

Open Peer Commentaries

on Larry Richards's "Designing Academic Conferences in the Light of Second-Order Cybernetics"



Can Conversations be Designed?

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> Upshot • Richards's article presents a well-argued discussion of conversational conferences, with a particular focus on the design of such conferences. Richards bases his discussion on many years of personal experience with conversational conferences, primarily those organized by and for the American Society for Cybernetics. I particularly appreciate that Richards writes not only on cybernetics, but also in a cybernetic manner. As I find the article comprehensive and thorough, I mainly add further depth and discussion to some aspects of Richards's article in the following sections, such as Richards's distinction between conventional academic conferences and conversational conferences, conversation theory in relation to design, and the question of how conversational conferences can be designed.

Differentiating conventional and conversational conferences

«1» Larry Richards introduces conversational conferences as an alternative to what he describes as *traditional academic conferences* (§§6–10). I would propose instead to use the characterization *conventional academic conferences*, which I will employ in the following. Richards characterizes this

kind of conference as purely utilitarian, serving the purposes of universities in allowing academics to publish and thus to advance in staff rank (§6). While conversations can and do occur during such conferences, they tend to be marginalized, relegated to coffee breaks, and to serve primarily as networking opportunities (§6). In contrast to conventional conferences, conversational conferences rely less on established formats but take a more experimental approach (§3). Referring to his personal experience with conversational conferences organized by the American Society for Cybernetics (ASC), Richards emphasizes the element of surprise and enjoyment that such conferences can engender in their participants. Implied in this description is the observation that conversational conferences can generate more new personal insights and perception changes in participants than conventional academic conferences, which are primarily concerned with providing platforms for academics to advance within existing hierarchies.

«2» In response to Richards's article, I believe it necessary to emphasize the background of the term *conversation* as it underlies the conversational conferences organized by the ASC. In this context, it relates to second-order cybernetics and conversation theory, as developed by Gordon Pask (1976). Richards refers to this understanding of conversation in item five of his list of "relevant features of second-order cybernetics": conversation describes the dynamic process of dialogic interactions, within which participants generate "continual change in human knowledge and understanding" (§16). Conversational processes are cyclical and

support construction of shared understanding: they are understood as more than linguistic devices – rather, language can be regarded as a conversational device (François 2004: 134). Conversational processes thus enable learning and allow new insights to arise from interactions of participants (Scott 2001).

«3» Conversation understood in this way is quite different from the casual networking that may happen during conventional academic conferences described by Richards (§16). Conversational processes are open-ended and unpredictable rather than goal-oriented and deterministic (Glanville 2007b: 384). Conversations often entail an element of surprise (and related enjoyment) for conversation participants, as described by Richards in §3. Whereas conventional academic conferences are based on the assumption that knowledge can be transferred by linguistic means, conversational conferences embrace a radical constructivist perspective that assumes understanding is constructed from personal and immediate experience: "Knowledge is not passively received either through the senses or by way of communication; knowledge is actively built up by the cognizing subject" (Glaserfeld 1995: 68). Based on this epistemological stance, conversational conferences aim to create opportunities for their participants to engage in conversational processes to allow new understandings to emerge, and are less concerned with achieving predefined external goals. In this context, conversational conferences could be described as creating opportunities for consciously collective construction of individual knowing.

Constructing experiences individually and collectively

« 4 » Although it sees all learning as essentially private, radical constructivism acknowledges the social dimension of learning (Scott 2001). Conversation theory offers a theoretical model describing the dynamics of (social) conversational exchanges as a basis of learning, involving self and other (Glanville 2007b). Conversational processes between human beings rely on the willingness of participants to engage in conversation (as Richards points out in design principles 3, 7, and 9). As described in the 2013 ASC conference website, conversation involves collaboration: “We will work together (collaborate) in small groups and through plenary sessions, to improve understanding and acting, explored together” (http://asc-cybernetics.org/2013/?page_id=12). Joining a conversation is a personal decision and cannot be forced – just as insight and knowing is personal and cannot be externally induced in individuals. In this sense, the success of a conversational conference heavily depends on the willingness of everyone involved to accept the basic premises of engaging in conversation with others, potentially to change existing ways of thinking and to accept differences in viewpoints where they arise. The most problematic aspect of conversational conferences may thus be the difficulty of establishing an atmosphere of trust and equality among all participants, as Richards points out in design principles 7 and 9.

« 5 » Conversational conferences cannot offer any guarantee that all attendees will experience insights, learning, or enjoyment. Paradoxically, Richards describes his most memorable conversational experiences as having taken place at conventional academic conferences (§9) and remarks that he has not been able to repeat similarly rich and rewarding experiences at later conferences. This comment is a reminder that personal experience at any event relies strongly on each individual's past experience – such that rewarding experiences may neither be predictable nor repeatable for ever-changing individuals. One cannot, to paraphrase Heraclitus, attend the same conference twice. This comment also emphasizes that even conversational conferences organized with the best intentions cannot *cause* rewarding experiences intentionally.

The cybernetics of designing (conversational conferences)

« 6 » How, then, can conversational conferences be designed – and can they be designed at all? The answer to this question forms the central aspect of Richards's article and can be characterized in terms of both cybernetics and design. In terms of cybernetics, Richards takes his own participant-observer position into account and builds his argument on insights gained through having being involved in conversational conferences. This personal approach allows him to appreciate the participants' experience first-hand, which he describes as ideally involving stimulating conversations, generating new and alternative ideas, and leaving intellectually stimulated and mentally/emotionally refreshed (§§3, 30). Through participating in conversational conferences, Richards is also acutely aware of the challenges that can arise when implementing conversational conferences – less desirable experiences such as disrespectful behaviours of participants, the formation of hierarchies, the desire to adhere to conventional conference formats, fixed schedules, and participants' expectations not being met. Several of Richards's “design principles” for conversational conferences directly address such challenges in order to enhance participants' experiences during the conference.

« 7 » The remaining “design principles” in Richards's list address questions of designing the conference itself. They are based on an approach to design that employs constraints rather than goals (Fischer & Richards 2015). As Richards points out, design by constraint does not aim to achieve certain goals, but to avoid undesirable events (§21). Design by constraint is designing in a cybernetic sense: instead of determining outcomes, opportunities for interactions are provided that may have a wide variety of potential outcomes. Richards refers to conversational conferences as potential generators of desirable social change (§30) and sees the role of such conferences as creating platforms for new or alternative ideas to emerge. As Ranulph Glanville (2007a) has argued, conversational processes are central to the activity of designing, of creating something new. Due to their conversational nature, the outcomes of design processes are open-ended and somewhat unpredictable.

Richards recognizes this in his first “design principle” (§20) by emphasizing that any conversational conference should be regarded by its designers as a process rather than a final outcome, eventually leading to the next and yet again different conversational conference. Experimental conferences provide opportunities to gain new insights not only for their participants, but also for their organizers.

« 8 » Design, cybernetics, conversation, and radical constructivism are strongly interconnected (Herr 2015): conversational processes underlie the creation of the new during designing, and designing can be described as the fundamental cognitive act involved in construction during reflection (Glanville 2006). If conventional conferences are devices to maintain the status quo, conversational conferences are devices to engage in conversation to create the new collectively. That which is new is, however, individually constructed and somewhat unpredictable, which leads to a setting in which the success of conversational conferences can be gauged less by means of reaching goals or producing certain outcomes. Rather, the main outcome of conversational conferences can be seen to lie in rich personal experiences and the individual changes participants go through as a result of learning to resonate with others and to see through others' eyes.

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