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Conferences are strange things! An often heard remark is that the best bits of a conference happen in the coffee breaks, yet we continue, in general, with the sort of conference that reflects in miniature an old doctoral contest: a presentation of a finding that has passed the initial check of peer reviewing, which is then subject to a short period of questioning. The proceedings, published with the conference, are normally published too late to help attendees make well-informed choices about what to attend, and deny the possibility of learning and improving the work presented (because the papers are already published) through the inclusion of what others offer, either as questions or in their own presentations! The epistemological position on which such conferences are built reflects a world of certainty, in which what is the case can be universally and unequivocally determined, rather than a more modern understanding that knowledge, and how we assemble and value knowledge, is as much a construct as anything else: what we see and how we value it depends on how we chose to look.

Not all conferences are of this sort. There is, for instance, a tradition of workshop conferences, which includes the famous Macy Conferences that saw the working out and founding of modern cybernetics. There, papers were indeed presented, but the questioning was extensive, unrelenting and savage, according to reports I heard from participants: a lot of time was given over to discussion of the findings presented. Originally, there were no proceedings for these conferences: but in 1948 that changed when the non-English-speaking Viennese, Heinz von Foerster, joined the group, and editing proceedings was proposed by Margaret Mead as a way of forcing an accelerated improvement in Foerster's English language skills. And although there are many workshop conferences nowadays, the big paper-

presentation conference with proceedings published at the opening still, I believe, form the majority and gain the funding that current metrics impose on the academic world.

Recently, the American Society for Cybernetics (ASC) has experimented with another sort of conference: a conversational conference. This is (in the ASC's version) a conference concerned more with raising new questions than hearing answers to established questions. It is about individuals transcending the limits of their knowing and ways of looking through conversation, one of the most effective means of moving our minds beyond the limitations of what we already know and how we each see the world; i.e. learning, at least in one interpretation. Such a conference also requires that we treat cybernetics as a language of communication between subjects – as transdisciplinary. The attempt is to create a conference that promotes the salient qualities of a coffee break. The first of these conferences was thoroughly described in *Kybernetes*, Vol. 40 No. 7/8 (Glanville, 2011).

Naturally we understand that, given the funding conditions many universities impose on academic attendance at a conference, we need to act within the academic tradition – to accept and publish papers. Accordingly, we make arrangements for papers to be written, reviewed, presented and published: more about that below.

We have also worked hard to establish connections with other societies and groups; to co-ordinate times and places of conferences; and to welcome others to our home as we hope they will welcome us to theirs. One such group is the Bateson Idea Group, a new group concerned to promote the work of Gregory Bateson, who was (amongst other things) a founding father of modern cybernetics, and one of those who placed the origin of cybernetics more amongst the social and biological sciences than the technologies of engineering. The Bateson Idea Group inherited the rights to Bateson's work. Many years ago, the ASC recognised Bateson's importance with the award of its Wiener Gold Medal, and we felt the founding of the new group to champion his work created the occasion to invite them to join us re-evaluating his work and finding new ways to further it. This we did. It led to the ASC/BIG conference on "An Ecology of Ideas", celebrating Batesonian and similar ideas in a theme that reflects back to Bateson's great collection of writings, "Steps to an Ecology of Mind".

The conference was initially designed by Ranulph Glanville, Phillip Guddemi (chair of BIG) and Nora Bateson, film maker daughter of Bateson and his wife Lois. Pille Bunnell stepped in as conference chair and worked tirelessly to organise and develop the conference, held at Asilomar State Park in California. I will not list all those who should be recognised, here: you can visit the conference web site and check the whole event for yourself at: <http://www.asc-cybernetics.org/2012>. You can also visit the web sites for the conferences in 2010, 2011 and this year (2013) and even express interest in next year's (2014) 50th anniversary conference of the ASC by substituting your year of interest for 2012 in the URL. We also celebrated the 80th birthday of Klaus Krippendorff, distinguished scholar, long term member of the ASC and Gregory Bateson term professor at the Annenberg School in the University of Pennsylvania, inviting him to open the conference and following with a workshop on one of his favoured themes, reflexivity. The conference, as usual, had an arts and performance program that was greatly enjoyed by many attendees (you can read a bit more about one aspect of this in the "Introduction to the refereed papers"), and Nora Bateson showed her award winning film on her father, "An Ecology of Mind" in the presence of state governor Jerry Brown, himself a long term disciple of Bateson. Videos of some of the events can be found on the conference web site (URL above).

A set of conference proceedings, however, is not a record of a conference in all its richness. It contains the accepted record of approved work. In this issue of *Kybernetes* you will find such a proceedings coming out of the ASC/BIG joint conference.

We had thought to present the papers included here in three sections: the first, refereed papers that we consider of great, but not necessarily academic value; the second about Bateson; and the third about the ecology of ideas, more generally. But we found that did not work. While the first section remains, we found we could not distinguish the second from the third in any meaningful way. It is not just that, in many cases, we could not determine which paper went where. It was that the pervasiveness of Bateson's thinking became clear through this failed attempt of ours. We see this as a delightful affirmation of the conference theme, for one of our basic propositions was that it was time to revisit (and hence revalue) the work of Bateson, and to find ways to take this work forward, 33 years nearly to the day after his death, at the moment we write this. The papers in each section are presented in alphabetical order by author surname.

This loss of division does not seem to us to present the reader with a navigational problem, however. The editor and publishers have kindly agreed to our request to have all the structured abstracts of the refereed papers published not only at the start of their papers, but as a separate item at the start of our second section. We believe that collecting the abstracts together helps the reader chose the path they wish to navigate through the rich material we are able to present here, and this is the main reason that, in this introduction, we do not summarise the contents in this introduction. We have placed the refereed papers before that (they help set the context of the conference and of the main material of the proceedings), preceded by a short introduction to these papers.

As we noted above, the ASC has experimented with conferences prioritising conversation, extending a virtual coffee break feeling to permeate the whole event. But we also recognise the need for paper presentation, if only as a means for participants to obtain funding; and for the consequent publication of proceedings in a reputable journal. We are fortunate that *Kybernetes* offers us such a platform. And although the space for paper presentation and for conversation were more normally balanced at our conference with the Bateson Idea Group in Asilomar than in some of our other recent conferences, we still faced an irregular refereeing situation. In order to assure the highest standards, refereeing took the following, exceptionally demanding form:

- Before the conference, (extended) abstracts were submitted and were reviewed by the conference committee. Reviews were sent to authors accepting proposals (with suggestions for improvement) and, where necessary, rejecting them.
- (Revised) abstracts were posted on the web for comment from the body of conferees again, before the conference.
- Papers developed from these abstracts were presented at the conference.
- After the conference, conferees were offered the opportunity to submit a reworked paper made up of both what they had learnt at the conference and their original material. We were prepared to consider completely new papers.
- Papers were sent out for peer review using a double blind process. The two reviews were forwarded to paper authors with a "reconciliation" composed by the editors to bring, where necessary, the different reviews together[1].
- Revised papers were sent back to reviewers for their re-assessment. We did not require that recommendations from reviewers were accepted by authors: but if they were rejected, we required an satisfactory explanation of why.

This is a complex process. We have been aided in it by a number of colleagues. In return for their help, they got to participate, in a mentored manner, in the process of editing, thus acquiring some familiarity with both the process (seen from the production side) and the difficulties that occur. If we do not make space to help the less experienced develop this skill, we are failing to use a resource, to pass on knowledge, and to develop the next generation who will keep this process going. Our editorial colleagues were an international group of younger scholars: Ramsey Affifi, Philip Baron, Alessandro Bellafiore, Colin Campbell, Jocelyn Chapman, Michael Hohl and Grazielle Lautenschlaeger. They represent Brazil, Chile, Canada, Germany, South Africa, and the USA. Our colleagues also joined us in choosing the paper awarded the Best Paper award generously proposed and given by the publishers, Emerald: we chose Thomas Fischer's "Enigmatic mechanisms in defense of the capability to have new ideas".

Some may not be convinced by our attempts to develop an alternative form of conference. To them we add the following. The conventional conference takes about as uncybernetic a form as it is possible to imagine. What feedback there is normally very curtailed, and the presentation of the read paper is largely pre-determined, with only the slightest possibility of adapting to changing circumstances. Communication is very much in one direction and the responsibility of the listener in constructing his/her meaning is minimised. We have tried to explore the possibility of a high quality meeting of scientists and others interested in the creation of new understandings where the processes of learning and interaction are given space and where the published proceedings are not unilateral declarations but the outcome of a social process of testing, judging and improvement: in other words, a cybernetic act.

In 2014 The ASC will hold its 50th anniversary conference in Washington, DC, provisionally timed from 3 to 9 August. The theme will be "Living in Change". There will be conversational, as well as special elements in the conference. We invite you to join us – as an individual, or representing your society. If you would like to register an interest, please visit: <http://www.asc-cybernetics.org/2014>. Detailed planning will have begun before this issue of *Kybernetes* is published.

Cybernetics is, according to founding mother Margaret Mead (and for some time married to Bateson), a common language that allows communication between different fields. Conferees in our conferences come from many different backgrounds, and reviews needed to recognise this. As a result, referees were not always working to the same template. Thus, reconciliation between reviews was sometimes necessary.

References

Glanville, R. (2011), "Introduction: a conference doing the cybernetics of cybernetics", *Kybernetes*, Vol. 40 Nos 7/8, pp. 952–963

Ranulph Glanville, David Griffiths *Guest Editors*