to me that I am re-living the story of the blind men and the elephant, except that there are a thousand men and women, none of them blind but each one perhaps standing so close to one part that they cannot see much of anything else, each one holding on to a unique part of some extraordinary, thousand-faceted creature. They hold rules, roles, loops, actions, cultures, languages, social classes, paradoxes, games,

relationships, contexts, intentions and much more.



*Imagining How Six Processes Could Work Together*

Drawing by Dennis Rivers

## **2.2. The practice of teaching communication skills raises the issue of how all these facets fit together.**

Although they may be studied separately, in actual communicative encounters all the elements just mentioned are woven together. When we learn to communicate by imitating our parents, we unselfconsciously adopt and adapt their ways of combining the various elements. A teacher of communication skills, however, cannot rely on years of imitation as an educational method. Communication training, as I see it, must necessarily include both specific skills and some over-arching integrative model that suggests how those skills would fit into ongoing conversations, tasks and relationships. Many otherwise helpful books and classes on interpersonal communication leave their students on their own to figure out the integrative part of the process<sup>22</sup>. The Six Dimensions model represents my effort to develop an integrative meta-model of communication. My

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<sup>21</sup>Stephen W. Littlejohn. *Theories of Human Communication*. 5th ed. (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing, 1996).

<sup>22</sup>In the context of teaching specific skills of interpersonal helping, Brammer notes that “the principal problem is putting the components together into a smooth, flowing performance.” Lawrence M. Brammer, *The Helping Relationship: Processes and Skills*. 5th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1993), 70.

goal is not to propose a new theory of human communication, but rather to use graphic modeling tools to tie together as much of the existing theory and knowledge about communication as I have been able to understand.

### **2.3. The Six Dimensions/Five Transformations model organizes the materials of communication theory from the point of view of communication skills trainers and learners.**

In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn<sup>23</sup> describes various ways in which researchers come to their subject matter with already established perspectives that shape their perception of what counts as a fact and help to organize facts into meaningful patterns. Using the history of science as his evidence, he makes a strong case that there is no view of any given subject matter without a point of view. Persuaded and inspired by this argument, I have decided to build a model of interpersonal communication from the point of view of communication skills coaching rather than trying to achieve an allegedly point-of-view-less, universal understanding.

It seems to me that we not only bring a point of view, but, as embodied creatures, we also bring our own needs and drives to the encounter with a given subject matter. For example, the desire to heal illnesses catalyzed the development of biology over the centuries. This is in contrast to the supposed ideal in science of disinterested curiosity about life and nature. I think it would be fair to say that both desire and disinterested curiosity are at work in science, and that each plays a crucial role. (I'm sure some philosopher of science has already said this much better than I can.) Many contemporary examples come to mind. The desire to build an atomic bomb before Hitler did was the motivating cause of what was probably the largest and most expensive research project in human history up to its time, one that yielded many fundamental insights into the structure of matter and also gave birth to computers and computer science. And, on a more mundane level, the desire to send more telephone messages down a single wire animated a long program of research that culminated in the development of fiber optics and glass telephone wires. And so on.

I take these examples to be illustrations of the point that our purposes as well as

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<sup>23</sup>Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 43.

our paradigms help us to organize our information about nature into meaningful configurations. Our purposes may be noble or base but it seems to me that since they play a key role in focusing our attention we cannot have much knowledge without them and we cannot escape their shaping influences. The narrow empiricist stance that our knowledge of the world should be an unbiased picture of whatever is out there fails to address the significant issue that there is way too much “out there” to put into any one picture and far too little time and effort available to investigate everything. We choose what to investigate and how to investigate it, and therefore the overall pattern of our knowledge is inevitably shaped by our values and our choices. To use an extreme example, if we know more about making hydrogen bombs than we know about making peace, it is because we have spent trillions of dollars and hundreds of thousands of working lifetimes on the former and not on the latter. Our resulting knowledge of nuclear physics is objective only in a very narrow sense. Viewed from perspective of the overall distribution of knowledge in society (what we have chosen to know and what we have chosen to ignore) one can see that our knowledge of nuclear physics actually embodies our worst and extremely subjective fears and desires for power.

I have used this very political example to emphasize that our quests for knowledge are influenced in subtle but powerful ways by our values. Even when we are meticulously even-handed about evaluating evidence, values that may be unexamined will have already shaped the kind of questions we find worth asking.<sup>24</sup> Hypothesis framing (“X causes Y”) and its twin, question framing (“Does X cause Y?”), are indispensable processes that exert enormous influence on the process of inquiry. And yet our hypothesis framing and question framing activities are not particularly scientific or even rational.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, in my view, scholars should strive to be conscious and explicit about their values and goals so that readers can understand what agenda of attention has shaped the question-asking and evidence-gathering.

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<sup>24</sup>An example recently in the news concerns funding for heart disease research. Although heart disease is a major cause of death among women in the US, almost all of the federal research funding concerning heart disease was spent studying men.

<sup>25</sup>The philosopher of science Karl Popper is well-known for his position that it does not matter how one develops scientific hypotheses, which he calls “conjectures,” it only matters how one tests them. This suggests that our most rational activities can depend somewhat on irrational processes. Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968).

I hope that my argument up to this point has persuaded you that every study embodies a particular perspective and implies the values that go with that perspective. Returning to the topic of my communication meta-model, it seems to me even more true (than in the case of just plain model-building) that the abstracting involved in building a meta-model grows out of the modeler's values and purposes. Thus it is important for me to state that I come to this material as someone concerned with peacemaking, conflict resolution and the teaching of communication skills. The Six Dimensions model is my effort to integrate various strands of communication theory from the point of view of what I imagine and hope would be valuable to communication skills trainers and to people who are trying to develop a deeper perspective on their own communication activities, in family, work, friendship and community settings. (I have been convinced by the arguments of Roger Fisher, William Ury<sup>26</sup> and others that similar processes are at work in all those different spheres.) Just as there is no one true picture of human communication (it's too big to fit into any single picture, too many angles from which to view), there is certainly no one true picture of how various communication theories might fit together into an integrated whole. There could be a multitude of possible overviews of human communication, each one better than most of the others for some particular purpose. In my case I am trying to organize as much information as I can about communication from the point of view of the active participants in a conversation. (In the balance of this study I will refer to participants in conversations as "conversants," following the example of W. Barnett Pearce<sup>27</sup>, rather than use the scholarly but forbidding term, "interlocutors.")

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<sup>26</sup>Roger Fisher, William Ury & Bruce Patton, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*, 2nd ed., (New York: Penguin Books, 1991).

<sup>27</sup>W. Barnett Pearce. *Interpersonal Communication: Making Social Worlds* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 27.

#### **2.4. The first-person approach of the Six Dimensions model emphasizes awareness, exploration and action rather than causal determinants in interaction.**

Most research about human communication is conducted within a university setting in which the teaching of communication skills is not the primary purpose. The information is gathered and organized to fulfill a variety of other purposes: to test hypotheses, to demonstrate that candidates for advanced degrees have mastered the tools of social research, to document structures of oppression in society, and so on.<sup>28</sup> My purpose here is not to judge whether these are worthy or unworthy goals. What concerns me is that information organized from these “third-person” perspectives seems to have very little to offer anyone approaching the subject from the “first-person” perspective of an active conversant asking “How could I have a more fruitful conversation?” The first-person and third-person stances are so different that information gathered in one may be inherently untranslatable into the other, a case of what Thomas Kuhn would call “incommensurable paradigms.” (If true, such a conclusion might offer some insight into why a century of social research has had so little discernible effect on the typical human patterns of war, massacre and oppression.) The first-person and third-person perspectives are also developed and championed by different scholarly groups, some seeking to identify the causal agents that shape people’s lives<sup>29</sup> and others seeking to help people become causal agents in their own lives.<sup>30</sup> (The Six Dimensions/Five Transformations model clearly falls in the latter category.)

Inside the university, the first-person perspective takes on an occupational cast: potential speech-makers, psychotherapists, newscasters, lawyers, managers, nurses, labor negotiators, doctors and actors explore the development of their communication skills.

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<sup>28</sup>In fairness to universities, there are many introductory classes in human communication that include some first-person information and exercises. But they suffer, in my view, from a pervasive fragmentation in which the learner is presented with a kind of “toolkit” of loosely connected ideas, research findings, techniques and exercises. What is the totality of which these ideas, etc. are aspects? One possible answer to this complaint of mine is that the totality to which these items refer is human life, and human life is so complex that it is beyond our capacity to sum up in any meaningful way.

<sup>29</sup>B.F. Skinner, classical behaviorists and the sociobiologists would fall into this group. But over the past few decades many behaviorists have shifted their focus to helping people shape their own behavior.

<sup>30</sup>For a study that places an increasing sense of personal agency at the center of human development, see Larry Cochran and Joan Laub, *Becoming an Agent: Patterns and Dynamics for Shaping Your Life* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1994).

But, I wish to protest, we are all “first-persons” engaged in dialogue and negotiation with all the important people in our lives. It seems to me that the question, “How could I have more fruitful conversations with the important people in my life?” deserves at least as much careful attention as “How can I listen to a client well?” or “How can I make a fine speech?” That is a matter of values, of course, and of defining what is worth studying.<sup>31</sup>

### **2.5. The divided world of communication theory and practice.**

Perhaps because, in the realm of human affairs, there is no straightforward translation of what one knows into what one should do, there seems to me to be a deep first-person/third-person divide within the world of books about interpersonal communication. Most books that give advice do not cite research or propose overarching models<sup>32</sup> and most books that cite research and/or propose models do not give advice.<sup>33</sup> As Donald Schön wrote in the early 1980s:

...there is a disturbing tendency for research and practice to follow divergent paths. Practitioners and researchers tend increasingly to live in different worlds, pursue different enterprises, and have little to say to one another. Teachers have gained relatively little from cognitive psychology; political and administrative practice has gained little from the policy sciences; and management science has contributed relatively little to the practice of management. The divergence of research and practice exacerbates the practitioner’s dilemma which I have called “rigor or relevance,” and tempts the practitioner to force practice situations into molds derived from research.<sup>34</sup>

I believe that, given the gestalt nature of human perception, the good advice in the

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<sup>31</sup>By way of anecdote, I once read a book about building houses out of rammed earth, i.e., dirt. The author lamented that in spite of the fact that one could build fine houses out of dirt, houses that were fire-proof, termite-proof and would last for centuries, there was very little interest in building earthen houses. Since dirt was everywhere, nobody could make any money out of selling it. This seems to me to be the fate of interpersonal communication in the university. It appears that communication will flourish primarily in those forms that can be sold.

<sup>32</sup>A typical example of this group is Matthew McKay, Martha Davis and Patrick Fanning, *Messages: The Communication Skills Book* (Oakland, Calif.: New Harbinger, 1983).

<sup>33</sup>A typical example of this group is Philip R. Cohen, Jerry Morgan and Martha E. Pollack, eds., *Intentions in Communication* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990).

<sup>34</sup>Donald A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

advice-giving books (such as *Getting to Yes*<sup>35</sup>) would be understood better and remembered more easily if it were integrated into some over-arching model or storyline rather than presented simply as a list of actions to take. Furthermore, I imagine that such integrative models would facilitate action more effectively if they embodied a first-person rather than third-person perspective.

Against this plea of mine for an integrative model is the consideration that the systemic, contextual and open-ended complexity of human communication<sup>36</sup> may make accurate over-arching models as complex as the activity itself, hence not of much explanatory value. A second argument against my desire to see an integrative plan would come from the new complexity theorists,<sup>37</sup> who would argue that complex systems in nature are not built from integrative plans (hence an investigator will not be able to find one). In this view, the order observed at any given level in a complex system is seen as generated by the open-ended interaction of a limited number of rules or sub-systems that operate at the next lower level.

Regarding the issue of books of theory that give no advice, I believe that the overarching patterns presented in theoretical work would be more helpful to a world suffering greatly from miscommunication and non-communication if they were translated into possible first-person actions.

Against this hope is the consideration, suggested by Pearce's<sup>38</sup> description of interpersonal communication, that "the right thing" to do in human conversations maybe so dependent on situational contingencies, cultural practices and the participant's web of moral obligations that no amount of research or model-building will ever yield any worthwhile advice. If this were the case there still might be worthwhile conversations in which the participants helped one another sift through the complexities of their situations. And we might find guidance for our conduct in the behavior of noble persons, a pattern that is part of Aristotelian philosophy and also a wide-spread feature of traditional religion.

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<sup>35</sup>Roger Fisher, William Ury and Bruce Patton, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*, 2nd ed., (New York: Penguin Books, 1991).

<sup>36</sup>Pearce, *Interpersonal Communication*, chap. 1.

<sup>37</sup>M. Mitchell Waldrop, *Complexity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 169.

<sup>38</sup>Pearce, *Interpersonal Communication*, chap. 1.

In the face of these difficulties and with full knowledge that I will not succeed as much as I would like, in the Six Dimensions/Five Transformations model I try to give well-researched (but inevitably culture-bound) advice in the context of an over-arching (but less than complete) model. I hesitate to call the Six Dimensions/Five Transformations model a theory of human communication because it offers a facilitative description rather than a causal explanation. In the world of interpersonal communication, as in the world of biological systems in general, everything pretty much causes everything else. But given that a person both influences and is influenced, it is possible to improve one's patterns of interaction within one's social world (to some unknown degree).

My goal is to try to name the various resources and possibility dimensions that people draw upon as they converse, and to suggest some ways of "imagining the real," imagining one's own action in a way that facilitates more fruitful action. As people become more aware of the subjective resources and possibilities that are available to them, and receive encouragement to explore and experiment, I believe they could begin to have different and more fulfilling conversations.

Such a strategy of awareness, exploration and action does not explain the cause of anything, but might cause people to cause new kinds of events. (The force of this last sentence depends on my having shifted from a third-person view of events as caused by outside forces to a first-person view of people as active agents, causing at least some of the events that occur in their lives.) My goal is thus not primarily to prove a point (allowing no other conclusion) but instead to document a reasoned appeal by which I hope persuade my readers to adopt a particular perspective and to take particular kinds of actions (listening more carefully, expressing themselves more fully, etc.). Both the logical form of my presentation and the methodology of my model-building follow the general outline of rhetorical rationality, the main points of which are summarized by John Shotter as follows:

It is now beginning to be argued: (1) that science does not start with

doubt but with assent to a story or narrative (Booth, 1974<sup>39</sup>; Lyotard, 1984<sup>40</sup>) possessing a degree of rhetorical force; (2) that the social world is best seen as a continuous flux or flow of mental activity containing regions of self-reproducing order, reproduced at their boundaries, surrounded by ‘chaos’ (Giddens, 1984<sup>41</sup>; Prigogine and Stengers, 1984<sup>42</sup>); (3) that such activity can only be studied from a position of involvement ‘within’ it, instead of as an ‘outsider’ studying it as merely ‘physical’ activity (Bernstein, 1983<sup>43</sup>; Giddens, 1984<sup>44</sup>); (4) that primarily, knowledge is practical-moral knowledge, and as such does not depend upon justification or proof for its practical efficacy (Bernstein, 1983<sup>45</sup>; Rorty, 1980<sup>46</sup>); (5) that we are not in an ‘ownership’ relation to such knowledge, but we embody it as a part of who and what we are, and to try to give it up would be like trying to give up our bodies, who we ‘are’ (Giddens, 1984<sup>47</sup>) - for we are dealing just as much with matters of ontology as epistemology (Bhaskar, 1986<sup>48</sup>); and finally (6) that practical-moral knowledge is not a unified system, but constituted in large part argumentatively (Billig, 1987<sup>49</sup>), that is within traditions of argumentation structured in terms of commonplaces (or *topoi*), whose discursive formulations are ‘essentially contested’ (Gallie, 1955-56<sup>50</sup>).<sup>51</sup> [Author’s italics and references. References cited by author are reproduced in the footnotes of this page.]

Of course, each of the six points in this quote cries out to be explained and argued. In terms of the Six Dimensions/Five Transformations model, I would like to make only two brief amendments to this summary. First, concerning item (4), I would prefer to say that knowledge about human action, interaction and social meaning-making

<sup>39</sup>W. C. Booth, *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

<sup>40</sup>J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

<sup>41</sup>A. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984).

<sup>42</sup>I. Prigogine and I. Stengers, *Order Out of Chaos: Man’s New Dialogue with Nature* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984).

<sup>43</sup>R. J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983).

<sup>44</sup>Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*.

<sup>45</sup>Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*.

<sup>46</sup>R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980).

<sup>47</sup>Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*.

<sup>48</sup>R. Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science* (Leeds: Leeds Books, 1986).

<sup>49</sup>M. Billig, *Arguing and Thinking: A Rhetorical Approach to Social Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

<sup>50</sup>W. B. Gallie, “Essentially contested concepts.” *Proc. of the Aristotelian Soc.*, 56;167-98.

<sup>51</sup>John Shotter, *Conversational Realities: Creating Life Through Language*. (London: Sage, 1994).

is practical-moral. In my view, lumping all forms of human knowing together weakens the argument rather than strengthening it. And second, I would prefer to see the appeals to “ontology” and “who we are” in item (5) restated with a more process-oriented vocabulary that emphasizes how we create ourselves through ongoing streams of action and interaction. In other words, I would like to see item (5), ontology, linked more carefully to item (2), process. Otherwise, it seems to me, we easily start slipping back into exactly those essentialist (entities and substances) habits of thought from which I believe Shotter would like to liberate us.

### **2.6. The Six Dimensions/Five Transformations model is intended to be a facilitative interpretation of human communication.**

Because it grows out of the constructivist approach summarized above, the Six Dimensions model is intended to be primarily a facilitative interpretation of human communication and action and only secondarily a realistic representation. In the course of working on this study I have been inspired by the work of Thomas Kuhn to shift my emphasis from representational modeling to facilitative modeling. Representational modeling says that object or process “A” is to some high degree like model “B.” Facilitative modeling says that if you want to accomplish goal “C,” it would be helpful to look at process “A” as if it were like model “B.” (For example, if you want to win when you negotiate, think of the negotiation session as if it were ...a chess game, ...a football game, ...a meeting of two people who do not speak the same language, etc.) While representational modeling strives for the one truest picture of all, facilitative modeling is comfortable with the coexistence of various pictures, each one of which might be helpful for some particular purpose.

These two ways of modeling represent to me the “realist” and the “pragmatic” approaches to philosophy and life. It is not my purpose here to argue in the abstract that one is better than another (for a pragmatist like myself that would be fruitless; better for what?, I would ask). As John Shotter points out in *Conversational Realities*,<sup>52</sup> we live in a world in which we both make things and find things already made. The problem is,

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<sup>52</sup>Shotter, *Conversational Realities*, 70.

according to Shotter (and Marx and Sartre before him) that we often view the products of our own collective action as if they were unchangeable facts of nature. (Gender and economic roles are the most frequently given examples.) At their best, realism deals with things found, pragmatism with the making of things. In my view, since life is a mixture of both making and finding, we need both realism and pragmatism and those visions need one another. By identifying (realistically, I hope) the areas of life that are primarily of our own making, we can take responsibility for making them differently and better.

These two worlds of model-making overlap and intertwine considerably. Pragmatic models rely on a certain amount of representation to locate their action steps in relation to their subject matters (although from one specific angle, only) and representational models (a topographical map of a mountain range, for example) are often made with the express purpose of facilitating action (hiking or mining). But the crucial difference is that a pragmatic model is acknowledged to be only one of many possible ways to organize information about a given subject matter. The goal Six Dimensions, as a primarily pragmatic model, is to organize information about communication, awareness and action (the realistic part) into patterns of coherence that make it easier for people to imagine talking and listening to one another in new and more fruitful ways (the pragmatic part).