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 represent 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.

Gary S. Metcalf is a faculty member in the Department of Leadership and Management at Saybrook University in Oakland, CA, USA, and a part-time faculty member in the Creative Sustainability program at Aalto University in Helsinki, Finland. He is President of the International Federation for Systems Research, and a past president of the International Society for the Systems Sciences.

Conversations Communities in Context: A Retrospective Prospective

Alexander Laszlo
Buenos Aires Institute of Technology, Argentina
alaszlo/at/itba.edu.ar

> 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 coordinated 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.

Alexander Laszlo is Director of the Doctoral Program in *Leadership and Systemic Innovation* at the Buenos Aires Institute of Technology (ITBA), Argentina, 57th President and Chair of the Board of Trustees of the International Society for the Systems Sciences (ISSS), and author of over seventy journal, book, and encyclopedia publications.

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A Comparison of Two Closely Related Methodologies

Ken Bausch

Independent Researcher, USA
agorasken/at/gmail.com

> 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*