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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