

Integrating the conversational format into conventional conferences

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In the spirit of the Asilomar and Fuschl Conversations, and with the purpose of trying to find some ways to make conventional conferences more effective, the Organizing Committee of WMSCI 2009 is trying to make another small step in organizing some experimental sessions with the format of informal conversations in the context of WMSCI 2009, as a way of identifying possible methods of making more effective the conventional conferences.

Input to meetings with conversational format is usually associated with **questions** and /or **problems**, while the usual input of conventional conferences is the presentation of papers, with **answers** to questions and/or **solutions** to problems, based on research activities, reflections and/or experience. The output of meetings with a conversational format is oriented to solutions or to the formulations of new problems and questions by means of knowledge communication, opinion or reflection sharing, knowledge production and idea creation. The output of conventional conferences is usually reduced knowledge or information communication, mostly in unidirectional way, via papers presentation. Creation usually precedes the conference presentation, while creation, group creation (Synectics) is an integral part of the conversational meetings. More of these contrasting and opposing characteristics can be found in the draft paper entitled "Is it possible to integrate Conventional Conferences and Conversational Meetings in order to achieve more effectiveness?", especially at the table A that resumes these opposing characteristics. More details can be found at www.iiis.org/conversational-Sessions

Both formats seem to be **opposites** in several senses, but we have a strong conviction that this opposition does not necessarily mean a **contradiction** between both formats. We think that both formats could be organized as to produce some kind of a **polar opposition** where both opposites might require each other in synergic relationships by means of cybernetic loops of negative and positive feedbacks as well as feedforward ones. Table A shows some of the polarities between both kind of conferences. A more detailed article can be found at www.iiis.org/conversational-Sessions.

Does this cybernetic perspective make any sense? Can it serve as a methodological substratum for the design of more effective conferences? Should both kinds of formats be held separately as they have been up to the present? Do they contradict each other? Can they complement each other in a synergic relationship? These are questions that deserve some reflections and opinion sharing. They might even deserve some action-research, action-reflection and action-design processes. What a better place to start trying to answer these questions than meetings in the conversational format?

With this kind of uncompleted reflections and questions, the members of the Organizing Committee of WMSCI 2009 decided to try the conversational format in order to continue and to expand these reflections to participants of the conference.

After the conversations are over, the following activities might follow:

Each scholar, academic, practitioner or professional who participated in the conversational format may write an extended abstract based on his/her reflections as well as on the opinions, information and reflections shared by others in the same conversational meeting.

These extended abstracts will be posted in an electronic forum as to continue with some kind of electronic conversations.

Those authors of the extended abstract who might be interested in writing a full paper on the subject, trying to integrate their reflections with those of the other participants in the conversations (citing the content of the extended abstract and what they might have heard in the conversational meeting or what they might have read in the electronic forum)

If there are an adequate number of full papers on the subject, the best of them will be selected for the publication of a multiple-author book or an issue in the Journal of Systemics, Cybernetics and Informatics (JSCI)

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	Conventional Conferences	Conversations Format
Input	Paper based on a solution or an answer , which will be presented by an individual (its author).	A problem or a question , which will be addressed by a group .
Output	Knowledge or information communication.	Sharing of knowledge, reflections, ideas and opinions in multi-directional communication.
Flow of Information	Basically unidirectional .	Multi-directional .
Sequence	Serial : one presentation after the other, in a linear format.	Serial/Parallel : multiple short presentations by each individual interacting with similar short presentations of others in a non-linear interchange of ideas.
Cybernetic Loops	None or very low level of feedback in the small time period of questions/answers.	High levels of feedback and feedforward loops in a highly interactive environment.
Formal/Informal	Papers are presented in a formal environment and informal interaction is limited to coffee breaks.	More informal sharing of ideas and reflections with more possibilities of group creativity and emergence of ideas
Creativity	Individual (or group) creativity previous to the meeting.	Group creativity during the meeting, nurturing and being nurtured by the individuals in the group in positive loops of feedback.
Order	Pre-established fixed order of papers presentations. Plan-based order.	Post-established, emergent and dynamic order. Rules-based order.
Process	Systematic	Systemic
Implicit General Objective	Oriented to efficient knowledge or information communication.	Oriented to effectiveness in knowledge communication, sharing of ideas and reflections, solving problems, answering questions, achieving consensual designs, etc.
Whole/Parts	The whole is basically equal to (or sometimes even less than) the sum of its parts	The whole is basically more than the sum of its parts.
Guiding Metaphor	Mechanism	Organism
Methodological and Epistemic Approach	Mostly, but not uniquely, oriented by Reductionism and Mechanicism.	Oriented by the Systems Approach and its Pragmatic-Teleological epistemology and methodologies.

Table A: From Nagib Callaos, *Integrating the conversational format into conventional conferences*, at www.iiis.org/conversational-Sessions

Guidelines for the Conversational Format

Richard Saul Wurman affirms that “You begin all the conversations with questions.” (Conversation: What are conferences for? *Harvard Business Review*, June, 2006, p.26). Other authors think that the conversational format might begin with “a panel, a video presentation, or a reading”. We will begin this conversation in the context of this 2006 conference with the question written in the conference program.

The Role of the Moderator

This role of the moderator of a conversational meeting can be both challenging and rewarding. She or he is the key to an open, proactive and productive conversation, enabling people to explore ideas and thoughts and seek common ground, consensus and understanding.

Here are a few suggestions for bringing out a range of opinions, exploring the topic thoroughly, and encouraging a rich and lively discussion. A good moderator:

- serves as a facilitator rather than a lecturer and encourage everyone to speak, creating opportunities for everyone to do so, and helping participants look for common ground.
- remains impartial, encourage tolerance to opposite ideas, shows respect for all opinions, and does not use the position to influence the outcome of the discussion,
- keeps the conversation moving and on track by occasionally summarizing points, and bringing the discussion back to the topic if it wanders unproductively,
- asks questions that challenge old assumptions,
- if a ground rule is broken, asks the group to help re-establish the rules,
- proposes changes in commentator role that might help improve next conversations,
- registers the names of the participants in the conversations, and, if possible, makes a very short description of the most important issues that were raised in the conversation.

Setting Ground Rules

Ground rules will help keep the conversation on track. Here are some suggested ground rules:

- Participants will be engaged listeners and contributing speakers, and will show respect for the views expressed by others.
- Although a frank exchange of conflicting views is encouraged, participants should be careful not to become argumentative or dogmatic in the expression of their point of view.
- Participants understand that their comments should be **brief no more than 5 minutes**. This is a basic rule to follow because it is essential to the interactive and participative nature of the conversational format. The group can change the limit of five minutes via consensus or, at least the majority rule. No one will monopolize the conversation. The moderator will ensure that all who wish to speak have a chance to express their views.

- Comments will be directed mostly to the group as a whole rather than to the discussion leader or another individual. Disagreements will not become personal; name-calling and shouting are not acceptable.
- Participants will not interrupt when others are expressing their views. If needed, the group can establish a mechanism (e.g., raising hands) to enable everyone to speak or respond to someone else's comments.

Wrapping up a conversation

To wrap up a conversation, within the specified time announced, two steps are suggested.

1. the moderator should a fifteen-minute warning as the session draws to a close. This will give some time to the participants to make some individual conclusions and/or to share their opinion regarding the most important issues, ideas, answers, possibilities, etc. raised during the conversations. Or participants may be asked to comment on the efficacy or impact of the conversation for them. If a consensual conclusion is reached it must be made explicit, but consensual conclusion should not be forced on the group. Where different or opposite conclusions are in conflict then this is what should be made explicit.
2. Even though a thought-provoking dialogue is, in itself, a good outcome of any conversation, and this is one of the most important outputs of the conversational format, participants may want a sense of closure to the discussion. To achieve this objective the moderator may challenge the participants to identify areas of common ground areas as well areas where opposing and different perspectives has been communicated.

Evaluation of the conversation

Participants can evaluate the conversation after the conclusion of the conference. They will be able to evaluate and make recommendations to both the process and the content of the conversation.

Post-Conversation publishing

Each scholar, academic, practitioner or professional who participated in the conversational format may write an extended abstract based on his/her reflections as well as on the opinions, information and reflections shared by others in the same conversational meeting.

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