Structured Abstract

Paper type – perspective

Background(s) – historical and sociological

Perspective – enactive cognitive science

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 Dr. 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 further develop and spread the methodology 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; 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 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 or 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 Dr. Bela H. Banathy, they decided to create an alternative format, essentially cancelling the sessions and staying on break. Following 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” (Frantz 1995).

2. The first conversation was held in Fuschl am See, Austria in April 1982 (IFSR 2001). A group of scholars from international systems societies, based on three continents and representing ten 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 ten biannual conversations in Austria (in Fuschl for many years; more recently in Linz), twelve 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. Thirty to fifty participants prepared input papers to share initial ideas and learning resources with one another, self-organized into teams of six to ten members to explore significant social/societal issues, engaged in intense face-to-face dialog 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 (Dyer 2014a). 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 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 to 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 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 be usefully viewed metaphorically, also. 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 of 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 background, hobbies and interests, or level 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" (Malinowsky as cited in Jones 2012).

13. 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, 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.

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 ten 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 than 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 proactively collaborate 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 reigns 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).

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., 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, or 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 responsible, also, 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 4-5 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, 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” (Banathy & Rowland, 2004). 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” (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 to others. Interactions between chemicals 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 important, also. 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 like Fuschl and Asilomar. With all these pieces in place, high energy and enthusiasm are nearly inevitable.

**Sustaining Conversation**

30. The metaphor of 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 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:
   1. display tolerance, patience and consideration to others
2. honor and respect each other
3. listen to others, attempt to understand the point of view being expressed, reflect and respond
4. do not dominate
5. do not offend
6. avoid losing control of one’s feelings
7. view all ideas as contributions to the group for consideration, accepting that not all ideas will be used
8. allow free exchange and public ownership of ideas
9. allow equal opportunity to participate
10. stand for what one believes in
11. 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 found, also, that it can help to define “guardian” or “guarantor” roles for team members to serve. Individuals might monitor and remind others to maintain focus on such things as:
   1. the selected theme
   2. an opportunity for equal participation
   3. honoring diversity and every contribution made
   4. developing team rules and spirit
   5. establishing common ground
   6. being open to emerging/new ideas
   7. shared leadership and other roles

Meeting in Plenary

34. Our experience is that being a member of a conversation team over a 4-5 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. For example, at a recent conversation in Linz, Austria (April 2014), our group (four authors plus Yoshi Horiuchi and Yoshi Ohkami from Japan) generated the following lists:

Features
36. The BCM …

1. 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.
2. serves to identify and reveal tacit assumptions among participants, which can help avoid communication break-down. Rather than quickly disagreeing, participants develop skill in asking each other to “unpack” or clarify statements.
3. asks questions that affect all direct stakeholders within a given problem context. It can expand boundaries of the problem that stakeholders define in the beginning.
4. 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.
5. 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.
6. 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.
7. 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.
8. is designed to tackle the intractable problems that might otherwise be hopeless, for example, by revealing root causes and potential points of leverage.
9. encourages problems to be defined and explored by all stakeholders collectively. BCM aims for win-win-win solutions; it is a conversation not a negotiation.
10. allows all participants to feel, often for the first time, heard and validated.
11. allows participants to agree to disagree after surfacing the underlying assumptions of positions.
12. 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.
13. is applicable not only to academic questions, but also to a wider range of questions and highly-complex issues in business and society.
14. 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.
15. allows one or more participants to participate off-site via Skype and related technologies.
16. 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.
17. 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.
18. can generate written knowledge—in the textual and graphical form—that can be leveraged later for short- and long-term solutions.
19. 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.
20. 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 …
   1. 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.
   2. takes a global view of root causes. Multi-perspectives of team members offer different views of causal and other relationships.
   3. produces solutions across institutions. Ideally all key stakeholders are included.
   4. exposes interconnectedness of the issues the group faces. Based on their unique backgrounds and perspectives of issues, team members share different networks of actual and potential relationships, and the teams explore intersections.
   5. 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.
   6. can yield synergistic, unexpected solutions. If done well, 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.
   7. deals head-on with the common challenges that stakeholders face. For example, 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.
   8. generates “locally-grown solutions created by locals.” With community member participation, compatibility of ideas with the local culture is quickly determined.
   9. allows for the capture of emergent knowledge that can be referenced in the future. Formal reporting processes are used for insights on the issue and on the methodology.
10. 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 contribution.

40. We explored language and symbols, also. 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. 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.

![Figure 1. Symbols for three question types.](image)

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 better reflect 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 model of planned change (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. 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 (2014a) along with its Addendum for Team Leaders (2014b). 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 conversation**

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 whereby one individual clearly had her own, predefined agenda. The person seemed to be intentionally 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.

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 helps 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 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 military and management background, my prior perception was that best results from “meetings” were obtained through an organized structure for discussion, with clear purpose. However, there was I, in an unfamiliar albeit beautiful environment, with new people who represented several different backgrounds and nationalities. We had each been attracted by an open question on how to use systems thinking for creating a better future, and had suggested tentative questions (triggers) for where we might start. But we were to embark on conversation of five days on a topic which had not been clarified. There was no agenda. These were early days in conversation and only two of the eight, had previous experience. The team had what we now call “wheel spin,” before we agreed to a trigger as 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, I thought, progress 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. 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 didn’t 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 the Pinchots, 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 which arose from conversation, occurred as a result of Gordon 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 Gordon 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 involve 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 sixteen 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 to 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 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 thirty 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 (Herrschner & 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 society 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 (Dyer 2014a). Conversation largely takes place through sharing and offering metaphor, which reflects the basis of understanding, beliefs and values that the participants hold. As Gregory (1993) puts it, “Conversation is 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.” 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 systems 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.

References


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Gordon Dyer had a first career in the RAF. He joined the Systems Group at the Open University in 1978, contributing as author, course team and exam board chairs to systems modeling and other courses. 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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