

Proposing a Fictional Conference Day Using Larry Richards's Cybernetic Design Principles

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> Upshot • This commentary gives voice to Richards's desire to move away from traditional formats, such as the paper presentation, by digressing from the OPC format by illustrating how the proposal inspires and disseminates rather than merely adding any critical commentary.

09.00: Doors open – tea, coffee, water and (chocolate) biscuits

«1» “Designing Academic Conferences in the Light of Second-order Cybernetics” by Larry Richards, struck a chord of recognition. I confess to sharing the view that most conferences that I have experienced left me with a level of dissatisfaction. This discontent would sometimes come from having unrealistic expectations on my part, but also from the inability of speakers to perform their knowledge transfer in an engaging way: I would often experience a useless wall of words. Dissatisfaction came from the lack of dynamics in knowledge transfer, or in other words the passive role of listeners; burning questions left unanswered in the sea of hands being left unaddressed by a moderator, with little time to formulate and or answer productively for a speaker; speakers' panels being more ritualistic than functional in any knowledge production. Coffee breaks and dinners become the only time to explore emerging thoughts, leaving many valuable tangents adrift. In honour of discussing problematic aspects of traditional conference and paper design, my open peer commentary will be “non-traditional” in the sense that it will consist of a proposal for a fictional cybernetic conference day, its design inspired by Richards's cybernetic design principles. The topic? As it is my prerogative, the topic will be the status quo of reality construction in reference to the article by Heinz von Foerster (1984): “On Constructing A Reality.” When I imagine taking that first sip

of coffee, I can already feel the anticipation of how the next few hours could pan out.

09.00–09.30: Welcome by conference committee

«2» In the light of not approaching the design of a conference with the idea of creating the ideal one (§20), the design of this conference will be a one-time event, not meant to be ideal in any generic sense, but ideal from the perspective of advancing general conference design. The importance of “design by constraint” (§21), for me, is perhaps his most crucial principle. If I have learned anything, as an artist, as an educator, as a researcher, it is that narrowing things down, if done well, will actually open up productive potential. A “constraint” for me, would be an act or intervention that limits, or places a parameter. For me, the creation of an effective constraint is an art form in itself; this could be seen as the art of conference design (or would it be the science of conference design?). Among the first steps of constraint in a conference is that it could be seen to exist within the limitations of its main topic. When the topic of a conference is too wide, it dwindles in quality, is too narrow, and might not be able to reach the quota needed to be sustainable. As not “anything goes” (§20), the topic of this fictional conference should ensure that it “[...] opens up a space in which new ideas, new thinking and new intellectual friends have the opportunity to emerge” (§21). So, how to find a topic that will ensure this?

«3» As an artist, I would have to say that to ensure this, one actually needs to state the opposite; I think that “anything goes,” but its quality or value depends on the context in which the “anything” is presented in. It also depends on the people behind that “anything”: “not everyone goes with anything,” in the sense that not everyone holds the skill to design a conference. It requires a vision, a desire that drives it, and this desire comes from the individuals organizing it. Furthermore, designing a conference requires organizational, social, and educational skills as well the skills of a designer (or other creative background). A conference should strive for aesthetics in its design, it should make conceptual connections. Von Foerster emphasizes in his article that the construction of a reality is a social

activity. As a conference designer one creates conditions for a temporary shared reality. During the introduction, while the coffee and tea wakes the brain and the chocolate biscuit munching makes everyone friendly, the conference committee will update the participants on any urgent matters, but also explain how to make the most of the next few days.

10.00: Show and tell

«4» The American Society for Cybernetics's (ASC's) 2010 Troy and 2013 Bolton conferences began with homework. In 2010, we were requested to bring a banner of one's own design, one that represents oneself. The 2013 conference requested that one brings a musical instrument of one's own design. The function of these little assignments forced participants to design what I saw as alternative self-portraits. Instead of simply introducing one's name and profession, the small results revealed much more about a person than any verbal description could. Participants would instantly learn more about one's character, skills, and or other abilities, as well as one's motivation or potential role in surrendering to the conversational design of these two conferences. For this conference, I would therefore also like to provide similar homework to the participants, by instructing them to bring something that relates to their interest in reality construction. This may consist of a drawing, an image, or other, as long as it represents, in some way, how the participant relates to the conference. Some might bring a fictional mathematical equation; some might bring a picture of a brain, while others might come with more enticing metaphors or texts. This type of homework assignment acts as a catalyst of connection, which is crucial in getting people to form productive conversational think tanks, in a minimal time frame. It is can also be quite humorous.

«5» As stated above, I find aesthetics when context and content intertwine, when the method embraces the topic, and vice versa. I feel that an opportunity arises to understand the topic through the real time experience of it. If one wants to understand better the quality or contribution of conversation in a conference, then one should indeed converse. If one wants to design a conference with the aim of improving con-

ference design, then one should consider conference design as an integral part of the conference. Involving participants in the design may do this. For instance, in my fictional conference, I will request participants to design the results of the conference in advance. Before they even begin, participants will be asked to write a statement on the effect that this conference will have on them, the desired knowledge, and the achieved results, in a sense constructing their own future reality, capitalizing on the concept of self-fulfilling prophecies, or self-organization. I have seen this method used in education, and its affects are astounding. A student, who declares that they will successfully finish a course, will achieve this with the support of their own declaration. One should embrace individual motivations. For some it might be related specifically to the topic, for instance, to understand better the role of metaphors in relation to the topic of the conference, whatever it may be. For another, it might be the simple practical desire that at the end of the conference, two connections will be made that will lead to concrete invitations that will advance that person's career. This preserves the individual participants' needs.

12.30–13.30: Lunch + formation of sub-groups

« 6 » Richards's main expectation of a (cybernetic) conference is to meet or run into people with whom, at some point during the conference, he will have a conversation that will advance or replace or inspire his existing ideas (§2). In order to achieve this, he describes, one needs to downplay the role of paper presentations, as was done in the 2010 and 2013 ASC conferences, where the centrality of paper presentations was replaced by conversation. My experience of these conversation groups was very positive, they allowed me to spar my own ideas productively, learning much more from other perspectives, than that I would from traditional paper presentations. They provided for me an arena to learn how to share thoughts in a non-hierarchical way, they taught me to be open to differing opinions, and they taught me the value of active inclusion. Instead of being bombarded with information, I was engulfed in transformative thinking in which renowned thinkers

took my thoughts seriously; it was enlightening. As the experiences of these conversations were so profound to me, this fictional conference will also implement the method of conversation as a key design feature (§25). By forming smaller conversation groups, the more introverted participants are able to find their voices (§26). Group-forming brings its own challenges.

« 7 » The ability to bring a group of strangers together and engage in active conversation may be seen, along with conference design, as another art form. To circumvent awkwardness in the group-formations, this conference will experiment in group-formation methods. Having experienced various forms of group forming, I found that an element of the unknown, in combination with an element of creative or active influence, enhances the likelihood of participants surrendering to group dynamics. At the end of the lunch, the people behind the assigned numbers will be revealed and the groups of the day will have been formed. Now that the bellies are satisfied, participants can get down to business.

13.30–14.30: Conversation groups

« 8 » The groups embark upon an unknown path of conversation, but one is not unprepared, one does not start from scratch. Having written expectations, and having heard the ones of others, a group dynamic can begin in which participants are aware of the needs of others, as well as their own needs, investigating group thoughts on reality constructions. The aim of the conversation groups is to form questions, share, and explore forming new questions as a group. The individuals of the groups determine the topics discussed.

14.30–14.45: Coffee break

14.45–16.00: Conversations continue – stepping up the game

« 9 » In the second half of the afternoon, the groups will continue discussions, but also prepare and discuss a way to communicate a summary of their conversation to the other groups. To facilitate this, the conference committee will infiltrate the conversation in the last 20 minutes, providing ludic materials and methods for this. Why ludic?

« 10 » Von Foerster emphasizes in his article that: "The way in which a question is asked determines the way in which an answer may be found." This is perhaps why it is so important to deviate from traditional conference formats. This is where "moments of art" may occur (§§30f). The crucial factor of the 2010 and 2013 conferences, which made the experience so successful for me, was the underlying performative nature. In the Troy conference, groups would sometimes literally take the stage, making a choice of location an element to consider. In that sense, a conference designer should not underestimate the effects of location architecture on the conversations. The design of 2010 and 2013 cybernetic conferences allowed for a form of professional ludicness, to explore ideas. How rarely does the adult mind have the permission to engage academically in a form of serious play? In spite of play being crucial to new paths of development and new perspectives, a method used in youth to understand the world, the method of play is abandoned as we climb the adult ladder of the academic world, its importance neglected, belittled even. Yet, to form new perspectives, one needs actively to seek alternative neural pathways. And by play, I mean more than just "playing or experimenting with dynamics" (§§24, 42). Play, as a method, may be experienced as a catalyst to the birth of these new synaptic paths, but what is play and how to play?

« 11 » Play is a method we use in childhood to help deal with our experiences. As an adult, play may be seen as a return to magical thinking, the ability to let go, and to be taken on an imaginative journey. The ability to play might be an embarrassing skill to master (or re-master) for many. In order to achieve this, one needs to be in a safe environment in which one is challenged by example and led by encouragement. A method to remember gently how to play may be created by returning to the concept of constraint, limiting the conversation groups of the conference by adding "rules." In practice, a rule could be as simple as experiencing a conversation in a different body position. Having a conversation about how the human mind constructs a reality while lying down in total darkness, instead of sitting in a circle of chairs in daylight, is a significantly different sensorial experience that could trigger conversational tangents that would

otherwise not be ventured, and as such is valuable to explore as a method in conference design. Inspiration for how to play may be found in the “groundcourse” developed by the artist and cybernetician Roy Ascott at Ealing College in Ipswich:

“Instead of working towards the production of finished objects, the students engaged in ludic group exercises that were aimed at fomenting counterintuitive thinking, cooperative strategies and generative systems, as well as dismantling hierarchies and eschewing virtuosity in any particular medium.”¹

«12» In my limited experience as an educator in using this method, the more bizarre a rule is (for instance: there always has to be a sheep involved, or: it as to be 30 x 60 x 60), the higher the level of innovation becomes, in particular when the rule is imposed by another group (I first witnessed this method being applied by the artist and educator Tine Melzer, with great effect).

1 | “On some faraway beach: The life and times of Brian Eno reviewed,” by Wilson Neate, 2009. Available at <http://thequietus.com/articles/02159-on-some-faraway-beach-the-life-and-times-of-brian-eno-reviewed>

16.00–17.30: Group reports

«13» In order to reconnect all participants as a whole, each group will report back what they discussed and learned, what was considered valuable and worthy of sharing to the other groups, using the provided ludic methods by the committee. The idea is to learn from these moments, and further develop them as the conversations progress during following days. This is the most precious moment of the day, as one witnesses the thought patterns and becomes acquainted with conversational pathways of others, new perspectives are born that stimulate the birth of new neural pathways, perhaps advancing creative abilities that are so often left underdeveloped, and underestimated in academic research.

17.30–19.30: Dinner break and evening programme

«14» The design of a single day, not even an evening programme, is all that this OPC has room for. Those readers who have been to the 2010 and 2013 conferences will see a strong similarity with this fictional conference. The two conferences were close to my own ideals, and thus this design is indeed inspired by their structure, and should continue to grow using Richards’s

design principles. Coming to the end of this OPC, is there anything I would like to add to Richards’s principles? In my own experience of conferences, I have often felt a sense of lost knowledge. Conferences often lack sufficient attention to capturing the knowledge developed during the conference. In the 2010 conference, we had a wonderful video publication filmed by Judy Lombardi, and further developed in collaboration with other participants during the workshops after the conference. A method of capturing epistemology of a conference should, in my opinion, be added as a design principle. That is why for this conference, I would like to explore methods of capturing the embedded knowledge, by aiming for an open-ended end product in the form of a one-day-publication.

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Author’s Response

Design for Participation: Culture, Structure, Facilitation

Laurence D. Richards

> **Upshot** • Conversational conferences are difficult to design in a way that avoids the consequences that arise when participants are not experienced with or fully value the conversational mode of interaction. So, the designers of such conferences must experiment with ways to build a culture, use a structure, and facilitate participation that might mitigate some of these consequences. The potential of the experimental conference designed in the light of second-order cybernetics lies, in part, in the prospect of identifying and acquiring the conversational abilities

and appreciations necessary to support a participative-dialogic society.

Introduction

«1» Conversation is a human activity at which we humans are not particularly adept, at least not all of the time. Current society simply does not encourage the development of the aptitudes or attitudes required for conversation to flow in the way we might prefer, if it flows at all. The open peer commentaries (OPCs) on my target article offer some thoughts on cultural, structural, and facilitative matters, to which I respond. However, I am not ready to draw connections between these aspects of conference design and second-order cybernetics (SOC), even if I have my preferences – hence, the call for experimentation. I like all their ideas and would participate in conferences that experiment with these ideas. The stakes in identifying

and acquiring the conversational abilities and appreciations necessary for a participative-dialogic society are huge, and I do not want to trivialize the demands this puts on our behaviors – our thinking, caring for others, and patience – as participants in such conferences.

«2» In my target article, I tried to connect themes from SOC with principles for designing an academic conference. I use as a point of departure the stereotypical traditional conference (although **Christiane Herr** prefers the term “conventional conference” (§1), which I also like). This stereotype is composed from my own experiences at a variety of conferences, and I recognize that it may not resonate with the experiences that some readers may have had. I have also attended academic conferences that I would describe as traditional, yet were different in significant ways from this stereotype, and I have certainly enjoyed some parts of some of these con-