



# *International Federation For Systems Research*

Proceedings of the

## **Thirteenth Fuschl Conversation G. Metcalf, G. Chroust (Editors)**

**April 22-27, 2006  
Fuschl am See (Austria)**

**SEA-Publications: SEA-SR-13  
July 2006**

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**ISBN 3-902457-13-9**



**JOHANNES KEPLER  
UNIVERSITY LINZ**  
Research and teaching network

## Impressum

Schriftenreihe: SEA-Publications  
of the Institute for Systems Engineering and Automation

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Printing sponsored by the  
International Federation For Systems Research (IFSR)

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printed:  
J. Kepler Universität Linz, 2006

ISBN 3-902457-13-9  
Institute for Systems Engineering and  
Automation  
[www.sea.uni-linz.ac.at](http://www.sea.uni-linz.ac.at)



## Topic 1: Fuschl Extension: Igniting a new Form of Conversation

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Urban Kordes (Slovenia)

Christian Fuchs (Austria)

Barbara Rivera (USA)

Gordon Rowland (USA)

### Abstract

Group innovation and collaboration can be fostered by the application of social systems design and dialogue methods. The conversation is then a journey of mutual inquiry that broadly follows a direction but never the exact same path. Along the way, a common base of shared meanings and social cohesion is developed. If enough energy is present, this momentum may inspire further advancement of the ideas and cohesion. This article describes the journey of the conversation at Fuschl 2006 that resulted in the conceptualization of a new evolution of the conversation itself, including a proposal to continue a new mini-conference at the fall Asilomar Conversation.

### Conversation is Journey

In the lobby of a cozy lakeside hotel (Seehotel Schlick in Fuschl) in Austria, five of us stood with our luggage around an old stone hearth and wondered if the lit twigs would be enough to catch a much larger, older log on fire.

“Do you think it will light?” asked Barbara.

“If the twigs can burn long enough,” said Yoshi setting his yellow rain jacket coat atop a huge solid suitcase.

Urban considered this situation and offered, “Well, if nothing else it was a great four days. We have really come up with something.”

Christian nodded, watching the small twigs, which seemed to be burning to no effect. “We built great relationships, had very constructive and envisioning conversations, and co-constructed new ideas and projects that have relevance and could make a difference in the world. We learned from others’ experiences and ideas and experienced a great time with some great people.”

“Yes,” said Yoshi, “although I had hoped it would catch on a little more strongly.”

“Perhaps in time,” suggested Doug.

Outside, taxis and small buses were beginning to load. With brusque shaking of hands, patting of shoulders, and quick hugs, we were off to parts all over the world.

“See you in Tokyo next year!”

“I’ll be there!”

“Bye!”

Meaningful conversation that produces group innovation, cohesion, and collaboration is a journey of interwoven ideas. Ideas emerge and spark others, sometimes combusting, other times dying out, as process and content evolve and mutually affect each other. In a seemingly magical way, the interaction creates a greater idea than would have been possible by one individual.

This article recounts the conversational journey of the “Future of Conversation” team that met as part of the Fuschl Conversation 2006. This team, while engaging in conversation themselves, also explored the future of the conversation conference, both as a concept and as a specific recommendation. The group’s journey, as well as its findings, are covered in this article.

The team’s conversation journey is recounted in a stylized way. This means that the statements and flow are not meant to be strictly literal. Rather, the narrative strives to convey the essential experience of what happened, grounded in the literal occurrences, but thus saving the reader from the frequent awkward, vague, and circular wanderings that dialogue participants go through in attempting to understand each other.

## What is Conversation?

The Fuschl Conversation is a unique kind of conference, often called a “conversation conference.” This extraordinary event has been hosted biannually for more than 20 years at Lake Fuschl, Austria, sponsored by the International Federation of Systems Research. Similarly, a sibling event, the Asilomar Conversation Conference, has been hosted annually for over 17 years in Pacific Grove, California by the International Systems Institute.

Both conferences were started by Bela H. Banathy, who saw them as an anti-conference of sorts. In Banathy’s view, most of learnings and conference value were achieved in the relationship building and through dialogue that people had between lectures and over meals. He was also cognizant that adult learning theory suggests how little of a lecture is retained over time. Thus, Banathy’s experiment was to focus the conference on the high-value learning elements, and he constructed the “conversation conference” with a format comprising several small research teams of approximately 4 to 15 people that conduct a 4-day dialogic exploration of pre-defined topic.

As occurred at Fuschl 2006, the conversation conference traditionally starts the evening before the intensive dialogue begins with an opening session. During this first session, all the teams meet together, and team topics, individuals, logistics, and ground

rules are introduced.

There are typically 6 or 8 teams present, comprising some 20-40 people, who assemble in the large meeting room.

This was where several of the Future of Conversation team members—Urban, Yoshi, and Doug—first chance met as a group in 2006. After introducing themselves, the three looked around without recognizing some additional expected faces.

“I heard Gordon Dyer can’t make it due to sudden illness in his family,” said Yoshi. “But where are Gordon Rowland and Barbara?”

“Don’t know. Haven’t seen either of them,” replied Doug.

It was not until an hour later, just as dinner was being served in a small cozy dining room by the lake that Gordon and Barbara appeared. “Our plane was delayed,” explained Gordon. He described a series of travel disruptions emanating from the delay. Then, he suggested, “Too bad we missed the big meeting—would it be good perhaps for each of us to share a little about why we came here and what we are expecting?”

The team agreed and stories were shared. “This, it seems to me, is often a good way to start,” said Doug. “Gordon and I have been together on these teams many times and it is amazing how just this simple task builds rapport.”

The team seemed to agree. After a while, Urban asked, “So, what is the work here? What is the team to do?”

“What I heard,” said Doug “was a request for us to re-imagine Fuschl, to ask, “How should future conversations be? And even ‘should we have them?’”

“Why now? Haven’t they been going on for 20 years?” asked Urban.

“In my email conversations with the organizers, there seems to be a sense of decline,” suggested Gordon. “This was the reaction to some difficulties at previous conversations, for example personal agendas conflicting with what others took to be the event’s major purposes. Also, there seemed to be less interest, less enthusiasm for it currently.”

“So do we ask whether it should even continue at all?” queried Barbara.

“Perhaps.”

The next morning, after breakfast, the team gathered in a small room lit by dim lamps. Vestiges of days gone by lurked in the shadows: hickory seating booths had survived the room’s previous life as the primary dining room; stuffed wildlife adorned the walls as trophies of some long forgotten conquests; skis and snowshoes hung on the side wall although no snow was to be found. The team



Gordon Rowland,  
Debora Hammond

sat around a rectangular table on a variety of chairs and benches, most none too comfortable. To the side was a blank flip chart on an easel, waiting like a field of pristine snow for someone to cross.



(from left) **Barbara Rivera, Doug Walton, Gordon Roland, Urban Kordes, Christian Fuchs, Yoshihide Horiuchi**

Also, in one chair, there was a new face: Christian. Following the practice of the previous evening, he was asked to give some background about himself, and the other members of the team did likewise, even if the background was a repeat for most.

After the introduction of Christian, there were a few moments of awkwardness, and silence, followed by some more general comments and small talk, until Barbara asked: "What is this about? Who has been here before? Since I haven't been here before, what has been your experience? What is this conversation?"

"I was here once before and it was positive," said Christian. "My experience was I could develop enthusiasm, commitment, and happiness related to the encounter with new people and the work we jointly accomplish in small conversation groups. It gives you a feeling of community that you often miss in large-scale conferences. The processes and outcomes are valuable and important for me."

Doug concurred: "For me, it is often a 'magical' experience. It might start out wandering and rough. In fact, often on the second day, a lot of people are feeling like it's a pointless waste of time. But then something—though not always—happens where the group coheres with a sense of purpose and clarity."

Yoshi looked in careful thought, then said, "I have also been to conversation conferences many times. But unlike the conversation teams I participated in the past, this time we did not exchange input papers before arriving. It probably would have been better if we had done so, I would think. In most of the past Fuschl Conversations, our team distributed our input papers before the actual conversation took place."

Gordon added: "I have also attended to the Fuschl Conversation several times, and this no doubt affected how I approached coming here. I haven't been entirely at ease. Early on I had offered to facilitate a sort of meta-conversation on the topic of conversation and the future of the Fuschl conversation. But as time passed, it became unclear to me if and how the conversation group would happen in the months prior to the event, so I adopted a wait-and-see attitude. Final notice arrived at the last minute, and that was the first I knew that the conversation group was indeed happening and input papers were expected. I could not respond and that made me uncomfortable, particularly since I was bringing Barbara along and felt like I had not guided her well on this." Everyone nodded understandingly.

"I had a similar confusion," said Doug. "There is so much to do already. Similarly, the historical traditional issue after the conversation has been that we often get together, have a great conversation, agree to action items, and then do nothing. This causes me to wonder: What is it that makes it a conversation? Are we having one now? If we change it, what must stay the same for it to be a conversation in this sense?"

"I think the conversation is about *opening and holding the space* for ideas and stories to unfold," Urban conjectured. "Each person is given respect and an opportunity to speak and be heard, and we witness often the emergence of synergetic concepts in newly created space."

Christian added, "For me I can best describe it by a story. Earlier, I spent some time with friends in Salzburg, which turned out to be a very nice afternoon. We went up to the Salzburg fortress from where there is a beautiful view of the city and its surroundings. We wanted to see the inside of the fortress and some of the rooms. We entered with a group of tourists, and every person received an audio guide. People were then brought into a room and expected to stay there until all had listened to the messages on the audio guides. Then we were brought to the next room. The second room was a former torture chamber; the whole procedure seemed similar to mental and social torture and it is a good example of an extremely bad socio-technological system design. There was no freedom to decide when to enter and leave a room and or whether to listen to a message or not. Besides that, communication between each other wasn't supported; rather, it was inhibited by the usage of the audio tools. We decided to leave the setting after the second room.

"Fuschl-like conversations are the exact opposite of the situation just described: They enable the intensive communication of people who are focused on certain topics and who aim to communicatively develop joint visions for the future. In fact, they are future-generating processes. The essentials are intensive dialog, co-learning, and collaborating."

"So it is a space, but is there also a process or a method?" asked Yoshi. "Or is it completely self-organizing?"

"Too much structure would constrain it," said Barbara.

"Agreed, but I think there is some process," said Doug. "For example, we were careful to exchange personal stories of introduction. This is something that Gordon and Yoshi and I have learned from our past experiences together, it is a good way to start."

"What other elements of method are there? Like now, where do we go?"

"I think there is a logical order of decisions, but it probably doesn't matter where we actually start," said Doug. "I have often started in the middle of the systems design process. Everything is interconnected and eventually comes out, although it is good to have a concept of the overall flow in the back of one's mind. We should just start where there is some passion around a question and then be aware there are answers that come before and after it."

"Then why don't we start with something like 'who is served?'" suggested Gordon. "And who should be included?"

"How should we deal with that?" asked Barbara.

"Here is where an element of process might be useful," said Doug. "One of the things Bela Banathy used to do was to have everyone take a flip chart and think independently for a while, writing ideas on the chart, and eventually reporting back to the group."

The group agreed to try this technique, and, within about fifteen minutes, they reported back, as summarized below.

DOUG:

"My perspective comes from several previous conversations like this one, many in which Bela Banathy was involved, and we called the effort the Agora Project. In that effort, we tried to create a better civil society or a reinvigorated public sphere, by combining technology with social systems design. The idea was to create local Agoras, or conversation communities of citizens, who would envision a better future. Some of them would be stewards, or versed in design and systems thinking and these stewards might also have their own community.

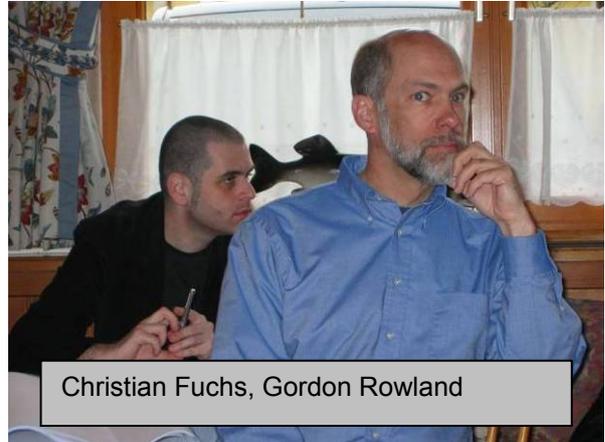
"Traditionally, though, Fuschl and the Asilomar Conversation, have been mainly attended by scholars and academics. So we have to decide if the community served is ourselves as scholars, or, if we want to more directly make a difference in the world by enabling people to have dialogue and do social systems design.

"I can see these possible groups: systems 'experts,' students, and other people who may not be systems-knowledgeable but have a passion to make a difference. So, we have to ask: Is it just

to get together and discuss coordinating between scholars? Is it to create more theory or to apply it? We have to choose whether it is for our own benefit, to come and have community and share ideas with other scientists, or is it to go out and improve civil society directly.”

**CHRISTIAN:**

“I think that contributing to a better society and to the empowerment of civil society are important goals of Fuschl-like processes. This idea is particularly important to me because I have myself gathered different experiences in civil society organizations and have for quite some time actively tried and struggled to contribute to the improvement of society and to the solution of societal problems. From a scientific and philosophical perspective I have been especially impressed by the writings of the Frankfurt School that has tried to find ways of sustaining the improvement of society by critical reflection on grievances. Although I was very critical of Jürgen Habermas for a long time, I think today that communicative action is an important principle for solving problems, sharing ideas, co-constructing society, and for achieving a participatory democracy. For me the work of Bela H. Banathy (1996) is conceptually closely linked to Habermas’ idea of communicative action because Social Systems Design is all about improving society by the power of communication. Social Systems Design for me means the collective construction of visions and practices of overcoming the alienation and the discomfort that many people feel in the social systems they live in by self-organization processes of affected individuals by and for themselves. Such estrangement might frequently be caused (in Habermas’ terms) by the colonization of the life-world by money. Capital. and bureaucratic power (Habermas 1981).



**URBAN:**

“I struggle more with ‘What is bringing people here? What is in it for them?’ They must come voluntarily and have shared intentions. There are concepts and then there are real-world applications. Is it about advancing theories and publishing papers or doing something? I think we must consider whether to leave the systems community and to connect Fuschl-like conversations to real-world problems and local communities.”



(from left): **Barbara Rivera, Yoshihide Horiuchi, Maria Mercedes Clusella Cornejo**

YOSHI:

“But, shouldn’t we still create knowledge to share with our colleagues? The teams I was on have always published papers. This has been a good outcome of the Conversation before. It allows us to share our findings with students and the academic community.”

GORDON:

“I go back to what Urban was saying. If we are serving citizens, then they must be included in the process. We cannot design for them. Perhaps what the conversation offers is easing of conflicts—transforming conflict to co-creation—and our conversations are not only about the future of conversation but also how society designs its own future.”

BARBARA:

“This has been quite interesting for me. I didn’t know what to expect—I thought this was going to be about systems theory—and now there is a long-range thought about society. The terms are even new. I thought at first ‘civil society’ was well-behaved society, but now I see we are using it in a special way. This presents quite a challenge if we include those ‘outside’ the systems community...how do they learn this special language?”

“Thus, do they have to have qualifications?” asked Doug.

“Part of our process could be educating people, building the stewards who learn new concepts and take them back,” suggested Gordon.

“So there would always have to be a track for new people?”

“But how would ‘everyone’ be invited? Isn’t there a limit to the size of a team and how many people can be involved, even with technology?” asked Yoshi.

“I think there can only be small teams,” said Doug, “although they can intermix in different conversations. But, rather than everyone meeting at once to agree on everything, it is more like an ongoing practice that tends to create greater alignment and shared meaning across the community—a ‘magnetic’ field by analogy.”

“Do they have to come prepared?”

“We should encourage it; we all agree it makes a better conversation.”

“Will people really want to put this much time in?”

“If they don’t, then their lives will be designed for them.”

“Perhaps, they should have the freedom to participate, whether they want to or not.”

“Well I guess they do have the choice in a free society,” said Doug. “But on the other hand, don’t people have to take responsibility to be involved? How can democracy work without that?”

There was a pause. Then Yoshi said, “I think maybe this discussion leans toward a very Western point of view.”

“How?”

“We are assuming that people will want to speak out, but, in Japan and other Eastern cultures, speaking out may be impolite. People in some other cultures prefer to keep their opinions to themselves.”

“Will dialogue not work then? Doesn’t dialogue require speaking out?”

“We must ensure that the expectation is set up front and that we are aware of the cultural dynamics.”

Gordon said: “Another issue I see concerns consensus. We believe in consensus, yet others may not. For example, my friend, who is a very nice and smart man, believes that the best approach is to debate and critique issues. He believes such an approach produces the best results by exposing the idea to testing, and he believes that consensus just builds a ‘group think.’”

“But with all of this, why come for the conversation? What are we offering people through this process? A better way of decision making? A way to remove conflicts?” asked Urban.

“Group polarity research has shown groups make better decisions if process and equality are followed,” suggested Doug.

Everyone seemed quite puzzled. Then Urban stood up.

“I guess I missed something,” said Urban. He walked to the flip chart where he had drawn some ovals of intention, concept, and space. After studying it for moment, he wrote JOY in red and drew an arrow into the intention circle, saying:

“It may be those things that you mention, but it is about what each of us is in it for. It is about the passion for dialogue—the joy of the conversation itself. That is something we can share and also serve others with.”

## The Flame Ignites

The next day, although aligned around the idea of conversation and joy, the group seemed to briefly struggle, confused and overwhelmed. A lot of questions had been raised, and only a few were satisfactorily answered. Urban then asked, "Would you come back? Perhaps we take each of our personal reasons. Why are you here? What would bring you back?" This question resonated with the group and there was general agreement to pursue that direction.

## The Horizontal Flip Chart Method

"Shall we do it the same way? Have everybody think independently and then go around and discuss?"

"What if we all write our ideas on the same flip chart?"

"We could divide it into sections for each?"

"But it would be too small and restrictive."

"What about just free form then?"

"What if we tape several sheets together and lay it flat on the table here? Then we can all gather around it."

In this way, a new method was born. Placing the flip chart horizontal on the table seemed to open the interactive systems thinking among the group. The group members could write out their thoughts and draw pictures that others could easily expand upon without getting up and interrupting each other's performances. The emerging set of drawings and notes were intellectually stimulating to look at from various angles. Moreover, the group found that there was no single correct angle to look at a contribution; rather, there were many equally interesting ways to view a contribution.

Barbara would later say, "Once this happened, I found the somewhat intimidating performance aspect of the conversation was gone. The vertical flip chart, which had at once seemed to be associated with control and hierarchy, became a horizontal flip chart more associated with equality and cooperation. Consequently, I was much more comfortable sharing and participating in the group using this arrangement."



(from left) Christian Fuchs, Doug Walton, Barbara Rivera

## Fuschl Extension Emerges

Once the clean pages were laid out, a stream of seemingly unrelated concepts unfolded, each helped by placement and by being viewed from multiple perspectives. Gradually, the pieces fit together as if everyone had been secretly given a different piece of the same puzzle, without knowing it, and then viewed with great surprise as the apparently different pieces began to form a recognizable picture. Gordon was first. At one end of the blank space, he drew a circle labeled "intention" and a half circle outside it called "framework." To this, Barbara added some elements of framework, such as diverse, special, self-reflection, fluidly bonded, transformative, few distractions, connected to beauty of the "natural" world, generative, and joyful.

Doug drew a timeline down the middle of the sheet showing the three phases of the conference: preparation, conference, and post conference. Yoshi added that the post-conference could feed into the preparation of the next conference, thus creating a self-seeding loop and that continuously opened up a new space. The group began to see the Fuschl conversation as more than a 'problem-solving' exercise. It was a way of surfacing assumptions in entrenched positions so new forms of moving forward together, or co-creating and co-learning, could be found.

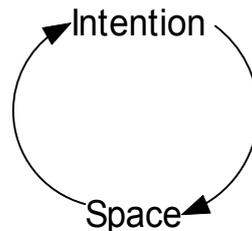
Urban proposed: "It may be better if the conference also had only one main topic, discussed from different perspectives, rather than any suggested topic."

The group indicated consensus.

Christian circled back to the process diagram and added annotations, explaining: "And these pre- and post discussions can be facilitated with technology—mailing lists, web-based discussion boards, wikis, and that."

In this fashion, there was much discussing of the drawings already on the table, annotating and clarifying them. Additional notes were written in different colored pens; lines were drawn across, around, and through objects to connect ideas; sub-drawings were made and inserted. Urban then went to the far end and drew two circles labeled intention and space, which were linked to each other as shown in figure 2. “In all of it, there is the continuous action of intention creating space, which feeds back to intention. They have the intention, and we create the space for communities that want to make changes.”

**Figure 1. Interaction of Intention and Space**



“Is it reasonable for the community to come here?” asked Gordon. And then he said

“What if we were to take Fuschl to them?”

The team became highly excited, realizing as the pieces came together there was suddenly a fundamental shift. As Urban later explained, “I must admit it is not easy for me to describe the concept. I can feel the idea very strongly, but making it sound reasonable is a big challenge. Why on earth would anybody want to invite a group of people to a conference that doesn’t promise results, but just an opportunity to learn together with the hosts? Yet, the basis for this enterprise is the insight that conversation can help a lot in cases where “local” actors are trapped in some kind of vicious circle. In these cases, an additional group of people – who are not involved in the local problem and are willing to learn from hosts – can bring fresh perspectives and detached view. So, a shared conversation between conversation lovers (i.e. Fuschl people) and a local group with specific issues as a with conversation focus – *that is what we labeled ‘Fuschl Extension.’*”

### **Detailing the Model**

Once the concept of Fuschl Extension emerged, there was tremendous excitement among the group and a great sense of coherence. The model was quickly sketched out on brand new flipcharts, and they transformed the room from a monument of the past into a 360-degree experience of fresh ideas. The model began to embody the following concepts:

The intent would not be to ‘sell’ the conversation methodology. Instead, in an ideal circumstance, after hearing a bit about the Fuschl conversations, potential local participants would approach a Fuschl individual and express an interest in trying out conversation methodology.

Once invited, interaction with the local community would involve key stakeholders being joined by Fuschl-trained facilitators who would help establish and maintain the “space” for authentic dialogue. Other Fuschl-experienced participants could also assist and participate peripherally in a virtual way. The Fuschl-extension to local communities and virtual support could help in making Fuschl not an event, but a process that extends in time and space and globalizes itself. Conversations would become permanent processes and would spread and influence each other, as a second-order conversation, a self-referential process in which conversations produce conversations and the conversation process reproduces itself permanently by spreading to other places.

Ultimately, there could be great interpenetration between Fuschl, local, and virtual communities.

Systems practitioners could go there, to the local setting, while at the same time, local stakeholders could periodically come to Fuschl. At times, some people may find they are systems theorists at heart and become active in the ongoing Fuschl Extension. Similarly, past participants, even if they couldn’t be onsite somewhere, could participate during the conference using technology.

## Presentation of the Model

The decision was then made to try to capture the ideas for presentation back to the plenary for feedback, and the Future of Conversation team consolidated the flip charts to explain the idea. These summary concepts are recreated below using Banathy's three lenses as a framework.

Aspect	Description
Purposes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Inquire into how insights from systems science can be applied to benefit humanity</li> <li>- Inquire into how and where systems and conversation might help communities discover what they themselves can do and become</li> <li>- Develop new methods, even new epistemology</li> </ul>
Who	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fuschl extension team(s)</li> <li>- Other IFSR teams</li> <li>- Experienced systems/conversation teams</li> <li>- Local leaders/stakeholders</li> </ul>
What	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- New methods</li> <li>- Local problem area</li> </ul>
Where	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- At Fuschl and alternating with conferences held at local communities</li> </ul>
Success Indicators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learning for us - how to improve the next conversation</li> <li>- People say it was meaningful</li> <li>- Report back in 1 year, whether there was a lasting effect</li> <li>- Joy in the process</li> <li>- Opening of space - something surprising happens</li> <li>- Individual and collective energy is built</li> </ul>
Success factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Must choose opportunities where there are good conditions for success</li> <li>- Language—there must be enough ability to speak to each other</li> <li>- Appropriate parties can be involved—decision makers, key stakeholders</li> <li>- Openness to dialogue</li> <li>- Appropriate scope and scale of problem—not too big</li> </ul>
Outputs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Papers</li> <li>- Shifting of deadlocked positions</li> <li>- Co-learning</li> </ul>
Guiding Principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To work with and develop the local community's capability as the only moral way, consistent with Banathy's public philosophy</li> <li>- Hold a qualitatively different conversation that seeks common ground before trying to create action</li> <li>- Use systems thinking</li> </ul>
Key open questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How to locate and select local community</li> <li>- Who is invited</li> <li>- Details of process</li> <li>- Logistics</li> <li>- Expectations, language, measures of success</li> <li>- Funding</li> </ul>

**Table 1. General Description (Systems-Environment Lens)**

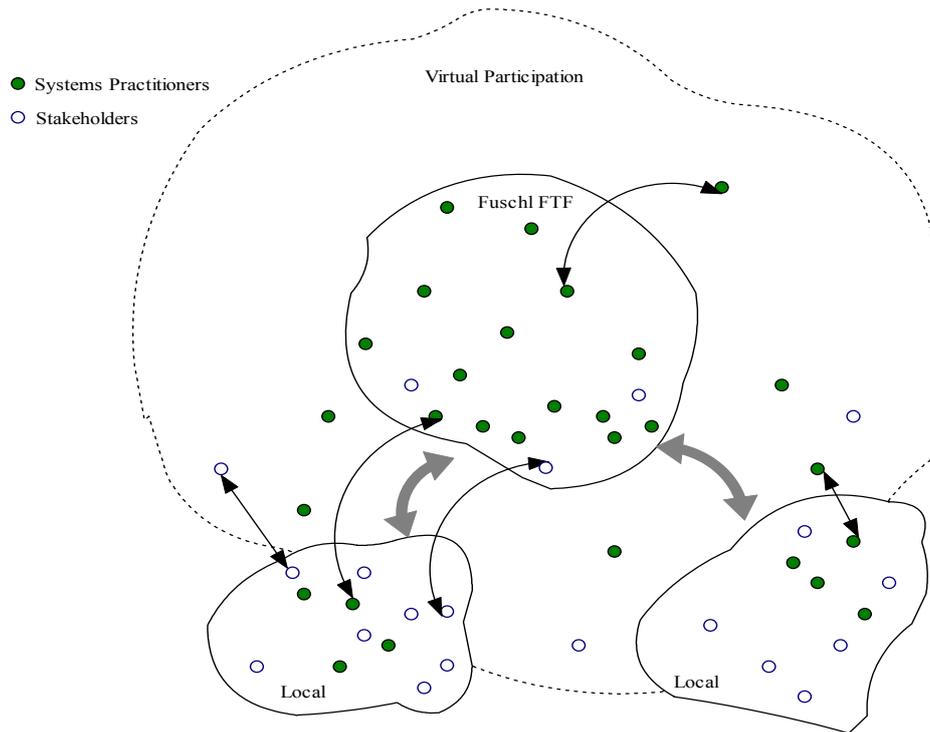


Figure 2. Fuschl Extension Functions-Structure Lens

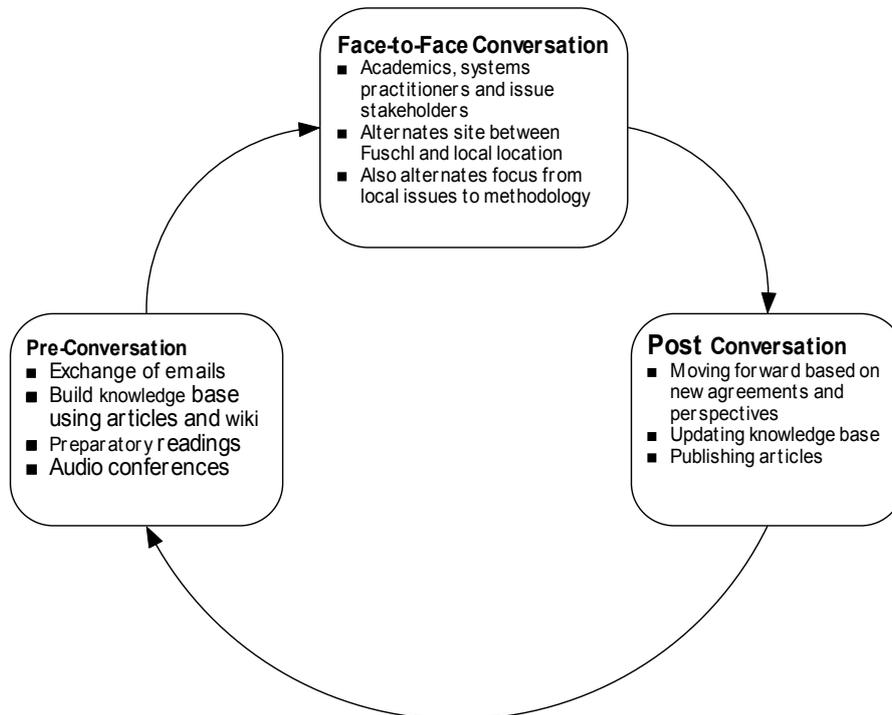


Figure 3. Core Process Flow (Process-Behaviour Lens)

## Concluding With a Challenge

The presentation of Fuschl Extension went exactly as planned. At the end of it, the Future of Conversation team asked the plenary: “What do you think? Any questions?”

From the larger group listening, there was mainly silence. A few clarifications were requested. Some heads nodded. Then without any formal statement or acknowledgement of an ending, a decision, or a transition, someone raised a new topic and the plenary vociferously took up discussion on the divergent topic. After a few attempts to redirect the conversation to discussion of the Fuschl Extension idea, the team gave up.



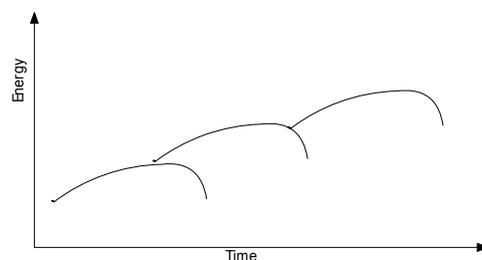
**Doug Walton**

After the meeting, the conversation team retired together and they reflected in the dim light of the old dining area. The once fresh ideas on flip charts that covered the walls now threatened to be consumed into the dusty history of short-lived past glory. Each team member was silent, deep in his or her own thought. A light flickered, almost extinguished, then returned again.

“I don’t think they really got it,” said Urban finally. “It takes a while to absorb.”

“It is difficult to pack four days of conversation into a fifteen minute presentation,” said Doug. “But this is the dilemma faced by those who desire to create change. Perhaps we were too optimistic to think the fire would just catch and they would run off with it. We may need to start smaller.”

“I am reminded of Gordon Dyer’s metaphor for increasing energy in a conversation,” offered Gordon. He draws a figure of three overlapping curves, shown in Figure 4. “The match lights the paper, which lights the twigs, which light the wood, and so on. The energy of each diminishes but serves to light the next wave, thus producing a higher level of energy in the system, that is, the conversation.”



**Figure 4. Flame Metaphor**

“Even if nothing else,” Barbara said, “We come out of this conversation energized and motivated. I am amazed at how the proposed process that has emerged from the group addresses the many differing concerns and perspectives that we all brought to the conversation. For me, what we have developed is clearly better than a process that any one of us could have come up with on our own. It underscores for me the value of conversation methodology. I am surprised about the commitment to the group that I have developed over such a short time; I am also surprised to discover how our discussions of systems thinking and conversation methodology have tapped into many of my deeply-held values of inclusion, equality, and connection. And also, I have developed a new appreciation of the great importance of promoting systems thinking in educational settings and in the world at large.”

“Perhaps we can find a way to pilot it, to show how it will work and to work out the details,” suggested Yoshi. “We could try a small group at the Asilomar Conversation.”

The group discussed forming a dialogue team for the fall Asilomar Conversation. The resulting plan included offering a 2-track format. One track would be shorter and offer an educational focus—seminars on dialogue and systems design. The other track would be similar to the traditional 5-day dialogue, except that experienced systems practitioners would be combined with invited stakeholders who bring their own local issue for discussion. In this way, a test could be conducted around the idea, learning obtained, and a case study developed.

Finally, Christian offered: “We might compare the conversation process to the communication strategies of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) in Mexico who continue to struggle for land, democracy, liberty, justice, and dignity. They have engaged in global communication (supported by the Internet) to invite civil society representatives from all over the world to conversations in the Lacanian jungle in Chiapas and to tour of all 31 Mexican states in order to establish conversations with Mexican citizens. The EZLN for me is an example of what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000, 2005) have termed *multitudes* – decentered, self-organizing, co-operative networks that aim at the establishment of a global democracy. Similarly, in a Fuschl-like conversation there is no hierarchical center, it is based on joint deliberation and envisioning and on inclusive communication, it grows from the bottom instead of exerting control from above and forms a polyphonic dialogue. Conversation is a method for making a difference by speaking and listening. Speaking and listening to words is how we know who we are, where we come from, and where our steps are going. Also it's how we know about others, their steps, and their world. Speaking and listening to words is like listening to life.”

With these metaphors in mind, the group spirit again lifted. Next meeting times were plotted. Action steps were defined. Then, it was time to pack up, and each did so wondering if six people could concentrate enough flame to sustain the fire once they returned to the even larger arena of their regular lives.

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