SUSTAINING CONVERSATION IN HUMAN SYSTEMS INQUIRY: THE METHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Human oriented research involves an interdependence upon human conversation, especially in its systemic and collective forms. Conversation is considered in terms of a core technological component essential to the vitality and sustainability of systemic research methodology. Specific attention is given to the roles and responsibilities of the systemist, who is the principal investigator and facilitator of a research team.

Keywords: conversation, facilitation, systems methodology, sustainability.

1. Introduction

When successful implementation of the various stages of a research project that purports to use a systemic method(ology) and depends upon human activity in collective forms, it requires sustained conversation among the researchers and participants of the inquiry. Consequently, conversation is key to understanding systemic methodology in action. Practitioners will admit that cooperation, collaboration, consensus, active participation, and guidance in conversation of those engaged in human systems inquiry are vital to the successful conduct and completion of the inquiry, yet these considerations remain largely overlooked and taken-for-granted in articulations of systemic methodology, to which others refer who seek to study, understand, and apply them.

The conspicuous absence of the topic as such, and furthermore its essential aspects as the pragmatic, logistical, and sociopolitical, in widely cited and used sources of systems research methodology is wide spread. For examples, see Ackoff (1981), Banathy (1991, 1992), Beer (1985), Checkland (1981), Checkland and Scholes (1990), Flood and Jackson (1991), Hall (1989), Jackson (1991), Miller (1978), and Weisbord (1992). I found but minor coverage of this critical topic in only three of the systems methodology texts sampled: Hall (1989, pp. 467-469), Warfield (1989, pp. 73-88), and Weisbord, (1992, pp. 335-341); leaving me with the impression from the sample of texts cited in this paper, the topic remains of glancing interest. I was pressed to find substantive guidance and left to conclude that, whether a principal investigator or a secondary one, information and guidance for the facilitator's role and facilitation of conversation to promote as much as possible the successful implementation of a systemic methodology remains chiefly a matter of presumed competency by the authors of methodology textbooks.

It is my hope that this presentation will encourage others, most notably methodologists, pedagogues and practitioners, to study and publish more extensively the relevance of the sustainability of conversation to their systems methods and methodologies applied to human activity systems. Such an endeavor would in my opinion go a long way to remove this present weakness in the literature of systems research methodology.

Given the current predicament, this paper may perhaps be best understood in four parts. First, I situate the topic in relation to macro and micro level developments. Second, I epitomize an earlier paper that laid the groundwork for this paper. Third, I examine the facilitation of conversation and the facilitator's role in conversation. And last, I focus the chief points to conclude the paper.

2. Sustainability and Systemic Methodology

At the macro level greater clarity I believe must be achieved at this time to transcend our faddish and presumptuous beliefs regarding Western philosophic notions of progress and sustainability of contemporary

life (Collen, 1998)—to the extent that we equate for example sustainability with maintainability—for our species and the planetary problematique may *evolve* in many ways toward forms presently unimagined by the greater multitudes of humanity. By and large, those of the privileged minority appear intent to *sustain* their personal and collective activities, in turn sustained by ready access to products and services and now information via the globalizing communications technologies. However, they have the opportunities and recognize the growing urgency to consider the design of human activities in order to influence more effectively the course of global trends. In the global sweep of capitalism and democratization at the end of this century, they seek to make more available their quality and privileges of lifestyle to an increasing proportion of humanity. This optimism perpetuates hope for humanity, one that rests still greatly on the expectation of human influence on evolutionary processes through scientific and technological means.

There are implications to be drawn from the macro level developments in regard to studying complex ecological and social systems and developing technologies, because it is widely presumed that individual and collective human activities of more micro proportions (ex: chemical emissions from machines) impact eventually and cumulatively on macro level processes (ex: Arctic ozone hole). In other words, it is widely assumed that macro level phenomena come about and represent the consequences of micro level activity.

Human organizations (e.g. corporations, small businesses, schools, agencies, institutions, centers, associations, and the like) may be viewed as the micro level entities to which systems methodologies are applied. Such organizations are comprised of even more micro level components, e.g. small groups and individuals. It is this last level that tends to represent and implement most applications of systems methodology to effect whole organization change. To reiterate, it is presumed that with sufficient changes in a given ameliorative direction across many human organizations, there will be a more macro, even planetary result.

If it is feasible to conceptualize both the material and human realms hierarchically from the more micro to the macro, and apply carefully both isomorphy and analogy from a general theory of systems as earlier professed by Bertalanffy (1968), given the pervasive interest in implementing systemic methodology in human organizations, then this logic compels a focus on those aspects critical effective implementation of the methodology. The importance of conversation to the successful facilitation of a systemic methodology in practice is one such vital aspect.

I realize it is a leap of gigantic proportions to move within a few paragraphs from the globality of humanity to the conversational component within a systems methodology. However, just as struggling to comprehend the hierarchical nature of whole systems lends itself to thinking more systemically about the world one is part, I believe it meritorious to contextualize in these terms the place of the person as participant in conversation with others of a research team trying to bring about an improvement in their organization through the execution of a systemic methodology and that this improvement is one effort among many to make the world a better place for more of humanity. To acquire a holistic perspective and clearer comprehension of the nestedness of human systems is likely a secondary benefit and advantage to those who participate in human systems inquiry.

3. Conversation Viewed as Methodological

In expectation of influence on more macro levels, attention must be given simultaneously at the more micro level. Specifically, we must carefully guide the finer grain aspects of implementing systemic ideas via systemic methodology.

Conversation is an element in common across all collective forms of systemic methodology (Collen, 1997). I suspect it is so, regardless of the micro-to-macro application. We evidence the importance of conversation in two ways: (1) increasingly each research project involves an interdependent team approach dependent upon conversation to formulate, initiate, conduct, and conclude the study of a complex ecological and social system; and (2) throughout the inquiry the research team is an interdependent subsystem of and in conversation with the larger human activity system that constitutes the more complex ecological and social system under study.

In a previous paper on the topic (Collen, 1997), I define key constructs and argue for the centrality of conversation in systemic forms of methodology. In bringing theory to practice, human beings become interdependent via conversation to coordinate their actions toward fulfillment of whatever purpose unites group units. Implementation of any systemic method(ology) that involves a collective social group process to develop and implement the methodology benefits from familiarity with interpersonal skills necessary to facilitate the conversation process of inquiry. The perpetually misunderstood notions of designing and planning conversation are not deterministic and inhibitory activities, but to the contrary, they frequently provide the modicum of structure and guidance that facilitates constructive and productive inquiry. The research group must discuss and decide upon its purpose, ground rules, design, plan, and numerous related matters via conversations. The course of the conversation actually taken is important in respect to the methodology, because some routes are more productive than others, and typically human resources are at stake. Nevertheless, the actual course of events depends very much upon the self organizing nature of the group conversation process itself. Self-organizing conversations are very characteristic of systems methodology for human activity systems. As a narrative form of human communication, conversation has content, structure, purpose, and process. A conversation can be conceptualized as a system and studied from not only its social and psychological perspectives, but also its technological one as well. Finally, the more meta-level findings about conversation from systemic research may contribute to our deepened understanding of the key role conversation has to the success of research in practice.

Before moving to fulfill the major purpose of this paper, it seems pertinent to repeat the key points of conclusion from the preceding paper. Conversation (1) provides the methodological core for transaction of systems methodology in human activity systems, (2) brings systems theory into systems practice, (3) draws participants into circular and oscillating dialectic forms of experience, (4) enables designing and planning activities to focus and shape human systems inquiry, (5) permits the reflexive study of its structure and flow that can facilitate inquiry, (6) invites its portrayal in metaphor that can facilitate inquiry, (7) becomes in discourse a human activity system, and (8) accentuates the human side of human systems inquiry (Collen, 1997).

4. Facilitating Conversation and the Role of Facilitator

Those who partake in inquiry expect conversation to mitigate rather than worsen, to cooperate rather than compete, and to serve rather than self-satisfy the collective purpose of the inquiry. Typically a research team representing an organization is a small group of people, a system of human activity within the broader sphere of human activity, directing their actions towards ameliorative change of the larger system. Knowledge of systemic aspects, interpersonal skills, effective practices in group process, and multiple perspectives of their human organization are relevant to fostering and facilitating the process of inquiry. The group must simultaneously negotiate their inquiry process with the larger systemic context of their organization, while working with their own internal dynamics. Conversation is the primary methodological means through which both the external and internal realms progress when a systemic methodology is put into action.

By the perceptions of others participating, the principal researcher, as systemist and participant, is frequently expected to be a primary facilitator of the inquiry process, because his/her knowledge of systems theory and methodology likely places him/her in a privileged position to serve such a role.

The role we speak of here is not that of the traditional researcher. The researcher is more than someone who sits in an office before the computer making research design decisions and writing research proposals, interviewing and observing participants and analyzing data, and modeling and simulating outcomes. The researcher becomes one member of an inquiry team of researchers, who are also designers, change agents, and systemists, that interact with the larger organization and shepherd it through an organizational change. Systems methodologies implicitly involve such a team. The team progresses through a series of stages, equivalent to a research cycle (Collen, 1996), and sometimes iterations of the cycle, for the purpose of effectively improving the organization.

In the Spring of 1992 at Fuschl-am-See, Austria, I participated in a biannual conference, termed the Fuschl Conversation. It consists of small work groups engaged in conversation. I was a member of a team that met over four days to discuss the topic of design learning. In the course of that conversation we mapped out the

ways members can proactively facilitate the process of design in their organizations through membership in a design team. Although the focus of the conversation was design learning, the many means articulated to facilitate a conversation for a design process turns out to be equally germane in my opinion to conversation as a methodological component key to the successful implementation of a systemic methodology. I have rewritten and paraphrased in my own words for this paper (Table 1) the relevant contributions of the 1992 Fuschl group; see acknowledgment.

Table 1 lists guidelines, precautions, and suggestions available to researchers and research teams to facilitate their conversations in the process of inquiry. No attempt has been made here to study systematically and exhaustively the facilitation of conversation and the role of the facilitator; the list stems solely from reformulations of my notes taken at the 1992 Fuschl Conversation.

Table 1. To sustain conversation of human systems inquiry.

 1♦ Emphasize "we" to cultivate the collective group consciousness of the research team.
 2♦ Remain sensitive to team values and remind others of them from time to time.
 3♦ Return to a previous decision periodically to reaffirm its continued validity and the collective agreement stemming from it.
 4♦ Examine conditions of inquiry from multiple perspectives, such as the conceptual, perceptual, and emotional views of the team members.
 5♦ Focus on "what to do" as a means to facilitate the "how to" inquire.
 6♦ Respect the views of others and draw upon the sociocultural backgrounds and talents of others, that is, the diversity of the team membership.
 7♦ Authenticate the team membership of others.
 8♦ Help other team members to become facilitators of the inquiry process.
 9♦ Make blind spots (e.g. missing perspectives and unrepresented voices) more visible to others and consider ways to include them when appropriate.
10♦ Foster consensus through the confluence of diversity and without the coerciveness of conformity.
11♦ Know when one phase of inquiry is sufficiently complete and it is time to move on to the next phase.
12♦ Remain vigilant to digression from the process of inquiry and in such a case suggest a way to get back on track.
13♦ Collaborate with other team members rather than advise and compete with them.
14♦ Remain flexible, creative, and open to inquiry that frequently is ambiguous, uncertain, and fluid.
15♦ Discuss with others not only what is happening, but also what they think about it.
16♦ Know when to record what is happening and when to discuss what it means and what others think about it.
17♦ Move the conversation back and forth in the dialectic of inquiry, specifically the content of what is happening in the process of inquiry on the one hand and the reflexivity of everyone thinking about what is happening and what it means to the process, its documentation and facilitation on the other hand.
18♦ Consider the ways the process of inquiry leads to an underconceptualization of the focus of inquiry.
19♦ Look for and act on opportunity to unit and synergize the research team to further its process of inquiry.
20♦ Use language that builds trust and fosters cooperation, commitment, and participation.
21♦ Delegate through distribution of tasks and responsibilities equitably and appropriately to the entire research team.
22♦ Accept other members of the research team for who they are and not what one might like them to be.
23♦ Move the conversation back and forth between the theoretical on the one hand and the practical and experiential on the other hand.
24♦ Avoid conversing in circles of unproductive dialog, entering an "eddy of the stream," such as dichotomous, personalized, and adversarial communications.
25♦ Look for the best (likes, skills, talents, values) in each person.
26♦ Contribute constructive rather than destructive communications to the group process.
27♦ Avoid imposing one's ideological, imperial, and dictatorial side upon others and the collective group process of inquiry.
28♦ Acknowledge the contribution of others and put them at ease, as their participation and contribution to inquiry need not provoke anxiety and insecurity.

29ò Holding the value of participation implicitly, model an active role in the group process of inquiry.

30ò Check the course of each move and decision in inquiry, and remain open to course correct and redirect the process.

31ò Since facilitation may mean keeping the research team at the point of an "advantageous disequilibrium," know that point and when to push it forward and when to hold it back to facilitate the group process of inquiry.

32ò Keep a finger on the pace of conversation, and keeping it going when it idles and slowing it down when it is speeding recklessly.

33ò Let the group find its natural pace of conversation and the progress that results.

34ò Establish a familiar place for conversation which is friendly, comfortable, and conducive to conversation.

35ò Avoid feedback which tends to kill conversation, such as "I will do it," "it can't be done," and "this is the only answer."

36ò Avoid feedback which puts the onus of responsibility for action only on the facilitator.

37ò Use resources (materials, persons, and time) prudently.

38ò Control one's temper and rush to judgment and action in favor of amicable negotiated means of coming to terms with interpersonal differences and settling conflicts.

39ò Avoid trying to force inquiry that is not ready to move forward, instead "step out" of it and take a look at what seems to be stalling progress.

40ò Avoid overdependence on one person for leadership but share the leadership role as the stages of inquiry call upon those who can best facilitate the group process through inquiry to its ultimate conclusion.

41ò Sensitize others to research issues and the ethics of doing research.

42ò Direct questions to the interests of participants, be they team members or others from which the data of inquiry comes.

43ò Manifest and sustain a contagious enthusiasm for the research process.

44ò Guide the research team while remaining as a person out of the foreground as much as possible, invisible in the process of inquiry.

45ò Make the invisible visible without allowing it to dominate the process of inquiry.

46ò Influence (steer) the conversation like the one at the helm of a ship (cybernetician), knowing there are many others needed to coordinate each movement forward.

47ò Work with the conversation like a conductor without sheet music, such that all the musicians come to unison in orchestrating the process of inquiry.

48ò Remain sensitive to the distinction between the ideas expressed and the person who expressed it.

49ò Pose concerns, issues, problems, and possible actions not as answers but as poignant questions to invite and facilitate conversation.

50ò Know when in the conversation to pose what kind of question.

51ò Allow other team members to imagine, brainstorm, dream, fantasize, and envision what research could be, do, and change.

52ò Situate the research focus and problem in context and via multiple perspectives, such that such descriptions catalyze the imagination of team members towards productive inquiry.

53ò Assign responsibility to every member of the research team.

5. Conclusion

Awareness and application of the numerous points presented in Table 1 may facilitate the process of human inquiry, especially in regard to the implementation of a systemic methodology in human activity systems, for it is the research team that is responsible usually for its execution. In this context, the research team does not instruct or teach, but rather serves as a resource to assist those participating in inquiry. If one begins to specify preliminarily the skills of the facilitator of a human activity system engaged in human inquiry, one might expect the following: to communicate, collaborate, and cooperate with others; to delegate to others; to empower, enable, respect, and synergize others; and to bring out the best in others.

Those familiar with group dynamics and social group processes may not find any startling revelation in this paper. Much of what has been presented may seem to group process and conversation practitioners like common sense and know-how acquired through our working experiences with others. But keep in mind that

the central theme of this paper is to bring this focus to bear on the apparent neglect of the importance of conversation to the successful implementation of a growing number of choices in systemic methodology. Conversation is a core methodological component, which must be understood and carefully guided if the human inquiry is to serve its intended purpose.

6. Acknowledgment

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