The Banathy Conversation Methodology

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> **Context** • Thirty years ago, members of the systems science community discovered that at their conferences, more was being accomplished in the breaks than in the sessions. Led by Bela H. Banathy, they cancelled the sessions and created a conversation methodology that has proven far more effective. Dozens of conversations have now been held around the world. > **Problem** • At a recent conversation in Linz, Austria, a team devoted its inquiry to the Banathy Conversation Methodology (BCM) itself, asking, in particular, how to develop and spread the methodology further, beyond the systems science community. > **Method** • The team captured key features and benefits of BCM and developed new tools. > **Results** • Described herein are the development of the methodology, its theoretical underpinnings, the methodology itself, heuristics for successful conversations, and an example of how the methodology is spreading. > **Implications** • Ultimately, the hope is to develop the methodology in such ways that communities could apply it to meet significant challenges and co-create their futures. > **Key words** • Conversation, dialogue, guided evolution, social systems design.

Introduction

« 1 » In the late 1970s, members of the systems science community grew increasingly dissatisfied with the typical conference format, in which selected speakers were granted blocks of time to deliver pre-written presentations and the opportunities for exchanging thoughts were limited to brief questions and responses, if time allowed. This sort of hierarchical distribution of knowledge was leading to neither widespread understanding nor new ideas, and certainly not to answers to complex problems that they felt systems inquiry could help solve. The group came to the hard realization that more was being accomplished in the breaks between sessions than in the sessions themselves. Led by Bela H. Banathy, they decided to create an alternative format, essentially cancelling the sessions and staying on break. Following C. West Churchman's (1982) suggestion, they chose "conversation" as the name for this form of gathering, and they saw it as an opportunity to "more fully harness the collective potential of groups."[1]

« 2 » The first conversation was held in Fuschl am See, Austria, in April 1982.[2] A group of scholars from international systems societies, based in three continents and representing 10 different cultures, gathered in this small village just outside of Salzburg for one week. The overarching question they asked was, "How can we use the insights from systems inquiry for the advancement of the human condition?" (Banathy 2008: 26).

« 3 » The event was a great success, and officers of the International Federation of Systems Research (IFSR) who were present took a proposal to their board requesting funding for future conversations. This was approved, and the "Fuschl Conversation" was born.

« 4 » Since 1982, there have been over thirty conversations, including 10 biennual conversations in Austria (in Fuschl for many years; more recently in Linz), 12 annual conversations at Asilomar State Park in Pacific Grove, California (sponsored by the International Systems Institute), three conversations in Spain, two in Crete, and conversations in England, Finland, Greece, Hungary, and Argentina. The Fuschl/Linz and Asilomar conversations have served essentially as centers from which participants have diffused the method to their countries.

« 5 » The early Fuschl conversations set the pattern that would be followed and further developed. Around 30 to 50 participants prepared input papers to share initial ideas and learning resources with one another, self-organized into teams of 6 to 10 members to explore significant social / societal issues, engaged in intense face-to-face dialogue without agenda for the week, and prepared post reports and reflections. Specifics have continually evolved, and a Guidebook for conversations methodology has recently been written.[3] The hope is that the Guidebook will assist members of the systems community in bringing the methodology to others.

« 6 » In this article, we will offer a brief summary of theoretical underpinnings, and some major steps in Banathy's thinking that served to shape the methodology over time. Then we will describe the methodology in

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1| From "The ISI story," by Tad Frantz, 1995. Available at http://www.systemsinstitute.com/about-2/the-isi-story

2| See "Fuschl: 20 years of history," IFSR Newsletter 20(1), available at http://www.ifsr.org/index.php/tag/fuschl-conversation/

3| Cf. *Draft Guide for Designing and Sustaining Effective Conversation* by Gordon Dyer, unpublished manuscript 2014.

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its current form, its key features and benefits, and some tools and techniques that have been developed. We will conclude with reflections on what our experiences indicate makes a conversation more successful, and an example of how the methodology is spreading.

Theoretical underpinnings

« 7 » The Banathy Conversation Methodology (BCM) has intellectual roots in many diverse fields, in particular: social constructivism, embodied cognitive science, information theory, soft systems thinking, intercultural communication, guided evolution, and social systems design. Each of these fields has a rich history, with multiple contributing scientists, philosophers, and educators. We mention just one or two key concepts per field that have exercised direct influence on – or at minimum served as an intellectual backdrop to – the development of the BCM.

Social constructivism

« 8 » A foundation of the BCM is the view that participants construct knowledge through their individual interpretations of experience and through social interaction. Each participant is assumed to be unique and complex, and to make personal meaning through an active sensemaking process (e.g., Vygotsky 1980). The particular form of social interaction that is sought within the BCM is David Bohm's conception of dialogue (Nichol 1996), while the term "conversation" is used to connote the art of "turning to one another," for example, in the tradition of telling stories around a campfire (Banathy 1996).

Embodied cognitive science

« 9 » Typical cognitive theories conceive of cognition as working like a computer, with clear differences between the computational apparatus and the information that flows through it. Truth and information are treated as objective realities apart from the organism that perceives them. In contrast, embodied cognitive science views human cognitive structures as intimately intertwined with the structures of our bodies and, in turn, with our bodies' ongoing interactions with the environment. Information is defined in less

computational terms; rather it is "a difference that makes a difference" (Bateson 1972). And from an ethical perspective, the operational workings of the brain are independent of the realm of judgments of "good" versus "bad." Instead, we and other living organisms are driven to maintain "structural coupling" with the environment in a way that supports our viability (Maturana & Varela 1992).

« 10 » In this view, we humans continuously create and update our internal realities as we move through time and space. Dialogue, the central communicative process of BCM, can thus be seen as a tool for the co-creation of meaning among participants, rather than as a battle to establish which participant has the handle on some outside, objective truth.

Information theory

« 11 » Two useful concepts from the early days of information theory are noise (i.e., something in the communication channel that is not part of the intended signal itself) and equivocation (i.e., signal loss) in a communication channel (Dretske 1981). These concepts highlight the importance of designing a dialogue environment that minimizes environmental noise and equivocation. They can also be usefully viewed metaphorically. For example, "noise" can be viewed as the potentially-disruptive influence generated by unearthed assumptions, failure to recognize conflicting cultural values, differing personality styles, and even mood or the weather.

Intercultural communication

« 12 » One key dimension from the many along which participants can differ is that of cultural background. Culture can be viewed as something that is largely regional, ethnic, and / or religious in nature. But it can also refer to other factors that bind us or set us apart from each other, such as shared industrial / work backgrounds, hobbies and interests, or levels of exposure to high technology. Thus, culture is never a monolithic set of attributes. Rather, each of us is likely influenced by several cultural layers. Cultures define the "norms, customs, values, dimensions, and rules by which their members live" (Bronislaw Malinowsky as cited in Jones 2012: 59).

« 13 » Stella Ting-Toomey (1999) identified five verbal communication dimensions

that vary by culture: low- versus high-context communication, direct versus indirect verbal interaction, person-oriented versus status-oriented, self-enhancement versus self-effacement, and expressing beliefs via talking versus via silence. Given the enormous number of possible combinations of these five dimensions (which themselves are not binary, but rather represent spectra), it is self-evident that cultural background plays directly into how a dialogue unfolds among participants. Hence one challenge is to try to find transcultural metaphors to sustain conversation.

« 14 » As the global problematique itself continues to evolve, including participants from very diverse cultural backgrounds in the dialogue process is essential. At the same time, cultural values continue to exert a very strong influence on how participants engage in, react to, feel about, and co-create meaning in a dialogue situation. The goal of studying cultural values in the context of dialogue should be to gain a deeper understanding of their effects on how dialogue unfolds, rather than trying to flatten, normalize, or otherwise mold participants' values toward some imagined standard or norm.

Soft systems thinking

« 15 » The field of systems thinking (and its cousin discipline, cybernetics) developed during and after the Second World War. A far-reaching field that promotes cross-disciplinary approaches to understanding, systems thinking was initially applied primarily to "hard," relatively closed (e.g., electronic and mechanical) systems. During the 1970s and 1980s, theorists such as Russell Ackoff (1974), Kenneth Boulding (1974), Peter Checkland (1981), and others began applying systems concepts to "soft," relatively open (e.g., social and ecological) systems.

« 16 » Dialogue itself can be viewed through the lens of soft systems thinking as a process. It possesses specific internal structures, exhibits distinctive behaviors through time, and operates in the context of various philosophical, social / organizational, and physical environments. This systems view of dialogue usefully moves it beyond the realm of simply being an exchange of words between two or more isolated speakers and into one that is much deeper, richer, and context-sensitive.

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Guided evolution

« 17 » After Fuschl 1982, Banathy studied societal evolutionary theory, and wrote his first major contribution, the concept of an evolutionary guidance system (Banathy 1989). This suggested a concept of some 10 dimensions of human experience that members of a designing community might wish to keep in balance as they designed their own future, for example, to ensure that their community did not become over-dependent on science and technology at the expense of other domains of human inspiration and endeavor.

« 18 » Banathy (2000) asserted that it is incumbent upon humans at the current stage of our evolution to begin to collaborate proactively in defining and creating our own futures. As our technological power continues to surpass our ability to control that power in sustainable ways, it is increasingly important that we take the reins of evolution and guide ourselves forward. In this light, effective dialogue that represents the needs and desires of all stakeholders is one of the essential tools for helping us build our evolutionary path forward. Consequently, the BCM calls for inclusion, or at a minimum, consideration, of all stakeholders' visions of a future they desire. The initial stages of a conversation would be aimed at trying to find some common ground: "Given the intimate, interdependent relationship between organism and environment, all actions should be carried out with the interests of all direct and indirect stakeholders in mind" (Banathy as cited in Jones 2012: 56).

Social systems design

« 19 » Concurrently, Banathy (1996) developed the idea of social systems design and described it as a process in which stakeholders of a new, would-be system worked together to transcend current approaches and solutions and to create something completely new. The process starts with the identification and gathering of as many direct and indirect stakeholders of the new system as possible. Those initially invited may suggest other groups who should be added as stakeholders. The process can continue until there no other groups can be identified – either who are part of the system or who are affected by the system – who should join the design group. The stakeholders then engage in a structured dialogue process (e.g., the BCM) that identifies triggering questions, develops an ideal image of the new system, and explores ways to bridge the gap between current reality and the ideal image.

« 20 » As these theories imply, the BCM is rooted in a particular set of values and beliefs as well. We (authors and others involved in the BCM's development) observe an increasing complexity of issues and rapidity of change, and a growing global interconnectedness. We seek means to transcend old patterns of thinking that are no longer well-aligned to these realities. As Banathy (2000) expressed, we seek to create out of humanity's recently gained evolutionary consciousness the ability to consciously evolve. The BCM is intended to help in that endeavor.

The methodology

« 21 » The BCM is initiated by a desire within a community to engage in a conversation about the future. Beyond that, there is considerable variation in the initial stages. Organizers may identify general goals and concerns early on. At least as often, they will assume that participants will gravitate to and co-define topics/issues over time; instead, they first work out logistics – for example, they select the site and dates, often a year or more in advance.

« 22 » One option for the next step is to issue invitations broadly and let those who respond self-organize into teams. Another is for organizers to extend initial invitations to potential team leaders, putting out a limited call for topics and brief descriptions that can subsequently be used in a broader announcement. In the case of IFSR conversations, that announcement will then go to all who belong to any of the 42 member organizations. Team leaders may recruit participants, potential participants may select a team or topic, and/or organizers may exercise guidance. The latter is common with the Fuschl conversation because of requirements of partial sponsorship by the Austrian government. Also relating to sponsorship, organizers have occasionally found that academic institutions are reluctant to fund participation when formal presentations are not involved. Steps taken in some early conversations reflected that: "conference" was sometimes retained in the title; participants were named "research fellows;" and a plenary was set aside for formal presentations by those who needed this opportunity to satisfy their institutions.

« 23 » Once teams are formed, the preparatory phase begins. Working online from a distance, team members explore the topic, share existing resources, and propose and refine triggering questions for the conversation. Members are also responsible for sharing short self-biographies and for composing brief input papers in which they articulate thoughts, views, and ideas on the team topic. Importantly, at this stage organizers and team leaders attempt to be as clear as possible about expectations for preparation, on-site processes, and full participation.

« 24 » When all have gathered, the on-site phase begins with an opening afternoon plenary. Introductions are made, and expectations and the week's schedule are reviewed. Immediately after, teams begin their work. Aside from meals, an occasional evening plenary, and an afternoon to explore the surrounding area, that work continues for the next four to five days. Community-building rituals are occasionally inserted, for example, it was important for all to gather and watch the sunset each day at Asilomar. A final morning plenary involves sharing insights gained by each team, and a reminder of expectations for follow-up.

« 25 » In the follow-up phase, teams are responsible for preparing executive summaries and full reports of their achievements. To the extent possible, these include answers to the triggering questions posed at the outset, as well as action plans. However, just as often they include insights and directions that were not foreseen. Where those insights are more individual, participants may append brief statements to their team's full report. Proceedings are prepared, but with the explicit desire for the teams to share their work more broadly, for example, to publish a version of their report in a scholarly journal.

« 26 » Where the BCM is most sophisticated, of course, is the on-site phase. Below, we describe how the on-site team work is initiated and sustained, and some helpful rules and roles that have been developed.

Getting underway

« 27 » Setting the stage at the opening plenary, organizers remind everyone that we define an effective conversation as one in which the interaction between participants throughout maximizes the potential for creative synergy. The process for achieving this is quite different from typical interactions where:

❝we fight for the floor, insert ourselves in momentary silence, and attempt to convince each other of right (me) and wrong (you) … [which] discourages listening and meaningful collaboration, the very things necessary for us to create [a future] together.❞4

Instead, the conversation is portrayed as

❝the antithesis of debate in that it is not based on adversarial premises and does not polarise people. Participants realise that the winning of arguments is not the issue. It opens the discussion rather than channeling it into something that may be difficult to get out of. It enables 'change of mind' to occur, without fanfare or fuss. It is the foundation of community building.❞ (Alan Stewart 1999, personal communication)

As an illustration, a simple heuristic we apply is to ask, "what do you mean?" rather than state, "no, you're wrong."

Catalyzing teamwork

« 28 » Immediately after the opening plenary, the teams separate to private locations and begin their conversation work. The team leader may act as a facilitator, but the team as a whole determines direction, agrees on process, selects tools and techniques, and so on. Likewise, an individual may take responsibility for notetaking and / or capturing key points (e.g., on a flipchart), or this responsibility may be distributed. Prior to breaks and meals, teams frequently step back to reflect on their progress and to consider adjustments in process.

« 29 » We find a metaphor useful here in appreciating and enhancing the experience as participants, and in describing it

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4 | From "Guiding our evolution," by Bela Banathy and Gordon Rowland, 2004. Available at http://www.scribd.com/doc/18384645/Guiding-Our-Evolution-If-we-don-t-do-it-who-will

to others. Interactions between chemical compounds take place more easily in the presence of a so-called catalyst. A catalyst reduces the activation energy required to break existing bonds between atoms, allowing new bonds to form and at the same time releasing sufficient energy for the reaction to continue. The same principle applies to human interaction and conversation. New temporary bonds can form within the team and provide the energy for joint creativity. Examples of catalysts for stimulating conversation include the input papers circulated in the preparatory phase and the triggering questions and ideas that emerge from careful reading and listening. The internal and external environments are also important. The team needs to create a safe environment for sharing and accepting one another's thoughts and views, one of mutual respect rather than posturing and competition. And the external environment can serve as a source of inspiration, hence the purposeful selection of idyllic settings such as Fuschl and Asilomar. With all these pieces in place, high energy and enthusiasm are nearly inevitable.

Sustaining conversation

« 30 » The metaphor of a chemical reaction continues to be useful as the conversation proceeds. For example, just as a fire can be built in stages from small twigs to large logs, the energy states of the team can build over time. Dyer (2007) describes this with the thermo-chemical term "enthalpy," and points out that the reverse is true as well. The notion of a reverse chemical reaction, which is associated with using energy to break bonds that have just been formed, alerts us to the dangers within teams when relationships break down. Energy is then expended to break bonds at the expense of that available for joint creativity. These conditions are most likely to happen if any member of a conversation team feels that he or she is not being given adequate opportunity to contribute, or when freedoms of expression, action, or participation are being impaired. Thus team leaders and participants need to offer alternative catalysts as conversation changes direction, and to remain alert to the energy level and the temperature of the team. Over-reaction is possible, of course, and more often than

not, more is gained through perseverance than through quick closure.

« 31 » Here it is important to check in with each other and not misunderstand non-verbal communication. In particular, silence can mean different things. It might mean disengagement, or it might mean that one simply needs time to reflect on what was just heard. Either might be a response to a mismatch of learning style, which points toward a delicate balance that needs to be achieved in terms of pre-structure. Too little structure can reduce efficiency and frustrate those who are more results-oriented; too much can reduce adaptability and thus effectiveness.

Defining and observing conversation rules

« 32 » We have found it helpful to agree to a simple set of rules for dialogue at the outset of team conversations. Examples based on the Western assumption of equality include:

- display tolerance, patience, and consideration to others;
- honor and respect each other;
- listen to others, attempt to understand the point of view being expressed, reflect, and respond;
- do not dominate;
- do not offend;
- avoid losing control of one's feelings;
- view all ideas as contributions to the group for consideration, accepting that not all ideas will be used;
- allow free exchange and public ownership of ideas;
- allow equal opportunity to participate;
- stand for what one believes in;
- allow equal opportunity, but take responsibility for actions and decisions.

Some of these might not apply in all cultures. For example, in Japan, strict protocols regarding contributions might be observed (Horiuchi 2008).

Defining roles of guardianship

« 33 » We have also found that it can help to define "guardian" or "guarantor" roles in which team members serve. Individuals might monitor and remind others to maintain focus on such things as:

- the selected theme;
- an opportunity for equal participation;

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- honoring diversity and every contribution made;
- developing team rules and spirit;
- establishing common ground;
- being open to emerging / new ideas;
- shared leadership and other roles.

Meeting in plenary

« 34 » Our experience is that being a member of a conversation team over a four- to five-day period will usually lead to intense bonding and thus, possibly over-separation from the whole group. Plenary sessions, and where desired and not disruptive, observation of other teams, help to maintain a larger community and to foster cross-fertilization of ideas among the teams. For a five-day Conversation, plenaries on the evenings of day 2 and day 4, and team presentations on the morning of day 5, seem to provide the right balance in the use of time.

Key features and benefits of the BCM

« 35 » The BCM offers many features and benefits to individuals and organizations, and the environments in which they operate. At a recent conversation in Linz, Austria (April 2014), our group (four authors plus Yoshi Horiuchi and Yoshi Oh-kami from Japan) generated the following lists:

Features

« 36 » The BCM:
- Gathers important stakeholders into the same physical or virtual space, with a format to air different perspectives on the issues, define problems, and create solutions.
- Serves to identify and reveal tacit assumptions among participants, which can help avoid communication breakdown. Rather than quickly disagreeing, participants develop skill in asking each other to "unpack" or clarify statements.
- Asks questions that affect all direct stakeholders within a given problem context. It can expand boundaries of the problem that stakeholders define at the beginning.
- Does not require special academic degrees, elevated social status, or special

training. An attempt is made to include a wide range of stakeholders and to consciously watch for and counter privilege.
- Is a future-oriented inquiry that considers the problem and solution set not only now, but in terms of how it could affect future situations and scenarios. This orientation is often symbolized by an empty chair in the circle for future generations.
- Yields deeper insights than other problem-solving methods because it allows for the definition of the problem or problem set itself to evolve as the dialogue evolves. This bias to delay commitment to a particular problem definition essentially infuses a characteristic of expert problem-solving behavior in a not-necessarily-expert group.
- Applies a systems approach to dialogue and problem-solving – not only, or even necessarily, a *systematic* process, but careful concern for the larger *systemic* context.
- Is designed to tackle the intractable problems that might otherwise be hopeless; for example, by revealing root causes and potential points of leverage.
- Encourages problems to be defined and explored by all stakeholders collectively. The BCM aims for win-win-win solutions; it is a conversation not a negotiation.
- Allows all participants to feel, often for the first time, heard and validated.
- Allows participants to agree to disagree after surfacing the underlying assumptions of positions.
- Can have positive personal effects on individual participants, beyond solving the issues at hand. Frequently, participants gain insights that are useful in their personal interest areas and settings.
- Is applicable not only to academic questions, but also to a wider range of questions and highly complex issues in business and society.
- Effectively utilizes the creative capacity of the team and the team members. For example, triggering questions typically ask for potential resolution(s) in addition to understanding of an issue. Participants thus engage not only in

research but in designing – in solution attempts through which problems are better understood.
- Allows one or more participants to participate off-site via Skype and related technologies.
- Attempts to transcend inherent power differentials among stakeholders and to counter privilege, for example, through guarantor roles. All participants are encouraged to make their voices heard and be part of the solution.
- Offers a structured methodology for re-framing the problems / questions / issues. Pre-formed problem definitions are examined critically, with an eye toward the perspectives they represent and the multiple alternative interpretations that are possible.
- Can generate written knowledge – in a textual or graphical form – that can be leveraged later for short- and long-term solutions.
- Draws upon three decades of practice and theory and a rich body of knowledge from, across, and beyond the disciplines and backgrounds of participants. This knowledge is especially useful when the group finds itself at what seem to be dead ends.
- Can incorporate a moderator to help the event run smoothly, for example, to facilitate movement, ensure all stakeholders are participating, and ensure that observations and findings are recorded for future reference.

Benefits

« 37 » The BCM:
- Fosters collective intelligence. Rich communication and deep relationships lead to a group capacity for understanding and responding to new and difficult situations that exceeds that of individuals.
- Takes a global view of root causes. The multiple perspectives of team members offer different views of causal and other relationships.
- Produces solutions across institutions. Ideally all key stakeholders are included.
- Exposes interconnectedness of the issues the group faces. Based on their unique backgrounds and perspectives of issues, team members share different

Figure 1 • Symbols for three question types: open-ended, closed, and leading to further, hopefully more powerful questions.
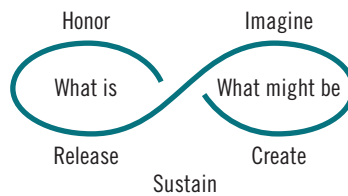

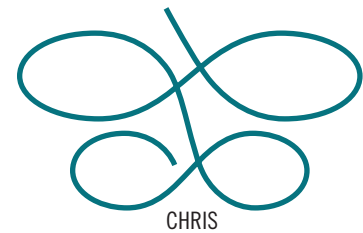Figure 2 • The CHRIS model of planned change.

Figure 3 • The CHRIS model sustained.

networks of actual and potential relationships, and the teams explore intersections.

- Promotes stakeholders' taking ownership of problems and solutions. Ownership is increased through meaningful participation in defining/framing the issue and designing the ways that it may be resolved.
- Can yield synergistic, unexpected solutions. If done well, the BCM does not result in groupthink around a sub-optimal solution; rather, team members' ideas are built upon as stepping stones to new and more powerful solutions.
- Deals head-on with the common challenges that stakeholders face. For example, the BCM promotes mutual agreement at the outset on how typical barriers will be overcome, and conscious attention to process throughout. This helps teams anticipate, recognize, and counter situations that could halt progress.
- Generates "locally-grown solutions created by locals." With community member participation, compatibility of ideas with the local culture is quickly determined.
- Allows for the capture of emergent knowledge that can be referenced in the future. Formal reporting processes are used for insights into the issue and into the methodology.
- Offers the potential for high-profile case studies, especially for organizational participants.

Tools and techniques

« 38 » A number of intellectual tools and techniques have been developed over the years, for example, the construction and critique of powerful triggering questions, the use of guarantor roles to insure productive participation, and the metaphors such as fire-starting and enthalpy described above.

« 39 » At the recent Linz conversation, our group developed and tested a few new tools and techniques. One such was a shared note-taking method that had been developed at a previous Fuschl conversation. This involved simply placing a flipchart page on the table between us and each of us capturing notes ourselves – at whatever physical angle the page was oriented – rather than leaving note taking to a facilitator. This had the interesting result of maintaining individual authenticity in the notes; they were not a facilitator's interpretation. We photographed the pages at the conclusion of the conversation and the photos serve as a lasting record of individual and collective contributions.

« 40 » We also explored language and symbols. In the case of symbols, we found that as we considered the phases and the experience of the week, we benefited from distinguishing different types of questions (Figure 1). Some were purposely open-ended, and were best left as such for contemplation over time. Others were more closed and intended to be answered in the short term. A third type were questions that led to further, hopefully more powerful questions. Recalling a symbol that had been created years ago and called the "quemma" (Rowland 1999), we found that three variations of the question mark could be used to distinguish these;

at the bottom of the question mark could be an empty circle, a full circle, or a comma.

« 41 » We saw that as answers were sought and circumstances changed, the question type might change as well. In particular, an open question could become closed as the group moved from long-term contemplation to short-term answers, symbolized by filling in the circle, and new questions might be generated by the inquiry, symbolized by turning the filled circle into a comma. We extended this "question algebra" to include a range of symbols – more than a dozen possibilities – and a colleague, Tony Keane, has since turned them into a font useable within Microsoft Word. We will experiment with these in future conversations, for example, in clarifying movement between generative and strategic dialogue (Laszlo & Laszlo 2005).

« 42 » A third intellectual tool we explored was the notion of "over-the-edge thinking" (Rowland 2013), an alternative to "thinking outside the box," thought to reflect better the perspectival change and relationships among ideas that are more typical in innovation. We combined this notion with the question algebra, for example, recognizing that the quemma seen from the top or side would look like a line or an exclamation point, respectively.

« 43 » A fourth tool that we found interesting was the CHRIS (create, honor, release, imagine, sustain) model of planned change[5] (Rowland 2012; see Figure 2). The CHRIS model is a heuristic emphasizing some aspects of a planned change effort that are frequently not given enough attention.

5 | Gordon Rowland "CHRIS model of planned change," unpublished manuscript, 2012.

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It calls for honoring the good in situations, which allows us to release the connections that prevent movement away from the status quo, which gives us greater ability to imagine new possibilities, then to create by bringing a selected possibility into existence. The cycle, essentially a shift of attention back and forth between *what is* (honor and release) and *what might be* (imagine and create) is sustained, as illustrated in Figure 3.

« 44 » The fifth and most substantial tool we used was Gordon Dyer's "Draft Guide for Designing and Sustaining Effective Conversation" (see Footnote 3) along with its "Addendum for Team Leaders."[6] Prior to the week, team members reviewed and commented on the Guide. Their positive impressions led to the Guide being circulated to other teams and their leaders. The Guide is now a significant resource for the systems science community as well as others who wish to apply or adapt the conversation methodology.

Heuristics for successful conversations

« 45 » From our own participation in many conversations, we have learned that there are some ways in which conversations can be derailed. Countering these will not guarantee an especially powerful conversation but will improve the chances of a successful one. Below are some proactive techniques we have found to be useful. We will introduce each with a brief story.

« 46 » *Jed Jones*: I recall an experience in Asilomar in 2002. I was involved with a group in which one individual clearly had her own, predefined agenda. The person seemed intentionally to be derailing any progress the other members seemed to be making in what otherwise seemed to be a very productive, exciting dialogue. As a participant observing this, I perceived the actions of this team member to feel almost violent in nature. Of course, it was nothing of the sort in terms of seriousness, but it felt very frustrating, nonetheless. This sense on my part no doubt had more to do with my perceptive apparatus rather than what the person may have been intending.

6 | Unpublished manuscript 2014.

« 47 » The dynamic in play felt obvious and blatant to me and, I believed, to other members of the team. In that situation, one instinctively wants to leverage the cooperation of other participants in order to call the person out on his or her agenda and / or remove him or her from the team. However, it is also important to speak one's truth, rather than relying on others. In addition, confronting a difficult person as group can feel like "ganging up," which also needs to be avoided.

« 48 » In this instance, we resolved the situation by calling for an afternoon break whereby we were to split up for an hour to collect our thoughts. I utilized this time to explore my own emotions that were in play. Something in me was being triggered by this person's actions, and I resented the effect that I let this person have on me. After an hour walking on the sands of the beach in the California sun, I felt much better. Upon returning to the meeting room an hour later, we found that this person was no longer present. The individual joined the group again the next day, but the person's manner felt more harmonious. The rest of the group, at that point, seemed to feel comfortable with resuming the previous day's work.

« 49 » From this and similar experiences, we have learned that *setting clear expectations beforehand is critical*. Participants need to know that what they offer prior to and at the outset of the event is like paper and kindling that help start the fire. If it is held on to tightly during the conversation, the fire can neither start nor be sustained. Rather, by letting personal agendas and inputs go, the potential for individual and team learning will increase dramatically. A related heuristic is to *insist on full participation*. Late-arriving participants, particularly if they come without prior experience with the BCM, can easily derail the process. This story illustrates, also, how *breaks can be very helpful*.

« 50 » *Gordon Dyer*: My first conversation experience in 1991 was, to say the least, a revelation. With a military and management background, my prior perception was that best results from "meetings" were obtained through an organized structure for discussion, with a clear purpose. However, there was I, in an unfamiliar albeit beautiful environment, with new people who rep-

resented several different backgrounds and nationalities. We had each been attracted by an open question on how to use systems thinking to create a better future, and had suggested tentative questions (triggers) for where we might start. But we were to embark on five days' conversation on a topic that had not been clarified. There was no agenda. These were early days in conversation and only two of the eight participants had previous experience. The team had what we now call "wheel spin" before we agreed to a trigger as a direction to explore. Most paths we explored were related to education and many ran onto difficult ground, where a lot more thought was required. I was disturbed on day 3 when I learned that a formal report from the team would be required on progress. What progress, I thought, had been made? My challenge was to suppress a natural response of wanting to drive agenda and outcome, and to enjoy and learn from the rest of the conversation process. My personal learning was huge. I now avoid conferences. What I learned was that *keeping an open mind, even to goals, and trusting in the process increases potential*.

« 51 » *Silvia Zweifel*: Once, working on the subject of an overarching theme, at the end of the second day of a five-day conversation, the group had to share its advancements with others in a plenary session. We had explored many aspects of the chosen triggering question but did not arrive at something we considered valuable. One of us was very upset about the poor outcome. Tension was palpable in the group as we attempted to agree on what and how to share at the plenary. Following the plenary, however, our group began with new energy, ideas, and understanding. It was clear that all of the groups, not just our own, were still in a divergence stage. The questions received and posed to others, difficulties of issues, similarities, interconnections, and so on provided fresh air. It helps to know that *the conversation process has an important divergence phase* at the beginning before a convergence phase matures. *Plenaries help to endure the tension over time and to enrich learning*.

« 52 » *Gordon Dyer*: Experience shows that, because of the deeper and more extensive exploration of topics with others, a conversation can have unexpected outcomes. It

will almost certainly lead to personal change and highlight new directions for individual and joint activity, and research. In my case, conversation experiences led to two major themes in research and publications. The first theme arose after contact at the Asilomar 1994 conversation with the work of Gifford and Elizabeth Pinchot, who proposed the idea of a Bill of Rights and Responsibilities and Declaration of Interdependence in the context of the workplace, and in what they call the "intelligent organization" (Pinchot & Pinchot 1993). I mapped these two concepts to conversation and to the idea of an "intelligent social system" (Dyer 1995). Another example of mapping between disciplines that arose from conversation, occurred as a result of Rowland's suggestion at Fuschl 1994 that starting and sustaining conversation was similar to the actions in lighting and maintaining a fire (Rowland 1996). This led to the investigation of the metaphor of enthalpy (Dyer 2007). The lesson from these examples is that if you participate in a conversation *be prepared to be surprised, to change, and to find new inspiration and avenues for your efforts.*

« 53 » *Gordon Rowland*: The fire-starting metaphor that Dyer refers to above originated in Fuschl. Our team was meeting in the second floor landing of a small hotel on a picturesque lake at the base of a mountain. Through a large picture window, we had a magnificent view of the mountain and all the snow from a late-season storm that had us locked in for the week. We sat by a fireplace, but the chimney was blocked so we could not light a fire. The fireplace without fire came to symbolize our struggle to get our conversation flowing. Frustrated, we took a break and found ourselves standing at the window looking up the mountain. At that very moment, a tree fell from the weight of the snow directly toward us, landing only feet from the window. We jumped back in shock, then released all the tension we had built up in great collective laughter. The tree proved to be a gift to us (and several pine cones we gathered from it have been special gifts to each other over the years since). We realized that we simply needed to *relax and let the flow come* to us rather than force it. Similar experiences over the years have repeatedly demonstrated the *power of metaphor* and the fact that *place matters.*

Future directions

« 54 » The BCM is slowly spreading internationally as participants bring it to their own communities and organizations. As one example, participant's enthusiastic sharing of their experiences at IFSR conversations in Austria over the years have kindled the aspiration to start a Latin American version. A few years ago, a small group committed itself to involving the authorities of the Universidad Nacional de la Patagonia San Juan Bosco, a national university, to host the "Conversaciones del Extremo Sur" in Ushuaia, the most Southern city of the world.

« 55 » The first edition took place in March 2012. The group of 16 participants, organized in four teams, engaged in exploring different aspects of the overarching theme of "transdisciplinarity." They conversed intensely, acknowledging their different perspectives on the subject, getting to know each other, and building relationships. Each day, they began to fuel the process at breakfast encounters only to finish past midnight by sharing again, seated in the hotel in front of the big windows onto the surrounding forests and mountains.

« 56 » *Moving* and *nurturing* are significant words that describe the process: moving from the hotel in the high area of the city to the university building in front of the Beagle Channel, going for a walk, visiting a place of special interest, staying in silence alone or in the company of colleagues, expressing one's viewpoints, sharing experiences, aspirations, and difficulties related to the subject, or professional and even personal issues.

« 57 » The second edition took place a year later, with more than 30 participants from Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, and the USA, this time hosted by the Universidad Nacional de Tierra del Fuego, a recently created university. They again explored the subject: "Transdisciplinarity: Across disciplines and generations." The results were most enriching. A few months later, the group succeeded in publishing its proceedings (Herrscher & Barrera 2014) and began to organize the next edition, with a more concrete subject: "Aspects of a regional plan."

« 58 » Work in South America also points toward the possibility of shorter conversations, perhaps among people from all walks of life interested in a sustainable soci-

ety and flourishing culture. Toward this end, the Economía Amable Group plans a traveling exhibition of a future scenario called "The World of Navis Utopia." The scenario is essentially a work of art that points out that the seeds of a desirable future already exist. It is intended to enliven brief conversations, in which people share ideas and experiences, and to help move from a dialogue among experts – no matter if they are academics, artists, philosophers, or practitioners – to the interaction of all people. The approach, like the BCM, intends to familiarize participants with dialogical – non-argumentative – modalities and encourage participatory consciousness: an attitude of profound openness and receptivity.

« 59 » As the BCM spreads internationally, and beyond the community of systems science scholars, cultural adaptation becomes increasingly important. One focus of our work in this area is the concept of transcultural metaphor (see *Draft Guide for Designing and Sustaining Effective Conversation*, Footnote 3). Conversation largely takes place through sharing and offering metaphor, which reflects the basis of understanding, beliefs, and values that the participants hold. This accords with Dik Gregory's view of Pask's Conversation Theory as being:

66 nothing more – and nothing less – than the attempt to model the way in which we manipulate our metaphorical systems to construct shared meaning and thereby, come to agree with one another over what we understand. 99 (Gregory 1993: 70)

To sustain a conversation, therefore, it is vital that metaphors that are shared are culturally and linguistically appropriate, and also possess structure, depth, and richness with an appropriate degree of familiarity for the intended purpose. And so, we seek to identify and / or design transcultural metaphors that would contribute to the BCM.

Conclusion

« 60 » The Banathy Conversation Methodology (BCM) emerged in the systems community as an alternative to the typical conference format. The initial aim, in 1982, was to develop and apply insights from sys-

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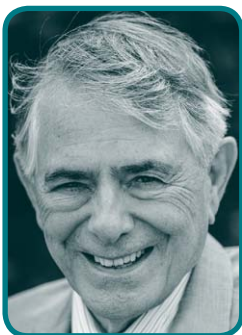
GORDON DYER

had his first career in the RAF. He joined the Systems Group at the Open University in 1978, contributing as an author, course team chair, and exam board chair of the systems modeling course. He was a member of several other course teams. Though formally retired, he continues to add to his publications of book chapters and some 25 articles in 10 different academic journals.

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tems inquiry to advance the human condition, or as Banathy hoped, to create from humanity's recently gained evolutionary consciousness the ability to consciously evolve. It developed to promote a technique for social system design, and it has continually evolved to serve mutual understanding, spread new ideas, create knowledge, and better address complex issues.

« 61 » The BCM implies an extended process that moves from unstructured to structured, from generative, non-goal-oriented dialogue to strategic, task-oriented dialogue. In its typical form, the methodology begins with a preparatory phase in which participants explore and articulate individual insights regarding the chosen theme, and begin to collaborate via media. They begin to formulate triggering questions to which they will seek to respond. Gathering in person at the event, teams spend long hours engaged in dialogue, separated occasionally by plenary meetings. Following the event, teams construct written reports that summarize their collective insights, which include at least preliminary responses to the triggering questions.

« 62 » The general character allows the methodology to be adapted to a variety of specific purposes in different contexts – from a demanding context where plurality of views from a variety of stakeholders and major transcultural issues need to be faced to one where a deeper understanding of a relatively bounded issue is required. To encourage diffusion, we have described theoretical underpinnings, details of process, key features and benefits, recent work on tools and techniques, heuristics for successful conversations, and potential future directions.

Open Peer Commentaries

on Gordon Dyer et al.'s "The Banathy Conversation Methodology"

Reflecting on the Impact of the Banathy Conversation Methodology in My Professional Practice

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> Upshot • Banathy's Conversation Methodology and the conversation events where it was developed and practiced had a profound effect on my role as a scholar-practitioner. In this commentary, I reflect on the impact of the BCM in my professional practice as an educator, facilitator, and consultant within the field of social innovation, where participatory processes for eliciting the wisdom of the group are essential.

« 1 » The target article "The Banathy Conversation Methodology," authored by my colleagues Gordon Dyer, Jed Jones, Gordon Rowland, and Silvia Zweifel, is a valuable contribution to honoring, clarifying, and enabling the evolution of Banathy's work within and beyond the systems science community. As a past participant in several Fuschl and Asilomar conversations, my experience with the Banathy Conversation Methodology (BCM) is consistent with the authors' description. I also had the privilege of having Banathy as my academic mentor during my doctoral studies at Saybrook University, and consider my work a continuation of his legacy.

« 2 » I found the article insightful and helpful in making explicit the theoretical and philosophical foundations of the BCM as well as in providing historical context. Another value dimension of the article is the articulation of the rules, guidelines, structures, and processes that integrate the practice of the BCM. Banathy made many significant contributions to the theory and practice of systems thinking. His social systems design methodology (Banathy 1996), his evolutionary systems perspective for understanding cultural evolution and guiding ethical human agency (Banathy 2000), and his emphasis on conversation as a form of inquiry (Banathy & Jenlink 2005; Jenlink & Banathy 2008) are among the contributions that had the greatest impact on my own learning and development.

« 3 » My first experience with his conversational approach was at the Asilomar conversation sponsored by his International Systems Institute (ISI) in 1993. I was a young master's student at the time, traveling from Mexico to California to attend the event, and the experience changed the direction of my professional and personal life. Banathy had recently published his book *Systems Design of Education: A Journey to Create the Future* (Banathy 1991) and the Asilomar conversation was an embodied experience of his radically systemic, participatory, and empowering view of education. I never met an elder as wise and humble as Bela, completely committed to empowering others to shape their future.

« 4 » The way I remember Bela describing the format of this "conference" was "a week-long coffee break." As the authors point out, Banathy became aware that the most productive time of traditional conferences was in between more traditional paper presentation sessions. It makes sense from a systems perspective: conversation is a relational process in which two or more individuals get to share perspectives and construct meaning together. Conversation is an open, evolving system, in which learning is amplified through positive feedback loops and synergy.

« 5 » As a member of the international community of systems scholars, I am puzzled about why it is taking so long for academic and professional conferences to embrace conversation fully as their primary mode of inquiry. The good news is that along with the BCM, there are other compatible and similar approaches to "more fully harness the collective potential of groups," as Tad Frantz is quoted in the article. World Café (Brown 2005) and Open Space Technology (Owen 2008) are two examples of methodologies within the Art of Hosting practice, http://www.artofhosting.org, which continues to grow and facilitate participatory and collaborative processes to harness the collective wisdom of diverse groups. The rules of conversation and guardianship roles delineated by the authors are consistent with the guidelines of these methodologies that seek to elicit democratic participation.

« 6 » I recall Banathy's frustration and bewilderment at why people would travel great distances to attend academic conferences to listen to papers they will be able to read later. In his view, research papers were an important aspect of the preparation process for the conversation, as the authors explain. Banathy distinguished between maintenance and evolutionary learning. Maintenance learning is focused on acquiring past (already documented) knowledge, which has been the focus of most of education and traditional conferences. Through maintenance learning…

" we are promoting already established ways of working in systems that now exist. Maintenance

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learning is indispensable for the functioning of a society, but it is far from being enough in times of turbulence, rapid change, discontinuity, and massive transformations – characteristics of our current era." (Banathy 1996: 318)

Evolutionary learning, in contrast, is focused on creating knowledge from the emerging insights of participants engaged in conversation. Evolutionary learning is…

"innovative learning [through which] we become open to examining and changing our purposes and perspectives, transcending our existing state, and redefining and re-creating our systems […] We seek to think and act systemically to seek and understand integrated relationships, grasp the patterns that connect, and recognize the embeddedness and interdependence of emergence in systems." (ibid: 318f)

BCM is an approach for evolutionary learning focused on designing new possibilities, consistent with the recognition that the complexity of the issues that we need to address require active inquiry and innovation. From an ecological perspective, the carbon footprint and other environmental impacts of organizing international meetings is not insignificant. The cost and investment in traveling to participate in a conference is better justified if new knowledge and authentic relationships will be actively created in the event. Technology is already facilitating the dissemination of knowledge via the Internet and giving access regardless of geographic location in effective presentations such as TED talks. Existing knowledge is only a Google search or YouTube video away. I hope that approaches such as the BCM will become the preferred format for intellectual and professional gatherings that bring people together.

« 7 » The BCM is a comprehensive process for transforming a scholarly conference into a conversation event. As the authors effectively describe, it is a process that starts before the actual event and continues afterwards as a full cycle of inquiry for the teams. While traditional conferences focus on reporting the results of previous research, the BCM is an approach to bring together scholars and practitioners to collaborate in research and produce knowledge through the conversation event.

« 8 » At the same time, the BCM is a process that democratizes knowledge creation because it seeks the inclusion of diverse stakeholders. Since Banathy's work was focused on social systems design, the ethos of his conversation methodology includes a valuing of diversity of voices and perspectives. Expertise comes not from formal training and academic degrees, but from personal experience as a stakeholder in the issue explored.

« 9 » The authors point out that Banathy selected idyllic places for his conversation events, which provided inspiration for the work and a safe environment for the development of trust and mutual respect. In my view, the places where the conversation events occurred had a profound effect on the experiences. Fuschl, in Austria, and Asilomar, in Pacific Grove, California, are both places of immense natural beauty. The rooms where teams engaged in collaborative inquiry were not the typical corporate conference rooms but rather comfortable and quaint gathering places, with comfortable seats and a fire place, created more for social gatherings than for professional meetings. The schedule and rhythm of the conversation process is self-determined by each research team, so access to the natural beauty of the place was integrated into the work itself: sitting outdoors, hearing the ocean, walking on the beach, watching the sunset. The conversation process was fluid and continued as we moved from our meeting room, to outside, to the dining hall, back to our meeting room, all according to the needs and desires of the group. Influenced by the deep and transformative experiences I had at these conversation events, I have continued to pay attention to the setting where I facilitate learning and design processes. My observation is that place is not only the background of the conversation, but a participant, an active contributor, an influencer of the process. Some of these insights were explored in a conversation event (that did not use Banathy's conversation methodology but followed the same spirit of self-organized co-creation) sponsored by the Breuninger Foundation. This conversation took place in Wasan Island, Ontario, Canada. Wasan Island was sacred land for the local indigenous peoples. The inquiry that brought a diverse group of artists, con-

sultants, educators, and scientists together was focused on "creative place-making: recovering the soul of place." I reported my experience in a blog about the healing power of place.[1]

« 10 » I was pleased to read in the article the recognition that the conversation experience is not always positive and fulfilling, but that conflict is always a possibility. The conversation process follows a natural cycle: a beginning, a peak, and a winding down. The peak, however, involves a high point of tension in which the group could either experience a breakdown or a breakthrough.

« 11 » Conversation requires personal capacities for collaboration. Active listening, willingness to suspend judgment and question assumptions, openness to new ideas and diverse points of view, readiness to learn and change one's mind, and willingness to let go of personal agendas in order to allow for the co-construction of new meaning are essential competencies that increase the possibility of a highly productive and rewarding conversation experience. These competencies, which are leadership capacities grounded in personal mastery, have become essential preconditions in my work. I have experienced frustration and disappointment in situations where the creative potential of a group was not achieved because of deficiency in these competencies. As a result, much of my work has been focused on what I call the embodiment of evolutionary leadership (Laszlo 2012).

« 12 » It was in a conversation event in Asilomar that my research team coined the term Evolutionary Learning Community (Group D 1995). The notion of the Evolutionary Learning Community became the main focus of my doctoral research (Laszlo 1997, 2000, 2001) and the systemic framework for my work in the field of social innovation (e.g., Laszlo 2003, 2009). Today, my practice as an educator and consultant fully integrates the lessons I learned as a student of Banathy.

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1 | "Healing places: Learning and leading for the re-enchantment of our world," available at https://www.saybrook.edu/rethinkingcomplexity/posts/06-27-12/healing-places-learning-and-leading-re-enchantment-our-world

« 13 » I genuinely appreciate the contribution of the authors. This article is a timely synthesis and much needed articulation of the richness of the BCM.

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A Constructivist Perspective on Banathy's Conversation Methodology

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> Upshot · This commentary will address the implicit and explicit connections between Banathy's Conversation Methodology, which is the heart of the process used at the IFSR Conversations held every two years in Austria, and constructivist theories in application.

« 1 » The authors of the target article, Gordon Dyer, Jed Jones, Gordon Rowland, and Silvia Zweifel, make several explicit connections between Bela Banathy's Conversation Methodology (BCM) and constructivism. In §§7–9, social constructivism and embodied cognitive science are cited as theoretical underpinnings. Also in §9, the link to the work of Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (1992) is made. While these connections may be more or less understood by participants of a BCM process, the implications in practice are not always entirely apparent.

« 2 » In Bela's writings and courses, constructivist theories *per se* were not heavily emphasized. Their implications, however, were ever-present in the theories and practices that he taught.

« 3 » The rationale for developing the BCM was based in a rejection of many long-standing assumptions. As noted by the authors, the BCM began as something of an "anti-conference." In traditional academic meetings, results of research or theory building were delivered (often read to an audience) under the assumption that knowledge could be transmitted whole and intact from one person to many others. The lack of time for discussion and dialogue between these deliveries left little opportunity for checking meanings or assumptions (the development of *structural coupling*, as described by Maturana & Varela 1998). It was assumed that scientific knowledge was like building blocks; that new ideas could be added to, or exchanged for, existing ones, with no loss of integrity. The fact that this was so rarely the case did little to change those assumptions.

« 4 » BCM effectively turned that process upside down. Participants in a conversation begin with interests and questions. Together, they work to clarify their own questions, and their understandings of each other's. They eventually arrive at one *triggering question* around which their common inquiry will focus. This is still understood, though, only to be an initial point of focus for purposes of orientation. As ideas are shared and new thoughts emerge, there is a point of reference to which the participants may return. The question itself often continues to evolve as ideas become clearer or more refined. Rather than assuming that information could be transmitted, it was assumed that the process of investigation and learning needed to be shared. Spending (typically) five very intense days and evenings together allowed not only a great deal of verbal discussion and synchronization of understandings (to the degree that those can at least be approximated), but also a common setting for physical expressions and reactions.

« 5 » BCM has been, and continues to be, used in the development of traditional academic work such as articles and books. Recent outputs include articles published in *Systems Research and Behavioral Science*, the development of university courses, entries into the Systems Engineering Book of Knowledge (SEBoK, http://sebokwiki.org/wiki/Guide_to_the_Systems_Engineering_Body_of_Knowledge), and a book describing systemic approaches to research (in progress). An official proceeding is published at the end of each conversation, as well. The point in this case is that BCM did not reject academic work, but proposed a different approach to accomplishing it.

« 6 » As Bela's work evolved towards social systems design, the focus of many BCM teams became describing desired futures for specific settings or situations. Bela held strong convictions about the ethics of such work, including the idea that all relevant stakeholders should be involved (or at least represented) in the design of systems that affect them. An important feature at the opening of BCM events includes a meeting of participants from all teams, held in one circle, with an empty chair set in the middle. The empty chair represented for Bela the future generations for whom we should design, and who would be affected by the impacts of the design.

« 7 » The broad inclusion of stakeholders created great diversity of participants in many situations. Experts in narrow specialties might be working with professionals from entirely different realms, and often with participants from different countries, cultures, and language backgrounds. Such diversity brings with it challenges to shared or synchronized understandings. Envisioning desired futures is additionally challenging, in that specific or tangible examples can be hard to employ. Addressing these challenges is part of the reason the BCM events last four to five days. It takes time for ideas to emerge, be processed and checked, and developed further between six or eight individuals.

« 8 » An important foundation noted by the authors, but not addressed in-depth, is the connection with the work of C. West Churchman. (This is specifically relevant to the role of guardian or guarantor, noted in §33 of the article). Churchman's background was in philosophy, including the philosophy of science, but he applied his work in realms including management. Churchman's work had great influence on Bela, and he referred to Churchman often in his teaching.

« 9 » As interpreted and described by Ian Mitroff, who was a student of Church-

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man, writing with Harold Linstone (Mitroff & Linstone 1993), there are five basic types of information or knowledge systems:

a   Expert consensus, based in empiricism.
b   Scientific modeling, based in rationalism.
c   Multiple models / assumptions, based in the work of Immanuel Kant.
d   Conflict, as described by Georg W. F. Hegel.
e   Systems thinking, from the ideas of Edgar Singer, Churchman, and Russ Ackoff.

« 10 » Each of these inquiry systems, or ways of knowing, in turn has a particular type of guarantor.

a   Expert consensus: the guarantor is the "tightness" of the agreement by the community (e.g., peer review).
b   Formal / analytic: the guarantor is formal logic as found in mathematical modeling.
c   Multiple models or realities: the guarantor is multiple formulations of a problem by stakeholders.
d   Dialectic: the guarantor is a conflict between the two strongest and most opposing views.
e   Systemic / pragmatic: the guarantor is systemic thinking, including ethics and applied philosophy.

« 11 » The relevance of this work to BCM is in how conversation teams arrive at what they believe to be knowledge or understanding. The expert consensus model dominates most academic work. It is the philosophy behind the assumption that peer review amongst a community of experts in a field is the best guarantor of valid knowledge. The formal / analytic system presumes that accuracy of data and description (e.g., quantitative modeling) is the best guarantor. As explained by Mitroff (personal communication), these modes of inquiry can be adequate when addressing well-defined and clearly bounded problems. A danger comes in assuming that they are the only adequate approaches to inquiry, and that they fit all contexts.

« 12 » The multiple models system is the one most common to group consensus and decision-making processes. (This includes many teams involved in BCM events.) It relies on the variety of understandings brought by diverse stakeholders. Inherent weaknesses of this approach (in my experience) include the lack of ability to repre-

sent all stakeholder views and experiences in highly complex situations truly, and the very general level of description at which outcomes tend to be left for the majority of such efforts. (There are notable exceptions.) The tenants of this system push for as much diversity of participants in a BCM team as can be found and tolerated.

« 13 » A dialectic inquiry system, or one based on conflict, purposefully seeks out the most differing views of a situation in order to overcome prevailing presumptions, even about the nature of the problem or issue at hand. While many people find such situations to be uncomfortable and unfamiliar, it would ask that BCM teams intentionally include participants who hold apparently irreconcilable differences as a means of learning.

« 14 » The systemic approach addresses what Churchman referred to as "sweeping in" – an attempt to include as many perspectives and types of knowledge as can be addressed. This would include knowledge of each of the philosophical foundations of the five different inquiry systems as a means of checking how information was included and evaluated.

« 15 » As noted in the article, BCM events have been taking place since the early 1980s. Over that time, the process has evolved, but continues to remain true to the essential tenets that Bela established. Various teams have understood and applied the principles to different degrees, and the types and quality of outcomes have differed. As an attempt to generate some common process of learning (as independent as the knowledge might ultimately be), the BCM represents a valuable alternative to traditional conferences and meetings. It is encouraging to see the authors of the article continuing to evolve the process, to consider ways of expanding its reach through communication technologies and a more formal development of the model.

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Conversations Communities in Context: A Retrospective Prospective

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> Upshot · The tradition of the Banathy Conversation Communities and its related methodology (referred to as BCM in the target article) represent a distinct evolution of social systems design inquiry. This inquiry has given rise to a strong cultural identity within the systems sciences for many who have experienced it. Key historical and axiological aspects of this inquiry are presented and future orientations explored as a complement to the main article on BCM.

« 1 » In recent years, much attention and interest appears to have surfaced in the related fields of design thinking, conversation methodology, dialogic inquiry, social systems design, and agent based modeling for self-directed community development. And yet, much of the work in these various domains is drawn according to different lineages, often without reference to each other or even acknowledgement of alternative renditions of narrative.

« 2 » The contribution made by Gordon Dyer et al. in tracing out the historical and sociological outlines of the common narrative, with particular reference to the synthetic work of Bela H. Banathy and the traditions of the systemic conversation communities that emerged under his guidance, is both timely and valuable. As they suggest, the design of open social systems emerged as a manifestation of open systems thinking and corresponding soft-systems approaches. It has crystallized into a disciplined future-creating methodology of participatory inquiry that serves to enable evolutionary systems designers to align the systems they create with the dynamics of civilizational change and the patterns of sustainable environmental development while at the same time empowering self-directed collective intelligence among the individuals and communities that engage

with it. Early pioneers in this general area of participatory inquiry for collaborative action include Herbert Simon (1969), John Chris Jones (1970), C. West Churchman (1971), Erich Jantsch (1975, 1980), and John Warfield (1976). The watershed year of this approach can be considered to be 1981, the year marked by the contributions of Russell Ackoff (1981), Peter Checkland (1981) and Gerald Nadler (1981), and followed shortly after by Chris Argyris (1982), Werner Ulrich (1983), Nigel Cross (1984), and Banathy (1985, 1996).

« 3 » As a complement to §§2–5, it is worth citing Banathy's observations in a chapter specifically titled "The Conversation Movement" (Banathy 2008) in reference to the origins and foundations of the conversation movement.

❝ The first conversation took place at the Fuschl Lake in Austria in April 1982. A group of systems scholars met in a small hotel at the Fuschl Lake, near Salzburg. Participants came from three continents, representing ten cultures. They were invited as leaders of various systems societies. The conversation was organized by the International Systems Institute. The group spent five days in two conversation teams, addressing the question: How can we apply the insights gained from systems thinking and systems practice to promote human betterment and to improve the human condition? By the end of the conversations, the teams defined eighty items to guide the work of the various systems societies and become an agenda for the conversations that follow. Following the Fuschl Conversation, a group of us – officers of the International Federation of Systems Research (IFSR) – attended the Board Meeting of the Federation, where the Board decided to provide funding for the Fuschl Conversations.❞ (Banathy 2008: 25)

❝ The various conversations that followed the first Fuschl event, have been organized and co-ordinated by the International Systems Institute, in cooperation with International Federation of Systems Research, and with several member organizations of the Federation. By now we [the ISI] have held thirty conversations; ten Conversations in Fuschl, Austria; eight regional conversations: two in Crete; one each in England, Finland, Greece, Hungary; and three in Spain. Since 1989, we have held twelve international Conversations at the Asilomar Conference Center in California and established the Asilomar Conversation Community (ACC) as a conversation community of the International Systems Institute.❞ (ibid: 26)

« 4 » Banathy always considered conversation as a "future-creating disciplined inquiry" (Banathy 1996: 45) when engaged with in the spirit of social systems design (SSD). As the BCM authors point out in §16, and §61 according to Banathy two complementary modes of dialogue comprise design conversation: generative dialogue and strategic dialogue (ibid: 218, following Bohm 1996). One provides a process through which individuals become friends and partners in learning / designing and a community generates common meaning. The other focuses on particular tasks in the creation of solutions for a specific social circumstance. The complementary dynamic between generative and strategic dialogue echoes Scott Peck's exhortation: "community-building first, problem-solving second" (Peck 1987: 104).

« 5 » In the 2002 *Festschrift* in honor of Banathy that appeared as a special edition of *World Futures,* I point to the importance of the identification and selection of an inspirational context in which to situate a BCM event (Laszlo & Laszlo 2002). It was at one of the early Asilomar conversation events that Harold Nelson came up with the principle that "the container flavors the contained" – so well captured by the metaphorical postulate of "where the sake hits the cedar." The authors make mention of this essential characteristic of BCM in §§1, 21, and 53, though the extent to which these initial conditions drive the conversation dynamics is insufficiently considered. Banathy went to great lengths to select idyllic settings for the conversation events, from the little lake town of Fuschl am See nestled high in the mountains of Austria, to the seaside nature reserve of Asilomar in Pacific Grove near his home in Carmel, California. This resulted in a combined emphasis on identifying a systemic nurturance space on the one hand, infusing the conversation dynamics with personal inspiration for collective aspiration, and on identifying a design conversation methodology capable of stimulating the shared search for systemic leverage points for actions to improve the human condition on the other. It is this emphasis on both the downward causal frames (the systemic nurturance spac-

es in which the conversation events are nested) as well as on the upward causal frames (the systemic leverage points that emerge from the participatory conversation dynamics) that lends great power to the BCM as a future-creating disciplined form of collective inquiry. In §§54–59, the authors make mention of other BCM conversation events, including those known as *Las Conversaciones del Extremo Sur* that take place in the southernmost city in the world: Ushuaia, Argentina. However, the authors do not discuss how the deliberate and considerate location of these events now stands in stark contrast to the expedient location of recent IFSR Conversation events in Europe, where much less attention has been placed on selecting and creating idyllic systemic nurturance spaces than on the identification of expedient, convenient and cost-effective venues.

« 6 » In §37, mention is made of the potential for BCM to foster collective intelligence. At the 59th Annual Meeting and Conference of the International Society for the Systems Sciences (ISSS) held in Berlin, Germany, from 3–7 August 2015, the Systemic Inquiry Group (or SIG) focused on Curating Emergence for Thrivability came to some interesting conclusions regarding the nature of collective inquiry. Mary Catherine Bateson, daughter of Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead, pointed out that the objective of *connective* intelligence (understood as the ability to identify and establish feedback links with relevant and leveragable information sources and enablers in one's environment, be they other human beings, networks, or specific technologies of information processing and communication) is that of enabling *collective* intelligence, but that collective intelligence is interesting only insofar as it enables collective *creativity* (see Laszlo 2015 for further consideration of this theme). This perspective invites consideration of ways in which social systems conversation events can best foster collective creativity (through the precursor stage of collective intelligence and its precursor of connective intelligence).

« 7 » A major portion of the text is dedicated to social systems design (SSD) (§§19f) and its application to the BCM (§§21–26 and following paragraphs), while §§54–59 consider future directions in the evolution and application of BCM. Nevertheless, a

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promising area of contemporary research not sufficiently examined shifts the focus from *design conversations* to *curating conversations*. In much the same way as strategic planning was all the rage in the 1970s and 80s, only to be augmented and reframed as a complementary component of idealized systems design in the 1980s and 90s, so is the design orientation of BCM now being expanded and enriched by a focus on curating emergence for thrivability (see Laszlo 2014 for further consideration of this theme). While planning approaches involve projecting current objectives onto a vision of how to build a bridge to a desirable future, design approaches involve creating aspirational images of the desirable future and exploring how to build bridges back to our present reality from them. Ultimately, both approaches focus on human interests and impose the values and visions of our species on what we think best for our kind and, in the best of cases, for other species and the environment, too. But in order to genuinely create conditions that favor the emergence of life-affirming, future-creating, and opportunity-increasing dynamics of flourishing environments capable of hosting all forms of expression of healthy and authentic living systems, collective creativity must be tuned to the biophilia of human relations. That is to say, conversation events must be curated so as to elicit the emergence of connection and interdependence as a core characteristic of both the process and the outcome of conversation. Only by listening into the nascent patterns of the emerging dynamic regime in which the conversation is taking place can we ever hope to break out of the impositional frames of homo-centric deliberation. Curating emergence for thrivability takes the conversation frame beyond design, just as social systems design conversations took it beyond strategic planning initiatives. The potential to foster a positive VUCA world – one based on *v*ision, *u*nderstanding, *c*larity, and *a*gility rather than on the reactive frame derived from the threat of environments that are perceived to be *v*olatile, *u*ncertain, *c*omplex, and *a*mbiguous – can best be advanced by evolving BCM beyond planning and design through emphasis on curating conditions that favor the dynamics of thrivability (see Johansen 2012 for more on reframing VUCA for positive action).

« 8 » While the conversation events in California have all but ceased to exist and those in Austria have become increasingly formalistic and stifling, the conversation community in Argentina has grown in vibrancy, offering distinct experiential dynamics of collective creativity unknown to the other two. In the *Conversaciones del Extremo Sur* touched on briefly by the authors in §§14 and 54–58, there is a marked lack of contractual, tactical, outcome driven conversation dynamics. Instead an atmosphere of conviviality, camaraderie, and experiential synergy prevails. The joy of sharing clearly supersedes the need to come up with some specific product as a result of the conversation, and yet what emerges from these conversation events often appears to be more powerful or at least more memorable and impactful in the lives of the participants. This is attested to by the degree of cohesiveness of the conversation teams. Those from the Northern Hemisphere tend to remain in collaborative contact if and when a specific project carries their interaction forward. However, those of Latin America appear to continue their conversations ongoingly – both formally focused on the research themes of each conversation event as well as informally engaged in explorations of other areas of synergy and mutual interest. I suspect this has much to do with cultural traditions that predispose individuals toward collective conviviality and solidarity, such as that of sharing *yerba mate* in the South American ritual of passing the tea gourde, keeping it hot and filled, with all participants sharing in the drink as they share in the conversation. The flow of conversation is easily and effortlessly woven through the creation of the invitational space provided by the sharing of mate. Participation in both adds dimension, direction, meaning, and flavor to the community dynamics by strengthening the threads of the social fabric being woven among the participants. Great potential lies in exploring how one might export rituals that curate the emergence of thrivability in the conversation dynamics among the remaining Banathy conversation communities in other parts of the world – and eventually, of transposing them into both popular culture and formal deliberation processes. A case for the advancement of collaborative systemic inquiry is made in Laszlo (2014,

2015). Through the conscious efforts of conversation communities to "be the systems they wish to see in the world," such inquiry could open up, draw upon, and explore new grounds of collective creativity, curating emergence for thrivability, and seeding systemic nurturance spaces that invite rituals of rich conviviality and meaning making.

Note

See also my commented list of supplementary literature on page 64.

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A Comparison of Two Closely Related Methodologies

Ken Bausch

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> Upshot · I compare two closely related methodologies: the Banathy Conversation Methodology (BCM) and Structured Dialogic Design (or Structured Democratic Dialogue, SDD).

« 1 » Bela Banathy was chair of my dissertation committee at Saybrook in the late 1990s. During this period, I participated in several of Bela's conversations at Asilomar. In 1996, when I was struggling to make sense of the data I had collected, I met Aleco Christakis at Asilomar. At Bela's suggestion, I asked Aleco if he could help me organize my data on the practice of social system design. He said he could, and in January 1997 we applied his Structured Dialogic Design (SDD) to 57 standards for stakeholder design of social systems (Bausch 1999: 143–227). Later, Bela and Aleco jointly wrote the preface to my first book, *The Emerging Consensus in*

Social Systems Theory (Bausch 2001). During these years, Bela and Aleco spent many hours discussing rules for fruitful conversations and dialogues. They were in thorough agreement on the principles laid out in this target article by Gordon Dyer, Jed Jones, Gordon Rowland, and Silvia Zweifel.

« 2 » My group at Asilomar in 1996 pursued understanding a perplexing problem that I cannot now recall. In the guidelines for the conversations, it was emphasized that we should honor everyone's contributions and should not talk over each other or attempt to change another's words or opinions. We took that to mean that we were not to rush to some premature answer that we could all grudgingly agree to. Instead, we strove to express our deepest sentiments on the issue, keeping at all times an open and beginner's mind. This was not so easy. We probed wider and deeper and did not come to a conclusion. Many times we had to remind ourselves to "trust the process."

« 3 » After four days, we still had not reached an answer. Then it dawned on us that we now understood the problem in its depth and complexity. We could very well explain various competing aspects of the problem in terms of heartfelt personal feelings, social situations, and strategies for dealing with it. We understood the answer to our quest in its context. We just could not define the essence of the situation. We felt that, should we be asked, we could use the same method to work out a reasonable plan for addressing the problem. We would definitely address important aspects of the problem that would otherwise be ignored.

« 4 » Upon reflection, I now realize that we were dwelling – in the four days of BCM – in the state of what Buddhists call "beginner's mind" (Welwood 1988). It is akin to Charles Sanders Peirce's abductive reasoning (Shank & Cunningham 1996). It is also very like third phase science as propounded by Gerald de Zeeuw (1997). We had trusted our intuition for days and come to a silent realization of the situation in its many facets and contexts. We had trusted our inner unconscious and transcendent core. With further contemplation, we could find a glimmer of our escape from any situation. Only at that time would we create a rational plan for proceeding. If I were working with a team of like-minded and contemplative members

on a situation that was not overly complex, I would like to proceed in this manner with the BCM.

« 5 » The SDD model is in the same family as BCM, but is designed for more industrial strength applications. It works even in situations involving emotions, conflicting perspectives, and huge interior and exterior complexity. It goes beyond training its facilitators; it structures the dialogue in ways that avoid most of dialogue's unshakeable burdens. Some of these burdens are:

The limits of human cognition in short term memory. We can process in our short term memory only seven, plus or minus two, items at a time.

Group pathologies. Individuals in a group might:

- Vent their anger and frustration;
- Perceive the situation as a threat to their self-interests;
- Use the situation to get attention;
- Dominate the group; or
- Follow some inappropriate strategy to meet a social or emotional need.

Unequal power relations. Dialogue is not substantively possible in a group situation where unequal power relations permeate the consciousness of the group. Banathy frames this issue with the question: "Who is responsible for designing the system?" SDD can equalize relations within its sessions, but has less control over power wielders outside.

« 6 » The application of Dialogic Design Science requires facilitators of structured dialogue to strictly comply with seven laws (Christakis & Bausch 2006: 55f):

The law of requisite variety (Ashby 1958): An appreciation of the diversity of perspectives and stakeholders is essential in managing complex situations.

The law of requisite parsimony (Miller 1956, Warfield 1988): Structured dialogue is needed to avoid the cognitive overload of stakeholder / designers.

The law of requisite saliency (Boulding 1966): The relative saliency of observations

can only be understood through comparisons within an organized set of observations.

The law of requisite meaning, attributed to Charles Sanders Perice (Colapietro 1989): Meaning and wisdom are produced in a dialogue only when observers search for relationships of similarity, priority, influence, etc., within a set of observations.

The law of requisite autonomy and authenticity (Tsivacou 1997): During the dialogue it is necessary to protect the autonomy and authenticity of each observer in drawing distinctions.

The law of requisite evolution of observations (Dye & Conaway 1999): Learning occurs in a dialogue as the observers search for influence relationships among members of a set of observations.

The law of requisite action (Laouris, Laouri & Christakis 2008): Any action plans to reform complex social systems designed without the authentic and true engagement of those whose futures will be influenced by the change are bound to fail.

« 7 » In following these laws, the structure and practice of SDD follows all the rules of BCM, even though the laws and rules are expressed in different language.

« 8 » In both modes, "futures creative" and "long range action scenario creation," SDD divides its efforts into three phases: visioning a future, identifying the obstacles blocking that future, generating strategies that surmount those obstacles. It also goes beyond acting upon obstacle that receive the most votes to identifying and overcoming the most influential obstacles to progress. In doing this, it avoids wasting time on the Erroneous Priorities Effect, on activities that are likely bound to fail.

« 9 » Bela and Aleco shared formative ideas in the construction of BCM and SDD. These methodologies are close cousins in their adherence to: conscious evolution, embodied social science, and emphasis on meaning. Both protect the authenticity and autonomy of participants and their observations. BCM is easier to implement in situations and can be highly effective

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in some situations and with the right participants. SDD is more industrial strength and harder to implement. It can work in situations that are extremely complex and contentious as long as all parties want to find their way out of a jointly unacceptable situation.

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Conversation vs. Communication: A Suggestion for "the Banathy Conversation Methodology"

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> Upshot • The Banathy Conversation Methodology (BCM) offers an approach to organizing and facilitating conversation groups among individuals self-identified as interested in a particular topic. As someone who would like to see more conversation integrated into academic conferences, I propose two extensions of BCM for consideration by the authors: one is an extension to the theoretical underpinnings, namely the conversation theory of Gordon Pask, and the other is an extension to the tools and techniques, namely the group syntegration process developed by Stafford Beer. If the authors do not like the direction these extensions might take BCM, I would be interested in their assessment of the circumstances under which alternative approaches to conversation groups might be more or less useful.

« 1 » I am passionate about conversation and its potential, under a particular formulation, to facilitate the participation of all self-aware individuals in the affairs of the world and to ensure that everyone in the world, all seven billion, has the ability to make a difference in that world (Richards 2013). I call a society structured around this formulation of conversation a participative-dialogic society. As such, I read the target article by Gordon Dyer, Jed Jones, Gordon Rowland and Silvia Zweifel on the Banathy Conversation Methodology (BCM) with much interest; I support all attempts to introduce more conversation into conferences and meetings, even into affairs at the highest levels of decision making, as well as into our everyday lives. In this commentary, I offer two possible extensions of BCM, the conversation theory of Gordon Pask (1976) and the group syntegration process of Stafford Beer (1994), for consideration and response by the authors. I claim that, if compatible with BCM, the potential value of these extensions is in introducing thinking (and perhaps methods) that could help retard the degeneration of conversation into communication, a phenomenon that happens all too quickly more often than not. If these proposed extensions are not compatible with BCM, I would be interested in the authors' thoughts on the time and place for alternative approaches to the organization and facilitation of conversation groups, assuming that BCM is not being advanced as the one best approach for all circumstances.

Conversation vs. communication

« 2 » While my formulation of conversation has a basis in the conversation theory of Pask, it is my simplified articulation of the concept and is not intended to capture the technical details of the theory with the elegance that Pask developed it. I offer it to stimulate thinking and apologize if it is too simplistic. I propose considering it as an extension to the authors' theoretical underpinnings of BCM.

« 3 » *Conversation:* A particular dynamics of interaction in a language among two or more participants that starts with an asynchronicity (a conflict, disagreement, tension, friction, being on difference planes, being out of sync) and moves toward a synchronicity.

« 4 » A conversation is not about what is said; it is about the dynamics – what "what is said" does. Conversation is not, then, communication; communication may be a byproduct, but no communication has to happen for there to be conversation. In fact, once communication happens, there is no more conversation; when everyone agrees, or has an understanding of each other, including agreeing to disagree, conversation stops (Richards 2010). Conversation is also the converse of control (Pask 1987); conversation introduces new variety; rather than working to conserve current ideas, conversation generates new ideas. Communication works to coordinate action; conversation works to create new distinctions.

« 5 » This formulation of conversation has implications for both the features and rules of conversation groups. In particular, sustaining a conversation suggests an awareness by at least some of its participants of the dynamics in which their actions are a part so that asynchronicity can continue to be introduced at times when the conversation is beginning to decay. Only thinking, caring individuals can do this. There must be an openness to each other and to new ideas and an acceptance that the dynamics is what is important as the vehicle through which participants can and will make a difference, in the conversation or more broadly. A society structured around conversation will be a society of thinking, caring humans who are aware of the dynamics of their interactions with others – what their language does and can do – and that the way it is delivered makes a difference. One might say that conversation is not a means to an end; it is both the means and the ends for a desirable society – that is, means and ends merge.

« 6 » Pask had a special interest in human learning and in the design of machines that could facilitate learning. Under conversation theory, learning (as opposed to training) is a creative act, not an act of transmission of information or of discovery. Learning happens in conversation. So, Pask developed a formal approach to conversation that could be used in the programming of a computer to facilitate this creative act (Pask 1975a, 1975b). My interest, on the other hand, is in seeking an alternative to

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power as the organizing principle of society and in overcoming the assumption that the only way someone can make a difference in the world is through the acquisition and application of power – the ability to cause things to happen. The Paskian dialogic, with its emphasis on the dynamics of interaction, offers an alternative way of thinking about difference-making. Causality is a relational concept; dynamics operates in an entirely different logical domain. In the domain of dynamics, there are no causal links, only ripples or waves that move instantly and shift the pattern of dynamics potentially everywhere and forever. (I offer this metaphor as an attempt to differentiate dynamics from causality; I recognize that it may not be adequate.) Of course, we live in the current society, where power, and its companion hierarchy, is the way of thinking about how to influence change. We must therefore deal with the domain of relations (and causality) along with the domain of dynamics, a dialectical pair. I claim that this dialectic is enacted in conversation and offers a way of thinking that is an alternative to power as the predominant way to think about participation.

Large group process

« 7 » As conversation groups get larger, and in particular as they begin to exceed five participants or so, the probability that interactional difficulties will bring a conversation to a halt prematurely increases. There are techniques for maintaining the participation of all members of a large group in the interactions. However, those interactions become less of a conversation and more of a discussion as the ability to sustain the initial asynchronicity decays; such participative discussions tend to jump from topic to topic, with little possibility for probing, as each participant takes their turn. BCM recognizes this dilemma by breaking the large group into teams. Then, each team has an opportunity to present their ideas to the large group as a whole, with some discussion. It is both the challenge of sustaining a conversation and the desire to use the small group conversations as triggers for conversations in the larger group that leads me to propose the group syntegration process (or Team Syntegrity) developed by Beer as a tool or technique that might supplement

BCM or serve as an alternative to BCM against which it might be compared.[1]

« 8 » I participated in a conference in 1999 (American Society for Cybernetics, Fairfax, Virginia, USA) where a group syntegration process took up three days of the conference; the theme was, simply: the future of cybernetics and of cybernetic thinking. I will mention only a couple of features of the syntegration process, features that I regard as key to my decision to include it in my commentary here. First, on the evening of the opening day of the conference, the participants in the conference engaged in an exercise to organize into small groups around topics of mutual interest; this took a couple of hours. The proposed group size was five. Participants were encouraged to limit the number of groups of which they were a member to two. Over the next three days, each group (the conversational group) held scheduled conversations on their topic. Also, in the room during these conversations were two other groups of comparable size to which participants were assigned in order to mix up the membership in the groups. One of these groups was called critics; its role was to interject ideas into the conversational group (a role the conversational group could also request), but not participate in the conversation beyond that role. This role was key in sustaining asynchronicity in the conversation, that is, in keeping it moving; this could also include resolving or dissolving a conflict so that the conversation could move on. The third group was called observers; its role was to be a witness for possible future reference, especially when the entire conference would convene later on. So, approximately fifteen people, plus a facilitator, were in the room at any one time. There were some general rules of conversation, like those of BCM, but otherwise no directions on what the conversational groups were to do. They were simply to have a conversation on a topic of mutual interest, knowing that

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1 | Beer may be more widely known for his development of the Viable System Model (VSM) than for his group syntegration process. I prefer to keep the ideas of the group syntegration process separate from the ideas of the VSM to avoid the confusion that could arise by conflating the two developments.

they would have the opportunity to present their ideas to the conference later on if they wanted. Conversation is not about achieving a goal!

« 9 » Second, the structure of the whole group (all conference participants) was based on the icosahedron (a polygon with 12 vertices and 30 edges) and was, therefore, non-hierarchical. If the number of participants had been exactly thirty, all participants would have been a member of two conversational groups, two critic groups and two observer groups, each with a membership of five. Each group would be composed of different participants, with all participants being in groups with different participants. Since there were not exactly thirty participants (or an exact multiple of thirty), the structure was somewhat asymmetrical with respect to an icosahedron (where each of its thirty edges represents a participant), but the effect of participation in multiple groups with different participants provided a context for the large group conversation at the end of the conference. Variations on this structure for almost any size group could be created and facilitated with the assistance of a computer program. While this may seem like more structure than necessary, or at least an uncomfortable amount of structure for some, for conversation to make the difference it has the potential to make in the meeting of the whole, preserving the small group conversations in the conversation of the whole would be an important feature of the structure. And, this must be a non-hierarchical structure. Hierarchical social structures introduce power as a way of thinking and talking about human interactions. Power inhibits conversation; conversation dilutes power.

Desired consequences

« 10 » While I am sure the authors have at least some familiarity with Pask's conversation theory and with Beer's group syntegration process, I would be interested in how they see these ideas in the context of their work with BCM. Could these ideas serve as extensions of BCM? If these ideas might take BCM in a direction they would not like it to go at this time, could they imagine circumstances where alternative approaches to conversation groups would be more or less useful? Or, are they devel-

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oping BCM to be the one best approach for all circumstances? This is a conversation I would like to have!

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Authors' Response
Conversation Never Ends

Gordon Dyer, Jed Jones, Gordon Rowland & Silvia Zweifel

> **Upshot** · Our five colleagues have offered what we consider to be complementary views and welcome suggestions. We extend the conversation with them by examining areas of agreement, responding to criticisms, and considering potential additions to the Banathy Conversation Methodology. We add a description of the mate tradition and further details on Las Conversaciones del Extremo Sur.

« 1 » We welcome the comments from our colleagues. They clearly illustrate the richness of activity in developing conversation processes. We have few arguments with what was said. We set out to provide a model of conversation that is robust and that presents guidance in a straightforward manner. In part, this was intended to be a summary of current practice for IFSR conversations, but we hope that it proves useful for other conversations that seek to maximize creative synergy. The methodology we described is not intended to fit all circumstances or perspectives. We recognize that there are "cousins" under development, which we generally welcome. These have their own proponents and likely niches.

« 2 » Below, we will attempt to respond to the many points made by our five colleagues, addressing first our areas of agreement and some specific criticisms they have offered with respect to our target article. Then we will respond to the suggestions they make for additions and extension that go beyond our article and, in some cases, the Banathy Conversation Methodology (BCM). We will close with a reflection on the "mate" tradition and the application of the BCM in another culture, Las Conversaciones del Extremo Sur.

The power of place

« 3 » We agree with our colleagues on many things, for example, the potential of conversation to democratize knowledge creation (**Kathia Castro Laszlo** §8) and the eclectic nature of the BCM – how, to use C. West Churchman's term, it "sweeps in" many sources (**Gary Metcalf** §14). In particular, we agree that place is very important (**Alexander Laszlo** §5; **K. C. Laszlo** §9). A setting of great natural beauty can serve as a strong catalyst for initiating and sustaining conversation. It can reduce participants' attachment to things they perceive to be constraints and increase creativity. Many of us have stories of barriers being overcome in conversation groups by hiking on the mountainside in Fuschl or walking along the beach at Asilomar. Similarly, an internal environment of warmth and comfort, and a more circular arrangement of chairs can help to foster interaction and idea generation.

Unlike minds and past patterns

« 4 » A couple of our colleagues' criticisms seem fair. Depending on the organizing team's intentions, processes, and success in recruiting participants, teams can tend to self-select for alignment with particular views, as opposed to rich representation of multiple views (**Metcalf** §§12f). This is a challenge that requires a pro-active, intentional strategy to reach out to "unlike minds." Also, newer conversations around the globe may be more readily able to escape past patterns than those that have been running for many years (**A. Laszlo** §8), although our sense is that the latter can be more a matter of the individual team and its dynamics than the venue and its history. We offer a more extended response to this particular point below.

« 5 » On two points we would differ somewhat from colleagues' statements. Our sense is that at this point in time the shift to "curating conversations" (**A. Laszlo** §7) is more localized and individual, reflecting our colleague's own work more than a global or general trend. Also, we are unconvinced that the increased formalization and quantitative elements of Structured Dialogic Design (SDD; **Ken Bausch** §5) necessarily lead to greater strength. Perhaps the term "industrial" appropriately connotes a more contextualized application and strategic guidance in a specific case, rather than greater strength overall.

Adding to the BCM

« 6 » With regard to **Bausch**'s (§5) comparison to SDD, though, we do acknowledge the existence of dialogue-based problem-transcending methodologies that are similar and/or complementary to the BCM. Further study of these related methodologies in the context of their relationship to the BCM may well bear fruit.

« 7 » We also concur with **Bausch** (§4) in his mention of the importance of assuming a posture of a "beginner's mind" for improving the chances of success in dialogue. This could, perhaps should, be mentioned to would-be participants at the outset. One way might be to talk about the non-privileged status of all participants and how groups can take advantage of both expertise and fresh contributions, and to reflect on how everyone is always in the process of becoming, of learning. In this sense, the BCM could take advantage of what Abraham Maslow valued in beginners in any field of human activity: "the novice can often see things that the expert overlooks. All that is necessary is not to be afraid of making mistakes or appearing naïve" (Maslow 1998: 6).

« 8 » With respect to **Larry Richards**'s (§§2–4) commentary, we acknowledge the potential applicability of Pask's conversation theory to the theory and praxis of dialogue methodologies such as the BCM. With Richards, we agree that conversation theory may help contribute to an understanding of how to sustain a healthy dialogue. In particular, we understand how the introduction of an "asynchronicity" (which is akin to conflict or tension) can sustain a healthy conversation among caring, responsible participants. With Richards and Pask, if the conversation

should begin to decay through the temporary resolution of the asynchronicity, another asynchronicity can be generated via the introduction of additional viewpoints into the dialogue as a way of keeping the conversation moving forward. Conversely, if all asynchronicities become (temporarily) resolved, the conversation will, by definition, either automatically terminate, or it will simply decay into a series of mere speech acts that do not serve to move the dialogue meaningfully forward.

« 9 » We also agree with **Richards** (§§5–7) that Stafford Beer's large group syntegration could inform the structural arrangement of the BCM. We view the BCM itself as very malleable and therefore always open to alternative ways of determining participants' roles, optimizing group size, and other structural considerations. We would be wary, though, of having the same number of "critics" as the number of members of the "conversational group," as the latter may never develop a feeling that they are moving forward to any intermediate solution, and may be disenchanted by their internal lack of success. In our own recent report on the 2014 Linz Conversation, we recommended the idea of a "trickster" or more precisely, a "Zen Mondo trickster," who would act in a similar role as the "critics" group but who would also be a member of the group. The interjections from this role-player would be used with care (and could also occasionally be encouraging).

« 10 » With **A. Laszlo** (§6), we agree with the idea of further avenues for related inquiry, such as that of the role of generating connective and collective intelligence via the dialogue process. The BCM itself, again, is certainly flexible enough to inform such valuable and worthwhile avenues of inquiry.

« 11 » With **Bausch** (§6), we believe that the seven dialogue laws as gathered by the purveyors of dialogic design science can meaningfully inform the BCM process. Each of the seven laws that Bausch mentions is informed largely by noted thinkers in the systems sciences. An example would be the law of requisite variety, which involves encouraging participants to attempt actively to appreciate the diversity of perspectives present. Each of these seven laws likely has a place in structured dialogue settings such as the BCM.

Mate and Las Conversaciones del Extremo Sur

« 12 » We close with a more extended response concerning newer conversations in other locations and involving other cultures. **A. Laszlo**'s (§8) comments suggest that Las Conversaciones del Extremo Sur express a cultural disposition of camaraderie and tendency naturally to mix the formal themes of each conversation event with explorations of other areas of synergy and mutual interest. This disposition does indeed have profound roots in regional tradition. A sincere curiosity about the other participants' world facilitates bonding, sharing, and nurturing a common ground. This is exemplified by the "mate" tradition.

« 13 » Mate is a beverage almost omnipresent in Argentina, Uruguay, parts of Bolivia, southern Brazil, and Chili, and more recently also in Middle Eastern countries such as Syria and Lebanon. Mate acts as a companion for one studying alone for long hours, and in most circumstances it acts as a connector among people, in both formal settings and settings where they share casual conversation.

« 14 » One drinks mate in a "round of pairs" hosted by the one who is in charge of the thermos and who serves the mate gourd to the entire group. The beverage stands for friendship; there are beautiful Guaraní legends of its origin, always celebrating gratefulness and friendship. Here is one version: One day the goddesses of the Moon and the Cloud came to the Earth for a visit, but they found a *yaguareté* (jaguar) ready to attack them. An old man saved the goddesses and then, in compensation, they offered him a boon in the form of a new plant born from their gratefulness, the yerba mate, and instructed him how to prepare a "drink of friendship."

« 15 » The mate tradition keeps alive the interpersonal connection that nurtured bonding among people in ancient times: sitting in a circle around the fire, eating and drinking together, sharing stories, queries, and findings. There is no doubt that gathering around the fireplace is the most ancient widespread image of conviviality and conversation around the world.

« 16 » At Linz (IFSR 2014), out of curiosity, respect, and the Japanese cultural value of harmony, we shared mate in our con-

versation group and with other participants at the gathering, A. Laszlo among them. Our experience leads us to wonder what role cultural traditions such as mate might play in developing and extending the BCM and other methodologies.

« 17 » Coming back to Las Conversaciones del Extremo Sur, they do indeed have a different flavor than traditional IFSR Conversations. Besides the particularities considered by A. Laszlo, it is worth mentioning that they are oriented to listening and responding to queries from the surrounding community / society. This year, the overarching theme was "aspects of a regional plan," and the subthemes for each team were integration of nature; integration of minorities; respect for identity; and the sustainable dimension. The theme and subthemes were chosen by the hosting university's Rector and accepted by participants at the previous conversation held in 2013. The practice is that at the closing of each conversation event, participants explore and agree upon the theme for the next scheduled event. For the next one, to be held in 2017, the theme most probably will be: "Is a planetary identity possible / viable?"

« 18 » Another relevant characteristic of Las Conversaciones del Extremo Sur is openness to complementary contributions that enrich the ongoing process and / or future issues. On this occasion, organizers welcomed an artscience exhibition created by one of the participants, proposed to them only a few days before the actual event. During the event, the whole conversation group also welcomed and interacted, via Skype, with the organizers of another artscience project planned for 2017, the Antarctic Biennale. Afterwards, the conversation group considered possible cross-contributions with that project.

« 19 » As positive as these developments are for Las Conversaciones del Extremo Sur, there are some key areas to improve. Local participants tend to show up only for some hours, and / or do not present their position paper in advance (or never do). They have limited understanding of what the conversations are about, making the process more demanding for the ones who participate thoroughly and are committed to contributing. For this reason, in this year's conversation, one group had to be cancelled at the

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beginning of the third day. There were only two participants constantly kindling the fire, and they agreed to dissolve the group to incorporate themselves into another of their choice.

« 20 » Another aspect for improvement is better care of intrapersonal needs. In spite of being immersed in a beautiful environment, there were long meeting hours, in which participants were deprived of appropriate pauses, exercise, and contemplative opportunities, perhaps due to a lack of awareness of the role such aspects play in a learning and creative process. Most probably, these issues can be overcome with more appropriate awareness and communication about the conversation methodology and codes.

« 21 » Again, we appreciate the thoughtful commentaries by our five colleagues. There is much to be gained from continuing this exchange. As Bela Banathy would say, conversation never ends.

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Supplementary Literature

Commented
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