

The Conditions for Thriving Conversations

Kathia Castro Laszlo and Alexander Laszlo

INTRODUCTION

Our planet is in trouble as result of the conscious and unconscious collective choices of humanity that dominated the 20th century. Human conflict and environmental degradation are two of the complex interconnected global problems that challenge the way we think, interact, and live. New scientific understanding offers insight into the interconnected nature of our universe. This is the context of our inquiry. An inquiry into the meaning of being and becoming human; a quest toward sustainable and evolutionary ways of living in planet Earth.

Our work on conversation methodology, as a means for searching together – and co-creating – connections and meaning, emerges from the interest in “research methods that can deal with the kinds of ‘data’ that emerge out of the everyday world of human conversations and activities” (Salner, 1996, p. 6). We are particularly interested in purposeful conversations that go beyond social/interpersonal aspects to embrace an explicit learning and design inquiry. The competencies required for engaging in this kind of conversation overlap with the competencies required for designing more just and sustainable social systems. By this we mean to indicate evolutionary competency – the understanding and capacity to participate in conscious evolution.

Conversation, in contrast with debate and other forms of antagonistic discourse, is collaborative. It demands from the conversants an openness to changing views and perspectives – that is, it involves learning – and can foster coordinated action. This has been our experience in the Asilomar Conversation Community of the International Systems Institute (ISI). This Conversation Community meets annually in Pacific Grove, California, and our reflections on thriving conversations are based primarily on our involvement with a

group of colleagues with whom we have been exploring, since 1993, the notion of Evolutionary Learning Community as the means for facilitating the emergence of an evolutionary Design Culture.

1 WHAT IS A THRIVING CONVERSATION?

We are living in a world that more and more demands the ability to work flexibly and loosely together in ways that combine rational thought, technical skill, creativity and intuition (Rowland, 1992). As a result, conversation is re-emerging as a method of inquiry and a form of creative and synergistic interaction. But not all conversations can be described as thriving conversations.

An improvisational jazz session is a good metaphor for a thriving conversation — both jazz and conversations can generate enough excitement and positive energy to keep going those involved. In a jam session, one can admire the fluidity and graciousness of the melodies generated as the players build on each other's contributions. The players are truly listening to each other, complementing and furthering each other's musical ideas. For jazz musicians to engage in a jam session, they need to have dedicated enormous amounts of time and energy in perfecting their skills as players of each of their instruments, and equally important, they must have learned to play together — to co-create. Thriving conversations, like improvisational jazz, are co-creative processes that involve competence, mutual support, and enrichment. Thriving conversations are challenging and fun.

Conversation, as a disciplined method of inquiry (Banathy, 1996), is an art form just as is improvisational jazz. There is no way one can predict or control a conversation in order to make it a thriving conversation. It is like a dance that is created and re-created, step by step, idea by idea, consciously and volitionally.

1.1 Reflecting on conversations experiences

In 1994, we participated in a week-long conversation sponsored by the International Systems Institute which exemplified a thriving

conversation. It was the first time that the six participants in that conversation gathered as a team to explore how to facilitate the emergence of a design culture. Some members of the group had been part of the inquiry on design culture in previous ISI events. The understanding of the history of Group D, also known as the Design Culture group, was helpful in creating a common identity and a shared purpose (essential characteristics of authentic community (Laszlo & Laszlo, 1997)). The bonding of the conversation group members resulted in the evolution of their common identity:

We began by revolutionizing the group: based on our continued quest and the sense of identity that all the members shared (even those joining the group for the first time), we decided we were no longer a group – we had evolved into a Gang! From now on, we would be Gang D, or better, D-Gang. (Castro, et. al , 1994, p. 57.)

The reflections on our personal experiences working in this team, using conversation as our research methodology, are full of amazement at the energy level and the flowing and synergic dynamic of the group. Was this a thriving conversation? We think so, because:

- It integrated and balanced the generative (i.e., community building) and strategic (i.e., learning and design inquiry) aspects of design conversations;
- It honored and celebrated the contributions of all the members of the group, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, education or nationality;
- It built on the different contributions to advance a collective understanding and to co-create new meaning;
- It was exhilarating and fun;
- It could have continued for months and years – and it did!

1.2 Exploring conditions for thriving conversations

When we ask ourselves what the conditions necessary for the replication of thriving conversations, such as the one described above, are we can identify aspects that fit four categories: context, past, present, and future.

By context we mean the physical environment where the conversation will take place. We believe that a relaxing and enjoyable environment will influence the quality of the conversation. Expressions such as “the container flavors the contained” and “where the sake hits the cedar” reveal the popular wisdom of preparing a comfortable and creative space for a thriving conversation. In Western capitalist societies we are all too often used to square rooms, artificial lighting, monotonous colors, and a complete disconnect from nature. These conditions are considered to provide acceptable and even productive spaces. And although many thriving conversations can happen in such “industrial” environments, we think that things like sunlight and wind, trees and flowers, fireplaces and art, can be central pieces in the creation of the creative space for a thriving conversation.

The other three categories – past, present, and future – make reference to the conditions prior, during and after the face-to-face conversation itself. A thriving conversation does not “happen” out of nothing. It usually is the result of a growing friendship, a collaborative inquiry, or a personal quest that began way before the actual conversation. In this sense, a thriving conversation may actually begin before it begins! The thread that pulls together past and present is often a key condition for the conversation to thrive. Another aspect related to the “past” is the level of preparedness of those who come together with the purpose of engaging in conversation. Past experience in other thriving conversations, a shared knowledge base or a common cognitive map to support the conversation, and basic design competence are examples of elements that can increase the possibility for thriving conversations.

But no matter how experienced and how prepared the members of the group are, it is important to recognize that a thriving conversation is a complex dynamic process that can never be predicted or controlled. In fact, there are no guaranties for its “success.” Just as the ISI action-research team described above was able to move upwards in a spiral of mutual support and increased meaning, the opposite can also happen. There is one condition that over the years we have identified as a useful way of guiding a group through the dynamics that lead to thriving conversations. This guiding system is derived from an

evolutionary consciousness, that is, an understanding of the dynamics of evolution grounded in the sciences of complexity (Laszlo, 1987). The particular aspect of this understanding that is useful is the appreciation of divergence and convergence, differentiation and integration, as movements of the evolutionary dynamic. A thriving conversation would most likely present a stochastic process that fits the general dynamic pattern of differentiation and integration. An example of group dynamics that follows this pattern is Weisboard's (1995, pp. 138-139) description of the process of community building in four stages: contentment, denial, confusion, and renewal. These stages can also be thought of as forming, storming, norming, and performing. Thriving conversations are not exempt from such stages — it often happens that an initial agreement (integration) is followed by disagreement and chaos (differentiation). However, a true thriving conversation transcends this stage of divergence and arrives at a new level of organization and meaning, or in Weisboard's terms, at a stage of renewal.

A thriving conversation tends to make waves into the future. Relationships become stronger, projects get planned, new conversations emerge. The future thinking of those involved in a conversation, that is, their intention to continue the learning and design inquiry beyond the conversation encounter, can also affect the quality of the conversation itself.

In the categories past, present, and future conditions for thriving conversations, there is a constant factor that seems always to affect the quality of the conversation. This factor corresponds to the expectations conversants bring with them going into the conversation regarding both the way the conversation will go and where it will lead.

2 WHAT DO YOU EXPECT FROM OUR CONVERSATION?

People come together to participate in a conversation with different aims, intentions and expectations in mind. What is the impact of these expectations on the quality and outcomes of the conversation? Reflecting on our experiences in thriving (and not-so-thriving)

conversations, we have concluded that the purposes and dispositions of the individual participants are important to the success of the community and their conversation. In other words, not everyone can make a thriving conversation happen.

2.1 Proximate Life Passions and Ultimate Life Passions

The inquiry on design culture carried out by D-Gang evolved into an exploration of Evolutionary Learning Community (ELC) as the vehicle for creating such a culture. We describe one of our ELC conversations of ISI as “the year of angst.” The experience was exactly the opposite of what we are calling thriving conversations. Although unpleasant and unproductive in the strategic sense, the experience of a not-so-thriving conversation helped us learn important lessons. After this experience, we reported on how “a review of the essential elements for effective group work reveals at least three non-productive ‘tension sources’ that arose during [the first] three days [of our conversation]” (Laszlo & Laszlo, et. al. 1995, p. 66). The first tension source was individual expectations that impeded the agreement on common goals for the conversation week. The second was problems with communication such as the absence of active and respectful listening, despite the fact that we had established communication ground rules. The third significant source of tension was due to the lack of well-defined decision taking procedures for consensus making. As a result, the creation of common ground was an elusive task.

Months later, the experience was articulated by Alexander (in Halstead, et. al., 1997) in a way that captured the deeper individual conditions for a thriving or non-thriving conversation:

The composition of a group is critical to its success.... Perhaps the filter relates to “relative passion objectives:” if the passion objective is to live, learn, and understand from the process in order to enrich one’s life, then the ELC will not transcend; if the passion objective is to live, learn, and understand from the process in order to enrich the world, then the ELC will transcend. In the former, the quest is for realization of the self, with contribution to and

betterment of the world being secondary and a by-product. In the latter, the quest is for contribution to and betterment of the world, with realization of the self being secondary and a by-product. ELCs cannot emerge from individuals with “proximate life passions.” They must seek and attract and embrace individuals with “transcendent life passions.” (P. 58.)

Just as ELCs cannot emerge from individuals with proximate life passions, neither can thriving conversations. A thriving conversation is much more than the sum of individual interests. But for true synergy to take place, individuals need to put aside their personal agenda – as well as many of their assumptions – in order to transcend with the rest of the group and create new meaning.

The interesting thing about the distinction between proximate and ultimate life passions is that they do not present an “either/or” choice. The proximate life passion is an egocentric position that leaves issues pertaining to the larger environment and our collective long-term future out of the conversation. But the ultimate life passion, which is an ecocentric and evolutionary position, includes the proximate life passion as an integral part of inquiry. As a result, those individuals motivated by an ultimate life passion are also moved from within by an interest that touches their own life in a very personal and profound way.

3 DEVELOPING CAPACITY FOR CONVERSATION THROUGH COMMUNITY BUILDING — AND BUILDING COMMUNITY THROUGH CONVERSATION

M. Scott Peck (1987) explains how “the rules of communication are best taught and only learned through the practice of community-making. Fundamentally, the rules of communication are the rules of community-making” (p. 325). He also advises: “community-building first, problem-solving second” (p. 104). The essence of his message is that there cannot be effective conversation if the basis of trust, friendship, mutual support and caring relationships are absent. Thriving conversations are interdependent with the quality of the communication of the group. In fact, it is the very sense of healthy

and authentic community that creates a safe and nurturing environment for rich learning and design explorations.

Banathy (1996) defines design conversations as the combination of generic and strategic dialogue. The first refers to the parts of the conversation that build trust, create bonds, and strengthen the sense of community among the conversants. The second refers to the parts of the conversation that are focused on the task that brought the group together in the first place, that is, on the specific form of learning and design inquiry. There is no required sequence for these two types of dialogue in design conversations, but in our experience, it is helpful to begin with generative dialogue to get to know each other, to set the bases for the collaborative inquiry and to make explicit the values and guidelines to be honored during the conversation. Generative dialogue naturally leads to strategic issues. And as the strategic dialogue unfolds, there are always elements of generative dialogue that continue to infuse and hold the process.

3.1 Approaches for generative dialogue

When a conversation is a learning and design conversation, generative dialogue could appear to be less important than strategic dialogue. But more and more and in different contexts, we learn the importance of community building for the effectiveness and productivity of a group's interaction.

While there exist rigorous methodologies for strategic dialogue (e.g., social systems design (Banathy,1996), soft systems methodology (Checkland, 1981), future search (Weisboard, 1995)), the generative part of the dialogue tends to be aided by less structured approaches. This does not mean that there are no generative approaches, however, they rarely are used in conjunction with strategic approaches. In fact, many of the approaches that seem clearly to aid community building are often presented as stand-alone strategic processes, instead (e.g., team Syntegration events, Psyche gaming activities, and Synergic Inquiry programs).

Synergic Inquiry (Tang, 1997) is an example of an approach that has great potential to aid the generative dialogue phase and to create

conditions that propitiate thriving conversations. Similarly to Weisboard's description of the dynamics of community building, Synergic Inquiry follows the evolutionary pattern of differentiation and integration. The phases of this approach involve self-knowing, other-knowing, differences holding and differences transcending. It is this last stage that characterizes an authentic community — “a way of being together with both individual authenticity and interpersonal harmony so that people become able to function with a collective energy even greater than the sum of their individual energies” (Scott Peck in Banathy, 1996, p. 239).

Synergic Inquiry can be used in an explicit or implicit way. By explicit we mean its conscious use by a group in a way that applies exercises to move along the four phases of the process. An implicit use would involve a shared knowledge of the SI process and an unstructured unfolding of the generative and strategic conversation interspersed with guided reflection on where in the SI process they have been or need now to be.

Design conversations are always learning conversations. Design is a future creating inquiry that requires innovation and openness of evolutionary learners. As such, design conversations enhance both individual and collective development which become the foundations of the co-creative design journey. Synergic Inquiry parallels the individual and collective development at the strategic level, where conversants learn and develop the shared knowledge base to support their inquiry, by guiding the differentiation and integration dynamics of the group along the path toward becoming a learning and designing community (see Figure 1).

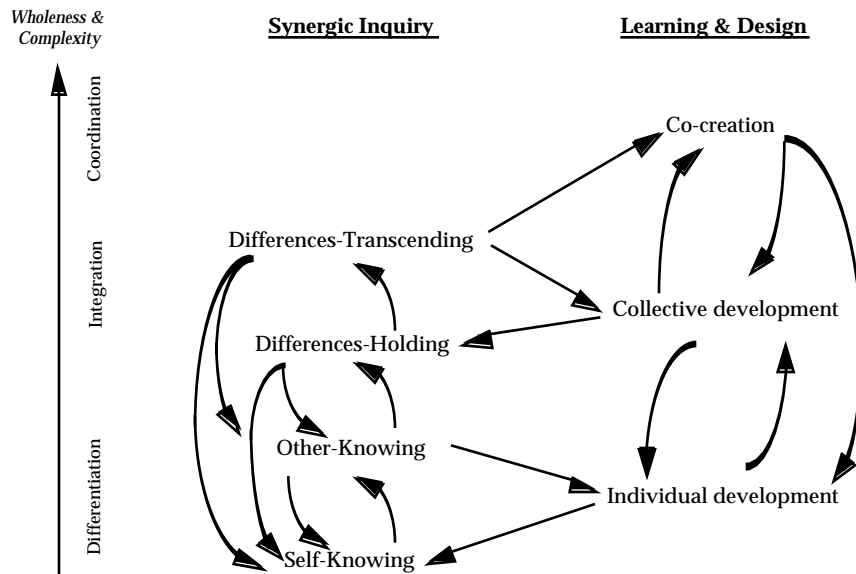


Figure 1. Interrelations between Synergic Inquiry and the process of Learning and Design Inquiry.

4 FACILITATING THRIVING CONVERSATIONS

Can someone facilitate a conversation in which he or she does not participate? We will look at this questions from the perspective of thriving conversations by using a particular design heuristic: the five generations of designers.

4.1 Generations of designers and conversation facilitators

A conversation facilitator is the person who guides and supports the interactive processes of the group. To *facilitate*, according to Webster's Dictionary, means “to assist the progress of a person.” It also defines it as “to make easier or less difficult.” Both of these definitions are relevant when considering the role of a conversation facilitator. They indicate that the function of the facilitator is to help the group move toward common meaning and transcendence through the not-always-easy stages of differentiation and integration involved.

We draw the analogy between generations of designers and of conversations facilitators. In social systems design we differentiate among five generations of designers (Laszlo, 1992). The *first generation* designer is considered an expert and specialist in the design process. She studies the situation of the group and decides which is the best solution for them. The *second generation* designer is akin to the classical consultant who asks for information from the members of the group, and then analyses it and gives them a solution according to her perception of their needs. These two first generations design *for* others. In contrast, the last three generations of designers design *with* others. The *third generation* designer gets the group involved in the creation of alternative solutions, but at the end of the process, she nevertheless selects the best alternative for them. The *fourth generation* designer works to create an adequate group environment that facilitates the processes of generating alternatives and selecting solutions. The newest generation, the *fifth generation*, not only involves the group in the design process, but also helps the group to learn how to learn to facilitate. A group that does so can sustain the continued design process by themselves (Banathy, 1996.)

How are these designer generations roles related to the role of the conversation facilitator? We believe that a facilitator of a conversation cannot operate out of the values and assumptions derived from the first two generations. That is to say, there is no possibility for an authentic conversation facilitator to “design *for* others” or to assume a position of authority and control over the conversants. The conversation facilitator cannot be an external agent to the community but rather needs to be just another member of it. In fact, many thriving conversations are characterized by a shared facilitation process in which the role of the facilitator is not assumed by only one individual but rotates among the members of the community.

The facilitator of a conversation can function out of the framework of a third, fourth or fifth generation of designer. But facilitators of thriving conversations tends to work from the basis of the fifth generation — completely integrated into the group, sharing the facilitation functions and responsibilities, and helping the group to become more and more capable of facilitating their own process evolutionary change and transcendence.

Bela Banathy (1996) suggests a set of guardianship roles to share responsibility and accomplish the tasks of the group. These roles include:

- the guardian of participation
- the guardian of keeping the focus
- the guardian of selected group technique
- the guardian of documentation
- the guardian of accepting and honoring all contributions
- the guardian of values
- the guardian of “keeping the fire burning”
- the guardian of time and coordination

Each role is descriptive of the functions that a facilitator carries out, but in thriving conversations, they are not assumed by just one individual but shared by the community as a whole. As with SI, these guardianship roles can be used explicitly or implicitly. The thriving conversation in which Group D became D-Gang used these roles explicitly, and the members of that conversation community found them extremely useful for the success of their conversation. The group that participated in the year of angst, because they were familiar with these roles and responsibilities, decided not to assign or rotate the functions explicitly, and the group was unable to secure processes such as that of accepting and honoring all contributions or keeping a common focus. It takes time and practice for these functions to be embodied in a community in a way that does not need to be consciously taken care of.

5 MANAGING PLACE AND SPACE

Conversation is a human activity that involves much more than language. Emotions, intentions, expectations, intuitions, dreams, knowledge, imagination, interpretation, and experiences are intertwined elements that shape the quality and meaning of the conversation. Conversations are characteristically complex, because so are human interactions (as well as humans, themselves!).

While before it was only possible to have a conversation when two or more people were physically in the same place at the same time, with the emergence of communication technologies it is becoming more common to have conversations that transcend boundaries of time and space. The Internet has revolutionized the way we interact with each other and is making it possible to establish connections with people all around the world.

The design conversations that we have convened through the International Systems Institute are week-long face to face conversations. In these intense encounters we have had the opportunity to learn much about conversation methodology and ways in which we can facilitate thriving conversations. Our yearly week-long conversations are supplemented with an on-line component in preparation and follow-up of our week together.

Thus far, on-line interaction has been limited to email, listservs, telephone, and fax. The intensity of the on-line interaction with D-Gang has varied widely. While in some weeks the interaction is rich and focused, there have also been months during which there was no interaction at all and others when it was limited to administrative issues. One thing is for sure: access through email to the rest of the team members gives some sense of continuity from one intense week of face-to-face learning and designing to the next. But it is difficult to keep the fire of our conversation burning once we get back to “life as usual.” The week at Asilomar remains as our main place for collaboration.

We have used Internet technologies, such as chat rooms and discussion lists, to facilitate conversations in other contexts outside of ISI. One example is our collaboration on a listserv that ended up creating a book with contributors from a variety of different countries (Miller, 2000). Our action-research has also benefited from other types of conversation over the Internet. For instance, we facilitated a community development project in Mexico in which the co-design and learning required for its implementation was accomplished through interactive chats and email exchanges (Laszlo, 2000). Much of our teaching at the doctoral and masters level has also been enriched by the opportunity for conversation beyond the classroom. With all but the experience on the collaborative book, our rich and

thriving conversations that have been mediated by information technology have also been complemented by face-to-face encounters. In fact, we have found that in many cases the very success of on-line conversations depend on the effectiveness of the kind of generative dialogue – the bonding – that happens when we interact in person.

On-line conversations can certainly be strategic, and if well defined, can bring about very positive and concrete results. It is the generative part of thriving conversations that still seems to call for the high-touch aspects of face-to-face interaction. A combined used of on-site and on-line conversations offer many possibilities for ongoing community building, learning, and design.

6 POSSIBILITIES EMERGING FROM THRIVING CONVERSATIONS

Thriving conversations involve trust and friendship, learning and transformation, democracy and participation, diversity and synergy, playfulness and enjoyment, connection and meaning.

Thriving conversations go beyond the social and community dimensions of many other forms of dialogue to embrace a collaborative learning and design purpose. In a world in distress, thriving conversations offer spaces for the joint creation of knowledge and meaning, for finding hope and energy to work together toward a better world, for learning and discovering new possibilities. Those communities that learn how to engage in thriving conversations experience what Csikszentmihalyi (1993) describes as “flow” or “optimal experience.”

We have chosen the term “syntony” to describe the creative aligning and tuning to each other and to the greater environment that allows a community to engage in a thriving conversation. In other words, the ultimate thriving conversation is a *syntonious* conversation – one that is purposefully focus on developing evolutionary consciousness for conscious evolution. Creating such conversations is at once tremendously challenging, tremendously fun, and tremendously rewarding.

References

- Apatow, Robert (1999). *El Arte del Diálogo: La comunicación para el crecimiento personal, las relaciones y la empresa*. Madrid: EDAF.
- Castro, Kathia; Laszlo, Alexander, et.al. (1994). Design Tools: Toward the concrete and conceptual heuristics of a design culture. In *Proceedings of the Sixth International Conversation on the Comprehensive Design of Social Systems*, Pacific Grove: International Systems Institute.
- Checkland, Peter (1981). *Systems Thinking, Systems Practice*. New York: Wiley.
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly (1993). *The Evolving Self: A psychology for the third millennium*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Halstead, Jack; Quiñones, Marina et. al. (1997). Evolutionary Learning Community Inquiry: Reflections on our conversation experience. *Proceedings of the Ninth International Conversation on the Comprehensive Design of Social Systems*. Pacific Grove: ISI.
- Laszlo, Alexander (1992). "Fostering Design Competencies: Empathizing With and Enhancing Individual and Collective Self-Development Capacities." Manuscript.
- Laszlo, Kathia and Laszlo, Alexander (1997). Partners in Life: Syntony at work. *Proceedings of the Ninth International Conversation on the Comprehensive Design of Social Systems*. Pacific Grove: ISI.
- Laszlo, Alexander; Laszlo, Kathia, et.al. (1995). Building a design culture through evolutionary learning communities. *Proceedings of the Seventh International Conversation on the Comprehensive Design of Social Systems*. Pacific Grove: ISI.
- Laszlo, Ervin (1987). *Evolution: The grand synthesis*. Boston: New Science Library.
- Laszlo, Kathia C. (2000). Co-Creating Learning Communities in Mexico. In Miller, Ron (Ed.). *Creating Learning Communities: Models, resources and new ways of thinking about teaching and learning*. New York: Solomon Press.
- Miller, Ron (Ed.) (2000). *Creating Learning Communities: Models, resources and new ways of thinking about teaching and learning*. New York: Solomon Press. Peck, M. Scott (1987).

The Different Drum: Community building and peace. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Rowland, Gordon. "Do You Play Jazz?" *Performance & Instruction* Nov./Dec. 1992. P. 19.

Salner, Marcia (1996). A new framework for human science. *Saybrook Perspectives*. San Francisco: Saybrook Institute.

Tang, Yongming (1997). Fostering transformation through differences: The Synergic Inquiry (SI) framework. In *ReVision*, Vol. 20, No. 1.

Weisboard, Marvin (1995). Future Searches. In Gozdz, Kazimierz (Ed.) *Community Building: Renewing Spirit and Learning in Business*. San Francisco: New Leaders Press.