conference, a pre-conference workshop was offered specifically to engage attendees in personal experiences of the performative content of the conference (McMullen, Jaycox & Brightman 2016). While this workshop was well received, it was not attended by all who later were impacted by the performances and it clearly did not prepare some attendees adequately for the novel artistic approach they encountered. Attendees could have been better served by including a discussion of how they might respond to the performance in appropriate ways, which could include permission to leave during the performance or not to participate at all.

« 11 » Certainly other, more successful approaches might exist of which I am not aware. And I did not experience the pre-conference workshops at ASC 2014 and 2015 or the opening sessions at ESJP 2013 and 2014. Yet the challenge remains to consider more deeply a design principle or practice of creating a common ground of conference culture early and adequately to avoid inciting violence and other undesirable behaviors. If societies such as the ASC and ESJP that have intentions "to contribute to the conceptualization of a new and more humane society" (§5) and to be "a network of activists, academics, and practitioners dedicated to social justice and peace," respectively, continue to design alternative conferences then this challenge is especially pertinent. So I conclude with questioning whether more concerted attempts are required to design a better praxis for alternative conferences or whether an additional design principle is needed to avoid inciting violence. Could a new design principle be formulated in light of the features of SOC and added to Richards's initial set of 10? Would this not be an application of SOC to the creation of principles for designing academic conferences?

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Desires, Constraints and Designing Second-Order Cybernetic Conferences

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> Upshot • I relate my own experiences of participating in and organizing conversational conferences to Richards's discussion. Perhaps contradictory to Larry's argument, I believe that in order for conversational conferences to be successful, they require some rules, structure and some hierarchy. Below, I would like to add reflections from own experience and also point to some guidelines worth considering, taken from Callaos's recommendations.

« 1 » Larry Richards's argument appears to me as idealistic as it is radical in that it recommends rigorous second-order cybernetic principles for conference design. However, I think this also might be its practical weakness. The target article suggests second-order cybernetic principles that conferences should implement or adhere to, linked to Heinz von Foerster's notions around "human experience and concerns, including the relationship between humans and technology – that is, biological, psychological and social concerns" (§12). These suggestions recall Margaret Mead's recommendations from the inaugural ASC conference that cybernetics should be conducted in a rigorously cybernetic manner (Mead 1968). Ranulph Glanville writes that a cybernetics conference should not only discuss cybernetic ideas but be done in a cybernetic manner (Glanville 2011). This was implemented, in a structured design, at the 2010 ASC conference at Rensselear Polytech in Troy.

« 2 » From my perspective, progress has indeed been made in developing an ever changing conference format with surprising variety – that deeply engages in Heinz von Foerster's aforementioned themes – yet after almost 50 years a genuinely self-organising cybernetic conference is still waiting to be implemented. Why is it so difficult for a genuinely self-organising cybernetics conference to emerge, even among committed and experienced participants? Could it be that conversational conferences work better with clear rules, moderators and some degree of hierarchy? Perhaps this is more effective as we are accustomed to this type of structured approach?

« 3 » Richards's recommendations presuppose that there already is an existing culture of respectful and generous listening. In my view, however, this culture of conversation needs to be reaffirmed and made explicit on multiple occasions. One way of doing this is by participants following a few guidelines, hopefully to be perceived as satisfactory by all.

« 4 » The first conversational conference I participated in was the American Society for Cybernetics 2010 conference at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) in Troy, NY. I experienced this conference as extraordinarily inspiring, but also became aware of some frustrating effects, mainly that some individuals monopolised conversations, interrupted or showed little respect for other people's opinions. Perhaps this was a sign of weak or lacking moderation? In 2011 I conducted a two-day conversational conference at the University of Huddersfield, UK. Both conferences explicitly reminded participants to prepare for the conference by reading Nagib Callaos's text giving short guidelines on how to conduct conversations in groups, which had been introduced and tested in various iterations over several years at the Fuschl and Asilomar conversations and at Callaos's own conference series:[1]

> "Groups require moderators which help to find a common ground, make sure everyone can express their views, encourage tolerance, keep conversations moving, ask questions that challenge assumptions, re-establish rules, summarize points, propose changes, register names of participants, take notes and make descriptions.

> "Establishing explicit ground-rules such as engaged listening, avoiding dogmatism, comments should be brief and last less then five minutes, no

1 | From the draft essay "Integrating the conversational format into conventional conferences," by Nagib Callaos, available at http://www.asc-cybernetics.org/2010/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/Integrating-the-conversational-format-.pdf

one should monopolise the conversation, comments are directed more to the group – and less to individuals, participants should not be interrupted when they are expressing their views, the group can change rules in consensus.

"Wrapping-up conversations: The moderator needs to keep time and fifteen minutes before session end the conversation needs to be wrapped-up. Did any conclusions emerge? What have been the main ideas? Is there consensus? What are the basic themes? The moderator encourages participants to identify areas of common ground as well as make explicit areas where perspectives differ."

The development of the conversation is presented in the plenary by the entire group which reports on the themes and trajectory of the conversation, relying on the notes of the moderator."

« 5 » In advance of the Troy conference, participants were encouraged to make themselves familiar with the guidelines above, and also reminded to follow them, during the conference. Discussions took place in small groups that had the goal of discussing a theme and coming up with questions (instead of answers). All group members briefly reported back those questions in the plenary sessions and gave an overview of the development of the discussion. Often they also reflected on disagreements among participants, communication problems and their frustration. In the plenary sessions Glanville synthesized and reflected upon the main themes, commonalities and differences. In my view, this was extremely helpful as it made explicit what had been implicit before – albeit from one individual's perspective. It helped to see connections and stimulated one's own reflections. Either a self-organising second-order cybernetic conference requires a main moderator who synthesizes (and moderates) the points presented by groups in the plenary, or perhaps this can be attempted by all participants? Otherwise much may remain undetected and be lost to the majority of participants. All in all, the Troy conference was perceived to be an intense and outstanding conference by the participants I spoke with. During discussions in the breaks, a small group developed the idea of working on a joint publication about methods, knowledge and design. This effort came to fruition in late 2012 with the "Trojan Horses" (Glanville 2012) publication – however, from my perception, the impetus for this publication came from the impression that views of designers towards methods, knowledge and designing were not represented in the mainstream of the conference. This frustration lead to fruitful results.

« 6 » For the 2011 "Making visible the invisible" conference I organized at the University of Huddersfield, I tried to follow a similar, structured approach. Participants had read Callaos's short "guidelines." Conversations took place in small groups, discussing themes and developing new questions. These were reported back in plenary sessions, keywords were captured on cards and jointly arranged into emerging themes, leading to further conversations and new questions. Here I took on the role of synthesizing and reflecting upon commonalities and differences. This was very demanding because I had to be present in the moment. As a result I have very little memory of the event, and am unable to report on the quality of the conference. Glanville reported a similar experience following the Troy conference, remarking that he did not feel as if he had been in attendance. Somehow stress appears to impede the construction of memory. A solution might be to involve the audience more in these reflections, to ask questions. A publication of papers written after the conference was published in 2012 (Hohl 2012). However, outcomes from discussions and plenary sessions were not captured due to my changing employers shortly after the event. Photographs of the event exist but I must admit that I have no clear memory of the themes we discussed.

« 7 » While conferences are attended by many, the labours of designing and organizing the event in the months before, during the conference itself and the subsequent publication is done by a few. What might we do to spread the workload? How can we make the process of conference design, organising and facilitating more a task of many? In the end, this is a question concerning not only resources but also structure and organisation.

« 8 » At the 2012 ASC conference, taking place at the University of Bolton, UK, Callaos's guidelines were not explicitly mentioned, and from my perspective, this resulted in a different experience. The conversations at the conference were more informal, aimless and the reporting back was less structured. Although participants were experienced, they did not successfully self-organise. Moderation was managed ad hoc by different individuals in each session. As a result, I perceived the conference to be somewhat less coherent, lacking purpose and a main focus. Events flowed into one another without a clear or distinct direction, plenary presentations were of differing quality. I perceived this lack of guidance and structure as frustrating and the conference experience did not meet my expectations. With a more structured event that encouraged participants to adhere actively to appropriate guidelines, we could have achieved a more satisfactory and fruitful conference experience. During the post-conference workshop, some of us attendees asked ourselves why this conference was less coherent than earlier ones, and how conversational conference might be made more successful (the proposal for this special issue grew from this conversation). How might we compose desires and constraints in order to achieve a satisfying experience for all attendees, as well as meaningful outcomes? Participants desire to meet people, engage in conversations, learn new things, express their own ideas and opinions and learn something new. This desire is shared by all participants. Comparing the 2010 Troy conference to the 2013 Bolton conference and my own experience organising the event in Huddersfield, I think the more structured approach applied in Troy created the best conditions for facilitating second-order cybernetic principles and resulted in a more satisfactory conference experience for all. Perhaps we might view those as the "constraints" that Richards mentions?

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