Author(s):

Ranulph Glanville (Innovation Design Engineering, Royal College of Art, London, UK AND CybernEthics Research, Southsea, UK)

David Griffiths (The Institute for Educational Cybernetics, The University of Bolton, Bolton, UK)

Philip Baron (Electric and Electronic Engineering, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa)

Citation:
Ranulph Glanville , David Griffiths , Philip Baron , (2014) "Introduction to Special Issue", Kybernetes, Vol. 43 Iss: 9/10
DOI
http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/K-09-2014-0180

Publisher:
Emerald Group Publishing Limited

Introduction to Special Issue

Article Type: Guest editorial From: Kybernetes, Volume 43, Issue 9/10

This Special Issue of *Kybernetes* continues the relationship between the journal and the American Society for Cybernetics (ASC). It contains papers arising from (and hence constitutes the proceedings of) the ASC conference on the theme "Acting, Learning, Understanding" held in collaboration with the Institute for Educational Cybernetics (IEC) of Bolton University between 27 July and 3 August 2013. This was only the second conference the ASC has held outside the North America and was intended to emphasise the international nature of the society – more than half the Executive Board members live outside North America!

Over recent years, the ASC has experimented with conferences that promote conferring above the presentation of reports of what has been achieved. We have taken the view that a meeting of people can be a briefing, but can also be a conversation intended to develop new ideas. (Of course, traditional conferences have this aspect, but we have liked to emphasise it because it is a more cybernetic way of learning together, and helps us look forwards.) We also retain a lively arts programme, which in 2013 consisted of building musical instruments and then jamming together – a way of introducing participants to each other – and an evening of performances presenting work by those attending the conference.

So, in our proceedings, we talk of selected papers arising from the conference, because our proceedings arise from participation in the conference, rather than being prepared beforehand and then presented as faits accomplis (published more as conference "pre-ceedings" than "pro-ceedings"). To this end, we have developed an extensive and thorough reviewing process, part judgement, part tutorial, intended to develop proposals at a high level of publication.

I have previously outlined this process in *Kybernetes* (Vol. 42, Nos 9-10, 2013, for instance), and it is defined on the conference web site, still open to visitors[1]. In summary, papers are accepted on the basis of refereed extended abstracts, made available for pre-conference discussion by those attending the conference. This serves both to improve the quality of the proposals, and to introduce participants to each other. After presentation and discussion in a paper session, authors rework their papers to reflect what they learnt at the conference. New papers also arise unbidden from conference discussions. Final paper drafts are submitted to double blind peer review. Comment on the adequacy of response to review critiques are sent back for further action. Finally, the editors, who adjudicate disagreements (often calling in an extra reviewer) proof read the contents for consistency and use of English. It is a thorough and demanding process!

The culture we aim to develop is one of learning together, of reflecting and acting, of moving on. We use concepts that come from cybernetics (such as feedback, reflection, acting in a cybernetic manner, conversation, collaborative control) in how we conduct and participate in a cybernetic conference. We not only discuss cybernetics of and in the first and the second order, we enact it.

The conference theme reflects cybernetics as a subject concerned with, as the Macy conferences put it, "circular causality" – as well as the importance of action in cybernetics. Current western thinking tends, for instance, to promote understanding above acting: generally, we believe that theory directs practice and that in order to act we should first understand. The link is linear and unidirectional. Yet the child learns by acting, from which (s)he develops understanding. In contrast, the conference promoted acting and understanding as a circular unity, with (in a small act of nod to our hosts at IEC) the recognition that learning is often, perhaps even usually, what transforms one into the other. Our concern was to bring both together and establish this cybernetic unity, this whole, as a currency with which we would and could work. The first paper in the proceedings rehearses several arguments and examples, setting the scene for the proceedings, as well as the conference (although it was written specially for this issue of *Kybernetes*).

It is always difficult for editors to decide how to organise the material that makes up any volume. Each choice naturally excludes at least as many readings of the material as it includes. Personally, I prefer to avoid this sort of "narrative" editorialising. Fortunately, the publishers of *Kybernetes* have allowed us to present the structured abstracts of each paper at the start of the volume. This allows the reader to consider which papers they would like to read, and in what order. Nevertheless, there is a minimal, imposed structure. As noted, the first paper is an extended and argued introduction to the conference theme which I wrote with this purpose in mind, after which the other papers are presented in alphabetical order by author.

The final paper was presented at the conference as an after dinner lecture by Noam Cooke to honour the memory of John Beishon, the founding professor of the Systems Group at the UK's Open University. We were glad to be offered the chance to host this lecture by our trustee, the current Open University professor of Systems, Ray Ison (who introduces the paper), and honoured to be joined by Beishon's family and former colleagues. There is no structured abstract for Cooke's lecture.

We are proud to include the paper which has been awarded the best paper in conference award sponsored by the publishers of *Kybernetes*. This goes to Loet Leydesdorff, Mark Johnson and Inga Ivanova for their paper: "The communication of expectations and individual understanding: redundancy as reduction of uncertainty, and the processing of meaning".

The conference was jointly chaired by David (Dai) Griffiths, professor in Bolton University's IET, and Ranulph Glanville, professor of research in Innovation Design Engineering at the Royal College of Art in London. We received great support and encouragement from the staff at Bolton University, and thank the director of IEC, Paul Hollins and our on site organiser, Janet Hollins, together with the University's Vice Chancellor, Professor George Holmes. Philip Baron, lecturer in the Department of Electrical and Electronic Engineering Technology at the University of Johannesburg, joined us to form the Editorial Board. The editors would like to thank the staff at Emerald, who publish *Kybernetes*; the editors of *Kybernetes* lead by Dr Magnus Ramage. But most of all we thank the authors and particularly the reviewers of the material in this volume. It is easy to forget just how much work they put in, and how much all academic publications depend on the voluntary work of reviewers (without which there would be no publications) and the willingness of authors to subscribe to the copyright and procedural demands of publishers, all of which place ever growing requirements on academics who are continuously required to do more with less. Thank you. We hope that readers will find the material interesting and valuable.

Professor Ranulph Glanville, *Innovation Design Engineering, Royal College of Art, London, UK and CybernEthics Research, Southsea, UK*

Professor David Griffiths, *The Institute for Educational Cybernetics, The University of Bolton, Bolton, UK*

Philip Baron, *Electric and Electronic Engineering, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa*

Note

1. See http://asc-cybernetics.org/2013/for the conference site, and http://asc-cybernetics.org/2013/?page_id=103 for the refereeing processes.